The Sin of Sodom

EZEKIEL 16:49

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.

TALMUD SANHEDRIN

109a

The Sages taught: The people of Sodom became haughty due only to the excessive goodness that the Holy Blessed One bestowed upon them. And what is written concerning them?

“So for the earth, out of it comes bread, and underneath it is turned up as it were by fire. Its stones are the place of sapphires, and it has dust of gold. That path no bird of prey knows, neither has the falcon’s eye seen it. The proud beasts have not trodden it, nor has the lion passed thereby” (Job 28:5–8).

They said: Since we [have] a land from which bread comes and has the dust of gold, why do we need travelers, as they come only to take away our property? Come, let us cause the proper treatment of travelers to be forgotten from our land, as it is stated: “[God] breaks open a watercourse in a place far from inhabitants, forgotten by pedestrians, they are dried up, they have moved away from men” (Job 28:4).

109b

They had a bed on which they would lay their guests; when a guest was longer than the bed they would cut him, and when a guest was shorter than the bed they would stretch him. Eliezer, servant of Abraham, happened to come there. They said to him: Come lie on the bed. He said to them: I took a vow that since the day my mother died I do not lie on a bed…

There was a certain young woman who would take bread out to the poor people in a pitcher [so it would be hidden]. The matter was discovered. They smeared her with honey, placed her on the city wall, and the bees came and ate her. Thus it is written, “The ETERNAL said: The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great [רָבָה]” (Genesis 18:20). Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: because of the incident of the young woman [רִיבָה].

• These excerpts come from an extended Talmudic discussion (a sugya), filling an entire page, about Sodom’s sins—mostly its greed. How do the first three paragraphs above focus the discussion?

• What do you make of the rabbis’ decision to quote extensively from Job? (Assume it is a deliberate artistic choice; they could have chosen other books to make their point.)

• How does the fourth paragraph up the ante? What do you make of that?

• How is it significant that the visitor to Sodom in the fourth paragraph above is from the household of Abraham?

• This last paragraph is the end of the sugya. How does knowing this be the point on which the Talmud chooses to end reshape your understanding of the entire sugya?

1 The next verse, which the rabbis do not quote but is certainly in their minds, helps make the link from this Job passage to Sodom, which is “overturned”: “[God] puts forth [God’s] hand upon the flinty rock, overturning the mountains by the roots” (Job 28:9).

2 Sifrei Devarim 43:10 offers another version of this text, in which God explicitly declares that Sodom will be destroyed for this sin of abusing travelers.
Rabbi Yehudah says: They declared in Sodom that anyone who supports a poor or needy person with bread shall be burned to death. Pleitat*, Lot’s daughter, was married to a leading citizen of the city. She saw a poor person passing in the city street and felt grieved for him, as it says in Job, “Did I not grieve for the needy? (30:25)” What did she do? Each day, when she went out to draw water, she would put in her pitcher some of every food she had in the house, and she would feed the poor person. The people of Sodom said: How is it that this poor person is still alive? When they learned of the matter, they took her out and burned her.

*Her name can mean “Refugee” or “Remnant.”

• What does this elaboration of the Talmud’s shorter version add to the story?
• In a third version, from Bereshit Rabbah 49:6, the young woman is described as a native of Sodom. How might her identity affect the meaning of the midrash?