

“Because the outcry of Sodom and Amorah has become great, and because their sin has been very grave.” (18:20)

The outcry of the victims of Sodom’s physical and mental abuse was too much. The tears of the oppressed seeking liberation from their misery had reached the Heavenly

sphere. The *Talmud Sanhedrin* 109b cites a number of cases depicting the perverted sense of justice which characterized Sodom. One of the more infamous decrees was their approach to hospitality. In fact, the “Sodom bed” has become a catchword for describing a situation where something is made to fit – regardless of its size. The custom was that when a visitor came to Sodom, they would lay him down on a bed to be measured. If he was too tall, he was surgically shortened. If he was too short, he was stretched. In any event, visiting Sodom was not encouraged. Another example was their decree concerning charity. When it was discovered that a young girl had given alms to a poor man, she was sentenced to death via an extremely cruel method. After all is said and done, Sodom was a depraved place, inhabited by individuals who were clearly out of their minds. Can a significant lesson be derived from this *Parsha*?

Horav Aryeh Leib Bakst, zl, explains that the Sodomites were far from insane. Indeed, they were normal – but very wicked people. Their depraved philosophy on life served as the cornerstone of interrelationships with people. They felt that every person should be made to stand on his own two feet – by himself – without assistance of any kind. Seeking communal assistance was a terrible failing, which bespoke weakness. They eschewed the concept of charity. Anyone taking charity was considered to have committed an unpardonable sin and he was severely censured and held in contempt.

Maintaining and enforcing this perverted philosophy became the prevalent lifestyle of Sodom. By employing extreme measures, they compelled people to accept their desired way of life. Refusing all acts of *chesed*, lovingkindness and rejecting any opportunity for doing good and helping others, were attributes inculcated in its citizens from early youth. By taking matters to the extreme, they felt they would indoctrinate them with a disdain for anything but self-sufficiency.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* feels that the Sodomite extreme has wormed its way into the Torah society. How often do we hear well-meaning parents and communal leaders decrying the fact that the *Yeshivos* and *Kollelim* are not providing educational opportunities for their young men to earn a living? “Should he be relegated to live off the assistance of others? Should my son grow up to be a beggar? I refuse to have my son support his family on charity.” They feel that everyone should do his part to provide for his family and that living “on the dole” is demeaning and counterproductive.

Rav Bakst cites *Rabbeinu Yonah* in his *Shaarei Teshuvah* 3:15, where he writes: “We find that the people of Sodom were very evil, with a number of wicked practices being attributed to them... Yet, at the end, they were destroyed because of their nullification of the *mitzvah* of *zedakah*.” Their

refusal to assist others was their death sentence. One who does not involve himself in acts of *chesed* is acting contrary to the *raison d'être* of the Creation of the world. As David *Ha'melech* says: *Olam chesed yibaneh*, "Forever Your kindness will be built," or, loosely translated, "The world will be built on kindness" (*Tehillim* 89:3). The world can only continue to exist upon a foundation established through the principle of kindness. When people live only for themselves the world cannot endure, because, at one time or another, people do need each other.

Avraham *Avinu* built this foundation of his mission on the attribute of *chesed*. He then transmitted it to his descendants, so that a love of *chesed* would be part of their DNA. *Chesed* was the vehicle by which he engendered spirituality within the Jewish People. When we realize that it is not all "about us," it comes to our attention that we have responsibilities in life, to one another – and to Hashem.

I think there is another aspect to *chesed* that is important. Without *chesed*, one cannot grow. By performing *chesed*, the individual grows exponentially, commensurate with the acts of *chesed*. In *Divrei HaYamim* (I 4:10) we find a prayer articulated by an individual whose name was Yaavetz. His request to the Almighty for blessing is as follows: "If You will bless me and extend my borders..." He basically is petitioning Hashem for two blessings: to be blessed and to be expanded. Why? *Horav Tzadok HaKohen, zl, m'Lublin*, explains that we often notice people who have been blessed with incredible blessing and unbelievable bounty, but regrettably have no idea how to deal with their gifts. Their concept of *tzedakah* remains on the same level as when they were poor. Their concept of sharing and helping others has not been altered from the time that they lived as hermits. They are ill-equipped for the blessing. They are literally small, simple people with large bank accounts who have no clue that with blessing, one's life must change radically.

We see it all the time, as when simple people win a lottery and spend the money on themselves, on items that have very little lasting value. They are soon back where they had been before their windfall. Sports figures who are venerated by those who have no concept of the meaning of true success, provide models of small people who do not qualify for blessing. Their large pay checks are soon spent on frivolities, leaving them with no enduring livelihood.

Yaavetz's prayer addressed this problem. He asked that he be "expanded" with the blessing. To receive great blessing but remain a small person, defeats the purpose of blessing. He prayed that he would be equipped to appreciate and make proper use of the blessing. In the *Talmud Temurah* 16a, *Chazal* expound on Yaavetz's prayer. "If you bless me with Torah – if I will become a great Torah scholar – then bless me also with students to teach, who will imbibe my Torah teachings. By giving to others, I myself will become bigger." This is how one grows – by sharing what he has with others.

Anyone with a modicum of intelligence realizes the truth of this idea. One who retains everything for himself will not grow. He will continue to be diminutive. Those of us who have had the opportunities to expand our horizons by reaching out to others – by being involved in acts of *chesed*, by teaching, by parenting – understand the incredible metamorphosis which has taken

place in our lives, in our psyche.

Who does not have a friend, classmate, or neighbor who years ago was mediocre at best? Suddenly, upon meeting him or her some thirty-years later, we wonder what happened. How did he or she become so successful? How did they blossom so much? We never knew that they had it in them. Wow!

Their horizons expanded and, with the added perspective, they accepted greater responsibility. It all came with the territory. Yosef *Ha'tzaddik* was not recognized by his brothers. Did his countenance change that much that these astute *Shivtei Kah*, future Tribes of Hashem, could not discern that it was Yosef standing before them?

They remembered another Yosef: a seventeen-year-old who went around tattling and worrying about his appearance. He would spend time combing his hair, something an individual who was a monarch, a world leader, who held the keys to the world food bank, would never do. He could not be Yosef! This individual who stood before them was as far removed from the Yosef that they remembered as a distinguished, well-bred diplomat was from an illiterate, uncouth village ruffian. No way could this be **that** Yosef.

But it was. The *Shevatim* were unaware of Yosef's travails, his many challenges and adversities. His tribulations demanded growth, maturity and acumen. All these latent qualities were possessed by Yosef, but had been dormant. There had never been a demand for them to surface. When Yosef became a world leader with the responsibility of feeding the world community, his horizons expanded. The imposition of the *middah* of *chesed* upon him catalyzed his growth. He became a different person.

Olam chesed yibaneh. The world grows on *chesed*. The more we do for others, the greater we become. Avraham taught us: If you want to grow, to be great, you must expand your horizons by doing for others. As you share with them, Hashem will provide you with more. The greater the expenditure of *tzedakah v'chesed*, the greater will be the income. Try it and see for yourself.