

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1 22:24)

Sodom & Gomorrah... and Sandy

2012 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

The people of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful to G-d... Genesis, 13:13)

G-d said (to Abraham), “Because the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great, and because their sin has become very grave, I will descend and see; if they have acted in accordance with its outcry which came to me – then destruction!” (Ibid, 18:20-21)

The Torah doesn't go into detail as to the nature of the wickedness of the Sodomites. Most of what we know about these wicked people is related in the Talmud. Suffice it to say that they were bad. Very bad.

What was Abraham's reaction to G-d's decree? After all, as G-d's chosen one, as the embodiment of all that is holy, he surely must have shared G-d's disgust for the evil actions of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. One would think that he would have been happy to see that that G-d was going to rid the world of these unG-dly and anti-social scoundrels.

However, that was not at all Abraham's reaction. Instead of celebrating G-d's decision, he began to negotiate:

“Will You even destroy righteous with wicked?! ... Far be it from You! Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (ibid. verses 23, 25)

Abraham was arguing that the cities weren't purely evil, and that the merit of the righteous people should allow even the wicked people to survive.

Abraham didn't love only righteous people. He loved ALL people:

Earlier in the day of the above quoted conversation, Abraham was visited by three “men.” (In reality, our Sages tell us that these were actually angels who appeared to be men.) But what type of men were they? Were they kind, holy, G-dly men? Or were they cruel, selfish, idolatrous people like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Abraham didn't ask:

He ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he bowed toward the ground... “Let some water be brought please, and wash your feet, and recline under the tree. I will bring some bread, so that you may nourish you hearts before you continue on your journey.” (ibid, verses 2, 4, 5)

Why did Abraham ask them to wash their feet?

Rashi tells us that it was a common practice at that time for people to worship the dust of their feet. Abraham, ASSUMING THAT THEY WERE IDOL WORSHIPERS asked them to remove this idolatrous remnant from their feet before entering his home.

To be sure. Abraham rejected their lifestyle, and he wouldn't permit it in his home. But that didn't stop him from extending every effort to insure that his fellow human beings were well-fed and provided for.

They told people to be careful. They told people in threatened areas to evacuate their homes. (Three of those evacuated families were those of my married children who live in Bayswater (Far Rockaway), NY)

Hurricane Sandy came with all its fury, leaving in its path a trail of destruction. The suffering continues. Some people “only” lost electricity. Some people have lost everything.

The pictures are shocking and heartbreaking. Empty lots where houses used to be. Trees lying across cars in driveways and in crushed homes. The tragic loss of life.

It is easy to look at the pictures of the devastation and be reminded of this week's Torah Portion's story of the overturning of Sodom and Gomorrah. After G-d was finished raining destruction on those cities, there was nothing left. The Torah tells us that before the destruction, Sodom was a green and lush paradise. After the destruction, it was a barren desert.

No doubt, there will be some who will glibly attribute the hurricane to G-d's anger over _____ (fill in the blank.) After all, Atlantic City, which is, arguably, as close to Sodom and Gomorrah as you can get, is currently under water. (That's Sodom and Gomorrah PLUS Noah's Flood!) Others will point to the increased level of acceptance of various forms of immorality. (By the way, both of these explanations have already been suggested to me.)

In short order, televangelists of all stripes will lecture their followers about G-d unleashing His fury against sinners.

I have little patience for those who think they have the ability to explain why G-d does what He does. Among other things, these “prophets” will need to explain why there are Torah scrolls that are drenched, and why there are holy books floating around in countless homes and synagogues.

Let's get one thing straight. G-d rewards the righteous, and He punishes the sinners. But He does it on His own timetable. And it is, I believe, the epitome of arrogance to attribute G-d's actions to what WE think His reasons are.

Why did this happen? I don't know. But He does. And that is all I need to know.

But there is another, much more important question. And that question is, Now what?

Abraham saw strangers walking past his home. He didn't ask if they were "Jewish." He didn't ask whether they were Democrats or Republicans or Red Sox fans or Yankee fans. In fact, he assumed that they were idol worshipers. He assumed that these were people whose theology was the antithesis of everything he stood for.

And what was his reaction? He wanted to make sure that they weren't hungry.

It is beautiful to see how complete strangers have been reaching out to one another to offer assistance. We are all in this together. Those of us who have not been hurt by the hurricane need to reach out to those who have.

Many of our fellow human beings will continue to sit in dark, cold homes for a week or longer. Many of our fellow human beings have no home to come to.

Efforts are underway to help these people. And we need to help. You can donate to American Red Cross efforts by clicking [here](#).

Envision what this Shabbos will be like for many people. The Mitzvah of lighting Shabbos candles before sundown on Friday was originally instituted, quite simply, to allow people to see around their homes, because after sundown they wouldn't be able to ignite any lights. Nowadays, we turn on all the lights we expect to need, and then light our candles. For many people, once the Shabbos candles burn out, their homes will be dark.

Efforts are being made in Jewish communities to provide Shabbos hospitality in homes that have electricity for people who have none. Kosher food and clothing is being made available. You can help by clicking [here](#).

When tragedy strikes, our job is not to question. Our job is to give.

That's what Abraham would do.

Have a good Shabbos.

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