

A Double Test

By Rav Elchanan Samet

A. THE DESCENT TO EGYPT AND THE RETURN (12:10-13:4)

The first nine verses of our parasha (12:1-9) represent a brief narrative concerning Avram's journey from Charan to Canaan by God's command, and his first hikes throughout the length of the land, from north to south. Verse 10, "And there was a famine in the land, and Avram went down to Egypt..." clearly begins a new story. The subject of this story is the opposite of its predecessor: Avram leaves the land, forced by the famine. Where does the story of Avram's descent to Egypt end? It would seem to conclude with his return to Canaan.

In the biblical perception, a person's return is considered a symbolic cancellation of his original departure and whatever happened in the meanwhile. Therefore, when going to a certain place has brought a person benefit and blessing, he will not return to his original starting point, in order not to lose what he has gained by that journey. If, on the other hand, journeying to a certain place has brought him suffering, loss and anguish, he will take care to follow his trail back to the beginning in order to symbolically erase it. This may be the reason for the Torah's prohibition ([Devarim 17:16](#)), "He (the king) shall not return the nation to Egypt... and God said to you: You shall not return on this way again." Return to Egypt along the same path that they left would represent a symbolic cancellation of the Exodus from slavery to eternal freedom, and therefore the Torah prohibits it.

In the description of Avram's ascent from Egypt, the Torah elaborates at length on the path that he takes, which is exactly the reverse of the path that he took in the previous story. This level of detail emphasizes that Avram returned along exactly the same path that he took when descending to Egypt. His return to Canaan is the mirror-image of the Torah's prohibition of returning from Canaan to Egypt along the same path as was followed for the Exodus – and the purpose is likewise the opposite. Avram wishes to symbolically erase the episode of his descent to Egypt, with all the suffering and humiliation that he experienced there, and he does this by returning to Beit-El "up to the place where his tent had been IN THE BEGINNING, between Beit-El and Ai, to the place of the altar..."

B. LOT'S SEPARATION FROM AVRAM (13:5-18) – AN INDEPENDENT NARRATIVE?

The next narrative unit in the parasha is the story of Lot's separation from Avram. The plot here is very different from that of the previous story: it takes place in Canaan, and the land

itself is the subject of discussion between Avram and Lot as well as, later on, between God and Avram. Lot is the principal character facing Avram in the first part of the story, and God – Who reveals Himself to Avram in the second half – says things that are clearly related to Avram's separation from Lot. This narrative therefore extends from 13:5 to 13:18.

But thus far we have ignored a glaring question pertaining to the beginning of the story of Lot's separation:

And ALSO LOT, who went with Avram, had flocks and cattle and tents. (13:5)

The phrase "also Lot" indicates that it is connected to the previous narrative and is not an independent unit. An additional consideration casts doubt on the independence of the narrative unit concerning Avram's separation from Lot: the seemingly unnecessary mention of Lot in the previous story, in the description of Avram's ascent from Egypt. Umberto Cassuto sees this as a preliminary technical hint "to prepare from now onwards for the story of his (Lot's) separation from Avram." But what need is there for this preparation? Were we not informed long ago that Lot is included in Avram's family?

Nechama Leibowitz z"l offers the following insightful interpretation of the intention behind the text's mention of Lot in 13:1:

Lot left his land and went with Avraham... Lot, who was Avraham's nephew, went with him and underwent several adventures with him. He passed through Canaan, descended with Avraham to Egypt, and ascended with him from there. But his return from Egypt to Canaan was not like his journey from Charan to Canaan. Let us compare the two verses. On leaving Charan:

"And Avram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his nephew, and all their property." (12:5)

On ascending from Egypt:

"And Avram ascended from Egypt he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the Negev." (13:1)

The order of the words in the verse is not incidental... When leaving Charan, Lot was part of the family, and the property was common to all of them. But when returning from Egypt, there are two families. From now Lot is not mentioned immediately after Sarah, but rather as someone who joins the group

and journeys with them – but as an independent person. Proof for this is to be found in the verse, "And also Lot, who went with Avram, had flocks and cattle and tents" (13:5). This alienation between Lot and Avraham, symbolized in verse 13:1 by the placement of the property separating between the names of Avraham and his wife and the name of Lot, is the same alienation that was only hinted at in the beginning of the chapter but later stated explicitly, and eventually reaches the point of dispute and even separation: "And the land could not bear their dwelling together, for their property was great, and they could not dwell together" (13:6).

According to the above explanation we discover that Lot's separation from Avram had actually started earlier, for whatever reason, when they ascended from Egypt - even before it could be explained by the fact that the land could not bear them to dwell together (as well as the disputes between their respective shepherds).

Thus we are left with no choice but to consider the possibility that we have one single story comprised of two halves that are distinguished by their plots. This possibility is also supported by the traditional division of parshiot – a division that in parashat Lekh-Lekha usually accords with the distinction between the different stories. The description of the descent to Egypt and the return are included in one long "parasha," together with the description of the separation from Lot (12:10-13:18).

C. LOT'S SEPARATION FROM AVRAM IN LIGHT OF THE ENCOUNTER WITH EGYPT

The description of Lot's separation from Avram is bound up – both stylistically and thematically – with the earlier description of their ascent from Egypt. Is the reverse phenomenon also true, i.e., can we point to instances where there are hints of the story of the descent to Egypt in the description of their separation? Furthermore, we may ask, why is it specifically upon the ascent from Egypt that Lot becomes an independent economic entity, thus sowing the seeds for his separation from Avram?

The answer to both of the above questions leads us to verse 13:6.

And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all of the Jordan plain, that it was all WELL WATERED - before God destroyed Sedom and Amora – like the GARDEN OF GOD, LIKE THE LAND OF EGYPT AS YOU COME TO TZO'AR.

This fascinating verse is the opposite of the description of the land in [Devarim 11:10-11](#).

For the land to which you are coming, to inherit it, IS NOT LIKE THE LAND OF EGYPT – the land from which you came out, where you

would sow your seeds and WATER IT WITH YOUR FOOT, LIKE A VEGETABLE GARDEN. But the land to which you are passing to inherit it is a land of mountains and valleys; it drinks water of the rains of the heavens.

On the factual level, there is no contradiction here: most of the land is indeed watered by the rains from heaven, but the Jordan plain – the place where Sedom and Amora were situated, before they were destroyed – was indeed "all watered" – i.e., saturated with water, with which the ground could be watered as one waters a "garden." And in this respect the Jordan plain was indeed similar to the land of Egypt, which likewise enjoyed the abundance of water from the Nile and was watered by it "like a vegetable garden."

The contradiction lies rather in the moral sphere: in Sefer Devarim it appears that the land of Israel, which drinks of the rains of heaven, is superior to Egypt, which is watered like a vegetable garden. The verse in our parasha, in contrast, seems to praise the land that is watered in the latter manner, and that the Jordan plain is the best part of the land – to the point where it is compared to "God's garden" – the Garden of Eden (see 2:8-10), and God's garden itself is compared to the land of Egypt!

The solution to this contradiction lies in the fact that verse 10 in our chapter reflects not the Torah's objective evaluation, but rather the opinion of Lot: the Jordan plain is described from HIS point of view. Thus we detect a hint here that Lot is enamored of Egypt, and seeks whatever is similar to it even when he is in Canaan.

From the various hints that we have mentioned so far, let us now try to reconstruct the story in its entirety. When Avram journeyed to Eretz Canaan "as God had spoken to him," we are told that "Lot went with him" (12:4). Since "Sarai was barren; she had no child" (11:9), and Lot was Avram's brother's son, he might have been considered as Avram's son and heir. God's promise to Avram, "I shall give this land to your descendants" (12:7), aroused great hopes in Avram and Lot for the future.

But disappointment was not long in coming: the land was inhabited at the time by the Canaanites (12:7, 13:7), and therefore Avram and Lot could subsist there only by pasturing their flocks in the uninhabited areas of the south. Shepherding in these areas is dependent on rainfall to an extent even greater than is agriculture. Avram and Lot very soon came to recognize the land's continuous dependence on rainfall: "And there was a famine in the land." This severe famine threatened the survival of Avram's flocks and income, as well as all those who were dependent on him – "the souls that he had made in Charan" – and therefore he had no choice: in order to save these lives he had to go down to Egypt, which was not dependent at all on rain.

In the wealthy, satiated Egypt, with its refined and ancient culture, Lot was "awakened" from the dream of Canaan. Here he realized that there was no point in continuous wandering with his uncle in a land that was not theirs, with him shepherding the family flocks, helpless in the face of the unstable climate. Had he been able to, he would have stayed in

Egypt and attempted to blend in, but the problem was that the Egyptians were highly suspicious of the shepherds who would stay over in their country during times of famine, and took pains to ensure that they would not stay.

Against his will, Lot was expelled with his uncle back to Canaan, but in his heart he had already decided: at the first opportunity he would take what belonged to him and separate himself from Avram's camp, with a view to settling permanently in a place that he considered worthy. Thus Lot, preparing for this eventuality, had dissolved his partnership with his uncle and begun to build up his own property already when they left Egypt. The conflict between Avram's shepherds and those of Lot, and the description of the land as being unable to bear the burden of both of them together, are only symptoms of a much deeper divide between nephew and uncle, the severity and significance of which Avram still had not yet grasped.

Avram perceives the conflict as a routine shepherds' squabble over pasture land, and he therefore suggests the obvious solution:

Is not all the land before you... if you take the left then I shall take the right; if you take the right, I shall take the left. (13:9)

The land stretches lengthwise from north to south, and therefore its division between different major flock owners will also be between north (left) and south (right). But Lot seeks neither the wide spaces of the north nor those of the south. He is fed up with the nomadic lifestyle of a shepherd, and has no desire to wait for the right historical conditions that might make the land his inheritance and that of his descendants in a few more generations. The "Egyptian experience" has brought him to lift up his eyes and to search: is there a parcel of land that resembles Egypt, where he may settle? He finds precisely such a parcel of land – neither in the north nor in the south, but in the east. The well-irrigated Jordan plain looks to Lot just like the Garden of Eden, like a little piece of Egypt within Eretz Canaan. Even the fact that "the people of Sodom and Amora are evil and sin greatly before God" does nothing to deter him from his choice.

Lot's separation from Avram represents a profound spiritual breach that cannot be repaired. It is the division between the impatient and hasty pursuit of the "here and now," and the patient anticipation of a far-off future; between the aloneness of a person who calls in God's name east of Beit-El, and the alignment with the people of Sodom; between living in tents and following the sheep and building a house and subjecting oneself to the field. It is no coincidence that our Sages ([Bereishit Rabba 40:7](#)) interpret the difficult term in verse 11, "And Lot traveled eastwards (lit., from the east) and each parted from the other" as meaning that:

He removed himself from the Ancient One of the world (the word for "ancient" having the same root as the word for "east"): I want nothing to do with Avram, nor with His God.

Lot's parting from Avram is a permanent one. Even though Avram acts on Lot's behalf later on, we never find them together again. Lot's preference for the "here and now" did not actually bring him the benefits he expected: he loses both his present and the future that he had already relinquished.

It becomes clear, therefore, that even though the text presents two narratives, the second is dependent on the first: it was in Egypt that the seeds for the separation between Lot and Avram were first planted; in the ascent from Egypt we begin to see the first results of that parting, and upon their return to Canaan the separation between them becomes a *fait accompli*. At that point it becomes clear that Lot's mind has remained in Egypt, and it is Egypt that he seeks even in Canaan. The "Egyptian experience" is the basis for the events that follow in Canaan. This is hinted at both in the story of the ascent from Egypt (13:1-2) and at the beginning of the story of Lot (13:5), and especially in the description of his selection of the Jordan plain (13:10).

C. THE FIRST TEST

Thus far we have proposed a few reasons to consider the story of the descent to Egypt and the return from there, and the story of Lot's parting from Avram, as two halves of a single story. Are these two halves, connected as they are on the level of plot and in the common structure of the story as a whole, also connected in terms of the significance of the story? In other words, is there a unified message that arises from the greater story, and if so, what is it?

Owing to the largely independent nature of each half, in terms of plot and otherwise, we shall not be able to answer this question before clarifying the message of each half separately.

What, then, is the message of the descent to Egypt? To answer this, we must read the beginning of that story immediately after the story that is before us, and then the great tension between them will be most acutely felt.

God commands Avram to go to the Land of Canaan, and promises that He will make him into a great nation through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Upon Avram's arrival in Shekhem, God appears to him and promises that this land, presently inhabited by the Canaanites, will be given to his descendants in the future. Avram believes these promises concerning both descendants and the land, and as a response to them he builds an altar to God.

Now, the first test with which he must contend is the severe famine in the land, forcing him to go down to Egypt. God does not appear to him now; He is not telling him what he should do nor explaining why the land is acting inimically to his interests. Upon reaching Egypt, Avram finds himself in a land that is satiated and stable, a complete contrast with the way in which Canaan revealed itself to him. It is impossible for some doubts not to creep into his heart as to the viability of the difficult existence in the promised land, he being a farmer, completely dependent on rain.

But much more serious and urgent problems confront Avram upon reaching Egypt: Sarai, his beautiful wife – destined to be the mother of the great host of descendants promised to him – is about to be snatched from him. This danger is quickly and drastically realized: she is carried away to no less than the palace of Pharaoh, the mighty ruler of a great power.

Avram, who was promised that he would be the father of a great nation through which all the families of the earth would be blessed, is astounded: he is now holding onto neither land nor any possibility of descendants. The famine took him from Canaan to Egypt, and Egypt has taken his wife; he has no way of knowing if she will return to him and whether they will ever return to the promised land. God hides His face from him at this moment when the bitter reality violates all the promises and makes them worthless. How will Avram react to such a glaring contradiction to everything that was promised to him and for the sake of which he left his land, his birthplace and his father's house?

Avram doesn't ask questions and expresses not the slightest regret over his choice of path, or disappointment in it. He acts as demanded by the difficult situation in which he finds himself, in order to protect his own life and the lives of his wife and household members, thereby creating some hope for the future rehabilitation of his family.

This story is therefore a story about the test that Avram faced after reaching the land, after all the great early promises that God gave him concerning both descendants and the land. This is indeed the way that Rashi and Radak explain the story, following the example of the Sages. Radak writes as follows:

"And there was famine in the land" – this was one of the tests that God placed before Avraham, and he succeeded in all of them and did not question the Holy One, saying, "Yesterday He told me, 'And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you,' while now there is famine in the land in which I dwell, to the point where I am forced to leave it and go elsewhere." Rather, he accepted everything with love and never questioned the ways of the Holy One.

Rashi and Radak perceive the crux of the test in the fact that Avram was forced to leave Canaan, but the continuation of the story seems to prove that the test was really when Sarai was taken from him, in stark violation of the promise of children.

What are the key words in the story? The various terms referring to Sarai, repeating themselves throughout, stand out clearly: she is called "the wife of Avram" seven times in the story, and in six other places she is called something else: "a woman of beautiful appearance," Avram's "sister," and "wife." The word "Egypt" (referring to either the land or its inhabitants) appears six times in the story. The combination of these repeated words represents the essence of the story: "The wife of Avram" is "a beautiful woman," but the descent "to Egypt" makes this dangerous. The solution – presenting her as Avram's "sister" - does not prevent her from being taken as a "wife" for Pharaoh.

But it soon transpires that she is truly "the wife of Avram," and she returns to this status with no harm having been done.

Avram stood up to the test, never questioning God's ways and never rebelling, but rather accepting all that happens to him in silence and with a human effort to salvage whatever is possible. In the second half of this story, God returns to Avram, saves Sarai from Pharaoh's house and returns her to Avram, and returns the united family to the promised land.

D. THE SECOND TEST

What is the message of the story of Lot's separation?

Avram returns to Canaan by retracing his footsteps until he reaches the starting point that anchors him to the land – the altar that he built in Beit-El, where he first had called in the name of God. Earlier we explained the retracing of his footsteps as Avram's attempt to symbolically erase his descent to Egypt and all that had taken place there. But what happens in reality is really not erasable, even when things seem to have returned to what they were. What happened in the descent to Egypt lives on – not only in the story that we read, but also in the human reality, both psychological and practical – within Avram's household. The influence of Egypt continues to echo in their minds. The stay in Egypt and exposure to its cultural and agricultural advantages have brought Lot to consider parting from Avram, a nomadic shepherd with no land. In ascending from Egypt, Lot is already described as an independent entity; he is no longer depicted as Avram's adopted son.

At the time when God promises Avram that He will make him a great nation and give the land to his descendants, "Sarai was barren; she had no child" (11:30). At that time, then, there is no way of knowing how God's promise will fulfill itself. But in Avram's house there is already a candidate, who – if there is no alternative – may represent the fulfillment of the promise: Lot, the son of Avram's brother, who is orphaned of his father and has chosen to go along with Avram when God commanded him to leave Charan for Canaan (12:14). This status, and especially his decision to accompany Avram, make Lot the adopted son of Avram and Sarai, and their possible heir. So long as he remains in Avram's house, Avram is unable to claim what he ends up claiming later on (15:2-3), "I remain childless, and the steward of my house is Eliezer of Damesek... and behold, this household member [i.e., my servant] will inherit me."

But when he returns from Egypt, Avram is dealt a severe blow: his adopted son, upon whom he has placed all his hopes for the future, leaves him. The "guarantee" of the fulfillment of God's promise is irreparably damaged. Egypt took from Avram his wife Sarai, but God returned her to him. Now Egypt is "taking" from him also his nephew. But this time it is Lot's own decision to "Egyptianize" and to settle in that part of Canaan that is so similar to Egypt in every respect. Here God will not intervene actively, and will not bring Lot back. Now that Lot has left his house, the barrenness of Avram and Sarai is even more acutely felt – cruelly violating the promise of seed and a great nation of descendants.

Again Avram stands up to the test, and this test parallels the former one, when Sarai was taken from him in Egypt: in both instances Avram's faith in God's promise of children is tested against a reality that denies it. But the two tests are also different from one another. In Egypt Avram is tested with a cruel and harsh violation of the promise: his wife is taken from him. But this situation was of short duration, and was corrected through immediate Divine intervention. In Canaan, Avram is tested with a much weaker violation of the Divine promise – after all, Lot is not his real son. On the other hand, Lot's decision of his own volition to leave and find himself an "Egypt" in Canaan cannot be reconciled with the promise.

We mentioned above that the word "Egypt" appears six times in the story of the descent thereto. In light of the central role of Egypt in the story, we might have expected that the number of appearances would reach seven, which is the usual number of times that a leading word appears in a biblical narrative (just as the term "wife of Avram," with reference to Sarai, appears seven times). The seventh appearance of the word does in fact finally reveal itself in the story of the separation from Lot:

And Lot lifted his eyes and saw the whole Jordan plain, that it was well watered... like the garden of God, like THE LAND OF EGYPT. (13:10)

We have already pointed out the great importance of this verse in revealing Lot's consciousness, so deeply influenced by his "Egyptian experience." In this way Egypt becomes the element uniting the two halves of the story – even stylistically.

But the crux of Avram's text in the story of Lot's parting pertains in fact to his faith in the other aspect of God's promise to him – the promise concerning the LAND, which was destined to be an inheritance for his offspring. How would this happen? After all, this land was not empty of inhabitants (12:6, 13:7). What, then, needed to be done in order to advance the realization of this Divine promise, to which the demographic situation stood in stark contrast?

Lot knows what he has to do: he has to settle in the land and to mingle with its inhabitants. Accordingly, he even selects the choicest portion of the land in which to make his home. But by this deed Lot parts ways with Avram and with his God, and cancels his status as Avram's possible heir and bearer of all of God's promises. There is an internal contradiction here: it is specifically through this parting of ways with Avram that Lot realizes for himself the promise of the inheritance of the land, and actively goes forth to take a choice portion of it. But the land has been promised to Avram's seed, and through his very act Lot removes himself from the category of being considered Avram's seed. This being the case, his possible right to the land expires, and that which he has taken has been taken from Avram and his descendants. This is an additional source of anguish to Avram, as well as an additional contradiction to the promise of the land.

But it seems that even this does not exhaust the severity of Avram's perplexity. It turns out that Lot's actions serve to sharpen the doubts and fears that have not left Avram since the

great famine that forced him to Egypt. We have already seen above that the famine was the beginning of Avram's test, at the time of the descent to Egypt. Wandering after the sheep throughout the expanses of this inhabited land appears pointless. The shaky status of the shepherd was already demonstrated to Avram when he was forced to leave the land because of the famine. Should Avram then learn a lesson from his nephew, and seek out a permanent place to settle? This would help to strengthen his hold on the land, and the process of his inheritance of it could begin. The encounter with Egypt and its successful agriculture may have increased the attraction of this option for Avram too.

Just as God saves Avram from his real distress in Egypt in the first half of the story, so He reveals Himself to him now and relieves his psychological distress. The doubts and fears that were sown in Avram's heart because of the famine and the encounter with Egypt, and the subsequent parting from Lot, all dissolve when God reveals Himself.

After Lot's departure, God tells him: "LIFT UP YOUR EYES AND SEE from the place where you are..." (14). This appears to be the precise spot where had Avram stood previously together with Lot, where we read, "AND LOT LIFTED HIS EYES AND SAW..." (10). At that time, Avram suggested to Lot that he choose for himself and his flocks either the north of the land or the south: "Is not ALL THE LAND BEFORE YOU... if you take the LEFT then I shall take the right; if you choose the RIGHT, I shall take the left" (9). But Lot ends up choosing specifically the Jordan valley which is in the EAST, and desires it as his dwelling place.

God responds to this in the continuation of His words to Avram:

...See from the place where you are – NORTHWARD, SOUTHWARD, EASTWARD and westward, for I have given ALL THE LAND THAT YOU SEE to you and your descendants FOREVER.

Lot has not diminished your inheritance in any way; his possession of the Jordan plain will be only temporary. "And I shall make YOUR SEED like the dust of the earth..." (16) – you need not worry about Lot's parting from you, for the promise of seed did not refer to him. "Get up and WALK ABOUT IN THE LAND, its length and breadth" (17) – continue your nomadic lifestyle; continue to pasture your flocks, do not allow your resolve to be weakened by the famine that forced you to leave, and by the encounter with the wealthy Egypt or by Lot's decision to change his lifestyle and to settle in the Jordan plain. Continue to walk about the entire land, for it is specifically in this way that you will assure your possession of it: "For I have given it to you."

We may summarize by saying that what unifies the two halves of our story on the level of its significance is TESTS FOR AVRAM. The events that it describes present Avram with harsh contradictions of the promise of seed and the promise of the land that God gave him in Charan, at the beginning of the parasha. In each instance Avram is tested concerning his faith in both promises, but in each half the principal test focuses on

one of them. In the descent to Egypt, Avram's main test comes when his wife is taken from him, and the possibility of establishing the offspring promised to him is cancelled. In Egypt the basis for a later test for Avram is also prepared – a test that started with the descent itself because of the famine – but the essence of this test lies in the story of Lot's parting from him. This causes Avram to experience grave doubts as to the promise of the inheritance of the land.

In the continuation of each half of the story, God intervenes and saves Avram from his distress. Then the fulfillment of the Divine promises to Avram is once again secure – until the next tests...

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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