

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Lot's Wife

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Elie Wiesel:

(audience applause) This tale is about evil and punishment. Courage and weakness. Death and survival. It is also an attempt to posthumously rehabilitate a woman who did not fare too well in her authorized biographies. Too many themes for one story. There are more. Curiosity and blindness. Apparent divine injustice versus undisputed human injustice. Well, we have, we have an evening of, I believe, [00:01:00] intense study ahead of us.

Let's read and reread the story as recorded in the text. Shall we? Two celestial angels, or at least two celestial beings, disguised as men, have come to bring good news to Abraham and Sarah. To inform them that despite of their advanced age, they will become parents. On hearing their improbable, implausible prediction, Sarah, who in her youth, was famous for her beauty, as well as for her piety, burst out laughing. And then denied that she had laughed. Typical. (laughter) Naturally, a family quarrel ensued. "You did laugh," [00:02:00] her husband told her. "Why then pretend that you didn't?" Perhaps because they were embarrassed at having provoked a dispute, the angels left,

while looking elsewhere. And where did they look? Towards Sodom.

Quote, "And they looked towards Sodom." Unquote. What an ominous, disquieting sentence. It surely portends misfortune and evil. One feels in it a distant threat. Something serious, even terrible, will soon happen to that city, to Sodom. And Sodom is not aware of it. Even Abraham is in the dark. This is clearly indicated in the text. God asks, , "Am I going to hide from Abraham what I am about to do,". Meaning, the destruction he was [00:03:00] about to inflict upon about the most sinful of cities -- is he going to hide it from Abraham?

Suddenly, God decides to shift direction. To make a detour. He opens parentheses. Forgetting Sodom, he begins to speak in the third person about his closest friend and associate, Abraham. "Abraham," says God, "will surely become a great, powerful nation. All others will be blessed in him, for I have chosen him to teach his children and theirs the path leading to the Almighty God. To practice justice, so as to allow God to fulfill the promises made to him." Unquote. And suddenly, God closes the parentheses and comes back to the subject which seems to be at the forefront of his concerns. And the Almighty said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is mounting towards me.

[00:04:00] Enormous are their sins. Thus, I shall go down and see for myself if the scandalous sounds below are true. If they are not, I shall know it." Unquote, from the Bible.

And so, we are plunged into the very heart of the drama. Sodom is already lost. No doubt about it. The mechanism of its destruction has been set in motion. Nothing can stop it, nothing will. Nothing? No. Not even Abraham's intercession. But what about teshuvah? What about repentance, and its extraordinary power? Is it too late for Sodom's citizens to mend their ways and be saved? Hasn't tradition told us, again and again, since the beginning of history, that it is never too late for teshuvah? Never too late to [00:05:00] turn towards heaven, and implore its forgiveness? Granted, it is not the angels' role, but man's, to awaken human beings to change and urge them to improve their behavior. But then, what about Abraham? Why didn't he rush to Sodom to sound the alarm? Rather than argue with God over the hypothetical number of *tzadikim*, of just men in Sodom, why didn't he share his knowledge of the impending catastrophe, with its future anonymous victims? Furthermore, didn't he know from the outset that this debate was a waste of time? Can one win victories over God? The same question may be addressed to God, too. Why did he allow Abraham to go on arguing when He knew that there

were -- there are no just men in Sodom. He could have
[00:06:00] said to His friend and ally, Abraham, another time.
Not now.

These are troubling questions, and we will explore them later.
Such questions have been our focus for the last 24 years, why
stop now? Yes, you wouldn't have guessed it, but this is our
25th anniversary. So much has happened in the quarter-century
since some of us met here for the first time. To follow Job,
who was victimized by Satan and God. Tragic episodes and
glorious events. Words of fear and songs of celebration.
Whenever I witness something special in the world, I say to
myself, Of course, I shall speak about it at the Y. This year,
we had the journey to Romania, with a very close friend. During
the recent [00:07:00] Moscow putsch, I was sent for a diplomatic
mission to Gorbachev and Yeltsin. I'll tell you about it. With
very good friends, new friends, we had a journey to Kiev. I'll
speak about it. Now? Later. Later tonight, not next year.
(laughter)

Since we began our exploration and analysis of Jewish tales in
the Bible, we have studied together texts and issues relating to
Adam and Eve's solitude. Cain's despair. And Noah's
resignation. We have attempted to throw and shed a different

light on the Akedah, the disturbing and powerful story of Abraham and Isaac. Has our ancestor really consented to [00:08:00] sacrifice his only beloved son to God? Twenty-five years ago, on a Thursday evening in this very place, I offered a negative hypothesis. I said, our forefather Abraham was a good father. And I believe then and still do that he never intended to bring his son as a burned offering. He said yes only to test God's will. Only to force him, so to speak, to bring first. Only to compel him to revoke the decree, and in so doing, extract from him promises for future generations of Jewish children, so often threatened also by fire. And what about Joseph? Why has he waited 22 years before inquiring whether his old father was still alive? And Moses. [00:09:00] Has he still, an adolescent, at least tried to share the fate of his family, of his people, still in Egyptian bondage? And Joshua, the great military commander and political leader, who led his people, our people, into the promised land? Is it true that he died alone, that no one came to his funeral?

I confess, these Biblical studies are my favorite. To bring back images from the distant past and introduce them in our awareness, in our very lives, is there anything more challenging or more rewarding to a student who likes to study together with his friends? Often, I would ask myself, actually, what are we

doing here together? And my answer was always the same. We were trying [00:10:00] to perfect the art of questioning. What is textual study, if not an effort to discover hidden meanings, left to us by previous generations of teachers and their disciples? The Torah begins with a *beit*, so we could ask, why not with an *alef*? And when we have nothing to ask, we say, why not?

In the Book of Books, the first question is asked not by man, but by God. *Ayeka*, Adam, where are you? What is your place in the world? What have you done with your life? One little word, and so many questions. Raised by God, they're all pertinent. Raised by man, they sometimes could lead us astray. That is why certain *sifrei Hakira*, or books of philosophy, were forbidden reading in previous centuries. One had to be intellectually and religiously mature before studying Maimonides' [00:11:00] *Guide for the Perplexed*. Were we afraid of questions? No. Not when they were preceded by faith. When a question brings me nearer to God, God is the answer. When it creates a distance between me and God, God is the question. But isn't God to be found in both the question and the answer? God wishes to be found inside, not outside. God is always the key that opens all gates. Only human beings stay, at times, in front of closed

doors. (laughter) Don't you think we should open them?

(audience applause)

[00:12:00] Let us return to Sodom, that singular city where everything is expensive, except life and human dignity. Is it dangerous to go there? Well, you know. Sometimes it is necessary and fruitful to live dangerously. In Sodom, though, danger is selective. It only threatens foreigners. [00:13:00] Never mind. Let's go there anyway. A fascinating spectacle has been prepared for us. A spectacle in five acts. The daily life in Sodom, the arrival of the three emissaries, the dialogue between Abraham and God, the destruction of the city, and the rescue of Lot. The pace of events is as breathless as the tale is devastating. At the end, everything will be reduced by fire. The most beautiful edifices will lie in ashes. Few manage to escape; fewer emerged unscathed. Lot and his family, only some members of his family survive. His wife and their two unmarried daughters. Having survived an immense tragedy, they became its main characters. [00:14:00] The others, for instance, the angels, played a secondary role. But, you know, angels always play secondary roles. We are told that in heaven, actually, to be an angel is nothing extraordinary.

Lot and his wife are at the center of the story. May I publicly admit my sympathy for Mrs. Lot? (laughter) Poor woman. She died the day she came back to life. First, she enjoys God's support in the form of a miracle. Then, she is deprived of the chance to reap its reward. She dies without experiencing the joy inherent in the act of liberation. She doesn't even have the time to speak about it to her grandchildren. Why such harsh punishment? Only because she looked where it was forbidden to look, [00:15:00] so what? If our own gaze could kill us, there would not be enough cemeteries. (laughter) Alright, she did disobey the angels' injunction and did deserve a punishment. But why death? Wouldn't it have been enough for her to lose her sight? I feel sorry for Lot's wife, who arrived in the desert, to stay there forever. Josephus Flavius writes that he had seen her statue with his own eyes. Well, let her rest a bit. Let her rest while we do something that she shouldn't have done. While we look at her native town. Don't worry, at this point in our journey, Sodom is still intact. Flourishing, I mean -- evil is flourishing in Sodom.

When we visit Sodom, we realize [00:16:00] that it is not only the scene of its collective tragedy which we are about to witness. We will also encounter one of its protagonists. Sodom has its own temperament, its own mentality, its own personality,

its own government. All of its inhabitants, with some rare exceptions, think and behave the same way. Individuality is done. It's a mass, a critical human mass, that we are faced with. One would almost say that Sodom is inhabited by one person alone, but copied and imitated a thousand times. The slogan "One for all and all for one" could apply to Sodom with a minor change: All are like one, and the one is selfish, violent, cruel, cynical, corrupt, almost [00:17:00] inhuman. That is why God has decided to annihilate the city. Its population has pushed its taste for sin, its thirst for injustice, too far. And the Midrash, the commentary on the Bible, is full of legends illustrating the moral depravation that reigned in that city, which had become the world of cosmic capital of crime.

Look at the social structure. Everybody was a thief, a liar, a swindler, a sadist, a narcissist, a monster. And that's only the beginning. The people respected no one and obeyed no one. They believed in no spiritual force and followed no ethical precept. They feared neither man nor their creator. Nothing was sacred and no one was safe in their eyes. Legend has it that once a year, [00:18:00] they gathered in a certain place to celebrate their right to free pleasure. How? We have the scenario. They celebrated pleasure through orgies, that the most fervent hedonists would find exaggerated and a bit obscene.

Quote, almost, "Fathers slept with their daughters. Husbands borrowed their friends' wives for one hour, or one night. With the consent of their own wives, and all of this was carried out in public." Still, their behavior toward each other was bad, but towards strangers, their behavior was worse. They saw in every stranger an enemy to be vanquished and robbed of his fortune and of his hope. One might say that they did everything to give tourism a bad name. (laughter) [00:19:00]

To see Sodom meant to be exposed to ridicule, humiliation, and death -- you know the slogan, to see Sodom and die. And the worst, most violent kind of death. A visitor who happened to enter Sodom was doomed, first of all, to die of hunger. The rest would come later. Inhabitants would sell him or even offer him anything but food. If he had bread in his bag, they would torture him, they would make him lie in a bed that was either too big or too small. If it was too small, they would mutilate his body to fit the bed. If it was too big, they would pull him by the hands, by the feet, by all his limbs, deaf to his shrieks and laments. That the Sodomites did that is bad enough. But then, they pretended to torture the visitor for his own sake. To allow him to sleep more comfortably. [00:20:00] Worst of all, they pretended to act in accordance with the law, the law of the land. Whatever they undertook was ordered or at least

approved by local courts. Strange as it may sound, there were four or five sitting judges in Sodom, says the Midrash. All had names that suited them perfectly. One was called man of deceit, the other was man of falsehood, the third of head of liars. With judges such as these, the plaintiff had no chance. He was condemned even before presenting his case, before opening his mouth.

And the question then is, how come that Abraham's nephew, Lot, was their leader? He was the chief justice. But they listened to him only when he spoke their language and expressed their ideas and behaved the way they wanted him to behave. Then, [00:21:00] they applauded him. When he disagreed with their decisions, they interrupted him and shouted, "What? A foreigner came to dwell in our midst, and he wants to rule over us?" In other words, there was a system in Sodom. Airtight and self-locked, it functioned with brutal and calculated efficiency. The system crushed any outsider who dared to challenge it. All trips to Sodom were one-way. It was possible to enter the city, but not to leave it.

Actually, according to one Midrashic source, it wasn't easy to enter Sodom at all. It wasn't as easy as one might think. The Sodomites saw to it that all roads leading to their city were

flooded. Was it an expression of their xenophobia, or their idea of public relations? Did they think that the word got around that their city was inaccessible, more and [00:22:00] more people would be attracted to it? Possibly. But there is a simple explanation. Since the ground of Sodom was made of pure gold, its citizens wanted all of the riches for themselves. But didn't they have enough? They did. But such is the nature of selfish men. Not only does he wish to be wealthy and happy, he needs to know that others are not.

If and when a foreign visitor did manage to enter the city, its inhabitants knew perfectly well how to deal with him legally. They assaulted him and deprived him of his possessions, but each person took only small things. Small doses. So they could tell the judge, "Look, your honor, it's nothing. For this, I am to face charges?" But together, they took [00:23:00] everything. It was a game, nothing else. The Sodomites needed not fear justice. The courts existed only to condemn and punish the victim, be he or she one of their own tribe. Example. If a Sodomite struck his neighbor's pregnant wife, who lost her baby in the process, her husband was told, give your wife to the man who hit her. He'll make her pregnant again. If a man wounded his fellow man and made him bleed, he was told to pay his aggressor for the bloodletting. Cruel to human beings, the

Sodomites were equally cruel towards animals and birds. In other words, towards any living creature whose life and movement escaped their authority. And eventually, the Sodomites manifested cruelty towards one another. Yes, [00:24:00] in spite of their plentiful natural resources, the Sodomites envied one another, were jealous of one another, and stole from one another.

Is that why God grew angry and said, quote, "I have given you more than I gave others, and you use my blessings to make others suffer?" Is this why he chose to annihilate Sodom? We stumble here upon a serious and disturbing issue, that of collective guilt. Does it exist within the framework of the Jewish tradition? Could there be no innocent person within a community of sinners? Then what about the children, the infants? Are they, too, guilty? Guilty of what? Of having been born there? Was it their choice? Furthermore, if guilt was all-pervasive, why were Lot and his wife and their children spared? [00:25:00] Only because they were Abraham's relatives -- is nepotism a valid reason? If the answer is yes, why were Aaron's children punished by death?

Let's analyze each of the characters and stay a moment with Lot, because Lot, superficially, appears to be the permanent

winner of Sodom's nicest citizen award. In the Biblical text, he is introduced in flattering terms. Unlike his compatriots, he was kind and hospitable towards strangers. Is that why he deserved to survive? It seems so -- didn't he welcome the three celestial emissaries, even though he ignored their identity and was unaware of their mission? Both Scripture and its commentaries make much of this episode. He invited [00:26:00] the three angels into his home, we are told. He offered them food and shelter. And when the Sodomites, all of them, young and old, rich and richer, came to besiege his house and demand that he hand them over, he refused. A perfect host, he protected his guests to the end. He went so far as to propose a deal to the aggressors. Instead of his three visitors, he will give them his two young daughters, both virgins. And he told them, "Do with these two girls whatever your heart desires." His plea fell on deaf ears. What the Sodomites wanted was to sodomize and lynch the three foreigners, [00:27:00] nothing less, nothing else would satisfy their vile instincts. They were about to break down the doors, when finally, the three angels, who until now were rather passive, decided to take action. They blinded the attackers and thus rendered them harmless.

At this point, one feels like yelling, Bravo, Lot. Well done. You are indeed special. But wait -- let's not be too hasty. That the angels deserve our praise, that goes without saying. Angels are by definition praiseworthy. But Lot? I mean, not the gracious host who knows the laws of hospitality, but Lot the father. What kind of a father was he, ready to hand his own [00:28:00] daughters over to a bloodthirsty and sex-thirsty mob? Did he at least consult his wife? Did he at least consult with his daughters, they had something to say about it? Is it possible that they agreed to be sacrificed in that manner?

One somewhat perverse theory maintains that that's what they subconsciously desired. You know, the new theory about the victim falling in love with the victimizer. In those times, they may have read about it. (laughter) Why would they want to be sacrificed? The reason, again the theory says, a Midrashic theory, that they weren't that young anymore. (laughter). And since they never knew [00:29:00] the mysterious joy of physical love. . . it is a fact that following their escape, they abused their father's fatigue and made use of his vigor while he remained asleep. Alright. Suppose they were consenting adults. When Lot offered them to the populace, they knew what they, the daughters, were going to do. But what about Lot, the father? Does this necessarily exonerate him, that they wanted? What

kind of father was he, why didn't he tell his daughters, "Look, you cannot do certain things, you are my daughters."

Admittedly, the angels were grateful. So much so that they revealed to Lot the true nature of their mission. The entire city was doomed, and therefore, "Take your family," they told him, "your sons, your daughters, their husbands, [00:30:00] take them and flee, for this place will be destroyed." Lot took the warning seriously. Quickly, he ran to meet with his sons-in-law. He repeated the precise words he had heard from the angels, and urged them to pack, quickly, and leave immediately. In vain. They refused to believe him. They mocked him for his fears and ridiculed his visions of horror. In the meantime, the angels grew impatient and began pressing him to leave. Time was running out. "Do not linger," they told Lot. "It's later than you think. Your sons-in-law refuse to join you, leave them behind. Take your wife and your two unmarried daughters and come with us. Those who are unwilling or unable to hear your warning, those who refuse to be saved, too bad for them."

[00:31:00] Growing more anxious by the minute, the angels led them out of town by hand. And that's when they said, "Do not look back. To look back means instant death."

(sighs) There, we cannot not be shocked by the behavior of the angels. That they were in a hurry was understandable. But since they could perform miracles by blinding the Sodomites, why didn't they perform one last miracle and save all the members of Lot's family, even against their will? And since we have come upon such a perplexing point about the angels, may we extend it and humbly ask our marvelous, unique grandfather Abraham something about his own whereabouts during this phase of the tragedy? Where was he when his nephew fled [00:32:00] Sodom? Granted, he was busy arguing with God, and it took some time.

Trying to save Sodom's inhabitants, you remember, he bargained with God. His civil courage was evident, no doubt about that. But why did he, all of a sudden, in the middle of the argument, before the debate was over, why did he vanish from the stage? Let's read the text. At a certain point in the debate, Abraham gave up. He picked up his marbles, so to speak, and went home. And the text says, "*Vayeilekh Adoshem ka-asher kila ledabeir elAvraham, ve'Avraham shav limkomo.*" Having told Abraham that he accepts his challenge, and that Sodom will be saved, if it had even ten just men in its midst, not 50. Abraham returned to his dwelling place. What is this? [00:33:00] God was ready to annul his devastating decree if only Abraham could designate to him ten just men. And Abraham didn't even try to locate them,

to identify them? He didn't knock at doors, didn't consult friends and experts? He simply went home and did nothing? He who knew how to fight, who loved to fight for his fellow man, he did nothing? What happened to Abraham? What made him yield to passivity all of a sudden? What made him so resigned? Why didn't he continue to argue, maybe nine, eight, seven? And the question of questions, whenever we confront someone else's tragedy. And what about God in all this? How is one to explain his attitude?

Before the destruction of Sodom, he seemed to play a game with [00:34:00] his favorite Jew, the first. Abraham. A game totally unfair to Abraham, who had no control over its outcome. Clearly, Abraham bargained with God in good conscience. He couldn't have known whether there were ten or ten hundred just men in the city, but God knew. So why did he force Abraham to play such a ridiculous game? Why didn't he stop him and say, Look, my dear fellow, I know it hurts you. I know you have family there, I know you know people there, but don't waste your time nor mine. It's no use. What is bound to happen will indeed happen, and there is nothing you can do about it. Why did he let him sink deeper and deeper into his own inevitable defeat? Is it possible, is it conceivable, that God actually wanted to demonstrate to Abraham something that Abraham already

knew? Namely, that the Creator is superior to his creation,
[00:35:00] that God's knowledge lies beyond that of man?

Admit it. All the protagonists here seem, at certain moments,
determined to move us to dismay, as if to tell us, Wait. You
haven't seen everything yet. There are other surprises in store
for you. Lot, the angels, Abraham. What about Lot's wife? Is
she also going to surprise us with her wickedness? Yes, even
she is full of surprises. We plan to question her later, but
don't worry, we know how to find her. She won't run away.
Let's retrace our steps and revisit the place of no return in
Sodom. We had the usual yet doubtful pleasure of meeting its
sinners. Was there really no honest citizen around? No
[00:36:00] charitable woman? No decent individual in that
entire city which was cursed by itself and punished by destiny?

Wait, there was one. One person. One soul. A member of Lot's
family. Himself? No. His wife? No. His daughter? Yes, his
daughter. Lo and behold, we even know her name: Paltith. True,
her name does not appear in Scripture, but she does play rather
a significant role in the Midrash. The Midrash offers some
interesting details about her personality. As the wife of an
influential Sodomite, she lacked nothing, needed nothing to
enjoy life and its blessings. Like the young Sakyamuni or

Buddha, she must have thought that everybody under the sun was as happy, as healthy, as vigorous as she was. Then one day, she noticed a hungry beggar. [00:37:00] And she couldn't help but feel sorry for him. Unfortunately, that, I mean to feel sorry, was forbidden in Sodom, where human responses were declared illegal. So, she brought him food clandestinely, under cover of night. It took some time until the Sodomites understood how the beggar managed to survive. They figured it out. Paltith was arrested, tried, judged, sentenced to die at the stake. In her agony, she screamed to heaven, "Master of the Universe, be my judge, and the judge of Sodom." That is when God decided to leave his celestial throne and pass judgment upon her tormentors and executioners. This is suggested in the Biblical text itself. "*Eirada-na v'ereh ha'ketzakata haba'a elai*, I must go down below and see what is happening, for her outcry has reached me." Meaning her in singular. One outcry only, or the outcry of a single woman. Indeed, it happened that the suffering inflicted upon one person moved God more than the pain endured by multitudes.

Does it mean that Paltith was the only just person in Sodom? If there is one, there are two. There was another one, claims the Midrash. And it tells the story of two girlfriends who would go together to draw water from the well. "You look bad," said the

one. The other didn't answer. But the first one was so insistent that her friend had to explain, "We have no food at home." The first girl came from a wealthier family and could have helped her friend, but again, compassion was considered a crime in [00:39:00] Sodom. But the rich girl had an idea. She filled her jug with grain, and then, when they met, the two friends exchanged jugs. The generous one ended up on the stake, and it is because of her suffering, says this Midrash, that God destroyed Sodom.

Another Midrashic text describes another sinful town, there were five of them, where a nice young girl also felt sorry for a stranger. She too was arrested, judged, and sentenced to death. This time, not by fire, but by the sting of thousands of bees, and it was because of her that Sodom was punished. Thus, the Midrash seems to emphasize the importance of individual suffering. And I like [00:40:00] such an attitude. I like to think that when a victim, any victim, feels pain, God listens. When a person, any person, is tortured, God is moved to bring justice.

But wait a minute. Any person? Any victim? God was unable to bear the pain of a charitable Sodomite girl. But what about the pain of the strangers who happened to visit Sodom for quite some

time? Am I to conclude that their tears left God indifferent? Does the agony of a Sodomite weigh more heavily upon God than that of the others? Does God practice discriminatory love towards victims of different ethnic groups? Good questions. They prove [00:41:00] that the divine meaning of human justice, or injustice, has often eluded its victims.

And this is true even to a higher degree of Lot's wife. She has been saved -- correction, she was meant to be saved. Look at the list of the survivors. She is there. Why? Because Lot was her husband. Was she better than other wives in Sodom? The Midrashic answer is a resounding no. She was no less wicked than her peers. If she became a pillar of salt, it was not because she had looked back, but because of what she had done before. It was because of her, says the Midrash, that Lot's three celestial guests were discovered. Listen. Upon their unexpected arrival, Lot turned to his wife and asked her to offer them the customary [00:42:00] bread and salt. "Right away," she said. And she went to knock at the door of her neighbor's, could she please borrow some salt? They were curious. Why did she need salt all of a sudden? "Oh, it's for our guests," she replied. And that is how the inhabitants of Sodom learned of the presence of strangers in their midst. And that is how they came to besiege the house of Lot, and try, and

try to take the strangers as their hostages. And since the punishment is usually meant to fit the crime, she turned into salt.

Well, let us stop again. I think that we need some respite from this tale of evil and misfortune. It's too much. With the notable exception of two local girls, none of the protagonists [00:43:00] seem irreproachable. Not even the supreme judge, God? He could have issued earlier warnings to Sodom, telling its citizens of their impending fate? He could have incited them to repent, he said it. Did he? Well, the Midrash says yes. He did. According to one source, many natural and unnatural catastrophes had struck Sodom during the 52 years preceding the Biblical story. All of these upheavals -- wars and earthquakes -- were meant to awaken the Sodomites, to inspire them, to remind them of their mortality, and to tell them it's time to repent. A nice try. But there is no hint of this in the Biblical text. Did God do nothing because he knew all along that Sodom would remain Sodom? But haven't we learned from Rabbi Akiva that [00:44:00] "*hakol tzafui, v'har'shut n'tunah,*" everything is foreseen on God's level. But on the level of human beings, everything is still possible, to the end.

Now, do I appear to act as Sodom's self-appointed legal defender? Don't I realize that such efforts, however valiant and selfless they might be, would end in failure? If Abraham lost, how could I expect to win? Still, may I be allowed to have a closer look at the file? It seems to me that one question ought to dominate our tale and we have already hinted at it. Is collective punishment compatible with the Jewish tradition? And regrettably, the answer is -- yes. I don't like it. But the Bible speaks of an "*ir hanidahat*" [00:45:00], a rebellious, sinful, isolated, and doomed city, which must, according to the law, be annihilated. Totally. Everything in it must disappear. The law seems cruel, yes. But it is one of those laws that exist on the page but have never been implemented. Sodom's case is an exception, and what's more, it predated the law. And therefore, it's illegal.

Abraham believed so, and Abraham doesn't hesitate to say so. For Abraham, there is no collective punishment. Remember Abraham's celebrated outburst to God, "*Ha-shofet kol-ha-aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat?*", can you, the judge of all that exists, commit an injustice? [00:46:00] And Abraham continues. Are you really going to punish, to kill the just and the wicked together? In other words, whether someone does good or evil have no effect on your reaction? Does it mean that just may not be rewarded --

worse, that he may be punished? For what? For being just? For being the neighbor of a wicked? To live in the midst of wicked? It's his choice? By the way, the problem of theodicy is only half-articulated here. Usually, we protest against the happiness of the wicked and the unhappiness of the just. Only the second part of the enigma is touched upon in this Biblical passage.

What pains and shocks Abraham is that all people could be equal in the eyes of the Almighty. And there, [00:47:00] we understand Abraham's perplexity. If the wicked and the just are equal on any level, how is one to differentiate between them? How do we know what morality is? How do we know what sin means? Isn't Judaism a desire, from the very beginning of its appearance in history, a need to distinguish good from evil? "*Hamavdil bein kodseh l'chol?*". To distinguish the sacred from the profane? And what is God's answer to Abraham's objection? He simply states that there is no just man left in Sodom. In other words, don't worry. Abraham, don't worry. Nothing bad will happen to the just. There are no just persons over there. If there were, I would [00:48:00] save them. Better yet, I would save everybody else as well.

And so, on this level, the case may be closed. Everything is settled. Abraham has nothing to reproach himself for, nor does God. Abraham has done his duty, as has God. Could Abraham have pushed the debate a bit further? He could have said, please God, save Sodom. Save it for one person's sake. But Abraham realized that it was pointless to continue. He had lost and he knew it. That is why he picked himself up and went home. What else could he have done? At least his close relatives would be saved.

And yet, if Lot and his children were saved, Abraham could not take credit for it. Uncle Abraham didn't even mention them in his plea bargaining. It was God's idea, [00:49:00] or his angels, not Abraham's. Aren't we entitled to ask, Why wasn't it? In other words, why didn't Abraham intercede on their behalf? Is it that he suddenly understood that they, too, were sinners? Lot's wife too, and their children? But then if they were sinners, the question remains, why were they worthy of being spared? The Midrashic commentaries tend to be harsh towards the entire family. Not only was Lot part of Sodom's corrupt system, he was said to have been a sex maniac. Whatever he did, said the Midrash, wherever he went, he looked for women. The verse, quote, "And Lot lifted his eyes and saw the entire

Jordan Valley," end of quote, is interpreted by Rabbi Nachman bar Hanina in a purely [00:50:00] erotic way. (laughter)

The other members of the family, better not talk about them. Well, let's. We go back to Lot's wife. She betrayed the three guests. Bad. The children, the two daughters were unmarried, the two others were not. When Lot told them of the impending catastrophe, his two sons-in-law snapped back at him, "Are you crazy?" Poor Lot. Do you really want to convince us that our city is on the edge of disaster? Don't you hear the music, the songs that come from its streets and houses? A city that sings is about to perish? Is that what you are telling us? And so, they stayed behind, and their wives too, and their children. The two sons-in-law were fools. After all, their father-in-law was not just anyone. [00:51:00] He had access to important people, even to God. If he was panicking, they should have listened. Naturally, Lot should have insisted on their departure, but time was running out. The angels told him so. Every minute could have been the last. Soon, flames would surge and come down from heaven and -- escorted by the angels, Lot and his wife and their two unmarried daughters fled the burning city.

At that moment, the Midrashic tale, as we expect it to be, the Midrashic tale dramatically changes course. Suddenly, the mother appears as a positive figure. In the Bible, she is a sinner; in the Midrash, she's a human being. Disobeying the angels' order, she looked back. And what she saw filled [00:52:00] -- or filled her -- with what? With fear, says one source. She saw the magnitude of the catastrophe and died. Because of them, because of the dead, she died. Another source says she was filled with light. She saw what no human being could see; she saw the Shechinah, the divine providence, with impunity. Incidentally, looking back was severely judged in antiquity. When Orpheus rescued Eurydice from the land of the dead, he received a similar warning not to look back. Unable to resist his curiosity, he did look back, and that is how he lost his beloved forever.

But that, why did Lot's wife [00:53:00] transgress this prohibition? The Midrashic explanation is charitable and I espouse it. I like it. Because this theory, this hypothesis, rehabilitates Mrs. Lot in my eyes. It was her maternal instinct that made her look back. She wanted to see the place where she had left her two daughters behind. She was a mother, after all. A compassionate mother. Sodom had not hardened her heart. She continued to love her children and grandchildren. She loved

them even more, knowing that they were dead. How could she have abandoned them without even looking at what was left of them? Between obeying the injunction of angels and listening to her heart, [00:54:00] she listened to her heart.

The two surviving daughters? They, too, actually, were granted extenuating circumstances. In this case, all the women have all the privileges. Men don't fare that well. Convinced that their immediately family represented the entire human species as in the time of the floods, these two unmarried girls felt an obligation to perpetuate it. It's not that they wanted to enjoy it. They thought of the future of humankind. It's a normal impulse, isn't it? They did it with their father -- so what? There was nobody else. And furthermore, they had to leave something for future psychoanalysts. (laughter) There were no other men around. And didn't Noah's daughters [00:55:00] do the same thing with their father, and were they blamed? Anyway, Lot's daughters may have felt like strangers to their father. Didn't he treat them as strangers when he offered them to the mob that besieged their house back in Sodom?

A Midrashic text goes even farther. It suggests that the two single daughters had no choice. History commanded them to do what they have done with their father. They had to bear Lot's

children so as to allow King David to be born, centuries, centuries later. David, a descendant of Ruth, the Moabite. And who was Ruth? A descendant of Lot's daughter. In other words, in this case, incest seemed necessary, if not [00:56:00] unavoidable. Without it, Jewish history would not have moved towards messianic redemption. So, all were rehabilitated. All? Almost all. Not Lot.

He is a difficult case. As a character, he's not too appealing. Why did he flee Sodom in such haste? Didn't he feel anything? His wife did, but he didn't. Once out of town, he didn't even look back. How can a father detach himself from his children with such ease? Granted, the angels ordered him not to look back -- so what? Was he so pious all of a sudden that he couldn't disobey them? Again, I repeat, and I insist that his wife seems more sensitive, more vulnerable, more human. Having lost in one minute all her belongings, having been separated from [00:57:00] some of her children, she felt irresistibly drawn to them. She had to look back one last time before confronting the future, and come what may. Frightened and tormented by a possible guilt feeling, for having survived her children, she was looking for her two married daughters and their children. Where were they? Is it possible that being unable to locate them, she wanted to stay behind, even as a

statue? Had she been alive, would she had permitted the incestuous act? Would there be a messiah, waiting for us at the end of time?

The only thing that Lot could say in his defense was that he was drunk. Still, at least one text maintains that he wasn't that drunk while his daughters -- [00:58:00] so, Lot, an egocentric hedonist, how could he be exonerated? I was looking very hard for him, too. I felt it was unfair. We are doing so much for the women, why not help out one man in need? Well, I think we succeeded. Listen to the next phase of the tale. When Lot escaped from the burning city, what did he do? He made a request to the angels. On whose behalf? On behalf of unknown people, total strangers. "Look," he told them. They who said to him, "Don't look anywhere," he said, "Now, look. Look at that little town. Its name is Mitzar. I implore you, spare it from destruction. I want to go and find refuge there. Naturally, I could try mountains. But I prefer cities. I prefer that [00:59:00] city. Let it live." And lo and behold, the angels heeded his plea.

Astonishing, isn't it? Lot succeeded where Abraham failed. With a few words, he saved human lives. He saved an entire community, an entire city. And so, at last, we find ourselves

ready to be reconciled with Lot, too. And his daughters, and their mother. But what about Abraham? He taught us an important lesson. It's always good to argue. Even if the debate seems pointless, continue to fight, and to bargain. Don't worry.

Well, it's time for us to leave Sodom. What is the meaning of its history? Victory or defeat, or both, perhaps? Ultimately, Sodom means the failure of a society, [01:00:00] and the triumph of a few individuals. What was the Sodomite society guilty of? It condemned itself by rejecting and humiliating and oppressing the poor, the strangers, the refugees, who more than anything, and anyone, need compassion and generosity. The story of Sodom may be the story of a warning for future generations. The lesson? A society that negates the humanity of its weaker human components is in fact bequeathing, if not producing, its own misfortune and malediction. Sodom, therefore, is not only a place of long ago. Its flames rush through our recent past. And if buildings and lives were [01:01:00] destroyed, it is also in the name of what made Sodom made famous for. Hate and indifference to the victims.

In conclusion, our history is reflected in Lot's story. Questions about him apply to us as well. Must I articulate

them? They are on your minds, as they are on mine. Why did my contemporaries in Europe refuse to believe that death was near? Why did so many children fall victim to so many murderers? Where was divine justice? Where was human compassion? Why did one survive, while so many others did not? And why did my generation lack intercessors in heaven, although Sodom did not. These questions are troubling, and they are eternal. [01:02:00] The answers, if they exist, I do not know them. All I know is that at the end of the story, I understand Lot's wife better than him. For at times, one must look backwards, lest one run the risk of turning into a statue. Of salt, of stone? No. Of ice. (audience applause)

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