

SAVING ZOAR: HOW DID LOT SUCCEED?

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In analyzing the life of Abraham, one is struck by his negotiating with God in an attempt to save the city of Sodom¹ and its neighboring cities (Gen. 18). A close look reveals that his plea takes more the form of an argument than one of prayer. The 11th-century French exegete Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi) goes so far as to say that in addition to Abraham's turning to God in appeasement and prayer he also confronted God, speaking harshly to Him as one confronts an opponent in battle.² Similarly, when the episode concludes, Rashi comments³ that the Judge (God) exits because Abraham is silenced as counsel for the defense. Hence, Rashi's commentary lends an air of a courtroom drama where Abraham zealously represents his clients' appeal to avoid death row. Yet, for all his pleading and for all his audacious argumentation, God's verdict remains unchanged.

In the verse following Abraham's marketplace bargaining with God, we are transported to Sodom itself, and to the one resident we already knew lived there: Abraham's nephew Lot. The prospect of his destruction along with that of the entire city enters the readers' mind from the initial mention of God's plan. The reader should recall Abraham's brave rescue of Lot from captivity which took center stage and reversed the outcome of the battle of the kings recorded in Genesis 14. In fact, God's informing Abraham of Sodom's wickedness brings us back to Genesis 13, where the Bible informs us of this wickedness at the inception of Lot's decision to live there: *And the people of Sodom were very evil offenders against the Lord* (13:13).

God's messengers arrive in Sodom and Lot insists on their spending the night as his guests (19:2-3). Lot's praiseworthy behavior of befriending the messengers and protecting them in face of the lynch mob which quickly surrounds his home allows one to differentiate him from the rest of the inhabitants (19:5-7).

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While Lot's later offer of his daughters to the mob in lieu of the guests detracts from his righteousness, his positive differentiation in taking in the guests instills in us the desire that somehow Lot at least should be spared from the impending doom (19:8). As the drama unfolds, Lot and his family are indeed given an opportunity to flee from the destruction (19:12, 15-17).

While the fact of Lot's being saved is clearly stated in the text, the reason why he is saved is much less clear. At one point, the text ascribes Lot's salvation to God's mercy upon him: *And the people grasped his hand and the hand of his wife and the hands of his two daughters in God's mercy upon him and He took him out and He left him outside the city* (19:16). This passage dovetails nicely with the text that immediately precedes it, that records Lot's praiseworthy behavior as a host in Sodom. Yet, when the text summarizes the chain of events after the destruction, Lot's escape is ascribed to God's remembering Abraham: *And it was when God was destroying the cities of the plains and God remembered Abraham and He sent Lot out from the overturn when overturning the cities where Lot had dwelled* (19:29). This dovetails well with the text that immediately precedes it, in which Abraham stands in his place of prayer/meditation/confrontation with God⁴ and then surveys the scene of the destruction.⁵

These two accreditations highlight the difficulty of properly gauging Lot's independent worthiness. However, leaving that issue unresolved, suffice it to say that, for whatever the reason, God saw it necessary that Lot be saved from the destruction.

When saving Lot, God does not grant him the same opportunity Abraham had to pray on behalf of the city and towns. Rather, Lot is told that he is to take his sons-in-law, sons, and daughters and all he has and flee (19:12) – a direct command for action. It is not meant as an informative statement but, rather, as an urgent directive. In addition, the text states that the messengers inform Lot that the cries from the city have grown before God and God has sent them to destroy it (19:13). In contrast, God's previous statement to Abraham left room for hope that the destruction is avoidable: *I will go down now and see if the cries that are coming to me have merited destruction and if not, I will have compassion* (18:21).⁶ This is an open-ended statement without the demand for action demanded of Lot and, on a certain level, invites a prayer by Abraham on behalf of the cities.⁷

Upon Lot's hurried and pressured escape, the messengers order him to flee to the mountains lest he perish (19:15). In the heat of the moment, with the messengers pressuring him to leave, Lot begins a selfish plea to be allowed to stay in Zoar – a city destined for destruction – for he fears that he will be unable to reach the mountains (19:18-20). Lot's request is granted as the text records: *'I have granted you a favor on this matter as well in that I shall not destroy the city of which you spoke'* (19:21). It is only after Lot arrives at his destination that the destruction of Sodom and the other cities begins (19:22).⁸

The many difficulties surrounding this ostensibly straightforward narrative have not been duly noticed. Abraham, who just a few chapters ago so valiantly rushed out with 318 men to rescue Lot from captivity, does not even attempt to save him from the destruction of the city. Abraham does not attempt to contact Lot to warn him of the destruction, nor does he put in a personal request to God to spare him. Abraham never seeks contact with Lot even after the destruction and God does not inform him that Lot is saved. How can one explain this callousness and ostensibly extreme change of heart?

In addition, Lot, who, at least according to one reading, is saved because God remembers Abraham, manages to save the entire city of Zoar while Abraham himself fails to save anyone despite his zealous advocacy. It should be pointed out that Lot does not directly ask to save an entire city. Rather, he asks selfishly to save his own life. It is only as a necessary byproduct that the city would be spared. Indeed, Lot's later abandonment of Zoar for the mountains also indicates that he was not concerned with the city's welfare but with his own. Had he cared for the city's welfare, he would have remained in Zoar to assure its salvation by his presence. It is, therefore, difficult to posit that Lot genuinely cared to save the inhabitants of the city, or that he used his own rescue as a ruse to accomplish this desire. After all, these people's close comrades were the ones who just the day before were ready to sexually abuse him, his family, and his guests. In this respect, Abraham's pleadings are indeed nobler than Lot's selfish request.

Yet, nevertheless, Lot's request is granted while Abraham's petition is denied. Ironically, Lot soon flees Zoar out of fear of its destruction and reaches the mountains that were the original destination. Yet, God does not destroy the town of Zoar even after Lot leaves.⁹ Thus Lot's success in saving Zoar is quite remarkable as Zoar is spared even after it ceases to serve its function as

Lot's safe haven. How can one understand this success in light of Abraham's failure? At this juncture, a close reading of the text with attention to pertinent *leitwort*, or theme-word, will reveal a fundamental understanding of Lot's and Abraham's personalities and resolve the issues raised above.

What was Abraham's position?

Upon hearing that God was contemplating dealing destruction unto Sodom, Abraham's understanding of God's plan is that the destruction would take place if the cries were justified, despite any individual righteousness of the people residing therein. In response, Abraham approaches God demanding justice. Abraham's demand for justice expresses itself in the very assertions he sets forth. The first is a demand for not destroying the righteous with the wicked.

Will you bring to an end the righteous with the wicked? (18:23) . . . It does not befit You to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, and it will be as the righteous so the wicked, it does not befit You, the Judge of the entire world – will not do justice? (18:25).

The equal fate for the two disparate groups bothers Abraham. However, Abraham is not demanding individual justice; that is, that God simply save the righteous and destroy the wicked. In the middle of the section where Abraham says that it is unjust to punish the righteous along with the wicked (18:23, 25), he asks to save the place [*ha-makom*] for the sake of 50 righteous people (18:24). Abraham's plea is on account of the righteous that may dwell in its midst. The word place is a key word that appears throughout the narrative (18:24,26; 19:12,13,14,27). Abraham argues that when destroying a place, the place should take on a status of its own that is determined by its inhabitants on a collective level. It is the fate of the place that will determine the fate of its inhabitants and it is the actions of the inhabitants that will determine the fate of the place. It is this intertwined relationship between a place and its inhabitants that Abraham advocates before the Judge of all the earth.

Abraham's objection to the Divine plan as he understood it was that it was incumbent upon God to listen to all the voices, good and bad, prior to deciding the fate of the cities. God's statement (18:21), implies that He was to descend in order to hear if the cries rose to a level that warrants destruction. It

was only the cries of the evil to which God was to listen to and He seemingly would not give weight to the voices of the righteous. Abraham argued that if, after the infusion of the non-crying voices of the righteous, the cries heard were not as severe as before, then no destruction should take place. This represents a qualitative shift from the original Divine plan as Abraham understood it.

Abraham's pleading was also designed to minimize the amount of righteousness required to tip the scales under his suggested plan, as indicated by the descending number of righteous people required to win clemency. He thus requests what he believes to be a qualitative and quantitative change from God's plan.

As mentioned above, Abraham charges God with conducting an unfair trial, or perhaps no trial at all. *The Judge of the entire world - will not do justice?*¹⁰ (18:25). Rashi's allusion to a courtroom drama comes to life with this refined focus on judgment. Indeed, Abraham refers to God as the Judge of the entire earth. For Abraham, the God of the entire earth must be the God over Sodom, and there can be only one set of rules. For Abraham, justice and fairness demand that some sense of uniformity be preserved in meting out punishment. Therefore, in order to save the cities there must be something to be found in them to justify such salvation despite their ostensible wickedness. There must be some righteousness.

We find Abraham's claims for justice textually grounded in God's summons to Abraham. God's informing Abraham of His plan of destruction was itself based on the premise of justice. God Himself had turned to Abraham because He knew that Abraham and his offspring after him would perform *righteousness and justice* (18: 19). The text hints that God wanted Abraham to conduct the trial for Him. Indeed, as Rashi points out, Abraham's final silence ends the trial and grants his tacit agreement that the destruction is warranted. Abraham turns from defense attorney to judge.

With Abraham's need for universal standards of justice and fairness we can now understand that, for Abraham, there could be no special plea for Lot. Abraham does not feel the need for a heroic rescue of Lot because Abraham actually believes that the people of the cities, including Lot, are worthy of destruction if the terms he set forth to God are not met. Lot was to have his

fate move in tandem with the destiny of the city. There could be no nepotism or personal pleas in this dominion of ultimate justice.

In stark contrast, Lot approaches God appealing for God's mercy and avoids any plea for justice. He requests, '*Here now [na] Your servant has found favor in Your eyes and You have magnified Your kindness in what you did with me to spare my life*' (19:19). Lot either has no illusions as to his own role in his rescue, viewing himself as unworthy, or else modestly belittles in his own mind the acts of kindness he bestowed unto the messenger-guests. In any event, he acknowledges that his rescue is an act of kindness and mercy. Lot's use of the word "*na [please]*" is also used repeatedly in his conversations with the messengers as an indication of this attitude (19:2, 7, 8, 18, 19, 20).¹¹

In many senses, Lot is set up as a foil to Abraham. Lot's use of the word *na* can be juxtaposed to Abraham's earlier use of the same word in 18:27, 30, 31, and 32. In addition to the unique word usage, Abraham's treatment of the guests compared to Lot's and the identical beginnings of the one who chose to dwell in Canaan and the one who chose the cities of the plain compared with their disparate destinies, call upon the reader to measure one against the other.

For the purposes of this article, I will only focus on the unique use of the word *na* to illustrate how this *leitwort* can hone in on critical information.

Abraham declares: '*Here, now [na], I have dared to speak to God and I am but dust and ashes*' (18:27). He beseeches: '*Please [na], let not God be angered and I will speak*' (v. 30). He continues his pleading: '*Here, now [na], I have dared to speak to God*' (v. 31). He implores God: '*Please [na], let not God be angered and I will speak but this time*' (v. 32). In each instance, Abraham's use of the word *na* is used in the context of a plea for justice.

In contrast, Lot entreats his guests as recorded in 19:2: '*Here, please [na], my masters, turn now [na] to your servant's home and lodge*' (19:2). He begs the lynch mob: '*Please [na], do not do evil, my brothers*' (v. 7). In 19:8, Lot entreats the crowd: '*I have here now [na] two daughters who have not known a man. I will take them out to you now [na] and do to them as is good in your eyes*' (v. 8). During his escape from Sodom, Lot requests that God allow him to flee to Zoar:

And Lot said to them: 'Please [na], not so my Lord. Here now [na] Your servant has found favor in Your eyes and You have magnified Your kindness in what You did with me to spare my life . . . Here, now [na], this city is close and is small. I will please [na] flee there' (vv. 18-20).

In all these situations, Lot appeals that his request be heeded, but always as a favor, not because justice or morality demands it. Furthermore, with Abraham the word *na* is associated with speech (18:27, 30, 31, 32), while with Lot it is associated with some form of action (19:2, 7, 8, 20). One may feel that Abraham talks, bargains, and negotiates, and Lot gets the job done.

At this point, it might be useful to be more exacting in our analysis. Abraham's arguments do not fail. God does grant the appeals in full, and agrees with every point that Abraham suggests. The outcome, however, does not allow for the cities to be saved. The emphasis that needs to be made is that the difference in outcome is not causally related to the identity of the petitioner but is rather a result of the diametrically opposite contents of the messages conveyed.

God seems to have been ready to grant clemency even to all of Sodom and all the cities of the plain, had anyone asked Him to show mercy and spare them despite their wickedness. Why did not Abraham, identified with acts of loving-kindness as exemplified with the three guests, petition God for mercy?

Abraham, whom God attests does righteousness and justice (18:19), can lead a life where reward and punishment are dealt out according to his deeds. He never needs to appeal to God's mercy personally and, therefore, abides by the universal standards that there must be some merit or righteousness to allow for salvation. In contrast, Lot, who throws his lot in with the wicked people of the plain and whose twisted sense of loving-kindness has him offer his two daughters to the lustful mob outside his home, cannot afford to lead a life predicated solely upon the merits of his deeds. He understands that his salvation is beyond what is justly due to him¹² and so beseeches God for mercy. The textual irony leaves the reader to glean that sometimes it is specifically the life experience of the less righteous that holds the key of salvation for all.

NOTES

1. Translations and transliterations of proper names follow Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004). Translations of the text are by the author.
2. Rashi on 18:23.
3. Rashi on 18:33
4. See commentary of the 15th-16th century Spanish-Portuguese exegete Rabbi Don Isaac Ben-Judah Abravanel.
5. See 19:27-28.
6. See Alter, p. 88, commenting on verse 21, where he points out that the Hebrew formulation of the verb "to do" [*asah*] with the noun *kalah* as a direct object occurs a number of times in the Prophets in the clear sense of "deal destruction". See also commentary of the 13th-century Spanish exegete Rabbi Moses Ben Nahman (Nahmanides) on 18:21 explaining the word *eda'ah* as having compassion.
7. Abraham must feel quite surreal as he hears God's intent and proceeds to see two of his guests arise and embark to carry out the mission. He realizes that he has hosted the very destroyers of Sodom. His nurturing of these destroyers and their circuitous pitstop at his tent may symbolically represent Abraham's nurturing of Sodom's treachery. Abraham's complicity in Sodom's treachery may be attributed to his allowing Lot to depart from his company earlier in favor of encamping at Sodom (13:8-14) as well as Abraham's failure to seize control and reform Sodom after his successful campaign to free Lot from the four kings (14:15-24). As such, God is now turning to Abraham to demonstrate the results of his actions and inaction. Abraham's contemplative overlook at the destruction the morning after his failed attempt to save the cities (19:27-28) crushes him and Abraham is too pained with the memories of his failure in Hebron and decides to travel in a southerly direction and moves to Gerrar to open a new chapter in his life (and perhaps to see if Lot survived) (20:1).
8. While it is tempting to attribute the etymology of Zoar solely to Lot's reference to Zoar as a "small place [*miz'ar*]" it seems it is also related to the language of a.z.r. – to prevent. In fact, the verse (19:22) seemingly indicates that the latter is the reason for the naming. However, see Alter, p. 94 commenting on verse 20. Zoar's original name was Bela as noted in 14:2.
9. One can conclusively determine that Zoar was not destroyed from later textual references. In Deuteronomy 29:22 the destruction of Sodom and the other three cities of Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim are mentioned with Sodom but Zoar is not. Similarly, prior to Moses' death, God shows him the entire land "until Zoar" (Deut. 34: 3). Thus, Zoar is not part of the destruction. Earlier textual references have all five cities grouped together (Gen. 13).
10. The ending of the verse in the Hebrew also allows for a translation of: "will not hold a hearing?"
11. The word *na* standing alone can mean either "please," "now," or "raw," with the combination of *hineh-na* meaning "here now," and *al-na* meaning "please do not." I cite all uses of the word *na* even if the word is to be understood as "now" as I believe the word choice of *na* over a different word for now such as *atah* is significant.
12. As he explicitly states in 19:19.