Knocking Opportunists: Thoughts on Parashat Lekh Lekha, October 12, 2013

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God instructs Abram to set out for a new land. God states that He will bless Abram, make him into a great nation, increase his fame, support his allies and curse his enemies. Abram will be a blessing to the nations of the world.

Abram complies with God's commandment: "So Abram went as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him…"(Bereishith 12:4).

Lot? How did Lot get into this scene? God had spoken with Abram and hadn't said a word to Lot about going to a new land!

The very next verse (12:5) reports: "And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son…and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan." But didn't the previous verse already inform us that Lot was going with Abram? Why is Lot mentioned again?

Let us try to reconstruct the story.

After receiving God's commandment and His promises, Abram must have caused a stir among his family and friends when he announced plans to move away. Abram was 75 years old at the time; he and Sarai had no children. Upon hearing of the wonderful blessings that God would bestow on Abram, Lot—Abram's nephew—thought this would be a terrific opportunity for him. He would be the natural heir of Abram. He would inherit the land, the fame, and all the blessings that God had promised to Abram. So even without having been commanded, "Lot went with him." Lot knew a good opportunity when he saw it.

Lot attached himself—uninvited-- to Abram's destiny. Lot was an unabashed opportunist.

When Abram saw Lot's unseemly eagerness to join the journey to the new land, Abram might first have been annoyed at his nephew tag-along. But then Abram had second thoughts. Perhaps it would be good to have Lot come with him. Perhaps Lot would indeed become his heir and inherit Abram's blessings. Even if

Lot was opportunistic, Abram thought that he could shape Lot's personality if he maintained a close relationship with him. When Abram decided that Lot could accompany him, the Torah informs us that Abram took Lot along i.e. agreed to take Lot under his wings.

But Lot remained a materialistic opportunist. He was not interested in Abram's philosophy or his religious message; Lot wanted wealth and power. Sadly, Abram came to realize that he was not going to be able to influence Lot for the good.

The Torah reports that Lot's shepherds feuded with Abram's shepherds over pasture land. Lot—who already had "flocks and herds and tents" (13:5)—wanted more. He let his shepherds encroach on Abram's territory. At last, Abram decided that Lot was incorrigible. He told Lot: "Is not the whole land before you? Please separate yourself from me. If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I will go to the left" (13:9).

Instead of trying to apologize to his uncle or allowing his elder uncle to choose first, Lot scans the territory and sees that "the plain of Jordan was well watered everywhere" (13:10). He chose this lush and abundant land, without giving a second thought to Abram's needs or desires.

Lot ends up in Sodom, a city of wicked people. Lot, though, does not remove himself or his family from this corrupt environment. Business is business! His goal was to amass wealth, and if he had to live among immoral people, that was a price he was willing to pay.

The story goes on to say (in next week's Torah portion) that the Lord destroyed Sodom. Lot and family had to flee. Lot's wife died during the escape. Lot and his daughters are left stranded on a mountain. The Torah underscores that Lot's life was spared due to the merit of Abraham: "And it came to pass when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, that God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt" (19:29).

Lot is a classic example of a self-serving opportunist who tries to exploit every situation to his own material advantage. In spite of all his maneuvers, though, Lot is a dramatic failure. He not only is spiritually and morally defective; he does not even manage to live a happy, trouble-free life of wealth and leisure.

Abram must have been filled with disappointment over Lot. In spite of his best efforts, he was not able to alter Lot's egotism and materialism.

“Please separate yourself from me.” These poignant words of Abram to Lot provide a lesson: when dealing with an incorrigible self-serving opportunist, the sad but true approach is to separate.

Angel for Shabbat