

Genesis 13 tells the story of a family in the process of falling apart. God's bountiful blessing of wealth paradoxically leads Abram and Lot, the Patriarch and his nephew, into deep conflict. Having returned to Canaan together, the two now part ways: Abram remains in the land of Canaan, while Lot departs for Sodom.

But the separation between Abram and Lot is not just geographical; it is also characterological. In the hands of the narrator, Abram and Lot become paradigms for two very different ways of perceiving and responding to abundance and wealth. Where Abram is portrayed as the man of faith and trust, able to see clearly even in the face of increasing prosperity, Lot is depicted as the opposite, a man blinded by materialism and an unquenchable hunger to acquire more. A careful reading of their story offers a remarkable window into the Torah's approach to receiving and responding to God's blessing.

Genesis 12 had informed us that there was a severe (*kaved*) famine in the land, which led to Abram's "descent" into Egypt (Gen. 12:10), where his family was rent asunder by his fear that Pharaoh would kill him and take Sarai. Genesis 13 provides a stark contrast: Although the nuance of the Hebrew is impossible to capture perfectly in translation, the text tells us that now Abram is "severely (*kaved*) wealthy" (13:2). In this chapter too, the family is torn apart, only this time the problems are induced by prosperity. In its careful choice of words, the Torah hints that if scarcity can tear families apart, so too, assuredly, can abundance. Summoned by God to head toward the Promised Land, Abram begins his journey: "Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed . . . and they set out for the land of Canaan" (Gen. 12:5). Faced with famine, Abram soon departs Canaan

and heads to Egypt. After a tempestuous sojourn there, he returns to Canaan. Subtly the text suggests that while Abram and his nephew had been on close terms in the past, by the time of their return to the land, something has come between them: "From Egypt, Abram went up into the Negev, with his wife and all he possessed, together with Lot" (13:1). "By placing [Lot] last in the list, after Abram's possessions, the text hints at a degree of estrangement."⁴³

What now stands between Abram and Lot? Read the verse closely, and it tells us: wealth and property⁴⁴ — the verse literally places the issues that drive them apart between their names. The breach between Abram and Lot is amplified in the following chapter: When Lot is taken into captivity, we learn that "the [kings of Sodom and Gomorrah] also took Lot, and his possessions, the son of Abram's brother" (Gen. 14:12). The unusual formulation is extremely suggestive: Lot's possessions are what stands in the way of his relationship with his uncle.⁴⁵

So plentiful is Abram's and Lot's wealth that "the land could not support them staying together, for their possessions were so great"; perhaps in order to emphasize that the land's resources has other claimants as well, the text adds that "the Canaanites and the Perizzites were then dwelling in the land" (Gen. 13:6–7). Abram's herdsmen and Lot's begin to quarrel. Wishing to avoid conflict, Abram speaks to Lot: "Let there be no strife between you and me, between your herdsmen and mine, for we are kinsmen" (13:8).

Genial as they are, Abram's words may convey a subtle critique of Lot. The usual word for strife in situations such as these would be *riv*, or quarrel (Gen. 13:7), but Abram speaks instead of (the linguistically closely related) *merivah*, or strife (13:8). Bible scholar Nahum Sarna notes that "it cannot be fortuitous that all other usages of *merivah* in biblical Hebrew refer exclusively to the controversies and grumblings of the people against their leader and against God over the lack of water during the wilderness wanderings." Abram's choice of words may thus contain "the submerged judgment of base ingratitude on the part of Lot."⁴⁶

Nevertheless, in his offer to Lot, Abram is "magnanimous in the