

Lot's Wife Lives

Vayera 5779

I.

PREPARE TO HAVE YOUR MINDS BLOWN. Mine certainly was when, a few weeks ago, I was reading an article by Rabbi Yehuda Sarna – now the Executive Director of the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University – when he was a YU student in the late 90s.

Among the many famous stories we read this morning, one stands out for how it captures our imagination. Fleeing Sodom's destruction, Lot and his family are told not to turn back, yet his wife does. What happens next?

She turns into salt, right?

Nope. Not at all. We're misreading the verse.

There's a couple of reasons to reconsider our traditional understanding of this story. The first is that God is not known for turning people into other things. Granted, there are a few examples of metamorphosis in the Torah: the serpent is punished with metamorphosis in *Parashat Bereishit*, his legs are removed; and Moshe's staff turns into a snake and back again in *Sefer Shemot*, but, neither of these are as drastic as Lot's wife turning into salt. It's either a unique punishment – never again seen in the entire Torah – or a misunderstanding.

And, second, even if this is a punishment, what is she being punished for? While she disobeys a direct command, Lot does, too. He doesn't leave when first commanded and, instead, hesitates. There's a greater justification for God punishing Lot than Lot's wife. It seems unnecessarily harsh for God to punish Lot's wife when her husband is equally guilty of violating a command.

These seems good reasons for skepticism. For rethinking our understanding of this story. But it's not so simple: the Torah itself claims that this unnecessarily harsh and never-again-seen kind of punishment does happen.

וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתִּהְיֶי נָצִיב מֶלֶח:

Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26).

It's all very well taking issue with the narrative – but that's what it says!

Or does it?

Because, there's another way to read this verse. Those of you familiar with *leining* will notice that the *trop*, the musical notation for the Torah reading, places an *etnachta*, a break, in the middle of this verse: וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו, “Lot's wife looked back,” and then the Torah adds a pause before continuing: וַתִּהְיֶי נָצִיב מֶלֶח. And herein lies the ambiguity. To what is the word *vatehi* referring? We think it means Lot's wife, but it could mean something else. There's another option. As argued by, among others, R. Chizkiya b. Manoach, the 13th-century commentator, in his work *Chizkuni*. He adds two words into the verse to clarify its ambiguity:

וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתִּהְיֶי כָּל הָאָרֶץ נָצִיב מֶלֶח:

Lot's wife looked back; and **the land** had turned to salt.

Lot's wife doesn't look back and, in doing so, get turned into salt. She looks back and sees her home, her neighbourhood, her town, covered in salt. And there's a good reason to think this is the correct understanding beyond it resolving the issues I already mentioned. As *Chizkuni* notes, Moshe himself describes the punishment of Sodom this way. In *Parashat Nitzavim* – we read it just a few weeks ago – Moshe describes a type of punishment that might befall the Jewish people:

גַּפְרִית וּמֶלַח שְׂרָפָה כָּל-אֲרִצָּהּ לֹא תִזְרַע וְלֹא תִצְמַח וְלֹא-יַעֲלֶה בָּהּ כָּל-עֵשֶׂב
כַּמְהַפְּכֵת סֹדֶם וְעִמְרָה אֲדָמָה וְצִבּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הִפָּךְ יְהוָה בְּאָפוּ וּבְחִמָּתוֹ:

All its soil devastated by sulfur and salt, beyond sowing and producing, no grass growing in it, just like the upheaval of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in His fierce anger (Deut. 29:22).

This story that we learn either as children or in the early stages of our religious journey is a misunderstanding. And that, I think, is mind-blowing. Lot's wife was never turned to salt. She looked back and saw Sodom covered in salt, to make sure nothing ever grows there again. It's completely destroyed.

But then, another question emerges. The narrative that follows Lot's escape is deeply disturbing: his daughters, thinking themselves the only people left in the world, commit to repopulation via their father. It's a harrowing enough story assuming their mother dead. But, if she's alive and with them in the cave, why doesn't she say anything?!

There is a simple answer. Lot's wife is a Sodomite. And while, in the English language, that word has come to mean one thing, in Jewish tradition it means something very different.

II.

The *mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* (5:10) describes different attitudes we can have towards our material wealth. One of which is described as follows:

הָאוֹמֵר שְׁלִי שְׁלִי וְשִׁלְךָ שְׁלְךָ, זוֹ מִדַּת סְדוּם. וַיֵּשׁ אוֹמְרִים, זוֹ מִדַּת סְדוּם.

One who says “what is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours” – this is a typical attitude. But there are some who say this makes one a Sodomite.

It's normal, says this *mishnah*, for us to think that what we have earned is ours, and what others have earned – or what they have not earned – is theirs. Each keeps his or her own and owes nothing to anyone else nor is owed anything by anyone else. But there's another type of person who exhibits this attitude. One who is selfish. One who is self-absorbed. One who feels they need not partake in wider society. One who is consumed solely by materialistic gain. This is what Judaism understands the word מִדַּת סְדוּם “sodomy” to mean – this was the great crime of the people of Sodom. Their refusal

to ever help others. This is why a mob turns up at Lot's home after he brings in his guests. In Sodom, you aren't supposed to take in those in need. Lot's house was his house; these other people in need have no right to it, and Lot should not offer it.

Where is Lot's wife while her daughters are with her husband? The very same place she is when her husband offers her daughters to the mob to placate their urges: right next to him. But she doesn't care. If something doesn't affect her literal self, if something doesn't affect her financial bottom line, Lot's wife does not exist in the story. She only appears when her home is about to be destroyed, when her possessions are about to disappear. That's when she takes action.

And this side of her personality is underscored by the person she is juxtaposed to in the Torah. Right after the Torah describes Lot's wife turning to see her land covered in salt the Torah briefly pans towards Avraham, watching from a distance:

וַיֵּשְׁבֻם אַבְרָהָם בְּבֶקֶר אֶל-הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-עָמַד שָׁם אֶת-פְּנֵי יְהוָה: וַיִּשְׁקֹף עַל-פְּנֵי סוּדֹם
וַעֲמִרָה וְעַל-כָּל-פְּנֵי אֶרֶץ הַכְּכָר וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה עָלָה קִיטָר הָאֶרֶץ כְּקִיטָר הַכְּבִשָּׁן

Next morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the LORD, and, looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln (Gen. 19:27–28).

The imagery and the contrast are striking. Lot's wife, a resident of Sodom, turns back to look at *her* city – a city where, only moments ago, lived her friends, her neighbours, her wider society – and all she sees is the salt. Avraham, looking out at the city in which he knows no one save and has been told is full of evil people sees the smoke. What's the difference? The salt is sown into the ground to prevent its growth, the smoke is the buildings and the people. When Lot's wife looks back, she is drawn to the beauty of Sodom that is no more – the Torah has already told us that it is the most beautiful area of the land – and its produce, its materiality, that has been destroyed. But she doesn't notice the smoke, like Avraham. She isn't bothered by the death. Because she's a Sodomite: she cares more about the beauty of the land and the coins jingling in her purse than the suffering of people.

III.

We are so distracted by the dramatic image of a woman turned to salt that we don't notice the true horror captured by the verse. A woman so consumed by her own selfish needs that she can't notice death surrounding her. She does not have even the most basic level of human decency! And with that, the Torah makes very clear who should fuel our ideals: Avraham. Avraham who sees the humanity in everyone, who sees the value in everyone – he begs God to save people he knows are evil – that's the kind of person we should be.

Lot's wife is a cautionary tale for us. Not because it scares us into thinking that, should we ignore God, we'll be turned to salt, but because it terrifies us into realizing that, if we are not sensitive to the suffering of others, if we do nothing about it because we only care about what affects our bank balance and no more, than we will be like her. Not a pillar of salt but a living, breathing monster. God could inflict no punishment as harsh as the natural consequence of becoming Lot's wife.