



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

What was Sodom's sin?

'How great is the outcry against Sodom and how very grave their sin!' (Gen. 18:20).

Exactly what was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah that led to their destruction?¹ In the popular imagination it is usually viewed as sexual sin. Indeed, 19:1-11 points to lust and sexual abuse.² Abraham's nephew, Lot, has just offered hospitality to two mysterious visitors and suddenly there is an aggressive mob of townfolk at his door, demanding to have their way with his house-guests. In order to appease them and protect his visitors, Lot offers his daughters to the mob instead. Hardly a noble solution!

Interestingly, in response to the question 'What was the great sin of Sodom that earned its destruction?' Jewish storytelling traditions (midrash) reply that it was social inequity, mistreatment of the poor. Now where does the bible suggest that? Approaching the scriptures as a unity, the Jewish sages draw attention to the prophet Ezekiel:

'This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy' (Ezek.16:49).

Notice how the Jewish sages maneuver their way through the bible, freely associating diverse passages. It is creative method, grounded in a vast knowledge of the whole of scripture and, as we shall see, in the linguistic details of the Hebrew text.

Through a play on Hebrew words, the sages say that the 'outcry' in 18:20 which the text describes as 'great' (*rabbah*) is the cry of a maiden (*ribah*). In the imaginative tellings of the midrash, the laws of Sodom issued the death penalty for anyone who assisted the poor. When a certain young woman fed a hungry person, her compassion was exposed as a crime and she was put to a horrible death by fire. It was her cry that God heard, the cry of a just person performing a deed of kindness, which brought down a whole system of state-sanctioned savagery.

*'Said Rabbi Levi, God said "Even if I wished to keep silent, justice for a certain maiden [ribah] does not permit Me to keep silent."'*³

Thus the midrash teaches that each individual is endowed with the power and responsibility to stand up and make a difference to society. Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish scholar, puts it this way:

*'If a person...performs one good deed, he has weighted the scales in his own favour and that of the world's and brought salvation.'*⁴

When Jewish storytelling imagines a woman whose action determines the fate of Sodom, it captures a truth embodied in the lives of real women, men and children who have shaped the course of history.

The same point is taken up a creative interpretation of Abraham's attempt to save Sodom:

'Suppose there are fifty righteous in the city' (Gen.18:24).

As Abraham enters into negotiations with God, the sages ponder the superfluous addition of the phrase 'in the city' when it is already obvious he is talking about the city of Sodom. The repetition, they conclude, implies that the righteous ones (for whom the city might be saved) are *public* in their witness. They are not good people keeping their heads down, safe in their homes, fitting in with the surrounding culture. They are out there in the public eye ('in the city'), putting themselves at risk, boldly challenging the unjust status quo.

Pertinent contemporary challenges resound in this ancient story! •

1. Sources consulted: Bialik and Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (NY, 1992); Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (NY: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY, 1994). Scripture quotations: NRSV.

2. 'That we may know them' (19:5) suggests the knowledge of sexual intimacy.

3. Genesis Rabbah XLIX, 6-7

4. Quoted in Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, 174.