What's Mine Is Mine

Parashat Vayera

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Parashat Vayera contains the story of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, and God's destruction of those cities. Sodom has an outsize resonance in later material, both within the Tanakh and in rabbinic literature, and even down to today, when "Sodom" has become a byword for all sorts of evil and depravity. But what was Sodom's sin actually? Why did God destroy it? And what did the rabbis think was the lesson here?

A large section of chapter 5 of Pirkei Avot is devoted to talking about different permutations of four types of people. The first of these permutations talks about different *middot*, literally "measures", and figuratively "attributes" or "characters", found among humanity:

> אַרְבַּע מִדּוֹת בָּאָדָם. הָאוֹמֵר שֶׁלִּי שֶׁלִּי וְשֶׁלְּךָ שֶׁלְּךָ — זוֹ מִדָּה בֵּינוֹנִית, וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים: זוֹ מִדַּת סְדוֹם.
> שֶׁלִּי שֶׁלְּךָ וְשֶׁלְּךָ שֶׁלִּי — עַם הָאָרֶץ. שֶׁלִּי שֶׁלְּךָ וְשֶׁלְּךָ שֶׁלָּךְ — חָסִיד. שֶׁלִּי שֶׁלִּי וְשֶׁלְּךָ שֶׁלִּי — רָשָׁע.
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> There are four types of character in human beings:
> One who says, "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours"—this is an average character. And some say: This is the character of Sodom.
> "What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine": this is an uneducated person.
> "What's mine is yours, and what's yours is yours": this is a righteous person.
> "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is mine": this is a wicked person. (Avot 5:10, my translation)

The word I've translated as "average", *beinoni*, literally means something like "in-between", as in not tending to an extreme on either end of a scale. This broad characterization of humanity seems fair enough. But then the Mishnah adds that "some say" that what characterizes the *beinoni* person, the "in-betweener", is also what characterizes Sodom.

So what did really characterize Sodom, at least in the Torah narrative? The Torah does not explicitly indict Sodom for any one particular crime; instead, it refers to Sodom's wrongdoings as being "wicked and sinful" (Gen. 13:13), but their specific wrongdoings or sins are never enumerated. Much has already been written about what exactly the "sin of Sodom" was, and how the inhabitants of Sodom became the quintessential evildoers and paragons of immorality. Rabbi Steven Greenberg correctly points out that the main tenor of rabbinic condemnation militated against the inhabitants of Sodom for their lack of hospitality and charity. This

understanding finds its roots in Scripture: the prophet Ezekiel condemns Sodom explicitly for these failings:

> הִנֵּה־זֶה הָיָה עֲוֹן סְדֹם אֲחוֹתֵךְ גְּאוֹן שִׂבְעַת־לֶחֶם וְשַׁלְוַת הַשְׁקֵט הָיָה לָהּ וְלִבְנוֹתֶיהָ וְיַד־עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן לֹא הֶחֱזִיקָה: וַתִּגְבְּהֶינָה וַתַּעֲשֶׂינָה תוֹעֵבָה לְפָנָי וָאָסִיר אֶתְהֶן כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאִיתִי:
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> Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before Me; and so I removed them, as you saw. (Ezek. 16:49–50, Revised JPS translation)

With this condemnation in mind, we can turn back to Pirkei Avot and understand how the "average" characteristic—"what's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours"—could be equated with Sodom. The situation being described is one of abundance and plenty, in a time of peace and tranquility. In such a world, the inhabitants of Sodom chose not to look after the vulnerable.

The closest we get to an explicit condemnation of any particular crime is the reason given by God's messengers/angels, when they tell Lot to bring his family out of the city:

> כִּי־מַשְׁחִתִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי־גָדְלָה צַעֲקָתָם אֶת־פְּנֵי יְיָ וַיְשַׁלְּחֵנוּ יְיָ לְשַׁחֲתָהּ:
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> For we are about to destroy this place; because the outcry against them before GOD has become so great that GOD has sent us to destroy it. (Gen. 19:13, Revised JPS translation)

This translation smooths over a number of difficulties with this verse. The most salient one is that there's an uncertain pronoun reference: the translation simply says "the outcry against them", but it doesn't say *whose* outcry, and the Hebrew is even more vague: *tza'akatam* simply means "their outcry", so a more literal translation might be something like "for great is their outcry before the Lord". Radak's commentary makes the reference explicit: the outcry came from the victims of the inhabitants' crimes. Then God heeded the cry and exacted retribution on the perpetrators.

The word *tza'akah*, "outcry", is the same word the Torah will apply repeatedly to the Israelites' outcry to God under Egyptian slavery (e.g. Ex. 3:7 and Deut. 26:7). In the case of Sodom, the Torah contrasts the *tza'akah* of its victims with the *tzedakah*—the righteousness—that Abraham is instructed to teach his descendants. In fact, the text throws these two concepts into stark relief by putting them in adjoining verses, and letting the auditory consonance hint at the contrast:

> כִּי יְדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יְצַוֶּה אֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ יְיָ לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הָבִיא יְיָ עַל־אַבְרָהָם אֵת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר עָלָיו: וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ זַעֲקַת סְדֹם וַעֲמֹרָה כִּי־רָבָּה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כָבְדָה מְאֹד: אֵרְדָה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקָתָהּ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עָשׂוּ | כָּלָה וְאִם־לֹא אֵדָעָה:
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> [God said,] "For I have singled him [Abraham] out, that he may teach his children and his descendants after him to keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness [*tzedakah*] and justice, in order that the Lord may bring about what He had spoken of for Abraham." And the Lord said, "The outcry [*za'akah*] of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, since their sin is so severe. I will go down and see whether

> they have acted according to the outcry [*tza'akah*] that has come before Me, and if not, I will know." (Gen. 18:19–21, my translation)

And this sound-alike pun isn't unique to this text, either. There's a prophetic parallel: when Isaiah excoriates Israel for its sins, he says:

> ... וַיְקַו לְמִשְׁפָּט וְהִנֵּה מִשְׂפָּח לִצְדָקָה וְהִנֵּה צְעָקָה׃

> ... God looked for justice [*mishpat*], but behold, bloodshed [*mispaḥ*];
> For righteousness [*tzedakah*], but behold, outcry [*tza'akah*]. (Isa. 5:7, my translation)

An opinion in Pirkei Avot attributes the "characteristic of Sodom" to the *beinoni*, the in-between person. But if that's really all this is, doesn't God's reaction seem like a bit of an overreaction? After all, why destroy a city full of "average" people? Radak said the outcry was from Sodom's victims of oppression, but Ezekiel seems to say that these victims were not necessarily victims of *active* acts of oppression, but rather victims of passive indifference.

There is a principle in Jewish law known as *kofin al middat s'dom*, meaning something like "We compel one not to act in the characteristic of Sodom". The basic concept is that when it costs nothing, a court may oblige someone to allow what benefits another. The Talmud brings down this principle in several places, both explicitly and implicitly. One is at Eruvin 49a; Rashi's commentary glosses "the characteristic of Sodom" as "what's mine is mine", echoing Pirkei Avot. But Rabbi Shmuel Strashun notes a difficulty with this gloss: the attribute "what's mine is mine" is called the *beinoni* ("average") character by Pirkei Avot, and the identification of it with Sodom is a minority opinion ("some say").

Why does Pirkei Avot not group the inhabitants of Sodom with the category of the wicked—"what's yours is mine, and what's mine is mine"? There's a paradox here: the *beinoni*, the average person, is not a villain, yet the "average" is Sodom. Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran, the Tashbetz, offers a resolution by noting that this kind of attitude can become habitual. The endpoint isn't wickedness specifically; the endpoint is *middat s'dom*, when the habit can grow into refusing to help even when it costs nothing:

> וְזֶה שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְהַנֶּה כְּלָל, אִם תִּגְבַּר עָלָיו מִדָּה זוֹ, יָבֹא שֶׁלֹּא יְהַנֶּה אֲפִלּוּ בַּמֶּה שֶׁאֵינוֹ חָסֵר כְּלוּם, וּשְׁכֵנוֹ אוֹ חֲבֵרוֹ אֵינוֹ מְקַבֵּל מִמֶּנּוּ הֲנָאָה, וְזוֹ הָיְתָה מִדַּת סְדוֹם.

> As for the person who never does anything good for anyone else, if this characteristic overcomes him, he will come to not do anything good for anyone else even when it costs him nothing, and he will refrain from doing anything good for his neighbor or friend. This is "the attribute of Sodom". (*Magen Avot* to Avot 5:10, my translation)

The Bartenura reaches the same conclusion. He points out that there is no contradiction: one who becomes used to saying "what's mine is mine" will eventually slide down the slippery slope and refuse to do good things, even when that person will lose nothing. He paraphrases a *midrash* (Sanhedrin 109a) that explicitly charges Sodom with restricting travel ("to stop suffering wayfarers"), because they wanted to keep all their natural wealth for themselves. They were miserly with God's earth and the natural abundance of their land when it would

have cost them nothing to be kind to strangers.

In the way the Torah tells the story, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and their inhabitants are destroyed without any specific person ever being named as the antagonist of the story. The king of Sodom, who appears in Gen. 14, could have made an excellent narrative focal point. Yet the Torah doesn't present it this way. Like the "average" person, there is no obvious villain. The outcry reaches God because it is the whole society—not one "bad guy"—which lives in this way. The closest we get to a "bad guy" is an angry mob surrounding Lot's house; the antagonist of the Sodom story is, well, Sodom itself: "the people of Sodom … young and old, the whole nation" (Gen. 19:4, my translation). By not focusing on any characters other than "the people of Sodom" and "the whole nation", the Torah shines the spotlight on the whole society.

The principle of *kofin al middat s'dom* applies when helping costs nothing. That's why the "average" characteristic—"what's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours"—isn't bad in and of itself. But the habit can grow. And a habit isn't only personal—society develops its own habits too.

Abraham, of course, is the contrasting figure. He runs *toward* strangers at the beginning of this parashah (Gen. 18:2); in the rabbis' reading, the inhabitants of Sodom decide not to suffer wayfarers. The mob at Lot's door enforces this attitude violently (Gen. 19:4). Abraham is chosen to "teach his children and his descendants after him … to do righteousness and justice". And just as habits grow by learning and reinforcement, so too do counter-habits. Abraham is charged with teaching a *derekh*, a path. This is the path of righteousness and justice, of generosity and hospitality, that cultivates habits that keep us pointed past *beinoni* towards the *ḥasid*, past the "in-between" towards righteousness and lovingkindness.

Sodom made a habit of "what's mine is mine". Abraham's charge is to teach his descendants the opposite habit: "what's mine is yours".