

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

BULLY FOR SODOM

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Sodom was a halakhically sophisticated culture. Everyone knew the law, and the difference between a violation of the law and what you could be sued for. On Sanhedrin 109b, the Rabbis illustrate the evils of Sodom via the halakhic principle that one cannot be sued for stealing property worth less than a *perutah*:

*If someone had a row of bricks – they would come and each steal one.
If somebody had put out garlics or olives to dry – each person would take one.*

Rashi explains:

They would say to the victim: "What loss have I caused you? All I took from you was one clove!"

It is as if each person pulled one hair out of his head – the victim ends up bald.

Let's think for a moment about this case. Who were the perpetrators, and who were the victims?

I suggest that the rabbis are describing something all-too-familiar – malicious bullying. Groups would get together and impoverish whomever they didn't like, while making sure not to do anything that could provoke reaction from those with formal authority and official power. [1]

The analogy to the schoolyard is clear. These are the clique of kids who pick on a classmate to torment. No individual kid says or does anything particularly unforgivable, and anyway there are no witnesses outside the group – perhaps they even physically surround the victim so no one else can see. The victim eventually overreacts to one seemingly minor offense, and then gets in trouble, since the attacker at whom he or she lashes out has not individually caused significant damage.

Sodomean bullies consciously manipulate society so that the victim's acts of self-defense become punishable while their aggression creates no liability. They take advantage of a morally intuitive "doctrine of proportionality".

But is it possible that "each person stealing less than a *perutah*" is terrible not only when it consciously manipulates the system, but even, or perhaps especially,

when it enables people to avoid realizing that they are causing harm? Can we identify systems and environments in which this happens? I suggest that conversation is one such realm. Please allow me to explain.

Liberal cultures have a deep, understandable, and to some extent laudable reluctance to acknowledge that a conversation can be zero-sum, meaning that whatever one participant gains, another loses.

Talmudists, by contrast, understand this instinctively. This is because Talmudic *sugyot* (=literary units) are often structured as disputational dialogues. In disputational dialogue, a *raayah* (attempted proof) for one side of the *machloket* (dispute) is always a *kushya* (attempted disproof) against the other, and a *kushya* on one side is usually a *raayah* for the other.

It is important to recognize that a Talmudic dialogue is zero-sum on only one axis – which position wins, meaning emerges as more likely true. Anything that makes one side more likely true, makes the other less likely true. A *raayah* for one side (+1) is a *kushya* on the other (-1) – that's zero-sum. But both sides benefit in the sense that they have come closer to the truth. So the way to avoid zero-sumness is to change the goal of conversation from victory to truth.

But – what if the other person has not made that change? For them, it still *feels* zero-sum, no matter how much you tell them that they have been enriched. If you "defeat" them in argument, they will likely disengage and decide that the modality doesn't suit them.

Sometimes the zero-sum axis is not about persuading each other, but rather about the public authority of your respective positions. In such contexts, total victory is achieved when the opposing position becomes untenable in your community's discourse. This can happen through pure logical or empirical demonstration, as when looking through a microscope proved that microbes exist. But much more often, it results from effective rhetoric which makes use of or disguises itself as logical or empirical demonstration.

Disputational dialogue using formal arguments and verifiable evidence are rare in the public square. What is much more common is what might be termed “affective debate”, in which a conversation is “won” when one side has made it more emotionally or politically difficult to disagree with it than the other.

It is often assumed that even thinking about affective conversations as zero-sum games is inappropriate. Surely the goal is for each side to express itself fully to the other! No one loses just because the other side got to express itself.

But this is true only when there is a shared goal of emotional transparency. With regard to public affairs, affective conversations are often properly understood as (conscious or unconscious) battles for emotional dominance, with each side trying to make it difficult for anyone to express the other position.

Let’s imagine a conversation set on the midrashic planet EinMakom.

Some people on this planet find emotional fulfillment only by eating roast lamb in public. Deprived of that outlet, they become terribly sad and lonely. Many believe that their god cuts off all relationship with them if they fail to eat lamb in public at least once a year.

Other people on this planet worship sheep, and believe that killing them for food is sacrilege and a perversion of the natural order. Watching people eat lamb makes them physically and psychologically ill. [2]

Now let’s imagine a group conversation space – say, a WhatsApp group for EinMakom’s communal leaders. Nachshon, one such leader, opens a conversation by sharing the intense inadequacy and despondency he felt when work recently compelled him to spend months in a vegetarian community, where it was socially impossible to eat lamb in public.

Following Nachshon, another community leader offers profound gratitude to him for sharing the experience. Another admires Nachson’s bravery and courage, and considers them inspirational. A third expresses astonishment that such intolerant communities still exist. A fourth declares with happy confidence that no one in **this** group would consider acting so intolerantly. And so on.

Each of these follow-up notes seems positive and innocent – what could be wrong about supporting someone who has taken an emotional risk? But their collective effect is to silence anyone on the listserv who worships sheep and wishes to protect themselves against

the psychological and physical damage they experience when watching lamb-consumption. Each individual note has minimal effect. But the camel’s back is nonetheless fractured.

In another space, the roles might be reversed. An initial posting about the psychological damage caused by watching lamb-consumption is followed by similar supportive postings, so that the notion of expressing one’s pain at being deprived of public lamb-consumption – let alone of demanding the right to consume lamb in public - becomes inconceivable.

As opposed to Talmudic discourse at its best, in which one argument generates the necessity for another, and stimulates its development and formulation, Sodomean conversations silence people and end genuine discussion. The result is that people lock themselves into homogeneous communities, or bubbles. (Homogeneity of opinion may be coincident with apparent ethnic or religious diversity. This will tend to aggravate the difficulty of recognizing the problem of silencing.)

Too many conversations in too many spaces in the Jewish world today are conducted in Sodomean fashion. Too many conversations in too many spaces in America today are conducted in this fashion. Thus we keep locking ourselves into self-affirming bubbles, and are shocked to discover that our opinions are not universally held.

It would be an important step forward if we acknowledged – at least to ourselves – that in public conversations about controversial issues, affirmations and expressions of support are often powerful zero-sum moves, and when utilized en masse, can easily become instantiations of middat Sodom.

Acting on this recognition, we can take care that our conversations make space for genuinely different and surprising opinions. Surprised often enough, we may rediscover how to argue ideas for the sake of truth rather than victory, and share experiences for the sake of mutual understanding. As Jews, we can recreate the art of disagreeing for the sake of Heaven, and as Americans, the art of deliberative democracy.

Notes:

[1] Deborah Klapper and Davida Kollmar both asked, with Avraham Avinu: If there were victims in Sodom, didn’t G-d destroy the victims and perpetrators together? I suggest that in a deeply corrupted culture, the victims are just wannabe bullies, and there is no essential difference between them. Bad people can be bad to each other.

[2] One Rabbinic interpretation holds that the first Paschal sacrifice was instituted as a public defiance of Egyptian lamb-worship.

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.