

# HEBRON TO SODOM

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

## ***Parashat Vayera – From Hebron to Sodom***

***Yitzchak Etshalom***

### ***Dear Haverim,***

This is a chapter from the new, revised and significantly expanded volume of *Between the Lines of the Bible*, due out in stores and online early next week.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A significant tool of interpretation that was always recognized by the classical commentators but has become more formalized and systematized in the last century is the identification of a *leitwort* or key word (in Hebrew, *Milah Manhah*), which is an unusual word that appears within a literary unit with great frequency. Experience bears out that this word will invariably appear seven (or a multiple of seven) times within the unit. For example, the key word *Tov* (good) appears seven times within the first Creation story; the root *s b t* (meaning "rest") appears seven times in the passage regarding the Sabbath in Exodus 31; the word *Ben* (son) appears seven times in the opening section of the book of Samuel. In each of these cases, the *leitwort* serves to underscore the subtext of the passage. In the three examples cited here, the subtexts are: the essential goodness to God's world as He created it; the entire purpose of the framework of the Sabbath as a cessation from labor; and the exposition of the opening passages in the book of Samuel are all focused on Hannah's desire for a son.

In many cases, identifying a *leitwort* (or several – there may be more than one in a section; for

instance, the final literary unit in the Torah, Moses's death, contains three key words: Moses, the Land of Israel, and the nation) only serves to confirm that which is abundantly clear in the text. In other cases, it may reveal that we are focusing on the wrong subject or event and should be paying attention elsewhere.

This chapter on the destruction of Sodom will provide a vivid example of the latter, where a careful read of the story and identification of the *leitwort* provide an unexpected and new perspective on the story. One ancillary tool that will be used here is the identification and demarcation of the literary unit, such that we can divine its parameters and identify structures within.

## **THE PROBLEM**

The story of the destruction of Sodom, which properly encompasses *Perakim* 18 and 19 in Genesis, opens with a scene as famous as it is difficult. Abraham, recently self-circumcised into the covenant, is sitting at his tent-opening in the heat of the day when God appears to him. At that point, the text becomes hard to decipher. Is the appearance of God made manifest through the vision of three men coming to visit, to whom Abraham shows his storied hospitality (as Maimonides explains)? Or is God's visit interrupted by the "real world" intrusion of three strangers, who later prove to be His own agents, who come to Abraham's tent? In any case, the opening scene seems to be focused on the "glad tidings" of a miraculous birth — one year hence — of a son to Abraham and Sarah. Sarah's laughter foreshadows the name of that long-awaited son — Isaac.

Yet, the entire visitation episode is, from a broader view, entirely unnecessary. In the previous scene (*Perek* 17), when Abraham was commanded to enter the covenant and to change his name as well as the name by which he called his wife (see Malbim at 17:15), he was promised a son with Sarah and that son's name was already given: "But My covenant will I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time in the next year." (17:21)

Not only is his name given, Abraham is also told the date of the birth; all of the information imparted by the angelic guests was already given to him. What need was there for them to visit?

Although a significant number of "detail" questions can be raised regarding the "annunciation," I'd like to direct attention to the rest of the story as it unfolds. In order to do that, we first have to clarify where this story ends.

## **FROM ABRAHAM'S TENT TO THE CAVE AT ZOAR**

Even though the seventy-one verses that comprise *Perakim* 18 and 19 make up two full chapters and are conventionally broken into more than three separate readings ("*Aliyot*"), they are one paragraph in the Masoretic text. In other words, the only division that is inherent in the text — the breakdown into *Parashot* — defines this sequence of scenes, a veritable travelogue that begins and ends in the mountain country but descends to the topographical and moral abyss of Sodom, as one literary unit. As such, I would like to assay the entire unit and ask several overarching questions on the sequence.

In addition to the first question regarding the telos of the angelic visit, the famed negotiation over the fate of Sodom (which makes up the latter half of *Perek* 18) is also burdened by some glaring difficulties.

Abraham presented the foundation of his argument:

"Will You also destroy the *Tzaddik* with the wicked?... Be it far from You to do after this manner, to slay the *Tzaddik* with the wicked; and that the *Tzaddik* should be as the wicked, be it far from You; Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (18:23–25)

(I have deliberately avoided translating *Tzaddik* for now ; we will return to the meaning of this word later on.)

At that point, it is reasonable that Abraham should have pointed to the possibility of there being one *Tzaddik* in the city, for God's justice would just as surely be tarnished if one person were to be wrongly punished as if that fate were to befall fifty. Why does he begin at fifty, and only negotiate down as far as ten?

In addition, the premise of his negotiation is shaky: why would Abraham think that there were any *Tzaddikim* in Sodom? When Lot moved to that district, the text told us that "the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against Hashem exceedingly" (13:13); why would he think that suddenly there would be any *Tzaddikim*? However we may translate the term, it doesn't jibe with "wicked and sinners."

Once we move to the next *Perek*, and the furthest descent of the travelogue, we are assailed by more questions. Why did the angels enter the city of Sodom at all? If their purpose was to save Lot (and members of his family), why send two? The Midrash (quoted by Rashi ad loc.) makes much of the notion of each angel having a unique mission, so there was only need for one angel to rescue the fortunate ones. Why send two angels?

One final question in Sodom: The deal struck with God was that if there were ten *Tzaddikim* in

Sodom, the city would be spared. Where did the angels — or anyone else — complete the search and find the city wanting? When they entered Lot's house and were pursued by an angry mob, there was no evidence that there weren't *Tzaddikim* who didn't participate in the attempted gang-rape of the visitors? If we posit that the angels had the omniscience of their Master, then the entire visit is unnecessary, as is God's refrain in the negotiations "If I find in Sodom . . ."

As we continue to follow Lot, his wife and daughters, and their angelic guide out of the city, the band of refugees is charged not to look back; when Lot's wife fails to heed the command, she becomes a pillar of salt (19:26, but see Gersonides ad loc.). Yet, in the next verses, we read that Abraham gazed at the city and watched as the smoke rose. This interjection is odd on several accounts:

- Why does the text abruptly switch its focus, for a mere three verses, from Lot on his way from Sodom to Zoar to Abraham standing on Mount Hebron?
- Why are the refugees forbidden from looking back as the city falls, with such dire consequences, while Abraham may gaze, undisturbed and unaffected?
- Verse 29 — the end of the interjection — states: "And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt." Why is Abraham mentioned here in conjunction with Lot's salvation? If there was any need to mention Abraham's role in saving Lot (yet again, see 14:16), it should have been presented either at verse 12 when the angels reveal their plan to Lot, or after Lot is rescued and safely housed in Zoar.

The end of this long narrative takes us to the cave in Zoar, where Lot's daughters get their father drunk and, on successive nights, seduce him in order to create some progeny for themselves in their errant belief that the world has been destroyed. In concocting the plan, the elder daughter says to her sister, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth." (v. 31)

What is the significance of his age here? It seems a gratuitous remark, considering that if, indeed, there are no men left in the world, they would need to act immediately even if their father were young.

In summary, we have seven questions regarding this series of subplots that comprise one story:

- What is the purpose of the angelic visitation to Abraham?
- What are we to make of the negotiations over Sodom?
- Why do the angels enter the city at all?
- When is the search for ten *Tzaddikim* completed — in failure — such that the fate of the city was sealed?
- Why is there a mention of Abraham's gazing at the city?
- Why is Abraham's role in saving Lot placed (awkwardly) in the middle of the description of Lot's flight to safety?

- Why does Lot's elder daughter declare "our father is old"?

Before we can solve the particulars, we need to attend to the unity, structure, and intra-connection of the components of this unit of seventy-one verses.

## **THE UNITY OF THE NARRATIVE**

*I recommend following this section with text in hand.*

Although the story begins in Hebron and ends in Zoar, there is a circle that nearly becomes closed by the end of the passages. The narrative begins in the mountainous region of Judea, abruptly descends (in more ways than one) to the lowest point of human civilization, and then returns up to the mountainous area overlooking the formerly fertile plain of Sodom (see 19:30, "And Lot went up out of Zoar, and dwelt in the mountain . . ."). This is but one piece of the integrity of the unit.

A close look at the unit reveals that there are two sequences here that mirror each other in an inverted manner.

### **1. Birth**

A: (18:1–15) The story begins with the arrival of three people (= angels), to a place (Hebron) where there will be the birth of a child, whose name (*Yitzhak*) will be a deliberate play on words (*Midrash Shem*) associated with the events related to his conception (Abraham and Sarah's laughter), and a repast (food) is served at that place.

A': (19:30–38) The story ends with the arrival of three people (Lot and his two daughters) to a place (the cave above Zoar) where there will be the birth of two children, whose names (Moab, ben-Ami) are a deliberate play on words associated with the events related to his conception (Moab = *Me'Av* [from the father]; *Ben-Ami* [son of my nation]), and a repast (wine) is served there.

I would like to propose that this is why the text credits the daughter with the seemingly superfluous statement "our father is old"; it further strengthens the parallel with the annunciation at Abraham's tent, where Sarah thinks "my lord (= husband) being old . . ." (18:12) Yet note the stark differences between the two scenes, drawn together to show us how very different they are.

Abraham receives his three visitors during the day, in the open, with a meal that consists of

everything but wine, in a state of total consciousness. (According to Maimonides, this visitation was a prophecy and never took place in the real world, and there is no higher state of consciousness than prophecy.) The astounding birth of this child will be the source of blessing to the world (note 12:2 and 17:21).

The three refugees act at night, in a cave, with a meal that consists (as far as we are told) only of wine, in a state of such total unconsciousness that Lot is able to be “fooled” again the next night.

I would like to propose that this is the purpose of the angelic visit to Abraham. There is no need to inform him of that which he already knows; rather, that visit is presented to contrast it with the horrible and abominable mirror scene at the end of the narrative. The purpose of this contrast will be addressed in the last section of this chapter.

This is, in addition, the reason for the gratuitous addition of the phrase “*v’avinu zaken*” (our father is old) spoken by the older daughter — it serves to bolster the parallel with the annunciation in Hebron where Sarah accurately and pointedly reacts to the glad tidings with “my lord being old . . . .”

(I am deliberately eliding sections B and B’ as they serve as “interludes” and will be highlighted last.)

## 1. The Fate of Sodom

C: (18:20–33) The famous negotiation over the fate of Sodom takes up the end of this chapter and, as noted earlier, is beset with several general difficulties, in addition to all of the specific issues addressed by the *Rishonim*.

In this section, there is a *leitwort* that appears seven times: *Tzaddik*. Note how cleverly this word is elided in the “lower numbers” in order to preserve the sevenfold repetition.

In Rabbinic and modern Hebrew, a *Tzaddik* is a “righteous person,” that is, someone whose behavior is exemplary and whose piety is unquestioned. This is not the case in Biblical Hebrew, where the word, simply put, means “innocent.” For example, the passage introducing court procedures and “lashes” states “by justifying the *Tzaddik* and condemning the wicked” (Deuteronomy 25:1), clearly meaning “innocent.” When David reacts unfavorably to the confession of the murder of Ish-bosheth by Rechab and Baanah (II Samuel 4:6), he accuses them of killing an “*ish tzaddik* on his bed.” He certainly does not mean to elevate Saul’s remaining son to sainthood, which is irrelevant to the dialogue in any case, but to accuse them of killing an innocent man on his own bed. (i.e., not in self-defense or on the battlefield).

(This meaning is only meant when applied to humans; when God is called *Tzaddik* (e.g., Deuteronomy 32:4), the meaning there is certainly nobler than “innocent.”)

What, then, was Abraham using as his argument against the destruction of Sodom? The notion that God, as "judge of the earth" (Whom Abraham had been publicizing these many years) would violate His own reputation by destroying those who were innocent along with the guilty? Why didn't he then point to the possibility of there being *one* innocent person in Sodom, thereby saving the town?

There was a history to the destruction of the place in spite of innocent people being there. Noah is told by God that "I have found you to be a *Tzaddik* before Me in this generation" (Genesis 7:1); again, the simplest meaning is that Noah is simply innocent of the crimes of the generation and, as such, does not merit their fate. His ignominious end (to which we will return further on) seems to testify to his being less than pious; but he is not deserving of the destruction rained upon the generation of the Flood.

How did God serve His justice here? He destroyed the place and rescued the innocent. He "plucked" the innocent from the doomed place and kept him (and his family) safe while destruction rained down.

As such, Abraham, who may have harbored hopes that after these many years in Sodom, his nephew and former apprentice Lot may have influenced some of the sinning citizenry to give up their evil ways, raises that very possibility with God. If there is a large group of innocent folks, justice will be better served by punishing the wicked alone and leaving the innocent in their place. The reputation of justice (as opposed to the capricious judgment accorded to the pagan gods — compare the Noah story with that of Utnapishtim in the Epic of Gilgamesh) will not be served if a town with a sizeable population innocent of the crimes leading to the "terrible cry" that is emanating from the town is utterly destroyed and its innocent residents are displaced and made into refugees.

God allows for the possibility that there are fifty innocent people there, and that He will spare the town "for their sake" (i.e., so that they not suffer the hardships mentioned above).

The negotiations end at ten because the last group of innocents that was spared totaled just under ten (Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives, all evidently innocent as they were saved) and their place (the world) was not spared for their sake.

The word "*Tzaddik*" is the key word of this section, because it is the possibility of there existing a community of innocents that is the linchpin of Abraham's pleas.

By the way, there is another *leitwort* in this section — *Matzo* (to find). It should be clear why this word also appears exactly seven times — the entire enterprise of the Divine investigation into Sodom depends on "finding" a group of innocent people.

C': (19:1-26) In the mirror section with which *Perek* 19 begins, the fate of Sodom, negotiated in section C, is sealed. The messengers of God come into Sodom with one mission — to search for innocent people. They expedite the search by entering the city and poking at its Achilles' heel. As the prophet Ezekiel points out (16:49), and as is repeated many times in Midrashic literature, the city had a

reputation for not taking care of the "other" (i.e., the outsider, the destitute, etc.). In order to test the guilt of the town, they fall upon the goodwill of others, and only Lot brings them into the house. When the townsfolk surround the house, making their abominable demands on Lot regarding his guests, Lot goes out and offers them a substitute "plaything" for the night — his own two daughters. At this point, the angels pull Lot in, saving his life, and tell him that they are going to destroy the town; again, where is the search for the innocent?

We err if we think that it is possible to live in a town where such terrible things are initiated by a mob and those who refuse to participate — but continue to reside there — are considered "innocent." To be innocent, one must publicly and obviously do what is possible to stop such abominable behavior, or, at the very least, loudly and clearly protest it.

When the angels found that no member of the town was making any attempt to stop the mob, it was a clear sign that there weren't ten innocent people; there wasn't even one. (We will look at Lot's "innocence" later on.)

Whereas the first half of this pair carries the Abrahamic optimism that there may be some *Tzaddikim* in Sodom, the mirror story that takes place in Sodom bares the city's true nature. Once the mob has been stilled by the angels, the judgment of the city is final and the only obstacle in the way of its destruction is the presence of Lot and his kin.

We still have a few loose ends to tie up — and section "B" to look at.

## 1. Abraham

B: (18:16–19) This somewhat awkward interlude, following Abraham's escorting his guests towards the mountaintop overlooking the lush valley of Sodom (and seemingly being a Divine response to Abraham's hospitality and the self-same act of escorting the guests), highlights the great promise of Abraham and the "responsibility" God "feels" towards His chosen one. As this Divine "rumination" is expressed, the angels are looking down at Sodom (v. 16).

B': (19:27–29) In an even more awkward interjection, the text leaves Lot on his way up to Zoar and returns to the hills of Hebron, where Abraham is watching the destruction. God remembers Abraham and, as a result, sends Lot away from Sodom.

I believe that the unusual location of this passage is justified by what it accomplishes within the unified narrative. Just as the transition from Hebron down to Sodom is broken up with a mention of Abraham's greatness, so the return move from Sodom up towards Hebron has a parallel refocusing.

The "awkwardness" of these mentions of Abraham highlights that even though the major focus of



the events in these seventy-one verses is the fate of Sodom, the real "star" of these chapters is Abraham. We will comment on this in the final section of the chapter.

We can now turn our attention to Lot (and his salty wife) and the final tally of *Tzaddikim* in the city. Conventional wisdom holds that there were three or four innocents in Sodom: Lot, his two unmarried daughters and, perhaps, his wife. I would like to propose that there were none at all; I believe that this is borne out by a careful reading of the verses.

There is a clear parallel between the stories of Noah and Lot; both are spared, along with members of their family, from Divine punishment that destroys their home. Indeed, the final picture we are given of each of them is that of a drunk being shamed by his own children.

But, the parallel falls short of totality. When God turns His attention to the ark and begins to cause the waters to recede, He "remembers Noah" (8:1) and, as a result, slows the waters and begins the process that will lead to his exodus from the ark.

Why does God spare Lot? "And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, that *God remembered Abraham*, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow . . ." (19:29) Lot was no better than his neighbors, as is evidenced by his shameful behavior outside of his door. He is saved not by his own innocence, but by the merit of his uncle, brother-in-law, and former patron, Abraham.

This is why none of his entourage was allowed to look at the destruction; one may only look "down" at God's justice if one is truly raised above the status of the guilty. The immediate mention of Abraham gazing at the city should be enough to underscore this point; in the parallel section (B), the angels also gaze down, further strengthening the distinction between the innocent, who may look, and the guilty who are spared through no merit of their own, who may not. (Violation of this norm turns one into the very vehicle of the punishment, in this case, salt.)

## **ABRAHAM**

We have responded to all seven questions posed above; yet we cannot leave our gaze down at Sodom without noting the role of Abraham in this story. As noted earlier, a superficial reading of these two chapters places the focus in and about Sodom; a more careful reading leaves us with the conclusion that the real focus is Abraham. Why else would the text "jerk" us away from Lot's travels to refocus on Abraham and his prayerful gaze at the horrible destruction raining down from heaven?

Not only is Abraham's hospitality set against the terrible norms of Sodom, but the elevation of Abraham from chieftain to "prince of God" (*Perek 23*) seems to take place within these *Perakim*. Whereas Abraham's only interactions with other leaders had been tense (e.g., in Egypt and at the

détente with the king of Sodom), from here on his power and stature are raised significantly. (Compare Abimelech's invitation in *Perek* 20 to Abraham's expulsion from Egypt at the end of *Perek* 12.)

The many contrasts against which Abraham is shown favorably, beginning with the annunciation (against the shameful birth of Moab and Ben-Ami), continuing with his pleading for the *Tzaddikim* (against the horrible treatment of the innocent wayfarers), and concluding with his merit, which spares Lot and his daughters (who have no merit of their own) serves to underscore the august and noble nature of our first father. Is it any surprise, then, that Abraham's name appears fourteen times throughout this narrative? (Compare this to the fourteen mentions of Moses at his consecration at Sinai in Exodus 3:1–4:17, and the twenty-one mentions of Samuel at his inauguration in I Samuel 3.)

### **AFTERWORD**

By identifying the parameters of the literary unit, we are able to discern structures that help us clarify the subtext. In addition, once we have the contours of the unit clear, we can identify those words that repeat and stress certain personalities, themes, or events such that the *leitwort* informs our understanding of the text.

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