

THE CITY IN RABBINIC THOUGHT¹

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Within biblical and rabbinic thought there is no separate category such as the city. No doubt this was due in part to the fact that the biblical and rabbinic authors did not tend to think in these kinds of categories. On the other hand, Zion is a constant preoccupation of the Bible and the rabbis. The word "Zion" means in ascending order - the land of Israel, that is the Holy Land; the City of Jerusalem as the center of the Holy Land; and the Temple Mount as the center of Jerusalem. In this sense, it would hardly be an exaggeration to assert that Zion is, a central theme of the Bible. In this paper I shall deal with the formulations of the rabbis towards the social structure that should exist within Zion and any other city. We shall show, on the other hand, how Sodom is the embodiment within biblical and rabbinic literature of the notoriously evil community, and on the other hand, the place of Zion as the righteous community,

In Rabbinic Law one sees a fusion of legal and prophetic strains. The rabbis sought to implement the ideals and the social righteousness of the prophets into social legislation, intervening in every area of life. Herford Travers, Christian student of rabbinic teaching, pointed out that;

"between the prophets and the Pharisees there was no breach whatever...The Pharisees and the Rabbis took note of the fact that the line of the prophets had come to an end...the Pharisees never dreamed of repudiating the prophetic teaching. On the contrary, they desired to make it effective, to bring out in the lives of those whom they could influence, the fruits of a godly, righteous and sober life' which the prophets would have brought out if they could. Phariseism is applied prophecy."

The legislation which the rabbis encouraged and interpreted was rooted in the community, a people rather than any ecclesiastical class was to be its bearer, The rabbis habitually thought in terms of community and not in terms of church. Perhaps one of the most famous dictums of all rabbinic teaching was Hillel's "Do not separate yourself from the community." Since the community was the province within which men lived, they were deeply concerned with social legislation and

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creating out of that community a place where God's pattern in history might be worked out. Therefore, physical, economic and social areas were proper areas for religious legislation,

Man himself was sacred. We are told in Sanhedrin 4:5 that man was created a single Individual to teach us that whosoever destroys one life, scripture describes as though he had laid waste the entire world, and whoever rescues ones life, scripture accounts it to him as though he had saved the whole world. The Talmud explains that a man may strike many coins from one die and they are all alike but the Holy One, blessed is He, strikes every person from the die of the first man, but no one resembles another. So, man is unique but he can only reach his fulfillment within society and that - within a just society. A man is both thus independent and Interdependent and constantly lives within this dual tension. We are told in the Talmud that a rabbi was astonished at how much society contributed to his welfare, and he is purported to have said;

"How much labor Adam must have expended before he had bread to eat - he plowed, he sowed, he reaped, bore the sheaves and thrashed, winnowed, and selected the ears, sifted the flour, kneaded and baked and after that he ate. Whereas I get up in the morning and find ail this prepared for me. And how much labor must Adam have expended before he had a garment to wear. He sheared, washed the wool, combed, spun, wove and after that he had a garment to wear; whereas I get up in the morning and find ail this prepared for me. An artisan comes to the door of my house and I get up and find all these things are right there."

Man must live in a society; the society limits him, and is the field for his fulfillment. But even the society itself must be limited, Property rights are never absolute; the community through the court, has the right to subordinate an individual property to public welfare. If a well is found in a field privately owned, it has to be made available to the people of the nearby town. Profits could be subject to limitations set by the community. Necessities, in particular could not be sold at exorbitant profits and In rabbinic times, overseers were appointed to prevent overcharging by unscrupulous merchants, There were communal inspectors to watch that the scales and measures were honest. In a legal system that functions in the context of a religious ethic, intent is especially important. Note the following selection from the Talmud:

"Even as the law prohibits fraud in buying and selling, it forbids fraud that is perpetrated solely by the spoken word. A man may not say to a merchant

'how much does this article cost'? If he has no real intention of making a purchase, (The fraud ensues from the fact that he raises the merchant's hopes falsely.)"

To give an idea of the Talmudic legislation on the subject, we can quote the following summary, We need only quote Maimonides whose own writings reflect the view of the ancient rabbis:

"(1) Every community, if necessary with the cooperation of a great leader, may at its discretion fix the prices of all articles, (2) Every community should fix the prices of all articles, allowing for a total profit of but one-sixth, (3) Wherever there are no communal fixed prices, the seller is wholly free to set his own price on land, slaves, free labor and commercial paper, (4) A merchant may do the same with respect to movables, if he gives complete and candid information to the other party. (5) However in case, of failure to do so, he runs the risk that the injured party may choose to demand restitution of the balance of precisely one- sixth or complete annulment of the contract if the difference, exceeds one-sixth of the market price. (6) An error in weight or measure merely calls for the restitution of the difference, (7) The merchant is entitled freely to sell below the prevailing market price and employ other 'fair' methods of competition,"

The rights of labor were also recognized, and the dignity of labor upheld. A parent had to teach his son a trade. There was a limit set upon the hours that hired help could work. Workers were permitted to join together and to set a wage scale. Employers could not pay their labor in kind since this exposed the worker to the risk of receiving inferior goods appraised at inflated prices. Where meals were included in the stipulated compensation, the employer was obliged to provide the highest quality food. A laborer's wages were not to be reduced during a period of absence caused by illness, and the worker himself could not work in his field by night and hire himself out for the day, since he could not bring to the work the full measure of his energy,

In rabbinic times, each synagogue had attached to it a hostel so that no wayfarer would remain without shelter. The poor of each municipality received, every Friday, assistance for a full week for themselves and their families, Orphans were supported out of community funds and dowries were provided to poor orphaned brides, free burial of the indigent was part of each community's responsibility.

All of this - the relation of individual to society - required an ethic of government. Government was of course, the means to attaining the end of the creation of a good society. Therefore government had to be respected. The rabbis expressed themselves by saying that government was so crucial that only at the time of the Messiah would there be no governments in the world; or as another rabbinic sage put it:

"Men are enjoined to pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear of it, men would swallow each other alive."

But the government was always a means only to just ends; It could not be an end in itself. The government had the right to tax and to be supported in terms of manpower, but only if its acts on behalf of its people were acts of care and concern, conscious of their needs and welfare. There could be no, rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's unless Caesar really met the needs of the social arena, The government was also the executor of Justice. No evildoer is the object of greater condemnation by the Rabbis than the Judge or government officer who violates his trust, A judge who judges truly, even for an hour, is "the partner of God" in the work of creation. Therefore a great amount of time was spent by the rabbis in working out exactly how the rights of the individual and the society could be protected In a legal sense, Thus no man could incriminate himself (f; testimony was not accepted from usurers or gamblers; close relatives of the principals involved are likewise barred from testifying; witnesses were interrogated separately; and every effort was made to impress upon them the full seriousness of their responsibility. Any discrepancy in the testimony of a witness automatically led to acquittal. In a criminal case; for acquittal, a majority of one was sufficient; for conviction, a majority of at least two was needed. Circumstantial evidence was not acceptable when the penalty could be death. Two witnesses who could be cross-examined, had to see the crime and they were called upon to testify not only to the facts as they saw them, but also to the defendant's capacity to understand and know the meaning of his actions and their consequences, In actuality, rabbinic law had hedged capital punishment with so many qualifications, that it essentially abolished the death penalty. The Mishnah very severely castigates a court which pronounces a death sentence once in seven years, accusing the judges of not exercising enough care in their procedure. To make the death penalty impossible, one rabbi even amended the Mishnah to read "once in seventy years." The Rabbis even went so far as to recommend the kind of city one could live in. They say; a man is not allowed to settle in a city that does not have the following; a court that is effectual, a system of charity that is collected by two people, and divided by

three, a synagogue, a bath house, sanitary facilities, a doctor, an artisan, a scribe and an educator,

In all of this we see how rabbinic teaching interwove the legal and the religious until they really could not be separated into two strands. The law was part of religious doctrine and spiritual aspiration. Thus society had to be subject to the legislation, which would make it possible for man to live creatively and fulfill the Image of God in which he was made.

SODOM- AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT A CITY SHOULD NOT BE

Biblically we are told very little about the sin of Sodom. What we see is that they violently demonstrated their hostility to strangers, their devotion to lust, indulging in all manner of unnatural vice, The most sweeping condemnation of the Sodomites is In the following passage In Genesis, 18; 20-21:

"Then the Lord said, "The outrage (za'aqat) 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."

We have to understand what the Hebrew root Za'aq really means. It is the agonized plea of the victim for help in some great injustice, For instance God heeded the za'aq of Israel in Egypt against their taskmasters, or If any mistreated a widow or orphan, God will hear their Za'aqah as soon as they cry out.

Ezekiel, speaking In the name of God, powerfully sums up the iniquity of Sodom And Gomorrah as follows, (Ezekiel 16; 49-50):

...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 abomination before Me; and so I removed them, as you saw.

It is interesting to note how the rabbis picked up this theme of Ezekiel's and through their description of what Sodom was, give us a description of what the corrupt city Is. we shall let them speak in their own words, They point out that Sodom was destroyed but the generation of the dispersion (the Tower of Babel) only dispersed, because at least the generation of the dispersion loved one another; but the people of Sodom had no use for one another, and no respect for the integrity of any individual. Therefore they were destroyed. In another place they

described the Sodom type as being one who says, "what is mine, Is mine and what is yours, Is yours."

The rabbis describe Sodom as being an exceptionally prosperous city. This is the land which gives forth bread of its own, laden with precious stones and gold, They say that there was not a street in Sodom that did not have vines intermingled with trees mingled with plantings, one on top of another, giving forth grapes and figs and pomegranates, nuts and almonds, fruit and spices. Indeed one could barely see the sun for all of the foliage; and indeed if one stood on the hills outside Sodom, one could not even see the city for all of the prosperity and the fruitfulness of the land, When one went to the gardener and asked for vegetables, as the gardener cleaned off the fruit or the vegetable, one found gold, The rabbis say that the people of Sodom used to say;

"Look at us - so prosperous and so powerful. We have food, we have gold, and we have precious stones and all sorts of natural resources. Why do we have to pay any attention to wayfarers and to strangers who only come to diminish us."

They went on to say that the people of Sodom were money hungry and would search out ways of depriving one another of the resources that were theirs. Thus, if a man had a hidden treasure, they would try to locate and uncover it and to take it from him.

Much of what they did was done within the law or in such a manner as to use law for immoral ends - the very opposite of what the rabbis tried to do in their social legislation. If a person had a row of bricks for sale or a row of bricks to be used In a building, each Sodomite would come and take one and then turn to him and say, "But after all, I took only one and it is not worth much." If a person had a row at onions or garlic, each one would cone and take one and say, "But after all, I took only one.' And If a man wounded another man, they would tell him that Indeed the man who was wounded should pay the man who wounded him because all he did was to help draw blood from him (i.e. cupping, a process which in ancient times was seen as aiding health). They not only perverted the law but also instituted unjust laws. We are told that a man who used a bridge In Sodom paid four zuzim, but if he chose not to use the bridge, and swam across the water, he paid eight. The indifference to justice- in terms of outsiders is demonstrated by this story, A man came to Sodom and they asked him for four zuzim (coins) for crossing the bridge, He said, "But I swam through the water,' they said, "Well, if that's the case, pay us eight." He refused to pay, and they beat him, He came before the Judges and they

said to him, "You had better pay the money to these people who have beaten you, for they have helped cup you and take blood from you, and in addition pay the eight zuzim for using the water."

We are told that the men of Sodom would confiscate the property of anyone who invited strangers to their home. If a poor person came to town, each one would give him a check which no one else would cash, but no one would give him food, When the poor man died, each one would come and claim back his check. In this way they could say, "But look, I helped" There, was a young girl In Sodom who used to bring out food for the poor in her pitcher. Three days passed and the poor man did not die and It was revealed that she had saved his life, They punished her with an ungodly death, It was only a part of their having legalized this kind of punishment by announcing that anyone who extended a hand to the unfortunate would die by fire,

The rabbis tell of the Judges of Sodom that each of their names described a characteristic way of distorting the law, either by living by the letter of the law, passing unjust laws or by enacting laws which deprived people of their rights.

This in brief then, was the sin of Sodom; they were unable within a prosperous, urban society to legislate with any sense of respect for individual sanctity or for the need to share what was entrusted to them by God, Justice was perverted, the rights at the Individual distorted and destroyed, And so, in the rabbinic and biblical view, Sodom could only be destroyed.

ZION AS THE EMBODIMENT OF THE GOOD SOCIETY

As we pointed out at the beginning at this paper, Zion Includes the Land of Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple mount in ascending order. Biblically this land is God's gracious gift to His people and it is the place where their destiny and their life are to be worked out, It is "the land that is flowing with milk and honey," It is a very, very good land of abundant water, a variety of crops, delicious fruit and mineral deposits; It contains large, fortified cities, well built homes and wells already dug; and in short, it is a blessed land. It is a land especially subject to and in need of God's care, and though God is the ruler of the whole universe, this land is His as no other land is. It is described as "His Heritage," "house," "vineyard," "the dearly beloved of my soul."

The rabbis could no more conceive of Judaism without the Land of Israel, than they could have of Judaism without the people of Israel. In this framework of Zion,

Jerusalem occupies an outstandingly prominent position. It is the City of David and especially the home of God's 'Temple and it is praised by all. Abraham, according to tradition, was spared the sacrificing of his beloved son on one of its mountains, and that mountain here comes to be identified as Mount Zion, the place where the Temple was built, Jerusalem becomes, after David captures it, *The Sacred City* with Solomon's temple being its crowning glory, It is the place to which pilgrims come, not only from all the far corners of The Land of Israel, but in rabbinic times, from all over the world. Perhaps Psalm 122, the Pilgrim song, expresses it best:

"PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM

A song of ascents. Of David

"I rejoiced when they said to me:
We are going to the house of the Lord.
Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem,
Jerusalem built up, a city knit together,
To which tribes would make pilgrimage,
the tribes of the Lord,
--as was enjoined upon Israel--
to praise the name of the Lord.
There the thrones of judgment stood,
The thrones of the house of David.
Pray for the well-being of Jerusalem;
May those who love you be at peace.
May there be well-being within your ramparts,
peace in your citadels.
For the sake of my kin and friends,
I pray for your well-being;
for the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I seek your good."

In rabbinic times Jerusalem was described rhapsodically as having nine-tenths of the beauty and the strength and the wisdom of the world, and as being the city which unified the entire people of Israel. One rabbinic source even describes Zion as being the reason for the creation of heaven and earth, and it was only for Zion that the creation took place. Indeed, another rabbi describes the creation of the world as having been from Zion, and another that the re-creation of the world will begin from Zion; this very much in keeping with biblical verse, "For out of Zion

shall come forth the law and the word of God from Jerusalem. Zion is to be, in a certain sense, the courthouse of the world; for it is there that social Justice will proceed to the entire world.

The life of the covenant had to be worked out within the Land of Israel that included the city of Jerusalem. Perhaps one of the best sources in which to see the relationship of these is the sermon of an ancient rabbi In the Midrash, - the sermon of Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai on the verse in the Hymn of Habakkuk, Chapter 3, verse 6:

"He (i.e.. The Almighty) arose and measured the earth:

The Holy One, blessed be He, considered all generations and found no generation fitted to receive the Torah as the generation of the wilderness; similarly, He considered all mountains and found none fitted for His presence to dwell on other than the Temple Mount; the Holy One, Blessed Be He, considered all cities and found none worthier of the 'Temple than Jerusalem; the Holy One, blessed be He, considered all lands and found no lands suitable to be given to Israel other than the Land of Israel.

This is what is meant by the verse: "He rose and measured the earth," Now what Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai was saying was that the great facts of Jewish religious history are, not accidental; and secondarily, and more important to our investigation here, that Israel's Inheritance of the land and its obligations therein are equally part of the heavenly design and mandate. If the record of scripture means anything, Rabbi Simeon says, it means that the connection between God, Israel and Torah and the land is inseparable, Little wonder then, that in rabbinic Hebrew "The land" always signifies the Holy Land, while any other country is referred to as "outside the land" and similarly "The City" signifies Jerusalem which the rabbis fondly call "the very center of the earth." Indeed, only in this land and in this city could the good society be worked out. As a matter of fact, we are told in many places that the land and the city are incapable of bearing evil and will in the words of the bible "vomit out" the inhabitants who are evil. The men of Jerusalem, by the fact that they inhabited the city, were considered to be something quite special. They were described by the rabbis as being trustworthy, brave, and eager to fulfill God's commandments. In addition to which they were also tall and good-looking.

According to rabbinic thinking, it was only in Zion that the fullness of God's plan for the social structure of man could be worked out, Outside of this land, only

personal obligations could be binding and the rabbis had interesting problems to deal with when the Temple was destroyed and more later on in the fifth and sixth Century CE when the exile became complete. A preacher of the third century asked "Why was Moses eager to enter the land of Israel? Did he need its fruit or its bounty? Moses, however, pleaded with the Almighty: "The people of Israel have been given many commandments which can only be fulfilled in the land. Permit me to enter, that I too may fulfill them personally." The land, as well as the Torah, was God's gift to His people and it was only in the land that the good society had a chance of being worked out. Thus we are told that those who are outside of Zion are encouraged to return.

In the case of a domestic argument, if a husband wishes to go to The Land of Israel and his wife refuses, she may be compelled to go; and if she refuses to go even when being compelled, she can be divorced and she forfeits her marriage contract. If on the other hand, she wishes to go, and he refuses, he may be compelled to go, and if he refuses, he is compelled to divorce her and pay her marriage contract in full. There exists the constant reiteration, the constant idea that one who lives outside of The Land of Israel is an unwilling abettor of idolatry and that only one who lives in the Holy land can properly be spoken of as subject to the discipline of God,

Jerusalem, the Zion of rabbinic thought, exists in a constant tension with the other cities of the world, Jerusalem is described as the light of the world, the only place where God can be worshipped decently, and the place where God's spirit rests. It is the place where men are brought close to the proper worship of God and indeed, its inhabitants are made righteous by their very presence within it. It is the covenant city par excellence. In rabbinic times in The Land of Israel, the city that was the greatest contrast to Jerusalem was Caesarea. Caesarea, as the name indicates, was the Roman city par excellence in The Land of Israel. It had all of the components of a Roman city - the forum, the public bathhouses and it is held by the rabbis in contrast to Jerusalem. We are told in Midrash² that if you are notified that both Jerusalem and Caesarea are destroyed, don't believe it; if you are told that both are prosperous, don't believe it; but If you hear that Caesarea is destroyed and Jerusalem is prosperous or that Jerusalem is destroyed and Caesarea is prosperous, then believe it, because the two cannot really coexist in the world, Caesarea was represented to the rabbis as everything that the Romans did. They comment that they did superb things, but for the wrong ends. The Romans built bathhouses,

² Non-literal interpretations of the text.

circuses and bridges, but they did this only to benefit themselves, not for the betterment of the society.

In rabbinic times a large Diaspora community already existed. Zion was the focal point of that community. It was the place toward which prayers were offered. The author of Daniel had already made his hero pray from the Upper Chamber with the windows open towards Jerusalem and the rabbis later made it quite clear that "those who pray abroad shall direct their hearts towards The Land of Israel, and those who pray in The Land of Israel shall turn their hearts towards Jerusalem, so that all Israel will be found praying towards the same spot." Regular pilgrimages were conducted from all over the world. If the distance was not too great, pilgrims walked to Jerusalem, but usually they traveled by ship or on camels and donkeys in large caravans to repel the attacks of robbers. Babylonian Jewry in particular, sent large companies of pilgrims on the well-kept roads, which linked the Euphrates to the Jordan on a two-week trip. And as Jerusalem was the focal point for the attention of Jews all over the world, so it was to be, and was indeed In rabbinic times the very source of learning and light to them. The biblical verse "For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah and the word at the Lord from Jerusalem" was fulfilled for Diaspora Jewry. Books, teachers and exchanges of letters went forth, and Rabbi Akiva, when he came to Rome on an official mission, recognized the Jewish section when he saw children playing mud pies and saying "this One is t'rumah³, this one is tithe" and this is what the people in the land at Israel do,

The rabbis had to deal with the problem of the destruction of Zion. Their insight as to why it was destroyed gives us as good an inkling as any to their vision of what Jerusalem in the land of Israel should have been. They saw God's hand as ruling the destiny of mankind and it was only because of the sin of the covenant people that their land would in any circumstances be destroyed. The Rabbis said that the first temple was destroyed for the following three reasons: "idolatry, sexual immorality and because blood was spilled there" Why was the second temple destroyed? After all, they studied torah, fulfilled the commandments and even practiced charity. It was destroyed, among other things, because of Sinat Chinom - (causeless hate) - and this teaches us, according to this ancient homily, that causeless hate is as great a sin as idolatry, sexual immorality and shedding blood. Perhaps the following story will explain what they meant. Jerusalem was destroyed because of Kamtzah and Bar-Kamtzah.

³ An offering made to the Temple for use in the ritual.

There was once a man whose best friend was Kamtzah and his greatest enemy was Bar-Kamtzah. He hosted a dinner party for all his friends. He said to his servant, "'Go and invite Kamtzah.' The servant went and invited Bar- Kamtzah. Bar- Kamtzah came to the dinner and was discovered by the host who told him, 'I hate you, - what are you doing here? "Leave immediately"!! Bar-Kamtzah responded; "Since I have already come, let me be and I will reimburse you for everything that I eat and drink." The host answered, "no!" Bar Kamtzah offered to pay one-half of the entire expenses of the dinner party and he was told "No." "I will pay the entire, expense." He was told "No." The host took him and threw him out.

The embarrassment of Bar- Kamtzah the rabbis give as the event that began the destruction of Jerusalem. The host was not sensitive to the feelings, of the person he did not like. Other reasons were also offered for the destruction of Jerusalem. We are told that wise men did not receive proper status there; that the schools which educated little children were empty; that the lines between those who should have had prestige and those who should not have had it were blurred; that the Sabbath was not observed there properly; that they were not honest in rebuking one another and that they were not sensitive to one another's feelings; that they did not look beyond the letter of the law and that they did not protect those widowed and fatherless. That the City of God would come to these things was seen by the rabbis as more than sufficient to account for its destruction.

The rabbis believed that as the punishment had come, so the redemption would likewise come. If the people remained loyal, if they took the oath of Psalm 137:

"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour".

The covenant remained in force and God would punish His people but ultimately the tie between this people and its land would be renewed, for this was the very heart of the covenant; and so in constant repetition in hope and prayer, in constant reminder at each wedding service and funeral, in constant recognition at each holiday, the return to Zion became the very heart of the Jewish purpose for countless centuries in exile. The return to Zion would also mark the beginning of its redemption and the beginning of its redemption would mark a new phase for the world. In Zion and in the land of Israel and Jerusalem, God's covenant would once again be fulfilled by the people whom He loved so much that He could not see them go astray.

