

Parshat Re'eh – Building Character

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This week's Parsha contains within it the required reckoning for an entire city that deviates from the directives of the Torah and subjugation to God and instead chooses to worship an alternate god (עיר הנדחת).¹ If after careful investigation, the claims of such deviant behavior are found to be true, the Torah mandates that the inhabitants and the livestock of the city be wiped out by the sword, the city itself be razed and all the possessions of the city be burnt in a pyre. In the Tosefta, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer argue as to the extent of the annihilation required.² Rabbi Eliezer believes that the children are included in the mandated punishment, whereas Rabbi Akiva exempts the children from execution. Given all the qualifications of the Oral Law and the devastation of rendering such a punishment, there is an opinion in the Gemara Sanhedrin that there was never historically a case of a wayward city (עיר הנדחת).³ Even according to the dissenting opinion, it was a rarity for such an event to take place.

What is most interesting about the Parshia of the wayward city are the closing verses that describe the reason for carrying out such a cruel sentence which is "...in order that the God may turn from His wrath **and show (give) you compassion, and have compassion for you and increase you as He promised your forefathers.** For you will be heeding the LORD your God, obeying all His commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, doing what is right in the sight of the LORD your God (וַתִּתְּנוּ-לֶךָ רַחֲמִים וְרַחֲמֶיךָ וְהִרְבֵּךְ כְּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע) (לאַבְרָהָם)." The opening and closing of the verses are comprehensible since they explain that properly heeding the Torah's directives will successfully placate God's anger. As the Ibn Ezra explains, the wrath that would have been directed at you has now been channeled by you, as emissaries of God, towards the wayward city. What is very cryptic is the middle of the verses which indicate that God "will show you compassion and have compassion for you and increase you." How and why are these the results of executing the wayward city?

In a similar vein to the remainder of the verses, the Ba'alei HaTosafot explain that your lack of

compassion in executing the Ir HaNidachat will be rewarded with God showing compassion towards you. The Ba'al HaTurim adds that you should not be plagued by the guilt of eliminating an entire city of Israel because God will "increase you" as a quid pro quo for that which you did on His behalf. While these interpretations are compelling in that they are contextually consistent, it fails to address the seeming duplication of compassion in the verse. In addition, the more likely understanding of the verse is not that "God will **show** you compassion," but rather that "God will **give** you compassion."⁴

The truth is that the Tosefta quoted above already leans towards acknowledging this understanding of the Pasuk. Rabbi Akiva believes that the children are spared the fate of the city because you will be compelled (וַתִּתְּנוּ-לֶךָ רַחֲמִים) to show mercy as guardians for the orphans that remain after the inhabitants are executed. On the other hand, Rabbi Eliezer believes the children are executed and that the meaning of the verse (וַתִּתְּנוּ-לֶךָ רַחֲמִים) is that God will cause the relatives of those executed in the city to feel compassion towards the judges and executioners. Even though they might be upset over the loss of their relatives, they will not harbor a grudge against the authorities for doing that which God enjoined them, thereby implicitly justifying their decision. Rabbi Akiva's explanation clearly sees the verse as engendering compassion within the individual involved, but why is that necessary and again what does that have to do with the remainder of the verse?

Following in the footsteps of Rabbi Akiva, both the Alshich and the Or HaChaim are groundbreaking in their understanding of this verse and all subsequent commentators build upon their interpretation. They both suggest that the execution of a wayward city requires a certain amount of cruelty or suspension of compassion in order to carry out the will of God. Even though it is condoned by God, engaging in this type of activity leaves an indelible mark on the nature of the individual. As Golda Meir famously is purported to have said, "When peace comes we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons."⁵

¹ דברים יג, יג-יט

² תוספתא סנהדרין יד, ג קטני בני אנשי עיר הנדחת שוודחו עמה אין נהרגין ר' אלעזר אומר נהרגין

³ סנהדרין עא. מעניין שר"א שאומר שהילדים נהרגים גם סובר עיר הנדחת לא היתה ולא עתידה להיות ולמה נכתבה - דרוש וקבל שכר

⁴ עיין רש"ר הירש

⁵ There is some question as to the historicity of this quote, but nevertheless the sentiment is consistent with demonstrating the dangers of engaging even in justified killing of others.

In Kohelet it says, "One who performs a Mitzva will know no evil (שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוָה לֹא יֵדַע דְּבַר רָע)." ⁶ The Gemara implies that this principle is suspended when there is a high likelihood of danger or damage.⁷ The wholesale killing and destruction of a city unquestionably would have long ranging impact on the involved individual's ability to be compassionate, experience empathy or feel sympathy. Given that likelihood, it would certainly not be subsumed under the rubric of those commands that are protected from any evil befalling those that engage in the execution of God's will. Therefore, in this instance God had to guarantee those involved in prosecuting, sentencing and executing the wayward city that He will give them compassion (וְנָתַן-לָהֶם רַחֲמִים) as a reward for adhering to God's will. The individual's core nature would remain compassionate despite all the external stimuli that might have caused just the opposite to transpire. In this sense, Rabbi Akiva's interpretation of the verse is very compelling. Forcing those that executed the city to become the guardians of the resultant orphans would be an immediate and direct offset to the "cruelty" they were forced to engage in. Given the rarity of wayward city, this part of the verse remains mostly in the realm of the theoretical, but the remainder of the Pasuk has significant daily ramifications.

The Pasuk continues that after God awards the individual's with compassion, He will be compassionate towards them (וְנָתַן-לָהֶם רַחֲמִים) (וְרַחֲמֶךָ). The Gemara quotes this as the source for Rabbi Gamliel's dictum that "one who is compassionate towards others, God will be compassionate towards them" and vice versa "one who is indifferent and lacks compassion towards others, God will not show them compassion (כל המרחם על הבריות - מרחמין עליו מן השמים)." ⁸ It is interesting that a mere lack of compassion, rather than actively engaging in cruelty, results in the suspension of God's compassion towards the individual. A similar, but broader principle is mentioned in the Mishna, "In the measure with which a person metes out to others, they mete out to him (במדה שאדם מודד בה) (מודדין לו)." ⁹ The necessity for God to ensure the compassionate nature of the individual involved in the execution of the wayward city is essential in maintaining their ability to receive the compassion of God in the future. That is because the lack of compassion engendered is not just detrimental to

their personality, but rather it becomes a fatal flaw for them. If God did not compensate for that deficit, it would be impossible for anyone to be expected to act on behalf of God in this instance since it would leave them permanently handicapped in their ability to receive God's compassion.

Accordingly, even though the case of Ir HaNidachat may never have taken place historically, it has major implications for how we conduct ourselves.¹⁰ We all beseech God for many things that we need, but as the story of the wayward city shows us, there is a secret way to ensure that all your prayers are answered. If you are generous towards others, God will be generous towards you; if you are compassionate towards others, God will be compassionate towards you. In other words, the way a person acts is the way they will be treated from heaven. Therefore, when we entreat God for something, we should not only ask Him for that particular item, but we should also ask God to imbue within us the character trait that we are praying that He demonstrates towards us. A positive response to our prayer has double the benefit; we become better people, improve our character and as a result of that improvement, we will as a "natural" reciprocity receive that which we were beseeching from God.

Shabbat Shalom

⁶ קוהלת ח,ה.

⁷ והאמר רבי אלעזר: שלוחי מצוה אינן ניזוקין! - היכא דשכיח היזיקא שאני (פסחים ח:)

⁸ כל המרחם על הבריות - מרחמין עליו מן השמים, וכל שאינו מרחם על הבריות - אין מרחמין עליו מן השמים (שבת קנא:)

⁹ במדה שאדם מודד בה מודדין לו (סוטה ח: משנה א,ז)

¹⁰ אפשר שזה פירוש הגמ' בסנהדרין דרוש וקבל שכר בדרך מליצה דרוש את הפרשה ותקבל הדרך שיש בו תועלת (שכר)