

## Vayera

In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Vayera, we hear about the destruction of Sodom and Gamorrah, S'dom and Amorra in the Torah. Most of us have heard the story of these two cities whose inhabitants were so filled with wickedness and evil, that God decides to eradicate the residents, and decimate the cities along with them. But there is a part of this story that is less known; there were, in fact, four cities- not two- that were destroyed that day. The Torah states that God "rained down on S'dom and Amorra brimstone and fire from heaven", and it follows, "He turned over these cities and the entire plain and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground".

Breaking down this passage according to Rashi, "The cities" are S'dom and Amora, and the "Entire plain" refers to the cities Admah and Tzevayim.

Though all four cities were punished, it is important to note that "fire and brimstone" only rain down upon S'dom and Amora, the difference being that these two cities would be nearly impossible to rebuild in the aftermath of their destruction.

There is a Midrash that speaks to the reasoning behind the difference in the punishment of these 4 cities. According to this midrash, the meaning of the name of the King who ruled each city reflects the behavior of its inhabitants and sheds light on the discrepancies of their fates.

The king of S'dom was named Bera, Broken down, his name is, 'b'ra-- ' gives insight into to his (and his people's) state of being as 'living in wickedness, maliciousness, villainy and evil'. The midrash interprets this as "evil to heaven and evil to people".

The name of the king of Amora, was Birsha. In the midrash, his name indicates that "He was outstanding in his wickedness". His name broken down is 'b'rasha', indicating that he and his people were criminals, evil people, and filled with malice- committing crimes against both people and God.

Shineav was the king of Adma. His name is understood as an acronym for, 'He hated his Father in heaven'. "Sniat Av" or "she-sonah av". 'Av, is 'father' in English, referring to God. The sin of this city was against God alone, not each other.

And finally, the king of Tzevayim's name, Shemever, is interpreted as him having the 'Ability to rebel against God', Shem meaning 'name' and 'Aver' meaning 'to violate or to transgress'. Like the residents of Adma, the people of Tze-vayim were committing transgressions against God alone.

This midrash teaches us that It is NOT our sins against God, but our sins against EACH OTHER that bring forth the worst of God 's wrath. In the last few weeks, we have witnessed examples of this in the stories of the Tower of Babel and Noach. When people decided to build a tower so high that they could reach up to heaven- perhaps even with nefarious intent- it was not enough to warrant annihilation. God's punishment was our inability to communicate with each other, causing a dispersal of humanity to all corners of the earth. However, in parashat Noach where we see wickedness and evil between people permeating the world, God's response is to wipe out everything and start all over.

In Shabbat 31a, Hillel, when challenged by a prospective convert to explain the entire Torah while the latter stood on 1 foot, Hillel answered "That which is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow: This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it" In his teaching, Hillel lends credence to the midrash of Sodom and Amora. With these few words, Rabbi Hillel teaches us that the essence of the Torah is in the guidelines and scaffolding it gives us so that we may live with each other honestly, ethically, and compassionately.

One of Hillel's most famous lessons is threefold:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

May we learn and grow from our mistakes and live each day as if it were the last.

Apologize often, be slow to

anger, and be content with that which we have.

If I am only for myself, says Hillel, what am I?

May we practice patience and understanding because we don't know what paths those around us are walking and what burdens they are carrying. May we give the benefit of the doubt and act with sensitivity, generosity and patience; especially with those with whom we disagree or deem unworthy.

And lastly, says Hillel, If not now, when?

We are living in very stressful and divisive times. It is in times such as these when empathy, understanding, and open mindedness are needed the most. And there is no one better to emulate these characteristics than each one of us.

Shabbat shalom.

