

Now the people of Sodom were wicked and sinful toward Hashem exceedingly. (13:13)

The sins of the people of Sodom serve as the paradigm of evil and iniquity. Theirs was the only city that was totally obliterated, indicating that their evil was not only reprehensible, it was unpardonable. What was their primary sin? I emphasize “primary,” because, once they fell into the clutches of sin, everything fell apart. Their entire moral compass was no longer pointed in the right direction. One would think that, in addition to their sinful behavior vis-à-vis Hashem (they were *rai'im v'chataim l'Hashem me'od* – exceedingly wicked and sinful toward Hashem), they needed no added sins. The *Navi* (*Yechezkel* 16:49) indicates otherwise. “She and her daughters had pride, surfeit of bread and peaceful serenity, but she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy.” The *Navi* implies that their primary sin was their failure to help the poor and the needy. In other words, because of their missing the mark in the area of *chesed*, kindness, they were considered *rai'im v'chataim*, wicked and sinful. Let me qualify this: They gave *tzedakah*; they did perform *chesed*, but not to the degree commensurate with their ability. As a result, Hashem considered them to be sinful to Hashem.

Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zl, derives two lessons herein. We see that an act of *chesed* is determined, not by how much a person gives, but by how much he is able to give and what fraction thereof he actually gives. In other words, one who is able to give more, but gives less; or is able to do more to help, but decides to get by, is not fulfilling his obligation. Second, we see that fear of G-d is tied directly to one's execution of *chesed*. One whose acts of *chesed* are limited to his emotions and feelings concerning the beneficiary fails in his *chesed* and, as a result, indicates that he does not really fear Heaven. The people of Sodom were charitable – to an extent. The amount they contributed did not make a dent in their economic portfolios. This was Sodom. They were guilty of many egregious sins, yet the *Navi* recounts their lack of giving generously in accordance with their means – both in financial support and in acts of lovingkindness. A Jew who truly fears Hashem establishes no parameters or premiums for his *tzedakah* and *chesed*.

Some people, however, must be taught the correct manner to give *tzedakah* and do *chesed*. Some listen and learn; others, like the people of Sodom, do not. The Sodomites refused to listen, because their fear of Hashem was, if anything, seriously flawed. The following story, related by *Horav Shabsi Yudelevitz, zl*, relates how *Horav Shmuel Salanter, zl*, with his extraordinary sagacity, was able to turn around a man who, for most of his life, had refused to share any of his largesse.

The members of the Old *Yishuv* decided that they badly needed a new *mikveh*. They scraped together whatever they had, but it was woefully short of their target. Hearing this, *Rav Shmuel*, who was now the *Rav* of *Yerushalayim*, decided to visit the well-known magnate, *R' Wittenberg*, to solicit him on behalf of the *mikveh*. His family attempted to dissuade him, claiming that he was notorious for his miserliness. Why would he bother soliciting someone who was sure to refuse

him?

Rav Shmuel replied that he understood and felt bad for R' Wittenberg. *Kamtzanus*, penuriousness, is an illness, whereby a person becomes so attached to his money that to share it with others is tantamount to cutting off a finger from his hand. He was going anyway, with the feeling that he would have a positive impact on him. R' Wittenberg received the Rav of Yerushalayim with great reverence. The Rav presented his case for the *mikveh* and waited for a response.

"*Rebbe*," R' Wittenberg began, "I am fully aware that in all of Yerushalayim lives no wiser man. This is coupled with the Rav's encyclopedic knowledge of Torah. Why would such a wise man make such a ludicrous attempt to solicit funds from someone like me, who is well-known not to give anything toward any form of charitable endeavor? I simply do not believe in giving, period. Why waste such important time?"

Rav Shmuel looked him in the eye and said, "One day, you will die, and, as all Jews, you will be buried in the ground, where worms and maggots will devour your mortal remains. Your body will decompose and your *neshamah*, soul, will rise up to Heaven. There, it will be asked a number of pertinent questions, whose answers will determine your fate. One of these questions will be, 'Why did you not contribute to the Yerushalayim *mikveh*?' Your response will be, 'No one asked me.' I want to prevent this response. Therefore, I am here today soliciting your donation."

Suddenly, R' Wittenberg began to shake uncontrollably. He looked at Rav Shmuel and said, "Here is the key to my vault; take whatever you need. I cannot go with you, because I cannot watch my money being taken." The man was such a tightwad that even once he had conceded to contribute, he was just unable to watch the transfer of his funds.

Word has it that this contribution broke the dam, and a flood of money emerged for the poor of Yerushalayim, among them Batei Wittenberg. Someone just had to explain it to him in very simple, -- very real -- terms. Rav Shmuel explained. R' Wittenberg listened.