

Lot and Loving the Stranger: Scriptural Insights on Immigration
(Leviticus 19:33-37; Genesis 19:1-17, 23-26)

Happy Mother's Day! Before the sun sets, please make a point to convey to those mothers in your life how valuable is their unpaid work, how expansive is their unconditional love, how enduring is their unrecognized influence. The Talmud says, "God couldn't be everywhere, so God created mothers." Yet, mothers are too often unsung, unseen. Indeed, it is a misunderstood mother that I want to call to your attention today. When we think of the story we just read, what is the image we most often call to mind? With fire and brimstone raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah, we imagine the solitary figure of Lot's wife, a forlorn refugee looking back, as the world she knew was being destroyed. We can see in our mind's eye Lot's wife, unnamed, turning into a pillar of salt. Even today, if you go down to the Dead Sea in Israel, you will see rock formations that could be mistaken for Lot's wife, eternally standing vigil over a world that once was. The rabbis give her a name—*Idit*, from the Hebrew word, "*ed*" meaning witness. But they also see in that name a poignant pun—if you reverse the two consonants in *Idit*, you get "*Atid*"—future—the state that Lot's wife will always be on the threshold of but will never enter. Why did this woman forfeit her future? Why did she look back? Poet Merle Feld looks at the biblical text and writes a poem she calls "Lotswife". Here are some excerpts.

I am the no-name mother
Of four no-name daughters.
The young ones, the virgins,
Escaped with us.
But my first born, and
The second—the tall slim
One with the long auburn hair—
They were left behind.

He spoke to their husbands,
Said we must go,
Said, run away with us now.
But those two were rough
types, they scoffed and
turned their backs. My girls—
My first born and the tall
slim one with the long
auburn hair—

No one ever spoke

to them at all.

And then it was time
to go.
He said Now
Now we must go
And I ran after
him, after him as I
always had.

The heat was so intense
It licked at my heels
It burned my back
The heat was so intense.

I ran to keep up with him
At his heels I ran
As I always had
And then the tears
They flowed and burned
Until finally
It wasn't a decision
To stop, to turn
It's that I couldn't see
him anymore, blinded as I as
by my tears, my burning tears.

...blinded by my tears, my pain,
looking back, because I am
a mother and a mother
can't look away
even when God commands it.

So I'm there in the story,
after eloquent Abraham,
without a name, without
my daughters
turning
into a tear
into a pillar of salt.

(Merle Feld, *A Spiritual Life*)

Merle Feld conjures up a mother overcome by sorrow, yearning to protect her daughters yet impotent to save them, a mother who can only stand as a monument to those she has lost. From our relatively secure and distant vantage point, we can

understand the totality of her despair, but when we look carefully at the world she lived in, the world of Sodom and Gomorrah, the depth and faith of her motherly compassion, connection and commitment is all the more astonishing. The world Lot's wife lived in had been awash in sin, in violence, in brutality. After all, her husband, trying to protect the strangers who had come to visit was set upon by a mob. Either out of fear or fealty, trying to prevent the rape of his guests, Lot instead offered to the insatiable, grasping gang outside his doorway, his two virgin daughters, "Please brothers, do no evil! Look—I have two daughters who have never been intimate with a man; let me bring them out for you and do to them as you please. But do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." To our modern sensibilities, what Lot offers is monstrous. But fortunately for him, as can happen in biblical stories, films and fantasies, the angels struck blind the mob, saving the day, saving the daughters, saving Lot, saving themselves.

The Midrashim, the rabbinic stories on the biblical story embellish the already stark cravenness of the Sodomites. Sodom itself becomes a repository for all potential sins of a city, for the many ways society sometimes reveals its worse instincts. They go on for pages describing the immorality and cruelty of the people of Sodom. I will share with you just two.

The men of Sodom were arrogant because they lived in a town that God blessed with natural resources. They quoted Job, "As for the earth, out of it comes bread...the stones of the place are sapphires, and it has dust of gold." They reasoned, since bread comes out of our earth and even our dust is gold, why should we suffer wayfarers, who come only to deplete us of our wealth? Come, let us make laws against foreigners coming to our land, let us make it illegal for outsiders to enjoy the largesse that belongs only to us. (*Sanhedrin* 109b)

In effect they are saying, "Let's seal the borders. Let's send back the illegals."

D'var acher. Another Midrash. "They issued a proclamation in Sodom, saying, "Everyone who strengthens the hand of the poor and the needy with a loaf of bread, shall be burnt by fire!" One of Lot's daughters married a magnate of Sodom. She saw a very poor man, and couldn't help but provide for him. When she would go out to draw water, she secreted food from her house. The men of Sodom grew suspicious—"How can such a poor man survive?" They investigated; they fingered her, and they brought her out to be burned by fire. According to the Midrash, it was the cry of this compassionate woman as she faced death for her generosity that called Divine attention to the sins of Sodom. (*Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 25)

Despite the association between sexual immorality and the sin of Sodom, despite the etymology of the word Sodomy, for the rabbis, it is not sexual perversion that constitutes the sins of Sodom. No, far more egregious in their minds are social sins—

the absence of hospitality, the sin of stinginess, of xenophobia, the protection of me and mine in the face of those in need.

Jewish tradition teaches, *“Bamakom she’ain anashim, histakel lehiot eish.”* “In a place where there is no humanity, strive to be human.” Lot’s wife, fighting the tide of the world in which she lived, tried to mother her forsaken daughters, one of whom, according to the Midrash, showed kindness toward the poor, even at the cost of her life. These women stood valiantly against the orthodoxy of their day. They broke human laws in order to obey Divine Law—they tried heroically to live out of compassion in the face of callousness.

In Leviticus, in the Holiness Code, we are taught, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Eternal, your God.” (Leviticus 19: 33-35)

This teaching reminds us stand against the sins of the Sodomites. It warns us not to protect only what we have, but to protect those without what we have. On this Mother’s Day, I think of immigrant mothers who came to this country to find a future, not just to bear witness to a brutal past. These women were not paralyzed by tears. They are not a still monument to despair, but rather an active beacon of hope.

I think of one mother without papers who was determined to have her daughter receive a good education. She made sure her first grader read with her every night. She volunteered in the classroom whenever her work schedule allowed her too. She attended every parent teacher conference. But then, in the middle of her daughter’s first grade year, she had to move. Within days she realized that the new neighborhood school was far inferior to the one where her daughter had been flourishing. As the little girl said, “At that school, they weren’t going to grow my brain.” Despite the risk, this mother daily drove a half hour to and from her daughter’s school, fearful at every minute that things most of us experience without concern—witnessing a traffic mishap or having a headlight burn out or a turn signal malfunction or simply looking foreign might result in her being stopped and potentially deported. She had to weigh her desire for her child to have a bright future against the hardships and uncertainty of an anxious present.

Or I think of the story of Maricela, a woman who had cleaned a colleague’s home for years. One day she started to bring her young children with her. She seemed distraught and protective of them, but try as my friend might, she was unable to learn why Maricela was so troubled. She felt powerless, watching this young mother grow more and more fearful, and she begged Maricela to reveal the source of her distress. Despite her fear, Maricela finally broke down and shared her situation with my friend. Her husband was beating her. More than for herself, she feared that her children were also at risk, so she kept them with her whenever she could. He was here legally. She

had no papers. He threatened that if she ever told anyone, he would report her to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement and have her deported. She was terrified that she might never see her children again. She knew that she could never go to the police. All of her motherly instincts told her it was better to accept his abuse than to risk him abusing and her losing her children. As an undocumented immigrant, she couldn't protect her children and advocate for herself at the same time.

On this Mother's Day, we can assist these mothers and 3 million other California immigrants who live their lives every day in fear. We can strive to be humans in our own time. We can stand against the indifference and arrogance of Sodom in our own day.

Presently, California participates in the Secure Communities program. While this program was intended to target only those undocumented immigrants who had criminal records, it has since become indiscriminant. 7 out of 10 Californians who have been deported had no prior convictions or convictions for minor offenses, like selling street food without a permit or having a barking dog. The climate of fear among immigrants has made community policing impossible—because of their fear of deportation and separation from their families, witnesses of crimes won't speak to police, and battered women like Maricela can't report domestic abuse. Inaccuracies in the Secure Communities database have resulted in holds being placed on citizens and lawful immigrants. The costs of deportation are borne by local communities—in 2012, California taxpayers spent \$65 million to detain people for immigration authorities. And the law is enforced inconsistently. In some communities, law enforcement complies with requests for immigration detention only if an individual has a serious criminal record; but in others, anyone undocumented is susceptible. Since a person might be treated differently depending upon what jurisdiction they are live in or are passing through, undocumented immigrants can only escape the repercussions if they remain in the shadows.

Even as the federal government is working on comprehensive immigration reform, there is an effort in our state to right these wrongs. It is called the TRUST Act, standing for Transparency and Responsibility Using State Tools. The bill sets a clear statewide standard to detain immigrants only if the individual has a serious or violent felony conviction. This will protect battered women and those who report crimes. It will in turn strengthen the ability of local law enforcement to protect neighborhoods and save California taxpayers millions of dollars. Tomorrow, the day after Mother's Day, Monday, AB4, the TRUST Act, will be sent to the State Assembly floor for a vote. Today, as part of your Mother's Day celebration, let your voice be heard. Today, on this Mother's Day, before the sun sets, please make a point to convey to those who represent you in Sacramento that you support the TRUST Act, that you trust them to truly create secure communities, where our neighbors can live free of fear.

On this Mother's Day, let us remember the compassion of Lot's wife in the midst of a society with riches but without generosity. Let us be witnesses and advocates for those

unable to do so themselves. Let our actions usher in a future where our neighbors can leave the shadows and enter into the light. Let us live in a state where compassion overcomes callousness and lead the way for the rest of the nation. Let us live so that trust replaces insecurity and recognition replaces fear. Happy Mother's Day.