BS"D

Parshas Vayera

*Avraham and Job made similar statements. Avraham said it would be profane to kill the righteous with the wicked while Job said, "It is all one… He destroys the innocent and the wicked.” Yet Avraham is rewarded while Job is punished. Why?*

The Story of Sodom

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

I would like to talk about some Midrashim regarding the story of the destruction of Sodom. In particular, there's a Midrash about the nature of Avraham's plea to G-d that is particularly meaningful. But first, let's deal with an issue in the *pshat*, the simple meaning, of the story.

As Avraham starts to plead with G-d, he says, "Will Your anger destroy the righteous together with the wicked? (Breishis 18:23). Later he continues "It would be profane of you ... to kill the righteous together with the wicked ... It would be profane of You, the Judge of the whole world to not act justly (18:25). So here Avraham is pleading with G-d not to kill the righteous. Now in sentence 24, Avraham says, "Perhaps there are fifty righteous people within the city ...Will You not forgive the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people who live within it?” Here Avraham is asking to spare all of the people for the sake of the righteous.

The Ramban explains, Avraham realized that G-d might punish the Sodomites with the attribute of stern justice (*midas hadin*). Or He might judge them with compassion (Midas HaRachamim), so he pleaded both ways. Even if You, O G-d, judge Sodom sternly, it is not right that the righteous die. And if You judge them with compassion, then let the merit of the fifty save the entire city.

By the way, there's an interesting argument between Rashi and the Ramban. According to Rashi, when Avraham goes down to forty, thirty, twenty, and ten, he's pleading that if all five of the sister cities of Sodom cannot be rescued if there are not fifty righteous people, then at least four cities should be rescued if there are forty; three if there are thirty, etc. The Ramban, on the other hand, maintains that Avraham is pleading throughout for all the cities and, at the end, he asks that ten righteous people save all of the cities.

The Akeidas Yitzchok provides another approach to the problem of Avraham first asking to save only the righteous and then asking for the whole city. If every wicked person in Sodom was to die and only fifty or forty Tzadikim survived, what kind of life would those Tzadikim have? They would lose their community. They would lose their homes; their means of livelihood. Indeed they would lose everything. How would they be able to survive when the infrastructure of their lives was utterly destroyed? Destroying Sodom was tantamount to killing the righteous people, too. The only way to spare them was to spare the whole city.

Here are some Midrashim about the story of Sodom.

G-d said He cannot be silent at what the Sodomites did because of the following incident: Two young women went to draw water from a well. One noticed that her friend looked terrible. She asked her what was wrong. Her friend replied that she had no food for days, and she felt she would soon die. Now in Sodom, feeding the poor was a crime, so the first young woman went home, filled a bucket with flour and returned to the well ostensibly to draw water. But she actually exchanged buckets with the other woman and gave her the life-saving flour. Somehow the leaders of Sodom found out. They killed the charitable young woman by burning her. This was the epitome of evil that G-d could not tolerate. This was the unforgivable sin.

The picture the Midrash paints of Sodom is of incredibly selfish people who wanted no poor people under any circumstances. You could leave town, or you could quietly starve to death, but don't hope for any help from anyone. There was no place for the poor or the weak in Sodom.

The Midrash reads the following passage differently than its plain meaning: "It would be profane of you to kill the righteous together with the wicked; the righteous would be (treated) just like the wicked. The last part of the sentence is interpreted thus: G-d replies to Avraham, "But the righteous people are just like the wicked people." Whenever the term tzaddikim (righteous people) is used, it is written without the last "yud" and can be read as "Tzadkam," their righteous people. By Sodom's standards they were righteous, but by any other standard they were wicked. Yet, apparently, Avraham prayed to save even these barely righteous people.

The Midrash also rereads another passage: "Perhaps of the fifty there will be missing five," can be read as "If there are not fifty, will you accept (just) five?" So G-d told Avraham you can't ask to save for so few righteous men. You must ask by decreasing the amount a little at a time. So Avraham asked first for 45, then 40, then 30, 20, and finally ten.

In the Roman courts there was a type of water clock. When the lawyers spoke, the clock timed how much time they were allowed to speak. Once a judge was very sympathetic to a lawyer for the defense's pleas. So he added more water to the clock to allow more time for him to speak. So, too, G-d allowed Avraham to plead again and again to save Sodom for the sake of less and less people.

My final citation from the Midrash: Avraham and Job seemed to make similar statements. Avraham said it would be profane to kill the righteous with the wicked. Job said (9:22), "It is all one, I say He destroys the innocent and the wicked.” Yet Avraham is rewarded while Job is punished. Why is this? Because Avraham spoke patiently, and Job spoke impatiently.

Here's my understanding of that Midrash: We sometimes see the righteous suffer and injustice prevail. We can react by crying out to G-d to stop the suffering as Avraham did. After all, we know G-d is good, kind, and just. So how can He allow pain and suffering? We plead with G-d to stop the suffering as Avraham did.

However, another reaction is to blame G-d. To be angry at G-d, to accuse G-d. That's what Job did. But that approach is barren and destructive. We're angry at G-d, therefore, we feel good about ourselves. We are so wonderful. We criticize G-d for His "bad" conduct. But what do we do? Nothing. We feel smug and self-righteous by blaming G-d. But Avraham's approach is constructive. We know G-d is good and just. We plead for His kindness. If we don't see it in action, then we act ourselves. Since we know G-d is good, WE must be good. Since we know G-d is kind, WE must be kind. We don't understand why it sometimes seems that the righteous suffer. We can't understand why G-d allows it. But since we believe in G-d's goodness, we must emulate His goodness. Avraham, the man who demanded G-d's justice, was also the man who practiced loving-kindness to all.

In the face of unexplained suffering, our question should not be "Why did G-d allow this?" It should be "What can I do to help?"