

## Drash on Parashat VaYera

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Parashat VaYera is found about a third of the way through the first Book of the Torah, Bereshit (Genesis in English Bibles). The Jewish name of the book means *In The Beginning* and the English name means *origin* or *mode of formation*, in this case, of the Universe as well as the Jewish people.

The name of this parashat in English is *And He Appeared* (not to be confused with *And I Appeared*, the English title of the parashat beginning in Exodus 6 verse 3). According to *Wikipedia*, today's parashat:

[...] tells the stories of [Abraham's three visitors](#) and [Abraham's bargaining with God over Sodom and Gomorrah](#), [Lot's two visitors](#) and [Lot's bargaining with the Sodomites](#), the flight of Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, how Lot's daughters became pregnant by their father, how Abraham once again [passed off his wife Sarah](#) as his sister, the birth of [Isaac](#), the expulsion of [Hagar](#), disputes over wells, and the [binding of Isaac](#) (הַקְּדָה, the *Akedah*).

In preparing this drash, I was drawn to the fate of the sometimes called *Cities of the Plain*.

Yah-a-mod, Jasmine ben Vernon.

Our Torah reading is Genesis 19 verses 23-25 and 27-28 (TLV):

**23** The moment the sun rose upon the land, Lot entered Zoar, **24** and **ADONAI** rained sulfur and fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah from **ADONAI** out of the sky. **25** So He demolished these cities and the whole surrounding area, all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground. [...] **27** Now Abraham rose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before **ADONAI**, **28** and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward the entire land of the surrounding area, and saw, behold, the smoke of the land ascended like smoke from a furnace.

That place where Abraham interceded for those cities is a few miles northeast of Hebron, on the eastern edge of a plateau more than a half mile above sea level. From there the terrain slopes down to the east for about thirty miles to the Dead Sea which is more than a quarter mile below sea level, thus the vertical drop approaches one mile. Within this lowest valley of the planet, and to the south of the Dead Sea, is a plain that in Abraham's time was a well-watered jewel of the Fertile Crescent. Archaeologists have found there evidence that a wide variety of crops were cultivated as recently as the conclusion of the Early Bronze Age (Abraham's era). They have also found evidence of contemporaneous ore extraction including prized bitumen, a sulfurous petroleum substance, which was available in some places right on the surface. The natural wealth of this region was tremendous. Geologists found a fault that runs north/south along the eastern edge of the valley along with evidence of a sudden uplift on one side of the fault during Abraham's time that in some places exceeded a hundred feet. It is theorized a city-wall-destroying earthquake "overthrew" the region while causing subterranean bitumen deposits to

be ejected directly upwards, ignited as they passed the surface, which then fell across the region. Excavations within the area have revealed many buildings dated to Abraham's era that were clearly destroyed by fire originating on the roofs. The destruction by fire at that moment in time was found to be spread throughout the plain. No archaeological evidence thus far discovered suggests those cities were repopulated afterwards.

Two score and three years ago (that's 43 years ago; i.e., 1975) the first contemporaneous mention of Sodom not contained in Jewish artifacts was discovered in northern Syria. Within the ancient city of Ebla was unearthed an annotated map apparently of a trade route that placed the city just south of the Dead Sea along the eastern edge of the valley, consistent with the archaeological excavations. Thus the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has somewhat recently in history been clearly revealed to be a historical event.

Abraham was not the only soul to observe the aftermath of this cataclysm, of course. It became widely known and well-confirmed throughout the Middle East. It probably compelled most folks to wonder, "Could that happen to me?" or even, "Should that happen to me?" The supposition that the event was an act of Divine Judgment was apparently commonly accepted, as the Torah says The LORD intended. It seems the negative character reputation of those cities was likewise accepted commonly. While The Torah is not entirely clear what the sins of the cities were, subsequent Scriptures fill us in more.

Yah-a-mod, Ralph ben Ralph.

Our Haftarah reading is Ezekiel 35 verses 48-50 and 56-57 (TLV). The entire chapter is directed at Jerusalem, which is said to make Sodom appear righteous by comparison. I am certain most of us are familiar with the judgment that fell upon Jerusalem that included the destruction of the first Temple.

**48 "As I live"—it is a declaration of ADONAI—"your sister Sodom with her daughters have not done as you have done, you and your daughters. 49 Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: pride, gluttony, and careless ease—so had she and her daughters—and she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. 50 So they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.**

**56 "Was not your sister Sodom an object of scorn to you in the day of your pride, 57 before your own wickedness was exposed? Now you have become an object of scorn for the daughters of Aram and all that surround her, for the daughters of the Philistines, for all around who despise you.**

Note how sexual sin is not preeminent in this list. Anecdotes of lack of regard and even harsh cruelty for strangers and the less fortunate by the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah are described in the Talmud, the Targums, and the Apocryphal literature (note that in Tikkun congregations these sources are not deemed authoritative *vis-à-vis* the Tenach, and in some cases are considered untruthful). These stories were likely common knowledge within much of the Jewish community at the time of Yeshua's birth. Alas, I have not time to explore them.

Second Peter chapter 2 and the Book of Jude, which reference other common knowledge of the period, also mention the sins of these cities. I'll quote Jude verses 5-7 which present three examples of serious judgment:

**5 Now I wish to remind you—though you have come to know all things—that the Lord, once having saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. 6 And the angels—who did not keep their own position of authority but deserted their proper place—He has kept in everlasting shackles under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great Day. 7 In the same way as these angels, Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them—having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after a different sort of flesh—are displayed as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire.**

What angels have been kept in everlasting shackles awaiting the Day of Judgment? Hoo, boy. I have not the time to unpack this highly controversial passage and its connection to “a different sort of flesh.” Mayhap Roeh Ralph will bless us with his considered opinion at some point. For this drash, it will have to suffice to note that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of divine judgment with extreme prejudice. A wise person will obviously want to avoid receiving such a sentence. Yet the extreme prejudice those people incurred is not as bad as it gets.

Yah-a-mod, Elaine ben Moshe.

Hear the Words of Yeshua as recorded in Matthew 10 verses 11-15 as He was instructing the twelve prior to sending them out to preach the Gospel:

**11 “Whatever town or village you shall enter, find out who in it is worthy and stay there until you leave. 12 As you come into the house, greet it. 13 If the household is worthy, let your *shalom* come upon it. But if it’s not worthy, let your *shalom* return to you. 14 And whoever will not receive you or listen to your words, as you leave that house or that town, shake the dust off your feet. 15 Amen, I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment than for that town.**

So if a couple strangers knock on your door, start talking about repentance and the Kingdom of God, but end up leaving and wiggling their feet in the process, and everyone in your town has the same experience, then come Judgment Day you’re all destined to suffer something worse than will the truly evil people of Sodom and Gomorrah? On what possible basis?

Be wary of verses taken out of context. After sending the six pairs off on their ministry practica, Yeshua continued to “teach and preach,” during which He received and answered John the Immerser’s question. After sending John’s disciples back to report what was going on, Yeshua started teaching the crowd about John and the Kingdom, including Matthew 11 verses 20-24:

**20 Then Yeshua began to denounce the towns where most of His miracles had happened, because they did not turn from their sins. 21 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have turned long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 Nevertheless I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the Day of Judgment than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum? Will you be lifted up to heaven? No, you will go down to *Sheol*! For if the miracles done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. 24 Nevertheless I tell you that it will be**

**more bearable for the land of Sodom on the Day of Judgment than for you."**

Ah! There's an assumption in the first passage that corroborative signs and wonders will accompany the door-to-door ministry.

What I perceive I'm supposed to make plain in this drash is taken from the verse-by-verse commentary of John Gill, an 18<sup>th</sup> Century British Baptist pastor and notable scholar of Hebrew and Jewish writings. I am slightly abridging and modernizing what he wrote about Matthew 10 verse 15 which ended the first passage read:

The inhabitants of the land of Sodom and Gomorrha [...] were very notorious and abominable sinners, so their temporal punishment was well known, exemplary and awful, [...] but their future damnation is here regarded, of which the Jews made no doubt [here quoting the Mishna:]

**``the men of Sodom have no part in the world to come; as it is said, ( [in] [Genesis 13:13](#)) "the men of Sodom were wicked, and sinners, before the Lord exceedingly": they were "wicked" in this world, and "sinners" in the world to come;''**

[unquote ... Matthew 10:15 presents] their double punishment in this and the other world. But though their punishment was very tremendous, and they will suffer also "the vengeance of eternal fire", as Jude says; yet, their punishment will be milder, and more tolerable, than that of the inhabitants of such a city that rejects the Gospel of the grace of God[. A]s there are degrees in sinning, for all sins are not alike [...] so there will be degrees in suffering[. T]he sins of those that are favoured with the Gospel are greater than those who only have had the light of nature, and so their torments will be greater. [...] see Lamentations chapter 4 verse 6 which is thus paraphrased by the Targumist[...]:

**``the sin of the congregation of my people is greater than the sin of Sodom, which was overturned in a moment; and there dwelt no prophets in it to prophesy, and turn it to repentance.''**

Here ends John Gill's point of view.

So what does this mean to us—we who have listened intently to drashes and full sermons in this congregation and at Tikkun conferences and seen signs and wonders following? Clearly, we have received exceptionally bright illumination and so must be exceptionally accountable for what we do and do not do with it, making the stakes for us in the age to come exceptionally high. Are we stalks of wheat or tares? As Keith Green sang, "You'd better know now, don't just be hopin'." And as Paul said in II Corinthians 13 verse 5:

**5 Test yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Examine yourselves! Or don't you know yourselves—that Messiah *Yeshua* is in you? Unless of course you failed the test.**

If we need another clue about the nature of this test, well, what kind of fruit is your life producing? As Yeshua said, "To him who has ears to hear, let him hear." And, yes, I *am* preaching to myself as well.

The next parashat is *Chayei Sarah* and covers Genesis chapter 23 verse 1 through chapter 25 verse 18.