

Which narration of the Torah springs to mind when the names Abraham and Lot are mentioned? The obvious answer concerning Abraham would be his first appearance in the Torah “Lech lecha” “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you ...” (Gen 12:1 – 3) And what about Lot? Until last week when I studied the parashah more in depth, I would have mentioned the narration of the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah. “Lot’s wife looked back, and thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.” (Gen 19:25 – 27). I deeply admire the art of observation of the sages in our tradition. They brought the scrutiny to perfection not only analysing each written word of the narration but also the words that are not said in the narration. Bex Stern-Rosenblatt, teacher of Tanach at the Fuchsberg Center of Conservative Judaism, called my attention to Lot’s role and significance in today’s parashah, both in what is said about Lot and what is not said about him. Thrice Lot “goes forth” in our parashah. “Abram went forth as HaShem had commanded him, and Lot went with him.” (12:4) Who has commanded Lot to go forth, HaShem? The text continues: “Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed and the persons that they had acquired in Haran.” (12:5) Is Lot subject in this part of the narration or object, someone who can act out of his own volition or an object of the events, someone who is acted upon? Again Lot “goes forth” after the episode in Egypt. “From Egypt, Abram went up into the Negeb, with his wife and all that he possessed, together with Lot.” (13:1) Both Abraham and Lot became quite rich. Abraham had “cattle, silver and gold” (13:2) and Lot “also had flocks and herds and tents” (13:5). For a third time Lot “goes forth”, this time quite obviously against his will. The five kings who invaded Sodom and Gomorrah looted the wealth of the country and “they also took Lot, the son on Abram’s brother and his possessions, and departed.” (14:12) Abram hears about Lot’s misfortune and frees him by defeating the five kings. That constitutes the end of Lot’s first quite ambiguous appearance in the narration, but we will meet him again next week in Sodom.

Another observation on the unsaid words was made by Rabbi Yaakov Tsvi Mecklenburg in his commentary Haketav Vehakabalah – Mecklenburg a 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbi and scholar in Königsberg/East Prussia. Why does it say, Mecklenburg asks, “Go forth from your country, and from your birthplace, and from your father’s house ...”? (12:1) The logical sequence would have been ‘from your father’s house, your birthplace and from your country’ since a person first leaves home, then his birthplace and his fatherland. Mecklenburg suggests that HaShem’s commandment rather describes a spiritual withdrawal than a physical one. Withdrawing from one’s country and from one’s birthplace is not as demanding and challenging as cutting the bonds with one’s own family. Nehama Leibowitz stresses that Abram’s/Abraham’s first and last trial are opened with the words “Lech lecha – Go forth (for) yourself” – in our parashah (12:1) and again in the narration of the binding of Isaac “lech lecha el ertz hamoriah – go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering.” (22:2) In his first trial he is bidden to forgo his past, in the last one his future.

Avot D’Rabbi Natan, the Talmudic companion volume to Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) states that “Abraham our forefather was tested with ten trials before the Holy Blessed One, and he emerged from each one complete. They are as follows: Two when God said to him, “Go forth!” Two with his sons. Two with his two wives. ... One with circumcision. And why so many? So that when Abraham our forefather comes to take his reward, the angels will say: More than us, more than anyone, Abraham deserves his reward, as it says (Ecclesiastes 9:7) “Go eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart.” (Avot D’Rabbi Natan 33:2)

Listening to and obeying HaShem’s command “Go forth” can be a trifold challenge, not only to leave one’s country and one’s birthplace but even one’s family. We can count ourselves lucky in our days not to be forced to such harsh withdrawals. But we do remember other times when many families were forced out, and not on HaShem’s command, as by far too many people are in the Ukraine.

But obeying the “Lech lecha - go forth” stands under a blessing that once in Abraham’s time constituted the founding of the Jewish people and ultimately includes “all families of the earth” (12:3) through Avraham Avinu, our father Abraham.

Shabbat shalom