

Sodom, Gemorah and Uncle Sol

There was a Southern radio station with a morning DJ who liked to make jokes. He would prank call people, trying to create some spontaneous humor.

One morning, he took out the New York City phone book – this was back in the day when phone books existed (I'm not sure how I can explain what this was to our younger generation. But imagine Google in a huge book! It contained thousands and thousands, or in New York's case, maybe millions of phone numbers.)



The snarky DJ stumbled upon a name and dialed the number.

The phone rang.

A soft-spoken man picked up the phone, "Hello."



The DJ asked with a strong Southern accent, "Hello, is this Sodom and Gemorah?"

"No, no, this is Solomon Gemorah."

"So, you are really Sodom and Gemorah!!?! I cannot believe it!"

The man tried to explain that he was SOLOMON Gemorah, not Sodom and Gemorah.

"How could your parents have given you such a name??"

The man, who was a professor, tried to explain that his name had no connection to that story, to the narrative in this week's Torah reading; that,

in fact, Gemorah, was from the word – *Gemarah* – part of the *Talmud*, the commentary on the *Mishnah*, written by our great sages almost two millennia ago.

The DJ was not interested in the lecture.

The man was my wife, Sharon's uncle, and it was her grandparents who named him Solomon. To us, he was just Uncle Sol.

The last name, which survived Ellis Island mostly intact – was Gemorah or originally *Gemarah*, which makes up most of the *Talmud*, replete with philosophy, law, biblical commentary and all kinds of things from ancient medicine to cooking recipes.



To have the last name Gemarah must have been a badge of honor in the old country for it indicated someone who was deeply engaged in traditional Jewish learning, but here, it became lost in translation.

The word for the second city in our Torah reading is actually *Amorah*, or originally pronounced with a more guttural sound 'AH-more-RAH. The King James translation of the Bible strove to capture that guttural sound with a G and hence, the city of Gemorah. This happened to many words like the region on the coast of Israel which is *Aza* or 'Aza in Hebrew and Arabic, became Gaza in English.

Back to Uncle Sol. He was a wise and temperate man who lived an austere life. He never married and was a professor of philosophy at Brooklyn College.

He was fascinated by learning and continued to study throughout his life. He passed away two years ago, and I had the privilege of officiating at his funeral and later, helping the family say *Kaddish* for him, as he had no children.



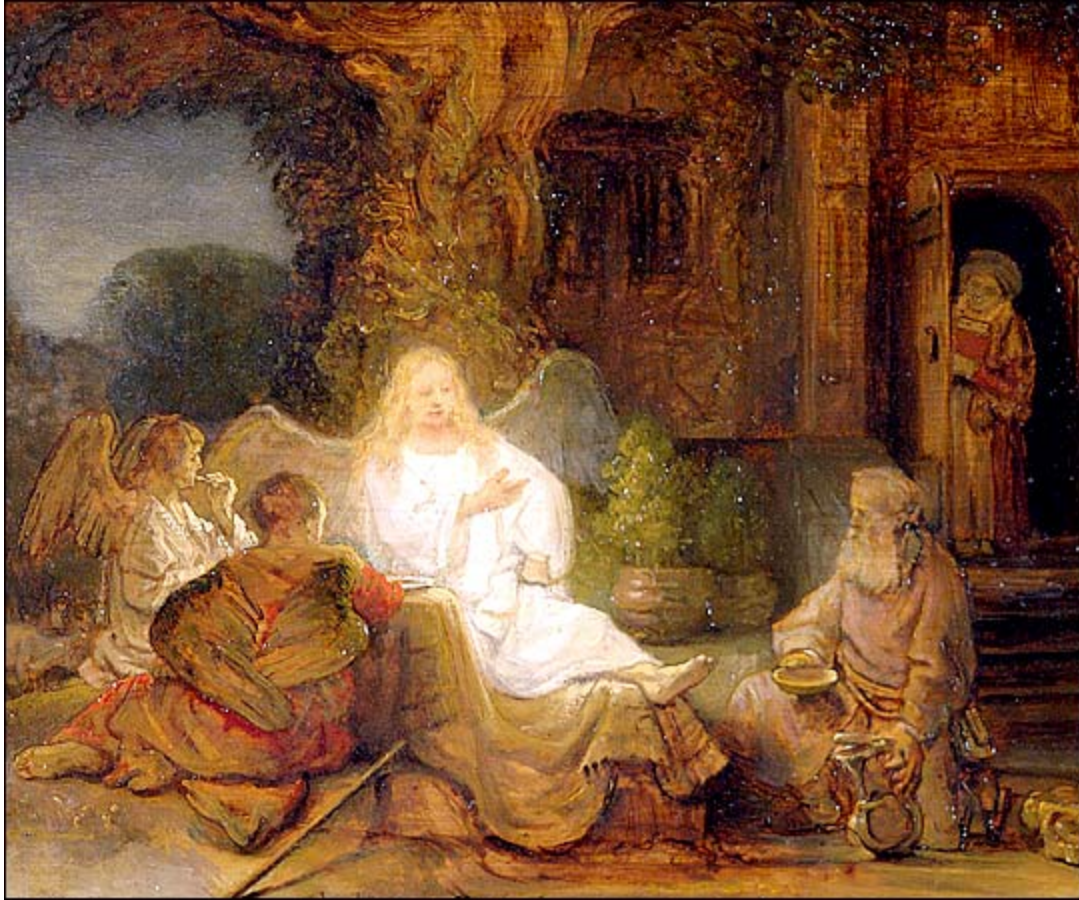
One of the areas he focused on was the great Russian-British social and political theorist, philosopher and historian of ideas: Isaiah Berlin. Berlin's works focused on liberty and the dignity of human beings.

Uncle Sol, like Berlin, was a true humanist. He treated everyone he encountered with dignity and respect, young and old, educated and those who did not have an education. He was interested in everyone's thoughts and opinions on a wide range of topics.

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Parashat Va-yera, which includes a number of separate vignettes, contains one underlying theme: hesed – love and kindness.

It opens with Avraham being visited by God while he recovers from his surgery – the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick. From there we see Avraham and Sarah welcome in three strangers, the *mitzvah* of *hakhnasat orhim* – welcoming in guests.



Then, we find Avraham arguing with God on behalf of the righteous. A powerful reminder that not only should we speak out against injustice, but that we must. From here we learn the *mitzvah* of *mishpat* of doing justice – something our world hinges upon and something our country desperately needs today. With the current impeachment hearings in Washington, we need moderates on both sides of the aisle to speak out for justice.

I want to return to the cities of Sodom and Gemorah or in Hebrew: *S'dom* and *Amorah*. Why were they destroyed and what is the deeper meaning of this story?

First, one way to look at this narrative is that it is an origin story, an etiological tale or pourquoi story, from the French, meaning why. It explains why something is the way it is.

In our example, there is a region in Israel by the Dead Sea which contains numerous salt deposits. This narrative explains how this natural phenomenon came to be.



When Lot's wife does not obey the command not to turn around and witnesses the destruction of the cities, she turns into a pillar of salt which explains the natural phenomenon.



Second, this vignette teaches that it is unjust to punish the innocent with the guilty. Unlike Noah, Abraham argues on behalf of his contemporaries, modeling a justice where we should not be afraid to speak

out, even to God. Calling out inappropriate behavior of superiors takes courage, but it is definitely required at moments such as this.

But third, there is the question of why were these cities destroyed? What was their crime?

Just after Abraham argues with God, there is another, often overlooked scene: Two angels appear in *S'dom* – to the inhabitants of the city, they were strangers. How were they treated? Avraham's nephew Lot welcomes them into his home, serving them a feast.

But the townspeople do not welcome them. They surround Lot's home, demanding that he send out these strangers so they can be attacked and abused. Shortly thereafter, the city is destroyed.

The rabbis in the *Midrash* build on this. The Torah states that God declares: "I will go down and see whether they (the people of *S'dom* and *Amorah*) have acted altogether according to *tza'akatah* – her outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note." (Gen. 18:21)

The rabbis are curious about what "her outcry – *tza'akatah*" refers to? Is it the city's crying out or someone else's?

Rabbi Levi in *Midrash Bereisheet Rabbah* sees it as referring to a young woman who was killed in *S'dom* for sharing food with another woman who was starving.

As the writer Gershon Gorenberg wrote: "I used to read this as hyperbole. Rabbi Levi saw Sodom as the archetype of a polity so morally debased that it chooses not to help the hungry. To



put it only slightly anachronistically, it was a city run by the self-worshipping tenets of Ayn Rand. [...]

“The *midrash* is rooted in the straightforward meaning of the biblical text. The prophet Ezekiel says the sin of Sodom was that it had ‘plenty of bread...but did not support the poor.’ In Genesis, the story focuses on a very specific kind of people in need: strangers who entered the gates, were given shelter by a townsman and were then threatened by a mob.

“Let’s take note: Sodom’s failure wasn’t just a lack of giving by individuals. The city, as a polity, rejected responsibility.”

That might be the greatest lesson of *S’dom* – we are all responsible. We are all responsible to care for the stranger, to speak out against abuses of power, to feed the hungry, to create a supportive community. When people act in immoral ways, or speak or share words of harshness, we must call attention to those.

When we do not, the rabbis teach, then we all become accomplices. Silence is equivalent to acceptance. When we are silent in the face of injustice, we are guilty.

If there is a lesson that I learned from Uncle Sol, Isaiah Berlin, and Rabbi Levi it is that we must create communities and societies that cry out for justice.

The eternal lesson of *S’dom* and *Amorah* is not how we can tease someone about their name, but how we work to stand up against injustice.

May we all be partners in that sacred calling.