

## HIGH HOLIDAYS 5780: SELFISHNESS AND RESPONSIBILITY

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It is said that the Holy One had blessed the people of Sodom with happiness and abundance. Bread came directly out of Sodom's earth. The stones of it resembled sapphires and it had dust of gold. There was not a path in Sodom that did not have the foliage of seven trees over it, foliage of the vine, fig, pomegranate, walnut, almond, apple and peach. The inhabitants of Sodom used to say: *"We live in peace and plenty – food can be got from our land, gold and silver can be mined from our land, precious stones and pearls can be obtained from our land. What need we have to look after wayfarers, who come to us only to deprive us?"* When a poor man came to the land of Sodom, each Sodomite would give him a denar with the Sodomite's name inscribed on it, but not one of them would sell him a morsel of bread to eat. Eventually, when the poor man died of hunger, each Sodomite would come to claim his denar. There was a maiden in Sodom who once brought a morsel of bread concealed in her pitcher to a poor man. When three days passed and the poor man did not die, the reason for his staying alive became clear. The Sodomites smeared the maiden with honey and placed her on a rooftop, so that bees came and stung her to death. The Torah says that God saw this immeasurable selfishness and destroyed the whole city and all its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

The impetus of the wickedness of the Sodomites was selfishness, egoism, the pursuit of self-benefit and self-interest, even at the expense of other people. Ethical egoism claims that we are morally obliged to be interested in another person only if it is in our own interest. Why should I care for starving children in Africa or the victims of an earthquake in India? Why should the fate of the unemployed, the homeless, the poor in my own society play any role for me? It is often spoken about the external evil embodied by people from outside, who could come and take our freedom and prosperity. Although we cannot underestimate any kind of risk, I am deeply convinced that as our society strengthens the picture of the other as somebody who comes as an intruder,

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<sup>1</sup> BT Sanhedrin 109b, Numeri Rabbah 9:24, Leviticus Rabbah 5:2, Genesis Rabbah 42:5, Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer 25. According to: BIALIK, Hayim Nahman; RAVNITZKY, Yehoshua Hana (eds.): *The Book of Legends. Sefer Ha-Aggadah. Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. Translated from Hebrew by David Stern. New York 1992.

regardless if he or she is a refugee, unemployed, homeless or poor, another serious danger is growing. Every refugee automatically becomes a terrorist, every unemployed becomes a sponger, every homeless becomes a lazy fellow, and every poor becomes, in our thinking, a burden. Why should I be interested in supporting such terrible beings, who are responsible for their own suffering? As our ability to see the other decreases, our selfishness increases. Therefore, I am convinced that the danger of selfishness is currently the biggest threat that our society currently faces.

Every human generation faces the real threat that it will follow the example of the people of Sodom, who lost the fight against their own selfishness. The High Holidays are here to protect us from this danger by not allowing the selfishness to rule over us. The prayer *Unetaneh Tokef*, which we recite both on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, ends with the resounding: “*U’teshuvah, u’tefilah u’tzedakah ma’avirin et ro’ah hag’zerah. Repentance, prayer and righteousness have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny.*”<sup>2</sup> At first sight, it may seem that *teshuvah*, *tefilah* and *tzedakah* represent three individual qualities. However, I am convinced that they actually are a three-phase process, whose goal is to clear us from selfishness. Through repentance (*teshuvah*), we are returning to ourselves and getting back our ability to identify the selfishness in us. After this experience, we are able to turn to God in the phase of prayer (*tefilah*) and ask for the correction. And only after that, in the phase of righteousness (*tzedakah*), we are able to turn to another person and see in them our fellow human being, who needs our help.

One of Judaism’s most distinctive ideas is its ethics of responsibility, the idea that God expect us to become God’s partners in the work of creations, that we bear the responsibility for the world, for other human beings. In 1190, Moses Maimonides, one of the greatest rabbis of the Middle Ages, published his work *Moreh Nevuchim*, The Guide for the Perplexed, which he ended by a quotation from the prophet Jeremiah<sup>3</sup>: “*Thus said the Eternal: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the strong man glory in his strength, let not the rich man glory in his riches. But only in this should one glory: that he understand and knows Me, that I am the Eternal, who acts with kindness, justice and righteousness in the world, for in these I delight.*”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> FELD, Edward (ed.): *Mahzor Lev Shalem for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*. New York 2010, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> MAIMONIDES, Moses: *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Translated from Arabic by M. Friedländer. Skokie, Illinois 2002, p. 396.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 9:22–23.

Wise people should use their wisdom to act with kindness, otherwise their wisdom is useless, strong people should use their strength to act with justice, otherwise their strength is useless, and rich people should use their riches to act with righteousness, otherwise their riches is useless. Wisdom, strength and riches are indeed useless if they are not followed by the deeds of ethical responsibility towards the others. Therefore, may we, similarly to the maiden from Sodom, have enough wisdom to exercise kindness, enough strength to defend justice and enough righteousness to help this world not to be based on selfishness, but on responsibility for the other human beings. Shanah Tovah Ve'Gmar Chatimah Tovah!

### **Bibliography**

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