

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT VAYERA

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The Rescue of Lot and His Daughters

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I. THE PESACH OBSERVED BY LOT<sup>1</sup>

Rashi cites a surprising aggadic tradition in his commentary on the incident of Lot and his guests:

"And he baked them unleavened breads (*matzot*)" — it was Pesach. (*Bereishit* 19:3)

The reader might rightly be astonished by this. Pesach, after all, commemorates the Exodus which occurs only four hundred years later; the *matzot* in particular remind us of the haste with which the Israelites must leave, rushed out by the Egyptians. What do they have to do with the rescue of Lot from Sedom? Moreover, what has Pesach, which will eventually be given to Israel alone, to do with Lot, the ancestor of the nations of Moav and Ammon?

According to Rashi's line of thought, Sara could offer her guests (leavened<sup>2</sup>) cakes (*ugot*, *Bereishit* 18:6), because it was the fourteenth of Nisan, and perhaps even before noon. Nevertheless, the angels reach Lot on the evening of the fifteenth of Nisan and are forced to eat *matzot*.

What is the basis of this exposition? According to the plain sense of the text, the angels could enjoy cakes from Sara's kitchen, because there they could eat in peace and comfort, and the dough could rise in proper manner. Lot, however, has to prepare their meal in haste, as he fears the evil eye of the people of Sedom, and therefore he quickly bakes them *matzot*, before the people of Sedom can come to disturb them.

If, however, we carefully examine the wording of the section, we find clear allusions to Pesach, as proposed by Rashi:

1. Three days before the destruction of Sedom, Avraham undergoes circumcision together with the rest of his household. This is also what happens at the time of the first Pesach that the people of Israel celebrate after entering the land:

And He raised up their children in their stead; them did Yehoshua circumcise; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised by the way. And it came to pass, when all the nation were circumcised, every one of them, that they abode in their places in the camp, till they were whole... And the children of Israel encamped in Gilgal; and they kept the Passover on the

fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Yericho. (*Yehoshua* 5:7-10)

*Chazal* expound that the same thing happened at the Pesach observed in Egypt, and in accordance with God's command to Moshe and Aharon:

And the Lord said unto Moshe and Aharon: This is the ordinance of the Passover... but every man's servant that is bought for money, when you have circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof... And when a stranger shall sojourn with you, and will keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land; but no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof. (*Shemot* 12:43-48)

*Chazal* expound:

Why did He order that it should be taken from the flock four days before its slaughter, something which He did not command in respect to the paschal lamb that was offered by succeeding generations?

Rabbi Matya ben Charash said: Surely it is stated: "And I passed over you, and looked upon you, and behold, your time was the time of love" (*Yechezkel* 16:8) — there had arrived the time to fulfill the oath which God had sworn to Avraham to redeem his children. They, however, possessed no divine commands in which to engage in order that they should merit to be redeemed...

He, therefore, gave them two commands, relating respectively to the blood of the paschal lamb and the blood of circumcision, for that night they circumcised themselves... (*Rashi*, *Shemot* 12:6, based on *Mekhilta*)

2. The meal in Lot's house is eaten in haste. Apparently, the haste stems from the fear of the people of Sedom, but in the end it became clear that haste is necessary in order to remove Lot before dawn from the city which is to be destroyed for its sins, like the haste of the Exodus, in which the Israelites must leave Egypt immediately.

3. The people at the entrance to Lot's house are smitten with blindness several hours before being struck with a fatal blow when Sedom is destroyed. This parallels the plague of darkness, which precedes the plague of the smiting of the firstborns.

4. The separation between Lot and the wicked people of Sedom finds expression in Lot's being brought into the house and the door being closed before the rest of the people of the city. This is similar to the manner in which the paschal lamb would be eaten in Egypt, with the door sealed with blood on the lintel and side-posts, and with a prohibition to take the meat outside or to leave the house before morning.

5. In our *parasha*, what stands out is the unique word "*Vayitmamah*," "He lingered" (*Bereishit* 19:16), concerning Lot, his hesitation almost leading to his death along with the rest of the people in the city. It is difficult not to draw an analogy between this word and that which is stated in connection with the Exodus:

And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened;

<sup>1</sup> The foundations of this *shiur* I took from my revered teacher, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Avraham tells Sara: "Knead and make cakes," emphasizing the kneading. Hastily-made bread, the biblical matza, is usually made without kneading: a quick and diluted mixture of flour and water that is poured onto a sheet of metal laid across a fire and immediately baked into matza. The kneading of the dough attests to the fact that Avraham intends to give his full attention to his guests over an extended period of time, and so the kneaded dough has time to rise.

because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not tarry (*le-hitmame'ah*). (*Shemot*12:39)

6. Based on the parallel between the story of Lot and the Exodus, we can understand the tragic end of Lot's wife:

And it came to pass, when they had brought them forth abroad, that he said: "Escape for your life; look not behind you, neither stay you in all the Plain; escape to the mountain, lest you be swept away..."

But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. (*Bereishit*19:16, 26)

The Torah does not explain the severity of the prohibition to look back and why Lot's wife is punished so harshly. The comparison to the Exodus might explain this:

And when Pharaoh drew nigh, **the children of Israel lifted up their eyes**, and, behold, the Egyptians were marching **after them**; and they were sore afraid; and the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord. And they said unto Moshe: "Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt thus with us, to bring us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we spoke unto you in Egypt, saying: 'Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians?' For it were better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness."

And Moshe said unto the people: "Fear you not, stand still, **and see** the salvation of the Lord, which He will work for you today; for whereas **you have seen** the Egyptians today, **you shall see them** again no more forever." (*Shemot*14:10-13)

Looking back almost makes the Israelites give up and return to Egypt. Moshe commands them to look forward in the direction of God's salvation, and not to turn around to see the Egyptian army. In this manner we can understand Lot's wife's looking back as a longing for her past in Sedom, rather than looking forward to a different future.

To summarize, Lot's rescue from Sedom is similar to Israel's rescue from Egypt. In both cases, God judges the wicked, and rescues the sojourner from among them. Lot is hastily removed from the city, and he is to celebrate a private Pesach every year after. This, it would seem, is Rashi's understanding.

## II. LOT'S DRUNKENNESS

As described in *Bereishit* 19:30-38, Lot goes up from Tzoar and rests in a cave on a steep hill going up to the land of Moav. On his daughters' initiative he drinks wine to excess two nights in a row, and he does not know what is happening to him. Lot's indulgence, which brings him to incestuous relations with his daughters, is reminiscent of Noah (*ibid.* 9:20-27), who drinks excessively, becomes drunk and uncovers himself in his tent, causing his son to see his nakedness. Noah does this in the aftermath of the flood that destroyed the entire world. Lot does this after a flood of fire that destroys Sedom and the neighboring cities. The similarity between the two cases points to despair as a cause of drunkenness:

Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto the bitter in soul; let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more. (*Mishlei* 31:6-7)

When their contemporaries are destroyed, Noah and Lot lack the strength to continue. In both cases, the younger generation has the strength to start fresh with a new world, but the younger generation does it in their own way, and not in the way of their parents; and in both cases, they do so in a manner that reveals their parents' nakedness.

A puzzling aspect of this story is how the daughters find wine to give their father. It is unlikely that in their hasty escape from Sedom they took wine with them! Rashi (*ibid.* 19:33) cites the Midrash (*Sifrei, Ekev*43):

Wine was at hand for them in the cave out of a set purpose, that they might bring forth two nations.

This is a supernatural explanation, but we may suggest a more realistic one. On an excursion that we conducted on the eastern side of the Dead Sea above Tzoar (identified with Safi, southeast of the Dead Sea), on the steep ascent to the land of Moav, we looked down upon Tzoar, filled with vineyards. However, the great heat in Tzoar does not allow for wine to be stored there. Presumably the vintners of Tzoar would go up to the caves on the eastern slope and bury their barrels of wine in the cool caves on the side of the mountain, allowing it to ferment there. Lot and his daughters happen upon a cave in which a large amount of wine is being stored, and there Lot drinks until he reaches a state of intoxication.<sup>3</sup>

## III. THE DAUGHTERS OF LOT

One might expect the strange behavior of Lot's daughters to be condemned by every civilized society, but *Chazal* relate to it as a mitzva, praise it, and see it as the foundation of Moav and Ammon's connection to the kingdom of Israel by way of Ruth the Moabitess and Na'ama the Ammonitess, wife of Shelomo:

Rabbi Chiya bar Avin said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha: A man should always be as alert as possible when a mitzva is at issue, for as reward for anticipating the younger by one night, the elder daughter [of Lot] was privileged to appear in the genealogical record of the royal house of Israel four generations earlier. (*Nazir*23b-24a)

According to most of the *midrashim*, Lot's daughters think that the entire world has been destroyed, but this raises a question: Did they not know that the city of Tzoar had been spared at their father's request? Could they not see from the mountaintops of Moav the land of Canaan, just as Moshe saw it before he died?

We may suggest that the objective of Lot's daughters was to establish a name for the dead, for the people of Sedom and for the members of their family who had died. The mystery of levirate marriage was known, at least among Avraham's family, as demonstrated in the story of Yehuda and Tamar (*Bereishit* 38). Lot's daughters wish to conceive specifically from their father, as indicated by the names of their children: Moav = *min ha-av*, "from the father"; and Ben Ami, "member of my family." They want in this way to commemorate the members of their family in particular and the entire community in general. This may be derived from a verbal analogy between two unique phrases in the Torah:

And the firstborn said unto the younger: "Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth **to come in unto**

<sup>3</sup> Regarding this, see the *midrashim* brought in *Torah Sheleima*, Vol. 3, p. 817, note 183..

us (*la-vo aleinu*) after the manner of all the earth." (*Bereishit* 19:31)

Her husband's brother **shall go in unto her** (*yavo aleha*), take her to him as a wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother unto her. (*Devarim* 25:5)

Regarding every other coupling in the Torah, it says *la-vo el, with an alef*. Only in these two passages of levirate marriage do we find the phrase *la-vo al, with an ayin*.<sup>4</sup>

As in the other two passages of levirate marriage in Scripture, the story of Yehuda and Tamar and the story of Boaz and Ruth (*Rut* 3), the initiative for relations comes from the woman. So too in the passage of levirate marriage in the book of *Devarim* (25), it is the woman who demands levirate marriage from the elders of her city, and they try to persuade the woman's brother-in-law to take her in levirate marriage.

Indeed, Moav and Ammon are considered in *Tanakh* to be heirs to Sedom and Amora:

Therefore, as I live, says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Surely Moav shall be as Sedom, and the children of Ammon as Amora, even the breeding-place of nettles, and saltpits, and a desolation, forever; the residue of My people shall spoil them, and the remnant of My nation shall inherit them. (*Tzefanya* 2:9)

This is also the way to understand the severity of their punishment for what appears to be a relatively minor transgression:

An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the assembly of the Lord forever; because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when you came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against you Bilam the son of Be'or from Petor of Aram Naharayim, to curse you. (*Devarim* 23:4-5)

It would appear that the failure to provide Israel with bread and water was judged with extreme severity, precisely because we are dealing with the people of Sedom and Amora, who were already punished in the past for their attitudes to their guests. Ammon and Moav should have dedicated their lives and their countries to the repair of that transgression, for it was on that condition that God in His grace left a remnant of Sedom. When Ammon and Moav continue in the path of Sedom and Amora, they too are severely punished. Their punishment follows the rule of *Sanhedrin* 27b: "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children' – when they hold their fathers' deeds in their hands."

Ruth the Moabitess, in her lovingkindness for her mother-in-law Naomi, partially repairs their sin. In her days, a new halakha is introduced (*Yevamot* 77a): "A Moabite' – and not a Moabitess," and she is permitted to enter the assembly of Israel.

In conclusion, here is the place to summarize the missions of the angels who are sent to Avraham and Lot. The angels test the hospitality of Avraham and Sara. In reward for their hospitality, Avraham and Sara are informed about the birth of Yitzchak, who will continue to keep "the way of righteousness and justice" (*Bereishit* 18:19) that is followed in the family.

These same angels test Lot and Sedom with regard to their hospitality. They sentence Sedom to destruction and Lot to be saved. However, Lot's fate is tied to that of Sedom, and therefore Lot merits a levirate relationship with his daughters and establishing descendants for Sedom and her daughters, descendants who are to repair the sin of the Cities of the Plain. The repair is only partial, and she who embodies that repair is joined to the Kingdom of Israel.

Translated by David Strauss

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<sup>4</sup> This is already noted by Jacob Benno.