

# Sodom vs. Urk

Category: Bereishis, Vayeira

*Even Sodom & Gemorrah had a redeeming factor- Tzohar!*

## The Angels in Disguise

This week, the Netherlands made headlines, and not in a good way. Last week's disturbing attacks were a chilling reminder of darker times and raised some troubling questions about Europe's future.

But the Rebbe taught us to look for the good in every situation, so here's something uplifting I came across.

After these attacks, Channel 13 in Israel aired a story about two journalists who had traveled to Amsterdam to report on the events. While there, they ended up in the middle of an anti-Israel protest. In the chaos, one protester snapped a photo of them and posted it on social media, practically marking them for pursuit. Suddenly, they found themselves in real danger.

Then, out of nowhere, two Dutch locals stepped in to help. They invited the journalists to stay with them, offering them protection and whatever else they needed.

These two "angels in disguise" were from a small fishing town called Urk, about 24,000 residents strong and not too far from Amsterdam. When the journalists got to Urk, they were astonished to find the whole town decked out in Israeli flags! As they approached their host's home, they saw a mezuzah on the doorpost, and when they stepped inside, there was a menorah in the middle of the room along with other Judaica pieces. It was as if they had stepped right into a town in Israel!

## The Town of Urk

It turns out that Urk is a town where, despite not a single resident being Jewish, there's a deep, heartfelt connection to Israel. For the people of Urk, saving Jewish lives in times of trouble is seen as a mission—a small way to atone for the tragedy of World War II, when so many Dutch Jews were lost in the Holocaust.

The people of Urk see Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. They believe G-d chose the people of Israel and miraculously returned them to their homeland. They feel they're witnessing the prophecies unfold before their eyes—like Zechariah's words, "Old men and women will yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem" (Zechariah 8:4), or Isaiah's prophecy to Rachel, where G-d promises, "Your children shall return to their borders."

They also understand that biblical Israel includes "Judea and Samaria," so they feel it's essential to help Jewish people return and live in their ancestral land. Twice a year, many of them make pilgrimages to Israel, and their host shared that she herself has visited Israel 44 times! They even celebrate Jewish holidays: on Chanukah, they honor the miracle of the Maccabees' victory, they celebrate Passover as a time that the Jews got their freedom, and during Sukkot, the entire town is dotted with sukkahs. It's truly extraordinary.

One of the journalists even visited a local Judaica shop, which sells yarmulkes, Judaica items, and other goods imported directly from Israel, all to strengthen their bond with Israel and support its economy.

## **Nothing is Perfect**

When I saw this report, I was very gratified. Here was a "small island" in the Netherlands—Urk, which, until a few decades ago, was actually an island—where everyone seemed to be a friend of Israel. A place where being Jewish wasn't just accepted, but actually celebrated. The two journalists even mentioned that, while staying in Urk, they felt like rock stars.

But just two days later, very different news came out of Urk. On Shabbat, disturbing images began circulating on social media, showing a group of young people dressed as Nazi officers, humiliating a someone dressed up as a "Jewish prisoner." The "prisoner" wore clothes marked with a yellow star, and one of the "officers" pointed a gun at his head. This entire scene took place in the industrial area of town. The police quickly launched an investigation, but it was a painful reminder that even in a place we thought was entirely supportive, there are still troubling exceptions.

# The Dark Story of Sodom

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayera*, we read about the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. It all begins in the tent of our forefather, Abraham. Three angels arrive, and one of them brings the exciting news to Abraham and Sarah, saying, "By this time next year, Sarah will have a son." As the angels prepare to leave, G-d shares with Abraham that they are heading to destroy Sodom, explaining that the people there were deeply corrupt.

When Abraham hears this, he immediately starts pleading on their behalf. He turns to G-d and asks, "Will You really wipe out the righteous along with the wicked? Will the Judge of all the earth not do what's just?" He then suggests, "What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will You spare the place for the sake of those fifty?"

Why fifty? Here's where it gets interesting: Abraham had all five cities in the region in mind. We know Sodom and Gomorrah, but there were actually three other nearby cities—Admah, Tzvoim, and Tzoar. So why are only Sodom and Gomorrah so infamous? The Rebbe explains that these two were known for a "double sin"—they not only acted against G-d but also against each other. In other words, they were "evil to Heaven and evil to people," while the other cities mainly rebelled against G-d (Likutei Sichos, vol. 35, pg. 70; Biurei HaChumash, vol. 1, pg. 196).

So, Abraham reasoned that fifty was the right number—ten righteous people per city, enough to save all five towns. Where did he get the idea of ten? From the story of the flood. There were eight people on Noah's ark—Noah, his sons, and their wives—but that wasn't enough to save the rest of their generation. From this, Abraham understood that a full "minyan" of ten righteous people would be needed to make a difference.

Since there weren't fifty righteous people, Abraham tried to renegotiate with G-d, this time suggesting forty-five. Why that specific number? Rashi explains that he hoped for nine good people per city, with G-d Himself counted as the "tenth." This would round out the required ten, or minyan. In some communities, a similar idea is seen today; if there are only nine adults for a minyan, a young boy holding a Chumash or Torah scroll is sometimes included to complete the quorum.

When forty-five weren't available, Abraham lowered his request to forty, hoping he could at least save four cities. Then he tried for thirty, but ultimately, not even ten righteous people could be found. Realizing the situation was hopeless, Abraham reluctantly accepted it and stopped negotiating.

The angels then went to Sodom, where they met Lot and told him to gather his family and leave, as the city would soon be destroyed. Lot tried to persuade his sons-in-law to come with him, but they didn't take it seriously, because they were right in the middle of a party—it feels reminiscent of the story of the Titanic, where people kept partying as the ship was sinking.

The angels took Lot and his family by the hand, led them outside the city, and told them, "Run for your lives, and whatever you do, don't look back." Lot then asked the angels if he could flee to a small nearby town instead of the hills, saying he didn't think he would survive the escape to higher ground. The angels agreed, and only once Lot arrived in Tzoar did G-d bring about the destruction of Sodom.

## **The Miracle Baby**

So, how many cities were actually destroyed? The Torah spells it out clearly in Parashat Nitzavim (Deuteronomy 29:22), which lists four cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Tzvoim. Lot succeeded in saving Tzoar—why? Because, in relative terms, the people there were the least corrupt, the most "righteous" of a wicked area. Clearly, even in Sodom there were levels of wrongdoing: Sodom and Gomorrah were the worst, while Admah and Tzvoim were guilty but less so in how they treated each other. Tzoar, meanwhile, was ultimately spared.

At first glance, the story seems overwhelmingly dark. So, where is the hope? We find it in Chapter 21 of our portion, with the words, "And G-d remembered Sarah." This is the good news everyone had been waiting for—the miracle of the first Jewish child finally came to pass.

The birth of Isaac, the first Jewish child, reminds us that after periods of darkness, hardship, and testing, G-d's kindness and light come through. Isaac was a "miracle baby." The lesson is clear: after all the challenges we've experienced, we, too, will soon see incredible miracles. May they come to us very soon.