

## Vayera 5779

### The City That Couldn't Make a Minyan

Once again this week we come to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah - the two cities that God destroys for their 'wickedness' despite Abraham's impassioned plea to God's justice. We all remember the story - Lot and his family fleeing, Lot's wife turning her head back just to look once more at everything she had left behind and being frozen there forever; the aftermath for Lot's daughters as the last vestiges of smoke vanished from the apocalypse.

This time around, I am struck by the numbers in Abraham's bargain [page 103]. He begins with 50 what if there are 50 *tzaddikim* - righteous people - in the place? God concedes and agrees not to destroy it. Then the numbers begin to tick down - what if there are 45? Or only 40? 30? 20? And finally, what if there are only 10? The bargain is struck: God will not destroy the city if there are 10 *tzaddikim* within it. But there aren't - and so Sodom's fate is sealed.

The Rabbis of the later tradition seize on that number and understand it in a very particular way - this is the first time in the Torah when a *minyan* is mentioned.

The word *minyan* simply means 'measure' or 'number,' but it comes to mean something more like 'quorum' - a critical mass of people for getting something done. In its most mundane sense, a minyan is required for prayers that are called *devarim she-bikdushah*, holy things: the Kaddish, the Barkhu, the repetition of the Amidah, the Priestly Blessing, reading Torah and Haftarah and the 13 Attributes we recite when the Torah is taken out on a holiday.

Our teachers speculate about why it is that these particular things require critical mass. In the Talmud [Berakhot 6a] Abba Binyamin taught that prayer is only heard in a synagogue, based on the verse *to listen to the song and the prayer* [1K 8:28] (this is also the basis for one of Elliot's favorite *piyyutim*). In a place of song, Abba Binyamin teaches, there prayer should be also.

And Rambam (Maimonides) teaches [Mishneh Torah, Prayer and Priestly Blessing 8:1]:

*The prayer of a community is always heard, and even if there are sinners [amongst them], God does not reject the prayers of the many. Therefore, it is necessary for a person to join with a congregation and not to pray alone whenever he is able to pray with a community...Anyone who has a synagogue in his city and does not pray [together] with the congregation is called a bad neighbour.*

And there are many other such arguments.

But there are also contexts outside of regular synagogue services that require a minyan. We can't say the seven wedding blessings without one, and nor can we bury someone properly. Here is what the Mishnah and Gemara [Megillah 23:9] have to say about it:

*One does not observe the practice of standing up and sitting down for the delivery of eulogies at a funeral service with fewer than ten present. This is not a davar shebikdushah, so we need to explain why a minyan is needed. The Gemara explains: Since the leader of the funeral procession is required to say: Stand, dear friends, stand; sit down, dear friends, sit down, when there are fewer than ten it is not proper conduct to speak in such a dignified style.*

So at times of great joy or great pain we also need a quorum. Perhaps it's that we need more than just a few witnesses at these moments of transformation; perhaps it's that we need to see what we are feeling reflected in enough faces of other human beings to validate what we are going through.

Let me leave those ideas there for a moment while we explore another text, this one directly about Sodom. It's from *Pirkei Avot*, the teachings that we study on Shabbat after lunch (we haven't learned this one yet - should get to it in a few weeks!):

*5:10. There are four types of people: One who says, "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" is stupid. One who says "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours" — this is an average person, but others say this is the character of Sodom. One who says, "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours" is a hassid (this simply means a pious person). And one who says "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is mine" is wicked.*

Notice the ‘character of Sodom.’ What’s wrong with that? It looks perfectly reasonable to say ‘What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours.’ It’s logical; it’s nicely balanced; it makes sense. I’m reminded of someone I once met who had the policy of not giving to beggars on the street because ‘I don’t have a penny that I haven’t earned.’ Also logical; also nicely balanced and rationalized. ‘Mine’ and ‘yours’ in nicely sealed, tidy categories.

But behaving this way doesn’t make a person a *hassid*. It doesn’t make them a *tzaddik*. And remember - it is the lack of ten *tzaddikim* in Sodom that seals its fate. Nobody in that city ever looks beyond their own interests.

I had the honor of giving the benediction at the Weiss award dinner last night. The room was full of people from all of the various communities that make up this unique city. Our own Leopold Sher was one of the honorees. Every single honoree across their different fields - civics, law, nonprofit, private enterprise, charity - every single person who spoke voiced the sentiments that make a *hassid* a *hassid* and a *tzaddik* a *tzaddik* - going one step beyond what is reasonable and expected and reaching out, always reaching out, to other human beings.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches that our acts of *hesed* power the universe, building bridges between the higher and lower worlds. But they also build bridges between people, as each honoree expressed at the end of their recorded speeches in the words, ‘NOLA united.’

And to loop back to the texts with which I began: this is exactly the mindset that applies to making a minyan. It also involves reaching out beyond what is logical or reasonable. After all, aren’t we already equipped as individuals with what we need to connect to what is greater than we are? We know that we don’t need to come to shul to pray and that it’s often more meaningful or spiritually fulfilling to have our own practice.

Yet there is a sense of what I can only describe as ‘righteousness’ when there are sufficient people to make a minyan. There’s an audible exhalation as a tenth person joins the group and makes it complete. A minyan demands that we show up not for ourselves but for each other. Our joy and our pain need and deserve to be shared and witnessed and not experienced in isolation. In a minyan,

categories dissolve and bridges are built. Perhaps they even span the space between the higher and the lower worlds.

So here's what I realized this year. Sodom couldn't get beyond the matrix of 'mine' and 'yours' to realize that 'ours' is the only word that is important. Sodom was destroyed because it was the city that couldn't make a minyan.

In our own city and in our own communities, we need to show that we still can.