

DEBAR TORAH by RABBI ROHDE

When Success Must Be Guaranteed—Failure is Often Doomed

Although the final destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah appears in next week's reading, the set-up for it is in this week's. The story of Abram is very much entwined with the story of his nephew Lot, Lot's settling in Sodom and Lot's descendants' later settling in nearby Moab.

Abram's righteousness is from the very first contrasted with Sodom, whose people were "evildoers and sinners to the LORD, exceedingly." Although the episodes recounted here belonged in the ancient and legendary pre-history of Israel, Sodom and its fate were forever remembered, mentioned time and time again, becoming a byword for everything which was the exact opposite of the behavior expected of Abraham's progeny, Israel, and threatening Israel with the same fate as Sodom's.

Lot chooses to settle in the plain around Sodom because of the assurance of its prosperity and fertility which its location in a well-watered, irrigated plain gave it. Within that narrow but lush plain or vale, Lot could support as much livestock as Abram could on a range of Judaeian and Samaritan hilltops. But already in our Parasha, this seeming guarantee of prosperity turns into its very opposite, the foundation for its destruction and ruin. Abram emerges out of his hilltops as a prosperous as well as a valorous and respected prince, whereas Lot only narrowly escapes utter ruin because of his uncle. We are not told exactly what put originally these "Cities of the Plain" under the domination of the distant Mesopotamian kings, nor what made them rebel. However, it can be inferred that the same seeming "assurance" of their prosperity must have made them a prized target in the eyes of their enemies, as well as giving their own denizens an exaggerated overconfidence in their own wealth and potential power. Abram, by contrast, knows that he can and must rely upon God's reward for righteousness rather than upon purely material assurances of prosperity which are often false and indeed may be the very ticket to ruin. But Lot, and indeed all of Sodom, after barely surviving by the skin of their teeth, fail to heed the lesson, setting the stage for the cataclysmic devastation which follows in next week's episode. The salvation of Lot and Sodom by Abram in this week's Parasha is thus the prequel to God's salvation of Lot and wiping out of Sodom in next week's segment.

The seemingly-assured nature of the prosperity of Sodom which its material wealth apparently gave it are the very sources of its curse and downfall. Abram had left the irrigated river-valley of the Euphrates and only lived in Egypt when famine gave him no other choice. Abraham and his descendants will live in the mountains and vales of Judea and Samaria where they will depend upon God directly for rain, rather than upon "dependable" material assurances for their prosperity. They will learn to look risk squarely in the eye, but that will teach them both coping skills for facing adversity as well as empathy for the poor and destitute among them who also face even more risk. Citizenries and societies which expect constant material guarantees of success quite often turn out more and more vile, evolving the most evil and idiosyncratic mores. Although Abram had no problem accepting rather questionable "gifts" from Pharaoh, he refused to keep the spoils of his military campaign in particular because he did not want to be known as beholden to as evil a place as Sodom, it seems.

What exactly the mores of Sodom which make them vile enough to warrant destruction is subject to conflicting interpretation, both in the Torah as well as in later prophetic books. The lack of clarity in detailing the particular sins seems to me deliberate. As a clergyman who has at times looked into trying to help the homeless, poor, and destitute strangers and even familiar brothers and sisters in our midst, I can attest to the arcane nature of the laws and mores our country and city has evolved, and how arcane requirements which try to guarantee safety for all often yield the opposite, creating more danger and risk for everyone, which then seeks rectification through yet another and more unnatural requirement and attendant procedure and etiquette. The cycle of risk-avoidance which the laws inculcate leads to predicaments and consequences which become more and more depraved. In short: Lot and his city's need for material guarantees of success becomes so addictive they cannot break away from their doom, even having experienced devastation once.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Lekh-Lekha

October 31-November 1, 2025 | 10 Marbeshvan, 5786

SCHEDULE

Kaplan: Parasha: 52 | Haftarah: 1058

Hertz: Parasha: 45 | Haftarah: 60

Candle Lighting | 5:35 pm

Evening Services | 5:45 pm | Main Sanctuary

Friday Night Lights will not meet this week.

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Kiddush | following services | *Kiddush Supporter: Faith Fogelman, in memory of her father, Theodore Watkin*

Teen Shiur will not meet this week.

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 4:45 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

Evening Services | 5:30 pm

Habdala | 6:22 pm

The choir will return next week.

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday: 4:30 pm

Monday-Thursday (**Arbit Only**): 6:30 pm

IN CELEBRATION OF THE US SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL

And 250 Years of Jewish Life in the United States



Rabbi Soloveichik's Major Lecture Series

Upcoming Installments:

Sunday, November 9 (at Touro)

Shabbat, November 15 (at Shearith Israel)

More to follow

These lectures highlight Shearith Israel's historic personalities central to the founding and formation of our American democracy.

Stay up to date at shearithisrael.org/us-250.

A Special Weekend in Newport: November 7-9, 2025

America at 250 and the Future of the Jewish People:

Reflections on a Weekend on which we Commemorate Kristallnacht,

Mark Veterans Day, and Ponder the Future

Touro Synagogue, 72 Touro Street, Newport, RI

If any of our congregants are visiting Newport on this special Shabbat, we'd be delighted to have you join us to experience four powerful talks by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, one uplifting concert by Magevet, and an abundance of unity and togetherness.

Thinking of coming? Let us know at shearithisrael.org/newport-weekend250.

Veterans Day Program – “Beyond Chatham Square”

Thursday, November 6 | At Shearith Israel | Rev. Z. Edinger &

Special Guest Lt. Mikhael Smits, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard)

7:00 pm (after 6:30 pm Evening Services)

Hear stories of Shearith Israel congregants who have served in America's armed forces—past and present, including special guest speaker, Lt. Mikhael Smits.

In connection with the upcoming **250th anniversary of our nation's founding**, this year's presentation looks beyond the patriots buried in Chatham Square—those we honor at our annual Memorial Day ceremony—to remember and recognize veterans interred throughout all our congregational cemeteries. We'll also pay tribute to **current members** of our congregation who continue the proud legacy of service.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Adrienne & Roberto Salama**, upon the marriage of their daughter, Jessica, to Matan Kelly, in Israel.

This Sunday's **NYC Marathon** will cause heightened security and street closures. Plan your commute to the synagogue accordingly. Good luck to all our runners!

GET OUT THE VOTE

A message from Shearith Israel's "Get Out the Vote" Captain, Naftali Friedman

Early voting for the NYC election is now underway. Every member of our community must participate—our shared priorities and future are at stake.

Find your polling location here and make sure your voice is heard. Whatever the polls currently say, the outcome of this election carries significant consequences. Therefore, full participation is essential, so please encourage everyone in your network (family, friends & colleagues) to vote as well – and to do so ASAP - as early voting (with shorter lines) ensures they won't forget or accidentally miss Election Day.

Find your Poll site: <https://findmypollsite.vote.nyc>

COMING UP

Register at shearithisrael.org

Sunday Matinee with Sisterhood Returns!

Four Film Discussions on Select Sundays

THIS Sunday, November 2 | 4:00 pm | Hill 24 Doesn't Answer (1955)

Register now to receive & watch the film before our first discussion on Sunday!

Sunday December 7 | 4:00 pm | Ushpizin (2004)

Sunday, January 11 | 4:00 pm | Norman (2006)

Sunday, February 8 | 4:00 pm | The Testament (2017)

Preparing With Wisdom, Planning With Love, Strength For The Journey

A Practical & Important Healthcare Workshop for Everyone

Sponsored by the Sisterhood and the Hebra | Presented by Ematai

Sunday, November 9 | 4:00 pm

The Sisterhood and the Hebra Hased Va'Amet are partnering with Ematai (ematai.org) for this workshop on the importance of completing a health care proxy and how to navigate meaningful conversations about aging and end-of-life care with our loved ones. This interactive workshop will run for 50–60 minutes and engage participants in discussion.

MEET OUR NEW YOUTH DIRECTORS!

We are excited to announce our new Youth Directors,

Dalya Stokar and Jake Frankel!

Starting next Shabbat, November 8

Let's give Dalya and Jake a really warm welcome on their first Shabbat!

Tots through Teens, please join Jr. Congregation at 10:30 am.

Everyone, please come meet Dalya & Jake at Kiddush!

To learn about Dalya & Jake, go to shearithisrael.org/youth.