



JEWISH MOSAIC THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SEXUAL & GENDER DIVERSITY
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torah **QUEERIES**

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The Real Sin of Sodom

by **Rabbi Steven Greenberg**

Parashat Vayera -- Genesis 18:1 – 22:24

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This week, daily riots erupted in Jerusalem’s streets as the Haredi (“Ultra-Orthodox”) community violently protested the upcoming Jerusalem Gay Pride march, scheduled for November 10. Haredi youths pelted police officers with large stones, blocks, bottles, angle irons, and wood planks. Posters lined the streets promising the payment of thousands of shekels to any zealot who would kill a “sodomite” marching in the parade. The riots were so intense that it became necessary for Haredi rabbinic leaders to come to the scene with megaphones and encourage the crowds to disperse. In another act of intolerance, the Edah Haredit, a right-wing Haredi rabbinical court, pronounced a rabbinic curse – a *pulsa danura* – on those organizing the march and against the policemen defending the marchers.

The fear voiced by many religious leaders is that the pride march (which had been originally scheduled for August, but postponed due to the war in Lebanon), will turn Jerusalem into Sodom. Indeed, the religious press – Jewish, Christian and Moslem – has been rife with warnings of the dire consequences of abandoning the holy city to the corruptions of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that were destroyed for their wickedness.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is surely the best known of the biblical narratives used to condemn homosexuality. For over a millennium, preachers have employed it – with dramatic effect – to prohibit and punish sex between men. The word “sodomy,” invented by an English churchman to describe male intercourse, helped to transform male sexual relations into an unparalleled evil. For generations, men who were accused of sodomy were humiliated, persecuted, tortured, and put to gruesome death in imitation of the violent divine destruction of Sodom. Today, the people who carry placards reading, “God hates fags” know this must be so by reading their Bible.

The details of the story in the Book of Genesis, chapter 19, are well known. God knows that the cry from Sodom is great and sends angels to investigate the gravity of the situation. Lot, the patriarch of Sodom’s only

decent family, ushers the angelic guests into his house. After dinner, the townsfolk of Sodom clamor at the door, demanding that Lot send out the guests “that they might know them.”

Despite the common perception that the sin of Sodom was rampant sexual vice, Jewish literature has largely rejected this reading. The Prophet Ezekiel locates the sin of Sodom in its inhospitality, its cruelty and perversion of justice, and not in homosexuality. He describes Sodom as arrogant and insensitive to human need. The residents of Sodom had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility, yet they refused to support the poor and the needy.

Among early rabbinic commentators, the common reading of the sin of Sodom was its cruelty, arrogance and disdain for the poor. The sages of the Babylonian Talmud also associated Sodom with the sins of pride, envy, cruelty to orphans, theft, murder, and perversion of justice. While the event which sealed the fate of the Sodomites was their demand for Lot to bring out his guests so that the mob might “know” them, this still was not seen so much as an act of sexual excess, but as hatred of the stranger and exploitation of the weak. Midrashic writers lavishly portray Sodom and the surrounding cities as arrogant and self-satisfied, destroyed for the sins of greed and indifference to the poor.

Rabbinic legends about Sodom describe an area of unusual natural resources, precious stones, silver and gold. Every path in Sodom, say the sages, was lined with seven rows of fruit trees. Eager to keep their great wealth for themselves, and suspicious of outsiders’ desires to share in it, the residents of Sodom agreed to overturn the ancient law of hospitality to wayfarers. The legislation later prohibited giving charity to anyone. One legend claims that when a beggar would wander into Sodom, the people would mark their names on their coins and give him a *dinar*. However, no one would sell him bread. When he perished of hunger, everyone would come and claim his coin. There was once a maiden who secretly carried bread out to a poor person in the street in her water pitcher. After three days passed and the man didn’t die, the maiden was discovered. They covered the girl with honey and put her atop the city walls, leaving her there until bees came and ate her. Hers was the cry that came up to God, the cry that inaugurated the angelic visit and its consequences.

Another famous rabbinic tale mirrors the Greek myth of Procrustes. Both the Jewish and Greek stories are about beds that invert the ethic of hospitality. In Sodom, they had a bed for weary guests upon which they might rest. However, when the wayfarer would lie down, they made sure that he fit the bed perfectly. A short man was stretched to fit it and a tall man was cut to size. The Midrash tells us that Eliezer, Abraham’s loyal servant, was once offered to lie upon it but he declined, claiming that since his mother died he pledged not to have a pleasant night’s sleep on a comfortable bed. In the Greek myth, Procrustes (meaning “he who stretches”) kept a house by the side of the road for passing strangers. He offered them a warm meal and a bed that always fit whomever lay upon it. Once laying upon it, he would likewise cut off the legs of those too long or stretch those too short. Theseus, the hero of the Greek tale, turns the tables on Procrustes and fatally adjusts him to his own bed.

The people of Sodom are not only protective of their wealth and punishing of acts of charity; they are also desperate to force everyone to fit a single measure. They have a well-to-do gated community that makes sure no beggars disturb their luxury and peace. They have zoned out poverty. But what makes Sodom the “right” kind of neighborhood is that no difference is tolerated. “Our kind” of folk are welcomed and protected, while all the rest are excluded or eliminated. It can hardly be incidental that the locus of this one-size-fits-all violence is a bed that serves as a guillotine and a rack. The place of sleep, comfort, and sexual pleasure in Sodom has been transformed into a place of threat and malice, a device of torture for strangers.

Eliezer saves himself from being amputated or stretched by the mourning of his mother. Mourning the dead is a particularly selfless expression of relationship and love. The people of Sodom treat all who are not inside the walls as being as good as dead; Eliezer treats the dead with an honor and presence that makes their memory a living reality. Sodom is a place where compassion is punished brutally, as the story of the young maiden suggests. Eliezer is saved from Sodom’s evil not by his sword or cunning, as is Theseus in the Greek myth, but by his own loving beyond all boundaries or benefit-by a loving which, like a mother’s love, has no reasons.

Without a doubt, Jerusalem is in danger of becoming Sodom. But it will not be made so by gay pride marchers—at least not according to the prophet Ezekiel or the rabbis. What bought down the wrath of God upon Sodom was not homosexuality, but inhospitality and cruelty, arrogance and greed, callousness, fear of

loss, and ultimately, violence against the stranger. Indeed, we cannot let Jerusalem become like Sodom—a city where humiliation and even violence against people who are different is judged to be the epitome of moral decency and religious integrity.

About the Author:



Steve Greenberg is an Orthodox rabbi, ordained at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. Since 1985 he has served as a senior educator for CLAL, a think tank, leadership training institute and resource center. While living in Jerusalem, Steve helped to create the Jerusalem Open House, Jerusalem's first gay and lesbian community center and continues to serve as its educational advisor. Steve appeared in the documentary, [*Trembling Before G-d*](#), and joined with the film maker to create a worldwide outreach project conducting over 500 post-screening community dialogues all over the world. Steve is the author of [*Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*](#), University of Wisconsin Press (February 2004), which recently won the Koret Jewish Book Award.