

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## SODOM AND GEMARA

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

A [Washington Post article last week](#) described how people stranded in their cars by a snowstorm in Buffalo were turned away by numerous private house owners. They avoided death by hypothermia only because one broke into a school building and let the rest in. Maharat Ruth Balinsky asked on her Facebook page: Has Buffalo descended to the level of Sodom?

It seems unlikely that the people of Buffalo are any worse than people in other U.S. urban areas. So the question is really to all of us: Do we live in Sodom?

The question has two parts. First, was it a Sodomian act to turn those people away? Second, would we have let them into our own houses?

The second part hit me hard. Many years ago, Deborah and I invited anyone who came to Harvard Hillel home for Shabbat meals. But a series of edgy experiences made us cautious. There was the woman Torah scholar who was homeless, but it turned out that she had left her home because it was infested by demons. There was the man who announced himself as the Messiah, and simply would not leave after Friday night dinner. That was at a friend's house, and it led to a communal policy of requiring guests to have references. So I sent Deborah the article and asked: Had we become Sodomians?

I read my friend Rabbi Daniel Cohen's *What Will They Say About You When You Are Gone?* this week. Rabbi Cohen asks people for the moment when they felt best about themselves. One woman responded with a story about a time she offered to buy pizza for a homeless man, and suddenly realized that this was an actual person when he asked for an extra-cheese.

In 1992-3, I gave shiur weekly at Yale and Penn on different nights, commuting both ways by train from New York, arriving back after midnight. Teaching Torah was a bipolar experience for me then - I'd get back either too exhilarated or too depressed to go home and sleep. So I generally walked up Broadway to 125<sup>th</sup> Street before catching a taxi to Washington Heights. Along the way I'd meet Cole, who only let me buy him a specific brand of deodorant; and John, who wouldn't

take food instead of money because it validated my distrust; and several other street people I knew by name and story. And yes, that made me feel good about myself. And no, I don't currently know any street people by name, and haven't for many years. Have I become a Sodomian? Or was I wrong then to expose my family to potentially dangerous people when there were reasonable alternatives, and of course even now I would take in stranded motorists who might otherwise die?

Chazal portray Sodom as an absolutely lawful culture. The mob around Lot's house is enforcing the law about treatment of strangers, not breaking the law. The mass of Sodomians would rob newcomers blind, but no individual would take enough to violate the prohibition against theft. In essence, Chazal imagine Sodom as a culture just like their own, except evil. Or maybe unjust – just like their own. Maybe nonetheless not just law-abiding but obsessed with the details of law.

I love that Chazal could fashion such a mirror and look into it unflinchingly. It worries me when I hear these midrashim quoted with no sense of reflection. Teachers should be asking their students, rabbis should be courageously asking their congregants: what halakhot do you see us observing punctiliously but pointlessly and at the expense of others?

Some comments on Maharat Balinsky's post suggested that the problem was less with the individual householders than with the government's failure to have proper infrastructure or respond with enough resources. This is a very reasonable position. Nor is it one taken only by private citizens – a city in Connecticut I passed through last week has signs as you enter from the highway urging drivers to donate to specified charities rather than giving to the panhandlers who frequent the spot. Very likely that will ensure that the money is used more efficiently and with a clearer focus on long-term outcomes.

As I said, it is a reasonable position to blame the government – that is to say, our whole society – MORE than individuals. But that doesn't excuse the individuals. More importantly, the comment suggests that AN effect of having government take

primary responsibility for charity and chesed is to diminish the responsibility that individuals feel for specific cases. That effect must be exacerbated when government advises individuals to give only to organizations.

Talmud Bava Batra 9a challenges this approach, which might be termed “effective altruism”.

*A poor man going door-to-door came before Rav Pappa, who did not respond to him.*

*Rav Sama son of Rav Yayva said to Rav Pappa: If sir does not respond to him, no one else will respond to him – should he die?!*

*Rav Pappa replied: But a beraita says: A poor man going door-to-door – one must not respond to him!?*

*Rav Sama replied: One must not respond to him with a large gift, but one responds to him with a small gift.*

Rashi assumes that the discussion is about whether the public charity fund, of which Rav Pappa was treasurer, ought to respond to beggars who ALSO go door-to-door. The concern may be that such beggars will be receiving a disproportionate share of available charitable funds, or an effort to limit the annoying phenomenon of door-to-door solicitors. The conclusion is that the public fund should provide only token funds to such solicitors.

Rashi’s reading is very difficult, as nothing in the story suggests that Rav Pappa gave anything from his private purse to the poor man.

Rambam (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7:7) convincingly reads the entire story as about private charity. Rav Pappa thought it was an inefficient use of his charitable funds to give to solicitors. Rav Sama replies that one must give nonetheless. Rambam then adds a powerful coda to Rav Sama:

*It is forbidden to return a poor person who asked emptyhanded, even if you give him (instead) only one dried fig, in accordance with Psalms 74:21: “He must not turn back a crushed person humiliated”.*

The simple meaning of Rambam is that humans do not live by bread alone; they also require dignity. Possibly he also worries about the cost to your own virtue when you risk humiliating someone to avoid being morally inefficient with your money.

But, you will reasonably protest, the goal of our policy is to prevent people from having to beg. If we succeed, they’ll never need even to risk humiliating refusals!

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I often begin shiurim on the laws of charity by asking: Does a genuinely socialist government fulfill the mitzvah of tzedakah, or eliminate it? This can be framed as a choice between utilitarianism (fulfills) and virtue ethics (eliminates). But a better framing might be that government sustains its commitment to the goals of tzedakah only so long as the people who sustain the government sustain that commitment. Maybe what really happens is that people lose that commitment if their private experience is always to refer the poor to government – one cannot build toward utilitarian ends without building virtue. Maybe that’s why another element in midrashic portraits of Sodom is a ban on private charity.

Of course, at least some members of Chazal also depict Sodom as hyper-committed to the principle of private property (Mishnah Avot 5:10):

*“Mine is mine and yours is yours” – this is a characteristic of mediocrity; but some say: a characteristic of Sodom.*

The models above collectively demonstrate that a Sodomian society is not built by encouraging vice, but rather by distorting or overemphasizing a virtue. This makes it all the more important that we commit to looking at the mirrors people hold up in front of us, even though we will not always see the horrors they see. And even though often we will be right and they will be wrong. So it would be dishonest not to mention that our tradition also depicts Sodom as a society which has lost its way sexually in ways that at least superficially mirror aspects of our own.

Those holding textual mirrors up to the contemporary West can argue that – to varying extents – we have overemphasized or distorted genuine values such as charity, inclusion, compassion, authenticity, and love (yes, Jews have historically argued that love, compassion, and charity are subject to overemphasis). We need to look in their mirrors if we want them to look in ours. We also need to look - at least occasionally - in mirrors that scare us in order to make certain that what we ordinarily regard as mirrors are not actually pictures of Dorian Gray.

Maybe the story in the Washington Post missed key details. Maybe in the moment we would all have invited those stranded motorists in. I hope so.