

A brief trigger warning: I am going to talk about violence, including (briefly) sexual violence this evening, in the context of Torah and commentary. You are welcome to do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself. This week's parashah, Vayera, includes many famous episodes regarding the lives of Abraham and Sarah, including the angelic visitation and prediction that Sarah would bear a son, Sarah's laughter in response, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the banishment of Ishmael and the binding of Isaac.

When we discuss the destruction of Sodom, we usually discuss Abraham's famous act of chesed, mercy, as he faces God to bargain for mercy for the wicked city. But what, in fact, was the crime of the city of Sodom? The pervasive Christian interpretation is that Sodom was destroyed for homosexual acts. This Christian interpretation is reflected by the word, "Sodomy." This does have a textual basis, in the fact that when the inhabitants of the city clamor at Lot's door for him to send out his angelic visitors, they state their presumably collective intention to "know them intimately."

Jewish tradition historically understands the sin of Sodom very differently, focusing on the threat towards the strangers as indicative of a culture that goes to great lengths to deter foreigners from seeking hospitality, even to the point of threatening to rape those who do dare to come, rather than as an expression of sexual desire.

An entire folio of the Talmud Masechet Sanhedrin, page 109, is dedicated to explaining why the people of Sodom have no share in the world to come. The first anecdote refers to a culture of xenophobia:

“The people of Sodom said: Since our land produces bread, and gold dust is abundant, what use are wayfarers to us, as we can only lose by their presence? Come, let us forget the Torah of how to treat travelers in our land.” And there are hyperbolic examples of what the people would do to deter travelers, “They had beds on which they would lay their guests; when a guest was longer than the bed they would cut him, and when a guest was shorter than the bed they would stretch him.”

So the commentary makes explicit the implications of the behavior of the citizens of Sodom. There is no sexual interest in the strangers, only a desire to make the city so famously unwelcoming that strangers will not be tempted to come, whether through rape or torture. If they had thought of the strategy of separating children from parents and keeping them in separate detention facilities, they presumably would have lauded that as well.

But the commentary does not just portray a culture of distinct unwelcome, but rather a culture wherein the very norms of justice and mercy are subverted. The increasingly hyperbolic examples of the “justice” in Sodom include: “The people of Sodom would say: Anyone who has one ox shall herd the city’s oxen for one day. Anyone who does not have any oxen shall herd the city’s oxen for two days.” And, “Furthermore, they declared in Sodom: Let one who crosses on a ferry give one dinar as payment; let one who does not cross on a ferry, but walks in the river, give two dinars.”

In the rabbinic imagination, these are basically tall-tales, extreme conjectures about how a hypothetical, now-extinct unjust society would behave. The rabbis tell these stories because according to their common sense, *no-one* would actually do such a thing. No one would actually make the poor pay more to use a lesser service than the rich! No one would actually make the poor labor harder, without reward, than the rich! The rabbis could only imagine mythically evil people legislating such practices.

You might be thinking the same thought as I – the more I study the rabbinic take on Sodom, **the less I can shake the suspicion that I currently live in Sodom.**

Especially because Sodom is not just distinguished by an active hostility towards outsiders, or even overt injustice, but a certain subtle attitude, mentioned as an aside in Pirkei Avot 5:10, which teaches: “There are four temperaments among humanity: one says "what is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours" -- that's an [average] temperament, **but there are some who say that is *midat S'dom*, the temperament of Sodom.** [Another says] "what is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" – that’s a fool. [A third type says] "what is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours" -- [that's a] pious person. [A final type says] "what is yours is mine, and what is mine is mine" -- [that's a] wicked person.”

Now you would think, based on all of the previous hyperboles, that Pirkei Avot would definite *Midat S'dom*, the temperament of Sodom, as the last wicked character who wants everything for him or herself. But in fact, Pirkei Avot suggests, the temperament of Sodom is more insidious. Even just the idea that “What’s mine is mine,” and let everyone else have what is theirs, is the temperament of Sodom.

Because of course, in the whole scheme of Torah, we are taught over and over again that what is mine is *not* mine – what’s mine comes from God, it’s only by grace that I could have what I have, and I could just as easily not have it – and so I owe a large portion of it to the poor and to the greater communal good. That is Torah consciousness.

In contrast, as Bartenura teaches: [the problem with saying “what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours”] is since one gets accustomed to this, one will not want to give benefit to one’s fellow - even with something that benefits another without causing any loss to the first. And this was the temperament of Sodom - as they were intending to stop sojourners from among them, even though the land was broad-shouldered in front of them and they did not lack anything.

In other words, once we think “what’s mine is mine,” we think that we have the right to stop others from accessing “what’s mine,” even if they need it, or even if our sharing will do ourselves no harm. This applies to land, money, and less tangible resources such as love or community. The fact that this attitude is both described as the average temperament, and as the basis of the temperament of *Sdom*, shows how a tendency that is really a pervasive part of the human condition can easily be warped into violence.

So if we do in fact, live in *Sdom*, at first glance, this parashah is not too hopeful for us. This society of Sodom is annihilated in an angelic conflagration.

But then there is the premise, argued eloquently by Abraham, that the guilty can be redeemed by a handful of innocents within the city – even as few as 10 in an entire city.

What does it mean to be innocent within the city? Commentator Ibn Ezra writes, it means people who publicly display their fear of Heaven, that is to say, their convictions. As Lucy Goldenberg wrote in her drash on this parashah last year, “the innocent are those who don’t just secretly wish things were different; they are people who get out into the public and do something about the problem: upstanders.”

We may be living in a society that looks increasingly like Sodom in its view of justice and in its view of foreigners, but as long as even a minyan of us are publicly fighting those tendencies, there is hope that we may yet be redeemed. And the fact that the minimum is 10, a minyan, is telling: we need each other. We cannot just be voting right, and donating right, and taking action within our own domains. Redemption is possible when we are out there, offering an alternative vision of how our society could be.

May we merit that redemption.

Shabbat shalom.