Lot: Compromising Principle for Comfort

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Our Spring 2023 issue of *Conversations* will be dedicated to standing up for our core principles. This value is paramount for us at the Institute.

Over the summer, I will be writing a series of reflections on biblical stories that speak to this topic.

Lot: Compromising Principle for Comfort

Lot is one of the most fascinating figures in the Torah. As the nephew of Abraham and Sarah (known as Abram and Sarai during the first stages of the narrative), he joins them on their long journey to the Land of Canaan.

From the very beginning, God repeatedly promises the Land to Abraham's descendants. As Abraham sees no possibility of biological descendants as he and Sarah are barren, Lot seems like the obvious heir.

Then, famine strikes, and Abraham, Sarah, and Lot descend to Egypt to obtain food. It is a traumatic experience, as Pharaoh takes Sarah as a wife. The episode ends well thanks to God's direct intervention. Abraham and Lot emerge from Egypt much wealthier, as a result of Pharaoh's gifts (Genesis 12).

While Abraham and Sarah rebuilt their lives in Canaan afterwards, Lot never forgot the fact that the Nile provided material stability for Egypt. Canaan precariously depended on rainfall, leaving its inhabitants prone for future famines.

When the shepherds of Abraham and Lot quarreled over room for pasture, Lot chose to move to Sodom. The Torah describes Sodom's appeal: "Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of

it—this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt" (Genesis 13:10). The steady rise of the Jordan River resembled that of the Garden of Eden and Egypt. Lot wanted that stability and comfort.

The Torah immediately reports the price of that comfort: "Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the Lord" (Genesis 13:13). By moving to the depraved city of Sodom, Lot abandoned the lifestyle Abraham and Sarah exemplified.

Over the next several years, Lot married a woman of Sodom, and two of his daughters later married men of Sodom. Deeply entrenched as he was, he still maintained a sense of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality. He invited the angels to his home when the other inhabitants of Sodom ignored the visitors (Genesis 19).

Lot remained head and shoulders above the people of Sodom. Nevertheless, he compromised the dearest principles of the household of Abraham and Sarah by moving to the wicked city, all in the name of comfort. In the final analysis, he never won the respect of his neighbors, he lost his home, his two married daughters, and his wife. On a different plane, Lot also forfeited his position as the potential heir of Abraham and Sarah.

Lot's descendants, the nations of Ammon and Moab, were characterized by Sodom's anti-hospitality culture: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aramnaharaim, to curse you.—But the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you.—You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live" (Deuteronomy 23:4-7).

Yet, some trace of good remained in Lot, and that streak of hospitality was manifest in Lot's stellar descendant, Ruth the Moabite. Ruth married Boaz, and became the great-grandmother of King David.

The Lot saga reminds us of how easy it is for generally good people or institutions to be overly tempted by financial gain and comfort to the point where they compromise their integrity and core principles. Today's Lots may rationalize this behavior on the grounds that everyone needs financial security. Nonetheless, the price they pay in compromising their values far outweighs whatever temporary gains they obtain.

The Torah enjoins us to emulate Abraham and Sarah—righteous, hospitable, principled individuals who stood firm in their faith and ideals. With all of their struggles, they worked hard to build a righteous family with authentic values, and they prospered among their neighbors.