

## **What Makes a Good City**

### **A Jewish Perspective**

**(extract)**

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[NB. The longer paper considers two passages that concern the story of the city of Sodom: Gen. 19 and the Babylonian Talmud (BT San. 109a-b)].

In asking the question, 'What is a good city?', many of the qualities could equally well apply to a good state, a good country or a good society in general. But Sodom is a city, and there are therefore features which apply particularly to a city. It is a walled city with gates. It is therefore a closed society. This means, firstly, that unlike a group in the countryside or the desert, which can be approached by anyone, the inhabitants of the walled city can determine who can enter it and meet its inhabitants. Secondly, it means that the inhabitants are crowded together, aware of all their neighbours doings for better or worse. They have a tendency to group together and to exclude 'the other', the people who come from outside the city walls. The example of Sodom is a particular warning to city dwellers.

We learn what the Talmud expects of the 'good city' from the beginning of the passage. We learn that wealth is from God. It should not be taken for granted or lead to hubris. It does not belong exclusively to those who own it, but is given on trust, so that it can be used to help the poor and the stranger. The wealth is especially to be used for the most vulnerable, the orphan and the widow. It is to be used as well for those who are passing through, the strangers who are dependent on the goodwill of the cities they pass through. The 'law of the wayfarer', which the men of Sodom abandoned, demanded that the wayfarer be cared for.

We learn that small actions matter. The effect of accumulated small thefts - as of bricks and onions - is the total removal of property. Small actions of depriving others have an accumulated effect of leaving them destitute. Conversely we can extrapolate that small acts of giving can accumulate to sustain the poor.

Finally, we learn about justice. Firstly, we learn that justice can easily be perverted. It can be used to protect the vulnerable but it can also be used to exploit them. We have to be alert always to the possibility that justice will be abused and used by the powerful for their own ends. Secondly, important as justice is, it can be misused even whilst abiding by the law. Application of the law too strictly can also be harmful to those the law is designed to protect. Compassion is essential in the application of the law. And thirdly, justice is not just there to protect the inhabitants of the city. It is there also, and especially, to

protect the outsider: the wayfarer, the stranger, the sojourner who is not a citizen.

The passage also shows that, for all their arrogance and cruelty, the men of Sodom were vulnerable. Just as they subverted justice, the system they developed could also be subverted and undermined by those it was designed to exclude – the orphan, the fuller and the wayfarer, Abraham's servant Eliezer. Eliezer's action at the banquet shows that the climate which the men of Sodom created by excluding the stranger was corrosive. It resulted in mutual mistrust, so that each man at the banquet feared he would be exposed (literally and metaphorically) for inviting a stranger. Not only those at the margins suffered, but so did those at the centre, whose lives were built on mistrust and suspicion that they would be treated in the way they treated others.

The good city, then, is a city which, though it may be physically enclosed, is open to the stranger and the wayfarer. It is a city which is built on justice, fairly applied but tempered by compassion. It is a city in which the poor are treated with kindness and generosity. If the inhabitants of the good city do all this, they, too, will benefit from a city which is built on trust and mutual benefit.