

PARSHAT VAYERA

It is very comfortable to think of Sedom as a city of thugs and pervers. After all, is that not the reason why God decided to destroy it? And certainly, most of our own societies are nowhere as bad - we should hope.

Yet, a more careful study of the Torah's presentation of these events (as we will soon demonstrate), could lead to the opposite conclusion - that Sedom was a city with a culture not very different from our own.

In the following shiur we'll examine this possibility, as we study how the Torah tells the famous story of Avraham and the 'three angels'.

INTRODUCTION

Our series on Sefer Bereishit has been following the theme of 'bechira', i.e. God's choice of Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of His special nation. In last week's shiur, we discussed **why** God chose Avraham Avinu - i.e. to create a nation that will bring the Name of God and His message to all mankind.

But **how** will this nation ultimately be able to achieve that goal? In this week's shiur, we'll attempt to show how the Torah answers this question in its presentation of the story of God's consultation with Avraham Avinu before He destroys Sedom.

We begin our shiur by paying attention to the lack of any 'parshia' divisions in this entire narrative.

AN EXTRA LONG 'PARSHIYA'

Even though a 'parshia' break in Chumash is most similar to a 'paragraph break', there are times when a single 'parshia' is extraordinary long. When this does happen, we would expect it to be thematically significant, especially when that 'parshia' contains more than one story.

And that is exactly what we find at the beginning of Parshat Vayera, where the 'parshia' that begins in 18:1 continues all the way until the end of chapter 19, yet contains **two** unrelated topics:

- 1) The news that Sarah will give birth to Yitzchak;
- 2) The story of God's destruction of Sedom (& Lot's rescue).

By including both of these events in the same 'parshia', the Torah is already alerting the reader to search for a thematic connection between these two events.

One could suggest that these events are recorded together for the simple reason that the same "mal'achim" [angels or messengers] are involved in both stories. However, this itself raises the same question from a different angle, i.e. why are the same "mal'achim" who are sent to destroy Sedom - first instructed to inform Avraham about the forthcoming birth of Yitzchak?

[If we adopt Rashi's position (see 18:2) that each angel was assigned only one mission, then we would re-phrase our question: Why must all three travel together, or why doesn't each angel travel directly to fulfill his own mission?]

THE DEEPER 'CONNECTION'

The answer to this question can be found (right where we would expect) - at the transition point between these two stories.

As you review these psukim, note how the first topic, i.e. the tiding that Sarah will have a child (18:1-16), clearly concludes in 18:16 - while the story of God's destruction of Sedom doesn't begin until 18:20. Hence, by default, 18:17-19 form the transition between these two stories.

Let's take a careful look at this 'segue', noting how it forms a 'parenthetical comment' to the reader - before Chumash continues with the story of Sedom :

"And God said: Shall I hide from Avraham what I am about to do? For Avraham is to become a great nation ["goy gadol"], and through him, all other nations will be blessed ["ve-

nivrech u'bo..."]

For I have 'come to know him' in order that he will instruct **his children** and his household after him to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right... - in order that I shall bring upon Avraham all that I have spoken about him."
(See Breishit 18:17-19)

Review these psukim once again (in their context), noting how it explains why God must first consult Avraham before destroying Sedom; and hence, it forms an appropriate transition between these two stories.

However, these psukim appear to allude to a much deeper thematic connection - especially when we consider their obvious textual parallel to the first three psukim of Parshat Lech Lecha: "... ve-e'escha le-**goy gadol** - and I will make you a great nation - and bless you and you will be a blessing [to others] - "ve-nivrech u'bocha kol mishpechot ha-adama / - and **through you all the nations will be blessed**" (see 12:1-3).

Review these psukim once again, while comparing them to 18:18. Clearly, the wording of 18:18 highlights how God had originally chosen Avraham Avinu to become the forefather of a great nation - but now 18:19 provides us with the underlying reason for why he was chosen:

"...in order that he will instruct **his children** and his household after him to keep the way of God by doing **"tzedeq u'mishpat"** - what is just and right..." (see 18:19)

First, Chumash explains to the reader (in verse 18) that Avraham Avinu had been chosen to become a nation that would be a blessing for all nations - and then (in verse 19) God explains **how** this will happen - for Avraham will teach **his children** (and those children their children, etc.) to do **tzedaka u-mishpat!**

In other words, Avraham is expected to initiate a family tradition - that will create a society characterized by acts of tzedaka & mishpat [social justice]. In this manner, they will truly serve as God's model nation. [See also Devarim 4:5-8 for a very similar explanation. See also Yeshayahu 42:5-6.]

As Avraham is commanded to pass on (and teach) this destiny to his son - **Yitzchak**, it makes sense that the Torah would inform the reader of this destiny, immediately after the story of God's promise to Avraham concerning the birth of Yitzchak.

With this background, we can suggest a reason for why the Torah records both stories in the same 'parshia'.

PREVENTING FUTURE CITIES LIKE SDOM

According to 18:18-19, God had chosen Avraham to become the forefather a 'model nation' that would be known for its heritage of "tzedaka u'mishpat". Should that nation fulfill that destiny, then it would be able to save societies such as Sedom, for they will serve as a 'model nation' from whom corrupt nations could learn from.

If this interpretation is correct, then it also explains why the Torah records Avraham's petition that God spare the doomed city. Avraham does not ask that God save only the righteous men in Sedom; instead, he begs that God should save the **entire** city - for the sake of those tzaddikim! [See 18:26.] - Why?

Because - hopefully - those righteous few may one day, by setting an example, influence the people in Sedom towards proper behavior, just as the nation of Avraham is destined to lead all mankind in the direction of God.

This also explains when Avraham's petition ends. After God agrees to save the city for the sake of 50 righteous men, Avraham continues to 'bargain' for the sake of 45, 40, 30, etc. - until he reaches ten (see 18:23-32). He stops at ten, for there is little chance that such a small number would ever be able to exert a serious influence upon an entire community.

[This may relate to the concept of a 'minyanyan' - a minimum amount of people capable of making God's Name known. Note as well the influence the ten 'spies' have on the entire nation in the incident of the 'meraglim', and how Chazal learn the number ten for a minyan from that incident!]

It is God's hope that, in the future, Avraham's nation would prevent the emergence of 'future Sedoms' - by creating a model society established on acts of "tzedaka u-mishpat". As Yitzchak is the son through whom this tradition will be transmitted, it is meaningful that the same angels assigned to destroy Sedom must first 'plant the seeds' for the prevention of future Sedom's - by informing Avraham concerning the birth of Yitzchak.

The Torah goes out of its way to record how Avraham makes this gallant effort to save Sedom, for it reflects the very purpose for why he had been chosen. Despite his futility of his efforts at this time, it will be this tradition that he must pass on to his son Yitzchak, and later to all future generations of the Jewish people.

AVRAHAM VS. SEDOM

Even though at this point in the narrative, we are not yet aware of the precise sin of Sedom, this 'prelude' certainly suggests that it must relate in some manner to a lack of "tzedek u-mishpat".

Now, we will attempt to determine more precisely what their sin was, and how it represents the antithesis of everything for which Avraham stands.

Chapter 18 is not the first time in Sefer Breishit when Sedom is mentioned. As we explained in our shiur on Parshat Lech Lecha, Lot's decision to leave Avraham and move to Sedom (13:1-18) reflects his preference not to be dependent on God and to dissociate himself from his uncle. It is in that context that we are told: "The men of Sedom were very wicked to God" (see 13:13).

Furthermore, after rescuing Lot from the 'four kings' (see chapter 14), Avraham refuses to keep any property belonging to Sedom which was recovered in that victory. Although he rightfully deserves his 'fair share' of the spoils from the battle which he himself fought and won, Avraham Avinu, expressing his opposition to anything associated with Sedom, prefers to completely divorce himself from any resources originating from that city:

"Avram said to the King of Sedom: I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a shoe strap of what is **yours**, so you can not say: It is I who made Avram rich" (14:22-23).

Based on this backdrop, it would be safe to assume that the sin of Sedom must relate in some manner to a lack of "tzedek u-mishpat". Therefore, we must read that ensuing story (in chapter 19) in search of that theme.

A GOOD HOST

Review the first three psukim of chapter 19, noting how the Torah goes out of its way to describe how insistent Lot is to provide these two 'unknown travelers' with a place to stay:

"And the two mal'achim came to Sedom towards evening, and Lot was sitting by the gate of the city, as he saw them he approached them... And he said -

'Please come stay at your servant's house, for lodging and washing up, then you can continue on your way in the morning';

but they declined. But Lot **very much insisted**, so they came to his house; he gave them to drink and baked for them matzot [wafers] to eat." (see 19:1-3).

Clearly, the Torah is emphasizing Lot's very own "hachnasat orchim" [hospitality] as the opening theme of this narrative.

Furthermore, it seems that this is precisely how the 'angels' planned to 'test-out' the city to see if it deserved to be destroyed. Recall how God originally told Avraham:

"The crying out from Sedom is too great... I shall go down and see whether they deserve destruction or not..." (18:21)

God sends these two 'angels' not only to destroy Sedom, but first to determine if indeed the city deserves to be destroyed (and if there are any "tzadikim" who deserved to be saved). By pretending to 'sleep on the street' (see 19:1-2), they are testing if there is any hospitality in Sedom - a test which Lot passes (see

19:3), and the rest of the city failed terribly (see 19:4-6).

In fact, one could suggest that this same theme of hospitality and the lack of "tzedek u-mishpat" continues in the Torah's description of the city's reaction to Lot's harboring of his two guests. To explain how, let's carefully follow the narrative:

"..They [his two guests] had not lain down yet when the townspeople, the men of Sedom, gathered outside his house - from **young to old - all** the people until the edge [of the city]. And they **protested** [outside his house] and shouted: '**Where** are those men who came to visit you this evening? Take them **out** of your house so we can **know** them [ve-nei'da'em]" (see 19:4-5).

Most of us are familiar with Rashi's interpretation, that this gathering consisted of merely a small group of the lowest social and ethical stratum of Sedom, who wanted to 'know them' in the Biblical sense (i.e. sodomy, based on 19:8 and 4:1).

However, read this pasuk in its original Hebrew very carefully, noting how the Torah only states that the demonstrators wanted to 'know them', which is open to a wide range of interpretation.

NO GUESTS ALLOWED

Ramban (and Rasag) advance a totally different interpretation, explaining that the **entire** town did indeed join in this protest (as the simple reading of this pasuk implies), for they had all gathered outside Lot's house, demanding to 'know' **who** these guests were.

Why are they protesting, and what they demanding?

As Ramban explains so beautifully (see his commentary on 19:5), the people of Sedom are protesting against Lot's hospitality to these strangers - as they would call for a mass protest anytime there was a fear that someone in their town was 'harboring' guests!

According to Ramban, there appears to have been a strict **law** in Sedom of: **No guests allowed!** As the people of Sedom didn't want to ruin their exclusive [suburban] neighborhood, they did everything possible to keep away 'transients'. It was their terrible fear that should Lot accommodate guests this evening, tomorrow night more guests may come, and by the end of the month, the city streets could be flooded with transients and beggars. Should the word get out that there is 'free lodging' in Sedom, their perfect 'country club' would be ruined.

[One could even find a warped ideology in this 'policy'. For example, one could reason in a similar manner that no one should help the needy, for if everyone agreed not to take care of them, then they would ultimately learn to take care of themselves.]

Hence, should any citizen of Sedom bring home a guest ['chas ve-shalom'], the city's 'steering committee' would immediately call for a public protest. [See also Sanhedrin 109a.]

There may have been "mishpat" in Sedom - a standardized system of laws and ordinances - but it was terribly warped. Not to mention the fact that "tzedaka" had no place whatsoever in this bastion of immorality.

[Chazal remark in Pirkei Avot that the social norm of 'sheli sheli, shelcha shelcha' - what is mine is mine, what is yours is yours - is a 'custom of Sedom'. The attribution of this social philosophy to Sedom reflects this same understanding (see Pirkei Avot 5:10 - 'arba midot ba-adam...').]

TZEDEK U-MISHPAT VS. SEDOM

This interpretation explains why, throughout Nevi'im Acharonim, Sedom is consistently associated with the absence of "tzedek u-mishpat". In fact, the three most famous of the Nevi'im Acharonim - Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, and Yechezkel - all of whom foresee and forewarn the destruction of the first bet ha-mikdash, compare the corrupt society in Israel to that of Sedom, and see therein the reason for their own forthcoming destruction.

As we will show, in every instance where Sedom is mentioned by the prophets, it is always in reference to a society lacking social justice, and **never** in reference to illicit sexual

behavior - such as 'sodomy'.

The simplest proof of this point is found in Sefer Yechezkel, as he states explicitly that this was indeed the sin of Sedom (i.e. the very same point discussed above concerning "hachnasat orchim"):

"...Your younger sister was Sedom... Did you not walk in her ways and practice her abominations? Why, you are more corrupt than they in all your ways... **This was the sin of your sister Sedom** - she had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquillity, yet she did not support the **poor** and the **needy**. In her haughtiness, they sinned before Me, so I **removed** them, as you saw..." (see Yechezkel 16:46-50).

In Yeshayahu, the direct connection between the lack of "tzedek u-mishpat" and Sedom is even more explicit. As we all recall from the Haftara of Shabbat Chazon, Yeshayahu compares Am Yisrael's behavior to that of Sedom & Amora:

"Listen to the word of God - you [who are like] officers of **Sedom**, pay attention to the teachings of our God - you [who are like] the people of **Amora**. Why should I accept your many offerings... Instead, learn to do good, devote yourself to justice, aid the wronged, uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow... How has the faithful city, once filled with **mishpat tzedek**, now become a city of murderers..." (Isaiah 1:10-21, see also 1:3-9!)

Recall also how Yeshayahu concludes this nevu'a: "Tzion be-**mishpat** tipadeh, ve-shaveha bi-**tzedaka** - Zion will be redeemed by our doing "**mishpat**"; her repentance - through our performance of **tzedaka**.

In chapter five - Yeshayahu's famous 'mashal ha-kerem' [the parable of the vineyard] - the prophet reiterates God's initial hope and plan that Am Yisrael would perform tzedaka u-mishpat, and the punishment they deserve for doing exactly the opposite:

"va-yikav le-**mishpat** - ve-hiney mispach"
[God had hoped to find justice, and found instead injustice],
"li-**tzedaka** - ve-hiney tze'aka." (Yeshayahu 5:7)
[to find "tzedaka," and instead found iniquity]
[note amazing parallel with Breishit 18:19-21!]
(See Isaiah 5:1-10, as well as 11:1-6.)

Perhaps the strongest expression of this theme is found in Yirmiyahu. In his powerful charge to the House of David [whose lineage stems not only from Yehuda but also (& not by chance) from Ruth the Moabite, a descendant of Lot!], Yirmiyahu articulates God's precise expectation of the Jewish king:

"Hear the word of God, King of Judah, you who sit on the throne of David... Do **mishpat u-tzedaka**... do not wrong a stranger, an orphan, and the widow..." (Yirmiyahu 22:1-5).
[See also 21:11-12.]

Later, when Yirmiyahu contrasts the corrupt king Yehoyakim with his righteous father Yoshiyahu, he admonishes:

"... Your father (Yoshiyahu)... performed **tzedaka u-mishpat**, and that made him content. He upheld the rights of the poor and needy - is this not what it means to **know** Me [la-da'at oti], God has said! But you (Yehoyakim) - on your mind is only your ill-gotten gains..." (see 22:13-17)

Note that Yirmiyahu considers doing tzedaka & mishpat as the means by which we come to 'know God' ['la-da'at et Hashem' - (compare with Breishit 18:19, see also Yirmiyahu 9:23)!]

Finally, when Yirmiyahu speaks of the ideal king who will bring the redemption, he emphasizes this very same theme:

"A time is coming - Hashem declares - when I will raise up a **true** branch of David's line. He shall reign as king and prosper, and he will perform **mishpat** and **tzedaka** in the land. In his days, Yehuda shall be delivered and Israel shall dwell secure..." (23:5-6). [See also Zecharya 7:9; 8:8, 16-17, II Shmuel 8:15!]

This reason for the choice of the Kingdom of David corresponds with the underlying purpose behind God's choosing of Avraham Avinu. As we have explained numerous times, God's

designation of Avraham came not in **reward** for his exemplary behavior, but rather **for a specific purpose**: to establish a model nation - characterized by tzedek u-mishpat - that will bring all mankind closer to God. For this very same reason, God chooses a royal family to rule this nation - the House of David. They too are chosen **in order** to teach the nation the ways of "tzedaka u-mishpat".

But even when there is a lack of proper leadership, this charge to follow the 'way of God' to do "tzedka u-mishpat" remains an eternal challenge for every individual. To prove this point, and to summarize this theme, we need only quote one last pasuk from Yirmiyahu (not by chance, the concluding pasuk of the Haftara for Tisha Be-av):

"Thus says the Lord:

Let not the **chacham** [wise man] glory in his wisdom;

Let not the **gibor** [strong man] glory in his strength;

Let not the **ashir** [rich man] glory in his riches.

- But only in this should one glory:

Let him be wise to **know** Me [haskel v-**yado'a** oti] -For I the

Lord act in the land with **chesed** [kindness], **mishpat**, and

tzedaka - for it is this that I desire, says the Lord."

(see Yirmiyahu 9:22-23, see also Y. 22:13-20).

[See also the Rambam's concluding remarks to the last chapter of Moreh Nevuchim!]

Once again we find that **knowing** God means emulating His ways, acting in accordance with the values of **tzedek u-mishpat**. Should the entire nation act in this manner, our goal can be accomplished.

Thus, what appears at first to be simply a parenthetical statement by God (concerning Avraham) before destroying Sedom (in Breishit 18:19) unfolds as a primary theme throughout Tanach!

LA-DA'AT - THE KEY WORD

It is not by chance that Yirmiyahu (in the above examples) uses the Hebrew word 'la-da'at' in the context of following a lifestyle of tzedek u-mishpat. As we have already seen, the shresh 'daled.ayin.heh' has been a key word throughout the narrative concerning Sedom. First and foremost in a positive context: "ki **yeda'tiv** lema'an asher... la'asot tzedaka u-mishpat..." (18:19), but also in a negative context: 've-im lo **eida'a**' (see 18:21!). However, this same word also surfaces in a rather ambiguous manner later on in the story. As noted briefly earlier, Rashi and Ramban dispute the meaning of 've-neida otam' (see 19:5 - when the protesters demand that Lot surrender his guests). From this pasuk alone, it is not at all clear what this phrase implies.

Rashi explains that the men of Sedom wanted to 'know them' in the Biblical sense (i.e. to 'sleep' with them 'mishkav zachar' - see 4:1 & Chizkuni on 19:5 - and hence the English word for this act: 'sodomy'). Ramban contends that they wanted to 'know' their identity in order to 'kick them out of town,' in accordance with their city ordinance that prohibited visitors.

Clearly, Ramban takes into consideration the psukim from Yechezkel (which he cites explicitly, and most probably also took into account Yeshayahu chapter 1) that clearly identify Sedom's [primary] sin as their unwillingness to help the poor and needy. In light of the direct contrast drawn between Avraham's devotion to **tzedek u-mishpat** and the character of Sedom (as in 18:17-19), we can readily understand why Ramban preferred to interpret 've-neida otam' in relation to 'kicking out' these unwanted guests.

Rashi (and many other commentators) argue that ve-neida otam implies mishkav zachar (sodomy). This opinion is based primarily on Lot's reaction to the protesters' request of offering his two daughters instead of his guests, and his comment, 'asher lo **yad'u** ish' (see 19:8 / note again the use of the same 'shresh').

Had it not been for the psukim in Yechezkel 16:48-50, and the special 'prelude' to these events in Breishit 18:19, then Rashi's explanation would seem to be the most logical. However, the wider context of these events certainly supports Ramban's approach.

To bring additional support for Ramban's approach, let's examine the story a little more carefully, as we will try to show the

entire story may center around "tzedeq u'mishpat", and it could be that Lot really never intended to give over his daughters to that crowd.

WHO HAD GATHERED OUTSIDE THE HOUSE?

The most obvious problem with Rashi's explanation (that the protestors are interested in sodomy) stems from their sheer number. According to 19:4, it appears that the group that gathers outside Lot's house includes the entire city, most likely hundreds if not thousands of individuals, **young and old - the entire city!** If they are simply interested in sodomy, pardon the expression, how could two guests 'suffice'?

[Rashi, in light of this problem, offers a somewhat novel explanation for 19:4, that only the 'thugs of Sedom' ('anshei Sedom' implying a specific group and not the entire city) banged on Lot's door. The Torah mentions the rest of the population - 'from young to old' - only in regard to the fact that they did not protest the gang's depraved behavior. Rasag (on 19:4) disagrees, proving from 19:11 that both young and old had gathered outside Lot's house.]

Ramban combines both explanations, i.e. he criticizes Lot's own character for foolishly offering his two daughters in exchange so that he could continue to provide proper hospitality for his guests. However, this explanation of 19:8 is also quite difficult, for how (and why) should this offer appease this mass crowd who claim (according to Ramban) to be interested only in expelling unwanted guests!

One could suggest an explanation for Lot's remarks that solves all of the above questions, thus leaving Lot's character untainted, while keeping the focus of these events entirely on the lack of tzedeq u-mishpat in Sedom.

GIVING MUSSAR

Any attempt to understand Lot's bizarre offer of his daughters must take into consideration not only the context, but also the crowd's reaction. Let's take a closer look at how the crowd responds to Lot's 'proposal':

"And they said to him:

Go away [gesh hal'ah - i.e. move a far distance]
You have just (recently) come to dwell (in our city) -
and now **you judge us!**
Now we will deal with you **worse than with them...**"
(see 19:9, read carefully).

What was there in Lot's offer that prompted this severe response and censure? If Lot was seriously offering his daughters, why couldn't they just say: No, we prefer the men! Instead, they threaten to be more evil with Lot than with his guests. Does this mean that they want to 'sleep' with Lot as well? It seems more likely that they are now threatening to throw Lot out of town!

One could suggest that when Lot pleads: "My brothers, don't do such evil [to my guests], here are my two daughters..." (see 19:6); he is not seriously offering his daughters at all. Rather, he makes mention of them as part of a vehement condemnation of the people. In a sarcastic manner, Lot is telling the crowd that he'd sooner give over his daughters than his guests - even though he has no intention whatsoever of actually doing that.

[Note how Reuven's statement to Yaakov that he would kill his own two sons... etc. (see Breishit 42:37) could be understood in a similar manner; i.e. not that he would do that, but he makes this bizarre offer to emphasize his seriousness to his father.]

Furthermore, as we mentioned above, if indeed the entire town has gathered, how could two women 'appease' such a large crowd! Instead, it would make more sense to explain that Lot is making this harsh statement as a form of rebuke, emphasizing how important it is that they allow him to keep guests. It is at though he was saying: "I'd **sooner** give you my daughters than my two guests."

[Note as well that Lot does not bring his daughters with him when he makes this so-called 'offer.' In fact, he actually

closes the door behind him (see 19:6) - and only afterward leaves to negotiate with the rioters. Had Lot been truly serious about his offer, he should have taken them outside with him! Also, the conclusion of the story suggests that Lot's daughters were actually married (see 19:14/ unless we assume that Lot had more than two daughters).

This explains why the crowd becomes so angered by Lot's remarks. They are taken aback by his harsh rebuke of their 'no guest' policy.

Based on this interpretation [that Lot is 'giving them **mussar**' and not 'making a deal'], we can better understand the mob's response to Lot's offer (19:6-8). They neither accept nor reject Lot's proposal. Instead, they express their anger with Lot's rebuke:

"One has just come to live by us - va-yishpot shafot - and now he is **judging us**; now we will deal more harshly with **you** than [we planned to deal] with **them!**" (see 19:8-9).

What do people mean by "you are **judging us**"? Apparently, there is something in Lot's response that suggests a type of character judgment - but is it only his request that they 'not be so evil' (see 19:7)?

One could suggest that they consider Lot's sarcastic offer of his daughters instead of his guests as a moral judgment of their 'no-guest' policy; a reprehension of their unethical social system. If so, then this is exactly to what 'va-yishpot shafot' refers to. They are angered for Lot has 'judged' their character.

As no one likes being told what to do, especially by 'newcomers' - they react in very threatening manner.

In other words, the crowd is saying: 'HEY, you're just a newcomer here in our town, and you already think you can tell us how we should act! Now - we're going to kick **you** & your guests out of town!

[This interpretation of 'shafot' in relation to rebuke (or being 'judgmental') is found elsewhere Tanach: For example, see Shmuel I 7:6, where Shmuel (at Mitzpa) rebukes the entire nation for their behavior. We find a similar use of the verb 'lishpot' in I Shmuel 12:7, when Shmuel rebukes the nation for not appreciating God's salvation when asking for a king to lead them instead! See also Yirmiyahu 1:16, and its context.]

If our interpretation is correct, then it may be that Sedom's sin related **solely** to the lack of social justice (as Yechezkel 16:48-49 implies), and had nothing to do with 'sodomy' at all! And for this reason alone, God found it necessary to destroy that city.

Agreed, that there are many other ways to explain these events, but the very possibility that the entire story of Sedom deals exclusively with the lack of social justice certainly must be considered not only when we contemplate our own values and lifestyle, but even more so when deciding our community priorities.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

1. See Rambam in Sefer Zra'im, Hilchot Matnot Aniyim, chapter 10, the first halacha. Note how he explains that the mitzva of tzedaka requires the highest priority, and he supports his statement from Breishit 18:18-19, as we discussed in our shiur.

2. In Parshat Ki Tetzeh (see Devarim 23:4-5), the Torah forbids the marriage of a Jew with a 'mo'avi ve-amoni' [Moabite or Ammonite], the descendents of Lot. But note the reason, "for they did not greet you with bread and water when you were traveling through the desert..."

Once again we see the theme of hachnasat orchim in relation to Sedom and Lot. Note as well how Ruth the Moabite does return one strain of Lot back into Am Yisrael, which will later lead to David ha-Melech. However, in that story, Ruth's entry is replete with incidents relating to acts of tzedaka.