

After promising to never again destroy the earth's entire population after the flood, HaShem must repeatedly learn that humankind is woefully inept at discerning between good and evil. Now, two cities have become so steeped in evil that HaShem has no other choice but to destroy them. Their wickedness is rooted in unbridled arrogance, which causes them to pervert justice in every possible manner. Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 109b illustrates in a variety of midrashim. "The people of Sodom became haughty and sinned due only to the excessive goodness that the Holy One of Blessing bestowed upon them. ... The people of Sodom said: 'Since we live in a land from which bread comes and has the dust of gold, we have everything that we need. Why do we need travelers, as they come only to divest us of our property? Come, let us cause the proper treatment of travelers to be forgotten from our land ...' There were four judges in Sodom and they were named for their actions: Shakrai (liar) and Shakrurai (habitual liar), Zayfai (forger), and Matzlei Dina (perverter of justice). ... There was a young woman who would take bread out to the poor people in a pitcher so the people of Sodom would not see it. The matter was revealed, and they smeared her with honey and positioned her on the wall of the city, and the hornets came and consumed her. ... It is due to that sin that the fate of the people of Sodom was sealed." Indeed, 18:20-21 inspire this last example: "And the Lord said, 'Since the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great, and since their sin has become very grave, I will descend now and see, whether according to her cry, which has come to Me, they have done; [I will wreak] destruction [upon them]; and if not, I will know." Rashi interprets HaShem's "descending" as an admonition for judges to not decide capital punishment cases unless they have visited the site of the crime and have thoroughly investigated the matter. The midrashim describe a society in which hospitality is reviled and cruelty is exalted in a topsy-turvy world of human depravity. If it weren't for the tragic fact that this mentality still persists in many parts of the world, these stories could be understood as ancient versions of dark comedy. What is it that makes some humans so inhumane, perpetuating the message of these midrashim with their own perversities? The answer lies in the many words related to the name of our parashah: *vayiera* (and he appeared). The root ראה forms words connected with vision: seeing, experiencing, prophesying, appearing, showing, perceiving, understanding, looking at one another, vision, mirror. According to Samson Raphael Hirsch, who noticed that certain letters of the Hebrew alphabet can be used interchangeably to create related word roots, ראה is related to ר'ה (casting, shooting at a target), ר'א (fearing, being awesome, being aware of a presence), רעה (tending, pasturing, grazing, being neighborly), but also loosely related to רעע (breaking, being evil, paying homage, rejoicing loudly). Many of our languages have expressions for "I see," which implies deep understanding, as well as for "mind's eye" and "mental picture," i.e., the ability to visualize concepts as well as objects. In last week's parashah Lot saw the fertile Jordan plain, visualized a good life, and chose to settle next to Sodom, turning a blind eye to the depravity of his neighbors. In chapter 19, he is obviously assimilated and well regarded, since we meet him sitting at the gate of the city. Midrash Genesis Rabbah says he has just been appointed chief justice that very day. Lot thinks he has arrived. But in verse 9 the mob clamoring at his door for access to his guests brusquely reminds him that he is only an alien resident, despite his willingness to adhere to their social norms by offering them his innocent daughters in lieu of his guests. "This one came to sojourn, and now he is judging! Now, we will deal even worse with you than with them." On that fateful day Lot learns that he has been engaging in egregious self-deception. Despite all he has done to assimilate, he is still an outsider, and in danger as soon as he fails to conform. His uncle Abraham pleads with HaShem to spare these wicked cities if just 10 righteous people can be found there. But sadly, it is only Lot along with his wife and their daughters who are rescued. But Lot's hesitation, the pregnancies resulting from his daughters' misconception of their situation and his own weakness, and his wife's fatal backward glance are poignant illustrations of sorely misguided vision. Throughout history Lot's story continues to be retold in countless variations, tragically illustrating the shortsightedness of so many people in a multitude of cultures the world over. Inspired by the negative visions others thrust upon them, gullible, often frustrated individuals single out a particular group onto which they project their worst resentments and fears in paroxysms of righteous wrath. Their humanity, which our dictionaries define as compassion and generosity, extends only to those they see as worthy, while in the name of their skewed morality they dehumanize others in order to justify, and even glorify their actions against them. We are seeing this once again in excruciating detail as the world grapples with the inhumanity of Hamas and their extremist allies and tries, often woefully shortsightedly, to put it into perspective. Throughout history we Jews have lived on the margins, creating our own culture within the larger civilizations in which we found homes, sometimes participating, often rebuffed and persecuted. And throughout history some of us have opted for complete assimilation, overlaying our intrinsic Judaism with the veneer of the prevailing society. The 19th and 20th centuries have painfully taught us the lessons of Lot. We can put on the costumes of the culture in which we live, but we cannot change who we truly are, and there will always be those who will not accept us no matter how hard we try to be one of them. In this difficult time it is upon us to do all we can to uphold our vision of the humanity our Torah teaches as we deal with the inhumanity that is rife in our world today.

Shabbat shalom!