

# PLANTING THE TREES OF WELCOME TO OUTSIDERS

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Very nearly at the end of the Torah portion for the first day of Rosh Hashana, we read

וַיֵּטַע אֶשְׁל בְּבֵאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא שְׁם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה אֵל עוֹלָם:

[Abraham] planted an Eshel at Beer-sheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God ([Genesis/Bereishit 21:33](#)). The midrash Avot d'Rabbi Natan (7:1) reads the noun “eshel” (aleph, shin, lamed) not as a type of tree, but as an acronym for the words *akhila* (eating), *shtiya* (drinking), and *livui* (accompanying). This might seem peculiar, but the midrash has something very particular in mind: it understands this as a comparison to the actions of Job, showcasing Abraham’s significantly higher level of care for strangers.

“... So when all the great tragedies came upon him, Job said before the Holy Blessed One: Did I not feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty? ...And did I not clothe the naked? ...And even so, these tragedies came upon me. The Holy Blessed One said to Job: Job, you still have not gotten to [even half] the level of Abraham. You sit and wait in your house, and guests come in to you. And if it is someone’s custom to eat wheat bread, you feed him wheat bread. And if someone’s custom is to eat meat, you feed him meat. And if someone’s custom is to drink wine, you pour him wine. But Abraham did not do this. Rather, he sat and looked out at the world, and when he would see potential guests, he would go bring them into his house. And if someone was not accustomed to eating wheat bread, he would feed him wheat bread. And if someone was not accustomed to eating meat, he would feed him meat. And if someone was not accustomed to drinking wine, he would pour him wine. Not only that, but he built large booths out on the roads, where he would leave food and drink, and anyone who came by and entered would eat and drink and bless the heavens, and he would feel content. Anything that one could ask for was available in the house of Abraham, as it says, ‘And he planted an eshel tree in Beer Sheba’” ([Genesis/Bereishit 21:33](#)).

This midrash ties together Abraham’s actions at the end of our reading with actions that occurred much earlier. In [Genesis/Bereishit 18](#), Abraham and Sarah receive visitors; although they do not at first know that their visitors are special in any way, they receive them with their very best, offering them food, drink and shelter. In return, they receive the greatest possible blessing - the promise of descendants. Immediately following this, we have an illustration of something quite different - God tells Abraham about very wicked cities, saying: “The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note” ([Genesis/Bereishit 18:20](#)).

When God sends messengers to the city, they are received by Lot, who, like Abraham, shelters them, for which reason he and his family alone are saved from the destruction of the cities. The significance of Lot’s sheltering of outsiders and the merit of Abraham being his hospitality to outsiders was already signaled when God reasoned to Godself why it was important to tell Abraham what God was planning: “For I have singled him out, that **he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right...**” ([Genesis/Bereishit 18:19](#)).

God is already making clear what is at stake in Sodom. But what *is* at stake? The prophets tell us:

הִנֵּה זֶה הָיָה עוֹן סֹדִם אֲחוֹתָהּ: גָּאוֹן שְׁבִיעַת לָחֵם וְשִׁלּוֹת הַשֶּׁקֶט הָיָה לָהּ וּלְבָנוֹתֶיהָ יָד עֲנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן לֹא הִחֲזִיקָה - Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and careless ease was in her and in her daughters; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy ([Ezekiel 16:49](#)).

But what does that mean? What was wrong with the people of Sodom? What were they doing to make God feel it necessary to destroy all the cities in the area?

We already have a hint from the parshah itself: It is something about the way Sodom and Amora treat outsiders. But the rabbis want to make it perfectly clear:

Our Rabbis taught: The people of Sodom waxed haughty only on account of the good which the Holy Blessed One had lavished upon them.....They said: Since bread and the dust of gold come out from [our] earth, and it hath, why should we suffer wayfarers, who come to us only to deplete our wealth. Come, let us abolish strangers from our land ([Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 109a](#))...

... If a poor person happened to come there, every resident gave him a [coin], and upon each and every coin, the giver's name was written, but no bread was given to [the traveler]. When he died, each came and took back his ([Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 109b](#)).

Now, most of us will find this appalling - as we should: Sodom was a wealthy society which gloried in its wealth, and felt that what they produced was theirs, and theirs alone. The poor were a burden which the people of Sodom refused to shoulder, and as a society they refused to provide - even when it would harm them not at all. Indeed, they vilified those who wanted to provide for others, and treated them as enemies.

I expect that most of us do not think of the extreme examples offered by the Talmud as applying to us in any way - after all, they are SO extreme. But clearly the rabbis think that the behavior of Sodom is alive and well. In fact, in the Mishnah ([Pirkei Avot 5:10](#)), the rabbis tell us:

There are four types of character in people: 1) One that says, "Mine is mine, and yours is yours": this is a neutral type; some say this is the trait of Sodom. 2) One that says, "Mine is yours and yours is mine," is a fool. 3) One that says, "Mine is yours and yours is yours," is a pious person. 4) One that says, "Mine is mine, and yours is mine," is a wicked person.

We know that Judaism emphasizes over and over again that how we treat the ger, the outsider, is the measure of our righteousness and of our relationship with God. I think it is natural for us to think of this obligation as one which is commanded upon us individually, but the Torah wants to make it clear that it is a commandment not ONLY of individuals, but of the society as a whole. It is a commandment not only of our treatment of the wayfarer, but of the powerless among us, and the consequences both of doing justly by the outsider, and of failing to do so. It is thus no surprise that this is read on Rosh Hashana, the day on which, the Talmud tells us, nations stand before God to be judged.

It is an astonishing fact that the Bible has more laws dealing with the protection of the ger than with any other law, including honoring God, observing the Sabbath, festivals, etc. The Talmud ([Bava Metzia 59b](#)) notes "the Torah warns against [the wronging of] a proselyte in thirty-six, or as others say, in forty-six, places." In Exodus/Shemot it says: "You shall not wrong a stranger (ger) or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" ([Exodus/Shemot 22:20](#)) and, when it is repeated, the Torah adds the phrase "you know the mind of a stranger [for you were strangers in the land of Egypt]" ([23:9](#)).

In theory, then, our own experience as outsiders should be enough to motivate us to treat the powerless among us with tzedakah, righteousness. But the rabbis clearly didn't think that that would do it. The Talmud ([Baba Batra 8a](#)) lists at what point a person is assessed for taxes of different types in a township: At thirty days for the soup kitchen, at six months the clothing fund, etc. There is no term of residency required in order to eat from the soup kitchen. In fact the Mishnah says something even more interesting: The obligation is upon the community to provide for the poor - even for a person wandering from town to town, who is not a resident of this town, and it sets a minimum for meals worth of food and necessities for sleeping ([Mishnah, Peah 8:7](#)). In fact, not only is the obligation on the community, but the Jewish law asserts that the community compels individuals to give for the sake of maintaining the community resources for the poor ([Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah, 256:5](#)).

Jewish law tells us that "A person should not think: How can I reduce my wealth by giving it to the poor? He must realize that the money is not his, but rather a trust granted to him in order to carry out the will of the One who entrusted it to him" ([Kitzur Shulchan Arukh 34:1](#)). It's easy to dismiss the sin of Sodom as something beyond us,

It's easy to dismiss the sin of Sodom as something beyond us, but most of us sometimes fall into thinking in that way: It's mine, I earned it, and I don't have to share it. Indeed, it is perhaps the hardest work of a parent, and also of society, to teach us to share, not just what moves us as individuals, but as a communal obligation which we enforce upon the community.

On Rosh Hashana, as we stand together as a nation before the Judge, reading about Abraham's planting hospitality to outsiders, we should reflect on a piece of [folklore](#) about the [Gaon of Vilna](#), who sat with a voice but no vote on the Council of the Jews of Vilna. He had been asked to comment on some new legislation before the Council for ending or greatly reducing the influx of poor Jews from other regions into Vilna. When they got to the proposal, the Gaon got up to leave the meeting. The council member who proposed it, objected to his leaving, as he had not yet commented on the new legislation, as he was tasked. "What new legislation?" said the Gaon. "This was already the law of Sodom, long ago!" And he left.

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