



שערי צדק

The Gates of Justice

■ Avraham Avinu and His Mission

The Divinely-ordained destruction of S'dom provides us with a most unique opportunity to get to know, and marvel at, the workings of Divine Justice. Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham, is chosen as G-d's "middle man" through whom He guides the world in the ways of Supreme Heavenly Justice.

When we read the story of Avraham's discussion with Hashem about the destruction of S'dom, it seems at first as if Avraham is simply standing and arguing with Him. He repeatedly asks if G-d would actually destroy the entire city even though there might be 50 righteous people, or 45, or 40, and so on. But in truth, a careful look at the verses makes it clear that it is Hashem Who is pushing Avraham Avinu to continue to ask. G-d's objective is to provide answers to Avraham's questions and clarify precisely the ways of Divine justice and righteousness.

Another mistaken impression that might be received upon reading Parashat Vayera is that Divine punishment is collective, without regard to individuals. This is, after all, exactly what Avraham is complaining about! But by the end of the story, it will become clear that in truth, every individual is judged on his own, precisely according to his own level of responsibility.

The Torah tells us that G-d asked Himself: *"Shall I conceal from Avraham that which I intend to do?"* After all, *"Avraham will become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations will be blessed through him."* Not only that: *"For I know him, so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of G-d to do justice and righteousness."* (B'reshit 18,17-19)

Hashem emphasizes two important facts about Avraham: He will become a great and mighty nation, and he will guide his household in the ways of justice. But how do these two points explain why G-d should reveal to

him His plans for S'dom? Does the fact that Avraham will become a great nation mean that he must be told future events? Should he be a partner to Hashem's plans simply because he teaches his family law and justice?

And another difficulty: Why does verse 19 state **כי ידעתיו למען**, "*For I know him, in order that he command his children*"? Could it not simply have stated, "For I know that he will command his children"? The word **למען** appears to be unnecessary.

The key to understanding these verses correctly is in the word that precedes the afore-mentioned difficult word: **ידעתיו**. It usually means "*I knew him*," but here, it comes from the word **ליידע**, meaning, "to inform" by giving over information.

The point of these verses is that Avraham is destined to stand at the helm of a great people that will teach G-d's ways, having learned them from their Patriarch Avraham himself. Furthermore, the **entire world** will one day learn justice from Avraham and how to perform it. He is to be the great teacher who will instruct the whole world.

For this reason, G-d says, **ידעתיו** – not "I knew him," but rather, "*I have informed him of My ways, so that he will command his children and his household after him*." Hashem is saying that He must equip Avraham with the appropriate tools and knowledge to enable him to explain His ways to the world. He does not want Avraham to be shamed if he cannot answer difficult questions such as, "Why must entire cities be destroyed, including both their righteous and their wicked people, without apparent justice?"

Therefore, G-d says, "I must reveal to him what I am about to do, and why: *so that he will be able to command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of G-d to do justice and righteousness*." G-d must supply Avraham with knowledge of His plans, so that he will be able to persuade those around him that Hashem's ways are just. The verses must therefore be read and understood as follows:

And G-d said: Shall I conceal from Avraham that which I intend to do? For Avraham will become a great and mighty nation [one that will serve as a model for walking in G-d's ways], and all the nations will be blessed through him. For I know him [I inform him of the reasons for My decision to destroy S'dom] so that he will command his children and his household after him [i.e., I give him the tools to explain G-d's ways, so that they will not appear illogical], and they

shall keep the way of G-d, to do justice and righteousness [i.e., so that they will continue to do justice, as is G-d's way, and not, Heaven forbid, think that G-d has strayed from this path.]

G-d is thus about to impart secret information to Avraham regarding the destruction He plans to visit upon the five evil cities. G-d thus wishes to start a discussion, in which He will explain that He punishes righteous people not because of the sins of the wicked, but rather for their own sins alone.

■ The Extra Chance

G-d tells Avraham that He is about to “descend” into our world in order to verify the evil taking place in S’dom and the neighboring towns:

זַעֲקַת סְדֹם וְעִמֹרָה כִּי רַבָּה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כְבֹדָה מְאֹד.
 אֲרִדָּה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקָתָהּ הַבְּאֵה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ כָלָהּ, וְאִם לֹא אֵדְעָה.
Because the cry of S’dom and Amora is great, and because their sin is very grievous, I will descend and see if it is really that bad... If not, I will know. (18,20-21)

This is very puzzling. Hashem has already declared that their sins are very grave, so why must He go down and see if this is really the case? He Who sits above and watches over all His creations – can He not see what is happening in S’dom? Must He go down to check?

Reading the entire story, we see that G-d’s purpose in saying “*I will descend and see*” is to give the people of S’dom a final chance to improve their ways and escape punishment. The “descent” here is actually the descent of angels to the evil cities, in the clothing and appearance of mortal men, providing the sinners a last chance for a reprieve. The angels’ assignment is to go from place to place and to check: Whomever they see behaving properly and with kindness will be saved, but those who continue to act immorally will be thus signing their own death warrants for destruction.

But these angels do not come only for the people of S’dom. They also arrive at Avraham’s home in order to test him, and to actualize his potential, in the ways of kindness. If he passes the test, they will then be able to inform him with certainty that his wife Sarah will have a baby boy “*at this same time next year*”. (18,10)

By performing the kindness of welcoming guests so selflessly and with such zeal, Avraham Avinu proves that he is the flag-bearer and standard-setter of kindness in the world. The emphasis is not on the large amounts of food

that Avraham prepared for his guests, but rather on the zest with which he did so. The Torah mentions no fewer than five times how he “*rushed*” and “*ran*,” despite his advanced age and the fact that he was not yet fully recovered from his *brit milah* (circumcision). This amazing display of hospitality contrasts starkly with the ugly behavior of the people of S'dom that we read about in this Parashah. When two uninvited guests showed up there at Lot's home, the S'domites treated them with contempt and cruelty.

The angels thus helped Avraham actualize his potential and prove that his way - Hashem's way - is that of kindness and justice.

■ Will Both the Righteous and Wicked be Punished?

We now turn to Avraham's plea and appeal to G-d, wherein he asks the following:

הַאֵף תִּסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע? ... וְהִיא כְּצְדִיק כְּרָשָׁע?...
הַשִּׁפֵּט כָּל הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט?

Will You then destroy the righteous together with the wicked?...

Will the righteous and wicked [be rewarded] equally?...

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice? (verses 23, 25)

Avraham's question is straightforward: “Collective punishment that strikes the evil and the righteous equally, on the part of the Divine Judge? This is inconceivable!” Moshe Rabbeinu, too, at the end of his life, in the song of Haazinu, emphasizes the justness of Hashem's ways:

הַצּוֹר תְּמִים פָּעֵלוּ בִּי כָּל דְּרָכָיו מִשְׁפָּט. אֶל אֲמוֹנָה וְאִין עוֹל צְדִיק וְיִשָּׁר הוּא.

He is the Rock: His works are perfect,

for all His ways are just. He is a G-d of faith, with no iniquity;

righteous and just is He. (D'varim 32,4)

But Avraham goes one step further than the “regular” justice mentioned by Moshe. Avraham asks Hashem: “*Perhaps there are fifty righteous people in the city – will You not spare the city for these fifty?*” (18,24) He is actually asking for a blanket pardon for the entire city, including its evil residents! What basis is there for such a demand? Why does Avraham consider it “just” to save wicked people together with the righteous? What difference is there, actually, between that and the injustice of destroying the righteous together with the evil? Both are collective judgments!

One could answer as follows: Avraham's request is based on the assumption that if the S'domites were able to allow 50 *tzaddikim* (righteous people)

in their midst and allow them to live there, this is a point in their favor. It means that these evil people, to some extent, deserve to be saved. It's not just a matter of G-d having mercy on them, but rather that they have earned their reward.

But we cannot forget the other side of the coin: If there are 50 *tzaddikim* in S'dom, why did they not protest their neighbors' sins? If the wicked ones deserve credit for their righteous neighbors, then similarly, the righteous who did not try to keep the evil ones on the right path should be liable for punishment as well.

A third option is to separate the two groups. Perhaps the righteous should be allowed to escape, while the others are punished – as in fact occurred in the end, when Lot and his family were allowed to run away before the cities were wiped out.

If this is true, however, it must be up to them to run away *on their own*. That is to say, they must take action to save themselves. If they do not, there are again two possibilities: Either they will be saved despite all, as occurred with Lot, or they will have to pay the price together with the evil ones.

This is in fact what happened later in the Torah when Korach and his gang gathered together in rebellion against Moshe and Aharon. Moshe Rabbeinu turned to the entire nation, and said (in accordance with Hashem's command), "**Take leave of the tents of these wicked men, and don't touch anything of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins**" (Bamidbar 16, 26). It is up to the righteous not to remain with the wicked ones. If they do not separate themselves, they will have to pay the price of the others' sins.

But in the case of Avraham and S'dom, we see that Avraham did not consider the option of saving only the righteous. He had the novel idea of saving *everyone*. From where did he get this concept?

Avraham Avinu adds a new element: the concept of the Divine attribute of *ארך אפיים ורב חסד*, long-lasting patience and kindness. This means that in his negotiations with G-d regarding S'dom, Avraham takes the future into account as well: He wants to give the 50 *tzaddikim* an opportunity to try to influence the people of S'dom to change their ways. For this reason, they need not be forced to leave, nor be punished; Avraham wishes to give them a chance to save the cities.

■ The Generation of the Flood and the People of S'dom

In the Generation of the Flood, there was no justice. The world was full of thievery, deceit, exploitation and corruption. Standing up against it all was Noach, whom the Torah describes as “*a righteous and perfect man.*” The word for *righteous*, צדיק, is derived from the word for justice, and the word for *perfect*, תמים, implies uprightness and wholeness. He was thus both a man of righteousness and integrity.

The above-quoted verse in Parashat Haazinu, in which Moshe praises Hashem, bears this out:

הַצּוֹר תָּמִים פָּעָלוּ כִּי כָּל דְּרָכָיו מִשְׁפָּט אֱ-לֹהֵי אֱמוּנָה וְאֵין עֹל צְדִיק וְיֵשֶׁר הוּא.

*G-d is the Rock, Whose works are perfect,
for all His ways are just. He is a G-d of faith and no iniquity;
righteous and upright is He.* (D'varim 32,4)

Noach thus represented the fight against the injustice of his generation. But in S'dom, on the other hand, there *were* judges and judgment, as the S'domites themselves said about Lot, “*This man has come to reside here, and now he has begun to judge*” (B'reshit 19,9). Earlier in the chapter (verse 1), we read that “*Lot was sitting in the gate of S'dom*” - where judges would sit.

But whatever justice existed in S'dom was lacking the crucial elements of compassion and kindness. It was dry and technical: “What’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is yours.” The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5,10) does not praise this trait very highly, teaching that it is only a “mediocre” attribute that some feel is actually the “attribute of S'dom.” The concept of hospitality was clearly foreign to the S'domites' way of thinking – for it is based not on justice, but rather on kindness. It is clear that a society in which people never make concessions to each other will inevitably wind up with endless fighting and strife.

Furthermore: If there is no ideal of helping and being nice to one another, there is little chance that any given person will reach old age or survive any kind of illness.

The “justice” system in S'dom gave a legal stamp of approval to all sorts of injustice. Someone had to stand up against the culture of S'dom – and it was Avraham, blessed with a developed sense of both justice and compassion. Both are attributes of G-d:

אהב צדקה ומשפט חסד ה' מלאה הארץ.

*He loves justice and judgment; the kindness
of G-d fills the earth.* (Psalms 33,5)

■ A Judicial Debate

As becomes clear after Avraham's negotiations with G-d over the future of S'dom, not even ten righteous men can be found in the entire area. If so, why did Hashem allow the discussion to go on and on? Avraham asked if the city could be saved if there were 50 righteous men; Hashem said yes. He then asked about 45, and 40, and 30, all the way up to 10, and the answer each time was the same. Why didn't G-d simply tell Avraham at the outset that there were not enough *tzaddikim* in S'dom to justify a cancellation of the punishment, and that there was therefore nothing to talk about?

We see that Hashem answers every question of Avraham with a specific response applying only to that question. For instance, when asked if the city would be spared if there are 40 good men, Hashem says, "*I will not [destroy] on behalf of the forty*" (18,28). The same is true for all the other questions.

From this we learn that Hashem wants to teach His ways of justice via Avraham's questions. If the discussion had been cut off at the beginning, we would not have known that Hashem would have spared the city for the sake of 50 *tzaddikim*. Nor would we have known that the Halakhic concept of a "recognizable majority" – 40 righteous people (80% of the original 50) – would also have sufficed. We also wouldn't have known that a "slim majority" of 30 *tzaddikim* (60%) is also significant and could have prevented the destruction. We certainly would not have known the power of a minority of 20 (40%), which G-d says specifically would also have been enough – nor would we have known the great strength of a *minyan* of ten righteous people in saving the city from punishment. This is further evidence that Hashem's only desire in this discussion was to teach the entire world His ways of justice.

And to remove any doubt, let us look at the closing verse of this discussion:

וַיֵּלֶךְ ה' בְּאֶשֶׁר כָּלָה לְדַבֵּר אֶל אַבְרָהָם, וְאַבְרָהָם שָׁב לְמִקְמוֹ.

*G-d departed when He finished speaking to Avraham,
and Avraham returned to his place.* (B'reshit 18,33)

We see that it was G-d Who ended the discussion – even though we read earlier that Avraham initiated it, and therefore should have been the one

to end it! This means that on a deeper level, it was actually Hashem, in His great wisdom, Who initiated the discussion with Avraham, for the purposes we stated above – and when He finished explaining to Avraham His ways of justice, the conversation was over.

■ The Test of S'dom

True, there are not even ten righteous people in S'dom. Nevertheless, Hashem responds to the call of the Divine Attribute of forbearance. He decides to give the S'domites one more test by which they might be saved. The two angels of destruction arrive in the city towards evening, looking for a place to sleep. Lot gets up to greet them and invites them to his home. The angels refuse – in order to check how sincere he is. They want to see how much he is willing to invest in his invitation, and whether he really means it. Lot passes this first test: The Torah tells us that he “*pressed them greatly*” (B'reshit 19,3) until they finally agreed to come in.

But he is immediately faced with another test, when the residents of S'dom demand to harm his guests. Will he be able to stand up to his neighbors, or will he cave in? As we know, he passes this test as well, going further than required in his willingness even to endanger his daughters for the sake of his unknown guests.

The people of S'dom, on the other hand, fail test after test. Their wickedness is blatant, and they certainly will never be able to claim that they were not talked to nicely, or that they were not given friendly advice to do the right thing. For there is a halakhic concept known as *כּוּפִין עַל מִידַת סְדוּם*, meaning, “We do not tolerate the trait of S'dom.” It refers to instances in which one person can benefit at no expense at all to his neighbor, yet the latter does not allow it. This is what happened here: The guests could have gained a place to sleep, at no cost at all to the people of S'dom, since Lot was hosting them in his own home and at his own expense. Despite this, and despite Lot's attempts to convince them, the S'domites steadfastly refused, in their evil-heartedness, to allow Lot to welcome the strangers.

The people of S'dom were therefore culpable, and their punishment was just. But does this apply to all of them? What about the elderly people and young children? The Torah answers this clearly by telling us that everyone took part in the crime: “*They had not yet laid down to sleep and the men of S'dom encompassed the house - both old and young, all the people, from every quarter*” (19,4). The entire city was stricken with a craze of wickedness, and everyone in S'dom was clearly guilty.

The test has ended, and S'dom will be destroyed. But first, G-d stops the people of S'dom from carrying out their evil designs against Lot. The angels strike the residents with blindness, and bring Lot to safety inside the house.

The angels must now ascertain who among Lot's family is worthy of being saved, and who, on the other hand, has the S'domite character. When Lot told his sons-in-law that Hashem was about to destroy the city, they mocked him as if it were all a big joke (verse 14). This proved that they were an intrinsic part of the general evil of S'dom; they would not be rescued, but would rather be included in the circle of destruction.

■ “Don't Look Behind You”

Just before the crack of dawn, the angels try to get Lot to leave the city. But they see him hesitating, and so they gather him, his wife and their two daughters, and, in the blink of an eye, miraculously spirit them out of the city:

וַיִּתְמַהֲמָהּ, וַיַּחֲזְקוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים בְּיָדוֹ וּבְיַד אִשְׁתּוֹ וּבְיַד שְׁתֵּי בָנָתָיו
בְּחֻמַּת ה' עָלָיו וַיִּצְאֶהוּ וַיִּנְחֶהוּ מִחוּץ לְעִיר.

He tarried, and because of G-d's mercy upon him, they took his hand, and that of his wife and two daughters, and they took him out and placed him outside the city. (verse 16)

The question may well be asked: In what merit? Why did the angels not simply leave Lot and his family to fend for themselves? Why did they take him out of the doomed city? Wasn't it his own responsibility to leave a city of such sin and vice? The answer is that it was his uncle Avraham's merit that saved him, as the Torah tells us outright: *“It happened that when G-d destroyed the cities of the valley, G-d remembered Avraham, and sent Lot out of the destruction.”* (verse 29)

Lot and his family now find themselves suddenly out of the town, but it is up to them to escape further. The angels implored him: *“Run for your life. Don't look behind you, and don't stay in the entire valley. Escape to the mountain, lest you be killed.”* (verse 17)

Why don't they themselves help him get to the mountain, just like they helped him get out of the city? Why do they leave him on his own in the middle of the way?

It is because this is Lot's last and most decisive test of all, designed to see how much he will exert himself to distance himself from the evil. They

want to know if he still has an emotional bond with the people of S'dom. He and his wife are commanded, *“Don't look behind you!”* They are told to cut off all contact with the evil city, including with their own daughters and sons-in-law. Just a mere turn of the head backwards during the destruction of S'dom would mean that they had not yet cut off their ties with the evil people there, and their punishment would apply to them as well.

Lot's wife failed the test; she could not resist looking back, and immediately turned into a pillar of salt. This was a very strange death, and nothing like it appears anywhere else in the entire Bible. But its very peculiarity proves that the punishment meted out to S'dom and the other cities was not “collective punishment,” as Avraham feared. Rather, each individual was judged for his own crimes, as we see with Lot's wife: She received the same “salty” punishment that the city of S'dom received, as is hinted elsewhere in the Torah: *“The whole land is brimstone and salt and burning.”* (D'varim 29,22)

The brimstone and salt pursued, individually, each and every sinner in S'dom. Divine justice was meted out to each person on his own. We thus see that *the Judge of all the earth shall in fact do justice*, as Avraham had demanded – in contrast with the original impression that the tempest strikes without differentiating between righteous and evil.

■ Avraham's Overview of S'dom

Lot was not permitted to look back at the destruction of S'dom - but Avraham stood and watched the cities go up in smoke:

וַיִּשְׁקֹף עַל פְּנֵי סְדֹם וְעֵמֶרָה וְעַל כָּל פְּנֵי אֶרֶץ הַכְּפָר
וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה עֹלָה קִיטֹר הָאָרֶץ כְּקִיטֹר הַכְּבֹשֶׁן.

Avraham looked out over S'dom and Amora and the entire plain, and he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a furnace. (B'reshit 19, 27-28)

This proves that Avraham was totally detached from the sins of S'dom. In the same vein, we read in Parashat Lekh Lekha that he gave back to the King of S'dom all his men and all his property, *“from a thread to a shoe-string”* (14,23). Since no part of the evil of S'dom adhered to Avraham, there is no reason for him not to watch the city go up in smoke. There is certainly no reason to fear that he might feel any longing for them or their behavior.

But this is not true for Lot. The entire reason he was saved was in the merit of his uncle Avraham, as we saw above (19,29). Lot has no backbone of his

own, and cannot be allowed to stand and watch the terrible destruction. He must be very careful and must be sheltered from the slightest action that might re-connect him with the evil S'dom.

Thus, we have entered through the gates of Divine Justice, and we have seen that each person is related to, and rewarded or punished, in a most detailed and individualized manner. There is no “collective punishment,” nor is Divine justice and righteousness anything but perfectly straightforward and just. Rather,

מֶלֶךְ בְּמִשְׁפָּט יַעֲמִיד אֶרֶץ...

The King sitting in judgment will stand the world upright... (Proverbs 29,4)

