

פרשת וירא

The Destruction of S'dom

By Yitzchak Etshalom

I

INTRODUCTION

Parashat Vayera opens with a scene which as famous as it is difficult. Avraham, recently self-circumcised into the covenant, is sitting at his tent-opening at 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 Avraham shows his storied hospitality (as Rambam 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 Avraham'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 Avraham and Sarah. Sarah's laughter foreshadows the name of that long-awaited son – Yitzhak.

Yet, the entire visitation episode is, from a broader view, entirely unnecessary. In the previous scene (Chapter 17), when Avraham 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 Yitzhak, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time in the next year. (17:21)

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

Although there are a significant number of "detail" questions that 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.

II

FROM AVRAHAM'S TENT TO THE CAVE AT TZO'AR

Even though the 71 verses which comprise chapters 18 and 19 make up two full chapters and are conventionally broken into more than three separate readings ("Aliyot"), they are one Parashah in the Masoretic Text. In other words, the only division which is inherent in the text – the breakdown into "paragraphs" (Parashot), defines this sequence of scenes – a veritable travelogue which begins and ends in the mountain country but descends to the topographical and moral abyss of S'dom – 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 S'dom (which makes up the latter half of Ch. 18, and which we have analyzed in a previous essay) is also burdened by some glaring difficulties:

Avraham 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? (I have deliberately avoided translating "Tzaddik" at this point – we will return to the meaning of this word later on).

At that point, it is reasonable that he 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 50. Why does he begin at 50 – and only negotiate down as far as 10?

In addition, the premise of his negotiation is shaky – why would he think that there were any "Tzaddikim" in S'dom? When Lot moved to that district, the text told us that "the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinners before Hashem" (13:13); why would he think that suddenly there would be any Tzaddikim?

Once we move to the next chapter – and the furthest descent of the travelogue – we are assailed by more questions. Why did the angels enter the city of S'dom 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 S'dom: The deal struck with God was that if there were 10 Tzaddikim in S'dom, 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 well as God's refrain in the negotiations "If I find in S'dom...".

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 Ralba"g ad loc.). Yet, in the next verses, we read that Avraham gazed at the city and watched as the smoke rose. This interjection is odd on several accounts:

- a) Why does the text abruptly switch its focus – for a mere three verses - from Lot on his way from S'dom to Tzo'ar to Avraham standing on Har Hevron?
- b) Why are the refugees forbidden from looking back – with such dire consequences while Avraham may gaze, undisturbed and unaffected – as the city falls?
- c) 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 lived. Why is Avraham mentioned here in conjunction with Lot's salvation? If there was any need to mention Avraham's role in saving Lot (yet again – see 14:16), it should have been presented either at v. 12 when the angels reveal their plan to Lot, or after Lot is rescued and safely housed in Tzo'ar.

The end of this long narrative takes us to the cave in Tzo'ar, 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 to 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 father were young.

In summary, we have seven questions regarding this series of sub-plots which comprise one story:

- 1) What is the purpose of the angelic visitation to Avraham?
- 2) What are we to make of the negotiations over S’dom?
- 3) Why do the angels enter the city at all?
- 4) When is the search for 10 Tzaddikim completed – in failure – such that the fate of the city was sealed?
- 5) Why is there a mention of Avraham’s gazing at the city?
- 6) Why is Avraham’s role in saving Lot placed (awkwardly) in the middle of the description of Lot’s flight to safety?
- 7) 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 an intra-connection of the components of this unit of 71 verses.

III

THE UNITY OF THE NARRATIVE

[I recommend following this section with an open Humash in hand...]

Although the story begins in Hevron and ends in Tzo’ar, there is a circle that nearly becomes closed by the end of the passages. The narrative begins in the mountainous region of Yehudah, 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 S’dom (see 19: 30 - And Lot went up out of Tzo’ar, and lived in the mountain...). This is but one piece of the holism of the unit.

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

A: Birth

A: (18:1-15)

The story begins with the arrival of three people (=angels), to a place (Hevron) 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 (Avraham and Sarah's laughter) – and a meal 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 Tzo'ar) where there will be the birth of two children, whose names (Mo'av, ben-Ami) are a deliberate play on words associated with the events related to his conception (Mo'av = Me'Av [from the father]; Ben-Ami [son of my nation]) – and a meal 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 Avraham's tent, where Sarah thinks "my master (=husband) is old" (18:12).

Yet note the stark differences between the two scenes, drawn together to show us how very different they are.

Avraham 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 Rambam, 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 Avraham. 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 the essay.

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 master is old”.

[I am deliberately eliding sections B and B’ as they serve as “interludes” and will be highlighted last]

C: The fate of S’dom

C: (18:20-33)

The famous negotiation over the fate of S’dom takes up the end of this chapter and, as noted above, is beset with several general difficulties, in addition to all of the specific issues addressed by the Rishonim.

In several earlier essays, we have discussed the frequent and oft-noted use of a key word in T’nakh. Literary units make use of the same root – usually 7 times or a multiple thereof – in order to underscore the theme of that unit.

In this section, there is a leitwort (key word – Heb. “milah manhah”) which appears 7 times: Tzadik. 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”, i.e. 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”, the text states “and they shall acquit the ‘Tzaddik’ and convict the guilty” (Devarim 25:1) – clearly meaning “innocent”. When David reacts unfavorably to the confession of the murder of Ish-Boshet by Rechav and Ba’anah (II Shmuel 4:6), he accuses them of killing an “ish tzaddik al mitato”. He certainly does not mean to elevate Sha’ul’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).

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

What, then, was Avraham using as his argument against the destruction of S’dom? The notion that God, as “judge of the earth” (Whom Avraham 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 S’dom, thereby saving the town?

There was a history to the destruction of the place in spite of innocent people being there. Noach is told by God that “I have found you to be a Tzaddik in front of Me in this generation” (Beresheet 7:1); again, the simplest meaning is that Noach 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 “dor hamabul”.

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, Avraham, who may have harbored hopes that after these many years in S’dom, 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 Noach 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” which 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 50 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 10 because the last group of innocents which was spared totaled just under 10 (Noach, 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 Avraham’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 – for the entire enterprise of the Divine investigation into S’dom depends on “finding” a group of “tzaddikim”.

C’: (19:1-26)

In the mirror section with which Chapter 19 begins, the fate of S’dom, negotiated in section C, is sealed.

The messengers of God come into S’dom 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 Yehezqel 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 to 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 Avrahamic optimism that there may be some Tzaddikim in S'dom, the mirror story which takes place in S'dom 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.

B: Avraham

B: (18:16-19)

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

B': (19:27-29)

In an even more awkward interjection, the text leaves Lot on his way up to Tzo'ar and returns to the hills of Hevron, where Avraham is watching the destruction. God remembers Avraham – and, as a result – send Lot away from S'dom.

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

The "awkwardness" of these mentions of Avraham highlights that even though the major focus of the events in these 71 verses is the fate of S'dom, the real "star" of these chapters is Avraham. We will comment on this in the final section of the essay.

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 3 or 4 innocents in S’dom – 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 born out by a careful read 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 which 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 which will lead to his exodus from the ark.

Why does God spare Lot? “And it was when God destroyed the cities of the plain, God remembered Avraham and sent Lot from the destruction...” (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 - Avraham.

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 Avraham 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).

V.

AVRAHAM

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

Not only is Avraham's hospitality set against the terrible norms of S'dom, but the elevation of Avraham from chieftain to "prince of God" (B'reshet 23) seems to take place within these chapters. Whereas Avraham's only interactions with other leaders had been tense (e.g. in Egypt and at the détente with the king of S'dom), from here on his power and stature are significantly raise (compare Avimelekh's invitation in Ch. 20 to Avraham's expulsion from Egypt at the end of Ch. 12).

The many contrasts against which Avraham is shown favorably – beginning with the annunciation (against the shameful birth of Moav 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 Avraham's name appears 14 times throughout this narrative? (Compare the 14 mentions of Mosheh at the bush and the 21 mentions of Sh'mu'el at his inauguration in I Sh'mu'el 3).