

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



OUR WORLD CANNOT STAND ON JUSTICE ALONE

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An old Spiritual says: *G-d gave Noah the rainbow sign*

No more water, it's the fire next time.

At first glance, this seems to be a deeply and unjustifiably cynical reading of the Torah. What would be the point of G-d's covenant with Noah if He left Himself free to destroy the world again, only by other means? On the other hand – the destruction of Sodom seems very much to be the fire next time, and according to one midrash, (Genesis Rabbah 39:6), Avraham Avinu developed this exact reading in response.

א"ר אחא

נשבעת ואמרת שאין אתה מביא מבול לעולם, ומה אתה מערים

על השבועה

אתמהא

מבול של מים אין אתה מביא, מבול אש אתה מביא

א"כ לא יצאת ידי השבועה

Said R. Acha:

You swore that you would not bring another flood to the world; why are you trying to evade that oath?!

I am astounded!

You won't bring a flood of water, but a flood of flame you will bring?!

If so, you are not fulfilling the oath!

Midrash Tanchuma (VaYeira 5) draw a different parallel between the Flood and Sodom.

א"ר לוי

למה גילה הקב"ה לאברהם

שהיה מהרהר על דור המבול

לומר שאי אפשר שלא היה בהם עשרים צדיקים או עשרה

Said R. Levi:

Why did The Holy One Who is Blessed reveal (the impending doom of Sodom) to Avraham?

Because Avraham was wondering about the Flood generation,

thinking that it was impossible there not to have been among them twenty, or ten, righteous people

The difference between these midrashim is that G-d has a good answer for the question in Tanchuma – no minyan of righteous people was in fact present in either case. But there seems no way to deny that the fiery destruction of Sodom is an evasion of His oath to Noah. One might argue that Sodom is merely a local destruction, whereas the oath refers to universal destruction. One might argue further that Avraham's existence guarantees the fate of Sodom will not be universalized, because his descendants will always constitute the righteous minyan. After all, Lot was saved from Sodom.

But Tanakh denies this via the story of the Concubine of Giv'ah (Judges 19-21). The many deliberate literary parallels between this story in Judges and our story in Genesis suggest that any culture can turn into Sodom, even a city of Jews. And if any culture can turn into Sodom, it seems reasonable that they can all turn into Sodom, and bring the fire.

But how can this be? Doesn't G-d reveal His impending destruction of Sodom to Avraham because He knows for certain that Avraham's descendants will "observe the way of G-d to do righteousness and justice"? If Jewish culture post-Sinai can devolve into Sodom, what was the point of Sinai?

To answer these questions, we need to revisit the starting point of Midrash Tanchuma. Why does G-d feel compelled to reveal the fate of Sodom to Avraham in advance? The Tanchuma's answer is that He was trying to forestall a potential theological challenge from Avraham. This is not entirely compelling, as G-d could also have explained after the fact about the absence of a righteous minyan in Sodom.

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

Other midrashim offer variations of a parable that suggests a very different approach. In the basic version, a king presents a favorite with a forest. Eventually, the king needs to chop down several trees in that forest, and he feels it necessary to consult with his favorite before doing so.

What varies, however, is whether the favorite has a right to say no. In Genesis Rabbah 49 for example, the king muses that the favorite would not refuse him trees from his own patrimony – surely, therefore, he will not refuse trees from a gift the king himself gave him! The king consults the favorite only because he knows what the answer will be, and we can deduce that the forest was a reward for just that kind of loyalty.

In other versions, however, the favorite may actually have rights. Rashi, for example, notes that Avraham has been declared to be “the father of a multitude of nations,” and so the people of Sodom are his children. A more psychological approach recognizes that Avraham has just fought a war, the result of which was the restoration of Sodom’s monarchy. By destroying the city, G-d is not only undoing Avraham’s work, but implicitly rebuking him for leaving its culture unchanged.

All of these seem to me in some measure true. But I think the primary motivation is simpler. Lot, Avraham’s nephew, is in the city, and Avraham has just fought a war to save him. If G-d destroys Sodom without notice, perhaps Avraham won’t forgive Him. There is a flaw in my reasoning, of course: why doesn’t G-d simply tell Avraham in advance that Lot will be saved? Indeed, G-d doesn’t even tell Avraham this afterward.

Bereshit Rabbah offers a second, entirely different, parable. A king had three beloved advisers. When he wished to go against the first one’s advice, he expelled him; the second, he imprisoned. The third was most beloved, and/or most trusted, and the king could only try to convince him. The three advisers are Adam, Noach, and Avraham and Avraham is the adviser whom G-d will not act without convincing.

I have a slightly different perspective. G-d destroys the land three times in Genesis: when He curses the ground in response to Adam’s sin, when He sends the Flood, and when He destroys Sodom. The first two times G-d acts unilaterally, but the third time he consults. According to this midrash, what changes is the existence of a person whom G-d feels compelled to consult. I suggest in addition that what changed is G-d’s desire and willingness to consult.

Why does G-d become willing to consult? One possibility is that He bound Himself via a covenant to Noach. I would

argue that the covenant and willingness to consult stemmed from the same motive, *k’byakbol* – as if it were possible to speak of G-d having motives. What was that motive? Rashi (Genesis 1:1) tells us that G-d initially intended to create the world with absolute *din* (=justice). When He saw that it would not survive, he joined *rachamim* to justice and created.

This interpretation is narrowly intended to explain why there are two creation stories, one which refers to G-d as Elokim (= the aspect of *din*) and one which refers to Him as Hashem Elokim (*rachamim* + *din*).

But I suggest that it can also provide insight into our midrash’s sequence. Perhaps G-d tries twice to deal with humanity via *din*, but after those two tries, he tries to add *rachamim* to the relationship. Let us see what happens if we put all these explanations together:

- a) G-d cannot act without Avraham’s permission.
- b) G-d wishes Avraham to initially deny permission.
- c) G-d wishes Avraham to be personally and emotionally engaged in the argument.
- d) G-d wishes to ensure that His judgment of Sodom will not end up destroying the world.

The culture of Sodom was evil. Just on the evidence of the Biblical text, mobs gathered without protest for the purpose of raping strangers, and Chazal add gory details such as tortures inflicted on those who aided the poor.

But the people of Sodom were human beings like you and me. They had complex drives and motivations, and they were capable of both good and evil. Many of them were devoted and loving parents and children and siblings and spouses. Nothing in Tanakh or Chazal suggests that they had lost the capacity for free will.

Robert Frost wrote: *Some say the word will end in fire*

Some say in ice

From what I’ve tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire

But for destruction, ice

is also great, and would suffice.

Perhaps what distinguishes Sodom from the Flood is that Lot did not deserve to survive. But G-d ensures that Avraham argues out of his love for Lot. Avraham’s love for Lot is symbolic of his love for all the nations of the world, all in a sense his children, so that G-d can be certain that He will never again be able to apply *din* without being confronted by *rachamim*. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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