

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter IV: Vaveira (Gen. 18:1–22:24)

Essay 15. Fire and brimstone

“The L-rd rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the L-rd out of Heaven.”

– Gen. 19:24

וטעם הפיכת הערים, הוא דומנא למאי דאמרינן בדור המבול "נהגני משחיתם את-הארץ", משל למלך שהנה לו בן ומסר אותו לפדגוג. כשסרח הבן, מי נלקה? פדגוגו נלקה. ואף כאן הואיל שעיקר הטאם לא הנה אלא מחמת רוב טובה שהיתה משפעת להם ארצם, לכן לקחה אף היא, "לא תזרע ולא תצמח". אלא דהתם שהנה קלקול כללי משום הכי חזר ותיקן העולם, מה שאין כן הכא שהנה קלקול פרטי. ועוד שהארץ עומדת על המשפט, וכאן אדרבא ארבע דיני הוּוּ בסדום וכו'.

The reason for the overthrow of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is similar to what was said for the generation of the Flood:

“I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them; **I am about to destroy them with the earth.**”¹ **There is a parable of a king who had a son, and he delivered him to his tutor. When his son offended, who was flogged? The tutor was flogged.**

- Gen. Rabbah 31:7

So too here, in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, **since the main sin of theirs was only because of the great goodness that affected their land, therefore it too was crippled, “it would neither sow nor produce.”**² **Rather, there**, regarding the Flood, **there was a general corruption; because of this, [G-d] returned to active involvement and repaired the world** so that the people and animals on Noah’s ark could repopulate the world. **That is something that is not the case here** in Sodom and Gomorrah **where there was a private corruption**; i.e., as a localized destruction, it could be rendered inhabitable and there would still be plenty of other places in the world where people could flourish.

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¹ Gen. 6:13.

² Deut. 29:22.

Also, the land stands for justice, as it is said, “By justice a king sustains the land,”³ but here to the contrary, “There were four judges in Sodom: Shakrai [‘a liar’], and Shakrurai [‘a habitual liar’], Zayfai [‘a forger’], and Matzlei Dina [‘a perverter of justice’].”⁴

וְגִפְרִית וְאֵשׁ, עַל שְׁבִרוֹתֵיהֶן קִלְקְלוּ בְעֵבְרָהּ וּבְרוֹתְחֵין נִידוֹנוּ כְּדוֹר הַמַּבּוּל. וּמִכַּת הַסַּנּוּוֹרִים, לְפִי שִׁחְטָאוּ בְעֵין, שֶׁהָיָה לָהֶם עֵין רָעָה וְחוֹמְדִים מִמּוֹן אֲחֵרִים וְחוֹמְדִים נְמִי נְשִׂי חֲבִירֵיהֶם, וּמִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה לָקוּ בְעֵין. וְנָהוּ הַטַּעַם שֶׁהִמְלִיחַ סְדוֹמִית מִסַּמָּא אֶת הָעֵינַיִם, לְפִי שֶׁהִמְלִיחַ מְגִין עַל הַפּוֹרְעָנוֹת כְּדִלְקֶמֶן בְּסִמוּךְ, וְהַפּוֹרְעָנוֹת הָרָאוּן שֶׁלֹּא הִגִּין עֲלֵיהֶם הִמְלִיחַ הַיָּתֵה מִכַּת הַסַּנּוּוֹרִים.

And “brimstone and fire.” Why were they punished with fire? For they were corrupted by sin with hot water [i.e., semen], and with hot water they were judged,⁵ as was the generation of the Flood.

Also, they were punished by being struck with blindness, for they sinned with the eye, for they had an evil eye, and coveted the money of others and also coveted the women of their friends, and measure-for-measure they were struck in the eye. This is the reason that Sodomite salt blinds the eye.⁶ The salt placed on a table shields against calamities, as discussed in the following essay, i.e., Essay 16, but the first calamity that the salt did not shield them from was being struck with blindness.

וְעוֹד כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהִטְעִימוֹן הַקַּב"ה טוֹבָה מֵעֵין עוֹלָם הֵבִיא כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרוּ ז"ל, כִּי הִטְעִימוֹן רָעָה מֵעֵין גִּיהֵנָם שֶׁהוּא "חֶשֶׁךְ וְצִלְמוֹת". וְהִמְטִיר עֲלֵיהֶם אֵשׁ אֲשׁוּ שֶׁל גִּיהֵנָם, וְגִפְרִית לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא הִרְגִּישׁוּ בְּחַיֵּיהֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה, כִּדְאִיתָא בְּמִדְרַשׁ רַבָּה עַל פְּסוּק "נָה" הִמְטִיר וְכו'. אָמַר ר' יוֹדֵן מִפְּנֵי מָה אָדָם מְרִישׁ רֵיחַ גִּפְרִית וְנִפְשׁוּ סוֹלְדָת עֲלָיו, לְמָה מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהִיא יוֹדַעַת שֶׁהִיא נִידוֹנָת כֹּה [לְעֵתִיד לְבוֹא]⁷ עכ"ל. וְקִשְׁוֹ לְמָה נִשְׂאָר בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה דְּבָר שֶׁהוּא רָמָז לְגִיהֵנָם דְּוָקָא בְּחֹשׁ שֶׁל הַרִיחַ, וּמִכָּל שְׁכֹן שֶׁהִעֲבִירוֹת שְׂפָנָה חֹשׁ הֵם יוֹתֵר מֵעַט מִשְׂאֵר הַחֹשִׁים.

Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave them a taste of goodness from the World-to-Come, as the rabbis of blessed memory said,⁸ so too did he give them a taste of bad from Gehenna, which is “darkness and the shadow of death.”⁹ He rained down upon them the fire of Gehenna, and brimstone, because they didn’t feel the need in their lives to repent, as is brought in Midrash Gen. Rabbah 51:3 on the verse, “The L-rd rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the L-rd out of Heaven.”

³ Prov. 29:4.

⁴ Sanhedrin 109b.

⁵ Sanhedrin 108b.

⁶ Eruvin 17b.

⁷ The first edition read “לעולם”, and the translator has corrected it to match the text of the Midrash.

⁸ Zohar I:109a.

⁹ Job 10:21.

Why were they punished with brimstone? The Midrash states: **“Rabbi Yudan said: Why does a person smell the stench of sulfur and his soul abhors it? Why? Because [the soul] knows that it will be condemned by [sulfur] in the future [i.e., in Gehenna].”** It is difficult to understand why there remains in this world something that is a hint precisely of Gehenna in the sense of smell, and all the more so that the transgressions in this sense are the least of the senses.

ונש לומר שאמרו ז"ל איזהו דבר שהנשמה נהנית ממנו ואין הגוף נהנה ממנו? הוי אומר זה הריס. עוד אמרו שנשמתו של אדם מעידה בו בכל יום ויודעת שנפרעים ממנו. אבל הגוף מוטבע בתאוות העולם ולעולם חושב "והנה כזה יום מחר גדול יתר מאד". לכן בחוש הריס שהנשמה לבד נהנית ממנו נשאר בו רמז של גיהנם כדי שתזכור העונש יותר. וכשתעשה התראה אל האדם תמן לו סימן זה, וכינן שמרגיש אפשר שיעשה תשובה.

It can be said that the rabbis of blessed memory said: “What is it from which the soul derives benefit, but the body does not derive benefit from it? You must say: That is a fragrance.”¹⁰

They also say that, **“A person’s soul will testify against him”** every day,¹¹ and knows that punishment will be exacted from him for his sins. **But the body is sunk in desires of the world and always thinks, “And tomorrow will be just the same, or even much grander!”**¹² Therefore, in the sense of smell, which the soul alone enjoys, a hint of Gehenna remains, in order that it remembers the punishment. When you create a warning for man, give him this sign, and since he senses that, it is possible for him to repent.

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¹⁰ Berachot 43b.

¹¹ Ta’anit 11a.

¹² Isaiah 56:12.