



**SERMON VAYEIRA:
THE FORGOTTEN MRS LOT**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 23 October 2021
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue

- 1 Dickens. Edison. Disraeli. Churchill. Cromwell. Elgar. Tolkein. Darwin. Babbage. Chaucer.
- 2 What do all of these have in common? Well, all ten of them are names which automatically make us think of the men who bore them, rather than the women who also bore them. Alice Elgar, Emma Darwin, Georgiana Babbage: these are names who are all-but-forgotten. While their husbands appear on banknotes and the primary school curriculum, the wives have retreated into near-obscurity.
- 3 In her book *Forgotten Wives: how women get written out of history*, the historian Ann Oakley unearths² the story of many women who were married to famous men but whose contributions have been systematically overlooked. One of the most striking examples is that of Janet Beveridge, wife of William, who wrote the Beveridge Report that led to the creation of the NHS. Except he didn't write it – at least, not single-handedly. “The 200,000 words of the Report,” Oakley observes, “were full of technical details, and would have made tedious and unimpressive reading were it not for Janet’s intervention. Without her influence, the proposals would never have included the grand vision of a new social order, which the public found so attractive.”³



- 4 There are countless other examples, which, together, led Oakley to ask the first of her two key questions: “What might he have achieved without her?”⁴ Were it not for the input of the wife, the support of the wife, even, indeed, the unpaid household labour of the wife, would the husband have been able to do the great works for which he became celebrated?
- 5 So why, then, are women so often erased from the record? Oakley identifies the root cause as “the masculinity of the professional historian”, ruthlessly focussed on “the nation-state, war, empire, conquest, lineage”. The treasure trove of every historian is the archive, but archives, she says, are “virgin territory, and, as such, permanently susceptible to rape”.⁵
- 6 There is an invisible woman in our parashah this week. She is, of course, Lot’s wife. Like ‘Tolkein’s wife’, we don’t even know her name. We don’t know what she looked like. In fact, the only thing we know about her is – go on – that she was turned into a pillar of salt.
- 7 But was she?
- 8 It turns out, the picture isn’t nearly as clear-cut as we were all brought up to think. The actual verse reads: וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתְּהִי נְצִיב מֶלַח, invariably translated as, “And his wife looked behind her, and she became a pillar of salt.”⁶
- 9 But Hebrew, as we know, is a gendered language. That means that there is no word “it”; the only singular pronouns are “he” and “she”. We all assume that the “she” of “she became a pillar of salt” refers to Mrs Lot. But not every reader has reached that conclusion. Chizkuni, a rabbi and



biblical commentator in 13th-century France, thinks that “she” refers not to Mrs Lot but to הארץ, the land,⁷ itself a feminine noun.

- 10 This would also help us to understand the word נציב, universally translated here as “pillar”, in a more conventional sense. Everywhere else in the Hebrew Bible – everywhere else – it means “fort” or “garrison”. So too, here, we would expect it to refer to a building or collection of buildings rather than to a person. Lot’s wife looked back, and saw that the city of Sodom had been turned to salt.⁸
- 11 This significantly changes the ending of the story. It means that Lot’s wife wasn’t punished for looking back. We’ve been misjudging her all these years.
- 12 For some modern readers, this revelation is just a step too far. The idea of Lot’s wife as the baddie, the villain, the disobedient woman who needed to be disciplined, is too deeply-embedded in the mind. Rabbi Jason Strauss accepts that she wasn’t turned to a pillar of salt, but still condemns her for having no empathy for those who perished in Sodom, but rather she cared “only about her inability to return to her comfortable, cosmopolitan life”.⁹ Similarly, Rabbi Ahron Benmergui, observing that she turned round to gaze upon the damage to the physical structure of the city, writes: “She wasn’t bothered by the death. She cared more about the coins jingling in her purse than the suffering of the people.”¹⁰
- 13 These two interpretations are, I am afraid, nothing but examples of ingrained misogyny. Once we accept, as both of these rabbis did, that Lot’s wife was not punished by God with such a ghastly transformation, where is the evidence that she did anything sinful at all? Why is there a



need to pin some act of wrongdoing on her? It seems to be just reflexive: she's the woman, she must have done something wrong, let's come up with ever-more-contrived guesses for what it might have been.

- 14 True, she vanished from the narrative after this point. No doubt that reinforced the traditional reading that she became a pillar of salt... if she didn't become a pillar of salt then where is she? Why isn't she recorded as having travelled on with Lot and the two daughters?
- 15 Rabbi Yehudah Sarna comes up with a convincing answer. "Lot's wife's gaze was not motivated by mischievous curiosity, but by concern and hope. Motherly and tender. Lot had other sons and daughters who remained in the city – we know this from midrashim – and his wife, the inconsolable mother of the children who remained in the city, chooses to remain nearby, despite her husband's fear. Here, Lot is the one morally unfit. He runs up to a cave to drink himself out of his misery. His wife, however, waits for the four toasted cities to cool down before she can begin to turn over the salted rubble of her old home."¹¹
- 16 Therefore we see that Lot's wife is the one who stuck by her children, or at least she stuck by the slim chance that they were still alive. Far from being uncaring, as Rabbis Strauss and Benmergui claim, she was the only one who cared. And she got written out of the Torah as a consequence of her choice.
- 17 This leads us back to the second of Ann Oakley's two questions about forgotten wives. The first, we recall, was: "What might he have achieved without her?" The second was: "What could she have done without him to cater for?"¹²



- 18 Lot's wife got to experience a life without him to cater for. Her absence from the rest of the biblical narrative attests to the fact that they never reconciled. This was the moment at which they went their separate ways, or rather, at which she found the courage to leave her husband – who was, truly, a nasty piece of work, prostituting his daughters¹³ and raising no objections to his neighbours being wiped out.¹⁴
- 19 Ann Oakley closed her book by saying: “Every time you research and write about someone who is thought of as minor and not particularly successful, they become much less minor and much more successful. This is only one reason why wifhood should be taken seriously.”
- 20 We're very close to the start of the Torah, and at its beginning comes story after story in the Book of Genesis. Let us think closely about every minor character who makes a brief cameo appearance. Every woman described only as the wife of so-and-so. Let us ask why they did not gain a more significant place in the tales we read, and what they may have achieved outside the four corners of the parchment. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.

GKW 23.10.21

¹ Genesis 19:15-29

² Ann Oakley. *Forgotten Wives: how women get written out of history* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

³ Ibid: 161.

⁴ Ibid: 191.

⁵ Ibid: 177.

⁶ Genesis 19:26

⁷ Chizkuni ad loc. See also Rabbeinu Bachya and Ralbag, both ad loc.

⁸ Yehudah Sarna. “The salt saga: Lot's wife or Sodom itself?”, *Nachalah: Journal for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* 1 (1999), 73-82: 81.



⁹ Jason Strauss. “Moving past the salt”, Doreish v’Nafshi (2020): <<https://strausstorah.wordpress.com/2020/11/06/moving-past-the-salt-parshat-vayeira-2020/>>

¹⁰ Ahron Benmergui. “Lot’s wife lives” (2018): <<https://images.shulcloud.com/3195/uploads/DERASHOT/01BEREISHIT/04VAYERA5779TASS.pdf>>

¹¹ Sarna, *ibid*: 83. The midrash is Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 25.

¹² Oakley, *ibid*: 191.

¹³ Genesis 19:8

¹⁴ Oakley, *ibid*: 199.