YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Vayera**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable *z”l* and Ambassador Yehuda Avner *z”l*,
by Debbie and David Sable

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**Lot: The Lapsed Idealist**

Summarized by Tzachi Rauch and Aviad Brestel

Translated by David Strauss

I am going to give a talk that l already gave two years ago, because of the great importance I attach to the subject and because in the course of the educational process, fundamental ideas sometimes need to be repeated.

**Avraham’s Journey**

This week, we finish reading the primary *parashot* that discuss Avraham Avinu. Next Shabbat, in *Parashat Chayei Sara*, we will see Avraham tying up loose ends: immediately after the *Akeida* story in *Parashat Vayera*, Avraham buries his wife and marries off his son, writes a will, sends away the sons of his concubines, and descends from the stage. Essentially, Avraham's last act is the *Akeida*, which concludes with the following blessing:

And He said: By Myself have I sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have hearkened to My voice. So Avraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to Be'er-Sheva; and Avraham dwelt at Be'er-Sheva. (*Bereishit* 22:16-19)

Avraham concludes his mission at his prime: He reaches his greatest peak, the *Akeida,* past the age of a hundred, at the height of his strength, just before descending from the stage and making room for Yitzchak Avinu.

This is indeed exceedingly impressive, but it must be remembered that Avraham did not begin this great journey alone, but in partnership with others.

His journey began with departure from Ur Kasdim, back in the days of his father, Terach. Then, four people set out:

And Terach took Avram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Avram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur Kasdim, to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Charan, and dwelt there. And the days of Terach were two hundred and five years; and Terach died in Charan. (*Bereishit* 11:31-32)

Terach was apparently searching for quiet from Ur Kasdim, and perhaps he also got old, and so he stayed in Charan.

But Avraham continues: God reveals Himself to him and essentially asks him to "go after him in the wilderness" (cf. *Yirmeyahu* 2:2). He wanders along on a new path that leads him to the unknown, but he has a clear message: to "call in the name of the Lord, the everlasting God" (*Bereishit* 21:33), to establish altars and communities.

Four people (Terach, Avram, Sarai, and Lot) did in fact leave Ur Kasdim, perhaps due to pressure and persecution, but at the next stage, Avraham sets out from Charan because of a vision: to change the world and to make God known to mankind. Indeed, Avraham works to realize that great vision, and people follow him because they see that his charisma stems from belief in the great vision and not merely from a smooth tongue. Avraham is also unique in that he is the first person to develop a real relationship with God.

Once again – we must remember that in all these great matters, Avraham does not act alone: he is accompanied by his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot.

**“Lot His Brother’s Son”**

We will discuss the great partnership of Avraham and Sara further, but at this point, let us focus on Lot and on a simple question: What brought Lot to accompany Avraham on his journey?

It can be argued that he had little choice: Lot was an orphan, his grandfather died in Haran, and he was compelled to continue with Avraham on his journey. However, as Rashi calculates at the end of *Parashat* *Noach* (and so too the Ibn Ezra at the beginning of *Parashat Lekh Lekha*), Terach lived in Charan for many years both before and after Avraham left the place. Lot *did* have a place to stay, and he could easily have given up on the journey with Avraham.

Why, then, did Lot travel to Canaan? Because he "bought" Avraham’s vision. The Midrash, puzzled by Avraham's statement to Lot: "For we are brothers" (*Bereishit* 13:8), writes:

Were they brothers? Rather because his countenance resembled his. (*Bereishit Rabba* [Vilna], *Parashat Lekh-Lekha* 41, 6)

"Because his countenance resembled his" means Avraham's message spoke to Lot. They saw themselves as brothers because they shared the same values and vision. Lot also left the good, comfortable life for the unknown. He believed in a vision, a dream: he was convinced of its truth and understood the power of the message that would surely captivate the locals.

Later, we see that Lot continued to stand by Avraham's side, helping him rally the people and continue the journey of calling “in the name of the Lord, the everlasting God" (*Bereishit* 21:33). The Ramban noted this point in the context of Lot's rescue from Sedom:

"God remembered Avraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" – The idea of this verse is that Lot had shown kindness towards the righteous one [Avraham], by going with him to wander in the land wherever he would go. This is [what is meant when] it is said: "And Lot went with him" (*Bereishit* 12:4) – that he joined Avraham’s coterie. Therefore he had the merit to be saved on account of Abraham's meritoriousness. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 19:29)

Little needs to be added: Lot was part of Avraham's "team"!

**Taking Leave from Avraham**

***The move to Sedom***

At some point, however, a reversal takes place. There are not many figures in the Bible whose characters can be expounded with both praise and condemnation, but Lot is one of the most prominent among them. Let us return to Lot's rescue from Sedom:

And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, that God remembered Avraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt. (*Bereishit* 19:29)

The Midrash presents two opinions on the question of whether Lot was saved because of the merits of Avraham or because of his own merits – i.e., because the kindnesses of his youth were remembered for his benefit. Either way, it is clear that something went horribly wrong: How did Lot end up in a situation in the first place where he would need to be saved from the overthrow of Sedom? What happened to him?

The answer is simple: Lot is the prototype of the lapsed idealist. Although he began with high values ​​and a dream, he ends up in pursuit of the silver and gold of Sedom.

The dramatic change in Lot's life takes place when he escapes a famine in Canaan by going to Egypt, and returns from Egypt with great wealth:

And Avram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the South. (*Bereishit* 13:1)

Avraham returns with the same vigor and energy that characterized him in the past and will continue to accompany him later in his life. Economic wealth does not impact his ideals. But regarding Lot, the picture is different:

And Lot also, who went with Avram, had flocks, and herds, and tents. And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together; for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. (*Bereishit* 13:5-6)

Later in the passage, things deteriorate to the point that Avram and Lot separate from each other (*Bereishit* 13:11). What was the cause of the separation? It is clear that the real reason was not the large amount of property mentioned at the beginning of the verse, but what is mentioned at the end of the verse: Abraham and Lot "could not dwell together." Why? Because Lot began to be dazzled by the good life and the wealth, as reflected in the words of Avraham:

And Avram said to Lot: Let there be no strife, I pray you, between me and you, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself, I pray you, from me; if you will take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left. (*Bereishit* 13:8-9)

Lot should have responded that they should ignore the money and continue to stay together: after all, they have no other relatives, and they are also the only worshippers of God in the world. Instead, Lot agrees to part ways:

And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sedom and Amora, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as you go to Tzoar. (*Bereishit* 13:10)

Nowadays, we would formulate this as follows: Sedom is "it" – it has the fastest internet and technology, and most importantly, it pays the highest salaries. "It is good for business, for my career." "It doesn't matter how it will affect my children's education, my social relationships and my family; the main thing is money – the gods of silver and of gold." Lot is blinded by the advantages of Sedom:

So Lot chose him all the plain of the Jordan; and Lot journeyed east [*mi-kedem*]; and they separated themselves the one from the other. (*Bereishit* 13:11)

The Midrash describes Lot as having "removed himself from the Originator [*kadmono*] of the world. He said: I want neither Avram nor His God" (*Bereishit Rabba* [Vilna], 41, 7). Lot "removed himself from the Originator of the world" not because he wanted to worship idols, but simply because he decided he preferred the material world over "the Originator of the world." He decided to give up vision in favor of money. Lot abandoned the world of values and the family – the deep connections based on family ties and brotherhood, and the world of shared values and vision. Why? Because everything is null and void in the face of gold and silver.

We encounter a similar phenomenon among the people of Gad and the people of Reuven, who wished to settle on the east bank of the Jordan and expressed their desire as follows: "We will build sheepfolds here **for our cattle,** and cities **for our little ones"** (*Bamidbar* 32:16). The Midrash points out that "they made the main thing secondary, and the secondary thing primary; they loved their money more than their souls [i.e., their children]" (*Bamidbar Rabba* [Vilna], *Matot* 22, 9). In response, Moshe answered them: "Build cities **for your little ones**, and folds **for your sheep**" (*Bamidbar* 32:24), which the Midrash interprets to mean: "Make the main thing primary: *First* build cities for your little ones, and *afterwards*, build folds for your sheep" (*Bamidbar Rabba*, ibid.)

That is to say, Moshe answered them that their children take precedence: first attend to the education and spiritual development of the family, and only then, to livelihood. Of course, this does not mean that one should live on handouts, but that education is the main thing and livelihood is secondary. The people of Gad and the people of Reuven preferred to give up the promise of "I will bring you" (*Shemot* 6:8) and waive the national goal of entering the land, merely for financial gain.

As stated, Lot makes the same moral error of prioritizing money over values. This is evident in the following description:

Avram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the Plain, and moved his tent as far as Sedom. And the men of Sedom were wicked and sinners against the Lord exceedingly. (*Bereishit* 13:12-13)

"Who cares about the people, the values and the dream: the main thing is the money!" Where do you live? Where it is easier to make a living. Lot undergoes a dramatic transformation: from the brother of Avraham, known for his hospitality and kindness toward others, he comes to Sedom, which is known for its opposition to hosting guests (see *Sanhedrin* 109b). Lot arrives and sinks in the materialism of Sedom, and is aware of it.

***Sinking into the Material***

Of course, we know what happened next, and it reveals a great deal about Lot and his chosen home:

And there went out the king of Sedom, and the king of Amora, and the king of Adma, and the king of Tzevoyim, and the king of Bela – the same is Tzoar; and they set the battle in array against them in the vale of Siddim; against Kedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tid'al king of Goyim, and Amrafel king of Shin’ar, and Aryoch king of Elasar; four kings against the five. And the vale of Siddim was full of slime pits; and the kings of Sedom and Amora fled, and they fell there, and they that remained fled to the mountain. (*Bereishit* 14:8-10)

They fall into the slime pits [*cheimar*] – the material [*chomer*]. They go to war not for the sake of any values, but for the sake of comfort and the good life, and thus we understand that they sink into the wells of materialism. We are not talking about people with values (which would of course be different from those of Avraham), but about people who are burnt out, people who are looking for comfort and are immersed in material things.

In the end, Avraham arrives and rescues them from their captors. Even in the conversation they have later, it is evident that the king of Sedom simply has no understanding of Avraham at all (and truth be said, Lot probably didn't understand him either):

And the king of Sedom said to Avram: Give me the persons, and take the goods to yourself. (*Bereishit* 14:21)

He does not understand how it is possible for a person to be offered property and not take it. Avraham, on the other hand, does not serve the public out of concern for wealth or power; he feels an obligation towards Lot, an obligation that Lot does not feel towards him. His statement is: "That I will not take a thread or a shoe-latchet nor anything that is yours" (*Bereishit* 14:23).

What we have here are two completely different worlds: on the one hand, a world that talks only about property, and on the other hand, a world that talks about kindness. Avraham will not take anything. But the king of Sedom simply cannot imagine this – similar to when Achashverosh is told about Mordechai: "There was nothing done for him" (*Esther* 6:3) in return for reporting a plot to kill the king. To Achashverosh, this sounds like Chinese – how is it possible that someone would do something, not to receive something in return?

When Lot was young, the dream still held him. But now, he is in the abyss of Sedom. Moreover, he is "doubled in sin" (based on *Bava Kama* 68a, and elsewhere): even after the war, he does not notice how much his world has deviated from its original idealistic course and he stays in Sedom, though he does not actually make a conscious decision to deteriorate. For the sake of illustration, let us say as follows: He continued to get up every morning, put on *tefillin*, and learn his daily page of Gemara. But he did not notice that his personality was being eroded to the point that it no longer had any vigor. The reunion with Avraham should have served as a wakeup call, pitting the image of his worn-out self against that of Avraham’s continued vitality.

We find the same chronicle of "transgression leading to another transgression," that we are familiar with from the sin of Korach and his company, here: Lot continues to make mistake after mistake, and he remains in Sedom. He is so worn out that he does not feel the wear!

On the other hand, Avraham understood long ago what had happened to Lot:

And Avram said: O Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and he that shall be possessor of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? (*Bereishit* 15:2)

As far as Avraham was concerned, Lot was not even a potential heir.

In *Parashat Vayera*, Lot "suddenly" opens his home to guests, and it seems that something remains from his having been brought up in the house of Avraham. But even this, he does only as long as his standing is not in jeopardy. When he suddenly has to pay a price for his hospitality, and things deteriorate to the point that the lives of his guests are in danger, he makes a horrible offer – in my eyes, this is the most terrible verse in the Torah – which is intended not only to save the guests but primarily to maintain his own standing:

And he said: I pray you, my brothers, do not do wickedly. Behold now, I have two daughters that have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out to you, and do you to them as is good in your eyes; only to these men do nothing; forasmuch as they are come under the shadow of my roof. (*Bereishit* 19:7-8)

Obviously, on no level of explanation was this supposed to happen. Not from any moral perspective. This is the extent to which Lot had deteriorated from the world of Avraham Avinu: it started with leaving his family for money, and ends with a willingness to sell his daughters in order to preserve "family honor" (and things get even worse later, in the cave). In the end, Lot was saved because of the merits of Avraham (although some maintain that something remained of Lot's original merits, and because of them he was saved) – but to what depths did he reach on the way!

**Lot in Contrast to Avraham and Sara**

Three people wanted to change the world: Avraham, Sara, and Lot. All three were nourished by an amazing dream, but only two of the three fulfilled the dream, while one fell. Lot did not fall because of a theological or personal crisis, but because he was worn out, he became bourgeois and sank into the wells of materialism. That is all that happened to him: burnout. No despair, no theological doubts, and no other conflicts. He was simply worn down, all the way to the moral abomination of offering up his daughters. All this, simply because he lost his passion and vigor.

Lot's resounding failure stands out even more when we compare him to his uncle, Avraham, who not only remains strong and continues on his journey, but even reaches the pinnacle at the very end of his life – as noted above:

That in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have hearkened to My voice. (*Bereishit* 22:17-18)

Avraham is old-young, in the sense of "those whose hope is for the Lord shall renew their strength" (*Yeshayahu* 40:31). He continues to move from place to place, reaching his ultimate peak well after the age of a hundred. That is why it is stated at the *Akeida*: "For now I know that you are a God-fearing man" (*Bereishit* 22:12). Avraham is constantly rushing forward, running from challenge to challenge and task to task, from ideal to ideal.

So, while Lot wears out and deteriorates, Avraham continues to move forward and is constantly looking for new goals. This is apparent immediately after the overthrow of Sedom, when the Torah states: "And Avraham journeyed from there toward the land of the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar" (*Bereishit* 20:1). The Midrash comments:

"And Avraham journeyed from there to the land of the South." Rabbi Abon opened: "And surely the falling mountain crumbles away, and the rock is removed out of its place" (*Iyov* 14:18). "And surely the falling mountain" – this is Lot, who fell from the mountain; "and the rock" – this is Avraham; "is removed out of its place" – he turned from his place. When the place of Sedom was destroyed, the passers-by stopped. He said: "Should I stop charity from my house?" He went and pitched his tent in Gerar. This is what is written: "And Avraham journeyed from there." (*Bereishit Rabba* [Vilna] *Vayera* 52, 1)

That is, immediately after the overthrow of Sedom, Abraham seeks a new spiritual challenge, in the South. He is constantly rushing forward. He is certainly not worn out, and he does not even merely walk.

Avraham continuously searched for a new identity and new deeds, so much so that his name changes from "Avram" to "Avraham." This change is not merely symbolic; *Chazal* saw it as a fundamental change. In their words: "Bar Kapara taught: Whoever calls Avraham ‘Avram’ transgresses a positive commandment, as it is stated: 'And your name shall be Avraham'" (*Berakhot* 13a). According to Rabbi Eliezer there, calling him by his old name even transgresses a negative commandment.

But Avraham does not do this alone. All along the way, he walks hand in hand with Sara Imeinu, who goes through the same change along with him – transforming from "Sarai" into "Sara."

We can find a beautiful expression of the relationship between Avraham and Sara in a Midrash that describes Sara's actions in the house of Pharaoh:

All that night, Sara lay flat on her face, saying: Master of the universe! Avraham went out with a promise, and I went out in faith. (B*ereishit Rabba* [Vilna] *Lekh-Lekha* 41, 2)

Avraham and Sara build a world where they build, dream, and wander together. They constantly find renewed strength and move from one challenge to another.

**For Our Time**

***On Burnout***

Each generation has its own threats, and we face the threat of Lot. In religious Zionism, in modern Orthodoxy, the main identifiable threat that we face is that of burnout.

Many people went to their youth groups, had great ideals, and dreamed of establishing settlements – and today, they are urban (or non-urban) bourgeois. They have not become non-observant, God forbid: they continue to put on *tefillin* and even maintain regular Torah study. But they lost their passion, and because of that, they shifted their priorities so that the vision that they once had is now at the bottom of the list. A God-fearing and Torah-observant person who accepts the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven has many red lines that "protect" him in a certain sense. But the problem is that there is no red line to protect them from burnout. There is no prohibition that says "Don't become burnt out," or "Don't choose a job based only on the salary." There is only: "And you shall do that which is right and good" (*Devarim* 6:18). It all depends on the person and the energy he has.

My father, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein *ztz"l*, once said at a *tisch* that the gravest threat of our generation is despair. I think it is true that despair is worse than burnout, but it only strikes at a minority. Burnout is more dangerous in my eyes because it harms many more people: "The majority with burnout, and everyone with the dust of burnout" (cf. *Bava Batra* 165b).

This is true even for those who studied in a yeshiva. How much does a person continue to dream? How much does a person continue to broadcast his dreams? How many of a person's dreams in his first two years of yeshiva stay with him for another twenty years? How much does he manage to preserve outside the yeshiva hothouse?

The fundamental question is not how many hours one studies after he leaves the yeshiva (although this too is a function of energy and enthusiasm). Rather, when he encounters a difficulty in the *parasha* or hears a theoretical question about some halakhic issue, does it evoke a pleasant nostalgia ("I was once like that too") or does he go home and immediately look for an answer, address the problem, and maybe even call a friend about it?

The same goes for volunteering: How much will the spirit of volunteering translate into actual volunteering, not only in yeshiva when the setting actively supports it, but also later in life when he finds himself in other settings? How much will the person think that he should continue to volunteer and be active in his community? Will he choose a profession according to the social status and comforts it will bring, or will the ability to perform acts of kindness be a central element in his considerations? Avraham chose kindness as a vocation, but we see what happened to Lot when it clashed with his standing.

This is the central question before us: Does a person want the "coin" of his youth to be the "coin" of his old age as well – or as the Gemara says: "What was the coin of Avraham Avinu? An old man and an old woman on one side, and a young man and a young woman on the other side" (*Bava Kama* 97b) – or not? Will he burn out and deteriorate?

Once, at the funeral of a certain Rosh Yeshiva who died at the age of eighty-five, the eulogist said that he was a yeshiva student until his last day – he always wanted to renew himself and grow, and was never satisfied with what he had already achieved.

Are we bothered by these problems later in life, or are these only problems in our twenties?

One can be young even at the age of seventy or eighty, but it depends on the person: on how he decides to shape his personality and how he sets his priorities. In this context, it is important to emphasize that study, volunteering, and vision must become part of one's personality and must not remain external to it. Those who do not have these things as part of their personality will not be able to last.

What we do here in the yeshiva is not just a transfer of knowledge or an educational activity: the issues should be "on your heart" and should ultimately enter your heart. We were given the ability to know, and ears to hear, so that we can bring it into our hearts.

***On Living the Dream, Together***

As mentioned, Sara was a full partner in Avraham's dream and in his journey. The same is true for us: one should look for a partner, someone who will not only be nice, and funny, and compatible, but who will also share dreams: about their children's education, about the community, about society, and about the world. Marriage is friendship, chemistry, and relationship, but it must also include another element – that of partnership in the continued existence of the world – and the most important thing in this context is children. The Torah states: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh" (*Bereishit* 2:24). Rashi (ad loc.) comments: "One flesh – the child is created by the two of them, and there they became one flesh."

When a husband and wife go off to synagogue on Yom Kippur, they should each know what the other will be praying for, even without exchanging a word about it, because of the profound partnership in their inner worlds. One should not marry based only on values, and without chemistry and friendship, but woe to those who marry only out of friendship.

Avraham and Sara established a shared world: with all their difficulties, they were always together – not only because they loved each other, but also because they dreamed together and built a common vision. Those who want to build a world of values and completeness for themselves outside of the yeshiva need a partner for whom his world is her world and her world is his world. In this way, they will overcome all difficulties.

My father liked to quote the following Gemara:

Any man who goes seven days without a dream is called evil. (*Berakhot* 55b)

One should not only dream, however, but should also dream that his dream will come true. It is not enough only to dream; one should think about how to fulfill the dream from a practical and spiritual point of view.

The founder of our yeshiva, Moshe Moshkovitz (“Moshko”), liked to tell the following story about the Ponevitcher Rav: Ben Gurion told him he was dreaming, and he responded that he was indeed dreaming, but with his eyes open. Dreams are meant to be fulfilled. How does one do that? By bringing the dreams into our consciousness and personality.

One has to dream all the time, because it is otherwise very easy to suffer burnout and sink into the world. It is not difficult to live in a banal world where "everything is fine," in a world where I am content that the children are enrolled in a good school, that I am respected in the synagogue, and that my social standing is good – but something is hollow inside.

Instead of being lapsed idealists, instead of remembering how nice it was in our youth groups, while today we are weighed down and tired – we must live like Avraham and Sara, who were fulfilled inside as well. If we distance ourselves from the world of Lot, and draw closer to the world of Avraham, we will be able to see better and more impressive worlds in our old age than we did in our youth.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Sunday, 16 Cheshvan, 5778.]