

When Societies Collapse

Parshat Vayera
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וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה זַעֲקַת סְדֹם וְעֹמְרָה כִּי־רַבָּה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כְבֹדָה מְאֹד:

Then the LORD said, "The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! (Genesis 18:20)

Ramban: This is crying out of "the oppressed people who cry and plead because of the brutality of the wicked."

Or Hachayim: their wickedness included not only the metaphysical, i.e. idolatry, but also moral-ethical wickedness in their relations with fellow human beings.

Talmudic examples of their wickedness (Sanhedrin 109)

There were four judges in Sodom and they were named for their actions: Shakrai, meaning liar, and Shakrurai, habitual liar, Zayfai, forger, and Matzlei Dina, perverter of justice. These were the judgments that they rendered: In a case of one who strikes the wife of another and causes her to miscarry, they would say to the woman's husband: Give the woman to the one who struck her, so that she will be impregnated for you again...In a case of one who wounds another, they would say to the injured party: Give the one who wounded you a fee, as he let your blood.

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. And that is the meaning of that which is written: "And the Lord said: Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great [*rabba*]" (Genesis 18:20).

And Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: *Rabba* is an allusion to the matter of the young woman [*riva*] who was killed for her act of kindness. It is due to that sin that the fate of the people of Sodom was sealed. 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. And that is the meaning of that which is written: "And the Lord said: Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great [*rabba*]" (Genesis 18:20). And Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: *Rabba* is an allusion to the matter of the young woman [*riva*] who was killed for her act of kindness. It is due to that sin that the fate of the people of Sodom was sealed.

Economic Egoism

In his book of Torah commentary *Jewish Values in an Open Society*, the economist and business ethicist Meir Tamari writes about the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as the sin of "Economic Egoism."... "What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours" was the ethic of Sodom and Gomorrah (Pirkei Avot/Ethics of the Fathers 5:11). At first this would seem to be a sensible and harmless ethic, and yet it places the emphasis on individual possessions and financial gain and ignores the demand that we care for all of humanity.
-Rabbi Steven Nathan

Axios.com on Factors of Societal Collapse by Bryan Walsh

Inequality: One factor that recurs again and again in the collapse of civilizations is the rise of inequality, as elites increasingly accumulate wealth and power at the expense of the masses. Inequality creates social unrest, but it also undermines the collective solidarity needed to respond to other threats, both internal and external.

Disease: The "Antonine plague" struck the Roman Empire at its height in the late second century, spreading via trade routes to kill an estimated 7 million to 8 million people. Another plague in the mid-sixth century — a precursor to Europe's "Black Death" — may have killed half the Roman Empire, and its aftershocks "helped push the Romans past the breaking point," as the University of Oklahoma classics professor Kyle Harper wrote.

Luke Kemp BBC.com

Great civilisations are not murdered. Instead, they take their own lives. So concluded the historian Arnold Toynbee in his 12-volume magnum opus *A Study of History*. It was an exploration of the rise and fall of 28 different civilisations. He was right in some respects: civilisations are often responsible for their own decline. However, their self-destruction is usually assisted. The Roman Empire, for example, was the victim of many ills including overexpansion, climatic change, environmental degradation and poor leadership. But it was also brought to its knees when Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410 and the Vandals in 455. Collapse is often quick and greatness provides no immunity. The Roman Empire covered 4.4 million sq km (1.9 million sq miles) in 390. Five years later, it had plummeted to 2 million sq km (770,000 sq miles). By 476, the empire's reach was zero.

Collapse is not necessarily apocalyptic

Complete extinction of a culture is rare; in most cases, the new societies that arise from the ashes of the old one are evidently its offspring, despite a dramatic reduction in sophistication. Moreover, the influence of a collapsed society, say that of the Roman Empire, may linger on long after its death. wikipedia.com

Ancient civilisations

The average lifespan of a civilisation is 336 years 

