

## **The Soul of The Jewish People**

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The Jewish Center

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There's a lot of talk in the public discourse these days about loneliness in America.

- The workplace has changed; it's harder for people to make lifelong relationships with colleagues and co-workers.
- Civic involvement is down; younger people are less likely to join clubs or institutions.
- And of course social media has facilitated a culture of social isolation.

The academy trains its students to be very circumspect about assigning causes and effects. But I don't think it's a particularly big leap to at least note a correlation between loneliness and so many of the alarming trends we're seeing in our country:

- The opioid epidemic;
- Rising suicide rates;
- And radical political polarization.

So I think it's worth investing a few moments of our time considering what our tradition might have to say about these issues. Is there a solution in sight?

I want to frame our conversation this morning by asking a question from next week's parsha. When we talk about the Five Towns, we usually think of Long Island. But in the Torah, the five towns are Sodom and Amorrhah and the three surrounding cities. I'm not making a judgment; everyone should draw their own conclusions.

Before He destroys them, God makes a decision to share his plan with Avraham. And my question is why?

On its face, Avraham's only connection to Sodom is Lot; and Lot is destined to survive one way or another. Why does Hashem feel compelled to keep Avraham in the loop?

Rashi says maybe it's because the towns are in Israel and the land is eventually going to be Avraham's so he has a right to know.

But I want to suggest something more:

I want to take you back to a scene in our parsha.

If you remember the story, Avraham had gotten involved in a massive regional conflict because his nephew had been taken captive. And even though he's the underdog, Avraham sweeps in and it's his coalition that wins the battle. Lot is saved.

Wars are always interesting. But the really interesting stuff is what happens after the war.

- What are the new alliances?

- Who's going to consolidate power?
- How are they going to carve up Czechoslovakia?

The king of Sodom is the first one on the scene.  
And he makes a proposal to Avraham.

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ-סֹדֶם, אֶל-אַבְרָם: תָּן-לִי הַנֶּפֶשׁ, וְהַרְבֵּשׁ קַח-לָךְ.

How about this: You take the spoils and I'll keep the captives.  
But before he can share his plan, the Torah interrupts the narrative and introduces a character that we've never heard of before: A man called Malkitzedek.

Whether and to what degree he's been involved in the war isn't clear.  
But he's a priest and he steps forward to offer a tribute to Avraham.

And he says two enigmatic lines.  
If we can understand them, we'll be on our way to solving our riddle.

יֵט וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ, וַיֹּאמֶר: בָּרוּךְ אַבְרָם לֵאלֹהֵי עֶלְיוֹן, קָנָה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ  
כּ וּבָרוּךְ אֱלֹהֵי עֶלְיוֹן, אֲשֶׁר-מָגַן צָרִיךָ בְּיָדָךְ

Blessed be Avraham of God most high, creator of Heaven and earth  
And blessed be God Most High who has delivered your enemies into your hands.

What I'd like to suggest is that Malkitzedek arrives just in time to deliver a message about what Avraham should do at this fraught moment.

He's the victor. He could make any decision he wants. Everything is hanging in the balance.  
Malkitzedek has two messages for Avraham.

First: It's God who is קָנָה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ. You could accumulate all the possessions you want, but ultimately it's Hashem who's the proprietor and arbiter of who succeeds and who fails materially in this world.

And second: It's God who's delivered your enemies into your hands.

If you read between the lines, Malkitzedek is furnishing Avraham with the answers to the very two questions he's about to be asked:

What do we do with the spoils? And what do we do with the people?

The Gemara says it was right here that Avraham made a terrible error in judgment.

He rejects the spoils. No one should think, Avraham says, that he got rich off of Sodom's military victory. So far so good.  
But what about the people??

רבי יוחנן אמר מפני שהפריש בני אדם מלהכנס תחת כנפי השכינה

What a missed opportunity!

What's going to happen to these people?

Avraham has a choice. He can either let them be taken back to Sodom, or he can take them to his "Monotheism for Beginners" course in Elonei Mamrei.

Abandoning the chance to bring people close was a tragic mistake in judgment.

And that's why years later God shares the story of Sodom's destruction with Avraham.

Look what happened, Hashem says.

Look what could have been.

You could have attached yourself to these people. You could have given them a sense of purpose and meaning.

You may not be guilty of a sin of commission, but you're surely guilty of one of omission. And I want you to know, Hashem says, the consequences of what happens when good people with the capacity to act miss their chance.

You don't need me to remind you that today is the anniversary of Kristallnacht.

You don't need me to quote John Stuart Mill who said, "Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing."

Today the enemy isn't national socialism; it's social isolation. And it's our job to act.

What a bracha to celebrate Moe's bar mitzvah this morning. And Moe, it's a lesson that will apply to every day of your Jewish life. In all kinds of ways, you can matter in people's lives.

The Torah is an extended meditation on how to help people feel less alone.

- How many times are we commanded to think about the stranger and the widow and the orphan?
- How many times the Torah demand that we show up and participate in communal life?
- How many times the Torah insist that we attach ourselves to other people?

It's our life mission as Jews to constantly combat the ills of loneliness and help people feel connected. It's our life mission to seize our opportunities to matter in people's lives and make sure we don't let them slip by.

It's a message that applies to each and every one of us.

Let's not miss our opportunities.

When Rachel and I and our family moved to Yad Binyamin last summer, we knew exactly two people. It was August when we moved. They were both out of town.

And of course we had each other, but I can share with you quite personally that I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time. Walking down 86<sup>th</sup> St., I know people. These are our friends. This is our community.

In Yad Binyamin we were entirely unknown.

Of course it's a tiny yishuv and very quickly the neighbors came by and made us feel very welcome. They made dinner for us and brought cookies for the kids. It was beautiful.

But the neighbor who stood out the most was the neighbor who brought us a container of salt. I'd not heard of it before, but he said it was an old tradition to welcome people with salt – something that endures for a very long time.

It probably cost 99 cents and took around four minutes. But the gesture was priceless and the message was timeless.

Sometimes it takes so little to do something so meaningful.

New York City is not Yad Binyamin.

There are probably more people on West 86<sup>th</sup> St. than in our entire yishuv.  
But the principle is the same.

The stories we read in the news are a cautionary tale.

We can't fix everything that ails our nation; but we can do everything within our power to build a community that cares.

We usually translate the word nefesh as soul.

In biblical Hebrew it actually just means people.

In the life of Avraham it appears exactly three times.

את הנפש אשר עשו בחרן

A reference to all the people Avraham and Sarah won over to monotheism.

תן-לי הנפש, וְהִרְכַּשׁ קַח-לְךָ

A reference to the people Avraham let go back to Sodom.

ונכרתה הנפש ההיא מעמיה

A reference to the members of Avraham's household who would be circumcised.

The common denominator is that nefesh in each case belongs to a person whose story hasn't yet been written.

In each case, with a little care and a little attention, anything is possible.

No gesture is too small. No time is too short. Whatever we can do to alleviate the loneliness of others will be time well spent.

As the Harvard Professor Arthur Brooks recently put it, "Each of us can be happier, and America will start to heal, when we become the kind neighbors and generous friends we wish we had."