

The Prophetic Voice

Hebrew Scripture and Public Life

MINICOURSE



SACRED TEXTS
SHARED CIVIC LIFE



*With Benjamin Sax, Ph.D.,
ICJS Jewish scholar*

WEDNESDAYS

APRIL 15, 22, AND 29, 2026

7:00–8:30 PM ET ONLINE



Today's Agenda



1. A Jewish Way into Biblical Interpretation
2. The Sin of Economic Disempowerment and Idolatry Through Sodom and Gomorrah
3. A Jewish Way into Economic Empowerment
4. Plenary and Q&A

An open book with Hebrew text is shown in the foreground, with a rolled-up scroll in the background. The text is in Hebrew and appears to be a religious or historical document. The background is a dark, blurred setting, possibly a library or a study.

A Jewish Way Into Biblical Interpretation

The Jewish Canon: Standing On One Foot

Biblical Period

Rabbinic Judaism

BCE

200 CE

650 CE

TaNaKh

Torah, Nevi'im, Khetuvim

aka The Hebrew Bible

Mishnah

Mishnah: The Oral Law

Gemara: Commentary
to the Mishnah

Talmud

Mishnah, Gemara, and
Commentaries

Two version: Babylonian
& Palestinian

Midrash

Exegetical Explorations
of TaNaKh

The Jewish Canon: Standing On One Foot

Simplifying the Talmud



900 CE

1600 CE

Mishneh Torah

Maimonides, 1180

Shulkhan Arukh

Josef Karo, 1563



Speaking Jewishly: Terms



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Halakhah - הלכה

Jewish law; literally means “path or way;” also refers to a collective body of religious law deriving from the written and the oral Torah.

Mitzvah - מצוה

commandment, sometimes known as *mitzve*, which is a good deed.

Avodah Zarah - עבודה זרה

idolatry, literally means “foreign worship,” or “strange work.”



The Three Categories of Halakhah

משפטים

Mishpatim

Justice laws
between people

זכר

Zekher

Reminders of
G-d

חקים

Khokim

Statutes,
because 'G-d
says so'

Interpretation Can Prevent Idolatry



Zohar 1:135a

“Come and See! Of Solomon is written: *he spoke three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered one thousand and five* (I Kings 5:12). They have already established that every single proverb he spoke implied one thousand and five meanings (*BT Eruvin 21b*). If this is so with the words of Solomon—who was flesh and blood—how much more so with words of Torah, spoken by the Holy One! Every single word contains countless parables, songs, praises, supernal secrets, countless varieties of wisdom. So, who can express the mighty acts of YHVH?”

A landscape photograph of a salt flat, likely the Bonneville Basin in Utah. The foreground is a vast, flat expanse of white salt crust, cracked into irregular, polygonal patterns. The middle ground shows a calm, blue body of water extending to the horizon. In the background, a range of rugged, brown mountains stretches across the horizon under a clear, light blue sky. The overall scene is serene and desolate.

The Sin of Economic Disempowerment and Idolatry

Sources for an Interpretation of Economic Empowerment

TaNaKh:

Genesis 13:13, 19:4-11
Exodus 20:8-10
Ezekiel 16:49-50

Mishnah:

Avot 1:10, 2:21, and
5:10

Talmud:

Berakhot 8a
Sanhedrin 109a
Avot d'rabbi Natan 1:11

Commentaries:

Zohar 1:135a
Shulkhan Arukh (1563)
Aseh L'cha Rav (1970s)

Genesis 19:1-13



The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them and, bowing low with his face to the ground, he said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house to spend the night, and bathe your feet; then you may be on your way early.” But they said, “No, we will spend the night in the square.” But he urged them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. They had not yet lain down, when the townsmen, the men of Sodom—young and old, the whole entire body—gathered about the house.

Genesis 19:1-13



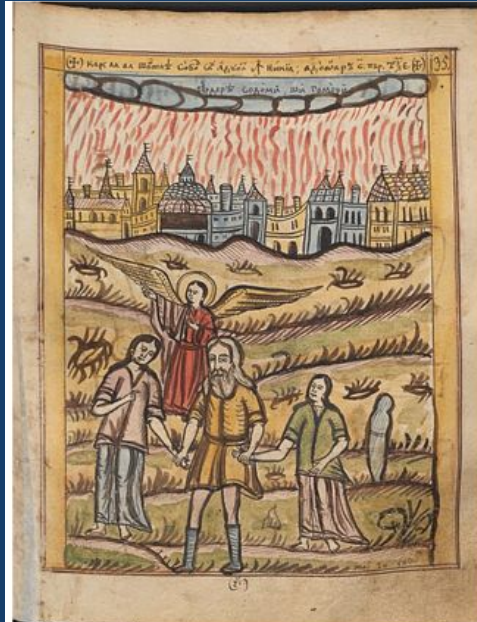
And they shouted to Lot and said to him, “Where are the ones who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them.” So, Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him, and said, “I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to the others, since they have come under the shelter of my roof.” But they said, “Stand back! The fellow,” they said, “came here as an alien, and already he acts the ruler! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.”

Genesis 19:1-13



And they pressed hard against the man—against Lot—and moved forward to break the door. But the others reached out and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And those who were at the entrance of the house, low and high alike, they struck with blinding light, so that they were helpless to find the entrance. Then the agents said to Lot, “Whom else have you here? In-laws, your sons and daughters [themselves]—anyone else that you have in the city—bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place; because the outcry against them before G-d has become so great that G-d has sent us to destroy it.”

Genesis 19:23-25



השמש יצא על-הארץ ולוט בא צערה ויי
המטיר על-סדם ועל-עמרה גפרית ואש מאת יי
מן-השמים ויהפך את-הערים האל ואת כל-
הככר ואת כל-ישבי הערים וצמח האדמה

As the sun rose upon the earth and Lot entered Zoar,
G-d rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire
from G-d out of heaven

annihilating those cities and the entire Plain, and all
the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the
ground.

Sodom and Gomorrah



ואנשי סדם רעים וחטאים ליי מאד

Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the Lord.

Genesis 13:13

While God promised Noah never to destroy the world again, God never promised not to destroy one community.

What makes a society, a body politic, so irredeemably wicked that it must be destroyed?

OR

What makes a society so wicked that it will inevitably destroy itself?

Genesis 19:4-11



טרם ישכבו ואנשי העיר אנשי סדם נסבו על-
הבית מנער ועד־זקן כל־העם מקצה

They had not yet lain down, when the townsmen, the men of Sodom—young and old, the whole entire body—gathered about the house.

ויקראו אל־לוט ויאמרו לו איה האנשים
אשר־באו אליך הלילה הוציאם אלינו ונדעה
אתם

And they shouted to Lot and said to him, “Where are the ones who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them.”

Genesis 19:4-11



- What produces such vile behavior?
- Why such mass hostility to foreigners and to those who want to protect them?
- Why use sex as a tool for violence?

What are the Root Causes of Sodomite Behavior?



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הנה־זה היה עון סדם אחותך גאון שבעת־לחם
ושלות השקט היה לה ולבנותיה ויד־עני ואביון לא
החזיקה: ותגבהינה ותעשינה תועבה לפני ואסיר
אתהן כאשר ראיתי

“Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom:
arrogance!! She and her daughters had plenty of
bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not
support the poor and needy. In their haughtiness,
they committed abomination before Me; and so I
removed them, as you saw.”

Ezekiel 16:49-50



Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 109a



“The people of Sodom became arrogant before the Holy One only from the goodness that God had provided for them... the people of Sodom said: ‘Since food comes out from our land, and gold and silver come out from our land, and precious stones and pearls come out from our land, we have no need for other people to come to us. They come to us only to empty us out. Let us take a stand to make strangers forgotten among us.’ The Holy One said to them: ‘Since with the goodness that I provided you, you have made strangers forgotten among you, I will make you forgotten from the world.’”

The Root Causes of the Sin of Sodom



Wealth hoarding: A worldview that suggests my fortune and wealth reflects a greater value or worth than others.

The passage in Sanhedrin continues with a list of the sinful Sodomite rules. The law of Sodom benefited:

- **property owners over orphans,**
- **rich over poor,**
- **locals over travelers,**
- **criminals over crime victims**

The city went so far as to criminalize giving to the needy, and meted out cruel punishments to those who attempted to share food with the hungry.

Mishnah Avot 5:10



“There are four types of character in how human beings relate to property:

- One that says: ‘mine is mine, and yours is yours’: this is a **commonplace** type; and some say this is a **sodom-type** of character.
- One that says: ‘mine is yours and yours is mine’: is an **unlearned** person (*am haaretz*).
- One that says: ‘mine is yours and yours is yours’: this is a **pious** person.
- One that says: ‘mine is mine, and yours is mine’: this is a **wicked** person.”

“Mine is Mine and Yours is Yours”



The Sin of Economic Disempowerment

- If one benefiting from my property would cause me any real financial loss or harm, then it is normal, common behavior to prevent it: “What’s mine is mine; what’s yours is yours.” Back off!
- However, if I prevent you from benefiting from my financial well-being, even though I would not stand to lose anything through your prosperity, then I embody the “sodom-type of character,” because I am not concerned with my own security, but only with preventing yours.

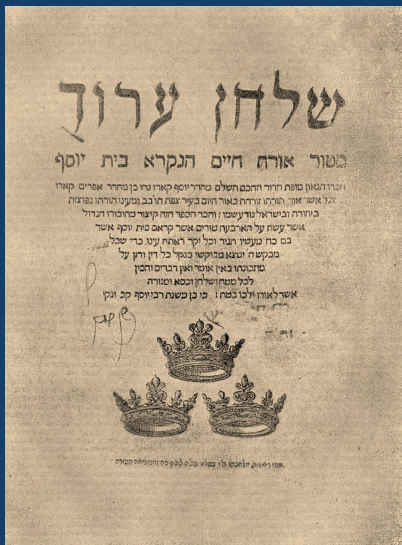
How to Prevent Another Sodom and Gomorrah



Kofin 'al midat Sedom - כופין על מדת סדום
We block attempts to behave like Sodom

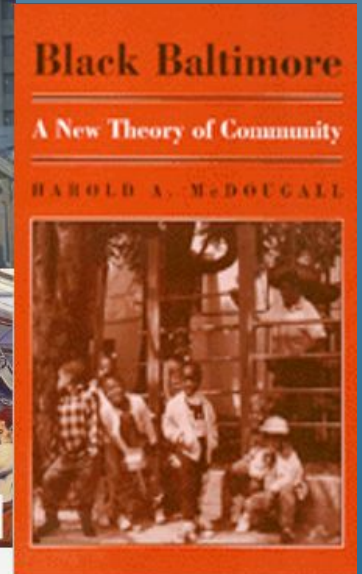
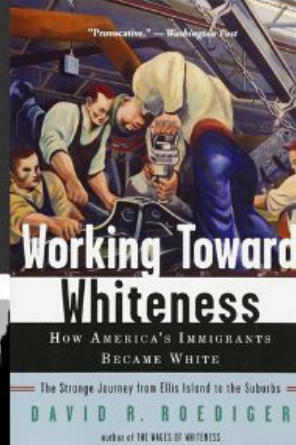
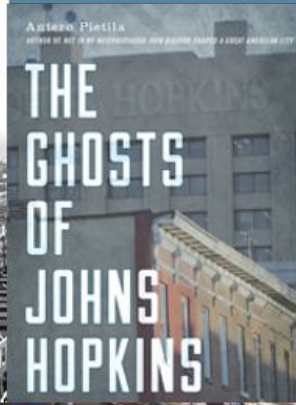
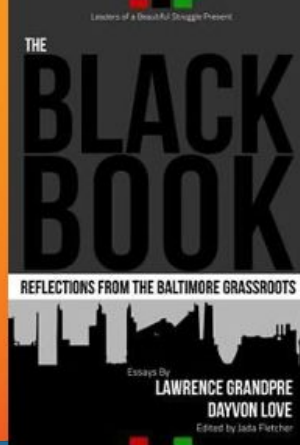
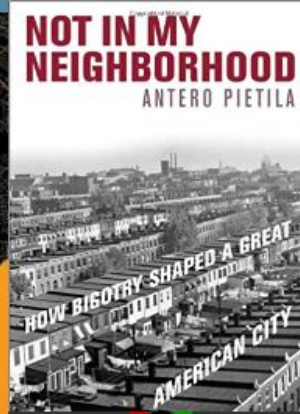
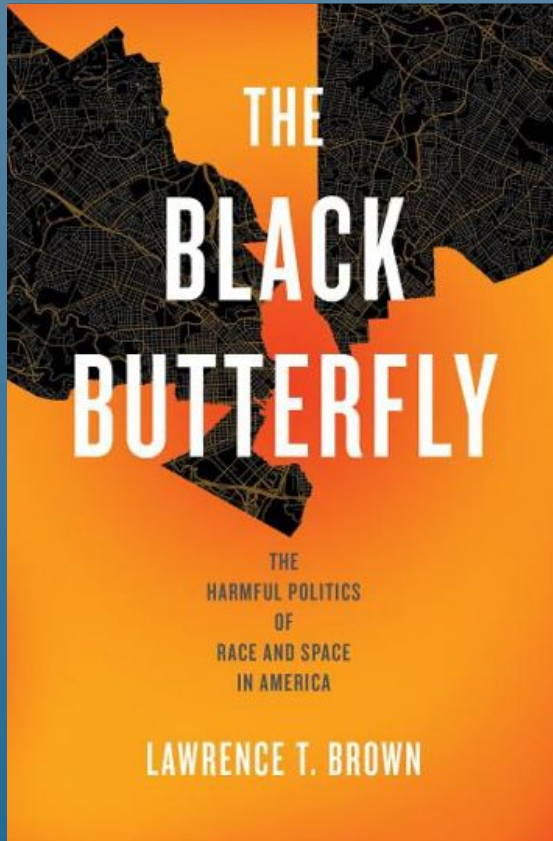
There is a long-standing principle in Jewish law that mandates a court intervene to compel people not to obstruct other people's flourishing.

Shulkhan Arukh (Josef Karo, 1563)

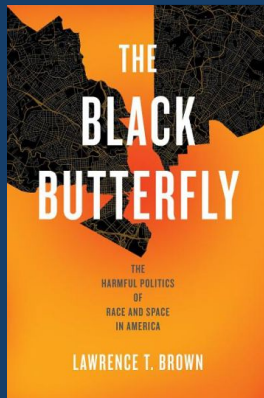
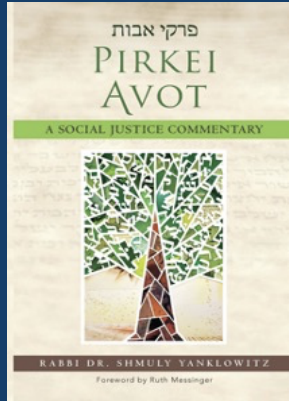


“ Siblings or partners who come to divide a field, each one taking one’s share: if it’s all completely equal, then they divide it only according to size. If one said, ‘Give me my share on this side, so that it will be connected to my other field and it will be one field,’ we listen to them, and we enforce this, for preventing this is a trait of Sedom. ”

Witnessing The Traits of Sodom in Baltimore



10 Minute Breakout



האומר שלי שלי ושלך שלך, זו מדה בינונית. ויש
אומרים, זו מדה סדום

"One that says: 'mine is mine, and yours is yours':
this is a commonplace type; and some say this is a
sodom-type of character." Mishnah Avot 5:10

- Is it fair to claim that redlining is an example of this trait?
- How do you reverse this trait when it has become part of society and culture?

A black and white photograph of a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a light-colored hoodie, shouting into a megaphone. She is in the foreground, looking towards the right. In the background, other people are visible, some holding signs. One sign clearly says "OUR FUTURE". Another sign has the word "HEAT" repeated. The overall scene suggests a protest or a public demonstration. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue gradient on the right side.

A Jewish Way to Economic Empowerment

Elements of a Jewish Way to Economic Empowerment:



1. Don't be like Sodom and Gomorrah

2. Ensure dignity in work

3. Don't deny G-dliness

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 8a



Rabbi Chiyya ben Ammi said in the name of Ulla: 'Greater is the one who benefits from the work of his hands than the one who fears heaven.' In regard to the one who fears heaven, it is written, *Happy is the person who fears God* (Psalm 112). But in regard to the one who benefits from his own work, it is written, *When you eat from the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you* (Psalm 128). "You will be happy" refers to this world; "It will be well with you" refers to the world to come. In regard to the one who fears heaven, the text does not say "it will be well with you."

What is Work?



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In Exodus 20:8-10, we read two distinct words for “work”:

זכור את-יום השבת לקדשו ששת ימים תעבד ועשית
כל-מלאכתך ויום השביעי שבת ליי אלהיך לא-תעשה
כל-מלאכה אתה ובנד-ובתך עבדך ואמתך ובהמתך וגרך
אשר בשעריך

“Remember the Shabbat and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor [*ta'avod*] and do all your work [*melakh'tekha*], but the seventh day is a Shabbat of the lord your God: you shall not do any work [*melakha*]--you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements.”



Two Words for 'Work.' Why?



Both roots describe the activity of the six days of creation, in contrast to Sabbath rest. Rabbinic tradition nonetheless distinguishes between them.

ayin-bet-dalet (עבד)

avodah comes to mean “worship” in the sense of “service”

eved, variously translated as “servant” and “slave”

lamed-alef-kaf (לאך)

melakha the rabbis use for all tasks prohibited on the Sabbath

malakh, a task-doer, translated both as “messenger” and “angel”

Two Words for 'Work.' Why?



ayin-bet-dalet (עבד) & *lamed-alef-kaf* (לאר)

- In both cases, there is an understanding of the nature of the human being, as a creature who cannot be reduced to the status of worker.
- The inclusion of the *eved* within the Sabbath commandment, whether rendered as “slave” or “servant,” combined with the increasing tendency to treat *avodah* as denoting primarily *divine* service, arguably forms a trajectory that leads to the fundamental denial that one human should be *eved* to another, rather than to G-d.

A Partnership with G-d



שמעיה אומר אהב את המלאכה

“Shemiah used to say ‘love work.’”

Mishnah Avot, 1:10

“Love work. How? This teaches that a person should love work, and not hate work. Just as the Torah was given through the covenant, so too, work was given through the covenant, as it says, *Remember the Shabbat and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor [ta'avod] and do all your work [melakh'tekha], but the seventh day is a Shabbat of the lord your God.*”

Avot d'Rabbi Natan, 1:11

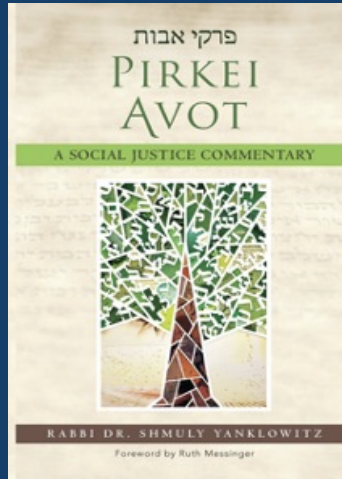
A Partnership with G-d



“Work is sacred--it is building and creating and is a partnership with G-d in the work of creation.”

Chaim David Halevi,
Aseh L'cha Rav, 2:64

Plenary



הוא היה אומר לא עליך המלאכה לגמר ולא
אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה

"Rabbi Tarfon said, It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either."

Mishnah Avot 2:21

1. What is the relationship between freedom and responsibility?
2. In your opinion, what does economic empowerment mean in a Jewish context?