

Lot's Wife / עידיִת

Biblical Text

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, and said, “Up, get out of this place, for Adonai is about to destroy the city.” But his sons in law thought he was joking. As dawn broke, the angels urged Lot on, saying, “Up, take your wife and your two remaining daughters, lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city.” Still he delayed.

So the men seized his hand, and the hands of his wife and his two daughters—in Adonai’s mercy on him—and brought them out and left them outside the city. When they had brought them outside, one said, “Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away.” But Lot said to them, “Oh no, my lord! You have been so gracious to your servant, and have already shown me so much kindness in order to save my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die. Look, that town there is near enough to flee to; it is such a little place! Let me flee there—it is such a little place—and let my life be saved.” He replied, “Very well, I will grant you this favor too, and I will not annihilate the town of which you have spoken. Hurry, flee there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there.” Hence the town came to be called Zoar. As the sun rose upon the earth and Lot entered Zoar, Adonai rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from the heavens. God 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 from behind him, and she turned into a pillar of salt.

-Genesis 19:12-26

Classical Midrash

Lot wanted the members of his household to participate in the meritorious act of hospitality, as had Abraham, and he asked his wife to bring them salt.

She responded: “Do you wish to learn this bad habit from Abraham?”

Lot’s wife then divided their house into two parts and told her husband: “If you want to receive them, do so in your part!”

She finally complied with her husband’s request, but she acted cunningly in order to remove the guests from her house. She went to her women neighbors to borrow salt.

They asked her: “Why do you need salt? Why didn’t you prepare enough beforehand?”

She answered, “I took enough for our own needs, but guests came to us and it is for them that I need salt.” In this manner all the people of Sodom knew that Lot was harboring guests. They stormed his house and demanded that he hand them over to the townspeople. Because she sinned through salt, Lot’s wife was punished by being turned into a pillar of salt.

– Genesis Rabbah 50, 51

But Lot's wife, who during the flight was continually turning round towards the city, overly curious about it, notwithstanding God's prohibition of such action, was changed into a pillar of salt.
- Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*

Since Lot's wife was a descendant of the people of Sodom, she looked back to see what ultimately would happen to her father's house. And she remains a pillar of salt until the time of the resurrection of the dead."

- Targum Neophyti Gen 19:26 (1st Cent. Palestine)

"But his wife looked back *from behind him*." We should have expected "from behind *her*." What this text really means is, "from behind *the Shekhinah*" (the indwelling presence of God). Thus when "his wife looked back from behind him," she turned her face to the destroying angel, and, as a result, she became a pillar of salt. For as long as the destroying angel does not see the face of a person, the individual is not harmed; but as soon as Lot's wife turned her face to look at the angel, she became a pillar of salt.
- Zohar (13 Cent. Spain)

Idit is named in the text

Abraham began reflecting: The kings [who came to fight with the Sodomites] fell, but the [Kings of Sodom and Gomorrah] fled. Surely they will not evade divine judgment forever! Thus it is stated: "And those who remained fled to the mountain." Perhaps you will say: "There were worthy ones among them." To this the Holy One replied, "Utter darkness waits for his treasured ones; an unfanned fire will consume them, will crush the survivor in their tent. Heaven will expose their iniquity; Earth will rise up against them. (Job 20:26). Who is this survivor? This is Lot's wife, **Idit** - עִידִית - of whom it is stated, "But his wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt."
- Midrash Tanchuma, Vayera 8

And the angels said to [Lot and his family]: Do not look behind you, for surely Shekhinah (indwelling Presence of God,) blessed be God's name, has descended in order to rain upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire. **Idit**, the wife of Lot was filled with love and compassion for her daughters, who were married in Sodom, and she looked back behind her to see if they were coming after her or not. And she saw the back of the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence), and she became a pillar of salt.
- Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 25 (7-11 Cent. Babylonia)

The angels took Lot by the hand, also his wife and his daughters and all belonging unto him, and they carried them outside of the city. And they said unto Lot: Now save your life! And he arose and fled with all belonging to him. And at that time the Lord let rain upon Sodom and Gomorrah and upon all these cities, brimstone and fire from heaven, and thus God overthrew all the cities and all the plain, and all the vegetation of the earth.

And **Idit** (עִידִית) Lot's wife, looked around to see the destruction of the city, and compassion welled up in her for her daughters that did not go along with her, who had remained in Sodom.

And as she turned backwards to see what occurred, she became a pillar of salt. That pillar is still standing in its place to this very day (עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה). The oxen which frequent that place daily lick the salt pillar until they come to the toes of its feet; and each morning, all they licked off would grow back, just to be consumed again the coming day, even to this day (עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה)

- Sefer haYashar, Vayera 29 (10-16 cent. Italy)

Idit in our Liturgy: Talmudic Origins

The Sages taught in a *baraita* a list of places where one is required to recite a blessing due to miracles that were performed there: One who sees the crossings of the Red Sea, where Israel crossed; and the crossings of the Jordan; and the crossings of the streams of Arnon; the hailstones of Elgavish on the descent of Beit Horon; the rock that Og, King of Bashan, sought to hurl upon Israel; and the rock upon which Moses sat when Joshua waged war against Amalek; **and Lot's wife**; and the wall of Jericho that was swallowed up in its place.

On all of these miracles one must give thanks and offer praise before God....

One must recite a blessing upon seeing Lot's wife, as it is stated: "But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt."

The Gemara asks: Granted, that one recites a blessing on ...the miracles; however, Lot's wife is a tragedy. Why recite a blessing on a tragedy?

The Gemara answers: One who sees that place recites:

Blessed is God, ruler of the Universe, the true Judge.

ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם, דיין האמת.

The Gemara asks: But the *baraita* teaches that for all of these, one must *give thanks and offer praise*? Why?

The Gemara answers: The language of the *baraita* should be emended and teach:

Over Lot and his wife one recites two blessings. Over his wife he recites: Blessed is God the true Judge, and on Lot he recites: Blessed is God, Ruler of the Universe, who remembers the righteous. As Rabbi Yoḥanan said: From the story of Lot it is possible to learn that even during a time of wrath of the Holy One, Blessed be God, God remembers the righteous, as it is stated: "And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when God overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt." (Genesis 19:29)

- Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 54a-b

Contemporary Midrash

The notion that watching the violent destruction of others is harmful to oneself; the concept that there are certain things at which one should not look is the antithesis of acceptable behavior in our modern society, which validates voyeurism as a ‘normal’ activity.” What effect does it have on a society when people regularly watch violence and call it entertainment?

- Judith Antonelli, *In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on the Torah*

Even the breeze is hot.

Hot, and dry.

You can feel the heat through your shoes. You can see it in the air. The sky is that sky-blue with a blue so rich and deep your eyes swim in it. Where you are standing, aside from some thin layers of silt and marl, everything is salt. Over the years salt accumulated to a layer 4.5 miles tall, now coated with deposits of eroded rocks and other minerals. The underground heat melted the salt, and the weight of the rocks on the surface creates a pressure that forces the melted salt up along the sides. Mount Sodom, 656 feet above the Dead Sea is still 623 feet below sea level.

Standing in that place, for all time, is the rough and salty shape of a woman....in Judaism, Idit is both a person and an archetype. *Netsib* – pillar – is translated elsewhere in the Torah as ‘garrison’ or ‘deputy’. What is it she is guarding us from?

In our society, we on the one hand seem to avoid looking at – and actually seeing – anything real and hard to witness: poverty, illness, death, racism. On the other hand, we are virtually unable to look away from anything sensational: Big Brother, Real Wives of All The Places, anything related to the Kardashians.

Turning our attention to another with the right intention is how we begin to know them, alleviate suffering, amplify voices, and repair the world. Jealousy, inhospitality, and voyeurism – where do these leave us?

Even the breeze is hot. Hot, and so dry.

The sky so very blue.

Standing in that place, for all time, is the rough and salty shape of Idit.

We see her there.

Blessed is the One who remembers the righteous.

Blessed is the true judge.



- Amy Yosefa Ariel (2017)

Lot's Wife

To Zoar! To Zoar! – You called to me.
Do not look behind you,
Do not turn to the left or to the right:
To Zoar!

Your voice was so harsh with its certainty about
the future,
The quietude in your eyes is terrible.
For you every path is straight,
Every road becomes smooth before your feet,
The road calls out and encourages, you:

Tread on me and walk safely.

You – your whole past life, you have wiped it out
from your very midst
Without a sigh.
You have immersed yourself in the light of
tomorrow,
You will be purified in it.
Clear and pure are the paths before you.
They are wide open to you, the one who crosses
over.

How lucky you are,
You righteous and simple man,
When you called out: To Zoar.
But I –
I cannot;
Please, do not call me
Do not press me, my husband –
Surely all my blood has been given to him, to the
one who vanished,
For him my very insides, for him my bowels burn.

I am drunk on yesterday.
Its murmuring is preserved with every pounding
of my blood,
Preserved its joys, its sorrows,
Lasting within me, within me.
All of me is saturated,
There is no uninjured place in me, no places left
untouched by them.

But how will I wipe them out from my heart?
How will I flee from their murmuring?
And they will march with me,
With a thousand arms they catch up to me:
Turn back!
You are ours –
You are part of us –
Turn!

Then how could I not look behind me –
Even if I am to be destroyed with Sodom?

A heavy fog is spread out before me,
It covers the mountain tops,
The expanses of the valleys,
Every path at my feet distorts,
And dims what my eye sees.
I no longer see a thing except for the figures,
Except for the life,
Which you have commanded me to betray.

The road twists before me –
How straight it is for you,
My simple husband.

Turn back!
You are ours –
You are part of us!
Turn!

I will surely look behind me,
Even if I am to be destroyed with Sodom,
Even if only I surely know.
Here I will meet my end
Like a huge stone I will harden here.
At the foot of the doomed Sodom.

I will stand like a stone in my place,
Forever will I look on the footsteps of my past,
I will look on their destruction – my destruction.

Anda Pinkerfeld - Amir (1902-1981)

Translated from the Hebrew by Sue Ann Wasserman