Lesson 7: Exploring the Rabbinic Sodom

Time needed: 60 minutes

Recommended age range: Adults

Objective: To understand the "sin" of Sodom in the rabbinic tradition

Materials: Copies of the text, one per each pair of participants

The rabbis took the story of Sodom and expanded its meaning in remarkable directions that are relevant to our contemporary reality. Not only is Sodom a foil to Abraham and Sarah's open tent, but in the hands of the rabbis, a symbol of profound moral failure in rejecting the humanity of the "other."

Lesson 7, Text Study 1

The Sodomite Bed or *Mitat Sedom*

Sanhedrin 109b

They had beds [in Sodom] upon which travelers slept. If he [the guest] was too long, they shortened him [by lopping off his feet]; if too short, they stretched him out. Eliezer, Abraham's servant, happened to go there. They said to him, Arise and sleep on the bed! He replied, "I vowed since the day of my mother's death not to sleep in a bed."

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף קט עמוד ב

הויא להו פורייתא דהוו מגני עלה אורחין, כי מאריך - גייזי ליה, כי גוץ - מתחין ליה. אליעזר עבד אברהם אקלע להתם, אמרו ליה: קום גני אפוריא. אמר להון: נדרא נדרי, מן יומא דמיתת אמא - לא גנינא אפוריא. כי הוה מתרמי להו עניא יהבו ליה כל חד וחד דינרא, וכתיב שמיה עליה, וריפתא לא הוו ממטי ליה. כי הוה מית - אתי כל חד וחד שקיל דידיה

Discussion Questions:

1. For a weary traveler, what does a bed represent? What does it mean to turn a bed into a torture device?
2. For the contemporary reader, beds are for more than just sleep. What does the sexual connotation of beds add to this interpretation?
3. What happens to someone who is neither too tall nor too short for the bed? What does that say about Sodom's particular sins? Who is welcome and who isn't?
4. What contemporary counterparts to the Sodomite Bed can you think of?
5. What do you make of Eliezer's connection for his deceased mother, over against the disconnection of the Sodomites for the living guests in their midst? Is there a relationship to the dead that can make us fully committed to life?

Lesson 1, Text Study 2

Bad Character: ***Middat Sedom***

Brothers or partners that desire to split up their shared property, each takes his portion. If it is all equal and there is no good or bad portion of land, then they divide solely on the measures of the land. If one says, give me this portion because it is next to another field which I own, and the land is all of one quality, then we listen to him and force the other side, for refusal of such a thing is the character of Sodom...and any matter where a person benefits and his neighbor does not lose anything, the neighbor is forced to comply.

רמב"ם הלכות שכנים פרק יב הלכה א

האחין או השותפין שבאו לחלוק את השדה וליטול כל אחד חלקו אם היתה כולה שוה ואין שם מקום טוב ומקום רע אלא הכל אחד חולקין לפי המדה בלבד, ואם אמר אחד מהם תנו לי חלקי מצד זה כדי שיהא סמוך לשדה אחר שלי ויהיה הכל שדה אחת שומעין לו וכופה אותו על זה שעיכוב בדבר זה מדת סדום היא. (רמב"ם הלכות שכנים פרק ז הלכה ח) וכן כל דבר שזה נהנה בו ואין חבירו מפסיד ואין חסר כלום כופין עליו

Discussion Questions:

1. In Sodom, other people's needs are perceived as a threat and an implicit loss to me. Here the Rabbis are carrying the psychology of Sodom to another level. What do you think this adds to their portrayal of Sodom?
2. As the Torah sets up the two spaces, Abraham and Sarah's tent and the city of Sodom are perfect opposites. How does this picture of Sodom add depth to our understanding of the Abrahamic tent?
3. There are hundreds of rabbinic expositions on Sodom that focus on inhospitality, cruelty and rejection of the poor, and a mere handful even mentioning sexual excess. The early Christian fathers read Sodom as heartless rather than licentious. Only later, among early medieval Christian readers did Sodom gain its reputation as a den of sexual iniquity. In only one source, the 12th century Midrash Sehel Tov, does Jewish interpretation follow the Christian reading and actively identify the sin of Sodom as homosexual union. What does this history of interpretation offer to us? What are the implications for how we read Jewish texts that are commonly employed to condemn homosexuality?

Lesson 7, Text Study 3

We have shown that a text that has a near universal popular reputation in religious communities as an indictment and condemnation of homosexuality was read by Jewish tradition as a forceful call to generosity in the face of human need and fearless welcome in the face of human difference. Here is the interpretation of the Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, of the 13th century, that ties together our exploration of Sodom. Note especially his use of the word toeva "abomination."

רמב"ן בראשית פרק יט פסוק ה

(ה) ונדעה אותם - כוונתם לכלות את הרגל מביניהם, כדברי רבותינו (סנהדרין קט א), כי חשבו שבעבור טובת ארצם שהיא כגן ה' יבאו שם רבים, והם היו מואסי הצדקה, אבל לוט בעשרו וממונו בא אליהם, או שבקש מהם רשות או שקבלוהו לכבוד אברהם, והכתוב מעיד שזאת כוונתם, שנאמר (יחזקאל טז מט) הנה זה היה עון סדום אחותך גאון שבעת לחם ושלות השקט היה לה ולבנותיה ויד עני ואביון לא החזיקה. ומה שאמר (לעיל יג יג) רעים וחטאים לה' מאד, שהיו מכעיסים ומורדים בשלותם ובענוי האביונים, והוא שאמר (יחזקאל טז נ) ותגבהינה ותעשינה תועבה לפני ואסיר אתהן כאשר ראיתי:

ועל דעת רבותינו היו בהם כל מדות רעות, אבל נגמר דינם על אותו העון מפני שלא החזיקו יד עני ואביון, כי היו תדירים באותו עון יותר מכולם, וגם כי כל העמים עושים צדקות עם ריעיהם ועם ענייהם, לא היה בכל הגוים כסדום לאכזריות: ודע, כי משפט סדום היה למעלת ארץ ישראל, כי היא מכלל נחלת ה' ואינה סובלת אנשי תועבות, וכאשר תקיא את הגוי כלו מפני תועבותם הקדימה וקאתה את העם הזה שהיו רעים מכולם לשמים ולבריות:

Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nachman) on the verse, Genesis 19:5 "Let us know them."

Their intention was to prevent people from traveling through their territory, as our sages say (BT Sanhedrin 109a) Because they thought that since the land is beautiful, like a heavenly garden, many will come (to live there) and they despised charity. Lot, however, was wealthy, so they accepted him when he came to them or requested residence among them, and perhaps they received him out of honor to Abraham… According to our sages they (the people of Sodom) had every bad quality but their judgment was sealed on this sin because they did not strengthen the hand of the poor and downtrodden, and they were consistent in this sin more than others. As well, every other nation in the world extends kindness to neighbors and to the poor, so, [in contrast,] there was not among all the peoples any that compared to Sodom in cruelty… Know, that the judgment of Sodom is an expression of the greatness of the land of Israel, since Israel is the inheritance of God it does not suffer men of hateful deeds (*anshei toevot* from the Hebrew word *toevah*, abomination). Since the land [in the future after Israel settles it] will completely throw out people because of their abominations, it already vomited out this nation because they were more evil than any other, both to heaven and to people.

Discussion Questions:

1. In our own time, are there communities where "undesirables" are not permitted in? What dimension of Sodom's sin can we learn from Sodom's acceptance of Lot in the midst of this policy?
2. Why might people choose to live in gated communities? What is gained in making this choice? What is lost?
3. Are there ways of communicating to people that they're not welcome, without the use of guards or walls? What signals communicate to people that they are not welcome or included? What might make LGBT people feel irrelevant or invisible in Jewish communities? Conversely, what signals could be sent to make LGBT people feel more welcome?

This text study was created by Rabbi Steve Greenberg for Keshet. We encourage you to download this resource and share it with others, as long as you credit Rabbi Steve Greenberg and Keshet.