

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS

GENESIS CHAPTER 19

VERSES TAKEN FROM “THE TANAKH. THE JEWISH BIBLE.”

19:1...The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them and bowing low his face to the ground,

When these men came to Abraham in the previous chapter, they were referred to as “men.” (anashim) Now they are referred to as “angels” or “Messengers.” (malachim) Modern readers usually think of angels as celestial beings with wings. (as depicted, for example, in Exodus 25:2) But “angels” in the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible almost always means God-sent “messengers.”

Did Lot perceive them as ordinary people or as something more? We cannot know for certain. On the other hand, given that he was not nearly as decent a person as his uncle Abraham, it is unlikely he would have treated the visitors as cordially as he did unless he perceived them as special. On the other hand, having lived for so many years with his uncle, he came from an environment which—completely unlike Sodom’s—insisted on hospitality to strangers.

19:2...he said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servants house to spend the night, and bathe your feet; then you may be on your way early.”

Lot’s suggestion the visitors leave early may have been due to his fear of what the citizens of Sodom might do to the visitors once they saw them. That could argue in favor of his not having perceived them to be angels—if they were angels, they would presumably have had supernatural protection.

19:2 (Cont.) ...But, they said, “No, we will spend the night in the square.”

19:3...But he urged them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

This is the first time the unleavened bread known as “matzah” is mentioned in the Torah. The term refers to bread that did not have sufficient time to rise. Just as the Jews ate matzah during the Passover exodus because they were in a rush to leave Egypt. Lot prepared matzah for his guest, to be able to serve them quickly.

***THERE WERE NOT EVEN TEN RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE IN
SODOM.***

19:4...They had not yet laid down, when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people to the last man—gathered about the house.

Sodom was so corrupt even the children and the elderly came—as we shall see in the next verse—to rape the visitors. An evil society breeds evil, including in its’ children. And although we think of elderly people as relatively harmless, that was not the case in Sodom. Moreover, from whom did the middle-aged and younger people of Sodom learn their behavior?

A modern-day analogy to the people of Sodom was provided by a Chinese author writing about China’s Cultural Revolution, (1966-1976) which led to three million deaths and a hundred million other victims: “The greatest horror of the cultural Revolution...was conducted by the population collectively. Almost everyone, including young children, had participated in brutal denunciation meetings. (The public condemnation, censure, or accusation of a person, action, or policy as wrong, evil, or blameworthy.) Many had lent a hand in beating the victims.”

19:5...And they shouted to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight?”

Sodom resembled twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, where state employees were stationed in apartment buildings to monitor everyone who entered the building, a level of oppression those fortunate to live in free societies have difficulty fathoming.

The sin that characterized Sodom’s evil society was cruelty to strangers. In this instance, they intended to rape Lot’s visitors. Conversely, in depicting Abraham’s goodness, the Torah emphasizes Abraham’s kindness to strangers—both to those who visited him and to the people of Sodom, on whose behalf he pleaded with God. The Torah contrasts Abraham with the people of Sodom, thereby teaching the supreme importance of kindness to strangers, a principle commanded more often than any other commandment in the Torah.

THE MEN OF SODOM SEEK TO RAPE THE STRANGERS.

19:5 (Cont.) ...Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them.”

The word translated here as “be intimate with” is the Hebrew word “yada.” (“to know”) In biblical Hebrew, when the verb “to know” is used to describe a man “knowing” a woman or a woman “knowing” a man, it is always a euphemism for sexual intimacy.

Other examples from Genesis:

“And Adam “knew” his wife, and she conceived...” (Genesis 4:1)

“And Cain “knew” his wife, and she conceived...” (Genesis 4:17)

“And Adam “knew” his wife again, and she gave birth to a son...”
(Genesis 4:23)

“I have two daughters who have not “known” a man...” (Genesis 19:8)

Here the term “know” is used for male-male relations, and it means the same thing. There is no other way to understand the demand of the men of Sodom—they want to rape Lot’s male guests. The men of Sodom were not interested in “getting to know” the guests—what foods they liked, their hobbies, or what brought them to Sodom. That is why Lot responded by suggesting the men do what they want with his daughters. He knew what they wanted—that it was not to discuss the issues of the day. Indeed, from the casual way in which the men of Sodom made their demand and Lot’s immediate understanding of what they wanted, it would appear homosexual rape was common there.

In demanding Lot “take them out,” rather than demanding “let us in,” the men of Sodom may have expected Lot to participate in their evil. In evil societies, it is difficult not to participate in evil. Human nature is to go along with the crowd. Hence, the importance of avoiding living among bad people, unless one is strong enough to work to make a bad society better.

WHAT WAS THE GREAT SIN OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH?

What was so evil about Sodom and Gomorrah that God destroyed the two cities?

The Bible supplies an answer through the Prophet Ezekiel: *“Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and committed abomination before Me...”* (Ezekiel 16:49-50)

The Hebrew word translated as “abomination” (to’evah) is the word the Torah uses to describe male homosexuality, (Leviticus 18:22) among other sins. Because the one story told about Sodom and Gomorrah concerns homosexual rape, many Jews and Christians throughout history have identified the two “cities” overriding sin with homosexuality. But while the one evil act described here in the Sodom story is attempted homosexual rape, it is clear from Ezekiel that the people of Sodom were guilty of evil in a variety of ways.

The Bible decided to depict homosexual rape of strangers as its one example of just how evil Sodom was. It is not a statement about homosexuality per se, as many traditionalists have regarded it. But it is also not a statement of poor treatment of strangers per se, as many in the contemporary period regard it.

19:6...So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him,

Lot's shutting the door served two purposes: to constitute a barrier between his guests and the mob and to prevent his guest and, more importantly, his daughters from hearing the suggestion he will offer the mob in his attempt to dissuade them from their plans for the visitors.

19:7...and said, "I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong.

19:8...Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof."

Lot's offer strikes the reader as unbelievable in its depravity. However, the men were not interested in women. Perhaps Lot knew this, and (viewing Lot's behavior in the most charitable light possible) knew the offer of his daughters would be rebuffed but, hoped to use it to buy a little time.

As noted above, Lot's response of offering his virgin daughters is proof the men at the door wanted to be sexually intimate with the male visitors in Lot's house.

19:9...But they said, "Stand back! The fellow," they said, came here as an alien, and already he acts the ruler! Now we will deal worse with you than with them."

"The fellow" is Lot. The men of Sodom consider Lot, a relatively new resident, an "alien." Like his guest, Lot is a stranger to whom the people feel no moral obligation.

19:9 (Cont.) ...And they pressed hard against the person of Lot, and moved to break the door.

19:10...But the men stretched out their hands and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.

19:11...And the people who were at the entrance of the house, young and old, they struck with blinding light, so that they were helpless to find the entrance.

The first “they” in this verse refers to the angels, who struck the people crowding the entrance to the house with blinding light.

19:12...Then the men said to Lot, “Whom else have you here?”

The angels asked Lot who else was in his family so they could save everyone.

19:12 (Cont.) ...Son-in-law, your sons and daughters, or anyone else that you have in the city—bring them out of the place.

Since Lot had previously noted his daughters’ virginity to the people of Sodom, as the next verse makes clear, the two daughters Lot offered to the crowd were not Lot’s only children. Apparently, Lot had four or more daughters, some of whom were married and two of whom were unmarried and living at home.

19:13... For we are about to destroy this place; because the outcry against them before the Lord has become so great that the Lord has sent us to destroy it.”

19:14... So, Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, and said, “Up, get out of this place, for the Lord is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law as one who jests.

It is quite understandable that Lot’s sons-in-law had trouble taking his warning seriously. Even if Lot were a particularly upstanding man—which he was not—it would be difficult to believe one’s city was about to be destroyed. It may well be, as evidenced by Lot’s own reluctance to leave,

(verse 16) that Lot himself was not completely convinced the messengers were speaking the word of God.

19:15... As dawn broke, the angels urged Lot on, saying, “Up, take your wife and your two remaining daughters,

The “remaining daughters” were the unmarried daughters whom Lot offered to the men of Sodom.

IT IS THE SIN THAT CAUSES THE SUFFERING—NOT THE PUNISHMENT.

19:15 (Cont.) ... lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city.”

It is particularly important to note the Torah uses the word “sin” (here translated “iniquity”) rather than “punishment,” even though the destruction of Sodom was a punishment. The reason is when people do wrong and suffer as a result, “it is their sin, not their punishment, which brought on their suffering.”

NO MATTER HOW BAD, MOST PEOPLE DO NOT LEAVE THEIR HOMELAND.

19:16... Still, he delayed. So, the men seized his hand, and the hands of his wife and his two daughters...

Lot delayed so long the angels had to grab him.

Ultimately, the angels had to coax him to leave six times:

1. They “urged” him.
2. They told him “(Get) up.”
3. They told him to “take your wife.”
4. They “seized his hand.”
5. They “brought him out.”

6. They “left” him outside the city.

One should not necessarily blame Lot. This is human nature. How many Jews stayed in post – 1933 Germany as antisemitic law after antisemitic law was passed once Hitler and the Nazis came to power? It takes a lot—not just a Lot—to get people to leave their homes, their communities, everything they know, and flee to a foreign land.

WHY DID GOD SAVE LOT?

19:16 (Cont.) ...in the Lord's mercy on him—

The answer to this question can be difficult to understand. However, the Scriptures do give some insight. To the Jew, Lot was saved because God pitied him. However, Genesis 19:29 tells the story:

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 the which Lot dwelt.

Jewish Rabbi's and Teachers have written “This is the first Biblical instance of the doctrine of the merit of the righteous, the idea that an unrighteous person might be spared for the sake of, or on account of, the accrued merit of a righteous person...Lot is no prize himself but, he is spared from destruction on Abraham's account.”

In Hebrew, this term, what is referred to as “merit of a righteous person,” is known as “zechut avot,” (“merit of the patriarchs.” or ancestors) Moses invoked the patriarchs (Exodus 32:13) when he pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites after the sin of the Golden Calf. One thing is for sure, the good we do and goodwill we engender can end up blessing the lives of our children and grandchildren.

At this point we must remember what Peter said in the New Testament about Lot in 2 Peter 2:6-9:

***⁶ And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha into ashes
condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample
unto those that after should live ungodly;***

***⁷ And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the
wicked:***

***⁸ (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and
hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their
unlawful deeds;)***

***⁹ The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and
to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished:***

19:16 (Cont.) ... and brought him out and left him outside the city.

***19:17... When they had brought them outside, one said, “Flee for your
life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the
hills, lest you be swept away.”***

As we have seen, the angels had good reason to be concerned Lot would not flee.

Lot may be regarded as the type of the person who has difficulty fleeing even if his life is at stake. This not only pertains to fleeing a terrible place; it also applies to leaving a terrible situation—such as an abusive relationship or a city in the path of a hurricane. Refusing to leave a dangerous situation can kill a person, as will happen to Lot’s wife.

19:18...But Lot said to them, “Oh no, my lord!

***19:19...You have been so gracious to your servant, and have already
shown me so much kindness in order to save my life; but I cannot flee
to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die.***

Lot was still blasé’ about the angels’ warnings despite their miraculous intervention (striking the men of Sodom with a blinding light) and their efforts to get him and his family out of the city. Lot seemed unmoved even

by an obvious supernatural intervention. When comparing Lot to Abraham, it becomes evident that if we are disposed to seeing God in the world, we are more likely to see miracles when we encounter them; and if we are disposed not to see God in the world, we will not recognize miracles even when they occur before our eyes.

19:20... Look, that town is near enough to flee to; it is such a little place! Let me flee there—it is such a little place—and let my life be saved.”

19:21... He replied, “Very well, I will grant you this favor too, and I will not annihilate the town of which you have spoken.

19:22... Hurry, flee there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there.” Hence the town came to be called Zoar.

“Zoar” means “small place.”

19:23... As the sun rose upon the earth and Lot went to Zoar,

19:23... the Lord rained down upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from the Lord of heaven.

This verse mentions twice that God was the source of the fire that rained down, thereby emphasizing God, not nature, was responsible for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Many scholars and lay people have tried to discover exactly how the cities were destroyed—was it an earthquake, fire, something else? However, what matters most is why, not how, the cities were destroyed. They were destroyed for the same reason God brought the Flood: God hates evil.

19:25... He annihilated those cities and the entire Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground.

This description of the utter devastation—down to the very ground—explained to later readers the desolation of Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding area, outskirts, cities and towns.

WHY DID LOT'S WIFE STOP FLEEING?

19:26... Lot's wife looked back,

This verse, translated literally, means “Lot’s wife looked from behind him.” Early Rabbi’s and Philosophers have suggested that “Lot’s wife had pity on her two older daughters who were left behind, and turned to see if they were following her. Maybe she was hoping against all hope that they did not listen to their husbands who had mockingly dismissed Lot’s plea that they leave.”

They also concede that Lot’s wife may have deliberately provoked her fate in order to be with her daughters who had remained in Sodom. Such is the power of the maternal bond.

19:26 (Cont.) ... and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, claims to have actually seen the pillar of salt that was once Lot’s wife. The imagery here is immensely powerful: Do not stay still, and do not look back. If you do not look forward and progress in life, you turn into a pillar. A Rabbi who was teaching this Torah passage at a home for the aged recalled the observation of an eighty-five-year-old resident: “When you’re always looking backward, you become inorganic.” (Matter that is not derived from living organisms.)

In life, one either progresses or regresses: that which does not grow contracts.

19:27... Next morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the Lord,

19:28... And, looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln.

WHAT DOES GOD “REMEMBERED” MEAN?

19:29... Thus, it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval.

The Hebrew word translated here “was mindful of” is actually the Hebrew word “remembered.” But God does not “remember” in the human sense because, unlike humans, God never forgets. The Torah uses this term to mean God acknowledges something at a particular moment and then acts on it. When God “remembered Noah,” (Genesis 8:1) He ended the flood. Similarly, Exodus 2:23-25 states God heard the groaning of the enslaved Israelites, and “remembered” His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Obviously, God had not “forgotten” the covenant; God “remembered” means He was now going to act.

In this instance, God “remembered” Abraham and acted on behalf of Abraham’s nephew, Lot.

19:30... Lot went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar;

Lot may have feared settling in Zoar because he felt unwelcome there. Knowing he had fled the ashes of Sodom, the inhabitants of Zoar might have seen him as a bad omen, a harbinger of destruction wherever he went.

19:30 (Cont.) ... he and his two daughters lived in a cave.

WHY DID LOT’S DAUGHTER’S SLEEP WITH HIM?

19:31...And the older one said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to consort with us in the way of all the world.

Given that Lot’s daughters were aware there were still other people living in the world—they had recently left Zoar, after all—they could not credibly believe all mankind except for them and their father had been wiped out. But this small remnant of Lot’s family was, at this point, isolated from the few people living in nearby Zoar, clearly unwelcome in the little

town. So, from their perspective, there really was not a man on earth for them to consort and make a family with.

ONCE AGAIN, THE PERILS OF ALCOHOL.

19:32... Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him,

All stories in the Torah, especially those that repeat a theme, are meant to teach some lesson.

One lesson, as in the case of Noah and his son, (Genesis (:20-25) is a warning against drunkenness. Neither the Torah, nor later Judaism prohibited use of alcohol. In fact, wine consumption is mandated on the Sabbath and other holy days. The Torah distinguishes between responsible alcohol use and drunkenness.

The Jewish attitude toward wine can be summarized by a well-known Hebrew phrase: “respect it and suspect it.” (kab-dayhu ve’chash-dayhu)

A second lesson may be related to a recurring theme in the Book of Genesis “that which goes around, comes around.” Lot offered his daughters to the men of Sodom for sexual use and now ends up himself being sexually used by them.

19:32. (Cont.) ... that we may maintain life through our father.”

19:33... That night they made their father drink wine, and the older one went in and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose.

Lot must have been quite intoxicated since he had no recollection of what had happened. As in his forced flight from Sodom, things just seem to happen to the passive Lot.

19:34... The next day the older one said to the younger, “See, I lay with father last night; let us make him drink wine tonight also, and you go and lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father.”

19:35... That night also they made their father drink wine, and the younger one went and lay with him; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose.

19:36... Thus, the two daughters of Lot came to be with child by their father.

19:37... The older one bore a son and named him Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today.

The phrase “of today” signifies that Moab still existed at the time this verse was written—more evidence of the antiquity of the Torah text.

19:38... And the younger also bore a son, and she called him Ben-ammi; he is the father of the Ammonites of today.

The nations that descended from these incestuous encounters, Moab and Ammon, subsequently become great foes of Israel.