YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law**

**By Rav Dr. Judah Goldberg**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**Shiur #30**

**Pursuit of the Ethical Life (1): Sedom and Avraham**

In this *shiur* we begin our exploration of the third core value of *berit Avot*, the pursuit of the ethical life. Previously, we most closely associated this value with a specific verse from *Parashat Vayera*: “For I have known him in order that he may command his children and his household after him, **that they may keep the way of God to do charity and justice**, so that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him” (*Bereishit* 18:19). In earlier *shiurim*, we looked at various interpretations of this verse[[1]](#footnote-1) as well as its manifestations in rabbinic literature.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, a full appreciation of Avraham’s ethical legacy, I believe, cannot rest upon an isolated reading of this verse alone but must take its larger textual context into account.

Specifically, this verse introduces God’s celebrated conversation with Avraham about His impending destruction of Sedom. Remarkably, not only does Avraham’s path of “charity and justice” figure in rabbinic literature, but “*middat Sedom*” (the manner of Sedom), too, is immortalized by the Sages as a model of unacceptable behavior. In order to fully understand what their opposing legacies demand of us, in addition to the responsibilities imposed by Sinaitic law, we will widen our lens to examine the entire unit of *Bereishit* 18-19 (which actually constitutes a single “paragraph,” according to the Masoretic text) as a whole.[[3]](#footnote-3) In subsequent *shiurim*, we will hone in again on 18:19 (as well as the two preceding verses).

***Bereishit* 18-19**

Arguably, the main topic of *Bereishit* 18-19 is the judgment of Sedom and the adjacent cities. The sins of Sedom and her neighbors have become unbearable, prompting God to unleash His full wrath upon them. The story of Sedom, however, is embedded within other narratives about Avraham and his family. The same messengers who will execute Sedom’s destruction (see 19:13) while sparing Lot, Avraham’s nephew, first visit Avraham and share the news that he and Sara will soon bear a child. The Torah further strengthens the link between these two missions by twice stressing that the messengers turn immediately from Avraham and his tent towards Sedom (18:16, 22).

Likewise, the Torah does not close this unit until it has followed Lot out of Sedom and to his eventual fate of being raped by his daughters. Somehow, it seems, the destiny of Sedom and the destiny of Avraham (and his family) are intertwined. The heretofore-barren Sara will produce a forebear for the Jewish nation upon the ashes of Sedom. On the other hand, while Lot escapes Sedom’s physical destruction, its corruption in some sense trails him, and we will yet see what path his bastard offspring, Mo’av and Ammon, will take.

**The Sin of Sedom**

Avraham and Sedom are further linked by the contrasting values that they display in *Parashat Vayera*. Avraham famously welcomes his visitors — perhaps even taking leave of God to do so (see 18:3 and Rashi) — and serves them a literal feast. When Lot follows suit, the townspeople of Sedom protest, quickly surrounding his house and demanding access to these outsiders “that we may know (*ve-neide’a*) them” (19:5).

Here, there is an element of ambiguity in the text as to what is motivating the Sodomites and what they intend to do. Most commentators (including *Bereishit Rabba* 50:5) understand the verb “*y-d-a*” in this context as carnal knowledge, meaning that the Sodomites plan to sexually assault these travelers. Rashi and Chizkuni learn this from Lot’s response (as well as from *Bereishit* 4), in which he offers the mob his two daughters “who have never known (*yade’u*) a man” (19:7).[[4]](#footnote-4) Rashbam and R. Meir of Rotenberg[[5]](#footnote-5) come to the same conclusion from comparison to the story of the “concubine in Giva” (*Shoftim* 19:15-25), whose plot and language eerily parallel those of *Bereishit* 19. In Giva, too, a mob surrounds a home that has taken in a traveler and demands that he be handed over “so that we may know him (*ve-neida’enu*)” (19:22). Instead, the traveler pacifies the mob with his concubine; “they knew her (*vayeide’u*) and abused her all night long until the morning” (19:25), which clearly signifies rape. So too, these commentators surmise, the people of Sedom intend to rape their visitors.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Sodomites, then, possess multifaceted wickedness. They are both morally corrupt and cruel beyond imagination, a point already made by Onkelos’s rendering of *Bereishit* 13:13: “‘The people of Sedom were wicked’—regarding their money—‘and sinners’—with their bodies—‘before God, to an extreme.’” Still, the exact nature of the current iniquity is unclear. From the text alone, we might presume that the Sodomites are committed hedonists whose drive to satisfy a runaway sexual appetite respects no boundaries.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, *Midrash Rabba* offers a different interpretation of their threatened gang rape:

Rabbi Menachama said in the name of Rabbi Bibi: This is what the Sodomites stipulated among themselves: “Any guest who comes here, we will rape him and confiscate his belongings.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:7 [Theodore-Albeck ed.])

Sexual assault is not pursued by the Sodomites for its own sake, but is used as a vicious method of intimidating potential visitors and punishing anyone who dares to trespass.

**No Trespassing Allowed!**

Without reference to this *midrash*, the Ramban emphatically offers a similar interpretation of the Sodomites’ behavior. Commenting on the Sodomites’ intention “that we may know them,” the Ramban writes:

Their goal was to eradicate travel from their midst, as our Sages said, for they thought that because of the quality of their land — which was “like God’s garden” (*Bereishit* 13:10) — masses would come there, and they despised charity.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As proof, the Ramban cites a description of Sedom’s primary offense that appears elsewhere in *Tanakh*:

Scripture testifies that this was their intention, for it says, “This alone was the sin of your sister Sedom — she and her daughters had pride from plentitude of bread and quiet serenity and would not support the hand of the poor and destitute”[[9]](#footnote-9) (*Yechezkel* 16:49).

The Ramban anchors his understanding of Sedom’s sin in the verses in *Yechezkel* and uses them to guide his reading of *Sefer Bereishit*. He further interprets the aforementioned verse of *Bereishit* 13:13 in line with his approach:

And that which it says “wicked and sinners before God, to an extreme,” [it means] that they angered and rebelled in their serenity and through their oppression of the poor; and this is what it says: “They were arrogant, and they committed abominations before Me; so I removed them according to what I saw”[[10]](#footnote-10) (*Yechezkel* 16:50).

Furthermore, though the Sages, echoing Onkelos, describe a range of crimes by the Sodomites against both God and humanity, they, too, according to the Ramban, focus upon Sedom’s cruelty:

According to our Sages, [the Sodomites] had every bad trait, but their judgment was sealed over the specific sin that they did not “support the hand of the poor and destitute,”[[11]](#footnote-11) for they were more persistent with this sin than any other; and furthermore, because all of the nations extend charity to their acquaintances and their poor. **There was never another nation that was coldhearted like Sedom.**[[12]](#footnote-12)

The *Tosefta*, based on verses from *Yechezkel* and elsewhere in *Tanakh* (see *Iyov* 28:4-8), elaborates:

The people of Sedom said: “Since food flows from our land, and gold and silver flow from our land, and jewels flow from our land, we have no need for outsiders to come to us. They only come to take from us. Let us take a stand and eradicate travel from our midst!”

God responded to them: “Because of the bounty I have bequeathed upon you, you are eradicating travel from your midst; so I will eradicate you from the world.” (*Sota* 3:3 [Vilna ed.])

The Sodomites are not merely miserly; they take drastic steps to protect their wealth and peace and to enforce their policies. The needy are perceived as a threat, and the innocuous wayfarer is treated as an enemy combatant in a war for economic isolation.

Furthermore, the Sodomites turned their sins into *mitzvot* and instinctive stinginess into a radical ideology. They ratified their wickedness as law, which, Nechama Leibowitz suggests, explains why they lay beyond salvation. Institutionalized cruelty had become so deeply woven into the fabric of Sodomite public and private life that reform became impossible (*New Studies in Bereshit*, trans. Aryeh Newman [Jerusalem: 1973], 173-174; also see *Yeshayahu* 3:9).

However, the Sodomites do not restrict their cruelty to outsiders alone. Worst of all is a traitor to their cause from their own midst! According to the Sages, anyone who dares invite a guest to a Sodomite party is to be stripped of his own clothes. Ultimately, God is compelled to action by one particularly hair-raising story:

There was a girl (*revita*) who would smuggle bread to the poor in a pitcher. When the matter came to light, they smeared her with honey and put her on top of the wall. Bees came and devoured her. This is what it says, “God said, ‘The cries of Sedom and Amora are *rabba*’” (*Bereishit* 18:20) — Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: Over the matter of *riva* (the girl). (*Sanhedrin* 109b)

Her gruesome punishment seems carefully chosen. The Sodomites, perhaps, are dramatizing the perceived danger of extending even a crumb to the destitute, who, like bees who sense honey, might swarm upon the city at the slightest scent of food and, like the bees, threaten to consume far more than they are offered.

Furthermore, *Bereishit Rabba* (49:6) tells a variant story in which two girls — presumably both from Sedom — go down to the well together. When one smuggles flour to the other in her pitcher, she is burned for her crime. The policies of Sedom, then, are not only directed outwards but come to govern the internal relationships of the townspeople as well.[[13]](#footnote-13) In Sedom, giving is weak, and isolation is sublime.

**Sedom and Giva**

Reflecting both *Nevi’im* and rabbinic tradition, then, the Ramban directs our attention away from the Sodomites’ sexual offenses.[[14]](#footnote-14) Returning to the text of *Bereishit* itself, there are two further reasons to embrace his reading. First, despite the numerous similarities, there are several subtle differences between the story of Sedom and the story of the concubine in Giva, as the Ramban himself notes:

Know and understand that the matter of the concubine in Giva, despite its resemblance to [the Sedom] affair, was not as grave, for the intention of those wicked men was not to eradicate travel from their territory; rather, they were lustful and sought relations with the male guest, and when [the host and his guest] handed over [the guest’s] concubine, they were pacified.

In contrast to the Sodomites, who will not settle for Lot’s daughters, the mob in Giva accepts a different sexual opportunity than the one they originally pursue. Since they act out of pure lust, their thirst can be quenched by other means. The Sodomites, on the other hand, are misread by Lot. He foolishly attempts to satisfy their perceived sexual desires (with his own children![[15]](#footnote-15)) when the target of their fury is actually his hospitality.

The Ramban further observes that the participants in Sedom and in Giva differ:

And in that breach [in Giva], not all of the inhabitants of the city participated as they did in Sedom, as it says, “from the young to the elderly, the entire populace included” (*Bereishit* 19:4); but regarding Giva, it says, “And behold, men of the city, indecent men” (*Shoftim* 19:22) — a few of them who were officers and held power in the city.

The Ramban’s main objective is to soften the travesty in Giva, but I believe that this distinction, too, reflects the different natures of the two crimes. In Giva, a group of men are prowling for sexual prey and find a vulnerable candidate. Presumably, they all want a turn with their victim, which is why their horrific assault continues “all night, until the morning” (19:25) and batters the concubine to death. No matter how depraved the Sodomites are, however, they cannot possibly all intend to take a direct, active role in the rape of their visitors. Nevertheless, every last Sodomite descends upon the house.

Apparently, it is not the satisfaction of lust they are seeking, but justice, according to their own, warped thinking. From the contrast between Sedom and Giva, the Netziv notes the Sodomites’ self-righteousness:

“The entire populace included”—for they didn’t consider it an offense at all. Therefore, not a single person declined to get involved and participate. And this was the difference between the affair of Sedom and that of the concubine in Giva: For in [Giva] “indecent men” gathered, and everyone knew that they were indecent, but [the townspeople] were not strong enough to protest. However, the Sodomites were so used to evil that it became like a virtuous ordinance in the eyes of all. (*Ha’amek Davar* on 19:4)

Not every Sodomite can participate in the assault of Lot’s visitors, but together, “from the young to the elderly,” they all stand in unified, collective condemnation of the travelers and of Lot’s brazen kindness to them.[[16]](#footnote-16) The visitors are to be assaulted not because they are vulnerable, but because they are guilty! Rape would merely be the humiliating punishment imposed.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Second, the very juxtaposition with which we began — of Sedom’s conduct to that of Avraham — naturally directs our attention towards the Sodomites’ contrasting cruelty. Here, an irony of our analysis emerges, captured by the Sages’ occasional observation that a prooftext “came to teach and instead has been elucidated.” We examined the nature of the Sodomites’ failings in order to underscore the contrast between Sedom and Avraham and thus the link between their respective destinies. At the same time, the narrative’s very interweaving of the stories of Avraham and Sedom emphasizes the common theme that unites them, rather than their unrelated elements. Homosexuality may appear in the text, but it is tangential to the larger story arc that is unfolding. Compassion, on the other hand, is the central motif of *Bereishit* 18-19, and the characters of the story are judged for either embodying this virtue (Avraham and Lot) or repudiating it (Sedom).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Moreover, according to the Malbim, the messenger’s immediate turn from Avraham’s tent to Sedom brings the latter’s offenses into even sharper relief:

“The men rose from there and they looked out upon Sedom” (18:16)—that is, when they saw the enormous degree of kindness extended in Avraham’s house, the sin of Sedom grew proportionally, for they practiced the opposite. This is what it means that “**from there**” they looked out a look of trouble.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Avraham and Sedom emerge as diametric opposites, and the contrast between them only highlights the extreme behavior of each.

**Sedom vs. Avraham**

Through its construction, the Torah implicitly pits Sedom against Avraham as two competing ideologies in the ancient Land of Canaan. On the harsh mountain ridge lives Avraham in his four-doored tent, spreading the word of God and practicing and encouraging kindness. Down in the lush plain sit Sedom and the adjacent cities, which have turned their selfishness into a doctrine of self-righteous self-restraint.

As far as the Torah tells us, they live silently parallel lives (aside from their brief encounter after the wars of *Bereishit* 14, which we will explore in a future *shiur*). The Sages, however, suggest that the Sodomites are deeply aware of their newcomer’s uncle and his philosophy. To the general warning that the Sodomites will rape and pillage any outsider who dares to set foot in Sedom, *Midrash Rabba* adds a specific threat directed at Avraham: “Even [if] he about whom it is written, ‘That they may keep the way of God to do charity and justice’ (*Bereishit* 18:19) [were to come to Sedom], we would rape him and seize his money” (*Bereishit Rabba* 50:7 [Theodor-Albeck ed.]). In other words, the Sodomites understand that Lot is a mere reflection of his uncle, whose compassionate ways constitute the ultimate indictment of their own philosophy. By putting the words of God’s own hopes for Avraham and his followers — “that they may keep the way of God to do charity and justice” — in the mouths of the Sodomites, the *midrash* suggests that they knowingly and emphatically reject everything that Avraham stands for.[[20]](#footnote-20) Were the paragon of kindness himself to come to their town, they say, they would attack him—and, by extension, his ideology—as viciously as they would any other foreigner.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Conclusion**

In this *shiur* we have contrasted the beginning of this textual unit of the Torah with its ending, bridged by the messengers who transition from one scene to the next. In between these two scenes, however, God forces a direct confrontation between the worldview of Avraham and the outlook of Sedom by involving the former in the judgment of the latter. On the ground, Avraham and Sedom function in isolation from each other, but in the Heavens, their destinies are becoming more and more enmeshed. In the following *shiur*, we will turn out attention to God’s revelation to Avraham, as well as to *Bereishit* 18:19, which constitutes His rationale for doing so.

**For Further Thought:**

1. For further analysis of Sedom’s sins, also see R. Yitzchak Arama’s lengthy essay (*Akeidat Yitzchak*, *Bereishit*, *Sha’ar* 20). He, too, argues elegantly and emphatically that the Sodomites’ primary offense is their stinginess, which they turn into official policy. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is not celebrated in the same way, but is merely an allowance in order to enforce their isolation.

However, R. Arama disagrees with the Ramban with regard to the comparison between Sedom and Giva. Based on the close textual parallels between the stories, he maintains that the people of Giva, too, are miserly and seek to alienate visitors. Nonetheless, according to R. Amara, their behavior arises out of moral vice and is never rationalized or formalized as an ideology. Only the Sodomites institutionalize their wicked instincts, and for this they are singularly punished.

**Questions or Comments?**

Please email me directly with your feedback at [judahlgoldberg@gmail.com](mailto:judahlgoldberg@gmail.com)!

1. See [*shiur* #3](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-03-components-berit-avot). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *shiurim* [#7](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-07-independence-berit-avot-and-its-interaction-berit-sinai-%E2%80%93-part-2) and [#14](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-14-jewish-peoplehood-7-incomplete-conversions-%E2%80%93-part-two). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. My analysis of these chapters, starting with the impetus to see them as a unified whole, is based largely on the insights of my teacher R. Menachem Leibtag. For his own careful reading of these chapters, see <http://www.tanach.org/breishit/vayera/vayera.htm>. In academic circles, Robert Alter also recognizes the interplay between the story of Sedom and the surrounding narratives. See “Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative," *Tikkun*, 1:1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 30-38, available at: <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Sodom-as-Nexus-The-Web-of-Design-in-Biblical-Narrative.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Also see R. Yosef Bekhor Shor. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Printed in the *Torat Chaim Chumash*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Also see ibn Ezra. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Similar to *Bereishit* 6:2; see *Vayikra Rabba* 23:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Also see Radak on 19:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Regarding the translation of this verse, see *Mechilta*, *Masekhta De-shira*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Rashi. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. However, see *Vayikra Rabba* 23:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Ramban implies that the Sodomites were judged by a universal standard of decency, rather than by God-given rules. Rabbeinu Bechaye (18:20), who expands upon this passage of the Ramban’s commentary, elaborates further:

    Even though the Torah had not yet been given, charity is one of the rational *mitzvot*; and it is repulsive that a person would see one of his own kind starving, and he [himself] is wealthy and satiated from all goodness [yet] does not have mercy upon him to restore his life; how much more so regarding one who has the same nationality and dwells with him in the same city! Therefore, God obliterated the people of Sedom, who prevented [charity], and avenged the poor.

    On the subject of natural morality, also see Ramban on *Bereishit* 6:2, 13, Rabbeinu Bechaye on 6:12, and Chizkuni on 7:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Also see *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* A, 12 (Schechter ed. — compare to *Machzor Vitri* 424):

    The Sodomites, because they hated each other, the Holy One, Blessed be He, eradicated them from this world and the World to Come, as it says, “And the people of Sedom were wicked and sinners before God, to an extreme” (*Bereishit* 13:13); “wicked” – to one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Ramban does not specifically relate to the verb *y-d-a* in the Sodomites’ threat. R. Leibtag therefore suggests that the Ramban may not interpret it sexually at all, thus narrowing Sedom’s sin to inhospitality alone. This would bring the Ramban’s interpretation closer to that of the Radak (19:5), who prefers to understand *y-d-a* in both the Sedom and Giva stories as a euphemism for murder. However, the Ramban himself believes that the mob in Giva desires to rape the male visitor and further comments that “they wanted and threatened to perform an indecency **like the Sodomites**” (19:8). My understanding is that the Ramban, too, believes that the Sodomites intended rape, even though he marginalizes the sexual aspect of their sin. Also see Rashi and Maharsha on *Kiddushin* 70a. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In his readiness to respect the Sodomites’ immorality, Lot demonstrates that he has imbibed elements of their culture, even as he rejects their miserliness. The Sages further claim that the licentiousness of Sedom is part of what attracted Lot in the first place (*Nazir* 23a, *Horayot* 10b). Indeed, it is this aspect of Sedom that haunts him when he is eventually raped by the daughters that he offered (*Bereishit* *Rabba* 41:7, *Tanchuma*, *Vayera*, 12; also see Ramban on 19:8). For an alternative understanding of Lot’s offer, see R. Leibtag’s *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Rashi’s comment on 19:4, which may support this two-tiered understanding of the mob. However, see R. Leibtag’s *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Thus Lot, according to *Midrash Tanchuma*, is threatened with the same for daring to intercede (*Vayera*, 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Similarly, see R. Yonatan Grossman, *Abraham: A Story of a Journey* (Tel Aviv: 2014), 193. Hence, while “sodomy” in Western tradition denotes deviant sexual activity, “*middat Sedom*” (*Avot* 5:10) in rabbinic tradition refers to miserliness.

    Parenthetically, the Sedom story has also been scrutinized by modern Christian Biblical scholarship for its condemnation of homosexuality or lack thereof. At least one “Revisionist” school of thought promotes a reading of the text that largely coheres with the one presented here, namely, that homosexuality appears in the story but is not central to Sedom’s downfall. For a review, see Gregory Garnet Rogers, “A Literature Survey of the History of Interpretation of the Sodom and Gomorrah Incident of Genesis 19:1-29, With Special Reference to the Homosexuality Debate” (2011), available at: <http://www.sats.edu.za/userfiles/Rogers,%20BTh%20Thesis,%202011%20Final.pdf>. Of course, the significance that Christian scholars attach to the interpretation of Sedom is irrelevant for traditional Judaism, for whom *Vayikra* 18:22 is in any case binding. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Rashi. Also see R. Ovadya Seforno on 18:16, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Also see *Sifra*, *Vayikra* 26:14 (quoted by Rashi on *Bereishit* 13:13), which contends that the Sodomites are knowingly defiant of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. However, see Ramban on 19:5. *Sanhedrin* 109b tells of several episodes in which Eliezer, Avraham’s servant, comes to Sedom and manages to turn their own ordinances against them. In other words, there is confrontation between Avraham’s household and Sedom, but it does not involve Avraham himself. Rather, Eliezer — himself possibly of Canaanite origin (see *Bereishit Rabba* 59:9, quoted by Rashi on *Bereishit* 24:39) — cunningly beats the Sodomites at their own game. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)