

TORAH SPARKS

SALT

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt
Dvar Parashah

Ishmael's banishment parallels Isaac's binding. Both stories tell of a cherished son nearly killed as a result of his parents following God's instructions. Both end with the son saved by God and the promise of progeny. The pattern is too deliberate to be coincidence.

But there is a third story in this sequence, the story of Lot and his daughters in Sodom. It contains the same pieces: divine messengers, endangered children, substitute sacrifice, aftermath. Yet everything comes undone. Where Hagar and Abraham's stories move from divine command to crisis to rescue to blessing, Lot's story scrambles the order entirely. The same elements appear, but assembled into nightmare rather than covenant.

Both the Ishmael and Isaac stories begin with divine speech and end with angelic intervention. Abraham rises early in the morning, obedient to the word that has summoned him. In each, a child is nearly lost, a substitute appears, and the promise of life is spoken again. The pattern holds, command, crisis, rescue, blessing, and through it the covenant renews itself, pulsing beneath each act of near-destruction.

In the story of Lot and his daughters, every element appears, but topsy-turvy. . The angels appear at the outset of the story instead of as a *deus ex machina*. The children at risk are daughters instead of sons. They risk rape rather than death. The replacement sacrifice is Sodom rather than a ram and it is offered by the angels. Instead of God opening eyes and letting the hero see, the angels blind the people of the town. Instead of God commanding the killing of the child, the angels do all they can to prevent the scenario from ever arising, trying their best not to enter Lot's house in the first place. It is on Lot's own initiative that he offers up his children.

Instead of God opening eyes to reveal provision, the angels close eyes to prevent violation. They strike the men of Sodom with blindness—**וַיַּכּוּ בְּסִטְרוֹתֵם**. The substitute sacrifice is not an animal but a city. Sodom burns in place of Lot's daughters, consumed by divine fire rather than human lust. Yet its destruction yields no blessing, only ash.

The phrase "rising early in the morning" marks the crisis moment in Abraham's stories. He rises early to obey, covenantal urgency before dawn. But when morning comes in Sodom, **וַיָּבֹאוּ**, **הַשָּׁחַר**, Lot cannot move. The angels must **seize his hand**, his wife's hand, his daughters'

hands, dragging them from the city. Where Abraham's morning signals decisive response to God's word, Lot's reveals paralysis. He negotiates even his rescue, pleading to settle in nearby Zoar. The angels become violent redeemers, forcing salvation on the reluctant.

His wife looks back and becomes מְלַח נָצִיב—a pillar of salt. This is the Torah's first use of the word מְלַח. Salt appears in Genesis only here, only once, marking a moment of looking backward toward destruction. Salt here means death. Salt is anti-fertility, anti-future, the opposite of multiplication.

But salt returns in Leviticus, transformed. When God explains the sacrificial system, every offering must be salted: “You shall not allow the salt of your God's covenant, מְלַח בְּרִית אֱלֹהֶיךָ, to cease from your grain offering.” The verb לֹא תִשָּׁבֵת, “shall not cease,” signals perpetuity. This salt must never stop. What froze Lot's wife in sterility now seals Israel into perpetual fruitfulness. In Numbers, salt becomes explicitly covenantal: בְּרִית מְלַח עוֹלָם, “a covenant of salt forever.”

The same substance. Opposite meanings. Salt outside covenant preserves nothing; salt within covenant preserves everything. Lot's wife is the anti-offering, the salt that looks back. The Temple's salt looks forward, binding past to future through divine promise.

And Lot's wife has no future. But her progeny do and it is a cursed one. After the Akeda and after Hagar's rescue, God speaks of the growth of their future nations, the prosperity of their children.

Lot receives no such speech. In a cave after Sodom's destruction, his daughters act on him, not with him. They make him drunk and lie with him, preserving seed without promise. Nations born of fear, fertility stripped of blessing. This is מִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה, measure for measure. Not only punishment but exposure. Lot offered his daughters to be violated; they violate him to continue the line. He tried to sacrifice their bodies without command; his own body is taken without consent.

Perhaps the intent of the daughters was pure. But their act remains outside the covenantal frame. When Abraham acts, God has spoken. When Hagar despairs, an angel speaks. When these daughters act, there is only silence. Their courage is human; it is not yet holy.

Lot's attempt to follow Abraham's pattern leads to disaster. He knows the gestures: hospitality, sacrifice, morning urgency, but performs them without divine voice to frame them. Lot provides a glimpse of what life adjacent to covenant looks like: gestures intact, meaning drained. He rises early, but to flee. He protects strangers, but by exposing kin. He escapes fire, but his lineage continues through violation. We never want to let our children go, to offer them up to something else. Lot sacrifices his without cause and without assurance that there

is a higher purpose.

Without that voice, we become pillars of salt. facing backward toward what was lost, frozen between what was and what might have been. With it, salt endures as covenant, binding past to promise, preserving what God multiplies. The same substance, transformed: from the residue of destruction to the taste that makes every offering endure.

THE SALTY PREFECT BY THE SEASHORE

Jonathan Lipnick

Language of the Parashah

One of the most memorable scenes in the Book of Genesis - perhaps in the entire Bible - is found in this week's parashah. Just as the cataclysmic destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah begins, Lot and his family rush out of the city to seek shelter. Perhaps having second thoughts, Lot's wife turns back for a final look at her hometown, whereupon she is punished in a very unusual manner:

וַתִּבֹּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתֵּהִי נָצִיב מֶלַח:

Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt. (Genesis 19:26)

For well over a century, tourists passing through the Dead Sea region have been taken to view a rather human-looking rock-salt pillar which they are told is "Lot's Wife." Putting aside the rather dubious matter of historical accuracy, let us focus instead on the Hebrew language of this verse. The Hebrew for "pillar of salt" is נָצִיב מֶלַח (*netziv melakh*). Most of the traditional commentators on this phrase are interested in matters related to the material itself: why was it fitting for Lot's wife to have been transformed into salt? I would like to focus on the pillar itself. The noun *netziv* comes from the root יצב YZB meaning "to stand." The word is found about a dozen times in the Bible, but this particular case is one of a kind. In every other instance, *netziv* refers to a military governor (prefect) or a garrison of troops, that is, a person or group that has been "stationed" to rule over a region. In the Hebrew Bible, this word always refers to foreigners: Philistines, Edomites, Arameans, but never Israelites. For example in we read:

וַיַּךְ יוֹנָתָן אֶת נָצִיב פְּלִשְׁתִּים אֲשֶׁר בְּגִבְעָה

"Jonathan struck down the Philistine prefect in Geba..." (1 Samuel 13:3)

Only here, in Genesis 19:26, does *netziv* mean "pillar." Why is this? There are perfectly good terms for "pillar" found throughout the Hebrew Bible: עמוד *amud* (a structural column in a building) and מצבה *matzevah* (a ritual standing stone). Let's focus on the second word, as it also comes from the root יצב YZB. A *matzevah* normally refers to a stone pillar that has deep religious significance, marking the spot where something wondrous has happened. For example, following Jacob's dream of angels ascending and descending on a celestial stairway, we read:

וַיִּשְׁלֶם יַעֲקֹב בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם מְרֹאשֹׁתָיו וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ מִצְבֵּה וַיַּצֵּק שָׁמֶן עַל-רֹאשָׁהּ:

Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. (Genesis 28:16)

Later, the monument which Jacob erects in Bethel after God's second revelation to him is also called a *matzevah*:

וַיִּצֵב יַעֲקֹב מִצְבֵּה בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר אֲתוֹ מִצְבֶּת אָבֶן וַיִּסֹּךְ עָלֶיהָ זָסֶר וַיִּצֶק עָלֶיהָ שֶׁמֶן:
 Jacob set up a pillar at the site where [God] had spoken to him, a pillar of stone, and he offered a libation on it and poured oil upon it. (Genesis 35:14)

But there is a dark side to the *matzevah* as well. It can also refer to an idolatrous pillar and is often classified together with the *bamah* and *asherah*, two notorious symbols of pagan worship:

וַיִּבְנוּ גַם-הֵמָּה לָהֶם בְּמֹת וּמִצְבוֹת וְאֲשֵׁרִים עַל כָּל-גְּבֻעָה גְבוּלָהּ וְתַחַת כָּל-עֵץ רַעֲנָן:
 They too built for themselves shrines, pillars, and sacred posts on every high hill and under every leafy tree. (1 Kings 14:23)

In Modern Hebrew, the word *matzevah* is only used to refer to one type of stone: a gravestone. This meaning is found in the Bible itself, even if it is not the primary meaning. For example, following the sudden death of Rachel in childbirth, we read:

וַיִּצֵב יַעֲקֹב מִצְבֵּה עַל-קִבְרֶתָהּ הוּא מִצְבֶּת קִבְרַת-רָחֵל עַד-הַיּוֹם:
 Over her grave Jacob set up a pillar;
 It is the pillar at Rachel's grave to this day. (Genesis 35:20)

Clearly, the word *matzevah* carries too much heavy, monumental, religious (both monotheistic and polytheistic), covenantal meaning to be used to describe the bizarre salt formations seen by the shores of the Dead Sea. Another pillar-like term was required to properly tell the story of Lot's wife. *Amud* would not have been appropriate since this refers to an architectural, weight-bearing column. And so the editors of the Sodom story in our parashah devised a new word, *netziv*, based on the same "standing" root YZB as *matzevah*. Or rather, they took an existing word that had always meant "foreign military governor" and applied it to a phenomenon that is a well known feature of the Dead Sea region: salt pillars with rather human appearances. Could this creative literary flourish constitute a subtle critique of non-Israelite military presence in the land?

Afterword: The word *netziv* might be familiar to you for two final reasons. Firstly, is also an acronym of the name Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (נפתלי צבי יהודה ברלין), one of the most famous

Lithuanian rabbis of the 19th century and the head of the Etz Hayyim Yeshiva in Volozhin (modern-day Valozhyn, Belarus). Referred to simply as “the Netziv,” he was one of the foremost representatives of the Misnagdic tradition in Eastern Europe. Secondly, you may be familiar with the Jerusalem neighborhood called *Armon HaNetziv*, literally the “Palace of the Governor.” This neighborhood is located in southeast Jerusalem, adjacent to the Haas Promenade (*tayelet*). Its official name is East Talpiot, but everyone refers to it by the name of the most impressive building in the area: Government House, the official headquarters of the High Commissioner of Palestine during the British Mandate. Today it is the headquarters of UNTSO (United Nations Truce Supervision Organization).

THE TWICE-TOLD TALE

Ilana Kurshan

Reflections on the Parashah

This week's parsha tells the story of the banishment of Hagar. Hagar, Abraham's concubine, has a son of her own, Ishmael, who is presumably just a bit older than Sarah's son Isaac. When Sarah sees Ishmael playing, she panics that he will be a threat to her own son, and insists that Abraham cast her out. Abraham, after consulting with God, reluctantly sends Hagar and Ishmael out of his home, along with some bread and water, which is hardly enough to sustain them in the wilderness. Hagar is left alone with a child she cannot feed or care for, and we, the reader, are left with a sense that we've seen this story before.

This is, in fact, the second time that Hagar finds herself alone in the wilderness. The first time she was not yet a mother, and she left her master's home of her own volition. Sarah, after encouraging her husband to try to have a child through Hagar, became jealous when Hagar conceived so easily. Sarah treated Hagar harshly, and Hagar ran away, alone and pregnant in the wilderness. There, an angel appeared to Hagar and sent her back, instructing her to submit to the harshness of her mistress and promising her that God would heed her suffering and she would bear a son. Hagar, for the first time, feels seen; she refers to God as "El Roi"—the God who sees me—and she explains this name by saying, "Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me?" (Genesis 16:13). Hagar feels that she has been given a new lease on life, and she returns to Abraham and Sarah's home hopeful in her own future and in the future of the child she is carrying inside her.

It is against this backdrop that we must understand Hagar's banishment in our parsha. Hagar, now a mother, feels that it is not just she who is being ill-treated by her mistress; her son, too, is the object of Sarah's resentment. When Abraham and Sarah send her away, it is not just her own life that is at risk, but also the life of her small child. For Hagar this experience must be all the more traumatic because she has been here before; she knows what it is like to be alone in the wilderness, an experience that comes back to her now like a recurring nightmare. God had promised to heed her suffering, but here she is, suffering again, this time with a child who is entirely dependent on her. According to the midrash, Sarah had placed an evil eye on Ishmael, and he was afflicted by fever and pain and could not walk (Genesis Rabbah 53:11). How might it feel for Hagar to be back in the very same place, unable to care for her only child in spite of God's promise, during her previous wilderness sojourn, that her offspring will be too many to count?

Hagar—though she has always been treated as a stranger in Abraham and Sarah's house, and though her name itself contains the Hebrew word for stranger, Ger—is no stranger to the wilderness experience. She knows she has been here before. When the water and bread run

out and she has no way to sustain her child, she places him under the bushes—under the sichim, a word that the midrash associates with sicha, conversation. Drawing on this linguistic parallel, the midrash suggests that Hagar places Ishmael in the very same place where the angel conversed with her last time, in the hope that God might intervene and help her now, too (Genesis Rabbah 53:13). Hagar sets her child in the bushes not as an act of desperation, but as an act of hope. She fervently desires that this time, too, an angel will intervene and help her find a way back.

Like Hagar, we sometimes find ourselves back in low places where we have been before. In those moments, we are confronted with a choice: Do we get bitter and frustrated that in spite of more hopeful times, we are back in the same place once again? Or can we draw on our past experiences to summon the strength and hope that this time, too, we will find our way out of the wilderness? After Hagar sets her son under the bushes, afraid to look upon him when he dies, an angel hears the cry of the boy and brings renewed hope to Hagar. The angel opens Hagar's eyes, and suddenly she is able to see a well of water, which she draws from to revive her son.

May we aspire, like Hagar, to draw on the rich well of our own sadnesses and traumas so as to open our eyes to a more hopeful and promising future.