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Parashat Hashavua
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PARASHAT VAYERA

The Prophet in Prayer
By Rabbanit Sharon Rimon

Parashat Vayera opens with God's revelation to Avraham and the arrival of three angels at his home. The angels tell Avraham about the imminent birth of Yitzchak, and then head for Sedom to carry out their next mission:

(16)The men arose from there and looked out towards Sedom, and Avraham went with them to send them off.

But the angels' journey to Sedom is held up slightly:

(22)The men turned from there and went to Sedom, while Avraham was still standing before the Lord.

What happens in between the angels "looking out towards Sedom" and their journey to the city?

(17)God said: Shall I hide from Avraham that which I do?

(18)Avraham will surely be a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed through him.

(19)For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall guard the way of the Lord, to perform righteousness and judgment, in order that the Lord may bring upon Avraham that of which He has spoken to him.

The angels are standing together with Avraham, looking out towards Sedom. It is in this situation that God decides to reveal to Avraham what is about to happen. And what is about to happen? At this stage, not only Avraham is ignorant of the imminent destruction of Sedom; the reader likewise wonders what God is about to do, that He must reveal to Avraham.

Further on we read:

(20)The Lord said: The cry of Sedom and Amora, for it is great; and their sin, for it is exceedingly grave.

(21)Let Me go down and see whether they have done altogether like its cry that comes to Me; and if not, I will know.

What is it exactly that God is telling Avraham?

Is He telling him that the people of Sedom are sinners? Was Avraham ignorant of this fact until now?[1] What is the meaning of God "going down" to Sedom? Is God telling Avraham that He is going to descend to earth in order to examine the people of Sedom? Or is God declaring His intention to punish them with annihilation?

The second question that arises from these verses is: why does God reveal this to Avraham? In verse 17 we read, "Shall I hide from Avraham...." It is as though God cannot perform this act without revealing it to Avraham. Why is this so?

Admittedly, the verses that address this latter question precede the verses that answer the previous one, but the answers to both questions are closely intertwined: in order to understand why God reveals to Avraham what He is about to do, we need to understand what it is that God is revealing to him. Therefore, we shall deal with both points simultaneously.

Notification of the Punishment of Sedom

One way of explaining the verses is that God told Avraham that He was going to punish Sedom. According to this view, the verdict has already been sealed, and God's descent is for the purposes of carrying out the punishment. Rashi's first explanation of verse 21 reflects this opinion:

"'Let me go down and see' – This teaches judges that they should not rule in matters of capital punishment without seeing, all as I explained in the story of the Tower of Bavel".

What was it that Rashi explained in the context of the Tower of Bavel?

Rashi on 11:5 – "'And God came down to see' – He did not need to do so. Rather, he came to teach judges not to pass judgment until they see [with their own eyes] and understand".

According to this explanation,[2] God has no need to examine the facts at close range: everything is clear and known before Him, and therefore it is clear that God has already decided what the verdict is, and His descent is meant only to demonstrate to mortals the proper juridical procedure.

This being the case, God is revealing to Avraham that the fate of Sedom has been sealed, and He is coming down in order to punish the city. For what reason does God reveal this to him?

Rashi answers this question in his commentary on 18:17 – "It is not proper that I do this without his consent. I gave him this land, and these five cities belong to him, as it is written (10:19), 'The border of the Canaanites from Tzidon... as you come to Sedom and Amora....'"[3]

The Rashbam (18:17) likewise adopts this approach:

"How can I destroy land that is his, or land that is his neighbors, without his consent"?

According to this interpretation, Sedom belongs to Avraham, and therefore God cannot destroy it without first telling Avraham.

Rashi also offers a different explanation: because of God's great love for Avraham, He reveals His secrets and plans to him:

)Rashi on 18:18) "Shall I then hide it from him? But he is beloved before Me, [destined] to become a great nation through whom all the nations of the world shall be blessed"!

Yet another possibility is raised by the Radak, commenting on verse 19:

"For he would tell them [the members of his household]: Observe the way of God and it will be good for you, and if you do not observe it, He will do the opposite to you... Lest you say that He does not watch your actions, see what He wrought in Sedom and Amora, because they were wicked. And if you say, It was fortuitous, just as we see places that are sunken because of earthquakes, – behold, He told me beforehand that He would destroy them – that He would destroy Sedom and Amora – on account of their evil deeds".

According to the Radak's explanation, God notifies Avraham in advance about the overturning of Sedom so that it will be clear that the disaster is not a natural accident, but rather a punishment for sin. Thus Avraham will be able to use the story of the destruction of Sedom in order to command his children and his household after him to follow God's way. I.e., it would help him to teach his household about Divine Providence and about God giving reward and punishment.[4]

Notification of Judgment

However, according to most of the commentators, God is not notifying Avraham of Sedom's verdict, but rather telling him about Sedom's trial.

"Let Me go down and see whether they have done altogether like its cry that comes to Me; and if not, I will know" – according to the plain meaning of the verse, God is going down in order to ascertain whether the reality of Sedom indeed accords with "its cry" – in which case the city is deserving of complete destruction, or whether it does not – in which case "I shall know": God will know what should be done with the people of Sedom.[5]

Thus, the Ibn Ezra writes, on verse 21: "... To my mind, the interpretation is: I shall see whether they have all performed this evil"....

Likewise the Ramban, commenting on verse 20: "I am coming to judge: if they have sinned, I shall bring complete destruction, and if not – I shall know what to do with them; I shall punish their iniquity with the rod, and their transgression with lashes. He was telling him that their judgment was not yet over, and that now He was about to address their sin and judge them"....

Rashi, too, further on in his commentary on verse 21, proposes:

"A different explanation: 'I shall go down' – to the ends of their actions, [to see] whether they have acted like the cry that comes to Me, and whether they persist in their rebellion, [in which case] I shall annihilate them. 'And if not' – i.e., if they do not persist in their rebellion, 'I shall know' what to do, to punish them with suffering, but I shall not annihilate them".

According to these interpretations, the verdict of Sedom is not yet sealed, and God is telling Avraham that He is about to judge them.

Why does God tell Avraham about the trial of Sedom?

We may explain this in terms similar to the previous explanations: Avraham is beloved by God (as noted in verse 18), and therefore God tells him about things that are happening in the world, as Rashi explains; or, alternatively, Avraham is supposed to learn about the path of proper judgment (as described in verse 19) and therefore God shows him how He judges Sedom so that Avraham can learn about God's path of performing righteousness and judgment.[6]

Let us analyze verses 18-19 more closely and try to find another reason why God tells Avraham about the judgment of Sedom.

According to these verses, God is not able to hide Sedom's judgment from Avraham, a) because "Avraham will surely be a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him," and b) because "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they shall observe the way of God, to perform righteousness and judgment".

What is the meaning of these verses? What reason do these verses present for God revealing to Avraham what He is about to do?

The Father Who Bestows Blessing

Let us take a closer look at verse 18:

"Avraham will surely be a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him".

This echoes the blessing that Avraham received from God at the outset:

"I shall make you into a great nation, and I shall bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing... and all the families of the land shall be blessed through you." (Bereishit 12:2)

There, Avraham received several blessings from God. The first – the promise that he will have many descendants ("I shall make you into a great nation") – is repeated again in our parasha: "Avraham shall surely be a great and mighty nation." What appears to be the crux of the verse, however, is the issue of "blessing" itself: "You shall be a blessing, and all the families of the land shall be blessed through you." Or, as our verse puts it: "All the nations of the earth shall be blessed through you." What is the significance of this special blessing?

Rashi, commenting on Bereishit 12:2, explains:

"'And you shall be a blessing' – The blessings are in your hands. Until now they were in My hands: I blessed Adam, and Noach, and you. From now onwards, you will bless whomever you wish".

According to Rashi, Avraham is granted a very special status: until now, only God was able to bless people. From this point onwards, there is a person in the world who is capable of bestowing blessings upon other people. He has the power to invoke God's abundant goodness and draw it down to the world. Such a person is not a regular mortal. He is, in some sense, God's partner in bringing goodness and blessing into the world.

According to what we are told in verse 18, God reveals to Avraham that He is judging Sedom because Avraham is capable of blessing the nations of the world. But what is the connection between this judgment and Avraham's ability to bless?

According to the understanding that we arrived at above - that Avraham is God's partner in bringing goodness and blessing to the world – it seems that we may explain as follows: God cannot conceal the judgment of Sedom from Avraham, because Avraham has a special status in the world; he is God's partner; not just a partner, but one with special power; through him, goodness is drawn into the world. He is able to cause God to bestow goodness and blessing.

If this is so, then when God comes down to judge, He notifies His partner of this. Not only because both partners need to know what is happening in the world, but because the partner has an important role to play. He is responsible for blessing the nations of the earth; he is supposed to arouse God's will to bestow goodness. It is specifically when God seeks to judge people that He wants Avraham to be part of the process, and to arouse His attribute of mercy. God awards Avraham this role, and He wants him to fulfill it.

Rashi, at the end of his commentary on verse 17, adds the following:

"I named him 'Avraham' – the father of a multitude (av hamon) of nations. Can I destroy the children without notifying the father, who is My beloved"?

According to this explanation, "The father of a multitude of nations" is not only a blessing for abundant progeny, but also an assertion that Avraham becomes the father of the nations.[7]
What is the significance of Avraham being the father of the nations?

Just as a father bears responsibility for his children, so Avraham is responsible for the nations. A father's responsibility is expressed in taking care of his child's education, guiding his behavior, having mercy upon him, and seeing to all of his needs. Likewise, Avraham's responsibility towards the nations includes guiding and correcting them, having mercy upon them, and trying to influence them in a positive way. Thus, there is a strong connection between Avraham's status as the "father of many nations" and his ability to bless them.

God notifies Avraham that He is going to overturn Sedom because Avraham is their father. He is responsible for them.

What is expected of him now?

Apparently, God expects him to act as one who is responsible for the nations: either try to correct their behavior, or plead for mercy on their behalf, as a father pleads for mercy for his child.

According to verse 18, where mention is made of the fact that "through him all the nations of the earth shall be blessed," it seems that God wants Avraham to participate in the debate over Sedom's fate, and to arouse Divine mercy – which he is uniquely capable of doing.

Keeping the Way of God

Let us now examine verse 19: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they will keep the way of the Lord, performing righteousness and judgment"....

This verse notes that there is a special closeness between God and Avraham ("I know him"[8]), and this closeness is expressed in the fact that Avraham will command his heirs to keep the way of God in the world.[9] In other words, Avraham represents God's way in the world.

What is God's way? From verse 19 we learn that God's way is "to perform righteousness and judgment".

According to this understand, God tells Avraham about the judgment of Sedom because Avraham represents God's way in the world, performing righteousness and judgment.

The Ramban explains as follows:

"For I know within him that he acknowledges and knows that I am God, Who loves righteousness and judgment. In other words, I perform judgment only in righteousness, and thus he will command his children and his household after him, to maintain My way. Hence, if through righteousness and judgment they shall be found exempt, then he will pray before Me to let them be, and that is good. But if they are completely guilty, then he, too, will seek their judgment. Therefore it is appropriate the he be included in God's counsel".

According to the Ramban, God reveals to Avraham what He is going to do because He knows that the path of justice and judgment is important to Avraham, and therefore he will want justice to be done. Therefore, if it turns out that the people of Sedom are sinners, then Avraham will support their punishment. If they are worthy of pardon, then Avraham will pray for them, in order to save them, and this is what God wants.

In other words, God wants Avraham's prayers: not because Avraham is some external factor whom God takes into consideration, but rather because he is God's partner – he, too, wants God's way to be fulfilled in the world.

What is "God's way"? "To perform righteousness and judgment".

Avraham himself wants righteousness and judgment to be done in the world, and therefore God makes him party to the matter of Sedom. If the people of Sedom are deserving of pardon, Avraham will pray for them, "And that is good" – God wants this prayer; it is worthy in His eyes because it suits His way and His will. If, on the other hand, the people of Sedom are deserving of punishment, Avraham will understand this, because he, too, wants justice to be done in the world.

Thus, the debate with Avraham is not the inclusion of an external force that may perhaps change God's mind. Rather, Avraham himself gives expression to God's way in the world; he is God's partner in the world, and therefore it is appropriate that he be included in fateful decisions as to what happens in the world.

The decision to overthrow of Sodom is a fateful decision. Following the Flood, God had decided not to destroy the world again. And now, ten generations later, a certain city has reached such a state of corruption that God decides to destroy it. The overturning of Sodom is not just a punishment for people; rather, it is the total destruction of the place – the ground, the plant and animal life,[10] and the human inhabitants.

While it is not the destruction of the entire world, it is still an exceptional, drastic step, with no parallel since the Flood.

Before carrying out such a grave step, God tells his partner, Avraham. Why? Because Avraham is God's partner in two senses:

Firstly, as we learned from verse 18, he is "the father of a multitude of nations," and has received from God the ability to bring down blessing upon the nations. Therefore he, too, bears some responsibility for their actions, as well as having some possibility of arousing God's mercy towards them.

Secondly, as we learned from verse 19, he represents God's way in the world – the way of righteousness and judgment, and therefore he is worthy of being partner to this judgment. He wants to see God's way implemented in the world, and hence he will want to arouse mercy where appropriate, or – conversely – to accept the need for punishment where necessary.

Thus, God is not only telling Avraham that He is going to judge Sodom, but also inviting him to be party to this judgment. God expects Avraham not merely to observe, but to realize his status as the "father of a multitude of nations," capable of blessing, and as guardian of God's way of performing righteousness and judgment. By virtue of all of this he should participate in the judgment and have his say.

In the judgment of Sodom, God takes the role of prosecutor, and He expects Avraham to represent the defense – the aspect of the Divine trait of mercy. God needs Avraham, as it were, in order to conduct a just trial.

The Role of the Prophet

This is the first biblical narrative in which we become aware of this mortal stand vis-à-vis God. God wants to perform a certain action, as it were, and man stands against Him and tries, through the power of his prayer, to change the Divine decree. From this story we learn that Avraham's debate with God does not go against God's will; it is not a manifestation of rebellion or audacity, but rather the opposite: it is desirable to God; moreover, it is what God expects Avraham to do. God invites Avraham to be the defense counsel of Sodom.

We usually think of a prophet as God's messenger, bringing God's word to people. Who is the first person referred to as a "prophet"? The word appears for the first time in the story of Sara being taken to the palace of Avimelekh, in Bereishit chapter 20. Avraham is the first person called a "prophet." The Torah narrates that God becomes angry and is revealed to Avimelekh

in the night, telling him (verse 7): "And now, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet; let him pray for you, that you may live".

The Rashbam explains: "'For he is a prophet (navi)': [Derived from] the expression, 'utterance of the lips' (niv sefatayim). He [Avraham] is familiar with Me, he speaks My words, and I love his words and hear his prayer".

A prophet is a person who possesses a special ability to speak. He has a special connection with God that is expressed both in his hearing God's word and conveying it to people, and also in his ability to speak to God, with God hearing his prayers. Accordingly, the role of the prophet is not only to convey God's word to people, but also to represent people and bring what they have to say before God. He is capable of standing before God and presenting people's requests and prayers.

The first mention of the concept of a "prophet" is specifically within the context of the capacity for prayer: "He is a prophet, let him pray for you." The uniqueness of the prophet lies in his ability to pray for people, and God hears his prayers.

But this is not the first time we encounter Avraham in the role of a praying prophet. Avraham who prays for Avimelekh is the same Avraham who prays for the people of Sedom. The prophet has a special closeness to God that is expressed in his ability to hear God's word and to convey it to other people. However, his special closeness to God also allows him to approach God and to plead for mercy on behalf of other people: to pray for them.

Avraham, the first prophet, the "father of a multitude of nations," includes both aspects of prophecy and gives them powerful expression. He hears God's voice and behaves accordingly, "walking in His ways" and influencing many other people to serve God. But he is concerned not only with correcting and guiding people: he also blesses them. He prays for them, utilizing his ability to arouse the Divine attribute of mercy and causing God to shower the world with His abundant bounty.

From the story of Avraham praying for Sedom we learn that prayer is not an attempt to "force" God, as it were, to do something that He does not want to do. On the contrary: God seeks the prayers of the prophet. He tells the prophet about His decree so that the prophet will pray and arouse His mercy.

Moshe's Prayer

Another example of this concept is Moshe's prayer. The Torah depicts Moshe as a prolific pray-er. Following the Sin of the Golden Calf, God asks Moshe not to pray on behalf of the nation, because He wants to punish them:

"The Lord said to Moshe: I have seen this nation, and behold, it is a stiff-necked nation. And now, let Me be; let My anger burn against them and I shall devour them and make you into a great nation." (Shemot 32:9-10)

God explicitly tells Moshe not to pray. Why? Seemingly, because in this situation, He does not want His attribute of mercy to be invoked. Seemingly, He wants to punish the nation. Despite this, Moshe prays:

"(11)Moshe begged the Lord his God and said: Why, Lord, shall Your anger burn against Your nation whom You brought out of the land of Egypt, with great power and with a mighty hand"...

Moshe seems to be doing something very wrong: God does not want prayer; He does not want the Divine attribute of mercy to be invoked, and Moshe is doing something contrary to His will!

Rashi, commenting on verse 10, explains:

"'Let Me be' – The Torah has not yet told us that Moshe prayed for them; why does God say, Let Me be? [We learn that] He opened a way for him here, telling him that it depended on him: if he would pray for them, God would not devour them".

According to this explanation, God's words, "Let Me be," are not a command to Moshe to desist from prayer. Rather, what God is saying is: "If you let Me be, I shall devour them. But you have the possibility of not letting Me be; you may pray for them, and they may thereby be saved".

God reveals His decree to Moshe in order that he will pray. By telling him "Let Me be," He hints that his prayer may save them.

God wants prayer; He wants people to act so as to bring about an actualization of His attribute of mercy.

Yirmiyahu's Prayer

Yet another prophet who prayed extensively was Yirmiyahu. His case expresses a similar phenomenon:

)Yirmiyahu 14:11) "The Lord said to me: Do not pray for this nation for their good.

(12)When they fast, I shall not hear their cry; when they offer up burnt offerings and meal offerings I will not desire them; but I shall devour them with the sword and with famine and with pestilence.

(13)Then I said: Ah, Lord God! Behold, the [false] prophets say to them: You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, for I shall give you true peace in this place...

(19)Have You altogether rejected Yehuda; has Your soul despised Zion? Why have You smitten us, that there is no healing for us...

... (21)Remember, do not break Your covenant with us".

Here, too, God asks Yirmiyahu not to pray, but Yirmiyahu "disobeys": He prays, he seeks to defend the nation, and begs God to overturn His evil decree.

Avraham, Moshe and Yirmiyahu understood that God reveals His decree to the prophet not merely so that the prophet will know what is going to happen. God wants the prophet to do something. He wants the prophet to use the special powers that have been given to him, his special closeness to God, and his ability to pray.

God seeks "partners" in the world who will arouse His attribute of mercy and cause Him to shower the world with an abundance of goodness.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]It has been mentioned already in chapter 12, when Lot separates from Avraham and goes to Sedom: "The people of Sedom were exceedingly wicked and sinful to God." It is reasonable to assume that Avraham was familiar with Sedom from the time when Lot went to live there, and perhaps even from before then.

[2]Based upon Midrash Tanchuma, 58,18

[3]Tanchuma Vayera siman 5

[4]Further on, commenting on verse 21, the Radak writes: "Even though everything is clear and known before the blessed God, this is written so as to teach mortals that they should not be hasty in judgment, for [even] God [Himself] said that He would [first go down and] see... The purpose of seeing was to examine the act to see whether there was a way of exempting them from punishment, like a person who deliberates in judgment. This opened the door for Avraham: by using the expression 'I shall see,' [God was encouraging Avraham] to look and see if he could find them some merit by virtue of which they could be exempted, and in order to teach them Divine justice... [As though God was saying,] I want Avraham to look and ask Me and delve into My judgment, in order that he may learn and teach it." According to this explanation, the verdict had already been passed, but God wanted Avraham to try and exempt Sedom from punishment, and to ask questions and demand answers from God, until he would understand that God's judgment had indeed been just, and thus he would be able to understand God's justice and his management of the world, and he would be able to teach his household about Divine justice.

[5]This is clearly the simplest understanding of the verse, but it raises an obvious question: does God then need to "go down" in order to examine the deeds of the people of Sedom? Does He not know everything in advance? This question leads Rashi, following the lead of the Midrash, to explain that no real examination is involved here: God already knows, and has already decided on the appropriate action; He "acts out" a trial in order that people might learn from Him. However, the other commentators (see further below) explain that the verse does not mean that God did not know, but rather that His judgment was not yet final. Rashi himself, further on in his commentary on verse 21 (to be examined below), also states that God had not yet put His final seal on His judgment, and He was giving the people of Sedom a final chance.

[6]See the Radak's commentary on verse 21, as cited above in note 4.

[7]In chapter 14, God changes Avram's name to Avraham: "... I shall multiply you exceedingly greatly... and I, behold My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And your name shall no longer be Avram; your name shall be Avraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations, and I shall make you exceedingly fruitful, and I shall make nations of you, and kings shall emerge from you".

" [8]Knowing" is used in Tanakh to imply closeness, intimate familiarity, affection.

[9]A wide range of interpretations is offered for this verse, especially for the word "le-ma'an." I believe that the interpretation offered above reflects the core idea expressed in the verse.

[10]We know that Sedom was an extremely fertile place, prior to its destruction, as we read in Bereishit 13:10 – "Lot raised his eyes and saw the entire plain of the Jordan, that is was all well watered, before the Lord destroyed Sedom and Amora, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as you come to Tzo'ar".