

Recasting Lot's Wife

Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School
and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership



In difficult times it's natural to want to look back. Our memories can have a way of blurring the edges, so we remember things the way we have categorized them in our minds, without the details that don't fit our story. If we're remembering warmly, we may blur out the parts of the story that don't hold up; if it's a bitter memory we may leave out the parts that included kindness or helpfulness.

We can get bogged down in "if only" and "I told you so," tripping ourselves in regret and blame. Too much looking back, we can't move forward. Too little, we fail to learn from history and experience. Blame is rarely productive or compassionate. It can be an understandable defensive strategy to help us make sense of difficult or painful reality. If someone else is at fault, it puts distance between those terrible events and our own responsibility, as well as the possibility that we could suffer a similar fate. Sometimes there is clear culpability, and it is important to be honest. Often the real story is unknown.

Classical midrash and commentaries look for culpability to understand the puzzling verse describing the fate of Lot's unnamed wife.

וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתְּהִי נְצִיב מֶלַח:

Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt. (Gen 19:26)

If the warning not to look back (19:17) was intended to spare Lot and his fleeing household the consequences of witnessing the destruction wrought on Sodom and Gomorra (see Ramban on 19:17) or betray any regret about leaving their material belongings or their neighbors, Lot's wife's backward look was some kind of violation. Bereishit Rabba 51 imagines that this unusual punishment was poetic retribution for an imagined sin

in Sodom, where she tried to avoid welcoming the angels into their home by asking the neighbors for salt to borrow, thereby informing them of the angels' arrival.

Many contemporary writers are puzzled by this theatrical punishment for such a natural impulse. How do we not look back? There is a fascinating body of poetry primarily by women poets whose imaginations were captured by the enigma of Lot's wife.

The American Israeli poet [Shirley Kaufman \(1923-2016\)](#) who was certainly aware of the rabbinic commentaries, offered a counter narrative in her poem, *His Wife*:

But it was right that she
looked back. Not to be
curious, some lumpy
reaching of the mind
that turns all shapes to pillars.
But to be only who she was
apart from them, the place
exploding, and herself
defined. Seeing them melt
to slag heaps and the flames
slide into their mouths.
Testing her owl lips then,
the coolness, till
she could taste the salt.

In [Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash](#)) Ruti Timor approaches the story with similar empathy, basing her reading on a midrash from Pirkei Derabbi Eliezer 25 which imagines Lot's wife (to whom midrash assigns a name, Idit

or Irit) overcome with compassion for her married daughters who she fears are remaining in Sodom: He said to her: Quiet, woman! Do as I say! She was silent. And the angels took them out of the city, and Lot did not say to his wife a word of what they said. He walked sure-footed, and she lagged behind him. Her heart was heavy upon her, she looked back and saw her city, her family, and her property going up in flames. And his wife looked behind, and became a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26). Tear after tear dripped from her eyes, and the tears grew fuller and fuller, stronger and stronger, until they became a pillar of salt. She stumbled and fell, and stirred no more. And Lot did not look back. Our Sages of Blessed Memory said, with salt she sinned and with salt was she punished. And I say, she sinned not, but was punished all the same.

It takes tremendous spiritual work to greet others with compassion or empathy rather than blame. It is harder to see the world in its moral complexity, and to act accordingly.

Dr. Gila Vachman, from Machon Schechter, brought to mind another midrash from Bereishit Rabba on a passage later in the parsha when Hagar fears that Ishmael is dying of thirst in the desert.

אמר רבי יהודה ברבי סימון
 קפצו מלאכי השרת לקטרגו
 אמרו לפניו: רבונו של עולם, אדם שהוא עתיד להמית את בניך
 בצמא, את מעלה לו הבאר
 אמר להם: עכשיו מה הוא, צדיק או רשע
 אמרו לו: צדיק
 אמר להם: איני דן את האדם אלא בשעתו
 (בראשית רבה נג, יד)

Rabbi Shimon said, 'The ministering angels leapt to condemn [Ishmael]. They said, Creator of the universe, a person who is destined to kill your children by thirst, will You produce a spring for him?' The Holy One said to them: 'What is he right now, righteous or wicked?' They said to him: 'He is righteous.' God said to them: 'I judge a person only at his present time.' (Genesis Rabba 53:25).

Here, the midrash reframes judgment as compassion, echoing the lesson implicit in Lot's wife's story: to see others as they are now, not as we imagine their past or future to be. May we rise beyond our instincts to blame and condemn, to try to greet one another, even those we do not understand, with compassion. May we learn from the past and from the complexity of the human experience, to move forward with empathy towards justice.