

Parshat HaShavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

## PARASHAT VAYERA

The Salvation of Lot

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On the face of it, it seems that the purpose of the angels' visit to Sedom is both to save Lot and to destroy the city (hence two angels). But, in fact, there is an even more primary task for which they are sent to Sedom. At first God says: "Let Me descend and I shall see whether they have done altogether as its cry that comes to Me, and if not, I will know" (18:21). The act of "descending" here hints at a kind of examination; it is as if God must, as it were, leave the high heavens and go down to Sedom in order to examine the situation in the city at close quarters.

Chazal understand this implication, ruling on the basis of this verse that "A judge may rule, in a capital case, only on the basis of eye-witness accounts" (Rashi on 18:21). Where is this Divine intention realized? Where does this "descent" take place? The answer lies in a reading of chapter 19 as a direct continuation of chapter 18; in other words, the dispatch of the angels to Sedom is, first and foremost, meant as a test and examination of the state that the city is in. If the angels find at least ten righteous people there, the entire city will be saved; if there are not enough righteous people, the city will be destroyed.

Thus, when we read of the angels reaching Sedom, the tension is palpable: how many righteous people will the angels encounter? Will they have the power to save an entire city?

In light of the above, we can understand one of the most obvious differences between the visit of the angels to Avraham (chapter 18) and their visit to Lot (chapter 19). When Avraham runs towards his guests and bows before them, he invites them to his tent: "Let a little water be brought, that you may wash your feet" (18:4). The angels agree willingly to his invitation: "They said: Do, then, as you have spoken" (18:5). In contrast, when Lot bows before his guests and invites them to his home ("Stay the night, and wash your feet"), the angels decline quite firmly: "No, for we shall stay the night in the street" (19:2). Only after Lot "pleads with them greatly" do they concede and turn to his house.

Rashi (ad loc.) quotes Chazal (Bereishit Rabba, parasha 3), who deduce from this difference that "One does not refuse a great person (= Avraham), but one may refuse a lesser one (= Lot)." But the reason for the angels' refusal to enter Lot's house is quite simple: how are they to inspect the city and calculate the number of righteous people who inhabit it from inside Lot's house? They specify, in their answer to Lot, that they wish to sleep in the street, a public place where they will be able to observe the culture and behavior of the local population. There was no necessity for this when they visited Avraham, to whom they were sent as God's agents to pass on good news.

However – ironically – the inhabitants of Sedom succeed in demonstrating to the angels what the culture of the city is like even while they are in Lot's house. The text specifies that around

the house there gathered "the people of the city / the people of Sedom / both young and old / all the people / from every quarter" (19:4). These five labels for the inhabitants of Sedom, mentioned consecutively in a single verse, represent a rare phenomenon in Tanakh. The intention of the text seems to be to solve the question of the number of righteous people living in Sedom. All the inhabitants of the city, "from young to old", clamoring outside to abuse Lot's guests, provide the answer to Avraham's question in the previous chapter: "Perhaps there are fifty righteous people in the city?" There aren't fifty; there aren't even ten. The number of righteous people in Sedom equals the number of members of the household who take upon themselves to care for the guests who have arrived in the city, but they are too few to save Sedom.

But if this is so, then it is quite surprising that Lot himself is saved. Upon reading the conversation between God and Avraham about the overturning of Sedom (chapter 18), it appeared that if there were not even ten righteous people in the city, the entire city would be destroyed – including both its righteous and wicked inhabitants. This is precisely the assumption that underlies the whole discussion: "Will You destroy the righteous together with the wicked?" (18:23). Avraham proposes that the entire city be saved on account of a minority of righteous people, while God seems to want to destroy the whole city because of the sins of its wicked inhabitants. Why, then – after it becomes clear that there are not enough righteous people to save the city – do the angels save Lot and his family?

The text appears to provide two different reasons for saving Lot. At first glance, these two reasons seem unrelated, but they actually stem from the same root.

The first reason for saving Lot is written explicitly at the end of the description of Sedom's destruction. After the whole story, the Torah declares – with a sort of broader perspective on the events – "And God remembered Avraham, and sent out Lot from amidst the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelled" (19:29). According to this verse, Lot enjoys a sort of "merit of the fathers" thanks to Avraham, although he is not his biological son. (It must be pointed out here that Lot was Avraham's adopted son for a long time, and journeyed with him from Charan to Canaan.) Like Yishma'el who, although rejected as a candidate to continue the covenant with God, receives a blessing ("I shall make him into a nation because he is your seed" – 21:13), so Lot is still protected by Avraham's merit even though their ways have parted.

According to this reason, Lot is not personally worthy of the special salvation that is performed for him, but his connection with Avraham is sufficiently strong for it to happen anyway.

At the same time, the text seems to be concealing another reason for Lot's salvation. It should be noted that in the verse that records Lot being saved by the merit of Avraham, God's name "E-lokim" appears, while throughout the rest of the story the Tetragrammaton is used (both in the description of the city's destruction and in the description of Lot's escape). This indicates that there may be two different perspectives on the events that take place when Sedom is destroyed. Even if in verse 29 we learn that Lot is saved by the merit of Avraham, there may be another angle that is hinted at throughout the story. To understand this better, let us examine Lot's behavior in showing hospitality to the angels.

As we know, the description of Lot's welcome of the angels is parallel, in many respects, to the description of their welcome by Avraham in the previous chapter. In some details Lot

appears to emerge second-best from this comparison. For example, in contrast to the sumptuous banquet prepared by Avraham ("Knead and make cakes... and he took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the lad, and he hurried to prepare it," 18:6-7), the text describes the meal prepared by Lot in much simpler terms: "And he prepared a feast for them, and baked matzot, and they ate" (19:3). One must admit that next to the cakes and the calf that Avraham serves, Lot's matzot look a little pale.

But to make such a narrow comparison is not fair. It should be remembered that the angels reach Avraham's vicinity "at the heat of the day," at the time when people generally eat a full meal, whereas they arrive in Sedom "in the evening," at a time when people are getting ready to go to sleep. The meal that Lot prepares is therefore not a regular one, and it demonstrates extra effort and exertion. At this time of day, it is no longer possible to prepare cakes and calves; a light and quick meal – like matzot – is required.

In general, we may say that the text simultaneously supports both contentions. While it seems at certain moments that Lot is not as hospitable as Avraham, we are soon convinced that Lot learned this from him perfectly. For example, let us compare the initial meetings of Avraham and Lot with the angels:

Avraham (18:2): "And he saw, and HE RAN towards them from the opening of the tent, and he bowed down to the ground".

Lot (19:1): "And Lot saw, AND HE ROSE towards them, and he bowed WITH HIS FACE down to the ground".

The text first seems to praise Avraham to a greater degree, for he "runs" towards the guests while Lot merely "rises." Running implies a special effort expended to welcome the guests. But the very next phrase conveys the opposite impression: Avraham "bows down to the ground," while Lot "bows with his face down to the ground." The expression "with his face" here indicates special exertion in this gesture of respect, and here it seems that it is Lot who is trying harder to treat his guests as he should.

Thus, even if Lot falls short of Avraham overall, his special exertion in welcoming his guests reflects a trait that is certainly praiseworthy – especially when viewed against the backdrop of the culture within which he lives and the environment in which he finds himself. Moreover, the very comparison implied in the text demands some explanation; the very fact that their acts of hospitality are presented in parallel fashion is itself a great compliment to Lot. The midrash hints at such a reading, as quoted by Rashi: "From Avraham's house he [Lot] learned to invite guests" (Bereishit Rabba, parasha 50, 4; Rashi on 19:1.)

We should also compare the results of the two stories. Following Avraham's act of hospitality, he merits to hear the good news of the son who will be born to him. In certain respects, this may be viewed as a reward for his actions – just as in the haftara of this parasha we read of the son granted to the Shumanite woman in merit of her exceptional hospitality towards the prophet Elisha and his assistant. In other words, in addition to the Divine promise to Avraham at the end of the previous parasha (chapter 17) concerning the son who will be born, now – in our parasha – Avraham and Sara will be granted a son by virtue of their exceptional exertion in showing hospitality.

The story of Lot's escape from Sodom should be read in a similar way. Because of his exceptional efforts on behalf of his guests – extending so far as to endanger himself and his daughters – he is deserving of a special reward: being saved from the city that is about to be overthrown. God shows mercy towards Lot because Lot showed mercy to strangers who came to Sodom. Lot must have known what was likely to happen to them in that evil city, and he endangered his life to save them. From this perspective, Lot earns his salvation; the guests whom he saves from the clutches of the inhabitants of Sodom suddenly turn out to be angels of God, and they reward him in kind, saving him from the fate of the city.

According to the above, we conclude that Lot is saved from Sodom for two different reasons: firstly, because of Avraham's merit, and secondly, Lot himself is worthy of being saved from the fate of the wicked inhabitants of Sodom, for he himself is not one of them. Through his actions he has proved his righteousness, and therefore merits his salvation.

As an aside, I would like to comment on another interesting phenomenon that becomes apparent when comparing the two stories of hospitality. After the "news of redemption" – the son (for Avraham) and the salvation from the destruction (for Lot) - we are faced in both stories with people who are skeptical of the content of the message. In both instances, the lack of belief is expressed in the root tz-ch-k. Upon hearing the angels' message, "Sara LAUGHED (va-titzchak) to herself, saying: After growing old, shall I have pleasure?" (18:12). Similarly, Lot conveys the news of the impending destruction and salvation to his sons-in-law, but "He seemed AS A JESTER (ki-metzachek) in the eyes of his sons-in-law" (19:14.)

Acceptance of the supernatural, the miraculous, is very difficult for the characters of these stories. But despite the apparent similarity between these two reactions, they are fundamentally very different. First and foremost, the lack of faith in each story leads to a different result. God admittedly is angry at Sara because of her laughter, but the personal redemption of Avraham and Sara is not delayed or changed in its wake. Ultimately, Sara will bear a son as she was promised, at which time she herself will re-interpret her laughter: "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (21:6). Lot's sons-in-law, in contrast, are not saved from the terrible destruction of the city, because of their lack of faith. Here, the laughter leads to great tragedy; Lot's sons-in-law perish with the other inhabitants of the wicked city. What is the meaning of this difference?

The Torah appears to be hinting at the great discrepancy between Sara's laughter and that of the sons-in-law. Concerning Sara, we are told that she laughed (tzachaka), in the simple case. Laughter in this case can mean the laughter of joy, of surprise, or even of scorn. In any event, it is not the same as the "jesting" mentioned in connection with the response of Lot's sons-in-law. Here the verb appears in the accusative case, and the contexts in which this form appears are always negative. Suffice it to mention Yishma'el, who is said to "make sport" (metzachek), as a result of which Sara asks that he be banished from the house (Rashi comments here that the verb "metzachek" may refer to idolatry, incest or murder!), or the sin of the golden calf, where we are told that the people "rose up to disport themselves" (letzachek)" (Shemot 32:6). It appears, as many commentators suggest, that the simple meaning of the verb in this case is related to sexual activity, as is implied in the story of Yitzhak and Rivka in Gerar: "And behold, Yitzhak was intimate ('metzachek') with Rivka, his wife" (26:8), and in the story of Yosef and the wife of Potifar: "The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came to me to amuse himself (letzachek) with me" (39:17.)

For the purposes of our discussion, this distinction has great significance. Although it is not reasonable to interpret the reaction of the sons-in-law in this sense literally, the very fact that the Torah chooses specifically this form of the verb to express their scorn towards Lot's news, connects their lack of faith with the sin of the inhabitants of Sodom themselves. When the people of Sodom demand that Lot surrender his guests, they state openly their intentions: "...that we may know them." (Attention should be paid to the irony here: faced with the test that God arranges for the inhabitants of Sodom – "Let Me descend and see... and if not, I WILL KNOW," they fail outright when they declare, "that we may KNOW them.") In other words, in our narrative the Torah emphasizes the prevalent sexual perversion in Sodom. Lot's sons-in-law heap disdain on Lot and his warning of the destruction, and the text formulates their response in the same semantic realm as the sin of the people of Sodom – the code of sexual morality.

The text implies that the sons-in-law, in their lack of faith, in fact identify themselves with the local population. They attach themselves to their culture and their fate, and as such they are not worthy of salvation. In complete contrast, Sara's laughter (in the simple case) should be seen as laughter that expresses great surprise after long years of despair, and perhaps a less-than-complete awareness that the speakers are actually angels of God. The great measure of wonderment in this laughter will be forever memorialized in the name of the son who will be born – Yitzhak, thereby eternalizing the message that Avraham and Sara merited to give birth to a son, despite their advanced age, by virtue of their saintly trait of hospitality.

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(