Sodom and the Me-Generation: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayera

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

One who says: “what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours” is an average person. Some say this is the characteristic of Sodom. (Pirkei Avot 5:14)

We could understand why such a person is “average,” simply expecting people to be responsible for themselves. But why would such a person be accused of emulating the ways of the wicked city of Sodom?

In Biblical and rabbinic literature, Sodom is identified with egregious evil. Its people are corrupt, selfish, and hedonistic. Sodom is so wicked, the Almighty feels compelled to destroy the city with fire and brimstone.

What were the sins ascribed to the people of Sodom?

Greed: they looked out for their own prosperity but were cruel and inhospitable to others.

Sexual license: they sought their own pleasures without regard for the feelings of others. In the Torah’s account, a mob of Sodomites sought to molest a male visitor who had entered Lot’s home. Lot, the most “righteous” of the residents of the city, offered the mob his two daughters rather than give over his guest.

Uniformity: rabbinic tradition teaches that the people of Sodom had a bed and expected everyone to fit into it. Those who were too short were stretched. Those who were too tall were cut down to size.

At the root of these sins was the philosophy of me first, me mainly, me at anyone else’s expense. The notion of social responsibility was conspicuously absent. The Sodomites wanted everyone to conform to their society’s system…to fit in and not to raise questions or criticisms. What’s mine is mine and I owe you nothing. You are responsible for yourself; if you need help, don’t come to me. I don’t share, I don’t care. Sodom is not a society where the social fabric is based on mutual respect and responsibility; it’s where each person takes as much as possible, and gives away nothing. Anyone who disagrees with this system is an enemy who must be cut to size.

Throughout history, and in our own time, some societies reflect the values of Sodom. People strive to amass as much wealth as possible without consideration for the needs of others. Social pressure leads some to cheat, lie, avoid paying taxes…whatever it takes for them to gain more.

In such societies, people place their own immediate pleasure above issues of morality. Sexual promiscuity becomes normal and widely accepted.

And like Sodom of old, such societies demand conformity to their system of materialism, hedonism, and hatred of outsiders. People mistrust and detest those who aren't part of their in-group.

Biblical Sodom was destroyed by the Almighty. But later Sodom-like societies tend to destroy themselves. Their corrupt values lead to a societal implosion. Greed creates simmering hostilities between the haves and have nots. Sexual license undermines the stability of family life. The demand for uniformity of thought and behavior leads to a cultural sterilization; it saps creativity, originality, constructive criticism.

But there's one more thing. The people of Sodom seem to have been entirely disconnected from their past, from any social or moral tradition. They were a "me-generation" whose goals seem to have centered only on themselves. Sodom, like other me-generation societies, sowed the seeds of its own destruction.

Carl Sandburg once observed: "We know that when a nation goes down and never comes back, when a society or civilization perishes, one condition may always be found. They forgot where they came from. They lost sight of what brought them along. The hard beginnings were forgotten and the struggles farther along." ("Remembrance Rock," 1948, pp.18-19)

Sandburg was pointing to a significant feature of a living civilization: it remembers its beginnings, it sees itself as an organic part of the past. The ancestors have an ongoing vote, albeit not veto power. When this connection with the past is lost, the civilization unravels and declines.

"What's mine is mine, what's yours is yours." Some say this is the philosophy of Sodom. They may well be right.