

Parshas Vayera – Henry Keller (reprint)

יח חשון תשע"ו – 31st October 2015 – שבת פי וירא

In this week's sedra we encounter two different types of societies, Sodom - Gomorrah and Gerar.

Hashem reveals his plan to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah to Avraham so that he will make his descendants aware of their failings.

*"For I have turned my attention to him only so that he may command his children and his house after him so that they may keep the ways of G-d to practice benevolence (tzedeka) and justice (mishpat).
(Chap 18 verse 19)*

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that mishpat is simple justice and denotes the benefit one person has the right to expect from another, whereas tzedaka is benevolence and denotes a benefit a person has no right to expect from another. However, Hashem has nevertheless commanded us to display benevolence to our fellow man.

Generally mishpat precedes tzedaka in the Tenach to emphasise that one cannot atone for a violation of mishpat by giving tzedaka.

However, in the above mentioned pasuk, tzedaka precedes mishpat because tzedaka was lacking in Sodom and Gomorrah rather than mishpat. Sodom was not a lawless society but one that did not have benevolence to complement its system of justice. The inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah respected each other's rights to property and possessions but there was no provision for those who did not have sufficient means to subsist. They recognised achievement but not human need and indeed the Gemara in Sanhedrin tells us that a young girl who gave food to the poor was condemned to a horrific death, As we learn in Pirkei Avot, Perek 5, mishna 13:

"What is mine is mine, what is yours is yours – this is the characteristic of Sodom".

A society which makes no provision for its less fortunate members deserves to be destroyed. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham travels with Sarah to Gerar, where Avimelech the king, having been misled by Avraham into thinking that Sarah is his sister, takes her to his palace.

After having been made aware that Sarah is Avraham's wife, Avimelech protests to Avraham for having misled him. Avraham then says to Avimelech (chap 20, verse 11),
"Because I said there is surely no fear of G-d (Yirat Elokim) in this place and they will kill me on account of my wife".

The Netziv in his commentary Haemek Davar explains that Gerar was a moral society, but the impetus for their morality was "Sechel Anoshi" - man's own intellect, not fear of Hashem. Therefore Avraham told the people of Gerar that Sarah was his sister because he knew that as Yirat Elokim was not the source of their moral code their morality would break down in the face of temptation.

As the Netziv says: "One who does not have fear of G-d is not able to overcome his evil inclination."

Ha'Rav Lord Jakobovits, in an address in 1961 applies this idea to a modern issue: He posed the question: "Communism.....teaches a lofty doctrine of human equality and brotherhood, a doctrine not entirely unrelated to our Prophets' passion for social justice. How can we explain then that Communism has been perverted to such a diabolical instrument of social oppression?"

He answers that "There can be no brotherhood of man without the fatherhood of G-d. It is only as children of a common G-d that we humans are brothers. Take away this common link and the chain of human fraternity and understanding disintegrates".

Only a society whose moral code is rooted firmly in belief in G-d can hope to maintain high standards of morality.