Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Vayera

Before the Brimstone

In this week's portion, Vayera, God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Before doing so, He sends angels to determine whether their inhabitants' sins are truly as grave as the outcry against them suggests—and, ultimately, whether the cities should be destroyed.

בראשית יח:כ-כט	**Genesis 18:20-21**
(כ) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה זַעֲקַת סְדֹם וַעֲמֹרָה כִּי־רָבָּה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כָבְדָה מְאֹד: (כא) אָרְדָה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקָתָהּ הַבָּאָה אֵלָי עָשׂוּ	כָּלָה וְאִם־לֹא אֵדָעָה:	Then God said, "The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note."

- **Traditionally, God is understood to be omniscient. Why, then, do you think He might have chosen to investigate before deciding whether Sodom and Gomorrah should be destroyed?**
- **Can you think of a time when you delayed a decision in order to gather more information? What did you ultimately decide, and did the additional information change your thinking?**

Based on the fact that God ultimately destroys the two cities, saving only Abraham's nephew Lot and his two daughters, it seems that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were indeed as egregious as the outcry that reached God suggested. Although the precise nature of those sins is never made explicit, the verses describing the two angels' experience in Sodom suggest one possible answer.

בראשית יט:ד-ט	**Genesis 19:4-9**
(ד) טֶרֶם יִשְׁכָּבוּ וְאַנְשֵׁי הָעִיר אַנְשֵׁי סְדֹם נָסַבּוּ עַל־הַבַּיִת מִנַּעַר וְעַד־זָקֵן כָּל־הָעָם מִקָּצֶה: (ה) וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־לוֹט וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אַיֵּה הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ הַלָּיְלָה הוֹצִיאֵם אֵלֵינוּ וְנֵדְעָה אֹתָם: (ו) וַיֵּצֵא אֲלֵהֶם לוֹט הַפֶּתְחָה וְהַדֶּלֶת סָגַר אַחֲרָיו: (ז) וַיֹּאמַר אַל־נָא אַחַי תָּרֵעוּ: (ח) הִנֵּה־נָא לִי שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדְעוּ אִישׁ אוֹצִיאָה־נָּא אֹתָן אֲלֵיכֶם וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶן כַּטּוֹב	They had not yet lain down, when the townsmen, the men of Sodom—young and old, the whole entire body—gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the ones who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them." So

בְּעֵינֵיכֶם רַק לָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵל־אַל־תַּעֲשׂוּ דָבָר כִּי־עַל־כֵּן בָּאוּ בְּצֵל קֹרָתִי: (ט) וַיֹּאמְרוּ ׀ גֶּשׁ־הָלְאָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֶחָד בָּא־לָגוּר וַיִּשְׁפֹּט שָׁפוֹט עַתָּה נָרַע לְךָ מֵהֶם וַיִּפְצְרוּ בָאִישׁ בְּלוֹט מְאֹד וַיִּגְּשׁוּ לִשְׁבֹּר הַדָּלֶת	Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him, and said, “I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. 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 the others, since they have come under the shelter of my roof.” 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.” And they pressed hard against the man—against Lot—and moved forward to break the door.

- **Based on this passage, what sins do you think the verses from Genesis 18 in the first source were referring to?**
- **This story is difficult for many readers and establishes Lot as a morally complicated figure. After reading these verses, how would you characterize him?**

However, a passage elsewhere in the Bible seems to point in a different direction. Ezekiel, the seventh book of the Prophets, was written during the Babylonian exile following the destruction of the First Temple. Among other themes, it focuses on religious life in the absence of the Temple and on personal responsibility. In the verses below, Ezekiel compares the sins of the Jewish people to those of Sodom.

יחזקל טז:מח-נ (מח) חַי־אָנִי נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יֱהוִֹה אִם־עָשְׂתָה סְדֹם אֲחוֹתֵךְ הִיא וּבְנוֹתֶיהָ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂית אַתְּ וּבְנוֹתָיִךְ: (מט) הִנֵּה־זֶה הָיָה עֲוֹן סְדֹם אֲחוֹתֵךְ גָּאוֹן שִׂבְעַת־לֶחֶם וְשַׁלְוַת הַשְׁקֵט הָיָה לָהּ וְלִבְנוֹתֶיהָ וְיַד־עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן לֹא הֶחֱזִיקָה: (נ) וְתִגְבְּהֶינָה וַתַּעֲשֶׂינָה תוֹעֵבָה לְפָנָי וָאָסִיר אֶתְהֶן כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאִיתִי:	**Ezekiel 16:48-50** (48) As I live—declares the Sovereign God—your sister Sodom and her daughters did not do what you and your daughters did. (49) Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. (50) In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before Me; and so I removed them, as you saw.

- **What do you think Ezekiel means when he suggests that refusing to give charity is an expression of arrogance?**
- **Why do you think Ezekiel compares the sins of the Jewish people to those of Sodom? What is his strategy, and do you think it is effective?**

The Talmud—a record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, compiled between the third and eighth centuries—follows the path laid out by Ezekiel in its account of Sodom's sins:

סנהדרין קט: תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: אַנְשֵׁי סְדוֹם לֹא נִתְגָּאוּ אֶלָּא בִּשְׁבִיל טוֹבָה שֶׁהִשְׁפִּיעַ לָהֶם הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא... אָמְרוּ: וְכִי מֵאַחַר שֶׁ"אֶרֶץ מִמֶּנָּה יֵצֵא לֶחֶם וְעַפְרֹת זָהָב לוֹ", לְמָה לָנוּ עוֹבְרֵי דְּרָכִים? שֶׁאֵין בָּאִים אֵלֵינוּ אֶלָּא [מְמָמוֹנֵנוּ]. בּוֹאוּ וּנְשַׁכַּח תּוֹרַת רֶגֶל מֵאַרְצֵנוּ!.	**Sanhedrin 109a** The Sages taught: The people of Sodom became haughty and sinned due only to the excessive goodness that the Holy One, Blessed be He, bestowed upon them... The people of Sodom said: Since we live in a land from which bread comes and has the dust of gold, we have everything that we need. Why do we need travelers, as they come only to divest us of our property? Come, let us cause the proper treatment of travelers to be forgotten from our land.

- **How does this Talmudic passage build on or deepen the ideas from Ezekiel in the source above?**
- **In this source, selfishness is presented as a possible negative consequence of abundance. Is that an instinct you have ever witnessed in your own life, whether from someone else or yourself?**

Another work from around the same time period as the Talmud, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, explicitly links the Sodomites lack of charity to the outcry heard by God. This work, which retells and expands upon the biblical narrative, is traditionally ascribed to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a 2nd-century sage. However, it was likely edited in the eighth or ninth century.

פרקי דרבי אליעזר כה:ח רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר: הִכְרִיזוּ בִּסְדוֹם, "כָּל מִי שֶׁהוּא מַחֲזִיק בְּפַת לֶחֶם עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן יִשָּׂרֵף בָּאֵשׁ". פְּלִיטַת, בַּתּוֹ שֶׁל לוֹט, הָיְתָה נְשׂוּאָה לְאֶחָד מִגְּדוֹלֵי הָעִיר, וְרָאָתָה עָנִי אֶחָד מְדַקְדֵּק בְּרְחוֹב הָעִיר, וְעָגְמָה נַפְשָׁהּ עָלָיו, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "עָגְמָה נַפְשִׁי לָאֶבְיוֹן". מֶה עָשְׂתָה? בְּכָל יוֹם הָיְתָה יוֹצֵאת לְשׁוּאָב, הָיְתָה נוֹתֶנֶת בַּכַּד שֶׁלָּהּ מִכָּל מָזוֹן בֵּיתָהּ וּמַאֲכֶלֶת לְאוֹתוֹ עָנִי. אָמְרוּ אַנְשֵׁי סְדוֹם: "הֲעָנִי הַזֶּה מֵאַיִן הוּא חַי"? וּכְשֶׁיָּדְעוּ בַּדָּבָר, הוֹצִיאוּ אוֹתָהּ לְהִשָּׂרֵף. אָמְרָה: "רִבּוֹן כָּל הָעוֹלָמִים, עָשָׂה מִשְׁפָּטִי וְדִינִי מֵאַנְשֵׁי סְדוֹם". וְעָלְתָה צַעֲקָתָהּ לִפְנֵי כִסֵּא הַכָּבוֹד. בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה אָמַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא:	**Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 25:8** Rabbi Yehudah said: They made a proclamation in Sodom (saying): Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor or the needy with a loaf of bread shall be burnt by fire. Peletith, daughter of Lot, was wedded to one of the magnates of Sodom. She saw a certain very poor man in the street of the city, and her soul was grieved on his account, as it is said, "Was not my soul grieved for the needy?" (Job 30:25). What did she do? Every day when

she went out to draw water she put in her bucket all sorts of provisions from her home, and she fed that poor man. The men of Sodom said: How does this poor man live? When they ascertained the facts, they brought her forth to be burnt with fire. She said: Sovereign of all worlds ! Maintain my right and my cause (at the hands of) the men of Sodom. And her cry ascended before the Throne of Glory. In that hour the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "I will now descend, and I will see" (Genesis 18:21) whether the men of Sodom have done according to the cry of this young woman, I will turn her foundations upwards, and the surface thereof shall be turned downwards, as it is said, “I will now descend, and I will see whether they have done altogether according to her cry, which is come unto me” (ibid.). “According to *their* cry” is not written here (in the text), only “According to her cry.”	”אֵרְדָה נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אִם כְּצַעֲקָת הַנַּעֲרָה הַזֹּאת עָשׂוּ אַנְשֵׁי סְדוֹם, אֶהְפּוֹךְ יְסוֹדוֹתֶיהָ לְמַעְלָה וּפָנֶיהָ לְמַטָּה”, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ”אֵרְדָה נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקָתָהּ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עָשׂוּ כָּלָה”. ”הַכְּצַעֲקָתָם” אֵין כְּתִיב כָּאן, אֶלָּא ”הַכְּצַעֲקָתָהּ”.

- **The midrash emphasizes that it is Peletith’s cry—not the cries of the poor people she helped—that reaches God. What might this tell us about the true nature of Sodom’s sin?**
- **In this story, Peletith seems to possess a natural instinct to help others, even though the society around her embodies the opposite value. What do you think it takes for a person to develop values that are not taught by their surroundings? Can you think of an experience that shaped your views on this?**

So far, we have examined sources that seem to overlook the sexual immorality described in Genesis 19, instead identifying Sodom’s central sin as its lack of kindness toward strangers. The fifteenth-century Spanish rabbi Isaac ben Moses Arama, in his philosophical commentary *Akeidat Yitzchak*, attempts to explain this emphasis.

Akeidat Yitzchak 20:1 “And in the midrash: ‘This fellow came to sojourn, and he would act as a judge!’ (Genesis 19:9)—You have come to overturn the laws established by the first ones! Rabbi Menachem said in the name of	**עקידת יצחק כ:א** ובמדרש האחד בא לגור וישפוט שפוט דין שרצו ראשונים אתה בא לאבד. רבי מנחם בשם רבי ביבי אמר כן התנו אנשי סדום ביניהם אמרו כל אכסנאי שהוא בא לכאן נהיה בועלים אותו ונוטלים את ממוני. אמר לו אפי' אותו שכתוב בו ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה (בראשית י״ח:י״ט) אנו בועלין אותו ונוטלין ממונו. הנה שכל עצמן היה לבטל האכסניא

Rabbi Bibi: The people of Sodom made the following agreement among themselves. They said: ‘Every guest who comes here—we will sodomize him and take his money.’ They said to him: ‘Even the one concerning whom it is written, “They shall keep the way of the Lord, to practice righteousness” (Genesis 18:19)—we will sodomize him and take his money.’ Thus, their entire purpose was to eliminate the practice of hosting guests from among them, so that no one from anywhere in the world would come there. This is what Scripture testified concerning them when it said, “Now the people of Sodom were wicked and sinful” (Genesis 13:13), following Onkelos’s explanation: “wicked with their property and sinful with their bodies.” Thus, the essence of their wickedness concerned their property, for that was what they intended primarily. Their debasing themselves by sinning with their bodies through this disgraceful act is associated with the word “sin,” because for them it was only incidental and secondary. The same is true of the statement, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah…” (Genesis 18:20): the essence of the outcry concerned their great guilt, while even that which stood for them on the level of that “sin” was an exceedingly grave disgrace. This is the meaning of the statement, “The punishment of the daughter of my people was greater than the sin of Sodom” (Lamentations 4:6), and this is correct. With this, the intention of Ezekiel, peace be upon him, is explained when he said, “This was the sin of your sister Sodom…yet she did not support the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49). The meaning is that they established this as a statute and law for themselves. He did not, however, mention	מביניהם ושלא יבאו לשם משום מקום בעולם וזה הוא מה שהעיד עליהם הכתוב האומר ואנשי סדום רעים וחטאים (שם י"ג) עם פי' אנקלוס בישין בממוניהן וחייבין בגופיהן. הנה כי עקר רעתם היה בענין ממונם כי הוא מה שרצו בעצם אמנם מה שנבלו עצמם לחטוא בגופן בדבר הנבלה הזאת יחסו למלת חטא למה שהוא אינו להם אלא במקרה ובמשנה. וכן ג"כ מאמר זעקת סדום ועמורה וגו' (שם י"ח). כי עקר הצעקה הוא אשמה רבה ואף מה שהוא להם במדרגת החטא ההוא גנאי כבד מאד והוא מאמר ויגדל עון בת עמי מחטאת סדום (איכה ד') והוא נכון. והנה עם זה נתבאר כונת יחזקאל ע"ה באומרו זה היה עון סדום אחותך וכו' ויד עני ואביון לא החזיקה (יחזקאל ט"ז:מ"ט). והכונה ששמו להם כן לחוק ולנמוס. אמנם לא זכר את דבר הנבלה אשר נוהגין בה לפי שהיא עם שמתירין עצמם לעשותה אינה מחקותיהם ואינן נוהגין בה ביניהם אבל כל קלקוליהם היה בדבר הממון.

	the disgraceful act that they practiced, because although they permitted themselves to perform it, it was not among their laws, nor did they practice it among themselves. Rather, all their corruption concerned matters of property."

- **How would you explain the distinction the *Akeidat Yitzchak* draws between *chet* and *ra*?**
- **This source argues that Sodom's sexual violence was incidental rather than fundamental to its identity. Do you find this argument compelling? Why or why not?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Have you previously encountered the story of Sodom? If so, did anything you learned here surprise you or change your understanding of the story?
2. Both the passage from Genesis 19 and the excerpt from *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*—the second and fifth sources, respectively—feature daughters of Lot, but in very different ways. What deeper understanding of the two texts might you gain by reading them together?
3. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will remain with you, and what is one question you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study
If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vayera visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vayera page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Vayera topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Sodom, Gemorrah, Lot, and Welcoming Guests.

The Talmud brings a long chain of stories detailing the cruelty of the Sodomites, of which the passage brought here as source four is only a small portion. If you are interested in reading more of the stories (one of which bears a striking similarity to the Greek myth of Procrustes!) you can find it at this link, in the original and an English translation.

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