



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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"Dystopia"

I never thought that I would begin a discussion of the weekly Torah portion by referring to a person who was canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church. Never, that is, until I sat down to write this week's *Person in the Parsha* column.

The person in question is Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), the great jurist and counselor to the notorious King Henry VIII, who was beheaded because of his insistence that the Catholic Church was his supreme religious authority, and not King Henry.

I have long admired Sir Thomas because of his courage and also because of his wisdom. One example of the latter is the following quotation, which remains one of my all-time favorites: "The ordinary arts we practice every day at home are of more importance to the soul than their simplicity might suggest."

Although those words of wisdom could themselves serve as the basis for an essay, it is another one of More's contributions to the world's culture that prompts me to begin this column by mentioning him. More earned a prominent place in the history of world literature because of his classic work, *Utopia*. In this work, More imagines the ideal society, one that is perfectly just and fair. Indeed, More coined the word "utopia," which has become part of our everyday parlance.

Centuries after More's martyrdom, at least

two of his countrymen found it necessary to seek a word which would signify a perfectly evil society. They searched for an antonym to "utopia." In the early 19th century, Jeremy Bentham introduced the word "cacotopia," defining it as a nightmare society in which morals mean nothing. Bentham's follower, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, preferred the term "dystopia." It is Mills' term that has prevailed as the antonym of choice for "utopia." Subsequent philosophers have found it ironic that this nightmare world often results from attempts to create an ideal society.

This week's Torah portion, *Parshat Vayera* (*Genesis* 18:1-22:24) tells the story of what was the world's first "dystopia," Sodom. We first encounter this "nightmare society" in last week's *parsha*, *Parshat Lech Lecha*. There, we read of Lot's decision to leave his Uncle Abram's company and "pitch his tents near Sodom." Immediately, the Torah interjects: "Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked and sinful against the Lord." (*Genesis* 13:13) The careful reader of this phrase wonders, "What exactly did they do to deserve such a malignant biblical review? What behaviors were so wicked and sinful?"

The rabbinic commentators, from the Talmud and Midrash down to our very own times, expand upon this description of Sodom and fill in some of the details for us. Rashi briefly summarizes some of the Talmud's views: "They were wicked with their bodies, sinful with their material possessions, and were intentionally rebellious against God."

They violated sexual mores, were unethical in their business dealings, and based their behavior upon a corrupt theology.

The great medieval commentator, Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher, elaborates even further by referring to a passage in the *Book of Ezekiel* that provides us with some further background as to the nature of Sodom. The passage reads: "Behold, this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abominations before Me; and so I removed them, as you saw." (*Ezekiel* 16:49-50) The prophet informs us that Sodom was an affluent society which could easily have been charitable to others; yet they enacted laws against charity. They were untroubled, at peace because of their military power, yet they isolated themselves from less fortunate neighboring societies. They committed moral abominations.

Rabbenu Bachya continues, "Although the Torah had not yet been revealed, simple human reason demands charitable deeds and moral behavior. It is despicable that one human would stand idly by as another human suffers from hunger. How can one who has been blessed with bountiful wealth not alleviate another person's poverty? How much more despicable is he who ignores one of his own people, one who dwells within his own community."

Our Sages assert that Sodom and the three cities that were her cohorts were denied a place in the World to Come. It was not because they were a lawless society that they deserved this extreme punishment. Quite the contrary—they had an elaborate legal and judicial system. But their laws

were based upon intolerance, selfishness, and cruelty. Our Sages tell us that their laws were enforced by means of the most sadistic tortures imaginable.

Abraham's *weltanschauung* was the polar opposite of Sodom's. Is it not astounding, then, that he pleaded with the Almighty for Sodom's salvation? After all, if the antonym for utopia is dystopia, then Abrahamism is the antonym for Sodomism. Yet Abraham prayed for Sodom!

Commentators throughout the ages have sought to understand why Abraham supposed that there might be fifty, or even ten, righteous men in such a thoroughly corrupt society. One approach to this problem is attributed to Rabbi Isaiah Jungreis, author of the work *Chazon Yeshayahu*, a profound and original thinker whose life was snuffed out by the Nazis in 1944.

He argues that, paradoxically, the comprehensiveness and totality of Sodom's evil was precisely what Abraham used in its defense. He puts these words into Abraham's mouth: "Almighty Lord! Is it not conceivable that there are indeed fifty individuals in Sodom who recognize the cruel and evil nature of their society but who cannot protest, because their own lives would then be in danger? Surely these well-intentioned but impotent individuals deserve to be considered righteous individuals in whose merit all of Sodom should be saved!"

Rabbi Jungreis suggests that the Almighty's responded as follows: "Yes, dear Abraham. He who opposes evil but does not protest because he fears for his own life is a righteous person. But there were not fifty, nor even ten, individuals in all of Sodom with troubled consciences. It was not the coercive

nature of their environment that prevented them from speaking out. It was their evil and sinful behavior."

I am not qualified to debate Rabbi Jungreis, a keen student of biblical texts and a *kadosh*, a martyr, of the Holocaust. I concur with his hypothesis regarding Abraham's argument. Abraham may very well have argued that those who fail to protest in order to protect their own lives should be considered righteous men.

But I take issue with his conjecture regarding the Almighty's response. I find the following Divine response more likely: "Abraham, dear Abraham! A person who finds himself in an evil society must voice protest, whatever the cost, if he is to be considered righteous. There may very well have been ten, or fifty, or perhaps even more, residents of Sodom who were aware that theirs was a morally corrupt environment. Arguably, those men should not be considered evil. But there is no way that they can be considered righteous. A righteous person speaks out courageously against the evil that surrounds him. Trust me, Abraham, had anyone in Sodom broken the conspiracy of silence which allowed evil to persist, I, the Lord Almighty would have hastened to assist him in his cause."

It was not only Sodom's evil that God could not tolerate. It was also the silence in the face of that evil. And that silence ultimately excluded all of Sodom from the World to Come. ■



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