

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Vayeira

The Last Night of Sodom

וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים סְדֹמָה בְּעֶרְב

And the two angels came to Sodom in the evening¹

INTRODUCTION: ANGELS IN SODOM

Chapter 19 of our parsha describes the destruction of Sodom. The events surrounding this episode are well known, which is all the more reason to raise a couple of basic questions:

1. As the verses later describe, the destruction itself did not take place until daybreak. If so, why did the angels already come to Sodom in the evening, where they would have spent the night in the street had Lot not persuaded them to come to his house – which only led to further commotion? Given that they had been with Avraham earlier that day, wouldn't it be preferable to spend the night at *his* house, making their way to Sodom the following morning?
2. When Lot first approaches them and invites them to his house, they refuse and say that they will lodge in the street instead, relenting only after he persists in his invitation.² What was behind their initial refusal of his hospitality, and what changed when he persisted?
3. When the people of Sodom surround Lot's house and demand that he turn over his guests, he implores them not to harm them, concluding his plea by saying, "כִּי עַל כֵּן בָּאוּ בְּצַל קַרְתִּי".³ These words are somewhat elusive.⁴ The simple translation is, "for it is on account of this that they came under the shelter of my roof". What does Lot mean to say by this? On account of *what*, precisely, did these men enter his house, and whatever it was, how would this feasibly dissuade the people of Sodom from molesting his guests?

WHEN WAS SODOM'S FATE SEALED?

To gain deeper insight into these events, let us go back to the point where Hashem informs Avraham of His intentions regarding Sodom. He begins by describing the extent of their wickedness:

¹ Bereishis 19:1.

² Verses 2-3.

³ Verse 8.

⁴ See Rashi *ibid*.

וַעֲקַת סְדֹם וְעִמֹרָה כִּי רַבָּה וַחֲטָאתָם כִּי כְבֹדָה מְאֹד

The outcry of Sodom and Amora has become great ,and their sin has become exceedingly heavy.

The following verse then reads:

אֲרִדָּה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה הֲפָצַעְתָּהּ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ כְלָהּ וְאִם לֹא אֲדַעַה

I will descend and see: If they act in accordance with the outcry that has come to me – then destruction; and if not – I will know.

The concluding words of this verse require clarification:

4. To what is Hashem referring by saying “and if not”?
5. What will He “know” in that case?

This simple understanding of the words “and if not” would seem to be if Sodom’s actions are not as bad as the outcry depicts them. However, Onkelos translates these words as saying, “*and if they repent, I will not destroy them.*” With these words, Onkelos is informing us that the fate of Sodom had not yet been sealed! Even at this stage, if they would do teshuvah, Hashem would “know” how to dispense judgment for their wrongdoings, but it would not be in the form of complete destruction.

SODOM AND THE IR HANIDACHAS

Amazingly, the notion that teshuvah could have helped avert the destruction of Sodom actually has halachic ramifications. In Sefer Devarim, the Torah discusses the *Ir Hanidachas* – a city whose population has been led astray toward idol-worship.⁵ In addition to punishing those who committed idolatry, the Torah commands that the city and all that is in it be destroyed. The Tosefta⁶ states that even the property of a righteous person that remains in the city is to be destroyed, citing as a proof the fact that although Lot himself was saved from Sodom, all his property there was destroyed with the rest of the city

These words of the Tosefta reveal a fascinating element within Sodom's destruction; namely, Sodom is seen as a prototype for the *Ir Hanidachas* later in the Torah! This is notwithstanding the fact that its corruption lay primarily in its cruelty to outsiders and not to idolatry per se.⁷

In the course of his discussion of *Ir Hanidachas*, the Rambam⁸ writes that if the citizens of the city do teshuvah, it is not destroyed. Many commentators wonder where the Rambam's source is for this ruling, as no such statement is to be found in the Talmud or Midrash. R' Yosef Rosen, the Rogatchover Gaon,⁹ explains that the Rambam's source is in fact Onkelos' words on our verse where he inform us that had the city of Sodom done teshuvah, it would not have been destroyed. This too, then becomes codified by the Rambam regarding *Ir Hanidachas* itself!

5 See Devarim 13:13-18.

6 Sanhedrin 14:1. See also Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:8.

7 See, in this regard, Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim 3:41, where he states that a city which formally rebels against any mitzvah is treated as an Ir Hanidachas.

8 Hilchos Avodah Zarah 4:6.

9 Tzofnas Paneach, Bereishis 18:21.

This idea, namely, that teshuvah could have averted the destruction of Sodom is a truly amazing one. However, it is also very problematic, since no one in Sodom appears to be even slightly aware of their impending fate, and certainly no one sees any need to consider changing their ways. Accordingly, if things continue as usual from now until their destruction, of what use is it to know that teshuvah *could have* helped? What do we imagine might happen that could conceivably cause the people of Sodom to consider doing teshuvah?

This brings us back to the angels.

“No, for we shall lodge in the street”

As we mentioned above, when Lot initially approaches the angels and invites them to stay with him, they refuse, stating, “No, for we will lodge in the street.”

What is behind this refusal of Lot’s hospitality? The Chizkuni explains:

In order that the people of the city shall see us, that we have come to overturn it, perhaps they will repent.

In other words, the Chizkuni is informing us that the reason the angels were already in Sodom the night before its destruction is because their mission was not simply to go and destroy it! Rather, it was first to tell its residents about their impending fate in the hope that they would do teshuvah.¹⁰ Should the people fail to do so, *then* the angels were then tasked with destroying the city. Hence, for purposes of issuing their warning, the angels express their desire to remain in the street where people would encounter them.

Lot’s Counterplan

In light of this, however, it now becomes difficult to understand what happens next; for as the following verse relates, Lot pleaded to them to come to his home and they acceded to his request. We have to wonder: why is Lot insisting that they come with him? Given their reason for wanting to stay in the street, if they will follow Lot to his home instead, the people of their city will not hear their message and will not be given the chance to do teshuvah, effectively sealing their fate! Equally puzzling is the fact that angels *accepted* Lot’s offer of hospitality. How could they leave their post in the street, failing thereby to relay the message which would effectively be Sodom’s last hope to avert its destruction?

It would seem that Lot’s intention here was not to seal the city’s fate, but to save it. Lot was well acquainted with the citizens of Sodom, and knew full well that they would not respond to any message calling them to repent. As such, if these visitors were to stay in the street and issue their warning, the city would be doomed for sure. Therefore, Lot saw that the only positive outcome would be if he were to invite the guests to *his* home. In this way, he would, so to speak, represent the people of Sodom in extending hospitality. [Indeed, the Midrash¹¹ informs us that Lot had recently been appointed as a judge in Sodom, perhaps thereby officially entitling him to act on the people’s behalf.] For their part, the city’s residents themselves simply had to not interfere with his act, thereby signaling their tacit acquiescence. Since it was the nighttime, this should be simple enough – all they needed to do was simply stay home and do nothing!

¹⁰ Indeed, the Rambam loc. cit. explicitly states that the Beis Din dispatches two talmidei chachamim to the *Ir Hanidachas* to exhort the people to do teshuvah. The commentators discuss what the Rambam’s source for this idea might be. According to the Rogatchover Gaon (ibid.), the precedent for this, too, is in the two angels who went to Sodom for that very purpose!

¹¹ Bereishis Rabbah 50:3, cited in Rashi to Bereishis 19:1 s.v. yoshev.

OUTRAGE IN SODOM

Sadly, however, Lot underestimated the people of Sodom and the lengths to which they would go in order to uphold their constitution and cruelty. After all, how could they sleep at night knowing that somewhere in the city there were guests in someone's home? No sooner had word gotten out that Lot was harboring visitors, the citizens of Sodom were galvanized into action. Verse 4 reads:

טָרַם יִשְׁכְּבוּ וְאֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר אֲנָשֵׁי סֹדֶם נִסְבּוּ עַל הַבַּיִת מִנֶּעַר וְעַד זָקֵן

They had not yet lain down when the people of the city, the people of Sodom, surrounded the house, from young to old.

There is a seeming redundancy here. It is clear that the city we are talking about is Sodom, in which case isn't it obvious that "the people of the city" are none other than "the people of Sodom"? Rather, the point is that that the people of the city as the people of Sodom converged upon the house, seeking to protect their constitution against such a terrible crime.¹²

LOT'S PLEA

Against this background, we can now appreciate that when Lot exits his house to plead with the mob that had surrounded it, it is not just with protecting his guests in mind, but with protecting the entire city. Thus, he says, "רַק לְאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵל אֵל תַּעֲשׂוּ דְבָר" – but to these men do nothing." The normal word for "these" is "האלה", yet here Lot says "האל", which also means "strong". Through this, Lot was trying to reason with the people of Sodom even in terms of their own policy. In effect, he was saying, "The entire policy of banning guests from Sodom is specifically in order to protect our assets from being depleted by strangers. These, however, are powerful people, to whom extending hospitality and establishing ties could only be to our benefit! Does it not make sense that our constitution should allow for an exception?" Beyond this, Lot concludes "כִּי עַל כֵּן בָּאוּ בְּצֵל קִרְתִּי" – for it is on account of this that they came under the shelter of my roof." We now understand that "on account of this" means that it was specifically in order *that you stay at home and do nothing* that I invited them to my house, since this was the only thing that could save you from condemnation.

For their part, the people of Sodom were incensed that Lot was trying to tamper with their laws, regardless of whether his reasoning was sound; for as protectors of "The Sodom Way," they felt that if an exception was allowed to be made, who knows where it would end. Thus, they exclaimed, "הֲאֵחָד בָּא לְגוֹר וְיִשְׁפֹּט שְׁפוֹט" – *This one comes to sojourn and he yet judges?*" This sounds like an unusual objection given that they had appointed him as a judge! What did they expect him to do? However, the double expression "וְיִשְׁפֹּט שְׁפוֹט" means that he is *judging our judgments*, and not merely implementing them as he should be doing.¹³ This was too much for them, and they proceeded to try and break down the door, standing up thereby for all that was right in Sodom.

The full extent of their investment in Sodom's laws is tragically and frighteningly depicted in verse 11, which states that after they had been stricken with blindness by Lot's guests, "וַיִּלְאוּ לְמַצָּא הַפֶּתַח". We normally take these words to mean that they were now unable to find the entrance to Lot's house, which is of course true. However, the word "וַיִּלְאוּ" comes from the word "נלאה", which means weariness; so that the verse is relating that they grew weary trying to find

12 Malbim.

13 Kli Yakar.

the entrance. In other words, being struck by blindness did nothing to deter them from trying to break down the door! They continued to fumble in their blindness, trying to find the entrance, until they simply had no more energy left.¹⁴ As far as the notion of them doing teshuvah was concerned, there was nothing left to say, as they literally expended the last of their energies sealing their fate, which came at daybreak, as described in the ensuing verses.

14 Seforno.