

The King of Sodom said to Avram, “Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself (14:21).

The king of Sodom had no problem with what seems to have been an audacious request. As a victor of the war, Avraham *Avinu* was entitled to all of the spoils. The king said that he would like his subjects to be returned to him, and Avraham could keep the money. Avraham had no intent in personal gain, especially from a pagan who would certainly claim that he was the source of Avraham's wealth. Avraham conveyed his feelings to the king of Sodom and then returned everything to him – people as well as money. In the *Talmud Nedarim* 32a, *Chazal* maintain that, while returning the wealth was praiseworthy, returning the people constituted an error on the part of the Patriarch. By not exposing them to his monotheistic belief, he was subjecting them to a continued life of paganism. The **Ran** comments, “Had Avraham not given up these people to Sodom, he would have been able to influence them to convert. For this, he was punished, such that his descendants were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years.

This seems paradoxical. Avraham devoted his entire life to the dissemination of Hashem's truth to all people. Wherever he went, and whenever the opportunity arose, he would spread the word of Hashem. He had a house open to everyone – regardless of beliefs or character. Yet, because one time he did not fight for these people, thereby allowing them to return to the hedonism that characterized Sodom, he was gravely punished. Certainly, one whose lifelong goal is outreach and who exemplifies its implementation should not be so severely taken to task for a solitary failure in fulfilling this *mitzvah*.

Twenty-three years ago, in my inaugural edition of *Peninim*, I quoted the *Telshe Rosh Yeshivah*, **Horav Chaim Mordechai Katz, zl**, who derives a critical lesson concerning the awesome responsibility one has to spread the truth of Torah throughout the world, from this *pasuk*. No parameters limit one's obligation to proclaim and publicize Hashem's Name in this world. Avraham left his father's home and dedicated his life to this goal, and yet – for his one failure- he was punished. This teaches us that our responsibility to reach out to our fellow Jew is to reach out consistently. One failure means that precious souls will be lost. This is an unforgiveable loss.

No subject is more reachable and more critical to reach than Jewish children. They must be our priority as parents, teachers, and members of the Jewish community. We must see to it that every Jewish child receives a bona-fide Jewish education, rendered by teachers who are paradigmatic of the highest Torah standards, in an environment that is replete with these standards and is a welcoming place ready to embrace all Jewish children who are ready to learn – regardless of background, financial ability or pedigree. As of late, a “good” school is judged by how many students it refuses – not by how many it accepts. Since this was the standard of *chesed* in Sodom, it was probably also its standard of education.

I have taken the liberty to share a few inspiring vignettes from the lives of *gedolei hador*, Torah

giants of the previous generation, as a way of setting the record straight concerning the critical importance of teaching Torah with consistence and dedication:

A *Yerushalmi avreich*, a young married man, who was himself not a *Gerrer Chassid*, came to see the *Gerrer Rebbe*, the **Bais Yisrael**, during the *Rebbe's* hours of reception. The *Rebbe* asked, "I believe you are a *cheder rebbe*. How did you manage to leave school during 'business hours'?" The young man excused himself, saying, "What can I do? When I finish teaching, the *Rebbe's* door is closed." The *Rebbe* told him, "Go back to your students. I will wait for your return." When the young man returned, long after the reception hours were over, he was immediately permitted entrance to the *Rebbe*.

At the beginning of his *sefer*, *Amalah Shel Torah*, the *Steipler Gaon*, **Horav Yisrael Yaakov Kanievsky, zl**, extolls the virtue of the *ben Torah*. Among the many accolades, he includes the following: "Since time immemorial, *Yiddishkeit* has owed its ongoing survival to the influence and guidance of its Torah sages, the delight of each generation who disseminated Torah to flocks of disciples and took numerous measures to ensure that Torah not be forgotten by the Jewish People. Hashem has shown us tremendous kindness by providing us throughout the generations with *yeshivos*, multitudes of scholars... all subservient to the might of the Torah sages of every generation.

"We sometimes see a Torah scholar and a *tzaddik*, righteous person, emerging from a simple home. This is the result of a grandmother who poured out her heart in tearful prayer that she would merit descendants who would be Torah scholars. Even if her prayers did not help her sons, they were efficacious for her grandsons. No prayer goes unanswered."

Shortly after the Six-Day War, an organization bearing the name *Moreshes Avos* was established to reach out to many seekers of Torah whose *neshamos* were catalyzed by the many miracles evident in that military victory. The organization's founder asked the *Steipler* whether it was appropriate to recruit *Avreichim* studying in *Kollel* to join him in his efforts. The *Steipler* replied, "How can one entertain the thought of taking them out of the *bais ha'medrash*? Why, all of the miracles that took place were only in the merit of their Torah learning!"

"I have lost all my family; I have lost everything – but I have not lost *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*." These were the words of the indefatigable **Klausenberger Rebbe, zl**, a Holocaust survivor who managed to triumph over his personal losses and singlehandedly undertook the task of reconstructing Jewish life from amidst the ruins. Torah-study was the only endeavor that soothed his tormented soul. His brilliance was matched by his encyclopedic erudition of Torah. It was only superseded by his love for Torah.

Indeed, despite his numerous projects, especially once he moved to *Eretz Yisrael* in 1960, the *Rebbe* viewed his principal vocation as none other than teaching Torah to young *talmidim*, students. Shortly after his move, he wrote to a friend, "You have surely heard that I have become a

teacher; taking some twenty children and several teenagers to my *bais ha'medrash* where they are under my close personal scrutiny almost all day. I must work diligently and with great toil, being preoccupied with this endeavor to an extent which you cannot imagine... but this is the only thing out of all of my work in which my soul finds pleasure. Would that their numbers double and triple, so that the singsong of pure children's Torah-study reverberates in my *bais ha'medrash*.

"Naturally, some of our friends feel that it detracts from the dignity of being a *Rebbe*, arguing that a *Rebbe* should not engage in such activity and that it is utterly incompatible with the position of *Rebbe*. In my opinion, we could do with a thousand such *Rebbes* (who would spend their day teaching Torah). Indeed, it is worthwhile training a single worthy disciple, who in the merit of our holy ancestors and of the Holy Land... will sanctify Hashem's Name by following in the footsteps of our holy ancestors."

The *Rebbe* was wont to say, "It is worth living one hundred and twenty years solely to train one single worthy disciple and guide him on the Torah's path."

His father-in-law, the **Nitra Rav, zl, Horav Shmuel David Unger**, was the head of its *yeshivah*, a position which involved fund-raising as well as spiritual guidance. At one point, the *yeshivah* was in dire financial straits. A Viennese layman, a former disciple of *Rav Unger*, proposed that the *Rav* spend *Shabbos* in Vienna. If he would agree to do so, the man would agree to cover the *yeshivah's* entire deficit.

Rav Unger demurred, citing his responsibility to deliver his *shiur*, Torah lecture, to his students on Thursday night and Friday morning. The man asked, "And what will happen if your honor forgoes giving the *shiur*?"

"I need money for the *yeshivah* in order to support Torah-study," *Rav Unger* replied. "Not the other way around... If it means suspending Torah study, I have no need for money."