

Sodom or Abraham--Thoughts on Parashat Vayera, November 15, 2008

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This week's Torah reading includes the story of the destruction of the wicked city of Sodom. Rabbinic tradition tells us that the people of Sodom were selfish, uncharitable, inhospitable and immoral. We are also told that the Sodomites had a bed in which they placed visitors. Those who were short were stretched to fit the bed. Those who were tall, were cut down to the size of the bed. Everyone had to be the same size! The bed of Sodom, I believe, does not simply refer to the desire for physical conformity--but also for intellectual and social conformity. The people of Sodom wanted everyone to think the same and to follow the same patterns of behavior. Their hatred of strangers symbolized their fear of the "other", of anyone who was different, who might in some way challenge or threaten the status quo.

Abraham was the antithesis of Sodom. He was famous for welcoming strangers and treating them with great respect. Our tradition identifies Abraham with the quality of "hesed", compassion, concern for others. To be a person of genuine "hesed" requires an empathy for others, an ability to recognize the goodness and the uniqueness of each human being. Instead of wanting to cut people into the same pattern, a person of "hesed" is fascinated by human diversity, is anxious to learn from people whose backgrounds and experiences differ from his own.

Hesed is such an important value to Judaism, that we can hardly overstate its importance. The philosophy of Sodom is so repugnant to Judaism, that we can hardly overstate our revulsion to it. And yet, unhappily, there are xenophobic and hateful attitudes within our community which put us at odds with Abraham's vision.

***We have read with horror and dismay that some "Bais Yaacov" schools (religious schools for girls) in Israel discriminate blatantly against Sephardic, Middle Eastern and Ethiopian children. In one town, the school actually erected a physical barrier separating Sephardic girls from Ashkenazic girls. In some schools, different entrances are used for children of different backgrounds. Other schools have quotas limiting the number of boys and girls they will admit from families of the "wrong" backgrounds.

***In various yeshivot, non-Ashkenazic students are made to feel ashamed of their traditions, and are psychologically pressured to adopt the Ashkenazic customs and mores. We know of cases where Sephardic students have felt the need to change their Sephardic-sounding names, to less conspicuous names that could pass as non-Sephardic. Sephardic students feel compelled to wear the same black hats and other garb characteristic of the Ashkenazim, and to wear their tsitsith to hang outside their pants even though this is not a Sephardic practice.

***Children in religious schools seem no more compassionate toward children who are "different" than children in non-religious schools. Indeed, sometimes the negative attitudes are actually encouraged by administration and faculty. Instead of creating an environment of hesed and respect for each student, some schools foster conformity and tolerate unkind behavior aimed at those who are "different".

Any school that fosters discrimination is, by definition, an affront to true religion, to Torah values, and to the hesed of Abraham our forefather. No matter how religious those schools think they are, they are trampling on the holiness of Torah and are desecrating God's name each and every day. Any parent of any background who tolerates or supports such schools is an accomplice to the crime.

In the first issue of Conversations, the journal of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, we published an article by Professor Yifat Bitton on the discrimination that goes on in some religious institutions in Israel (and we have kindred problems in the diaspora). Her article can be found in the Articles section of our website, jewishideas.org. She and some friends have started an organization, Tmura, to bring law suits against schools and institutions that promote hatred and intolerance. It is so sad that this needs to be done; but as long as there is injustice, discrimination and xenophobia in these "religious" institutions, then good people need to rise to combat the evil.

Each of us needs to be vigilant in regard to the schools our children and grandchildren attend; the synagogues we frequent; the organizations we support. Do these institutions live up to the model of hesed, love and compassion set by Abraham? If so, that is wonderful. But if not, we need to voice our concerns to administration, faculty, board members--the community at large. Much evil exists in our world because people feel afraid to stand up against the powers that be; because they fear retaliation; because they feel powerless to "fight the system".

Abraham reminds us that one person can change the world; that moral courage ultimately will be victorious; that to remain silent in the face of evil is to be

complicit. Rabbi Hayyim Angel once pointed out that Abraham was not the first monotheist--Adam and Eve, Seth, Hanoah, Noah and others were also monotheists. Abraham was not the first Jew--since Judaism didn't come into existence until the Torah was given to us at Mt. Sinai. Rather, Abraham is the first teacher--the first one in the Torah who is described as committed to transmitting righteousness and justice to his household and to his future generations. We are heirs of that legacy, and we must be the teachers for this generation and the generations yet to come.

***The Angel for Shabbat column is provided as a service of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Please join our expanding community of members by joining online at www.jewishideas.org.