

# WHAT WAS THEIRS WAS THEIRS

by Rabbi Label Lam

*So HASHEM said, "Because the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great and because their sin has been very grave..." (Breishis 18:20-21)*

Why was Sodom destroyed? What was the "great outcry" that sealed their decree? Rashi references the Talmud which tells the sad story of a young lady who met with a terrible fate at the hands of the "justice" system of Sodom. She committed the ultimate crime of feeding bread to the poor, and as a result she was punished with a cruel death. They covered her with honey and left her for the bees and other insects to devour her. (Sanhedrin 109B) The Mishne in Pirke' Avos gives us an insight into the ideology of that doomed city. It outlines four character types with regard to property.

- 1)** One who says what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours is considered average and some say it is characteristic of Sodom.
- 2)** Mine is yours and yours is mine is an unlearned person.
- 3)** Mine is yours and yours is yours is scrupulously pious.
- 4)** Mine is mine and yours is mine is wicked.

Why is the 1st category either average or Sodom-like? We would expect Sodom to be akin to the wicked one. What's so terrible about saying; "What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours"? Why is it possibly average? The answer is: #2 and #4 have no concept or respect for private property. They have little problem feeling deserved of another's stuff. In contrast

#1 and #3 seem to understand; "what's yours is yours". However Sodom's commitment to respecting the property rights of others is based upon a sinister ulterior motive. Why would they pronounce in principle "what's yours is yours"? Because they want to insure the more important part; "what's mine is mine". They sinned not from impulsiveness but with a dispassionate intellect. That's worse! Why is that so?

The Maggid of Kelm said many decades before WWII, "Because of Geiger's Reform Code of Jewish Law, another law will emerge from Germany. It will say that every Jew, without exception, must die. May G-d protect us!" How could he say such a thing? Yet, how true it turned out to be! Was he speaking with prophecy? I don't think so! My point in mentioning that startling quote is not to stir the larger than life questions of "why?" with regard to the Holocaust but to look for the basis of the Maggid's logic. Let us say: Shimon comes to school day after day without his homework. Each time

his teacher gives him that solemn look and pens a zero in the box marked "homework". Shimon and his parents are looking forward to a brutal PTA meeting. He is still, albeit failing, a member of the class.

Chaim comes to school and for the first time is missing homework. When asked for a reason, he declares, "My parents say that I don't have to do any homework or school-work anymore."

The teacher calls the principal and has the child expelled from school. Why should that be?

He only missed one assignment and Shimon so many!

All the time that Shimon is missing his homework he is wrong, and behind all the clever excuses, he knows it. His teacher hopes that someday he'll rebound and become responsive to his duties. Chaim declares his conscience dead. He guarantees that he can feel no pangs of regret. In his mind he is now correct in all he does. Legalizing his laziness locks him in a world of limitations no school can overcome.

Similarly, when Sodom promulgated laws disallowing charitable behavior and then enforced it, they sealed their own fate. They could never hope to be better, to become givers as Avraham had attempted to teach. Where there is no hope there can be no life and in the end what was theirs was theirs. Text Copyright &copy 2004 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.