

Thinking Torah

By Rav Alex Israel – www.alexisrael.org

Sedom and Jerusalem

Our Haftara this week is rather frightening. It so embodies the gloom and foreboding of the lead-up to Tisha B'av that our Shabbat - Shabbat Chazon - is named after its opening phrase: "Chazon Yishayahu."

What is the story of our Haftara? In short, Yishayahu in his opening chapter looks around First Temple Yerushalayim. What does he see there? What impresses him? - A corrupt Judiciary, a culture of bribery and perjury. He sees widespread abuse of the lower classes, the defenceless; he witnesses murder, he experiences a criminal government. And at the same time, this is a society that puts on a front of religious devotion. The people, despite their degenerate society still visit the Temple, sacrifice, pray. Yishayahu tells them that destruction is on its way, and that "your land shall become desolate, your cities wasted" unless Jerusalem changes its ways, transforming itself to a society of law, justice and compassion: "tzedeq umishpat." Read the perek! It is a monumental socio-religious commentary that has so much to teach us, even 2800 years on!

One of the phrases that Yishayahu uses, one of the epithets with which he describes the depravity of the people, is to call them "officiaries of Sedom ... nation of Amora." (v.10) This infamous title echoes an earlier phrase that foresees the destruction of the land as severe as the desolation of Sedom and Amora (v.9).

What is the comparison that is being made here between Jerusalem and Sedom and Amora? In what way are the two paired?

THE EVIDENCE FROM THE BOOK OF BERESHIT.

At first glance, it is all obvious. I assume that we can all recall the circumstances in which Sedom was destroyed. Genesis Chapter 19. Two angels posing as wayfarers enter the city of Sedom. They are offered hospitality by our hero, Lot. However no sooner have they had a meal and settled down for the night do the entire city encircle the house in order to lynch the guests. The text seems to say that the crowd would like to take the guests and abuse them sexually. The guests/angels use their angelic powers to extricate both themselves and Lot's immediate relatives. But this story gives us a glimpse at the culture of Sedom, and acts to justify the destruction of the city.

What is the sin of Sedom? At first glance we might simply say that it is a lack of hospitality¹. This is a place that is closed to strangers.

But it goes deeper than that. This is not simply a place that has a problem with foreigners. If anything, we should say that the town does not seek to share anything of itself with outsiders. Rather, it demands that strangers be used to satisfy the twisted desires of the townsfolk. This is a society which takes, it does not give. In an interaction with the non-citizen, the inhabitants of Sedom will take everything he has in order to fuel their own pleasures.

ABRAHAM'S CHOICE. BERESHIT CH.14 – BETWEEN SEDOM AND JERUSALEM.²

This would all seem to be precedent enough for our Chapter of Yishayahu, and here the lesson could end: the selfish cruelty of Sedom giving a message to Jerusalem. However, I believe that in Tanach, Jerusalem and Sedom are inextricably linked with a more fundamental connection.

Sedom has already appeared in Sefer Bereshit. In Chapter 13 Lot chooses Sedom as his residence. In Chapter 14, Sedom is attacked by foreign invaders and the entire population taken captive, including Lot. Bereshit 14 follows Abraham as he wages battle and wins against the kings who have invaded Sedom, thus saving his nephew, Lot and the entire population of the city.

It is upon his victorious return that the Torah depicts two Kings coming out to meet Avraham. The first we would expect. It is the King of Sedom (who had abandoned his nation in its hour of need?) The second is the King of Shalem – identified as YeruShalem – Jerusalem. That man is Malki-Tzedek – a name that literally reads, "My king is Justice"³. Moreover, he is a "priest to the Supreme God." Apparently Malki-Tzedek is a monotheist.

Avraham is approached by two kings. What does each King offer?

¹ This is certainly the perspective from Yechezkel 16:49. Focuses exclusively on the issue of chesed or lack of it, and ignores the sexual dimensions of the story.

² For a useful analysis of this perek, refer to Judy Klitsner's article, "From the Earth's Hollow Space to the Stars," in the volume, "Torah of the Mothers" ed. Ora Wiskin Helper and Susan Handelman pgs 262-279. (Urim, 2000)

³ Tzedek isn't simply legal Justice. It is sort of an overlap between the concept of Justice (mishpat) and kindness (Chesed.) Tzedek (like Tzedaka, tzaddik) is the true, just, honest thing that guarantees an outcome of fairness and interpersonal harmony.

The King of Sedom says:

"Give me the people and take the property (the war booty.)" (14:21)

As for Malki-Tzedek:

'And Malki-Tzedek, King of Shalem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of the Supreme God. He blessed him saying; "Blessed be Avraham to the **Supreme God, creator of heaven and earth**. And blessed be the Supreme God, who has delivered your foes in your hand."

And he (Avraham) gave him a tenth of everything. (14:18-20)

The king of Sedom comes to Avraham with a political deal, imagining that he will have to bargain with Avraham for the lives of his townsfolk, for their property. He is a pragmatic man. He is willing to make a deal.

What's in it for Avraham? Why would Avraham want to make a deal with the King of Sedom, after all he is already a wealthy man? The answer may be found in Bereshit Chapter 13. In this chapter, Lot separates from Avraham, his uncle, over a land dispute. There is simply not enough land for these two relatives to shepherd their flocks together. This chapter drives home the rather unstable alien status that Avraham has to contend with in the Land of Canaan. Avraham is a foreigner, he owns no land. He is a passing shepherd, but he is not a fixture, not a power player in the Canaan landscape. Until now! Until Chapter 14. Avraham, as victorious warlord, now has the opportunity to begin to create a pact with local kings, a pact that might provide stable tenure in Canaan and an opportunity for permanence and influence. And this is a very good reason to begin to seal agreements with local leaders.

But the Torah has already made things clear:

"The inhabitants of Sedom were exceptionally evil and wicked to God." (13:13)

Why does Malki-Tzedek make the journey from Jerusalem? To praise God? Maybe! But there is more going on here. It would appear then that Malki-Tzedek arrives, just in time, to remind Avraham - at the critical moment, seconds before he is likely to strike a deal with the King of Sedom - that everything; heaven and earth, bread and wine, and victory in war, all come from the Supreme God. Stability in the Land of Canaan shall not be won by military treaties and pacts of Kings. Rather it is earned by kindness and moral fortitude.

It is then not surprising that Avraham, influenced by Malki-Tzedek, refuses all of Sedom's overtures:

"I swear to the Lord, the **Supreme God, creator of heaven and earth**: I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who make Avraham rich.'"

An absolute refusal! But look at the text closely. It already tells us what might of happened had Avraham made the deal. It explains why Avraham refuses. "You shall not say, 'It is I who make Avraham rich.'" What is going on here? Why would the King of Sedom want to say: "It is I who make Avraham rich"? Why is it important that he should not be able to say it?

Let us repeat. This is a crucial moment for Avraham. With whom does he strike alliances? When one receives something, one is in some way indebted, or at the very least, interconnected, to the bestower of the gift. Avraham states emphatically: My patron is God and God alone. I will not make alliances with anyone other than God.

Who has assisted Avraham in making this decision? It is very clear. **Avraham adopts Malki-Tzedek's language**. Malki-Tzedek whose name belies the fact that he perceives God in the sphere of kindness and Justice, apparently approaches Avraham in order to thwart a possible Avraham-Sedom alliance. He knows that this will be devastating for an ethical-monotheist such as Avraham, that it will corrode his moral fibre, his religious soul. Instead of **taking**, becoming rich (HE'ESHARTI) through the King of Sedom, Avraham **gives** a tithe (MAASER – same root) to Malki-Tzedek. He gives instead of receiving. He makes a religious-ethical coalition rather than consorting with the King of Sedom.

We shall return to these formative moments soon. The stories of Avraham become the bedrock of our collective identity. His life is the early stages of our national gestation. Decisions made by Abraham have exponential significance. There is an important message here. Avraham does not live in a vacuum. Avraham stands somewhere between Jerusalem (Shalem) and Sedom. He has the possibility of allying himself with either culture. His fate is in some manner dependent on where he casts his vote.

YECHEZKEL AND ZECHARIA – MESSIANIC IMAGERY.

Let us look at two passages that once again link Jerusalem with Sedom and Amora.

Behold, a day of HaShem cometh, when thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. 2 For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city

shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, but the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city. 3 Then shall HaShem go forth, and fight against those nations, as when He fighteth in the day of battle. 4 **And His feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleft in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, so that there shall be a very great valley;** and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south....And there shall be one day which shall be known as HaShem's, not day, and not night; but it shall come to pass, that at evening time there shall be light. 8 And it shall come to pass in that day, **that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem: half of them toward the eastern sea, and half of them toward the western sea; in summer and in winter shall it be.** 9 **And HaShem shall be King over all the earth; in that day shall HaShem be One, and His name one.** 10 **All the land shall be turned as the Arabah....**And men shall dwell therein, and there shall be no more destruction; but Jerusalem shall dwell safely (Zecharia Ch.14)

And he brought me back unto the door of the house; and, behold, waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward, for the forefront of the house looked toward the east; and the **waters came down from under, from the right side of the house, on the south of the altar.** ... 2 behold, there trickled forth waters on the right side. 3... he measured a thousand cubits, and he caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the ankles. 4 Again he measured a thousand, and caused me to pass through the waters, waters that were to the knees. Again he measured a thousand, and caused me to pass through waters that were to the loins. 5 Afterward he measured a thousand; and it was a river that I could not pass through; for the waters were risen, waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed through... 8 Then said he unto me: **'These waters issue forth toward the eastern region, and shall go down into the Arabah; and when they shall enter into the sea, into the sea of the putrid waters, the waters shall be healed.** 9 **And it shall come to pass, that every living creature wherewith it swarmeth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live;** and there shall be a very great multitude of fish; for these waters are come thither, that all things be healed and may live whithersoever the river cometh. 10 And it shall come to pass, that fisherman shall stand by it from En-ge-di even unto En-eglaim; there shall be a place for the spreading of nets; their fish shall be after their kinds, as the fish of the Great Sea, exceeding many. (Yechezkel Ch.47)

Both of these passages are filled with enigmatic apocalyptic imagery, much of which I do not understand (and I apologise for the antiquated translation, but it is all I could find online,) but they share a unity of theme.

In both passages, a "Yom Hashem" – a day of Judgement, reckoning, recognition of God, is underway. Water is described as somehow emerging from Yerushalayim and flowing down into the Jordan valley thereby "healing" the dead waters of the Dead Sea. In Zecharia, the Mount of Olives splits open; in Yechezkel the water would appear to emerge from the Beit Hamikdash itself, but in both books, the water flows towards the Arava, or the "Eastern Sea." This excess of water transforms the sea in which nothing had been able to live – the Dead Sea – making it "live" once again, so much so that fisherman will set sail from Ein Gedi and haul in a catch similar to that of the Mediterranean.

What is the meaning behind these images. What is the metaphor here? What are the Neviim telling us?

WATER AND SEDOM

In the Torah, the Jordan valley is described as a paradigm of fertility.

"And Lot saw the entire Jordan valley to Tzoar, fully irrigated like the Garden of God, like the Land of Egypt; all this before the destruction of Sedom and Amorah." (Bereshit 13:10)

The Jordan valley is the epitome of paradise - water, fertility - until the destruction of Sedom. Simply put, the desolation of the Jordan valley takes place as a result of the moral degradation of Sedom. Land and moral standards share a single fate. And indeed if you ever visit this region of Israel, it resembles something like a moonscape. It is harsh, parched, unfriendly territory. It is desolate.

However, our Neviim describe how, in Messianic times, Sedom is healed. If we work off the model of Sedom's destruction then we will surmise that it is not simply a physical transformation that is to happen here. Sedom can only spring back to life if there is a moral corollary. When the evil, the injustice of Sedom is a thing of the past, then the life-giving waters are returned to Sedom. This is the vision of "end-of days." And where is the source of this morality, this justice? Where is the water-source? Jerusalem.

The reference here in Bereshit 13 to "the Garden of God," the comparison between the Jordan valley and the Garden of God, is interesting. What is "the Garden of God"? Apparently, it refers to the Garden of Eden, in which we hear of:

"And God planted a garden in Eden in the East... **A river flowed forth from Eden** to irrigate the garden and from there it separated into four arteries..." (Bereshit 2:8-10)

In the book of Bereshit, Gan Eden is the source of life-giving waters. In Messianic times, the source of water is Yerushalayim! Yerushalayim becomes a place in which God is ever-present – "And HaShem shall be King over all the earth; in that day shall HaShem be One, and His name one" - just like in the Garden of Eden (see Bereshit 3:8), and Jerusalem also becomes the source of healing waters!⁴

And so, we have established an interesting link between Sedom and Jerusalem. All this to reach the fundamental question that is being raised by Isaiah. It is this: Will Sedom control Jerusalem, with its injustice, death and destruction? Or shall we manage to bring Jerusalem to Sedom and transform it into a place of life and Justice? Shall an environment of cruel opportunism, of feeding indiscriminately upon the misfortune of the poor and weak, of a valueless political culture of opulence, lawlessness and self-centredness, a brutal, violent immoral public environment animate Jerusalem? Or shall Jerusalem spread the word of Justice, caring, compassion, truth, honesty and peace to the world? (See the continuation of the Haftara – Yishayahu 2:1-5)

Or putting it another way:

- With Abraham, Malki-Tzedek brings Tzedek from Jerusalem to Sedom.
- With Yishayahu (ch.1), the culture of Sedom has overpowered Jerusalem, and hence Yishayahu heralds its imminent destruction and desolation.
- In Messianic times. Jerusalem once again overpowers Sedom, spreading Justice and life to the parched Jordan Valley.

IN CONCLUSION – THE FUTURE.

The prophet Isaiah hasn't finished this theme in chapter 1. It resurfaces later on in the book. Let us conclude with a hope and a prayer that we merit THESE words of the prophet Isaiah, here in a most positive prophecy that truly sums up our shiur:

"Listen to Me, you who pursue JUSTICE,
You who seek the Lord:

Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
To the quarry you were dug from.
Look back to AVRAHAM your father,
And to SARAH who brought you forth ...
Truly the Lord has comforted Zion,
Comforted all her ruins;
He has transformed her WILDERNESS into
EDEN,
Her ARAVA into the GARDEN OF GOD.
Gladness and joy shall abide there,
Thanksgiving and the sound of song."
(Yishayahu 51:1-3)

Kein Yehi Ratzon.
Shabbat Shalom.

⁴ See also our Parsha shiur to Parashat Ekev that goes deeper into the Eretz Yisrael-water connection and explains why there is potential in the river lands for the moral deprecation that characterised Sedom.