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**Leo Baeck College**

At the Heart of Progressive Judaism



## Parashat Vayeira

Gabriel Webber

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LEO BAECK COLLEGE  
Sternberg Centre for Judaism  
80 East End Road, Finchley N3 2SY  
Tel: 020 8349 5600 Email: [info@lbc.ac.uk](mailto:info@lbc.ac.uk)  
<http://www.lbc.ac.uk>



דְּבַר תּוֹרָה  
D'var Torah

Parashat Vayeira – Between the wolves and the angels

“The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is grave.”<sup>1</sup>

An open-ended phrase, and an open invitation to writers of midrash, who delighted in conjuring up ever more detailed and outlandish descriptions of what it is that the Sodomites and Gomorrans did which was so wrong.

One of the most ridiculous illustrations of their cruelty is the ‘mitat S’dom’, ‘the bed of Sodom’. The Sodomites, it is said, had a standard size of bed in which to offer guests hospitality; if the guest was too short, they would lop off their feet; and if the guest was too tall, they would stretch them. Another tale says that they would all willingly give money to the poor and hungry of their city – except they would mark the coins they gave, and the traders agreed not to accept them as currency, so that when the recipient eventually died of starvation, the townsfolk could take back their named coins.<sup>2</sup>

These two stories are silly in one sense, but they have a common theme: the Sodomites weren’t just behaving badly, they were going far, far out of their way to behave with the utmost possible malevolence.

They could just have refused to give alms to the poor (which would have been bad), but instead they constructed an elaborate and time-consuming scheme to humiliate them (which is truly nasty). And if a person was ‘too short’ for a bed (what does that even mean?!) they could just have let them be, instead of gratuitously deforming them.

And so it was that an important prohibition in Jewish law, ‘middat S’dom’, ‘behaviour characteristic of Sodom’, was born.

A person behaving in the manner of the people of Sodom will exercise a right that they technically have, not because exercising it will be of any benefit to them, but for the sole reason of inconveniencing or spiting someone else.

Rabba gave the example of three brothers who inherited their father’s land and squabbled over how to divide it. One of the brothers already owned some adjacent land and so, quite reasonably, wanted his new plot to join it. The rabbis concluded that, all other things being equal – if the other plots of land are just as valuable, and if neither of the other inheritors has any particular reason to want one piece rather than another – they are compelled to comply with their brother’s request, because to insist otherwise would make them as bad as the Sodomites.<sup>3</sup>

Other examples include building a wall that needlessly blocks out a neighbour’s sunlight; a tenant who persists on paying rent in grain even though their landlord wants cash and they could easily sell their grain to get some; and even a squatter who occupies an empty building and doesn’t harm the owner’s interests.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, Aharon Barak, chief justice of Israel in the 2000s, has used the principle to bring reality into human relationships: “It allows the law to bridge the gap between the needs of the individual and the needs of society; between individualism and community. Good faith does not assume benevolence. Good faith does not require a person not to take account of his own personal interest. Protection of one’s own interest must be done fairly and with consideration for the other party.”

So the story of Sodom and Gomorrah isn’t just about generalised, abstract wickedness dreamt up by the overactive minds of darshanim. It’s about a real-world issue that faces all of us: how to live respectfully in society; how to rub shoulders with others without being unduly abrasive.

It’s very easy to assert our rights with unthinking instinctiveness:

“I got this seat first [but I’m perfectly able to stand and you have a big bag of shopping...]”

“It’s my right of way [although I’m stuck in traffic so it kind of makes no difference to me if I let you in...]”

“No you can’t borrow my ‘phone [although I do have full battery and unlimited minutes so it won’t cost me anything...]”

The people of Sodom are an important reminder that, yes, we have rights, but even though we always want to use them, sometimes we shouldn’t. And we have Divinely-created minds and powers of judgement, and even though we don’t always want to use them, we generally should.

Balancing impact on ourselves against impact on other people is the most fundamental building-block of a civilised society.

As Aharon Barak concluded: “Person-to-person, one is not required to be an angel, but one cannot behave like a wolf. Person-to-person, one must act like a person.”<sup>5</sup>

LBC Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 18:20

<sup>2</sup>bSanhedrin 109b

<sup>3</sup>bBava Batra 12b

<sup>4</sup>bBava Batra 7a; bKetubot 103a; bBava Kamma 20a

<sup>5</sup>Roker v Salomon CA 6339/97 (1997)