



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Vayeira

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October 19, 2013

Vayeira

**A Postcard From Sin City**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

Some 3,700 years ago, the wealthiest nation in the world was also the most corrupt. It was a filthy rich city-state, the key word being filthy. It was a foul city, an evil city, a wicked city.

It was the original Sin City.

The four judges who ruled it were named: Liar, Deceiver, Forger, and Perverter of Justice.

And, finally, God had had enough. He turned this Sin City upside down – literally turned on its head – and that was the end of that.

What can we learn from the evil ways of Sodom? What can the wickedness of its denizens teach us today, so that we may use our wealth, resources and power to turn the world back over, put the world back on its feet? What can Sodom teach us about our current situation – when the chief upholder of law and order, our government, shuts down?

And, most importantly, what lessons can we learn in our personal lives so that we use everything we have to act with empathy and righteousness? How can Sodom teach us to be better husbands, wives, parents, bosses and friends?

In addition to a provocative parable about a raven and a nightingale, this sermon examines key points of Victor Hugo’s classic *Les Miserables*, which is set in mid-19th century Paris – a more modern version of Sodom – to discover what it means to be righteous.

## A POSTCARD FROM SIN CITY

*Take-away message: You and I are purveyors of Righteousness and Justice. It is how we can turn the world over.*

### 1. The Bribe (Joke)

Taking his seat in his chambers, the judge faced the opposing lawyers.

“So,” he said, “I have been presented, by both of you, with a bribe.”

Both lawyers squirmed uncomfortably.

“You, Attorney Goldstein, gave me \$15,000. And you, Attorney Horowitz, gave me \$10,000.”

The judge reached into his pocket and pulled out a check. He handed it to Goldstein ...

“Now then, I am returning \$5,000, and we are going to decide this case solely on its merits.”

### 2. The Bribe (Alternative Joke)

The prosecuting attorney attacked a witness. “Isn’t it true,” he bellowed, “that you accepted five thousand dollars to compromise this case?”

The witness stared out the window, as though he hadn’t heard the question.

“Isn’t it true that you accepted five thousand dollars to compromise this case?” the lawyer repeated loudly.

The witness still did not respond.

Finally, the judge leaned over and said, “Sir, please answer the question.”

“Oh,” the startled witness said, “I thought he was talking to you.”

### 3. Law and Truth

Winston Churchill is quoted as saying: “Lawyers occasionally stumble over the truth... but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.”

Law and truth – what happens when one stumbles over the other? What happens when the law itself is corrupt? What to do when a Justice of the Peace is *neither* Just *nor* of Peace?

And what to do about our current situation – when the upholder of law and order, our government, shuts down?

In a healthy society, the laws that govern are meant to uphold a certain truth, a standard of goodness and righteousness, allowing humanity to flourish. We uphold *thou shall not kill, steal or lie*, because killing, stealing and lying would stifle a society’s growth (to say the least) and destroy the very fabric that allows it to function.

And on a more personal level, we uphold laws whose intent is to ensure that we live our lives with integrity and virtue. The laws of marriage are meant to preserve the purity and truth of love and create harmony between spouses. The laws of compliance and ethical business practice protect both parties from their competing interests, and generate synergy and cooperation between them. And the laws of honoring parents and respecting our fellows are meant to nourish interpersonal relationships, peace in the home and unity between all humankind.

But, then, there are times and places in history, and also times and places in each of our own lives, when these two roads of righteousness and justice seem to stumble over one another ... when righteousness and justice seem to clash.

Today, I would like to meet you at this crossroad – this spot where the two divergent roads of righteousness and justice appear to be in conflict – where (to paraphrase the eloquent Churchill) law occasionally stumbles over truth, picking itself up and hurrying off as if nothing ever happened.

#### 4. Les Miserables

Though we do not need any outside sources to substantiate Torah's timeless and universal themes of virtue and law, in today's world many respond more readily to examples from art and literature which address these same themes. Indeed, those who begin studying Torah often marvel at how many central ideas in contemporary writings originate from Torah.

Take for example, one of literature's masterpieces – Victor Hugo's *Les Misrables*. What makes it so great and sustaining are the timeless issues it deals with – destiny and privilege, freedom and equality, love and jealousy, class distinction in society and the role of government, sin and redemption, justice and kindness, and above all – law and order vs. empathy and righteousness.

*Les Miz*, as it is commercially known, has been made into a Broadway musical, several Hollywood movies, and TV mini-series. And now it has also made its way into a rabbi's Shabbat talk just to get your attention. I am bringing it up to illustrate a powerful theme in this week's Torah portion.

Let's sum up the key elements of the story: Jean Valjean, the hero, has just been released from 19 years' imprisonment in the galleys – 5 for the "highly-degenerate" and grossly exaggerated crime of stealing bread for his starving sister and her family, and 14 more for numerous escape attempts. In looking for a place to stay, Valjean is turned away by all the innkeepers because his yellow passport marks him as a former convict. Would you welcome a former convict into your home? He sleeps on the street, angry and bitter at the judgmental world around him. All he did was try to feed his starving family!

The benevolent clergyman Myriel gives him shelter. At night, Valjean runs off with Myriel's silverware. When the police capture Valjean, Myriel pretends that he has given the silverware to Valjean and presses him to take two silver candlesticks as well, as if he had forgotten to take them. The police accept his explanation and leave. Myriel tells Valjean that he should use money from the silver candlesticks to make an honest man of himself.

This is the opening of *Les Miserables*. The remainder of the 1,500 pages (1,900 in French) is not within the scope of this sermon (you may read it, if you so please, at your own leisure). Just let me say that the continuing story revolves around Valjean seeking empathy and redemption, with his alter-ego, Javert, the quintessential man of the law, seeking blind and brutal justice.

This is a classic case where the roads of righteousness and justice diverge. Justice would dictate that Myriel turn Valjean over to the police for stealing, but righteousness inspired Myriel to empathize with Valjean. Myriel realized that Valjean was a good man beaten down by a corrupt society – a society that allowed families to starve, causing people to steal bread to feed their dying children.

Justice (in the person of Javert) unceasingly and mercilessly pursues Valjean, despite any goodness he may do. But righteousness demands redemption for Valjean. [The clash between raw and heartless law and compassionate kindness comes to a climactic collision when Javert is faced with the horrible conundrum (in his mind) of the doomed criminal Valjean saving his life].

Javert's justice, we learn, is the cruelest thing possible, while Myriel's righteousness literally changes Jean Valjean's life.

Now ... imagine if Jean Valjean (or any other wayfarer) was transported 3,700 years back in time into the following setting:

## 5. Sin City

Some 3,700 years ago, there was a city called Sodom – one of the wealthiest city-states in the world. It was also the original Sin City, full of glitz, glitter and evil. At the heart of its evil lay this principle: what happened in Sodom stayed in Sodom. Literally.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanhedrin 109a.

<sup>2</sup> For all that follows – see Sanhedrin 109a-b.

The wealthy Sodomites were so concerned that people would take what was theirs that they wished to bar all travelers from their lands. Their attitude was: You stay there and we will stay here. This was the extreme of self-preservation and isolationism. The Sodomites preferred that there be no intermingling between people and nations. In fact, in Sodom it was illegal to host guests or welcome anyone into your home.

If Jean Valjean happened to be looking for a place to stay in Sodom, even without a convict's yellow passport, even if he were a saint, he would have been chased away. Or worse.

The sadistic Sodomites weren't satisfied with merely banishing people from their lands. Should you stumble into their borders, they would offer you a bed – to make a vicious point. If the person were too tall for the bed, they would shorten the person by trimming his legs; if the person were too short for the bed, they would stretch his limbs until he fit. The message was clear: *My* bed is not *your* bed; I am not here to accommodate *you*.

Lucky indeed for Jean Valjean that he stumbled upon Myriel in 19th century Paris and not someone in Sodom 3,700 years ago.

The evil in Sodom was so systemic that they even established a court system to uphold it.

Four supremely unholy judges ruled the supreme court of Sodom. They were named – and I kid you not – Shakrai, Shakurai, Zayfi and Matzle Dina, which translate as Liar, Deceiver, Forger and Perverter of Justice.

You cannot make this stuff up!

## 6. A Biased Judge (Parable)

The judges of Sodom remind me of this parable:

The nightingale and the raven were having an argument over who had could sing better. Of course, the nightingale couldn't believe the raven would even make a claim for herself on this count. So

confident was the nightingale of her superior song that she agreed to let the first animal who walked by be the judge of who had the sweeter voice.

The first animal was a filthy pig.

The contest was held. The raven screeched out a song that was way off-tune. The nightingale sang the purest, most beautiful, sweetest song known to man or bird.

The stinking pig deliberated and decided, from his grunting and earth-bound perspective, that the raven's call sounded better to him. The raven was deemed the unlikely winner.

In the aftermath, a lion came walking by and saw this small nightingale crying. The lion asked the nightingale: "Why are you crying? You agreed to the terms of the contest and lost according to those terms."

"I'm not crying because I lost," replied the nightingale. "I'm crying because look who is the judge of sweetness."

## 7. Judges as Swine

You see what type of society Sodom was?

Imagine showing up in a courtroom and the presiding justice is a serial killer, a liar and a thief. This was Sodom. The judges were swine and these swine decreed that all must roll in the muck along with them.

The Talmud relates a few sample cases these judges presided over and the verdicts they reached. Here are two of the less gruesome.

*Case 1:* A man maliciously slices off the ear of his neighbor's donkey.

*Sodom Verdict:* Give the donkey to the ear-slicer until the ear grows back. (Ears, of course, do not grow back, thus the man who sliced the ear keeps the donkey.)

*Case 2:* A person beats and wounds his neighbor, causing major damage and blood-loss.



*Sodom Verdict:* The neighbor who was attacked must pay his attacker for attacking him and letting out his blood, as bloodletting was a highly costly medical procedure.

This was how Sodomites administered justice. Justice for them was the opposite of righteousness. Justice was a means of upholding evil.

## 8. Selfishness As Ideology

Sodom wasn't merely evil. It was institutionalized evil. There was an ideology behind its evil, making the evil so much worse.

Evil on its own is one thing, but evil built upon an ideology is a whole other story.

Just look at Nazi Germany. The Nazis created systems and mechanisms of evil: they indoctrinated their young; they "educated" their masses; they brought so-called "proofs." They turned evil into a science and then into an ever-more efficient assembly line. And all this evil was meant to be perpetuated and passed onto their children.

This mentality originated in Sodom. The Mishna<sup>3</sup> and Talmud<sup>4</sup> call it *midas Sodom*, the characteristic of Sodom. And what was this defining characteristic of Sodom? Says the Mishna, it was "*Sheli sheli, shelach shelach* – what's mine is mine, what's yours is yours." Period.

## 9. Symbiosis in Creation

"*Sheli sheli, shelach shelach* – what's mine is mine, what's yours is yours" is the opposite of what God intended for His universe.

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<sup>3</sup> Avot 5:13.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bava Basra 12b.

God created the world to operate according to the principle of symbiosis. One human being completes and complements another. It's an interconnected, give-and-take universe. And no less so in human interactions. Each one of us has something to give to and something to take from the other. Everything in creation exists so that we can all give to another person that which they don't have, and they can give to us that which we don't have.

It is a grand symphony – each note with its unique sound, each musician playing his or her unique instrument, every one necessary and every one complementing the other – all together creating beautiful harmony.

Like one cohesive organism, we each complete one another – one person brings love to the table, one wisdom, one money, one ideas, one food, one humor, etc. until all of humanity is whole and one.

This is righteousness at its best. Balance. Mutuality. Harmony.

Evil at its worst is the exact opposite. Fragmentation. Separation. Division. “What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours.” I have nothing to do with you.

This was the culture of Sodom. This was Sodom's founding principle of self-absorption and selfishness. And they took it to the extreme. They made it illegal to help another person. “*Sheli sheli, shelach shelach* – what's mine is mine, what's yours is yours.”

And that's how it was ... until the last straw.

## 10. The Last Straw

The last straw in Sodom's evilness, which was the reason God decided to finally destroy the place, was a truly sadistic and horrific event involving a young woman.<sup>5</sup> This story exemplifies the far reaching consequences of Sodom's philosophy and where such an attitude, unchecked, can lead.

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<sup>5</sup> Sanhedrin 109b. Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer ch. 25.

There lived in Sodom a young woman with a kind heart, a fatal flaw in this heartless place. When she would go to the well to fill her pitcher with water, she would secrete pieces of bread in her pitcher and hand them clandestinely to the poor and starving people in town, thus saving their lives.

You see how vile Sodom was? One had to go on a secret mission to feed the hungry and save a human life!

When the despicable but astute people of Sodom realized that all the hungry and sick and homeless were not dying, they became very suspicious. How is it that they live? It is illegal for one person to help another! Why then don't these unfortunates die? Who is feeding them?

They opened an investigation and caught this young woman hiding bread in her pitcher and sharing it with the less fortunate. They took her up to a parapet upon the wall of the city, daubed her in honey from head to toe, and watched as the swarming bees, attracted by the sweet honey, consumed her alive.

The Sodomites, in their warped and wicked ideology, placed this kind young woman, slathered in honey, upon the wall, to make an example of her for all the world to see.

They were saying: If one is a sweet soul, figuratively covered in honey, performing good deeds, helping others and feeding the poor, one will be consumed by that sweetness. This was their belief. They believed that compassion and empathy for another person was wrong and evil.

This appalling story, encapsulating Sodom's sadistic philosophy, was the final chapter in Sodom's story. Because this is when God decided to close the book on Sodom forever:<sup>6</sup>

*And the Lord said, "Since the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great, and since their sin has become very grave ... And the Lord caused to rain down upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire, from the Lord, from heaven. And He turned over these cities and the entire plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and the vegetation of the ground.*

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 18:20, 19:24-25.

One can ask: Why did God have to go so far? Why did He *turn over these cities and the entire plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and the vegetation of the ground?* Why such an extreme punishment?

One explanation:<sup>7</sup> The punishment was *midah k'neged midah*, “measure for measure” also known as tit-for-tat or action-reaction. Just as Sodom was extreme in turning the concept of righteousness on its head, so was God extreme and thorough in turning Sodom on its head.

Just as the Sodomites turned 180 degrees from the purpose of creation – they were selfish instead of selfless – so did God turn their city over 180 degrees.

## 11. Lesson in Life

The fact that the Torah tells us the story of Sodom means that it offers us a lesson in life.

What can we learn from the evil ways of Sodom and Gomorrah? What can their wickedness teach us today so that we may use our wealth, resources and power to turn the world back over, put the world back on its feet?

And, most importantly, what lessons can we learn from Sodom’s demise – lessons that can impact our personal lives more meaningfully, that can help us use everything we have in empathetic and righteous ways? How can Sodom teach us to be better husbands, wives, parents, bosses and friends?

The verse directly preceding this week’s Torah reading and the story of Sodom, speaks of Abraham, our father:<sup>8</sup>

*For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord to perform righteousness and justice...*

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<sup>7</sup>See Likkutei Sichot vol. 5 p. 157 note 50.

<sup>8</sup>See Likkutei Sichot vol. 5 p. 157 note 50.

The connection between this verse and the subsequent story of Sodom is obvious: Abraham's "righteousness and justice" stood in stark contrast to Sodom's perversion of justice.

This, my friends, is the purpose that God created the world and how our forefather Abraham and his children are meant to fulfill that purpose – *keep the way of the Lord to perform righteousness and justice.*

The way of heaven is *righteousness and justice.* And notice that righteousness precedes justice.

## 12. Back to Les Miserables

The story of Jean Valjean and *Les Miserables* is a fictional recounting of an eternal truth – that man is made not only with justice but with righteousness as well. As Rashi writes at the opening of Genesis:

In the beginning it was His [God's] intention to create it with the Divine Standard of Justice, but he perceived that the world would not endure; so He preceded it with the Divine Standard of Mercy, allying it with the Divine Standard of Justice.

In fact, the reason the story of *Les Miserables* so moves us is because of the message it conveys – that righteous nature can prevail despite the horror of heartless, brutal justice. The greatest crimes are the ones that result when justice rules and compassion is taken out of the equation.

In the Sin City of Sodom, it was "just" to murder someone for hosting guests. It was "normal" (indeed required) to be selfish. And, therefore, it was "normal and just" to denounce and destroy anyone that was selfless and kind.

In Germany circa 1940, it was "normal and just" to murder Jews. It was the law to kill a handicapped child. So we see that justice is a very, very subjective thing. Righteousness is not.

In the enlightened Greek culture of 2,000 years ago, throwing a special-needs child off a cliff was the “just” thing to do. Indeed, the great philosopher Aristotle was in favor of the practice. He wrote:

There must be a law that no imperfect or maimed child shall be brought up, and to avoid an excess of population some children must be exposed, for a limit must be fixed to the population of the state.<sup>9</sup>

In his time, it was also “just” to shun and banish senior citizens who, after all, were really a burden to society. This was Greek justice.

Righteousness is very simple. You are either helping other people, or you are hurting them. If you do the former, you are helping them. If you do the latter, you are hurting them or even killing them.

### 13. What Does This Have to Do with Me?

You are sitting here in this synagogue and you might be asking yourself: “What does the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah have to do with me? I am a good person and, if I remember correctly, I have never trimmed a person so that they fit my bed and neither have I slathered anyone in honey. How is this story relevant to me in my daily life?”

There are situations we all face in our own daily lives where justice and righteousness seem to be at odds.

For example: You and your spouse have an argument. You think you are right – no, *you know* you are right. You yell how right you are, and your yelling how right you are makes your wife (or husband) cry. Maybe you are right but are you righteous?

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.16. This is very cold, rational thinking, which we find echoed by the great Roman philosopher Seneca: “Children also, if weak and deformed, we drown, not through anger but through the wisdom of preferring the sound to the useless.” Seneca, *Concerning Anger*, I.XV

Another example: You are an employer whose employee forgot that you like your coffee black. Your new assistant unintentionally added cream and sugar. The just thing would be to ask her to make you a new cup of coffee ... The righteous thing to do would be to get off of your high horse and make your own.

A third example: You are walking down the street. A homeless man asks you for some money to buy food. Maybe the just thing to do is to tell him to get a job – I don't know, maybe. Or maybe you just ignore him. Well, the righteous thing to do is to walk into the bagel shop down the block, buy the guy a bagel and coffee and give it to him. You might just change his life.

As we weigh the immortal words in this week's Torah reading, we must say to Sodom, to the Nazis, to the Terrorists: "No matter how scientific and systematic and ideological you are in your dark evil, we are more scientific and systematic and ideological in our bright goodness."

Your world, Sodom, was turned upside down.

We shall turn our world downside up, ensuring that no man ever goes hungry again.

Shabbat Shalom!