

Lessons of the Past - Warnings for Today

Commentary to Parashat Vayera

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“And HaShem rained down upon Sodom and Gomorra brimstone and fire.” (Ber. 19:24)

When reading the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra we must pause to ask ourselves a question; what horrible behavior did these two cities display more than other cities before them or after them that caused them to be destroyed in such a sudden manner?

Whenever there are large groups of people living together, the congested conditions always bring out the worst of human behavior. The history of urbanization might very well also be a history of human criminal behavior. From cities of ancient times like Babel, before Sodom and Gomorra, to modern day urban centers, cities foster all types of human perversions. Therefore, the question must be asked, why pick out Sodom and Gomorra from all cities to destroy?

Granted the Midrash relates to us numerous stories about how wicked the cities were, but do you really think that the other cities of the day, Canaanite, Babylonian or otherwise were really any better? Were Sodom and Gomorra any more wicked than modern day New York, Las Vegas or Tel Aviv? While we might argue which city is indeed as bad as Sodom and Gomorra, we cannot argue that many modern cities rank high on the list of the most wicked cities of all times.

If G-d brought down the judgement of fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorra, who is to say that He won't bring down judgement upon some modern cities? I am sure that witnesses to Hiroshima and Nagasaki might compare their holocausts to those of Sodom and Gomorra. Also during W.W.II, Berlin was practically decimated by Allied bombings (couldn't have happened to a nicer group of people). Yet, we make distinctions between these modern day examples of destruction and the Biblical account of G-d's Divine wrath. Sodom and Gomorra, we say, were destroyed by the hand of G-d. These other cities, we say, were destroyed by the hand of man. This is a big difference, or so we think.

Although the Torah states that G-d rained down fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorra a modern witness to the event of the destruction might interpret the Hand of G-d to be some type of natural phenomena, the hand of nature as it were, without any Divine involvement whatsoever. Such a witness would tell us that we religious folks are merely creating a myth about Divine wrath, when in reality, everything can be explained naturally.

While such a modern day secularist would be totally convinced of the correctness of his argument, he would still nonetheless be totally wrong. Is this not also the case with many events and occurrences that happen in our days? Indeed, the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra does teach us a very important modern day lesson, that the wrath of

G-d is not always discernable as such. Many times G-d's wrath is cloaked or concealed within everyday events and acts of nature.

According to the mysteries of the Torah, based upon the famous "a time and a purpose for everything under Heaven" pasukim in Kohelet 3, there are different phases throughout human history when G-d is sometimes more, sometimes less manifest. The holy Mekubalim teach us that based upon Israel's behavior G-d's symbolic spiritual "Face" is sometimes turned towards us and sometimes it is turned away from us.

At the times when G-d's symbolic "Face" is turned towards us, everything is in abundance. There is wealth, health, long and good life. Yet, G-d's "Face" is directed towards Israel only when the nation is faithful to G-d's covenant. G-d's "Face" symbolically means the complete outpouring of blessing upon a properly aligned and balanced, ready and worthy mankind. However if mankind's actions were to waver, then they would not receive the abundance of blessing.

The blessings would still be pouring forth from G-d, but Israel not being in the right spiritual and Halakic place to receive the blessings of abundance causes those blessing to be cast down and to be captured and imprisoned by the forces of the klipot (shells), who are the demonic races. They in turn are nourished by the spiritual power of the blessing that should have gone to Israel. When the demonic races are thus strengthened their souls have the power to incarnate into human beings who then become the scourges of Israel, always trying to destroy them so that they (the demonic souls) can continue to steal their spiritual root and powers.

When Israel is thus not worthy of G-d's blessings because they violate His covenant by not observing the mitzvot, then Israel is said to be turning her symbolic "back" to G-d's "Face". G-d in turn, in His mercy not wanting the forces of His blessing to suckle the forces of evil (who would then rise up to destroy Israel) turns away His "Face" from Israel. This spiritual state when Israel and G-d are spiritually "Back" to "back" is the time of exile. When G-d and Israel are "Face" to "face" this is the time of redemption.

During the days of Sodom and Gomorra, before the giving of the Torah all mankind was in a state of "Back" to "back" relationship with G-d. Avraham began to correct this matter, but it was not until Moshe Rabbeynu came along that any matter of "Face" to "face" union was accomplished.

During the period of a "Face" to "face" union with G-d, Israel openly receives not only financial abundance and blessing but also the reception of prophecy and the witnessing of outright miracles and indisputable Divine interventions. When G-d's "Face" is towards Israel, the world knows it and sees it, as did Pharaoh in Egypt, the population of Jericho, the army of Sennacherib (II Kings 19:25) and many others. Yet, G-d's "Face" is towards Israel only as result of their observance of His covenant of Torah and mitzvot. When this is there all is there. When this is gone, all is gone.

Many centuries later, when the sins of the Jewish people again arose before G-d, the Shekhina was taken out of the holy Temple. Jerusalem, the Temple and all the land was then destroyed. The abundance of blessing that G-d had bestowed upon His people had to be removed in equal measure to their removal of righteousness from their lives.

If G-d continued to bless an evil people with abundance, they would misinterpret their abundance as a sign of Divine approval of their wicked ways. Consequently, G-d's blessing of abundance would become a curse, blinding the eyes of the wicked from their evil and inhibiting them from doing teshuva (repentance). G-d, therefore, sends judgement as an act of mercy so that the sinning souls may be made aware of the error of their ways.

When Jerusalem was destroyed with the destruction of the First Temple and the removal of the Shekhina, the relationship between G-d and Israel again turned into a "Back" to "back" mode. No longer was there to be any more prophecy. No more would we merit hearing a prophet cry, "thus says HaShem." No longer was there a visible presence of G-d in the Temple. There was no more Ark of the Covenant. In a "Back" to "back" relationship with G-d, it is as if G-d is completely concealed from us. It is as if (G-d forbid) Israel is orphaned. This explains why the Jewish people have suffered so many hardships since the days of the destruction of the First Temple. We have never yet restored the "Face" to "face" relationship that we once had with G-d but have lost.

In a "Back" to "back" relationship all Divine actions are concealed within acts of nature. This concealment protects both Israel and G-d. G-d's mercy and miracles are as abundant as always, yet they are not so recognizable. When either fortune or misfortune strike, some people simply say that "fate" has dealt them such a hand in life. It is as if there is no G-d (G-d forbid), but only the forces of an impersonal universe guided by the laws of nature.

Yet, in spite of an apparent lack of Divine judgement, this does not mean that such judgement is not executed on a daily basis. One of the thirteen principles (#11) as outlined by RaMBaM is that G-d rewards those who keep His commandments and punishes those who transgress them. While sometimes Divine punishment is meted out only in the afterlife, sometimes one gets it right here on earth (RaMBaM, Hilkhos Teshuva 6:1). While individuals may be punished in the world to come for their sins, societies, cities and nations are punished right here and now. Our human problem is that in our present state of a "Back" to "back" relationship with G-d, we are either blind to, or refuse to see G-d's Hand of wrath upon us.

This brings us to ask ourselves a number of questions. Are there any cities today whose wickedness might match or even surpass that of Sodom and Gomorra? The answer is most likely yes, many cities fall into this category.

Question two, are there within these cities fifty, or even ten righteous men whose merit might save their city from Divine judgement. The answer to this might be yes in one or two cases, but most likely not more than this number.

Question three, is there today a righteous man of the stature of an Avraham Avinu who can pray to G-d for us and intercede on our behalf to mitigate Divine judgement? While I know of many righteous men in our generation, I seriously question which of them has the righteousness and holiness of an Avraham Avinu and which of them is so spiritually influential that they can postpone a holocaust. Postpone, not eliminate.

Notice that I do not call upon a Tzadik HaDor (most righteous Rabbi of the generation) to pray to G-d to remove all judgement from us. This is not likely to happen. There is a universal state of balance (justice) that G-d has ordained must exist. Even Avraham Avinu

could not cancel the judgement against Sodom and Gomorra; he was only interested in saving the lesser righteous that they should not perish alongside the wicked. Yet, as for the wicked themselves, we do not hear Avraham making any intercession prayers on their behalf.

So today, we have many cities that have surpassed Sodom and Gomorra in their wickedness. Most of these cities cannot even boast of one righteous man living amongst them, all the more so ten. We also seem to lack an Avraham Avinu who can intercede. When all is said and done, to live in one of today's urban megalopolises, might be a dangerous thing in light of Divine judgement which inevitably must befall such places.

Even the great lover of peace, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook viewed the modern world and knew that a Divine judgement would quickly come upon all nations, one that would destroy them forever, to make way for the coming government of the Mashiah. In his **Orot M'Ofel, 8, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook** writes:

"The sin of the murderers - the wicked kings and all provocateurs - is indelible. The blood that was shed in the land will be atoned only by the blood of those who shed it, and the atonement must come: total dismantling of all foundations of contemporary civilization, with all their falsity and deception, with all their poison and venom. The entire civilization that rings false must be effaced from the world, and in its stead will arise a kingdom of a holy elite (ref. Daniel 7:18).

The present civilization will disappear with all its foundations - literature and theatre, and so forth; all the laws founded on inanity and iniquity, all evil etiquette will pass away.

Therefore, the entire contemporary civilization is doomed and in its ruins will be established a world order of truth and G-d consciousness."

In light of the instability that exists in the world and the hostility between western nations and Moslem fundamentalist countries, the outbreak of a WWII might be only one rogue nuclear strike away. The intelligence agencies of the world's governments fight a never ending battle against rogue terrorist and organized crime groups (and sometimes each other) to maintain a world free of open armed conflict. With the existence of modern nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, with the existence of many evil and unscrupulous groups and with the existence of massive amounts of cash available to these groups to illegally obtain such weapons, we have a recipe for disaster.

We must again ask the question, in light of our current "Back" to "back" relationship with G-d, when the Divine Hand is concealed within acts of nature (or within acts of man), who is to say that Divine judgment will not be called for and that Heaven itself will not turn its Hand from preventing such a disaster? After all, if our sins deem for us such a fate, why should Heaven intervene? What righteous man is there to defend us? What merit will we have to offset such a horrible Divine edict?

Discount this possibility if you wish. Mock it if you feel so inclined. Just remember one thing; you will not be the first to do so. The Rabbis and ordinary Jews of Europe discounted such a possibility, until the Nazis came along and rounded them all up. As they were choking to death in the gas showers of Auschwitz they realized that this was part of

the Divine plan, a punishment for European secularism and for not returning to Eretz Yisrael. Alas, the revelation came all too late.

(Reference Sefer Eim HaBanim Semeichah of Rabbi Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal for a heart rending account of why the Holocaust happened from a Torah point of view. The text is available in English, distributed by Lambda Publishers NY. This text is must reading!!).

We do not have to suffer a repeat of their fate if we indeed learn the lesson of history that G-d Himself seeks to teach us.

We know that Mashiah is coming soon. We know that the situation in Eretz Yisrael is heading towards war. We know that Jewish leadership in Israel and abroad is in the hands of evil men who flagrantly violate G-d's commandments and Torah in both private and public.

The war against Torah and against the Jews is growing. Divine intervention is not far away, however concealed it might be. The world has suffered much in the 20th century. More than 100 million souls have died horrible deaths in war in this century alone. As the 21st century unfolds upon us, Divine wrath is growing against an arrogant, G-d-less, secular mankind, who seeks nothing more than to serve himself instead of his Master in Heaven.

Whether we like it or not, or whether we believe it or not G-d's judgement is soon to visit this world as it did Sodom and Gomorra. Call it WWII if you wish. All that we can do is to strive to be like Avraham Avinu and to pray that G-d spare the righteous, in Eretz Yisrael and abroad. As for the wicked, Jew and Gentile alike, nothing and no one can save them. If they choose not to repent then their fate will they meet, in fire.

Sorry to end on such a pessimistic note.

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