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Once upon a time, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had it good. Really good.

Hear me out on this.

What we know about Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis is only the beginning of the story. To recap: “[T]he people of Sodom were wicked, exceedingly sinful before the Almighty.”¹ God confides in Abraham the intention to go down and confirm the worrisome reports about Sodom and Gomorrah, “because their sin is very grievous.”

Abraham famously bargains with God, urging God to live up to the reputation as “Judge of all the earth” and *act justly* by saving the cities if just ten righteous souls can be found.²

Abraham’s audacity toward God for the sake of justice, what we Jewish people call “*chutzpah*,” is laudable, but in the end, even ten righteous citizens prove elusive and the city finds itself on the wrong end of fire and brimstone, an environmental catastrophe that would cause the names Sodom and Gomorrah forever to be associated with destruction and waste, utterly uninhabitable forever. And, if you look even today to the barren landscape surrounding the Dead Sea, where these Biblical communities presumably once thrived, you will find salt flats and sulphur pits to match the Biblical description of the wreckage, even down to a famous geological formation that looks in profile a lot like a woman and is known in Israeli folklore as “Lot’s wife,” the ill-fated resident of Sodom who disobeyed God’s will, looked back while fleeing the city, and turned into a pillar of salt.

But it wasn’t always ravage and ruin and high sodium content for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, or so the tradition goes. In the Rabbinic imagination, these twin cities once had an unusually strong economy. Stories abound in the *midrash*, the collections of Rabbinic legend, about the abundance of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Mind you, all of these folktales come from the imagination of the Rabbis, the great teachers of the tradition, so don’t go looking in your Bibles—you won’t find them there.)

¹ Genesis 13:13.

² Genesis 18:25 and surrounding verses.

One story reports that the agriculture of Sodom was uncommonly lush and rich—foliage so dense that made it impossible to see Sodom from the air, carrots that grew as tall as people, a single sheep or goat that could feed for a family for years. Another reports that when the Sodomites plucked vegetables from the earth, gold dust would scatter from the roots.

There is, of course, no crime in prosperity. So why did God slate all those people for destruction? What horrible thing could they have done, that made God want to blow up two whole cities?

Ezekiel gives us a clue. He said they “were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before [God].”³

And so—the *Midrash* elaborates—despite their extravagant wealth,

The people of Sodom and Gomorrah refused to export outside their own little province. They barred immigrants from their cities, fearing that they would hurt their wages, take their jobs, eat their food, steal their riches. They put steep tariffs on imported goods and zealously hoarded their bounty.⁴

And lest you think the Rabbis were concerned only with matters of “policy,” they also denounced the Sodomites as wantonly cruel:

Not only would they refuse to provide food for guests and strangers but they also would cut off the branches of fruit trees specifically in order to deprive the birds;

One story relates how a resident who gave bread to the poor was rounded up by the Sodomites and burnt alive;

Another says that when guests slept over in Sodom, they’d offer a bed and then, if it was too long, they would shorten their guests by lopping off their feet; if too short, they would forcibly stretch the victims.⁵

³ Ezekiel 16:49-50.

⁴ Summarizing and paraphrasing from various sources compiled in Bialik & Ravnitzky, eds., trans. William G. Braude, *The Book of Legends* (Sefer Ha-Aggadah): *Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. New York, Schocken Books, 1992. pp. 36-37, §30.

⁵ *Ibid.*

But the most astonishing teaching about Sodom suggests that its citizens were actually not too very different from you or me.

“A person who says, ‘What’s mine belongs to me, and what’s yours belongs to you,’—this is an average type of person, according to the ancient tradition. But some Rabbis disagreed, and said, “This is the Sodom type.”⁶

What’s mine belongs to me; what’s yours belongs to you. This is, after all, the essence of capitalism: What I earn, I keep. What you earn, you keep. We go about our own business. We don’t get involved in each other’s affairs. How could anyone possibly confuse the wickedness of Sodom with this ordinary, benign, outlook?

And that, I think, is the whole point: that it’s all too easy for an “ordinary, benign outlook” to become a vehicle for the perpetuation of injustice, even cruelty.

And specifically *this* outlook—that declares that if I have what I have, and you have what you have, then what good does it do me to look after you? what does it matter to me whether or not *you* have *enough*?”—*this* outlook can, under the right circumstances, lurch into a *looking-the-other-way*, a *not looking out* for people in need, for people who don’t have enough, people who may *never* have enough.

There’s a song in a show on Broadway right now about this very idea. The show is called *Hadestown* and the song (which, by the way, was composed in 2006) is called, “Why we Build the Wall.”

“Why do we build the wall, my children, my children?” it goes,

“The wall keeps out the enemy, and we build the wall to keep us free, That’s why we build the wall, to keep us free. Because we have and they have not... because they want what we have got - that’s why we build the wall.”⁷

Our society ought to pursue prosperity. America *should* be the kind of place where people “want what we have got.” But the true measure of a society is not how it rewards the fortunate or even the successful. “The true measure of any society,” Gandhi taught, “can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.” This explains the doom of Sodom; it also explains the division in

⁶ *Mishna Avot (Pirkei Avot)*, 5:13.

⁷ Anaïs Mitchell, *Hadestown*, “Why We Build the Wall,” 2006.

America. We have two visions of how we judge our society: one asks how the “haves” are doing: how strong is the economy, as measured by employment rates and consumer spending and the stock market? The other considers how the “have nots” are faring: what’s our record on poverty, health care for the neediest, opportunity for minorities, criminal justice, food insecurity, homelessness?

The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members. The Bible understood this, because Deuteronomy reports what must have presented as an all-too-commonplace real-life scenario and then insists that we all have an obligation to deal with it:

7 If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. **8** Rather, be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need.... **10** Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.”⁸

There’s even a verse that says, “Don’t even *think* about refusing to loan to a person in need just because the year for canceling debts is around the corner,” referring to the Biblical custom of remitting debts every seven years. “Don’t even think about” depriving your needy neighbor the loan he needs to make ends meet.⁹

“**11** There will always be poor people in the land,” it continues. “Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land” (*Ibid*).

In a society of endemic poverty—where the gap between rich and poor grows ever wider, further concentrating and entrenching the wealth and power and opportunity afforded the rich while further impoverishing the poor—in such a society, the rule of, “What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours” is, in fact, a perpetuation of the crime of Sodom—which, of course, was Greed, plain and simple.

Earlier this week, Michael Tomasky of the New York Times wrote a column called, “Bill Gates, I Implore You to Connect Some Dots,” (referring to Bill Gates’ recent dust-up with Elizabeth Warren) in which Tomasky noted that

Multibillion-dollar fortunes are often called excessive and decadent. But here’s something they’re rarely called but ought to be: anti-democratic. These fortunes

⁸ Deuteronomy 15:7-11.

⁹ Deuteronomy 15:10.

will destroy our democracy. Why “anti-democratic”? Why would it matter to our democracy whether Jeff Bezos is worth \$113 billion (his current figure) or \$13 billion?

Because any democracy needs a robust and thriving middle class, and we have spent the last 30 or so years transferring trillions of dollars from the middle class to the people at the very top. Just [one set of numbers](#), from the University of California, Berkeley, economist Gabriel Zucman: The 400 richest Americans — the top .00025 percent of the population — now own more of the country’s riches than the 150 million adults in the bottom 60 percent of wealth distribution. The 400’s share has tripled since the 1980s.

This is carnage, plain and simple. No democratic society can let that keep happening and expect to stay a democracy. It will produce a middle and working classes with no sense of security, and when people have no sense that the system is providing them with basic security, they’ll make some odd and desperate choices.¹⁰

That’s why, “What’s Mine is Mine, What’s Yours is Yours” is an outlook associated with the people of Sodom. There is, however, one more type of person, for whom the Rabbis reserved special praise. This person says: “What’s yours is yours, and what’s mine is yours.” The Rabbis did not think this kind of behavior “average” at all. They call it *chasid*—which happens to be the same word as *Hasid*, like the *Hasidic* communities of Brooklyn—but which literally means, filled with lovingkindness.¹¹

We need a society that reaches for lovingkindness. A society that views inequality as a failure to recognize the basic humanity and dignity of one’s fellow man and woman; a society that sees a quality education, fair job opportunity, and the basic health care of each citizen as fundamental rights, not privileges for those who can afford them; that treats immigrants—yes, even those who come to this country illegally—with basic human decency and dignity.

A society that reaches for lovingkindness does not intentionally separate families, deprive detainees of toothbrushes, toilets, and soap, smear immigrants as criminals or potential criminals, and slander refugees as terrorists-in-wait.

¹⁰ From *The New York Times* (online edition), November 11, 2019.

¹¹ *Avot* 5:13.

A society that reaches for lovingkindness may in fact know, as Deuteronomy knows, that “There will be poor, always,” but such a society nevertheless insists that we “Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart.”¹²

They say that “a rising tide lifts all boats,” and there’s solid research to back up the saying. A noteworthy study discovered in 2011 that, across countries, ... *inequality* “is associated with lower growth rates and shorter growth spells. Redistribution [of wealth], for the most part, is not.”¹³

We have so much bounty. How good is our harvest. How much we have that merits thanks. God has blessed us in so many ways. Now it is our holy work to figure out how best to let others share in those blessings.

We express our thanks best by giving of ourselves generously to others. Especially as the end of the year approaches and we think about our charitable giving, consider visiting charitynavigator.org and researching those organizations that help us share our blessings with populations in need.

We express our thanks best when we volunteer our time to the betterment of the human family. So consider volunteering at a local soup kitchen, homeless shelter, church, synagogue, mosque, community center, to give to others the most precious gifts you have—your time and your human presence.

We express our thanks best by supporting those policies that best distribute opportunity to all, not only to a few, so consider calling or writing your elected officials and advocate for the right and the just.

We express thanks best by building a society in which *all* have cause to give thanks.

¹² Deut. 15:11.

¹³ Andrew Berg and Jonathan Ostry, as cited in *The Economist (online edition)*, “Does Raising All Boats Lift The Tide?” March 14, 2014).