

Avraham pleads for Sodom to be saved, as messengers are sent to Sodom.

וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים סָדְמָה בְּעֶרְבַּי וְלוֹט יָשָׁב בְּשַׁעַר-סְדֹם וַיֵּרָא-לוֹט וַיִּקָּם לִקְרֹאתָם
וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֲפָיִם אֶרְצָה:

“And the two messengers came to Sodom in the evening. And Lot sat in the gates of the City of Sodom, and Lot saw, and he got up towards them. And he bowed toward them, his nostrils groundward.” (Bereishis 19:1).

Who were these messengers? Who sent them? What was their purpose? Why were there (only) two?

Gemara Bava Metziah 86b, says, *who were these men? They were Michael, Gavriel, and Raphael. Michael came to announce the birth to Sarah; Raphael came to heal Avraham; and Gavriel went to destroy Sodom. Two messengers came to Sodom because Michael came along to save Lot. As it says “He overturned the city” (Bereishis 19:25) because only one overturned it.*

This Gemara is well known and, in fact, it (and its companion in the Midrash) leads the interpretation of these passages not only for Orthodox Jews – and Jews generally – but also for most Christian and secular biblical scholars. They use it to make sense of why three men came to Avraham and yet two went to Sodom, and how these men had the foresight to know of a coming son and had the power to destroy cities.¹ Further, Gavriel is mentioned to be the “man” who found Yoseph wandering, by Midrash Rabba (84:14). (Bereishis 37:15). If Gavriel is a destroyer, per this Gemara, does that mean Gavriel sent Yoseph to his doom (to die by the hands of his brothers)? Why was the news-bringer Michael sent to Sodom to save Lot? Should it not have been Raphael, the healer? In fact, Rashi says it was Raphael in his commentary to Bereishis 18:2. He also references Midrash Rabba 50:2 that they were actually heavenly messengers, and not Gemara Bava Metziah. Another question: why did Gavriel come to Avraham if his mission was to destroy Sodom. He had no business by Avraham. It was not to tell Avraham about the destruction, because news would be for Michael and also, Hashem told Avraham about the destruction *after* the men departed. (Bereishis 18:17).

This is all *al pi drush*. When reading the pesukim finely, the plain meaning is that not only were these “men” not angels, but they did not give any news to Sarah, nor did they destroy Sodom (as both were done by Hashem). Also, it was Avraham that sent messengers to Sodom.

¹ Take notice that the names of the malochim, Michael, Gavriel, and Raphael, are not found in Tana'kh until the later Neviim (Doniel). Whether the Jews living in Bavel borrowed names from the Babylonians who named their angels, or who were influenced to actually name *their* malochim because Babylonians named theirs, is beyond the scope of this piece.

Rashi says, *two came to Sodom because the one to give news to Sarah already departed.* As mentioned, this is contrary to Gemara Bava Metziah, but it is brought in Midrash Tanchuma, Vayera 8. *They are called angels here but men before because in Avraham's presence they were like men, as he was fit to receive angels.* If so, Lot must be as great as Avraham because it calls them men before Lot, too. (Bereishis 19:10 and 12). *They arrived at Sodom in the evening because they waited for Avraham to finish bargaining with Hashem.*

Chizkuni says, *they were called 'men' by Lot not because Lot was great, but because Lot was saying to the people, these who you would refer to as men.* This explanation still makes it seem like Lot was great enough to discern they were angels while his townsfolk could not. That puts Lot also at a higher level.

Radak says, *with Avraham they did not outrank him so they were called 'men' while with Lot they were angels. He learned the practice of welcoming guests from Avraham.*

Haamek Davar says, *they were prophets who appeared regal, like in the form of angels, so Lot saw them and refers to them as angels.*

Ibin Ezra says, *evening means at dusk.*

Sforno says, *they were angels so there was no time for them. They remained hidden (invisible) until evening. They departed from Avraham after he finished bargaining with Hashem to spare Sodom. They would spend the night in the street, because Sodom would not offer them lodging.*

Ohr Chaim says, *Lot was saved because of his hosting the messengers. Although Midrash Rabbah says that he was saved on Avraham's behalf, Lot needed a redeeming quality. Lot rose to them because he recognized them as angels who he saw in Avraham's house. This would mean that Avraham also recognized the 'men' as angels, and yet both he and Lot asked them to wash their hands and feet and dine – angels have no need for these amenities.*

That the "men" were angels is *drush*. When the Torah wants to say "angel" it uses the term "messenger of Hashem." (See e.g. Bereishis 16:7-11, 22:11, Shmos 3:2, 22:22). Here the term is simply "man" or "messenger." If they were angels did Avraham and Lot know, because they both treated them as people. If they were actual angels, why did they eat and drink? Also, why did an angel need to bring Sarah news that they already knew (the news about having a son was given to Avraham, previously). Why were they men before Avraham but then Angels came to Lot and then they are referred to as men again? If the angel came to destroy Sodom why did Hashem do it, Himself (Ibid 19:24)?

The answer is the in the plain reading that the men were men, and the "messengers" were Avraham's messengers. This is revealed when the entire episode is read carefully in context.

When reading the beginning of perek 18, we note that Avraham's name does not appear until pasuk 6, "And Avraham hurried." (Ibid). This is because the beginning of the episode is a continuation, an expounding, of the pervious perek's revelations. Since Hashem changed Avraham's name, "your name shall no longer be Avram, but your name shall be Avraham," (Ibid 17:5), the Torah could not call him Avram in perek 18. Therefore, the name is left out until it gets to the part that it is elaborating. The previous

perek already said Hashem appeared to Avram (ibid 18:1), that Hashem made a bris with Avram (ibid 18:2) and commanded it be for generation (ibid 17:12), and changed his name (ibid 18:5) and Sarah's name (ibid 17:15). Hashem (not a *malach*) revealed to Avraham that he would have a son through Sarah (Ibid 17:19, 21) and Avraham rejoiced at the news (ibid 17:17). Then Hashem left Avraham, *when Hashem finished speaking to him*. (Ibid 17:22).

Perek 17 does not finish what happened because it explains that Avraham then went and circumcised himself and his entire household that day. (Ibid 17:26). Perek 18 then elaborates on what occurred during this appearance by Hashem. The appearance was by the forests or plains of Mamre in the heat of the day. (Ibid 18:1). This was an appearance in daytime, unlike all previous revelations when Avraham was sleeping. Now that the bris was made between them, Hashem could appear daytime. Avraham was conscious enough to notice men coming. (Ibid 2). He then asks *Hashem* to wait for him, so that Avraham (then Avram) may serve these men. (Ibid 3). That is why "Master" is singular, as it is referring to Hashem, not the *three* men. (Later, Lot says "masters" because he is talking to the two messengers. (Ibid 19:2)). Then he runs to them and asks them to stay (ibid 18:2) and prepares some water, gives them to drink and washes their feet. (18:4). He offers them bread and shade. (Ibid 18:5). Then he makes the bris on himself and his household. Now he is Avraham. As Avraham hastens to Sarah (despite the pain) and asks for three loaves. (Ibid 18:6). He then runs, chooses a calf, and gives it to an attendant to prepare. (Ibid 18:7). He takes butter and milk and the prepared calf meat and gives the men to eat. (Ibid 18:8). During the course of this meal, they ask after his wife, and he replies she's a homemaker (in the tent). (Ibid 18:9). (הִנֵּה "Behold" is used because despite him being rich and having many servants and attendants, she still runs the household herself. This is her qualification to raise the next generation of Hashem's people).

"And He [Hashem] said, I shall surely return to you at this time." (Ibid 18:10). It is Hashem because, first, it is singular, and second, Hashem already is recorded saying this exact revelation. (Ibid 17:21). "Sarah will bear a child to you at this appointed time, in the next year." (Ibid). It says further, "Hashem said to Avraham...I will return to you at this appointed time." (Ibid 18:13-14). It was not a *malach* or messenger that told Avraham. Hashem did, as recorded. Avraham even rejoiced that even though he and Sarah were so old, they would have a son. (Ibid 17:17). Now it elaborates and says "Sarah is ninety" was because she no longer had the way of women (ibid 18:11) and she also heard and also rejoiced. (Ibid 18:12).

Then the men got up and they looked to go toward Sodom. (Ibid 18:16). וַאֲבְרָהָם וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתָּם וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם אֶל־סְדוֹם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֲבְרָהָם וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם אֶל־סְדוֹם. "And Avraham walked among them and sent them." (Ibid). Avraham is the one that sent them to Sodom. This is because Hashem revealed the plan to destroy Sodom. (Ibid 18:17-21). He sent two. Knowing it would be destroyed, one went on his own way. Avraham pleads to save the cities. (Ibid 23). When not enough men of merit could be found, Avraham gets the conciliation from Hashem that Lot can be saved. "And the men turned from there and went to Sodom, and Avraham continued to stand before Hashem." (Ibid 18:22). Hashem only departed when He finished speaking to Avraham

(Ibid 18:33), as it said before “And He finished speaking with Avraham and Hashem went up.” (Ibid 17:22).

Avraham was the one that sent the messengers to Sodom to get Lot out. Two of the three that came to him agreed to be messengers and they went to inform Lot. (Ibid 19:1). Lot invites them but they refuse. (Ibid 19:2). When Lot is adamant, they know they have the right Lot. (Ibid 19:3). In this episode, every time it says “men” it refers to the people of Sodom, except pasuk 5 (because the Sodomites do not know they are messengers). The messengers are referred to as “messengers.” The “people of Sodom” surrounded the house. (Ibid 19:4). After Lot leaves his house to plead with them, “The men [of Sodom] sent their hands [enforcers, to get Lot] but [Lot’s household and the messengers] brought Lot into the house and closed the door.” (Ibid 19:10). “And the men [of Sodom] at the door of the house were struck with blindness. (Ibid 19:11). “And the men [of Sodom] said to Lot, further, ‘Who is with you here, your sons-in-law, daughters...take them out of this place.’” (Ibid 19:12). Having been struck with blindness they knew Lot and these messengers were no good for them. They wanted them out of the city.

“For we are destroying this place.” (Ibid 19:13). This cannot be referring to the messengers talking. The pasuk says “we” but only one destroyed Sodom (Ibid 19:25) and it was Hashem. (Ibid 19:24,29). The men of Sodom realized they were destroying their own city with their sins. It should be read *It is destroying us*. Whatever power struck them with blindness, they wanted it gone. “Because their cry was the face of [or facing] Hashem, ‘and we sent Hashem to destruction.’” (Ibid 19:13) Their “cry” was their “sin” as it clarifies earlier. (Ibid 18:20). Unlike the Tower of Bavel incident, the people of Sodom did want to destroy Hashem.

“The messengers pressed Lot to leave.” (Ibid 19:15). “He tarried so the men [of Sodom] took his and his wife’s hands and his daughter’s hands ... and put them outside the city.” (Ibid 19:16). They threw them out and did not kill them because of Hashem’s pity (and promise to Avraham). (Ibid). “He [Hashem] said, ‘Flee for your life.’” (Ibid 19:17). We know it is Hashem talking – not a *malach* – because Lot only pleads with one “Lord.” (Ibid 19:18). The only One that could grant Lot the favor of saving the small city and allow Lot to go there was Hashem. It was not a man or messenger or *malach* that destroyed Sodom, but Hashem. (Ibid 19:24,29). “It was when the Lord destroyed the cities.” (Ibid 19:29).

There are many lessons to be learned from the Gemara and Midrash, and it is also important to know the plain meaning.