

*Ed. Note: The following article was originally published in November 2020.*

### LOT'S WIFE WAS NEVER SALT (AND WHY THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE GREATNESS OF ABRAHAM)

*Mark Glass is the rabbi of Congregation BIAV in Overland Park, KS.*

#### I.

It is one of the best-known biblical stories. As Lot and his family are fleeing Sodom, his wife, ignoring the instructions of the angels, looks back and is turned to salt ([Genesis 19:26](#)). As it is a simple story found within a *parashah* with other narratives that demand far more attention – [the Akedah, for example](#) – it is easy enough to gloss over. “Listen to what others tell you, or else” seems to be its core message.

But take one step back to assess the narrative, and cracks start to emerge. For starters, while Lot’s wife’s transformation is typically understood as a punishment, it is difficult to identify her crime. True, she violates the angels’ command, “Do not look behind you” ([v. 17](#)), but her punishment seems an extreme reaction, particularly when we notice that Lot, too, ignores the angels by tarrying in the

city ([vv. 15–16](#)), yet faces no punishment. Indeed, just a few verses later, he receives a reward: a city is saved so that it can become his future home ([vv. 18–21](#)).

And even if we ignore this disparity between Lot’s treatment and his wife’s and accept that she deserves punishment while he does not, the punishment itself is uncharacteristic. Nowhere else in the Torah does God punish via transfiguration. God never threatens to turn an insolent people into stone; no enemy is ever miraculously defeated by being transformed into sheep. Lot’s wife alone suffers this unique fate.

The story demands reassessment. Thus, [Radak](#) argues that Lot’s wife is not singled out to be transformed into salt as a punishment per se, but instead is overrun by the destruction sweeping the city. Given that God is raining sulfurous fire upon the land ([v. 24](#)) and Lot himself expresses his fear that he cannot outrun the storm ([v. 19](#)), it makes sense that, should one member of Lot’s party stop to look back one last time, it would slow that person down long enough to suffer the same fate as Sodom’s other inhabitants. Radak’s comments solve some of the above problems. Lot’s wife does not turn to salt as a supernatural punishment for

ignoring a divine command, but as a repercussion of her lack of faith in the angels' words. Lot's wife's death is simply the consequence of her own slowing down.

But a far more fascinating interpretation of the story is offered by [Hizkuni](#) (R. Hezekiah b. Manoah, 1250–1310, France). His comment not only changes the entire narrative but also shifts its focus and leads to a deeply disturbing conclusion given the continuation of the story. Nonetheless, it is a comment from which we can learn plenty.

## II.

After quoting Rashi's explanation of the episode, Hizkuni offers an additional understanding, rooted in the ambiguity of verses [25–26](#), which state: "He annihilated those cities and the entire Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground. Lot's wife looked back *va-tehi* a pillar of salt." Given that Lot's wife is the most recent subject of the sentence, our instinct is to translate *va-tehi* as "and she became." Yet Hizkuni applies it, instead, to the subject of the previous verse, the cities of the Plain:

Alternatively, "Lot's wife looked back and *the entire land* had become a pillar of salt." As is found [in [Deuteronomy 29:22](#)] "all its soil devastated by sulfur and salt."

Hizkuni bases his understanding on Moshe's warning to the people that should they violate the will of God, they will suffer the same fate as Sodom:

And later generations will ask – the children who succeed you, and foreigners who come from distant lands and see the plagues and diseases that the LORD has inflicted upon that land, 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 – all nations will ask, "Why did the LORD do thus to this land? Wherefore that awful wrath?" ([Deuteronomy. 29:21–23](#))

Hizkuni's application of Moshe's threat, then, changes the entire way we understand the story. Going further than Radak, Hizkuni's understanding leaves us with Lot's wife still alive! The narrative is not recorded to illustrate a punishment, but to provide us with a dramatic scene in which to encounter the destruction. Rather than viewing the destruction of Sodom from a distance as dispassionate readers, we see it through Lot's wife's eyes: she looks back briefly and sees her hometown destroyed.

Indeed, Yehuda Sarna – in an article that sparked my thoughts on this topic – suggests that the word *netziv* in verse 26, typically translated as "pillar," may also be translated as "garrison" based on the word's occurrence in Chronicles. In his words, "she is met with the image of a cold, menacing, eternally

desolate stare of city walls covered in (or composed of) salt.”<sup>1</sup>

As radical as this understanding may seem – as much as it runs counter to the story we have always known – it adds far greater depth to the narrative. But not just because it adds an emotive thrust to the episode. It also allows us to see Lot’s wife as a piece within the broader narrative being told within the Torah’s verses. Because in the next three verses, as we shall see, the Torah takes a detour from the story of Lot to turn to Abraham once again. And thus Lot’s wife becomes a foil for Abraham, so that we can gain a richer insight into both of their personalities.

### III.

Chapter 19 has a curious feature. The entire chapter – all 38 verses – are about Lot, his escape, and Sodom’s destruction, save the three verses immediately following Lot’s wife looking back, in which the narrative abruptly switches to Abraham:

Next morning, Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the LORD, and, looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln. Thus it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain and annihilated the cities

where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval. ([vv. 27–29](#))

This abrupt switch of focus is explained by verse 29. The Torah underscores that Lot was not saved due to his own merit but due to Abraham’s. Yet, if this were the sole reason for the interruption, there would be no need for verses 27 and 28. The Torah could just add a parenthetical comment that Lot was saved because of Abraham. Why must the Torah interrupt the narrative to show us Abraham looking down at Sodom’s destruction?

For Zvi Grumet, these verses help us understand Abraham’s state of mind. The last time we encountered Abraham was during his negotiation with God to spare Sodom. Though we have learned Sodom’s fate, Abraham has not. God never told him that even ten righteous people were not to be found. Abraham has gone to sleep that night, says Grumet, believing he has saved Sodom. Verses 27 and 28, then, allow us to view Abraham’s reaction. This is when he learns his begging and bartering with God has failed. He also has no knowledge that Lot has been saved. “The morning after his valiant effort,” Grumet writes, “he wakes to the stench of an entire section of his domain incinerated.”<sup>2</sup> This is a dark moment for Abraham.

But these verses also contrast Abraham with Lot’s

---

<sup>1</sup> Yehuda Sarna, “The Salt Saga: Lot’s Wife or Sodom Itself,” *Nahalah: The Yeshiva University Journal for the Study of Bible* (1999): 75–84, quote from 81.

<sup>2</sup> Zvi Grumet, *Genesis: From Creation to Covenant* (Maggid Books, 2017), 214.

wife. If we adopt Hizkuni's view, verses 26–28 provide us with two figures both looking at the same scene before them, yet drawn to different things. Lot's wife is drawn to the sulfur and salt, while Abraham is drawn to the smoke rising from the land. This is not just a temporal distinction. It is not simply that Lot's wife witnesses the sulfur raining down in the moment, while Abraham seeks the smokey aftermath. It is that each is drawn to a very different aspect of the destruction.

That God should destroy Sodom with sulfur and salt is important. It suggests a specific tactic with a history in the ancient world: to destroy the economic success of a region. Sodom, the Torah has taught earlier, is the most beautiful region in the land, "like the garden of the LORD" ([Genesis 13:10](#)) – indeed, that is what draws Lot to live there. While sulfur and salt will undoubtedly destroy people, too, its specific intent is to damage the land itself. A land sown with salt cannot produce vegetation. Sodom is not just destroyed for a brief period of time; it is destroyed forever. No one will want to settle in an uninhabitable place.

In the moment that Lot's wife looks back – during the destruction of her hometown – she is drawn to the sulfur and salt coming to devastate her town's growth. She is consumed by its lushness fading away, its economy dissipating forever. Never again will Sodom sprout forth what it has in the past. In the words of Hizkuni, she fixates on *kol ha-aretz*, "the entire land." Sodom's soil is worthless. It will cease to be a center of growth and wealth.

Yet Abraham notices something different. He is drawn to the fire. The smoke. It is an image that evokes a more blatant vision of death. His concern is not for the flora that gave Sodom its glory, but for the people he tried desperately – in vain, as he has just learned – to save, despite being told they were evil. Despite having no reason to either love or care for them.

Lot's wife does not see her neighbors dying. She does not care for their screams. All she sees is a rich land being destroyed. Only Abraham notices the charred remains of Sodom's inhabitants. Hizkuni's understanding may spare Lot's wife's life, but it leaves alive a disturbingly callous person.

#### IV.

In truth, the idea that Lot's wife has no care for other humans is hardly alien. [Rashi's](#) explanation (quoting [Genesis Rabbah 50:4](#)) as to why she deserved to be punished by being transformed into salt highlights her selfishness: she was unwilling to offer even salt to guests. And the greatest indication as to what *Hazal* saw as Sodom's ultimate crime is found in the Mishnah:

There are four types of character. One who says "what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours" is a typical person. Yet there are those who say that such a person is a Sodomite. ([Avot 5:10](#))

Contrary to the English language, *Hazal* saw the

great sin of Sodom, the definition of Sodomy, as selfishness. A refusal to share with another. And though, at first glance, such an attitude does not seem so destructive – indeed, the Mishnah itself suggests it is the disposition of most people – there are dangers to such a mentality. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has diagnosed the notion that individuals may do broadly as they please with no responsibility to the wider population as the root cause of many of contemporary society’s ills. Defining this notion as what he terms “cultural climate change,” Lord Sacks devotes his latest work, *Morality*, to an extended analysis of this problem:

Divisive politics, inequitable economics, the loss of openness in universities, and the growth of depression and drug abuse are the result of what I call cultural climate change. They are the long-term consequences of the unprecedented experiment embarked on throughout the West a half-century ago: the move from “We” to “I.”

All countries and cultures have three basic institutions. ... [The third] is the moral system, which is the voice of society within the self; the “We” within the “I”; the common good that limits and directs our pursuit of private gain. It is the voice that says No to the individual “Me” for the sake of the collective “Us.” Some call it

conscience. Freud called it the superego. Others speak of it as custom and tradition. Yet others call it natural law. Many people in the West speak of it as the will and word of God.<sup>3</sup>

Lot’s wife is the ultimate Sodomite. She never sees the “We,” but only the “I.” And so, when God rains destruction upon her town, she does not care about the people, because that was not the mentality of Sodom. Only Sodom losing its lushness matters. Only those parts of the town that benefited her matter, either as the source of her own wealth or providing her with enjoyment. This is what Abraham stands against. The Abraham from whom the obligation of *hesed* is learned.

The Torah interrupts the narrative of Lot’s escape from Sodom immediately after Lot’s wife looks back to contrast her focus with Abraham’s. To underscore, emphasize, and highlight the abhorrence of her mentality. And to provide us with the correct model for our own lives: Abraham, sensitive even to the loss of those God saw as meritless.

## V.

With Lot’s wife still alive, the narrative’s already disturbing conclusion becomes darker still. Read traditionally, with Lot’s wife dead, the story of Lot’s daughters’ decision to conceive through him is already tough to read. But read with Hizkuni’s comment, Lot’s wife is still alive. Either she

---

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, [\*Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times\*](#) (Basic Books, 2020), 11.

abandoned her family upon her town's destruction, or she is with them in the cave. (That [verse 30](#) only mentions Lot and his daughters need not imply her absence. Not only does she go unmentioned in scenes earlier in the narrative, but it is a common enough feature of biblical narratives for characters not taking center-stage to go unmentioned, particularly when they are women and children. [Genesis 3:24](#), for example, only describes Adam being driven out of Eden, not Hava, despite the fact that she is obviously exiled with him.)

But, with Lot's wife in the cave, how can she allow her daughters to go through with their plan? If she is the ultimate expression of Sodom, then her callousness is not so surprising. Why should she care about her daughters? Why worry for her husband? Why concern herself with the future of humanity? That would reflect a concern for other people. It does not impact her. After all, we know her daughters' wellbeing counts for naught in her eyes. Given she offered no protest when her husband offered them to be raped by a mob, why would this bother her?

It may be one the best-known and simplest biblical stories, but the assumption that Lot's wife is turned to salt leads us to rarely investigate the alternative narrative path. But when we do so, it leads to a disturbing, yet important realization, and a message particularly relevant for our times. That Sodom's selfishness was the antithesis of Abraham – and that it is upon us to follow his path and not hers.

---

*Ed. Note: The following article was originally published in September 2020.*

## THE BIRTHPLACE OF INFERTILITY

*Yael Leibowitz has her Master's degree in Judaic Studies and is currently teaching at Matan Women's Institute for Torah Learning.*

Five days after the birth of her daughter, she hemorrhaged, on the floor of her bedroom. But it was 2011, and she lived in New York, so as she faded in and out of consciousness she was rushed to a local hospital where the emergency room staff wasted no time hooking her up to machines and getting her bleeding under control. So, she lived.

She was terrified as it was happening. Mostly that her newborn would go hungry because she hadn't yet taken a bottle. She insisted, irrationally, that her husband bring the baby with them to the emergency room. In some hazy picture in her dark and wild imagination, she figured that even if she were comatose, they could put the baby to her body to feed.

When she was back home, watching her two older sons sleep, she succumbed to the immensity of what she was feeling, and she cried thinking about what could have been. But more than anything, she cried for all the women throughout time and throughout the world, whose stories didn't end like hers. She cried for her matriarch Rachel, and she cried for the woman in a remote village somewhere, who lived too far from a hospital, so five days after the birth of

her daughter, bled out on the floor of her hut. She cried for that now-hungry baby.

As the tears fell, her mind glided back in time to a brightly lit room, whose soft music and idyllic photos were, for the most part, ineffectual. It was the familiar mix of emotions that transported her; the coalescence of vulnerability and gratitude, and the swelling of her heart for women she had never met.

The infertility clinic, they were told, was one of the best in the country. Plus, there was ample parking, which meant one less factor to consider on those rushed winter mornings when she sped post-ultrasound to work. She remembers that particular morning. She remembers joking around with the lab technician she had become friendly with as she passed by his window, and she remembers feeling pretty sure in those moments, that interacting with kind people was more calming to her than any of the techniques the waiting room pamphlets advised. She pulled the sides of her puffer vest close as she crossed her arms, and she remembers laughing at herself for neurotically trying to find just the right amount of pressure with which to hold the test tube in her hand. Not too tightly in case it's fragile, but not too loosely or it might slip through her fingers. She wondered for a moment if there were a guy somewhere whose job it is to come up with apparatus for medical procedures based solely on their symbolic value. If so, she thought, humoring herself, he nailed it with glass test tubes for aspiring parents.

Her husband had to be overseas for work, so as she offered a fleeting, anxious smile to the couple that chose the chairs next to her, she steeled herself for the loneliness she assumed would surge. But as she looked down at the vial that held within it the potential for human life and saw the writing on the sticker that encircled it, everything stopped. The swirl around her, the ringing phones, the hushed chatter, the magazine pages – stilled. And she became excruciatingly aware, in that moment, of her uniquely modern ability to exploit medicine's advances. For thousands of years, she knew, women tried desperately to cajole their bodies into obeying them. Fragments of amulets, incantations, and ritual texts unearthed from the ancient world attest that humanity has always tried to control the precarious progression from conception to birth. For thousands of years women ached. They begged their gods, they consulted their necromancers and their witch doctors, and they used every means at their disposal to break through their uterus's refusal to accommodate life. And there she was, she realized, sitting in a waiting room, holding in her hand scientific breakthrough.

She thought in those moments of the *Apkallu* figures depicted in Mesopotamian mythology, the semi-divine beings that revealed the secrets of cultural and technological progress to mankind. Left to its own devices, the ancients believed, humanity would be devoid of ingenuity. But the ancient texts she favored had a different take. The Book of Genesis told of Yaval who pioneered animal husbandry, Yuval who devised wind instruments,

and Tuval-Cain who developed enhanced agricultural tools. Innovators, she thought, because they heeded the injunction, not just to “fill the earth” but to “master it.” Genesis spoke of a God that not only created humans in His image but endowed them with the ability to probe the secrets of His infinitely complex universe. He enjoined humanity, she thought, as she pictured her doctor’s faces, to be, like Him, creative.

\*\*\*\*

Growing up on the Bible, meant growing up on stories of barren women. They were as familiar to her as the Garden of Eden and Noah’s Ark, despite the unfamiliarity of the world that produced them. Ancient subsistence living measured the worth of an individual, in large part, by the degree to which he or she contributed to the group’s ability to survive. Male valiance in battle and productivity in the fields, corresponded to the female ability to produce future soldiers and laborers. Naturally, the stories of the Bible reflected the realities of its world, gendered roles and all. But what she loved was how, in carving out space for the experiences of the women that lined its pages, the Bible allowed them to transcend their trappings and communicate timeless truths. And she thought about those truths that morning. She thought about Sarah’s laughter at the angel’s pronouncement of her impending pregnancy, and she understood that sometimes, when heartbreak is at stake, faith and skepticism exert equal pull. She thought about the nerve it took Hannah to march up to the male-dominated sanctuary in Shiloh, and how in fulfilling her appeals for a child, God was also confirming Hannah’s conviction that no one is

denied the privilege of prayer. She thought about the fact that Ruth chose compassion as the motivating force behind every choice she made, and how when her baby was finally born, she placed him in Naomi’s empty arms knowing that the warmth generated by new life can crack open the most frozen of hearts, and that its light, diffused, is not diminished. She thought of Rachel’s persistence, and of Leah’s ambition, and she wondered how women, raised in a home that taught them to expect nothing, found the inner strength to demand of man and of God. The stories enveloped her.

And she understood that this preoccupation with the fertility of people and the land was not unique to the Bible. The unpredictability of the ancient world, with its high infant and maternal mortality rates, flash floods that could decimate the annual crop, or drought that could desiccate it, meant that people of the Bible’s world lived with an acute cognizance of that razor fine line between fertility and death. But as she processed the multitude of analogous stories, what struck her was the fact that all the women, whose struggles were so evocatively depicted, ultimately bore children. The narratives, misleadingly labeled “barren women of the Bible,” were in fact preludes to extended narratives about the births of individuals that typically went on to become central figures in Israelite history. Forefathers, prophets, warriors. Countless biblical greats shared that common personal history. So even as she connected to the rawness of the stories, and she stroked that rawness, beneath the scaffolded layers of meaning characteristic of the Bible, there

had to be something more profound, more encompassing.

\*\*\*\*

All great cultures have their heroes. All great cultures speak of individuals, real or imagined, that embody what the culture stands for. And whether that status is earned or stumbled upon, once it is ratified, a culture sees in its heroes everything it wants to see in its collective self. Heroes, ancestors, forebears, are turned to by the cultures that venerate them, not just for what they accomplished, but for what they represent. They become, over time, microcosms of the macro; paradigmatic in the most literal sense of the word. The Bible, in a way that was exceptional for its time, did not deify its heroes and it did not portray them as beacons of perfection. The heroes of the Bible were relevant specifically because they were human. They were complicated, and they were flawed, and they made mistakes that blemished their legacies. But none of that changed the fact that the stories about Israel's heroes were preserved and transmitted because, like all heroes, they projected in their lives, and in the choices they made, matters that were at the forefront of Israel's consciousness.

For the fledgling nation of Israel, the metaphorical significance of a miraculous birth, following a protracted period of barrenness, was profoundly resonant. Israel, like so many of its heroes, emerged onto the world scene in a stunning manner. God had made promises to Abraham, about his descendants emerging from servitude, and returning as a people to their homeland. But after

centuries in Egypt, with the shadows of inherited memory fading by the day, those promises, for the few who even recalled them, seemed dubious. The birth of Israel seemed impossible. But just like its heroes, the Nation of Israel was born. And like its heroes, the fact that it emerged in the face of impossible odds points to the very source of its endurance- the fine interplay between divine promises and human initiative. Like their heroes, the people of Israel bore the responsibility connoted in a miraculous birth.

And just like the birth of its heroes, the Birth of Israel was facilitated by irrepressible women.

It didn't begin with the Ten Plagues. The Birth of Israel began with an inadvertent sisterhood. It began with midwives refusing to allow tyranny to undermine their craft, and choosing to usher in new life, at the risk of their own. It began with a woman who tried desperately to save her child from a cruel dictator's infanticidal decree, and it began when the daughter of that dictator rejected the hatred she was raised on, and chose to love her enemy's child. The women of Exodus chose, instinctively, to believe in life. She had always wondered as she read the account of Moses' mother placing him in a basket on the Nile, how many other mothers had done the same? When Pharaoh's daughter assumed correctly that her foundling was Hebrew, was that because the riverbank was filled with similar baskets? Similar attempts to delay the inevitable? She wondered. And when Moses' sister had the gall to approach Pharaoh's daughter and suggest she fetch a wet

nurse from among the Hebrews, how many women, she remembered thinking every time she read that exchange, were left lactating, anguished, with no mouth to feed?

The impossibility of birth was being whispered all around them. They chose not to listen. And because of that, there was life. Waters broke and Israel emerged.

She thought that morning about the women of Exodus. She thought of their tenacity, and their morality, and of their role in one of the grandest metaphors in history. She thought about how the aggregate of all the stories that had escorted her emotionally those last few months, was ultimately, the story of her people. It was the story of birth and loss, and obstinacy, and faith. It was the story of defying probabilities, of refusing to despair, and of trying to remain decent in a sometimes-indecent world.

\*\*\*\*

In ancient times, women would pray to Ishtar the goddess of fertility, and to mother goddesses believed to be present at birth. That night, as her tears fell, she offered up prayers to her God. She watched her children sleep, and she traveled back and forth among her memories and her thought processes, and she prayed in thanks, and in hope. Thanks for the abundance she did not take for granted, and hope for those suffering from emptiness, in any form. Thanks to God for inviting humanity to partner with Him in divine ventures and hope for people everywhere waiting on a medical miracle. Thanks that like their heroes, after

their miraculous birth, her people went on to stimulate moral consciousness in an ever-changing world, and hope that like their heroes, they would always be inclined to learn from past mistakes. Thanks that the world that she lived in, like the world of the Bible, was still filled with individuals who chose to push the limits of what others believed they were capable, and hope that the good ones never back down.

Managing Editor:

**Yisroel Ben-Porat**

Editors:

**David Fried**

**David Kolmar**

**Yosef Lindell**

**Lea New Minkowitz**

**Tzvi Sinensky**

**Miriam Zami**

Consulting Editors:

**Miriam Krupka Berger**

**Elli Fischer**

**Miriam Gedwiser**

**Chaim Saiman**

**Jeffrey Saks**

**Jacob J. Schacter**

**Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld**

**Shlomo Zuckier**

Please contact us at [editors@thelehrhaus.com](mailto:editors@thelehrhaus.com)