

THE ANTI-HYBRIDIZATION LAWS AND SODOM AND GOMORRAH: AN INQUIRY INTO AN EXPLANATION OF THE HYBRIDIZATION PROHIBITION

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INTRODUCTION

The prohibition against the hybridization of two species, *kilayim*, appears twice in the Torah; once in Leviticus, and again in Deuteronomy. In both places the same three prohibited activities are stipulated; the hybridization of animals, plants and fibers: *Keep my statutes. Do not let your cattle gender with a diverse kind. Do not sow your field with two kinds of seed. Neither shall there come upon you a garment of two kinds of stuff mingled together* (Lev. 19:19). *Do not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed; lest the fullness of the seed which you have sown be forfeited together with the increase of the vineyard. Do not plow with an ox and an ass together. Do not wear a mingled stuff, wool and linen together* (Deut. 22:9-11).

This inquiry aims to gain an understanding of the prohibition against hybridization in general, and the prohibition against the hybridization of the vineyard, *kilei-hakerem*, in particular. In an effort to do so, our discussion will temporarily veer towards the story of the infamous twin cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, with an eventual return to the anti-hybridization laws.

THE THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE HYBRIDIZATION PROHIBITION

The Bible itself does not provide a reason for the prohibition of *kilayim*. According to TB *Yoma* 67b, the prohibition against hybridization falls within the category of those commandments whose reasons are beyond man's ability to comprehend. Despite this caveat, the rabbinic exegetes probed the rationale behind this commandment.

Maimonides believed hybridization to be prohibited as it once functioned as part of a system of idol worship.¹ Sforno comments that hybridization produces species which are incapable of reproduction.² While this may be the reason for the prohibition against the hybridization of animals, it does not apply to the hybridization of the vineyard and the mixing of wool and linen. Nahmanides proposes that one who performs hybridization denies the perfec-

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tion of God's creation.³ *Sefer Hahinuch*, offering a similar explanation, explains that the Torah specifically prohibited the mixing of grain and grape seeds as they represent two particularly significant creations.⁴ Adopting this approach would appear to prohibit modern genetic engineering, whose goal is to correct the perceived flaws of the creation.

Maharal argues against this position, as he understands that the general thrust of the Torah law is that man is responsible to perfect a currently imperfect world.⁵ Instead, Maharal suggests that the prohibition against hybridization stems from the immorality involved specifically within the mixing of the species. He understands these laws as hinting at the prohibition against licentious sexual relations. The difficulty with this approach, however, is that whereas the hybridization of animals involves an actual mixing of species, and thus may be seen as comparable to illicit relations, the hybridization of the vineyard, and the mixing of wool and linen fibers, doesn't. Ibn Ezra learns that the latter two hybridization prohibitions are intended to merely hint at the mixing of species.⁶

The opinion of Maharal, that the injunction against hybridization contains a quasi-sexual connotation, is supported by Leviticus' use of the formula *lo tarbia*, meaning 'do not copulate'.⁷ This expression is found exclusively in Leviticus where it is used twice in a prohibition against bestiality.⁸ The other two forms of hybridization which follow in the verse in Leviticus, and which appear as a set again following the injunction against the hybridization of animal species in Deuteronomy, would then, as Ibn Ezra points out, appear to be connected to the concept of sexual morality. According to this view, why is it that the vineyard and grains were chosen to metaphorically represent illicit sexual relations?

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

Genesis provides us with a topographical description of Sodom and Gomorrah, as seen through the eyes of Lot: *And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain [kikar] of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere [kulo mashke], before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou goest unto Zoar* (Gen. 13:10).

This verse contains several double entendres. The word *kikar* means vicinity or territory around a particular place, but it also means a loaf of bread.⁹ Similarly, the word *mashke* means well irrigated, but it also refers to wine.¹⁰ This is borne out from the description of Pharaoh's royal butler (Gen. 40), as well as from Nehemiah's role as *mashke* in the royal court (Neh. 1:11). Cyrus Gordon discusses the role of the butler in the ancient world, whose job was to pour wine, not water.¹¹ He suggests that the role of Abraham's servant *Damesek Eliezer* (Gen. 15:2) was actually that of butler. Meir Lubetski, writes that understanding the word *mashke* from our verse as a reference to wine explains why the causative form was used, as opposed to the passive form (*mushke*). He documents the ancient Egyptian conception of paradise, a place where 'wine flows like water', which seems to be reflected in Lot's perspective on the plane, especially after having recently returned from Egypt.¹² The Southern Jordan Valley's association with both abundant bread and wine may be detected as well from the very names of their flagship cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, which I will now discuss.¹³

VINEYARDS

The Song of Moses describes Sodom and Gomorrah as having once been places where grapes were produced in abundance:¹⁴ *For their vine is of the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter* (Deut. 32:32).

In this verse, Sodom and Gomorrah parallel each other, as do the words *gefen* and *shadmat*. The word *shdema*, or field, is also used to describe vineyards:¹⁵ *For the fields [shadmot] of Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sibmah, whose choice plants did overcome the lords of nations; they reached even unto Jazer, they wandered into the wilderness; her branches were spread abroad, they passed over the sea* (Isa. 16:8). Kimḥi, on this verse and on Deuteronomy 32:32, comments that *shdema* means vineyard.¹⁶ Further support for the relationship between *shdema* and vineyard comes from a Ugaritic text, discussed by Avishur, which uses the word *shdema* to refer to vineyards.¹⁷

Gesenius suggests the possibility of an etymological relationship between the name Sodom and *shdema*, where the *samach* replaces the *sin*.¹⁸ An example of the *samach* replacing the *sin* in the Bible may be observed in Judges

12:6, where refugees from Ephraim pronounced the word *sibolet* instead of *shibolet*.

The name Gomorrah may also be related etymologically to wine when the *ayin* from Gomorrah is interchanged with the letter *het*. Nahmanides has an extensive discussion regarding the switching of these two letters in a variety of biblical and rabbinic sources.¹⁹ One of the examples that Nahmanides discusses comes from Joel: *Haste [ushu] and come, all ye nations round about, and gather yourselves together; thither cause thy mighty ones to come down o Lord!* (Joel 4:11). The word *ush* is a hapax, and is assumed to be related to *hush*, to hurry one's self.²⁰ Returning now to Gomorrah; when we switch the *ayin* from *omer* for a *het*, we get *homer*, or wine, as in *blood of grapes like delicious wine (hamer)* (Deut. 32:14).

WHEAT FIELDS

The names Sodom and Gomorrah also signify fields of wheat. The word *shdema* in the Bible also indicates fields of wheat. In Isaiah we read that *shdema* is a field full with *kama*, unripe grain still on the stalk:²¹ *Therefore their inhabitants were of small power, they were dismayed and confounded; they were as the grass of the field, and as the green herb, as the grass on the housetops, and as a field [shdema] before it is grown up [kama]* (Isa. 37:27). Sodom's etymological relationship with *shdema*, as discussed earlier, therefore also carries with it a connotation of fields of wheat. This is seen in the name Gomorrah as well, whose root *omer* also means piles of grain, as well as a measure used for measuring grain.²²

It is of relevance to note here that the word *shadmot*, which appears directly connected to the name Gomorrah in Deuteronomy 32:32, also has a connotation of burning:²³ *And the whole valley of the dead bodies, and of the ashes, and all the fields [shdemot] unto the brook Kidron, unto the corner of the horse gate toward the east, shall be holy unto the Lord; it shall not be plucked up, nor thrown down any more forever* (Jer. 31:39). *And the king commanded Hiliah the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the door, to bring forth out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them without Jerusalem in the fields [shadmot] of Kidron, and carried the ashes of them unto Beth-el* (II Kgs. 23:4).

THE ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

In addition to the etymological data, there is substantial archeological confirmation from the early Bronze Age of the Jordan Valley region supporting thriving vineyards. Asaph Goor writes that “the earliest indications of the grape in Palestine are seeds from excavations at Jericho on a site of the early Bronze Age.”²⁴ Jonathan Sauer confirms that “From about 3200 BCE onward, Jericho and various other Jordan Valley region sites have yielded abundant remains of grapes . . . viticulture is indicated.”²⁵ Excavations in Numeira in the Southeast region of the Dead Sea yielded a hoard of over 700 whole grapes noted for their uncommonly large size.²⁶ The fact that the grapes were found intact indicates that they were freshly harvested. In addition to the Jordan Valley’s role in the development of viticulture in the early Bronze Age, there is also substantial evidence for its being central to the development of contemporary wheat.²⁷ While the area of Ararat is considered to be the cradle of cultured wheat, useful, modern grain was first developed in the Jordan Valley.²⁸ Some of the earliest evidence for the cultivation of domestic grain comes from Jericho, where carbonized grains of two rowed barley were recovered.²⁹ Six row barley, emmer, and bread wheat were found in early Bronze Age excavations in Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira,³⁰ sites located in the Southeast region of the Dead Sea, which many archeologists believe to be the original location of Sodom and Gomorrah.³¹ Abundant crops of grain match what we already know about Sodom and Gomorrah, and their satiety of bread: *Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and careless ease was in her and in her daughters; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy* (Ezek. 16:49).

Perhaps the agronomical development of the Southern Jordan Valley explains the peculiar interest that the four Mesopotamian kings from the far north had in this region (Genesis 14), curiously bypassing the Jezreel Valley in their path.

When we consider the three other cities of the Pentapolis, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar, it is likely that they too were part of the wine production of the area.³² The word *admah* in Aramaic means red blood.³³ Both Genesis 49:11 and Deuteronomy 32:14 refer to wine as *dam enav*, or ‘grape blood’. The *tzadi* from the name *Zeboiim* may be switched for a *zayin*, much like we find in the Sodom story itself, where *tzaaka* and *zaaka* are used interchangeably.³⁴

This suggests that the name *Zeboiim* may be related to *zabim*, or a flowing, indicating an area well irrigated/flowing with wine (Gen. 13:10). While the name *Zoar* appears to stem from *zeir*, small,³⁵ it too must have had ample stores of wine; certainly enough to have allowed Lot's daughters to inebriate their father twice.³⁶

CORRELATION OF MULTIPLE THEMES

The relationship between Sodom and Gomorrah and sexual immorality is articulated in a variety of contexts. There is the notorious attempt of all of the denizens of Sodom to 'know' the visitors (Gen. 19:5), followed by Lot's twisted counter-suggestion that the crowd be placated instead with his two unmarried daughters (Gen. 19:8). Later still, there is Lot's own incestuous relationship with his daughters, leading to the birth of bastard children and the creation of the nations Ammon and Moab (Gen. 19:33-38).³⁷

We can now better understand the opinions of Maharal and Ibn Ezra, which related the general prohibition against hybridization to the concept of sexual morality.³⁸ Sodom and Gomorrah were understood to be connected to an abundance of both wine and grain as well as sins of sexual immorality. This is what came to mind when mentioning these cities in ancient times. When viewed from an etymological, thematic, and archeological perspective, the laws prohibiting the hybridization of the vineyard appear to be hinting to the sins and fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. The prohibition against hybridization thus plays an eternal role in reminding Israel that they must continually guard against sexual immorality. The prohibition against hybridization in general, and of the vineyard in particular, takes on new significance when viewed within this framework.

NOTES

1. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:37.

2. Sforno, Genesis 1:11.

3. Nahmanides, Leviticus 19:19.

4. *Sefer Hahinuch* 62, 244, 245, 548.

5. Maharal, *Beer Hagolah*, 2:10.

6. Ibn Ezra, Leviticus 19:19; Cf. Hizkuni to Deuteronomy 22:11, who comments that the hybridization of fibers, *shatnez*, is prohibited by the Torah, as this mixture recalls the murder of Abel by Cain whose offerings together represent a mixture of wool and linen. The wool and linen

mixture is considered by Hizkuni to be of a special nature, reserved for the priestly garments and royalty.

7. *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (hereinafter *HALOT*) 'rba,' CD ROM ed. p. 1180.

8. Cf. Leviticus 18:23, 20:16 .

9. *HALOT* 'kikar,' p. 473.

10. *HALOT* 'mashke,' p. 652.

11. C. Gordon, "Damascus in Assyrian sources," *Israel Exploration Journal* 2.3 (1952) pp. 174-175. Gordon's thesis also resolves the unusual construction of the name *Damesek Eliezer*.

12. Meir Lubetski, "Lot's choice: Paradise or purgatory," pp. 164-172 in *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century, Volume 1: Biblical, Rabbinical, and Medieval Studies* (eds. Judit Targarona Borrás, Ángel Sáenz-Badillos; Boston: Brill, 1999).

13. Cf. M.J. Mulder 'Sodom,' *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000) X: 152-165, esp. p.155. Mulder writes that the etymology of Sodom is disputed.

14. The rabbis understood Sodom to have had flourishing vineyards. Cf. *Tanḥuma Vayera* 22.

15. *HALOT* 'shdema,' p.1422.

16. Kimḥi, Deuteronomy 32:32, Isaiah 16:8.

17. The Ugaritic is *yzbrrn zbrm gfn, yzmdnn zmdm gfn, yskl sdmt kn gfn*. Avishur explains the text as follows: The vine will be pruned, the vines will be grafted, and the stones shall be removed from the vineyards (*shadmot*). Yitzchak Avishur, "Common language shared between the Song of Moses and Ugaritic literature," *L'shoneinu* 66 (2004) pp.7-29, esp. 21 (Heb.).

18. Wilhelm Gesenius, (Edward Robinson, trans.), *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: Including the Biblical Chaldee* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1865) p. 713.

19. Cf. Naḥmanides, Deuteronomy 2:23.

20. *HALOT* 'ush,' p. 804; Rashi quotes Menahem in support of this reading in Joel 4:11.

21. *HALOT* 'kama,' p. 1107.

22. *HALOT* 'omer,' p. 849.

23. *HALOT* 'shdema,' p.1422.

24. A. Goor, "The history of the grape-vine in the holy land," *Economic Botany* 20.1 (1966) pp.46-64, esp. 46.

25. J. D. Sauer, *Historical Geography of Crop Plants: A Select Roster* (Abingdon: CRC Press 1993) p.168.

26. D. W. McCreery, "Flotation of the Bab Edh-Dhra and Numeira plant remains," pp. 165-169, esp.168, in *The Southeastern Dead Sea Plain Expedition: An Interim Report of the 1977 Season* (Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research 46; ed. J. A. Callaway; Cambridge: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1981).

27. Cf. J. M. Renfrew, "The archeological evidence for the domestication of plants: Methods and problems," pp.149-172, esp. 163 in *The Domestication and Exploitation of Plants and Animals* (eds. Peter John Ucko, G. W. Dimbleby; Livingston: Transaction Pub., 2007).

28. Bruce Smith, "The transition to food production," pp. 199-229, esp. p.207 in *Archeology at the Millennium: A Sourcebook* (eds. Gary M. Feinman, Theron Douglas Price; New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2007).

29. T. E. Levy, "The Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in the Near East," pp. 491- 494, esp. 492 in *The Oxford Companion to Archeology* (eds. Brian M. Fagan, Charlotte Beck; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).
30. N. Lipshchitz, "Plant economy and diet in the Early Bronze Age in Israel: A summary of present research," pp. 277-296 in *L'Urbanization de la Palestine a l'Age du Bronze Ancien* (ed. P. de Miroschedji; BAR International Series No.527; BAR International, Oxford, 1989); D. W. McCreery, *The Nature and Cultural Implications of Early Bronze Age Agriculture in the Southern Ghor of Jordan: An Archeological Reconstruction* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1980) pp.153-208.
31. W. E. Rast, "Bab edh-Dhra and the origin of the Sodom saga," pp. 185-201 in *Archeology and Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Memory of Glenn Rose* (eds. L. G. Perdue, L. E. Toombs and G. L. Johnson; Atlanta: John Knox, 1987).
32. See Genesis 14:2.
33. Cf. N. R. Tur-Sinai, 'vechiper admato amo,' *Tarbiz* 24 (1954) p. 232 (Heb.).
34. Genesis 18:20, 19:13.
35. The small size of Zoar was Lot's stated reason for wanting to go there in the first place (Genesis 19:20, 22). Cf. Rashi, Genesis 19:20. A *tzadi* possibly replaced the *zayin* in the name Zoar.
36. Cf. Genesis 19:30-38.
37. The rabbis understood Ammon and Moab to be existential relatives of Sodom and Gomorrah. Cf. *Tanhuma Ki-Tetze* 3.
38. The Sages understood that the rule of mixed species in the vineyard only applies within the Land of Israel, cf. Maimonides, *Sefer Hamitzvot*, negative commandment 216; *Sefer Hahinuch*, 548. The destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah took place specifically because of their location within the boundaries of the Promised Land. The Torah declares that the Land of Israel cannot suffer sexual immorality: *That the land not vomit you out also, when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you* (Lev. 18:28). This warning immediately follows a long list of laws mandating sexual morality. There are two anomalies in Leviticus 18:28 which appear to hint specifically at the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. First, there is the assertion that a single nation was expelled, as opposed to the proverbial seven nations of Canaan. Furthermore, the verse speaks in the past tense, about a nation which *was* already expelled, while the nations of Canaan are *yet* to be expelled. This indicates that there was already at the time of the giving of these laws a nation which was rejected from the land due to their immorality. This can be understood as a reference to the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.



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