

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYERA

In honor of Bert Lewyn and his parents.

Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelema for all who require healing, comfort and peace – those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately. May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

E- I na refa na lo: Praying for a complete and speedy recovery for Meechael Yaacov ben Chava Dvora (Chaplain Michael Bloom) and all those who are ill.

Akiva and Shanen Werber and family

**“And God Remembered Avraham, and He Sent Lot” –
Behind the Scenes of the Rescue in Sedom¹**

By Rav Gad Eldad

“Wherever you find a description of the greatness of God, there you also find a description of His humility.” Even though God had already decided to destroy the cities of the Plain, He reveals His intentions to Avraham before He actually executes His plan (18:17-22):

And the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am doing...” And the Lord said, “Verily, the cry of Sedom and Gomorra is great, and, verily, their sin is exceedingly grievous. I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come to Me; and if not, I will know.” And the men turned from there, and went toward Sedom; but Avraham stood yet before the Lord.

Once Avraham hears about the plan, a discussion develops between him and God about the necessity of executing the punishment. Avraham consistently tries to lower the number of righteous people that would be required to prevent the punishment from being carried out (18:23-33):

And Avraham drew near, and said, “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from You to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from You; shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” And the Lord said, “If I find in Sedom fifty righteous within the city, then I will forgive all the place for their sake...” And he said, “Behold now, I have taken

upon me to speak to the Lord. Perhaps there shall be twenty found there.” And He said, “I will not destroy it for the twenty's sake.” And he said, “Oh, let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once. Perhaps ten shall be found there.” And He said, “I will not destroy it for the ten's sake.” And the Lord went His way, as soon as He had left off speaking to Avraham; and Avraham returned to his place.

It appears from the *midrash*, and from Rashi who follows in its wake, that the whole purpose of this process was only to emphasize God's respect for Avraham. In fact, the outcome of the discussion was known already from the beginning. But Avraham could not have known this, and so he tried with all his power to bargain with God, in a hopeless struggle. This approach is found in at least three places:

1. At the beginning of the *parasha*, Rashi (18:2) explains the mission of the three men who appear before Avraham: “And, lo, three men stood by him” – One to announce to Sarah [the birth of a son], **one to overthrow Sedom**, and one to cure Avraham, for one angel does not carry out two commissions.”

2. Regarding the reason for revealing the plan to Avraham, Rashi explains (18:17) that this was done solely out of respect for Avraham:

“Shall I hide?” – This is a question. “What I am doing” – In Sedom. It is not proper for Me to do this thing without his knowledge. I gave him this land, and these five cities are therefore his, as it is stated: “And the territory of the Canaanites was from Tzidon... as you go towards Sedom and Gomorra.” I called him Avraham, the father of a multitude of nations; should I destroy the children without informing the father who loves Me?

3. Accordingly, as soon as the discussion was over, the plan moved to the implementation stage. Rashi writes (18:17):

“And the Lord went away” – As soon as the counsel for the defense had nothing more to say, the Judge took his departure. “And Avraham returned to his place” – The judge departed, the Advocate went away, but the Prosecutor continued his accusation, and on that account: “The two angels came to Sedom” – to destroy it. Two – One to destroy Sedom, the other to rescue Lot – it was he who had come to heal Avraham...

The Rescue of Lot

This approach has implications for the matter of Lot. In the discussion between God and Avraham, Lot's name is not mentioned. We are forced to conclude that the matter of his rescue was self-evident, because he belonged to Avraham's family, and it was therefore left out of the discussion. This is indeed implied by the wording of the verse (19:29):

And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, that God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt.

This is also the understanding of the Ramban (ad loc.):

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all references are to the book of *Bereishit*. This *shiur* is based on the chapter: “*Tzadik Be-Sedom – Sippur Hatzalat Lot U-Benotav*,” chapter 10 in my book, *Ha-Adam – Bein Yetzur Le-Yotzer: Pirkei Iyyun Ve-Haggut Ba-Mikra* (Tevunot, 5770), pp. 109-120. See also Rav Prof. Y. Grossman, VBM *shiur* on *Parashat Vayera*, “*Hatzalat Lot Mi-Sedom*.”

“And God remembered Abraham and sent Lot” – The reason for this verse is that Lot acted piously with the righteous man [Avraham] to go with him wherever he went... and therefore he had the merit to be saved by virtue of Avraham, because it was on his account that he lived in Sedom, for had it not been for Avraham, he would still be in Charan, his homeland. It is impossible that evil should befall him because of Avraham, who left at the command of his Maker. This was also the reason that Avraham risked his life to pursue the kings on his behalf.

However, even though this fact was clear to God, it is somewhat puzzling that Avraham himself does not relate to his nephew, even if only to ask for confirmation that he would be left outside the destruction plan. This strengthens the atmosphere of “mystery” surrounding the very existence of a discussion between God and Avraham. Had God merely wished to honor Avraham, He could have sufficed with a straightforward announcement. The very fact that God was dragged into a discussion about the matter suggests that Avraham advanced an additional claim, beyond mere numbers.

“Will You Indeed Sweep Away the Righteous with the Wicked?”

Let us take a second look at Avraham’s arguments (18:23-28):

And Avraham drew near, and said, “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep away **and not forgive the place** for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from You to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from You; shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” And the Lord said, “If I find in Sedom fifty righteous within the city, **then I will forgive all the place** for their sake.” And Avraham answered and said, “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to the Lord, who am but dust and ashes. Perhaps there shall lack five of the fifty righteous; will You destroy all the city for lack of five?” And He said, “I will not destroy it, if I find there forty and five.”

Upon initial examination, Avraham’s argument appears to have a clear logical failure. He is incensed by the idea of killing the righteous for the sins of the wicked, but from here he reaches the very opposite conclusion. He asks that God should forgive the sins of all the inhabitants of the place because of the righteous who live there! God could have answered that He is prepared to spare the righteous while the wicked will bear their punishment, but to our surprise, He accepts the principle underlying Avraham’s words. He assures him that if there are found that number of righteous men mentioned by Avraham, He will spare the entire place because of them. Shall the Judge of all the earth fall for such a simple demagogic trick?

It seems that the matter should be understood differently. Avraham never asked for mercy for the wicked of Sedom. God’s decree was directed at overthrowing the geographical location, the city of Sedom, because the character of the place turned it into a city of evil. Avraham tried to save the righteous from that punishment, and to do so he tried to turn the tables upside down. The gist of his argument is that if a respectable number of righteous people are found in the place, then there will no longer be any justification to destroy the city, but only to punish the evil-doers individually. Of course, the very

thwarting of the destruction of the city might give hope to the villains living there in that their punishment was pushed off, but we are certainly not talking about its cancellation. God would find the way to take revenge from the evil-doers in a particular way that suited each individual. Avraham prayed for the place, not for its inhabitants, and therefore God was ready to negotiate.

Against this background, we wish to relate to Lot’s absence from the discussion.

“I Will Go Down Now and See Whether They Have Done Altogether According to the Cry of It”

God informs Avraham of his intention to examine from close-up the conduct of the inhabitants of Sedom. If the results of his examination confirm the indictment, the sentence will be carried out. However, to conduct such an examination, there is no need for all the uproar that was created by the angels. It would have been enough to examine the incriminating material that had accumulated in the heavenly files thus far, or to look down from heaven upon the people’s conduct, with no need for provocation on the part of the heavenly angels, with their insistence to spend the night on the street, or for the deliberate causing of friction with the population. We wish to argue that this indeed was God’s initial intention, but it changed in light of the arguments advanced by Avraham, who wanted to decide the fate of the city from a different perspective.

“Now the men of Sedom were Wicked and Sinners Against the Lord Exceedingly”

Let us refresh our memories and remember that Lot arrived in Sedom following his separation from Avraham (13:8-13):

And Avram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife, I pray you, between me and you, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself, I pray you, from me; if you will take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.” And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of the Jordan, that it was well-watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sedom and Gomorra, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as you go to Tzoar. So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan; and Lot journeyed east; and they separated themselves the one from the other. Avram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sedom. Now the men of Sedom were wicked and sinners against the Lord exceedingly.

Lot had the option to select a different region, but he preferred the natural advantages offered by Sedom and its environs. Scripture goes out of its way to immediately note the character of the people of Sedom, as a warning regarding the price that Lot had to pay when he chose this region despite the conduct of its inhabitants. This decision constitutes tacit agreement with their actions. Therefore, when evil will eventually befall them, it is quite possible that Lot will be caught in their corruption.

Now we can understand the atmosphere in the heavenly court. Avraham could not petition on behalf of Lot. When Lot was taken captive against his will, Avraham rushed to his rescue, but here we are dealing with a willing decision on the part of Lot to ignore the actions of the residents of Sedom and prefer their closeness. Avraham stubbornly insists that there are righteous people in Sedom, who can save the place, and it is not God’s way

to kill the righteous along with the wicked. But he needs proof, for ostensibly there is no voice of protest in the city. These righteous people must identify themselves in order to confirm his claim.

According to this reading, the argument was not sealed, as Rashi understands. On the contrary, it was reopened. What was needed now is a set of circumstances that would create a situation in which the righteous could separate themselves through some significant action that is different from that of their surroundings and save themselves and prevent the destruction of their city.² In such a situation, the wicked, because of whom the city had been slated for destruction, would be punished separately. God accepts the test proposed by Avraham to separate the righteous of Sedom from the rest of the residents, if they will only step outside the line and not hide in the crowd. It is in this spirit that the angels were sent to Sedom, with a possible cloud of salvation rising over the city and its fate still open.

“And They Said, ‘No, We Will Spend the Night in the Street’”

The angels arrive in Sedom and look to create a provocation. At this point, the righteous should identify themselves and demonstrate their righteousness, thereby meriting rescue. The results of the test are bitter, Lot being the only one who meets the requirements, with Scripture emphasizing his isolation in the face of the angry mob outside his home (19:3-4):

And he urged them greatly; and they turned in to him and entered into his house; and he made them a feast, and did bake unleavened bread, and they did eat. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sedom, encompassed the house, both young and old, **all the people from every quarter.**

Thus, the inhabitants of the city missed their lifeline and at the same time proved how justified was their punishment. Unlike Rashi, who understands that one angel was sent from the beginning to save Lot, we wish to argue that it is only now, after the people of Sedom failed their test, that the angels' mission took shape in the form of rescuing Lot and his family from the place before it would be destroyed along with its inhabitants.

It turns out that Lot was indeed saved by his own merits, since he helped the angels, but no less by the merits of Avraham, who conceived the idea of giving him a chance to prove himself. Accordingly, the Bible has two versions regarding Lot's rescue:³

² Moshe adopted this approach in his dispute with Korach. The people answered Korach's call to gather around his tent, and this constituted tacit agreement with his argument. This being the case, God wanted to destroy them. To prevent the calamity, Moshe tried to separate Korach from the people, and in response God asked that they prove through their actions their place in this controversy. Indeed, Moshe asked the assembled to remove themselves from the tents of Korach, Datan, and Aviram, and thus identify themselves as standing outside the controversy and actively prove their dissociation from the evil-doers, and in this way their lives were saved (*Bamidbar* 16:19-26): "And Korach assembled all the congregation against them to the door of the tent of meeting; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation. And the Lord spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying, 'Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.' And they fell upon their faces, and said, 'O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will You be angry with all the congregation?' And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying, 'Speak to the congregation, saying: Get you up from about the dwelling of Korach, Datan, and Aviram.' And Moshe rose up and went to Datan and Aviram; and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the congregation, saying, 'Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away in all their sins.'"

³ Rashi also brings two reasons for Lot's rescue. In verse 17, he explains the prohibition to look backwards, based on the fact that Lot was saved

1. But he lingered; and the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; **the Lord being merciful unto him.** And they brought him forth, and set him outside the city. (19:16)
2. And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, that God remembered Avraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt. (19:29)

“And Lot Went Out, and Spoke to His Sons-In-Law, Who Married His Daughters”

The possibility of rescue that was offered to Lot's sons-in-law would seem to be incontrovertible proof for Rashi. Since Lot was saved by virtue of his familial ties to Avraham, his entire family was included, and therefore the offer of rescue is offered even to his sons-in-law. Just the opposite, however, is true, and it is precisely this point that completes our argument. It would seem that Lot's sons-in-law are precisely the population group that Avraham had in mind in his argument. It is unlikely that they were among the people who surrounded their father-in-law's house, demanding that the guests be brought outside to be abused, but at the same time they took no action to save them. It turns out, then, that they represent the population group that stood in the middle. If, indeed, a band of righteous people had been found in Sedom, this group would have been saved because of them. But since such a band was not found, the tables were turned; now action was required to prove their right to life, as destruction had been decreed on the place. Since no such action was performed, they remained in the city and were sentenced to the same fate as were the rest of the residents, who became liable for destruction owing to their perverse deeds.

An important lesson emerges from the end of the story. One should never rely on the fact that he belongs to an important family. The Torah expects a person to assume responsibility for himself and strive to prove himself, and thus earn redemption by his own merits. After he demonstrates through his actions that he belongs to the camp of truth, he will merit salvation as part of that camp, but before he paves his way on his own to this camp, he has no claim on its protection.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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not by his own merits, but by the merits of Avraham, while he himself should have perished along with the other residents of Sedom. In verse 29, Rashi explains that Lot was saved by virtue of the fact that he remained silent when the family arrived in Egypt and Avraham claimed that Sara was his sister; he did not reveal her true identity. According to this explanation, it turns out that Lot was saved by virtue of his own actions. It should be noted that the wording of the verses suggests that the location of each of the explanations offered by Rashi should be reversed. In verse 17, it appears that Lot was saved by his own merits, whereas in verse 29 it seems that he was saved by Avraham's merits. But Rashi locates the two explanations in the opposite order. The matter requires further examination.