

Parashat Vayera

We read Genesis chapters 19 and 20 this year.

This year we read the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah. The sin of those cities provoked God's wrath, and once again God seem to only too ready to destroy human life. Many religious fundamentalists like to preach that sodomy was the provocation for God's wrath, but the Midrash clearly does not. It studies the passage in Gen. 18:20-21 and comes to another conclusion.

*“And the Lord said: Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great and because their sin is very grievous, I will go down and see whether they have done (ha-k'tza-akatah) according to **her** cry of it, which has come unto Me.”* The Midrash wants to know the antecedent of “her,” and is unable to find a feminine noun that fits. Thus it tells a story that seems to come from a verse from Ezekiel 16:49. There we read: “Behold, this was the sin of your sister Sodom; pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy.”

The story (told in Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 25) goes as follows: They issued a proclamation in Sodom saying, “Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor and the needy with a loaf of bread shall be burned by fire!” Pelotit, the daughter of Lot, was wedded to one of the magistrates of Sodom. She saw a poor man in the street and everyday she gave him food and water. The men of Sodom were dismayed that the beggar thrived, and discovered the reason. Pelotit was burned at the stake. It was *her* cry that ascended to God's throne.

What is the Midrash learning from the Sodom and Gemorrah narrative? Does this interpretation fit the text? Does it fit a larger context and agenda of Torah? Based on this Midrash, what was the sin of Sodom all about, and what lessons can we derive from this narrative for our own day and age?