



November 4, 2023



Parshas Vayeira

20th of Cheshvan 5784

The Human Salt Shaker

Perhaps the greatest urban legend in the history of the Land of Israel is that the Dead Sea is salty because Lot's wife, who turned into a pillar of salt, disintegrated into it. Why, in fact, did she turn into a pillar of salt?

We all know the story. The city of Sodom fell so deep into moral decay that Hashem decreed its destruction. Yet there was one inhabitant who, although flawed, merited salvation. This was Lot. The angels tasked with destroying the city stopped off at Lot's house to tell him to get out, and get out fast. As Lot and his family were leaving, the angels warned him: "When you run off, don't look back." Well, look back is exactly what Lot's wife did, and a human salt-shaker she became.

This story begs a question. What is so wrong with turning around for one second? What is the great harm in glancing backward and watching? It's not every day that a city is pummeled by a heavenly sulfur-and-fire storm. Why is it such a great sin that she stole a second to watch the historic apocalypse?

Never Look Back

I saw a powerful explanation by Reb Avigdor Miller. He says that the Torah is telling us a fundamental principle in repentance and growth: **If you want to grow, you can't look back.** You have to be a different person. You aren't the same person who ate too much. You aren't the same person who spent too much time on your phone. You aren't the same person who didn't learn enough or who spoke too much lashon hara. To grow is to shed the past and begin anew. Allowing the past to linger in our basements hinders our development. We can't possibly become a healthier eater with fast-food coupons in our pocket. We can't possibly be less attached to our phones while still subscribed to the same 347 WhatsApp statuses as before. We can't possibly be a new person if we still look to and befriend the bad habits of our past.

The angels were telling Lot, "Run for your lives and don't even glance back for a second. You are to leave here new people. Saved by the skin of your teeth. Grow. Change. Start anew."

It reminds me a little of how I used to view Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur. I used to feel slightly dejected at the end of Neilah. The gates are shutting right in my face and I'm going to drive home from shul the same guy I was last year. The gates of Heaven close right in front of my nose and I humbly walk home the same old me.

Then I heard a perspective that changed my outlook entirely. The gates of Heaven aren't closing in front of you. They are closing **behind** you! Hashem is urging us, "Quick, jump into My world and close the door behind you. Come through the gates and live with Me; you'll love it here. You'll be a new you. You'll live in My world."

Neilah isn't the end, it's the beginning. Neilah isn't the gates sending you home, it's the gates ushering you into the garden of Hashem. It is you, version 2.0. Don't be like Lot's wife and look back, look forward and step right through the gate.

Now, that is a refreshing outlook on teshuva.