

The Hebrew Corner

The great mercy of God is revealed in the pages of the Tanach. We see that, being the ultimate standard for holiness and righteousness that he is, he must from time-to-time judge people and nations, but he is not quick to do so, and gives plenty of opportunities for repentance. For our first example of this, let's look at the following passage (Genesis 18:20-33):

“And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know. And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the LORD. And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes. And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD, which am but dust and ashes: Peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous: wilt thou destroy all the city for lack of five? And he said, If I find there forty and five, I will not destroy it. And he spake unto him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there. And he said, I will not do it for forty's sake. And

he said unto him, Oh let not the LORD be angry, and I will speak: Peradventure there shall thirty be found there. And he said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there. And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD: Peradventure there shall be twenty found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake. And he said, Oh let not the LORD be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. And the LORD went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place.”

The names of the two cities in the passage whose wickedness had come to the attention of God are Sodom, or in Hebrew s'dom (סֹדֹם, suh-DOHM), and Gomorrah, in Hebrew amorah (עֲמֹרָה, ah-moh-RAH). The English translation of Gomorrah, beginning with the letter g, stems back to the ancient pronunciation of the letter ayin (ע), a voiced vibration at the back of the throat, which was thought to be similar to the sound of “ng”. In modern Hebrew the ayin is silent, like aleph (א).

Abraham bargained with God as to the number of righteous people that it would take for God to withhold judgment. Righteous in Hebrew is tsaddiq (צַדִּיק, tsah-DEEK), which is contrasted to wicked in the passage, a translation of the Hebrew word rasha (רָשָׁע, rah-SHAH). God was not looking for people that were righteous because of their own actions. This is apparent from Genesis 15:6 that indicates that because Abraham believed that God would keep his promises to him, this was accounted to him as righteousness. So he was really looking for any people of Sodom who believed and

trusted in him. Indeed as stated in the passage, if he could have found as few as 10 such people, he would have spared Sodom. Lot, Abraham's nephew, who was described in 2 Peter 2:7-8 as being a righteous man, and his 2 daughters were the only inhabitants of Sodom who were saved alive from the destruction of the two cities.

In the book of Jonah, we see another instance of God's mercy being exhibited, this time upon the city of Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria (Jonah 1:1-2):

“Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.”

God made the declaration that he must judge this city due to its wickedness, but showed mercy in that he gave them a chance to repent, and commanded Jonah to deliver this message to the Ninevites. Jonah was aware that God was merciful, but did not want to see Ninevah spared, The story, familiar to us, continues with Jonah fleeing in a ship to Tarshish, being cast overboard during a tempest, then swallowed by a large fish who then threw him up on the shore of Ninevah. Jonah then goes a day's journey into the city, then gives a short message of the impending judgment. The response of the people and the king was to repent of their wickedness with fasting not only of food but water also. God, in turn responds by withholding judgment from the city. Jonah meanwhile went in anger to the east side of the city to watch what God would do (Jonah 4:1-12):

“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live. Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry? So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city. And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?”

The Hebrew word translated as booth in the passage is sukkah (סוכה, suhk-KAH), which in the plural is sukkot. What frequently is referred to as the Feast of Tabernacles, is known to the Jewish people as the Feast of Sukkot (or Feast of Booths). God was teaching Jonah a

lesson, revealing to him why he was merciful to the Ninevites, that he loved and wanted to spare more than 120,000 people, and would not judge them before they were given a chance to repent.

The ultimate demonstration of God's mercy was revealed centuries later, when he allowed his son Jesus to be crucified, paying the penalty for the sins of all. He loved us and wanted to give us a chance to repent and not be lost for eternity, so that we could live forever in fellowship with him. Thank you Lord for the mercy that you have shown to us.

May you have a good month living in the mercy and kindness of God.