**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYERA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

 The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells the story of the destruction of Sedom and the surrounding cities, and how angels rescued Lot and his family just before the destruction. We read that Lot’s wife failed to heed the angels’ warning not to look back upon the city, whereupon she was turned into a “pillar of salt” (19:26).

 Rashi, citing the Midrash, comments that Lot’s wife was punished in this unusual fashion because salt had become the symbol of her selfish character. When Lot invited the angels to his home, as we read earlier in this chapter, he prepared a meal for them, and according to the Midrash, he asked his wife to share some salt with the guests. She angrily protested, insisting on keeping to herself everything that was rightfully hers – including her supply of salt. As salt represented her repulsive stinginess, she was punished by be transformed into a “pillar of salt.”

 It has been suggested that this Midrashic account forms the background of the Gemara’s famous comment in Masekhet Chulin (105b), where we find Sedom associated with salt in a different context. The Gemara there discusses *mayim acharonim* – the requirement to wash one’s hands after eating a meal, before reciting *birkat ha-mazon* – and one of the reasons given for this obligation is the concern of “*melach Sedomit*” – the presence of “Sedom salt” on one’s hands. If this salt was used during the meal, and some residue is present on one’s fingers, he faces the risk of impairing his vision if he subsequently touches his eyes. Therefore, *Halakha* requires washing one’s hands at the end of a meal. (According to some views, the requirement of *mayim acharonim* no longer applies, since “*melach Sedomit*” is not used. See *Shulchan Arukh*, O.C. 181:10, and *Mishna Berura* 181:22.) Symbolically, this perhaps alludes to the danger of our “vision” being impaired by “Sedomite” selfishness and greed after eating a satisfying meal. When we experience satiation, we are less likely to feel sympathetic to the plight of those suffering hunger and deprivation. The region of Sedom is described as having resembled “the garden of the Lord” (13:10), referring, presumably to *Gan Eden*, and its wealth and prosperity led its inhabitants to disregard the suffering of the poor and refuse on ideological grounds to share their bounty with those in need, as we read in Sefer Yechezkel (16:49). This heartless indifference to the plight of the needy is the “*melach Sedomit*,” the potentially harmful residual effects of a robust meal, which could “blind” us to the pain and degradation endured by the underprivileged. *Halakha* therefore requires us to “wash,” to cleanse ourselves of the insensitivity which can creep into our hearts upon experiencing satiation.

 As noted, different views exist as to whether the obligation of *mayim acharonim* must be observed nowadays. Certainly, however, according to all opinions, we must ensure to cleanse our hearts of all “*melach Sedomit*,” of any form of apathy and disregard borne out of satiation. We must live with sensitivity to the pain of those in desperate need of help, and never allow the comforts we enjoy to blind us to their plight or to our obligation to help alleviate it.

(Based on Rabbi Uri Cohen’s [“Sodom, Selfishness, and Salt”](http://harova.org/torah/view.asp?id=1951)

Sunday

 Yesterday, we noted the story that appears in the Midrash, as cited by Rashi in Parashat Vayera (19:26), of Lot’s invited the two angels into his home and asking his wife to offer them salt. His wife adamantly refused, scornfully asking Lot, “Even this bad practice you are trying to introduce in this place?” This incident, the Midrash relates, forms the background to the story briefly told in the Torah of Lot’s wife being turned into a “pillar of salt” after violating the angel’s warning not to turn around and look at Sedom as it was being destroyed. Since she sinned by denying her guests salt, the Midrash teaches, she was punished with salt.

 A number of writers raised the question of why Lot’s wife suddenly became stingy when it came to sharing salt. The Torah tells that Lot brought the strangers into his home, where he “made for them a feast, and he baked *matzot*.” Lot prepared a meal for his guests, apparently with his wife’s approval, but yet when it came to sharing salt, she angrily refused. Why?

 As the prophet Yechezkel (16:49) describes, the society of Sedom was characterized by utter disregard for the needy, and a staunch refusal to share its material benefits with the underprivileged. The people of Sedom were guilty, it would appear, of both heartless cruelty, and of an ideology of miserliness. They pitilessly ignored the hunger and deprivation suffered by the poor, and also believed that they deserved to keep their wealth to themselves. The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:10) famously teaches that “*middat Sedom*,” the attitude of Sedom, was “what’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is yours.” Beyond their heartlessness, they refrained from offering charitable assistance on ideological grounds, believing that they should be enjoying their material benefits, without sharing it with anybody else.

 Lot’s wife, it seems, accepted her husband’s sensitivity to people in need, but steadfastly adhered to her city’s ideological rejection of sharing. She felt compassion for travelers who would have to sleep in the streets and go hungry due to lack of food and shelter, and agreed that they should be invited and fed. However, she insisted that they not be given “salt,” enhancements and luxuries which they did not need. They were foreigners, and thus, in the eyes of Lot’s wife, were not entitled to enjoy the wealth of Sedom. And so although out of compassion she agreed to give them food and lodging, she insisted that they needed to eat simply, and not be granted a share equal to that of the townspeople. She was prepared to compassionately feed them, but she was not prepared for a moment to allow them to enjoy the high material standards of Sedom.

 If so, then the Midrash teaches us that we must be share our material benefits not only out of compassion, but also out of respect for the recipients. We must see people in need as our equals, who deserve the same comforts that we ourselves wish to enjoy. And thus we should be sharing with them not only “food,” the bare necessities they require, but also our “salt” – the additional comforts that we desire for ourselves.

Monday

 Parashat Vayera begins with the story of Avraham’s inviting three strangers – who, he did not realize until later, were angels – into his home and serving them a meal. The Torah describes how Avraham rushed to prepare a meal for them, and tells us that they ate while he “stood over them under the tree” (18:8).

 Rav Yisrael of Modzitz, in *Divrei Yisrael*, cites Rav Yaakov Yitzchak of Peshischa (the “Yehudi Ha-kadosh”) as creatively explaining this phrase to mean that Avraham assumed the angels’ roles in the heavens. The angels came to Avraham to deliver the message that Sara would soon conceive, and this necessitated their descent into this world and acting as human beings, partaking of a lavish meal. This resulted in a “vacancy” in the heavens, as their heavenly roles went unfulfilled. Therefore, Avraham “stood over them” – he rose to the heavens to serve the angels’ roles. As they had come to earth and acted like human beings, Avraham rose to the heavens to fill the roles which the angels would normally have filled.

 How might we explain this notion, of Avraham and the angels “swapping” their respective roles?

 We might suggest that Rav Yaakov Yitzchak viewed the Torah’s account of the angels’ visit to Avraham’s tent as a model of the possibility of extending beyond familiar boundaries. Just as these angels were sent away from the heavens, far from their normal surroundings, to engage in our world, similarly, we human beings are capable of extending beyond our familiar “worlds” and reaching higher. Too often, we assume that we are who we are, that we are restricted to our current lifestyle, routine, habits, character and religious standards. The story of the angels who came to earth and acted like humans, in the eyes of the Rebbe of Peshischa, demonstrates that we are capable of doing the same, only in the reverse – extending beyond what we wrongly assume to be our earthly limits. Of course, we will never be capable of becoming angels, and this is something which is never expected of us, as we are called upon to serve the Almighty within the limits of human life. However, the vast majority of us are capable of achieving beyond our perceived “glass ceiling.” We have the capacity to reach higher – and considerably higher – than our current standards, than the “world” with which we have become familiar. The story of the angels thus challenges us to set our sights higher, to carefully examine what we perceive as our limits, and see which of these boundaries we are capable of breaking in the pursuit of greater achievements.

Tuesday

 Among the stories told in Parashat Vayera is the disturbing incident that took place after Lot welcomed two strangers – who were actually angels – into his home in the wicked city of Sedom. The townspeople gathered around Lot’s house and demanded that he hand over the strangers, the hosting of whom, apparently, was in violation of Sedom’s strict ban on hospitality. Lot set out to protect his guests, and insisted on being allowed to host them safely in his home. Astonishingly, he went so far as to offer the townspeople his two daughters for prostitution in place of the guests: “Look here – I have two daughters who had never been intimate with a man; I will bring them out to you so you can do with them whatever you like, but do not do anything to these men, once they have entered the shade of my walls” (19:8).

 The Midrash (*Tanchuma*, Vayera 12) sharply condemns Lot for making such an offer, commenting “Ordinarily, a person surrenders himself to be killed for the sake of his daughters and wife, and either kills or is killed, but this person [Lot] surrendered his daughters to be defiled.”

 We might wonder for what purpose the Midrash made this remark. Is it not obvious that Lot’s offer was condemnable? Do we need our Sages to note the shocking perversion of Lot’s preparedness to surrender his daughters for prostitution?

 Possibly, *Chazal* seek here to draw our attention to the more common manifestations of Lot’s perverse offer to the people of Sedom. Lot’s offer perhaps represents, in the extreme, the all-too-common phenomenon of people sacrificing their family’s needs in the pursuit of lofty, altruistic goals. Certainly, Lot’s desire to care for the strangers to whom he had offered lodging was admirable, but he was wrong for going so far as to sacrifice his daughters’ dignity and innocence for this purpose. We, too, are warned not to allow idealism to cause us to neglect our most basic obligations, specifically, our responsibilities to our families. The Midrash here reminds us that our greatest sense of obligation and our greatest levels of self-sacrifice should be reserved for our families, and not for anybody else or any other goal. While we are encouraged to live and be driven by high ambitions and aspirations, these must never come at the expense of those who are closest to us and who rely upon and deserve our care more than anybody else in the world.

Wednesday

 We read in Parashat Vayera of the destruction of Sedom and the surrounding cities, and of the angels who rescued Lot and his family from Sedom before the region was annihilated. One of the angels instructed Lot to flee from the entire Jordan River valley and flee westward, to the mountains, warning that he would otherwise get caught in the firestorm that descended upon Sedom (19:17). Lot, however, claimed that he could not flee to the mountains, and therefore requested that the angel spare the smallest of the condemned cities – Tzoar – so he could find refuge there. The angel agreed, and Tzoar was spared the destruction visited upon the other cities in the region.

 The simplest explanation for why Lot feared fleeing to the hills, as the Radak writes, is because he feared he would not reach the mountains in time before the entire river valley was destroyed. This is why he expressed to the angel his concern that “the evil shall catch me, and I shall die” (19:19). Lot was already an elderly man (see 19:31 – “*avinu zakein*”), and he knew it would take him time to reach the safety of the mountains west of the river valley. He therefore desired to flee to Tzoar, which, as he told the angel, was close to Sedom (“*ha-ir ha-zot kerova*” – 19:20). Knowing that Tzoar, a suburb of Sedom, was also condemned to annihilation, Lot begged the angel to spare the city on his behalf. As it was a small town, Lot figured the angel would be prepared to spare the city from the decree of annihilation issued against all the cities of the region.

 Symbolically, Lot’s fears might represent the baseless fears that many of us have that prevent us from making significant changes in our lives. Like Lot, we often see ourselves as too old, or too frail, to leave the entire “river valley,” to quit bad habits and to make important, positive changes that we know we should be making. The “mountains,” our destination, seems too distant, too high, and too demanding. We therefore prefer remaining close to our current condition, within our familiar lifestyle, and making only slight, insignificant changes that do not require courage or hard work. Although the angel granted Lot’s request, there is no question that the preferred approach is to flee to the mountains, to have the strength, resolve and determination to grow and aspire to greatness, rather than feeling satisfied remaining “close to home” without trying to undergo a process of substantive change.

Thursday

 Yesterday, we noted the exchange that took place between Lot and the angel that rescued him from Sedom as the angel led him out of the condemned city. The angel instructed Lot to flee from the entire Jordan River Valley, which was about to be destroyed, and head to the mountains to the west (19:17). However, Lot expressed his fears of fleeing to the mountains, claiming that he might die in the process (19:19), and he requested instead that the angels spare Tzoar, one of the five cities in the river valley which had been condemned to annihilation, so he could seek refuge there. The angel consented to Lot’s request (19:20-22).

 Rashi, based on the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:11), explains that Lot feared moving to the hills because that is where his uncle, Avraham, lived. (Avraham lived at that time in Chevron, which is situated along the central peak of the Judean mountain range, west of the Jordan River Valley.) As long as Lot resided among the evildoers of Sedom, Rashi writes, he was viewed as a righteous person, whereas in relation to Avraham, he was considered sinful. He preferred living among evil people where he stood out as a man of morality, over living near a spiritual giant, next to whom he appeared very small.

 The explanation of this Midrashic reading, seemingly, is that Lot did not want to feel the pressure of Avraham’s high moral and religious standards. Among the people of Sedom and its environs, he could feel comfortable and at ease with his current stature, and could enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that he towered above his neighbors. Living near Avraham, however, he would constantly feel insecure and uncomfortable, ever cognizant of the enormous gap separating him from his righteous uncle. He preferred the comfort of feeling superior to the wicked people of Tzoar, over the pressure of having to look up with respect and admiration to Avraham, and of the inspiration he would receive from Avraham’s outstanding example.

 The Midrash’s comments bring to mind *Chazal*’s famous admonition in *Pirkei Avot* (4:15), “Be a tail of lions, rather than being the head of foxes.” Joining people who follow low standards leads to complacency, as one feels content with those standards and does not feel inclined to aspire to anything higher. *Chazal* therefore instruct us to seek the company of “lions,” of those who are greater than we are, who serve as inspiring role models for us to emulate and who set challenging standards for us to strive towards. While it is certainly easier to avoid this pressure by associating with those who follow more modest standards, we are bidden to look higher and welcome the pressure to reach beyond our current level and constantly advance.

Friday

 We read in Parashat Vayera (chapter 20) of Avraham’s experiences in the Philistine region of Gerar. As they had done many years earlier during their brief sojourn in Egypt, Avraham and Sara identified themselves as brother and sister in Gerar, fearful that otherwise one of the locals might kill Avraham so he can then marry Sara. Shortly after their arrival, Avimelekh, the king, sent his messengers to bring Sara to his palace, assuming that she was unmarried. However, God appeared to Avimelekh in a dream and sternly warned him that Sara was a married woman, and so he never touched her. In the morning, the Torah tells, Avimelekh told his servants about the incident, and they were all very frightened. Avimelekh proceeded to return Sara to Avraham and then invited them to reside wherever they wished within the Philistines’ territory.

 The Midrash, in an intriguing passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 52), connects this episode with the preceding narrative, about the destruction of Sedom. The reason why Avimelekh and his men were so frightened, the Midrash comments, is because “they saw the smoke of Sedom rising like a furnace of fire.” Upon seeing the smoke, they feared that perhaps the angels that had gone to Sedom to destroy the city had now come to Gerar. This prompted the king to immediately rectify the situation and return Sara to her husband.

 An insightful explanation of the Midrash’s comment is offered by Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Oznayim La-Torah* (20:8). He explains that the “smoke of Sedom” refers to the message of Sedom’s destruction, which was brought to punish the city for its ideological objection to hospitality. As evidenced by the story of the angels whom Lot welcomed into his home in Sedom, and whom the townspeople immediately then set out to banish from the city, Sedom sternly opposed outsiders who sought assistance or who desired to join their society. The society of Gerar did not follow this policy of barring all foreigners, but Sara’s abduction by the king certainly bespoke a culture of disregard for the basic rights of foreigners who moved to the region. Quite possibly, the news of Sedom’s annihilation spread and alerted at least some people to the dire consequences of mistreating visitors and newcomers. And thus after receiving God’s prophecy warning of punishment for abducting Sara, Avimelekh saw the “smoke of Sedom,” he understood that the time had come to apply the message of Sedom’s destruction, and to improve the way his society treated foreigners.

 Rav Sorotzkin explains on this basis Avimelekh’s offer to Avraham and Sara to reside wherever they wished. As part of his effort to protect his kingdom from the “smoke of Sedom,” to cure the ill of hostility towards foreigners, he specifically invited Avraham and Sara to reside peacefully wherever they desired among the people of Gerar.

 We might add that this insight explains the notable difference between Avimelekh’s conduct towards Avraham and Sara, and that of Pharaoh after Sara was brought to him. As we read earlier in Sefer Bereishit (12:10-20), Pharaoh and his family were stricken by illness as punishment for his abduction of Sara, after which the king angrily berated Avraham and drove him out of the country. In contrast to Pharaoh’s hostility towards Avraham, Avimelekh understood that he needed to soften his kingdom’s policies and attitudes towards foreigners, and thus invited Avraham and Sara to remain in his territory.

 This story, then, demonstrates the positive effects of Sedom’s destruction, showing how people began recognizing the need to follow Avraham’s example of kindness and generosity to all people, and to reject the selfish, exclusionary attitude of Sedom.

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