

Vayeira, Rabbi David Mahler

People are often not clear about which stories are found in the text of the *Torah* and which are found in the *midrash* or *gemara*. For example, the *midrash* teaches that *Avraham* broke all the idols in his father's shop. The *midrash* also tells the tale that *Moshe's* speech impediment was caused from an incident early in his life when he burned his tongue on hot coals in *Paroh's* palace.

On the other hand, there are some fascinating scenes clearly described in the text of the *Torah*. *Hashem* clearly describes the waters of the *Yam Suf* as a wall on the left and the right of *Am Yisrael* as they walked through the dry land on their way out of Egypt. In this week's *parsha* we have another such story.

Avraham debates *Hashem*, protesting G-d that He should not destroy the evil city of *Sedom*. *Hashem* decides the city must be destroyed but *Avraham's* family will survive. Due to their impudence, *Lot's* sons-in-law were killed, but *Lot*, his wife and two daughters were told to hurry out of the city to escape the lethal downpour. Upon their exit, the angels commanded them to not look back – *Al Tabeit M'achorecha* (19:17). Yet, despite the warning of the angel, *Lot's* wife could not help herself. She looks back and turns into a pillar of salt (19:26). The *pasuk* is unequivocal. She turns into a pillar of salt.

Why the emphasis on not looking back? What would have been so bad if they peeked? The classic understanding is that they were no more righteous than those being destroyed. Don't turn back and look with some sense of superiority. You are not more virtuous than those being destroyed. The only reason you're not being swept up with everyone else is that you won the DNA lottery. You are related to *Avraham Avinu*.

The *Divrei Shmuel* of Slonim offers an alternative approach which may hit closer to home. In telling *Lot* and his family not to look back, the angel is teaching a fundamental lesson in life. When you've made mistakes, when you haven't made the grade, you've sinned or messed up, you showed poor judgement – don't look back. *Al Tabeit M'achorecha*. Tomorrow will be another day. Only look forward. If you look back, filled with regret and remorse you will paralyze yourself. You will become incapacitated. You will not have only lost the past but you'll forfeit the presence and sabotage the future.

If you want to be able to turn the corner and do better next time, don't look back. Don't beat yourself up. Do you need to turn back a bit, reflect and see where you can get better? Of course! But don't harp on the past. Don't turn around extensively. Whether *Lot's* wife felt guilty or was nostalgic about her past indiscretions and way of life is not important. What's important is that she turned into a pillar of salt.

Have you ever wondered why salt? Why not something else?

One of the major qualities of salt is that it preserves. Salt denies the ability to move forward. Salt locks in as a preservative. It holds things back from changing.

The *Divrei Shmuel* writes that if you fixate on the past – you are a pillar of salt. You will never grow, change or develop. Don't be paralyzed by your past indiscretions.

This is one of the secret weapons of the *Yetzer Hara*. We define ourselves by our past and therefore feel incapable of reaching higher, reaching for greatness.

Amazingly, The *Ohr HaChaim* (*Vayikra* 18:2) writes that the *Yetzer Hara* works even more craftily than we can imagine. As we noted, brooding over sins, regrets and shortcomings is counterproductive but not simply because we don't grow. He shares that the more we think about our transgressions and slip-ups, the more we are tempted to sin again. One's motivation might be noble, to develop remorse, but in practice it is hurtful. As we think about the deed, we relive it in our minds, increasing the probability we will do it again.

Salt fastens us in place, not allowing for movement and growth. It's the methodology of destruction.

Research shows that at least 70% of the time when we think of the past, we relive the negative aspects, not the positive ones. Most people, when they focus on the past, do not think of the great family vacations. They ignore the *nachas*, the accomplishments and successes.

The Torah doesn't espouse ignoring the past rather simply using reflection as a springboard to greater achievement. That achievement can only be attained when we are forward-thinking, anticipating the great places we'll go, influence we'll make and people we'll become.