

**Vayeira 11/16/19 “Cruel to the Core”**  
**D’Var Torah by Rabbi Hirsch**

Good Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom.

When you return to the beginning of Torah, it seems to fly through tons of our foundational history, with meager attention to details. As the dictum from Mesechet Rosh Hashana 17a goes: *Divrei Torah Aniyim bimikoman v’ashirim bimakom acher - The words of Torah are poor in some places and rich in others.* These Parshiot are intensely packed, and it may seem that we can glean very little practical advantage from their terse narratives.

This week’s Parsha is certainly a case in point. But since the story is about Yitzchak, we do come prepared with a rich context from the holiday of Rosh Hashana we recently celebrated, when we focused on din/strict justice which is the attribute associated with Yitzchak and the troubling episode of Akeidat Yitzchak. However, while the Akeidat Yitzchak is the climax of the narrative about Avraham’s 10 tests, there is another baffling episode earlier in the Parsha -- the story of Sodom & Amorrhah.

We read that Avraham welcomes 3 guests into his and Sara’s home. The Gemara in Mesechet Bava Metzia 86b tells us that these men are actually the angels Meechael, Rephael, and Gavriel, who were each assigned one job to do. With regard to Sodom, the job of Gavriel was to destroy Sodom, and Rephael’s task was to save Lot who lived in Sodom, in the merit of his uncle Avraham, by warning him to flee before the destruction.

But after God gives the angels their assignments, He says to himself, “Hamechaseh ani meavraham asher ani oseh?” *Can I hide from Avraham that which I plan to do to Sodom?* After being told, Avraham balks at God’s plan, asking, *Aren’t there 50 righteous people worth saving in the city?* God says no, but Avraham, like a good Jew, keeps bargaining – how about 40? 30? 20? When he gets down to 10, he finally relents and gives God the go-ahead to destroy the entire province.

This interchange is perplexing. Why is Avraham arguing with God? And why does he conclude that it’s okay to kill all the Sodomites? What about the concept of Teshuva? After all, we know from the story of Yonah that even the evil people of Nineveh were given the opportunity to do Teshuva. God gave us free will, so how does it make sense for Him to control the choice about whether someone could return to the correct path? But the Rambam explains in Hilchot Teshuva 6:3 that it **is** possible to lose the opportunity to make that choice, if a person has **already used his free will** to choose **a path of evil.**

The Rambam uses Pharaoh as the classic example of this. The opportunity to do Teshuva is a kindness from God, and it’s not unconditional. But how do you know the criteria for losing this ability? The Rambam uses the word *piraon*, meaning *payback*,

which not coincidentally derives from the same root as *Pharaoh*. Because if someone sinks to the level where they are completely cruel (as Pharaoh was) and have no mercy for others, then God will respond in kind and show no mercy on them. If you think about it, this payback is the corollary to the Gemarah in Mesechet Rosh Hashana 17a: *כל המעביר על מידותיו, מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו*. If you are forgiving of other people's transgressions against you, then God will overlook your transgressions as well. As the Nefesh Hachyim explains regarding King David's words in Tehilim: "Hashem Tzilcha" *God is your shadow* and behaves with you the way you behave with others.

This explains why Lot was saved in the merit of Avraham, even though he was a resident of Sodom, and despite the fact that Avraham didn't ask for him to be saved. But we have to wonder, why would Lot, who was brought up by Avraham, choose to live in the most evil place in the world? It is possible to learn from his story that Lot was coddled and lived in the shadow of Avraham. He always felt like a second fiddle. When the Torah mentions Lot, it does so as an afterthought, saying "v'gam l'lot" - *also Lot*.

It seems from the enlightening Mishna in Pirkei Avot 5:13 that Sodom society was founded on the philosophy that individual independence is paramount. They hated Chesed, which Avraham touted, but which had also become the bane of Lot's existence. As King Solomon said in Mishlei, *Sonei Matanot Yichyeh - Those who hates gifts will live*, so Lot thought it was a wise move to join a community where he could become his own person. As the Mishnah says, some say the attitude of "Sheli sheli, vshelcha shelcha...yesh omrim zu midat Sodom" *What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours... is Midat Sodom*, not because it's inherently evil (as there is another worse characteristic identified in the Mishna), but because it was Sodom's mantra to promote independence.

The problem was that Sodom took this philosophy too far, and it morphed into cruelty. They never tempered their harshness with compassion. Instead, they played God, so to speak, deciding to inflict unmitigated hardship on everyone in the guise of promoting independence. Like a parent who refuses to help a child at all, and even contributes to their hardships, claiming that life is hard, so they should deal with it and just get over it.

But Lot was the exception in Sodom – he didn't adhere rigidly to that philosophy, which could be why in our Parsha the mob wanted to kill him when they discovered he had invited guests into his home. Any sign of compassion was a threat to their society.

This Parsha can help us understand why we are instructed to have no mercy with the nation of Amalek. Many people are troubled by this; they feel it's not right, because even Amalek could do teshuva and are not inherently evil. But in truth, if the nation you identify with adheres to the same philosophy as Sodom, a ruthless nation who holds no place for mercy or compassion, your nation promotes pure evil and must be immediately be stopped in its tracks.

This lesson was reinforced for me this week, when I attended a conference in Cherry Hill sponsored by Mekor members Marvin & Marsha Raab, where Rabbi Moshe Cohn, a rabbi-ambassador from Yad Vashem, discussed a program in Israel which advises educators how to teach the next generation about the Holocaust in a way that resonates with them. He mentioned an analysis performed by the Jewish psychiatrists Dr. Gustave Gilbert and U.S. Army Major Dr. Leon Goldensohn, who interviewed all the Nazis on death row during the Nuremberg trials. The one characteristic they found the Nazis all shared was a complete lack of empathy and compassion with regard to their crimes. **That** is what distinguishes pure evil from ordinary human failing.

The refusal to make that critical distinction is one of my fundamental objections when members of the BDS movement make the outrageous assertion that Israelis are comparable to Nazis. Even if you believe that Israelis are cruel to Palestinians, which at the very least is highly debatable, it is specious to argue that the state of Israel and its army are founded on cruelty and a lack of compassion. Despite the rhetoric, it is well-established that Israel has the most moral army in the world. And the most strident criticisms of Israel are expressed by those who make no allowance for the impossible situation that Israel finds itself in. Many in the BDS movement claim to “support” Israel, but the damaging consequences of their unrelenting opposition became clear recently when the European Union announced that all products made by Jews in the West Bank would have to be labeled as such.

Even worse, this antisemitic ruling was issued just as Israel was under continuous rocket fire from the Hamas-ruled Gaza, and following those attacks, there were many who made the shameful response that at least Israel has water and electricity as opposed to the Palestinians in Gaza. These critics should direct their anger toward countries who demonstrate no empathy, no regard for any level of humanity – rulers who are cruel to the core.

And **that’s** what the Torah is telling us in this Parsha: if you are really passionate about fighting evil, first ask yourself if your opponents truly **are** evil. There are many nations in the world which demonstrate cruelty without a shred of compassion or empathy and are therefore deserving of sanctions and denouncements. We, as supporters of Israel, must know and let it be known that the **very last** country in the world which should be castigated that way is the moral and compassionate Jewish state of Israel. Shabbat shalom.