

Temple Beth-El Shabbat AM Torah Study...Genesis 19:17-22

	FOX	JPS	HEBREW
17	It was, when they had brought him outside, that (one of them) said: Escape for your life, do not gaze behind you, do not stand still anywhere in the plain: to the hill-country escape, lest you be swept away!	When they had brought them outside, one said, "Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away."	וַיְהִי כִּהְיוּצִיָאם אֹתָם הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הַמַּלְט עַל־נַפְשֶׁךָ אֶל־תִּבֵּיט אַחֲרָיִךְ וְאַל־תַּעֲמֹד בְּכָל־הַפְּכָר הַהָרָה הַמַּלְט פֶּן־תִּסָּפֵה:
18	Lot said to them: No, pray, my lord!	But Lot said to them, "Oh no, my lord!	וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹט אֲלֵהֶם אֶל־נָא אֲדַנִּי:
19	Now pray, your servant has found favor in your eyes, you have shown great faithfulness in how you have dealt with me, keeping me alive—but I, I am not able to escape to the hill-country, lest the wickedness cling to me, and I die!	You have been so gracious to your servant, and have already shown me so much kindness in order to save my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die.	הִנֵּה־נָא מְצָא עֵבְדֶךָ חוֹן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וַתִּגְדַּל חַסְדְּךָ אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי לְהַחְיֹת אֶת־נַפְשִׁי וְאַנְכִי לֹא אוּכַל לְהַמְלִיט הַהָרָה פֶּן־תִּדְבַקְנִי הַרְעָה וּמָתִי:
20	Now pray, that town is near enough to flee to, and it is so tiny; pray let me escape there—is it not tiny?—and stay alive!	Look, that town there is near enough to flee to; it is such a little place! Let me flee there—it is such a little place—and let my life be saved."	הִנֵּה־נָא הָעִיר הַזֹּאת קְרֹבָה לָנוּס שָׁמָּה וְהִיא מִצְעָר אִמְלָטָה נָא שָׁמָּה הֲלֹא מִצְעָר הוּא וַתְּחִי נַפְשִׁי:
21	He said to him: Here then, I lift up your face in this matter as well, by not overturning this town of which you speak.	He replied, "Very well, I will grant you this favor too, and I will not annihilate the town of which you have spoken.	וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנֵּה נִשְׂאתִי פָנֶיךָ גַם לְדַבֵּר הַזֶּה לְבַלְתִּי הַפְּכִי אֶת־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ:
22	Make haste, escape there, for I am not able to do anything until you come there. Therefore, the name of the town was called: Tzo'ar/Tiny.	Hurry, flee there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there." Hence the town came to be called Zoar.	מִהֵרָה הַמְלִיט שָׁמָּה כִּי לֹא אוּכַל לַעֲשׂוֹת דְּבָר עַד־בֹּאֶךָ שָׁמָּה עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שֵׁם־הָעִיר צוּעַר:

V. 17

CHIZKUNI¹...and it was as he took them outside... the word אותם *otam* appears superfluous, as it is included in the plural suffix *mem* ם; the reason it was added was to emphasize that the angel only took Lot, his wife and the two daughters who were still unmarried. They were not

¹ Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (1250-1310) was a French rabbi and student.

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allowed to take with them any of their belongings. The spelling of the verse is to teach us that Lot was so “married” to his material possessions that he could not face having to become separated from these.... An alternate exegesis for the expression: ...the word is not exclusive but inclusive, i.e. “when the angel took Lot and his family out, etc.,”

ALTER...he said... The reader is meant to infer: one of the two of them.

JPS...Flee... The stem *m-lt* is repeated five times (v. 17-21) in a word play on the name Lot.

Do not look behind you...

- **JPS...**That is, do not linger.
- **CHIZKUNI...** the reference is not to what one sees with one’s eyes, but to what one sees with one’s mind’s eye, i.e. leaving behind other members of one’s family. The angel warned Lot to move forward with all possible speed, not allowing any other consideration to slow him down. The reason was that the cloud containing the lethal particles had already risen and was unstoppable. It would discharge its contents all over the region.
- **CHIZKUNI...** Although the command is issued in the singular mode, [presumably Lot’s wife and daughters did not qualify for being addressed by an angel. Ed.] the warning was meant for each of the members of Lot’s family also. We find a parallel example of such a formulation in Genesis 2:17... where the prohibition to eat from the tree of knowledge is addressed to Adam in the singular mode, although it was intended both for him and his wife. This is the reason why Adam’s wife was punished for eating from it....
- **OR HACHAIM²...** The reason for this is simple. We believe that by looking at a person's face one (א ק"ץ) can detect whether he is good or evil. If Lot were to turn his face towards the city his sins would be reflected on his face and there would be no way he could have been spared.
- **RABBEINU BAHYA³...** Rashi⁴ comments on these words: “you have been an accessory to their evil deeds and you have only been saved by the merit of Avraham. Hence you are not entitled to watch them die.”

Nachmanides⁵ claims that the reason the angel forbade Lot and his family to look behind them was that the air behind them was potentially lethal, and when they would turn around to look, they would themselves become victims of the poisoned atmosphere. He argues that even looking at any other diseases, i.e. the microbes which bring them about, are in themselves a danger to those who look at them. Nachmanides singles out rabies, claiming that looking at the urine of a person bitten by a rabid animal is liable to infect the person who has looked. He claims that the mere thinking of this is liable to produce such an infection.

² Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (1696-1743), a Talmudist and kabbalist, wrote *Or HaChaim*, his commentary on the Torah.

³ Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (1255-1340) was a commentator on Tanach.

⁴ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105) was a medieval French rabbi and author.

⁵ Nachmanides, or RAMBAN, (1194-1270) was a Sephardic Rabbi, philosopher, physician, Kabbalist, and biblical commentator.

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Apparently, in those days, when someone had been bitten by a rabid dog he was not allowed to drink any liquids at all. Also, if people had been bitten and were desperate to have something to drink they would see a reflection of the dog that bit them in the liquid.

A Midrashic interpretation: The reason the angels forbade Lot to look back was that he would see the presence of God as it was pouring sulfur and brimstone on the valley. Such a vision would prove fatal for him. Irith, Lot's wife, had feelings of compassion for her married daughters whom she had left behind, and this is what caused her to turn around. She wanted to see if these daughters now followed them. She beheld the שכינה instead and turned into a pillar of salt.

- **RASHBAM**⁶... Because of the distress of your sons-in-law who are in the city. And further, because one who looks back is delayed on the journey. And also that one should not watch angels and their activities unnecessarily, as it is written (Jud. 13:22), "We shall surely die, because we have seen God." And likewise Ya'akov (Gen. 32:31), "For I have seen God face to face, and my life has been spared."
- **RAMBAN**... The idea behind the prohibition Rashi says: You did evil along with them and through Avram's merit your being saved. You are not allowed to see their punishment.... I prefer to say when God destroyed these cities the Destroying Angel was "standing between the earth and the heavens" appearing in a flame of fire similar to the Destroying Angel David saw and that's why the angel forbade them to look....
 - **SIFTEI HACHAMIM**⁷... You might ask: It said in v. 15, "Lest you be swept away in the iniquity of the city." Does this not imply that he did not participate in their evil ways [and was in danger only due to *their* sins]? This is not a question, as v. 15 means: If you remain in the city you might be swept away with them [regardless of your virtue or lack of it]. Avraham's merit will not help you then — for a tzaddik's merit would not save even his own life! As Rashi says on 18:32, Avraham did not pray to save the city if there were less than ten tzaddikim; consequently the few would be swept away with the city if they remain. But Rashi's comment here, "Only for the sake of Avraham are you saved," means: [Although you participated in their evil ways,] you will be treated as if you did not do evil and are not deserving of punishment. Thus, if you leave the city you will be saved. But if you stay, you might be swept away with their iniquity — and Avraham's merit will not help! Furthermore, Rashi's comment of "You are not worthy to see their punishment" answers the question: Lot might be swept away with the city if he remains because he is not worthy to see their punishment, as indeed happened to his wife. (*R. Meir Stern*⁸)
 - **SIFTEI HACHAMIM**... People ask: It says, "Elohim remembered Avraham and He sent Lot out of the upheaval" (v. 29). On this, Rashi comments that Elohim remembered what Lot did for Avraham. Although Lot knew Sarah was Avraham's wife, Lot did not betray Avraham in Egypt [by telling Pharaoh about Avraham]. Accordingly, why does

⁶ Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, or Rashbam, (c. 1085-c. 1158) was Rashi's grandson and a leading French Tosafist out of Troyes.

⁷ Siftei Chachamim was a commentary on Rashi's commentary on Torah. It was written by Shabbethai ben Joseph Bass (1641-1718).

⁸ I am not sure who this is referring to. There is a contemporary R. Meir Stern who is a current dean of a yeshiva in the USA and a Talmud scholar.

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Rashi not say here that Lot was saved because of his own merit? Furthermore, [if he had such a merit,] why did the angel warn him not to look back? The answer is: Lot indeed saved Avraham from death by not revealing who Sarah was, and, measure for measure, he was saved from death. But this act was meritorious enough to save Lot only because Avraham's merit was so great. Lot would not have been saved had he done this kindness for someone less righteous than Avraham. Thus, the merit of Lot's act actually depended on Avraham's merit. This is why it says, "Elohim remembered *Avraham*" (v. 29), when it should say, "Elohim remembered *Lot*," according to [the initial understanding of] Rashi's above-mentioned comment on that verse. Perforce, it is as we explained. (*R. Meir Stern*)

in the entire valley/Plain...

- **RADAK**⁹... seeing that all the towns in that valley were being turned upside down.
- **RASHI**... the plain of the Jordan

the hills...

- **JPS**...That is, to the highlands of Moab.
- **RASHI**... Flee to Abraham who is dwelling in the mountain — as it is said, (Genesis 12:8) "And he removed his tent thence unto the mountain". He was still dwelling there, as it is said, (Genesis 13:3) "[And he went unto] ... the place where his tent had been at first", and although it is stated (Genesis 13:18) "And Abraham moved his tent etc.", he had many tents and they stretched as far as Hebron.

RADAK...*lest you be swept away*... "lest you will be destroyed with the people of the city if you stand still. I have no authority to save you from the destruction once the process has commenced. The destruction will occur instantaneously and simultaneously in all the towns slated for this."

V. 18

RADAK... he begged them not to make him rush up the mountain as he was physically unable to move so quickly.

my lord...

- **JPS**...Hebrew *'adonai* is here treated by many commentators as nonsacred. Others understand it as a direct plea to God.
- **RADAK**... the word is used in the secular sense, as proved by the fact that it concludes the sentence. Onkelos also translates it in this sense, writing *בבבעו כען רבוני*. [this may be so in the edition at Kimchi's disposal; in our editions the words are rendered as *בבעו יי*. Ed.] Our sages in Shavuot 35 claim that every time the word *א-דני* appears in connection with Avraham it is invariably a reference to God, i.e. is a sacred word. Every time the word occurs in connection with Lot it is secular, except here. The reason it is understood to be

⁹ Rabbi David Kimhi (1160-1235) was a French medieval rabbi, biblical commentator, philosopher, and grammarian.

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sacred in this instance is that Lot attributed to these angels the power to kill or to keep alive. The words of our sages are astounding, seeing Lot addressed them in the plural mode, something not appropriate when addressing God. Besides, when an angel is on a mission from God, he can obviously kill or bring to life just as his Master can. Moreover, the power to revive the dead was exercised even by such prophets as Elijah and Elisha.

- **RASHI...** Our Rabbis said, that this name (Lord) is holy (i. e. refers to God; Shavuot 35b), since it is said regarding him (i.e. regarding the one who was addressed by this name) (v. 19) “[and thou hast magnified thy mercy ...] in keeping alive my soul”. Therefore it must refer to Him who has the power to kill or keep alive. Indeed the Targum renders it, “I beg of thee, O Lord)”
 - **SIFTEI HACHAMIM...** In light of this we must understand Rashi’s next comments: אַל להקשה נָא אל לשון בקשה, נָא אל תאמרו אלי וכו', נָא אל לשון בקשה. Rashi is saying that this verse is split delicately into two parts. Lot says to the angels [only one word]: אַל. By this, Lot conveys: “Do not tell me to flee to the mountain.” Then begins his prayer to Hashem: הֲנֵאֱמַר מִצָּא עִבְדְּךָ נָא ה', הֲנֵאֱמַר מִצָּא עִבְדְּךָ. And this is what Rashi means by, “נָא. It has the meaning of making a request.” In other words, Lot’s request to Hashem begins with the word נָא, as Rashi said before: “The Targum also translates it ה' כַּעֲן ה'.” I.e., כַּעֲן is the translation of נָא, and expresses a request. This is why Rashi first explains that this Name is holy, and only then explains אַל נָא, contrary to the verse’s order. Rashi is telling us that since our Sages said this Name is holy, we must separate אַל from נָא. And אַל means: “[O angels,] do not tell me to flee to the mountain,” while נָא begins Lot’s prayer to Hashem. (*R. Meir Stern*)

V. 19

RADAK...*you have been so gracious...* seeing that the angel had told him המלט על נפשך, “save yourself,” it had become clear that the angel’s mission was to save him. Actually, both angels were on a mission of both saving Lot and destroying Sodom. The one who was speaking did so only because he was the senior of the two. The one who tried to save Lot said לבלתי הפכי את העיר, “I cannot yet overturn the city.” (verse 21) He also admitted that he was unable to destroy the town until Lot had been saved (verse 22).

ALTER...*I cannot flee to the high country...* Lot seems a weak character—he has to be led out by the hand from the city—and his zigzagging determinations of flight make psychological sense. Accustomed to an urban setting, he is terrified at the idea of trying to survive in the forbidding landscape of cliffs and caves to the south and east of the Dead Sea. But once having settled in the little town of Zoar (verse 30), he has understandable premonitions of another cataclysm and so decides that, after all, the rocky wilderness is the lesser of two evils.

lest the wickedness cling to me...

- **FOX...**The expression of an idea common to many cultures: that evil is like a disease, a physical rather than purely moral entity.

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- **CHIZKUNI...** He was afraid of the brimstone and sulfur that was beginning to spread all around him.
- **RASHI...** Whilst I was with the people of Sodom the Holy One, blessed be He, compared my deeds with the deeds of the people of my city and I seemed to be righteous and deserving to be saved. When, however, I come to the righteous man (i.e. Abraham whom Rashi 5:17 stated to be dwelling in the mountain) I must be regarded as wicked. Thus, too, did the woman of Zarefath say to Elijah, (1 Kings 17:18) “Art thou come to bring my sin in remembrance?” Before you came to me the Holy One, blessed be He, compared my doings with the doings of my people and I was regarded as a righteous woman amongst them, but now that you have come to me, in comparison with your deeds, I am wicked (Genesis 50:11).
 - **SIFTEI HACHAMIM...** *And I appeared as a righteous person and worthy of rescue...* [You might ask: Does this not contradict what] Rashi explained before, that Lot too participated in the evil ways of Sedom and was saved only in Avraham’s merit? The answer is: [What Rashi said before] is the truth. But Lot mistakenly thought he was saved in his own merit. Accordingly, when Rashi explains on v. 21: “I will spare the entire city for your sake,” it does not mean, “In your *merit*.” Rather it means, “In order that you will be saved.” Nonetheless, everything that is happening is in Avraham’s merit. (*Nachalas Yaakov*¹⁰) But this is difficult: How could Lot make such a mistake after hearing the angel say, “Do not look back,” implying, “You did evil and are saved only in Avraham’s merit”? The answer is: Lot was not saying [that he appeared as a righteous person] to explain why he was being saved from Sedom’s upheaval. He was speaking generally about his residence in Sedom, during which time he was saved from punishment for his deeds because he was considered to be righteous when compared to them. (*R. Meir Stern*)

V. 20-22

A little place...

- **JPS...** Hebrew *mits ‘ar* is a play on *tso ‘ar* (Zoar) in verse 22. It is intended to explain, by popular etymology, the change in place-name from the original Bela (14:2). For the locale of the city, see Excursus 13 (RMY: at bottom of this text study).
- **ALTER...** ...Lot’s point is that it is, after all, only a piddling town and so it would not be asking a great deal to spare it from destruction.
- **HAEMEK DAVAR**¹¹... Is it insignificant. A small town usually has fewer temptations to offer, therefore its sins are generally fewer as well.
- **FOX...tiny...** Or “a trifle.”

¹⁰ A work by Rabbi Yaakov Lorberbaum (1760-1832) that was published posthumously. It included sermons on the Torah portion, halachic decisions, responsa, and his last will. It is most famous for his ethical will to his sons that ask them to spend time every day to learn at least one page of Gemara.

¹¹ Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, or Netziv, (1817-1893) was a Lithuanian rabbi and scholar. In 1854 he introduced a style of Talmud study based on broad knowledge of Tannaitic and Geonic literature as well as the Rishonim. He also emphasized the importance of the study of Chumash and Nach, giving a daily shiur on the weekly parsha.

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- **RADAK...** he repeated the insignificance of the town due to its few inhabitants. Our sages understand the word מצער as meaning מזער, “young,” of recent origin; they therefore could not yet have accumulated so many demerits as the more established cities of the valley. (based on Shabbat 10) According to some sages Tzoar had been founded only 51 years previously, equaling the numerical value of the word נא used by Lot in his plea.

V. 20

OR HACHAIM...*this town is nearby...* The verse is difficult. If the inhabitants of that town were guilty, what difference did it make that it was close by? Moreover, how could the angel say: “I have granted your wish?” Since when was it up to him? If the town was innocent, who had given the angel permission to destroy it even if Lot had not pleaded on its behalf?

We must view the situation in light of the Talmud *Shabbat* 10 that Tzoar was only 51 years old, whereas the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were founded 52 years previously. Lot knew this and reasoned that Tzoar's measure of guilt was not full as yet. We also have a principle (*Baba Kama* 60) that once permission has been granted to the destructive angel to execute God's judgment, it does not really matter whether the measure of guilt is full. However, the angel Gabriel was then in a position to exercise some discretion. Lot was aware of this and appealed to Gabriel's discretionary powers. Lot left Tzoar as soon as possible because he was afraid that the time limit for the angel's discretionary power would elapse.

V. 21

very well, I will grant you this favor/lift up your face...

- **FOX...**A similar Assyrian phrase means “save” or “cheer.”
- **RADAK...** from this verse we may deduce that when God dispatches an angel on a major mission, He gives the angel some discretion in the manner in which he is to carry out the task assigned to him. The angel or angels may use their own intelligence in this respect. Clearly, an angel is not like a golem, but is an intelligent being.

RASHI...*concerning this thing also...* Not only will you be saved, but I will also save the whole city for Your sake.

overturning/overthrowing...

- **FOX...** ...The word is used later in the Bible to describe the fate of the two cities again (e.g., Lam. 4:6).
- **ALTER...** This is the physical image presented by the Hebrew verb, though the obvious sense of the word throughout the story (and in later biblical references to Sodom) is something like “destroy by sudden cataclysm.”
- **SIFTEI HACHAMIM... *I overturn [Rashi]...*** I.e., we should not mistakenly explain it as, “It overturns me,” since that too is a possible meaning when one speaks about another. But that meaning is not appropriate here. (*R. Meir Stern*)

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V. 22

I am not able...until you come there...

- **FOX...**In deference to Avraham (see v. 29).
- **RADAK...** because I have been commanded not to destroy the region until you have been saved.
- **RASHI...** This admission of their powerlessness was the angels' punishment for having said, (v. 13) "For we will destroy the city", attributing the act to themselves; therefore they could not go away from there (i. e., the incident could not close) until they were compelled to admit that the thing was not in their power) (Genesis Rabbah 50:9).
- **RASHI...** The pronoun is singular number. This proves that one was to overthrow the city and the other to deliver, for two angels are not sent on the same mission.
 - **SIFTEI HACHAMIM...** But v. 17 does not prove this. Although it is written there, "He [the one angel] said, 'Escape for your life,'" and it is not written, "They said," it could be that only one angel rescued, but they both overturned.

RADAK...the town came to be called... the city formerly known as *בלע* was renamed on account of what transpired on this occasion [We encountered the city and its king in Genesis 14:8. Ed.]

- Genesis 14:8: Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar, went forth and engaged them in battle in the Valley of Siddim:

JPS...Excursus 13¹²... The Cities of the Plain (19:1-38)

The sites of Sodom and Gomorrah and their sister cities remain unknown. There are no reliable postbiblical traditions about them. Moreover, the biblical texts themselves appear to yield conflicting information.

The destroyed cities are repeatedly referred to as being located in "the plain" (Heb. *kikkar*)¹³, also called "the land of the plain" (v. 28) and "the plain of the Jordan" (13:10f). The Hebrew term *kikkar* is of uncertain origin and application, but it is invariably rendered *meshra'*, "plain," by the Aramaic Targums. It seems to be either a geographical or a topographical term. The statement that King Solomon cast the bronze vessels for the Temple "in the plain of the Jordan between Succoth and Zerethan"¹⁴ refers to the middle section of the Jordan Valley, between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, and it seems to imply that the northern shore of the Dead Sea is the southern extremity of "the plain." This conclusion is supported by Deuteronomy 34:3. From the summit of Mount Nebo in Transjordan "facing Jericho" (Deut. 32:49), Moses was able to see "the Negeb; and the Plain—the Valley of Jericho." Finally, Lot is

¹² J. Penrose Harland, "Sodom and Gomorrah," BA 5 (1942): 17-32 and 6 (1943): 41-54; idem, "Have Sodom and Gomorrah Been Found?" BAR VI, 5 (1980): 26-36; W. C. van Hatten, "Once Again: Sodom and Gomorrah," BA 44 (1981): 87-92.

¹³ Gen. 13:12; 19:17, 25, 29.

¹⁴ 1 Kings 7:46; 2 Chron. 4:17.

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said to have been able to view the entire Jordan Plain from Bethel¹⁵, which would have been impossible if the cities were south of the Dead Sea.

But other facts would seem to favor a southern location. We are told that Abraham saw the devastated plain from a vantage point near Hebron¹⁶. Apparently, *kikkar* is a flexible term and can describe a fan-shaped area, a physical characteristic rather than a specific location. We find mention of a plain in the vicinity of Jerusalem,¹⁷ and there is no reason why the term could not also be used for the region south of the Dead Sea. This harmonizes better with the observation in Genesis 13:10 that the plain was “well watered...like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt,” for the area around the southern basin of the Dead Sea is blessed with an abundance of fresh water and is fed by several streams. The presence of bitumen in the region, mentioned in 14:10, likewise suits the southern basin or at least the southern shore of the northern basin in which this substance is especially prevalent, while mention of salt in the Sodom and Gomorrah traditions¹⁸ suggests a closeness to the salt mountain known as Mount Sodom (Jebel Usdum), which lies near the southwest corner of the Dead Sea.

Further circumstantial evidence might be thought to be provided by the Dead Sea itself. It is today divided into two parts by the Lisan (Heb. *lashon*), a tongue-like peninsula that juts out from the eastern shore and extends to within two miles of the western shore. The lower, or southern, section comprises only 27 percent of the entire body of water. Because of the considerable difference in depth between the two basins, some 1300 feet (400 m.) average in the north as opposed to a mere 20 feet (6 m.) in the south, there can be no doubt that the latter is of far more recent formation than the former. In other words, the Lisan at one time formed the southern bank of the Dead Sea, a conclusion strengthened by the evidence for the one-time existence of roads along the Lisan connecting the eastern and western sides of the sea. Below the Lisan, therefore once stretched forth a plain that subsided in historical times due to tectonic disturbances and was submerged by the encroaching waters of the Dead Sea to form the shallow southern basin. It is most plausible that the remark in Genesis 14:3, “the Valley of Siddim, now the Dead Sea,” refers to this process.

Were the “cities of the Plain” situated in this area, and do their ruins now lie below the waters of the southern basin of the Dead Sea? No biblical text supports the notion that the cities were destroyed by flooding. In fact, the several passages that employ Sodom and Gomorrah as a figure of utter destruction and desolation rest upon the presumption of a wasteland of seared ruins and scorched, infertile, salty soil.¹⁹ Yet this argument by itself is not conclusive; for while the original catastrophe may have been an earthquake followed by a massive conflagration, a partial collapse of the southern bank may have taken place. The resulting breakthrough of water may have been limited in extent, but in the course of the millennia the sea water would have gradually spread southward until it covered the entire area of the original plain and obliterated whatever remained of the ruined cities.

¹⁵ Gen. 13:3, 10-12.

¹⁶ Gen. 19:27-28; 18:1,16.

¹⁷ Neh. 12:28; cf. 3:22.

¹⁸ Gen. 19:26; Deuteronomy 29:22; Zeph. 2:9; cf. Pss. 107:34.

¹⁹ Deut. 29:23; Isa. 13:19-22; Zeph. 2:9.

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Another place that has to be taken into consideration in determining the location of the four cities of the Plain is Zoar. Genesis 13:10 shows that it lay to the south of these cities. Its closeness to Sodom is beyond question.²⁰ There is abundant testimony to the existence of continuous settlement at Zoar in biblical²¹, Second Temple²², and Talmudic times²³. Eusebius (3rd-4th cents.; Onom. 42) and Jewish tombstones from the fifth century provide further evidence of settlement in this region. Many of these sources place Zoar south of the Dead Sea, while the sixth-century C.E. mosaic map from the Byzantine church at Medeba marks it more specifically on the southeast edge. The most likely and most widely [sic] accepted location for Zoar is the fertile area of es-Safi on the Seil el-Qurahi in Jordan, a stream that flows into the Dead Sea. Remains of Roman and Nabatean settlements have been found here, but none from the biblical times. The later Zoar is hardly likely to have been the city to which Lot fled, but it must have been situated not too far away to have stubbornly retained the name over the millennia.

As a matter of fact, surveys and excavations during the late 1970s showed that the southern end of the Dead Sea could not have contained cities any time after 3000 B.C.E. On the other hand, on the eastern shore, about one mile east of the Lisan in Jordan, the town of Bab edh-Dhra has been uncovered, and not too far away are the other sites: Safi, Feifa, and Khanazir. These are the only sites in the area of the Dead Sea, and all four were occupied during the Early Bronze Age (3rd millennium B.C.E.). Following their destruction around 2300 B.C.E., they were not resettled until Roman times, more than 2,000 years later. In the present state of our knowledge, these sites would seem to be the most likely locations of “the cities of the Plain,” but this conclusion raises intractable problems of chronology and text.

²⁰ Gen. 14:28; 19:20-23, 30.

²¹ Isa. 15:5; Jer. 48:34.

²² Josephus, Wars 4.8.4 (Loeb, p. 143), and Ant. 13.15.4 (Loeb, p. 427), 14.1.4 (Loeb, p. 459).

²³ Mish. Yev. 16:7, Tosef. Shev. 7:15, Pes. 52a, 53a.

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	FOX	JPS	HEBREW
23	(Now) the sun was going out over the earth as Lot came to Tzo'ar.	As the sun rose upon the earth and Lot entered Zoar,	הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָצָא עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְלוֹט בָּא צְעָרָה:
24	But YHWH rained down brimstone and fire upon Sedom and Amora, coming from YHWH, from the heavens,	the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from the Lord out of heaven.	וַיְהִי הַמָּטֵר עַל־סְדֹם וְעַל־עֲמֹרָה גִפְרִית וְאֵשׁ מֵאֵת יְהוָה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם:
25	He overturned those cities and all of the plain, all those settled in the cities and the vegetation of the soil.	He annihilated those cities and the entire Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground.	וַיִּהְפֹּךְ אֶת־הָעָרִים הָאֵל וְאֶת כָּל־הַכְּפָר וְאֶת כָּל־ יְשֻׁבֵי הָעָרִים וְצִמַּח הָאֲדָמָה:
26	Now his wife gazed behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.	Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.	וַתִּבֶט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתְּהִי נֹצֵיב מֶלַח:

JPS...THE CATAclysm (vv. 23-39)

Here, and in all subsequent references to Sodom and Gomorrah, the biblical narrative focuses upon the moral significance of the events. For this reason, the description of the catastrophe is terse to the point of obscurity. This brevity, and the absence of external sources from the biblical period, renders any reliable reconstruction of the details all but impossible. Greek and Latin authors who mention the subject are extremely late and may have drawn their information from Jewish sources; they are not necessarily witnesses to independent traditions. Moreover, even the location of the cities cannot be pinpointed. No archaeological remains exist or can be identified to provide material for scientific investigation. The ruined cities have vanished without leaving a trace.

Geologists have ruled out the possibility of volcanic eruption in this region. The most obvious explanation of the cataclysm is an earthquake. Nowhere in the text is this clearly mentioned, not even in the many passages that use the stem *h-f-kh* (vv. 21,25,29). Nor are we helped by the fact that every biblical mention of the noun form *mahpekhah*, "overthrow," is in a context that refers to Sodom. The Hebrew *h-f-kh*, which simply means to "transform completely," is a general term for destruction without specifying the means. Still, the earthquake theory is the most plausible. The entire Jordan Valley is part of the Syrian-African Rift, a gigantic fracture in the crust of the earth caused by a series of geological spasms. It stretches from Syria in the north, down the Arabah to the Gulf of Akaba, through the Red Sea to the Upper Nile Valley and on to Lake Nyasa in East Africa. In this Sodom story we may well be dealing with a description of one of the last earthquakes that shaped the lower Jordan Valley area in historical times.

It is well known that fissures formed by quakes often allow heat and gases to escape from the earth. Lightning, frequently present during earthquakes, would have ignited the sulfur and bitumen existing in the area (14:10). A catastrophic conflagration would result (cf. Deut. 29:22).

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This would explain the utter ruination of the cities, the extinction of their inhabitants, and the obliteration of all vegetation in the region (v. 24.), as well as the smoke that Abraham saw rising from the land (v. 28).

V. 23

RADAK¹...*Lot entered Zoar...* As soon as Lot had entered Tzoar, the angel set in motion the rain that would obliterate Sodom, acting on instructions from God.

V. 24

the Lord... the Lord...

- **JPS...**The repetition, like the phrase “out of heaven,” dramatizes the conviction that what occurred was not a meaningless accident of nature but a purposeful event, the expression of God’s direct intervention in human affairs in order to redress the balance of justice.
- **ALTER...** The slightly awkward repetition of “from the LORD” with the added phrase “from the heavens,” taken together with the verb “to rain” (*himtir*), underscores the connection with the Deluge story: the first time the Flood, the fire next time. Moshe Weinfeld has aptly observed a whole series of parallels between the two stories. In each case, God wipes out a whole population because of epidemic moral perversion, marking one family for survival. In each case, the idiom “to keep alive seed” is used for survival. In each case, the male survivor becomes drunk and is somehow sexually violated by his offspring, though only Lot is unambiguously represented as the object of an incestuous advance. One might add that the phrase used by the elder sister, “there is no man on earth [or, “in the land,” *ba’arets*] to come to bed with us” (verse 31), equally reinforces the connection with the global cataclysm of the Flood story: she looks out upon the desolate landscape after the destruction of the cities of the plain and imagines that she, her sister, and their father are the sole survivors of humankind.
- **CHIZKUNI²...** according to B’reshit Rabbah 51:3, this is to be understood as the angel Gavriel and Hashem dividing the labor; the former set these harmful substances in motion, the region it emanated from was provided by the Lord Himself. [The reason why our sages understand more than one celestial force to have been involved is the connective letter ך at the beginning of the word: ךה. Ed.] According to an early version of Tanchuma on this verse, the first time the name Hashem is used in this verse it refers to the angel Gavriel, whereas the second time it refers to Hashem Himself.
- **RABBEINU BAHYA³...** We find three divergent opinions amongst our sages as to the meaning of the words in this verse. [The basic difficulty is the repeated mention of the name of God, i.e. the attribute of Mercy in this verse.] ...Rabbi Yehudah [bar Seymon]⁴ considers Gavriel as the messenger of destruction and he feels that this angel was so described by the

¹ Rabbi David Kimhi (1160-1235) was a French medieval rabbi, biblical commentator, philosopher, and grammarian.

² Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah (1250-1310) was a French rabbi and student.

³ Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (1255-1340) was a commentator on Tanach.

⁴ I’m not sure who this is, but it is found in Bereshit 51:2.

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words “God (His messenger) had made it rain sulfur and brimstone on the city.” Rabbi Eliezer⁵ feels that the verse testifies that both God Himself and His celestial court agreed to this form of punishment, but that it emanated from God directly. Rabbi Yitzchak⁶ sees no need to read between the lines of the text but considers the syntax as perfectly normal.

A kabbalistic approach: The opinion of Rabbi Eliezer is the correct one. Shemot Rabbah 12:1 postulates as an important rule that every place we encounter the word **יה'**, this is a reference to “God plus His celestial court of advisors.”...

RASHI⁷...made it rain on Sodom... When the morning broke, as it is said, (v. 15) “And when the morning dawned”, i. e. the time when the moon is in the sky together with the sun. As some of them worshipped the sun and others the moon, the Holy One, blessed be He, said, “If I punish them by day, the moon-worshippers may say, “If it had taken place at night when the moon rules we would not have been destroyed.” And if I punish them by night the sun-worshippers may say, “If it had taken place at day time when the sun rules we would not have been destroyed.” For this reason it is written, “And when the morning dawned” — He punished them at that time when both moon and sun are ruling (Genesis Rabbah 50:12).

- **SIFTEI HACHAMIM⁸...** Rashi is saying that “Hashem caused to rain” does not relate to the preceding verse, “The sun had risen upon the earth, when Lot came to Zoar,” [to say] that only after Lot came to Zoar did it begin to rain. Rather, it means that “Hashem caused to rain” already *before* Lot came to Zoar, at the very advent of the morning, before the sun had even risen.

RASHI...rained brimstone and fire... At first it was rain (**מטר**) to see whether they would repent and this was then turned into brimstone and fire (Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach 15).

JPS...sulfurous fire... Sulfur is Latin for “burning stone,” or “brimstone” in Old English. The fire here, like the Water in Noah’s day, may have a symbolically purgative function as it does in the narrative of Numbers 16:35 and in the law of Numbers 31:23. It may also be a metaphor of divine anger, as in Deuteronomy 32:22 and Isaiah 65:5.

- Numbers 16:35: And a fire went forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.
- Numbers 31:23: ...any article that can withstand fire—these you shall pass through fire and they shall be clean, except that they must be cleansed with water of lustration; and anything that cannot withstand fire you must pass through water.
- Deuteronomy 32:22: For a fire has flared in My wrath And burned to the bottom of Sheol, Has consumed the earth and its increase, Eaten down to the base of the hills.

⁵ Eliezer ben Hurcanus was one of the most prominent sages of the 1st and 2nd centuries in Judea.

⁶ I’m not sure who this is, but it is found in Bereshit 51:2.

⁷ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105) was a medieval French rabbi and author.

⁸ Siftei Chachamim was a commentary on Rashi’s commentary on Torah. It was written by Shabbethai ben Joseph Bass (1641-1718).

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- Isaiah 65:5: Who say, “Keep your distance! Don’t come closer! For I would render you consecrated.” Such things make My anger rage, Like fire blazing all day long.

from the LORD out of heaven...

- **RADAK**...what is meant is that the origin of this lethal rain was very high up in the sky.
- **RASHBAM**⁹... emanating from God, personally.
- **SFORNO**... this was not a natural event such as a volcanic eruption, the ash, brimstone and lava afterwards descending on the surrounding earth. The source of this destruction did not originate in the bowels of the earth.
- **RASHI**... The text (Job 36:31) refers to this: “For by them (the heavens; see the preceding verses) He judges the peoples etc.” When God is about to punish mankind He brings upon them fire from heaven, just as He did to Sodom (cf. 5:32 of the same chapter); and when he caused the Manna to fall it was also from heaven (cf. the second half of 5:31) as it is said, (Exodus 16:4) “Behold I will rain bread from heaven for you” (Midrash Tanchuma, Vayera 10).

V. 25

Overtured the cities...

- **MALBIM**¹⁰... The sulfur and fire only fell upon Sedom and Amorah, but the movement of the earth affected all the cities of the plain.
- **RABBEINU BAHYA**... The choice of the word **האל** to describe “these” instead of the more common **ההם**, is somewhat puzzling. The reason the Torah chose this expression may be that two of the names of the towns had been named before. By using the prefix **ה** before the word **האל** the Torah may hint that actually five towns were being overturned by the angel in charge of this destruction. The reason that Avraham at the time had commenced his plea by mentioning the number fifty was also because he was aware that each of five towns required a minimum quorum of ten good people each in order for the whole town to have any hope to escape immediate judgment.
- **RADAK**... He turned these cities and the valley from having been most fruitful to becoming most desolate. According to Job 28:6-8 the region had not only been good pasture land but its soil had yielded gold, gemstones, etc. The sulfur and brimstone which made up most of this rain made the earth forever incapable of producing crops or other matters of value to mankind. We know that even birds shun that region.
- **RASHI**... The four cities were situated on one rock and He turned them upside down, as it is said, (Job 28:9) “He putteth forth His hand upon the flinty rock [and overturneth the mountains by the roots]” (Genesis Rabbah 51:4).
- **SFORNO**... the earth as well as its inhabitants underwent a total chemical transformation being turned into brimstone and fire, similar to what David means in

⁹ Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, or Rashbam, (c. 1085-c. 1158) was Rashi’s grandson and a leading French Tosafist out of Troyes.

¹⁰ Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser (1809-1879) was a Hebrew grammarian and Biblical commentator from the Russian Empire.

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Psalms 105:29 “He turned their waters into blood.” The dew that rose from the earth prior to sunrise turned into salt. Compare Deut. 29:22 meaning that the moisture descended back onto earth but this time mixed with solid burned particles.

- Deuteronomy 29:22: ... all its soil devastated by sulfur and salt, beyond sowing and producing, no grass growing in it, just like the upheaval of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in His fierce anger—

Vegetation of the ground...

- **CHIZKUNI...** Rabbi Yoshua son of Levi¹¹ stated that when a person takes soil from a piece of land that once was Sodom and he transplants it, it will never grow anything again.
- **IBN EZRA**¹²... The trees growing there were consumed.

V. 26

looked back/behind him...

- **JPS...**She lingered in flight and was overwhelmed by the spreading devastation.
- **RABBEINU BAHYA...** It is possible to understand the word “behind him” as referring to the angel who overturned these towns, seeing the angel has already been credited with this activity in verse 25 where the Torah mentioned sulfur and fire being rained on the towns...
- **TUR HAARUCH**¹³... According to Ibn Ezra, the suffix in the word מאחרי refers to Lot. *Rashi* claims that the suffix refers to her having ignored the angel’s command. In *Pirkey de Rabbi Eliezer*¹⁴ it is said that the angels said to both Lot, his wife and daughters, not to look behind, as the Presence of the Lord raining sulfur and fire on the Sodomites was descending on earth immediately behind them. Lot’s wife Iddit¹⁵, who was concerned about the fate of her married daughters, ignored the instructions, and, as a result, was turned into a pillar of salt. According to this version, the masculine suffix in the word מאחרי would refer to the שכינה, the manifestation of God’s presence.

a pillar of salt...

- **JPS...**The tradition, preserved in Deuteronomy 29:22, describes ruination of the soil by sulfur and salt (cf. Zeph. 2:9). Radak notes that Lot’s wife would thus have suffered the same fate as the other inhabitants. “She wholly disappeared in a blanket of salt; yet popular notion has her body turning into salt and still recognizable,” writes Bekhor

¹¹ I’m not sure who this is referring to.

¹² Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1089-c.1167) was a biblical commentator and philosopher in the Middle Ages from Spain.

¹³ Tur HaAroch, a commentary on the Torah, is written by R’ Jacob ben Asher (c. 1269 - c. 1343), known as Ba’al ha-Turim.

¹⁴ Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer is an aggadic-midrashic work on the Torah containing exegesis and retellings of biblical stories. According to Jewish Encyclopedia it was composed in Italy shortly after 830. Scholars unanimously agree that Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer is a work of the 8th or 9th century.

¹⁵ “The Bible does not mention Lot’s wife by name, but the Rabbis referred to her as “Idit” (*Tanhuma* [ed. Buber], *Vayera* 8).”

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/lots-wife-midrash-and-aggadah>

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Shor¹⁶. This idea must have been suggested by some grotesque salt-rock formation in the vicinity of the Dead Sea. The pre-Christian book, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (10:4), says, “A pillar of salt stands as a memorial to an unbelieving soul”; and Josephus (*Ant.* 1.203) claims to have seen it in his day. The origin of the salt tradition must lie in the presence of Mount Sodom (Jebel Usdum), the base of which is a ridge of rock salt that extends for about five miles (8 km.). The salt, too, may have a symbolic function; in the ancient Near East, a site was strewn with salt as a mark of eternal desolation in punishment for disloyalty and a breach of a treaty (e.g., *Judg.* 9:45).

- **ALTER...** AS has often been observed, this tale looks doubly archaic, incorporating both an etiological story about a gynomorphic [sic] rock formation in the Dead Sea region and an old mythic motif (as in the story of Orpheus and Euridyce) of a taboo against looking back in fleeing from a place of doom. But the blighted looking of Lot’s wife is antithetically integrated with the “looking out” (a different verb) of Abraham in the next two verses over the scene of destruction from his safe vantage on the heights of Hebron.
- **FOX...** An old folklore motif of what happens when humans see God (or his actions), made popular by the many mineral pillars in the region around the Dead Sea.
- **RABBEINU BAHYA...** ...The reason Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt may have had to do with the power of the fire [which dehydrated all fluids and left only solids which endure like salt? Ed.] When we find Moses refer to this event in *Deut.* 29:22 where he credits “God” with having turned that area into uninhabitable sulfur and salt, something completely burned, he refers to the agent of God who performed this as אפר והמתו. The fact that he first mentioned “God,” and then “אפר” and “המתו,” indicates that these were the names of the respective angels who had carried out this destruction.
- **RABBEINU BAHYA...** Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra wrote that the word ותהי in our verse refers to the “earth.” In other words, the earth beneath her turned into a pillar of salt, not she herself. Our sages interpret *vatehi* that Lot’s wife turned into salt herself. The Midrash relates that a poor person came to her door to borrow salt and she refused to give any, and was therefore punished measure for measure: by salt she has sinned and with a pillar of salt she was punished. (*Genesis Rabbah* 50:4)
- **RADAK...** Lot’s wife who had been walking behind him turned around, seeing that she had little faith in such miracles as she had been warned would occur; This, in spite of the fact that she had personally overheard the angel warning Lot that no one was to turn around on pain of their becoming a victim of this destruction. Even though salt has not been mentioned as having been part of the lethal rain, the Torah speaking of sulfur and fire, it appears that the people themselves were turned into pillars composed partly of sulfur and partly of salt. We have proof of this in *Deut.* 29:22 when Moses describes the valley as it appeared in his time. The Israelites had not yet seen it, never having set foot in the land of Canaan as yet.
- **RADAK...** a ruin resembling a castle of salt which had largely disintegrated.

¹⁶ Yosef Bekhor Shor (c. 1140-?) was a French Tosafit and commentator on Torah and Psalms.

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- **TUR HAARUCH...** Nachmanides¹⁷ (on verse 17) explains that mere looking at polluted air containing all kinds of harmful ingredients transfers such harmful images to the brain and thence to the rest of the body. The effect is liable to be lethal. [The Talmud claims that if one sees the reflection of a rabid dog in the surface of waters of, say a lake, the effect is also liable to be deadly. Ed.] Nachmanides speculates that the angel causing all this destruction had taken up position between the earth and the sky. An effective medication may be to isolate oneself so that one is no longer exposed to the harmful influences either visually or through inhaling them. This would explain what happened to the wife of Lot by attributing it to natural causes, rather than assuming that God performed a miracle in order to kill her. My sainted father, the ¹⁸רא"ש, was troubled about the timing of the death of Lot's wife. From the plain meaning of the text it appears that the rain of fire and sulfur did not commence until Lot had safely reached the small town of Tzoar. This is also borne out by the description of the events in *Pirkey de Rabbi Eliezer* chapter 25. If the destruction did not commence until Lot was in Tzoar, why would his wife be punished more severely than the people in Sodom? Rabbi Yisrael answered my father by letter that there is no doubt that the destruction did not commence until Lot had reached Tzoar, and that his wife had lagged behind so that the sulfur and fire struck her. The Torah only revealed to us the reason why she had lagged behind; she was always trailing behind her husband, and the suffix מאחוריו describes that she was at all times behind him. The reason why she kept lagging behind was that she constantly looked backwards hoping that her daughters would join her. This also explains the angel saying: "do not look behind you." If correct, this means that he did not forbid her the looking behind per se, but warned her that her lagging behind due to her looking behind was liable to turn her into a victim of the destructive forces overtaking Sodom and that valley. If Nachmanides' explanation were correct, i.e. that looking at the air behind her were to cause her lethal consequences, the angel should have said: "do not look behind you so that the harmful substances will not cling to you." The fact that the angel added the words "do not stand still in the entire valley," proves conclusively that time was of the essence, not what he or she would see when turning around. Lot followed the instructions of the angel, whereas his wife did not, with fatal results to her. The Torah reveals that Lot's wife died as a result of disregarding the angel's instructions. If not for this, she would have been saved, just as her unmarried daughters were saved. The whole story may have been related by the Torah to explain what prompted Lot's daughters to sleep with him, i.e. the death of his wife.

¹⁷ Nachmanides, or RAMBAN, (1194-1270) was a Sephardic Rabbi, philosopher, physician, Kabbalist, and biblical commentator.

¹⁸ Asher ben Jehiel (1250 or 1259 – 1327) was an eminent rabbi and Talmudist best known for his abstract of Talmudic law.