

## When Indifference Becomes *Midat Sedom*

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ה משנה י

ארבע מדות באדם האומר שלי שלי ושלך שלך זו מדה בינונית ויש אומרים זו מדת סדום

There are four types among people: *Ha-omer* - One who says “what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours,” this is an “in-between” type. *V’yesh Omrim* - And some say this is *Midat Sedom*/the type of Sodom. (Pirke Avot 5:10)

I have always wondered what the “Midat Sedom” referred to in this Mishnah was. The Torah in Parshat Vayera tells us that the Sodomites were evil people, but does not explain exactly what the evil was. Rabbinic literature attempts to fill the gaps with all sorts of heinous, cruel, and often salacious examples of Sodomite evil. Even in Western Culture, the word “Sodomy” has a sexual connotation.

Rabbi Menachem Sacks, in his wonderful anthology of *Chomer Lidrush*, “Menachem Tzion” suggests that the sin was one of institutionalized indifference to the evil that was going on (based on all the other rabbinic interpretations). His homiletic suggestion is derived from the Hebrew “*V’yesh Omrim* - And some say” – which is in the plural. If “One says” what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours, it is just a way to live that may or may not affect others. If an entire community says this and lives this way, then we have a community of indifference, a community which leads to and condones the abuses of Sodom.

I have been reflecting over this Mishna and its teaching in the ongoing wake of what we have seen allegedly perpetrated by a rabbi in DC that many of us have known. He has been arrested for placing cameras in the mikveh, a violation of the most sacred and intimate spaces in Judaism, and a violation of the most intimate and private moments for pious women and for observant converts. He was finally fired from his shul job this past week.

Many are the thoughts and reactions to this terrible scandalous news. I, for one, felt something I have rarely if ever felt in my career - shame at being an Orthodox rabbi. It is easy to say these are the horrible deeds of one renegade rabbi. But the fact that he was so respected and revered by so many suggests that we have to look at the “Sodom” factor as defined above. How could we as a community have allowed this to happen? Where have we lacked oversight? Why were “red flags” ignored? How did this happen, coming on the heels of many other disgusting scandals in the frum community, both its “Modern” variety as well its Hareidi sector. What

kinds of Tshuva do we in the Orthodox Rabbinate and community (and I include myself in this thought) do we have to do?

If any good comes of this, it will be in the area of reevaluating Halachic conversion procedures, insuring that mikvaot are operating for the benefit of and with the authority of those who use it the most (women), finding ways to make rabbis more sensitive to boundary issues, finding accountability in all of these aspects of Jewish life, and recognizing that much of this is not about salaciousness or sexuality; it is about power. If the news articles are any guide to this, perhaps these things are already beginning to happen in the community and the Orthodox Rabbinate.

Elie Wiesel has frequently said that the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. When indifference becomes institutionalized – intentionally or via neglect – then good people and good rabbis have to act. Otherwise, we risk becoming Sodom ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom,

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