

“Now the people of Sodom were wicked and sinful to Hashem, exceedingly.” (13:13)

Horav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, z.l., claims that the evil perpetrated by the inhabitants of Sodom was motivated by a philosophy of evil. This is the only way that this evil could have spread throughout the entire community to the point that there were not even ten righteous people to be found. When evil becomes a doctrine, when sin becomes a matter of principle, it is difficult to overcome. The more one speaks out against the evil, the more the evil-doer will adhere to his “convictions” and “beliefs.” There is no room for reason or logic.

Horav Charlop attributes the Sodomite principle of evil to the dialogue that the wicked Turnusrus had with Rabbi Akiva: Turnusrufus asked Rabbi Akiva, “If your G-d loves the poor, why does He not support them?” Rabbi Akiva replied, “So that we may be saved through them from the punishment of *Gehinom*.” They continued their discussion, with Turnusrufus contending that if someone was “created” poor by the Almighty, he should remain that way. In fact, one who sustains the poor is “countermanding” G-d’s will! It is forbidden to help the needy. If G-d would have wanted them to be helped, He would not have made them needy. Turnusrufus would have done well in Sodom.

He was mistaken. *Tzedakah*, giving charity, is not only for the benefit of the needy. It is primarily to refine and enhance the benefactor’s sensitivity towards another human being. Hashem has created circumstances through which we can better ourselves. This is what Rabbi Akiva meant when he said, “So that we may be saved through them from *Gehinom*.” Through the vehicle of *tzedakah* the beneficiary becomes the benefactor.

Sensitivity towards another person less fortunate than we should not be motivated purely by a physical sense of compassion. The injunction to emulate Hashem, *imitato Dei*, “*mah Hu rachum, af atah rachum*,” “as He is compassionate, so should you be compassionate,” should be the overriding force that evokes our sensitivity. Just as Hashem’s compassion is not based upon sentiment, since He is above emotion, so, too, should our sense of compassion be spurred on by the Torah’s command to be sensitive, to have compassion, to help the needy and afflicted, and to share in their pain and anguish. Compassion that results from a human/physical inspiration, without a deeper recognition that it is the *Torah’s* command, denigrates and subordinates the *neshamah*, soul, subordinating it to its physical counterpart, the body.

Sodom’s evil principle was catalyzed by the Sodomites attempt to be like Hashem; they did not want to be affected by human emotion. Consequently, they legislated cruel and wicked laws which would eliminate any feelings of human emotion and compassion. This, explains *Horav Charlop*, is the deeper meaning of, “*The people of Sodom were wicked and sinful to Hashem.*” The entirety of their evil was a result of their desire to be like Hashem. They did not understand that to be like Hashem is to arouse one’s emotions. As He is good and kind and compassionate, so should we

be likewise. This is the true meaning of religious synthesis: the ability to integrate and assimilate *Torah* into every aspect of our lives, so that our perspective is the *Torah's* perspective. The *Torah* directs our behavior, and the *Torah* guides our emotions.