

Parashat Vayera

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The Prophet in Prayer

Genesis Ch. 18 v. 16-33

- What did God tell Abraham before He destroyed Sodom?
- Why did God tell Abraham this?
- How does Abraham dare to argue with God?
- What is the role of a prophet?
- Why does God inform a prophet of His plans for the future?

A. God's Communication to Abraham before the Destruction of Sodom

Parashat Vayera opens with God revealing Himself to Abraham and the angels' arrival at his home (Gen. 18:1-8). The angels notify Abraham and Sarah about the upcoming birth of Isaac (18:9-15), and then travel to a place overlooking Sodom:

And the men got up from there, and they looked toward Sodom, and Abraham walked with them to accompany them out. (Gen. 18:16)

וַיִּקְמוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים
וַיִּשְׁקֹפוּ עַל פְּנֵי סֹדֶם
וַאֲבָרָהֶם הֵלֵךְ עִמָּם
לְשַׁלְּחָם:

God's
Message to
Abraham
Regarding
Sodom and
its Purpose

The significance and purpose of the angels' looking towards Sodom is not stated explicitly. However, it is apparent from the verse that this was no mere glance in order to identify the way to Sodom; this was a crucial point. Immediately afterwards the Torah describes God's decision to tell Abraham of his plans to destroy Sodom. The description of the angels' journey resumes only in verse 22:¹

And the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, and Abraham still stood before God.
 וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ
 סְדֻמָּה וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדֵנּוּ
 עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי ה':
 (Gen. 18:22)

This separation of the two groups of verses indicates that the Abraham's encounter with the angels overlooking Sodom is independently significant. What happens between the angels' gaze towards Sodom (verse 16) and their journey there (verse 22)? Let us take a closer look at the verses that appear in between:

And God had said, "Shall I conceal from Abraham that which I do? For Abraham will be a great and mighty nation, and all of the
 וְה' אָמַר הַמְכַסֶּה
 אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר
 אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה: וְאַבְרָהָם
 הָיָה יְהוּדָה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל

¹ Apparently the angels actually continued their journey towards Sodom immediately after looking towards it, without waiting for God to speak to Abraham. This is indicated by the language of the verse: "And God had said," indicating that this had taken place beforehand. Still, a question arises as to why the Torah chose to insert God's speech to Abraham in between the angels' gazing towards Sodom and their journey towards it.

nations on earth shall be blessed through him. For I know him, so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of God in doing charity and justice, so that God will bring upon Abraham that which He has said of him."
 וְעַצִּים וְנִבְרָכוּ בּוֹ כֹּל
 גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ: כִּי יָדַעְתִּיו
 לַמַּעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת
 בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו
 וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרֹךְ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת
 צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לַמַּעַן
 הָבִיא ה' עַל אַבְרָהָם
 אֶת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר עָלָיו:
 (Gen. 18: 17-19)

The angels stand together with Abraham, gazing towards Sodom. It is at this point that God decides to tell Abraham what is about to happen.² Although these verses begin with the words, "And God had said," they are actually a description of God's thought process, so to speak: "And God said to himself, 'Shall I conceal from Abraham...'" The secret that God has decided to share with Abraham is not explicitly mention in these verses.³

² According to Seforno (Gen. 18:17), Abraham "was involved in the *mitzva* of acts of kindness, by accompanying his guests." During this incident, God observes his deeds, and "said that He would tell him, in order that he [Abraham] should command his children, as our Sages said: 'The reward for a *mitzva* is another *mitzva*.'" This is the reason that God's words come between Abraham's accompanying the angels and their journey to Sodom. See also *Toledot Yitzhak* ad loc., which expresses a similar idea.

³ It is possible that this information is concealed from the reader in order to hide God's intentions as long as Abraham himself is unaware of them. This emphasizes the importance of the encounter in which God actually shares his intentions with a human being.

What is Revealed to Abraham?

Only in the following verses do we discover what God wants to tell Abraham:

And God said, “The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is grave; I shall go down and see if what they have done is as severe as the cry that has come to Me, and if not, I will know.” (Gen. 19: 20-21)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' וַעֲקַת סְדֹם וְעִמֹרָה כִּי רָבָה וַחֲטֵאתָם כִּי כְבֹדָה מְאֹד: אֲרֹדָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקֹתֶיהָ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עָשׂוּ כְלָהּ וְאִם לֹא אֲרֹדָה:

What exactly does God tell Abraham? Is He informing Abraham that the people of Sodom are wicked? Isn't Abraham already aware of this?⁴ What is the significance of God's descent to Sodom – is God telling Abraham that He is planning to descend into Sodom in order to examine deeds of the people there,⁵ or is His descent meant to conceal the destruction of Sodom? Or perhaps it indicates that God means to destroy it completely?⁶

4 The sins of the people of Sodom were already mentioned in Chapter 13 when Lot separates from Abraham and goes to Sodom: “And the people of Sodom were wicked, and great sinners toward God” (Gen. 13:13). It stands to reason that Abraham was familiar with Sodom since Lot lived there, and possibly even beforehand. In any case, when Abraham is called upon to save Lot from Kedarlaomer and the kings with him, he saves the city of Sodom at the same time, and likely becomes acquainted with its inhabitants and their deeds. This might also explain why Abraham feared the war so much – he was aware of the character of Sodom, and feared that the war on their behalf was not justified (see *Bereishit Rabba* 44:4).

5 This is Ibn Ezra and Rashbam's interpretation.

6 As Rashi explains. We will develop these two possibilities below.

Why Tell Abraham?

The second question that arises from reading these verses is: why is it so important to God to reveal His plans to Abraham? And why does He phrase this as a rhetorical question: “Shall I conceal from Abraham...?” Apparently, God would not even consider (as it were) punishing Sodom without first telling Abraham. Why?

While these verses precede the ones related to our previous question, the answers to both questions are interrelated: in order to understand why God makes this revelation to Abraham, we must first understand what was revealed. Therefore, we will discuss both questions in parallel.

B. The Declaration of Sodom's Punishment

Revealing Sodom's Fate

As mentioned above, one possible interpretation of the “secret” God decides to tell Abraham is that God reveals **His plan to punish and destroy Sodom**. According to this opinion, judgment has already been passed, and God is descending to Sodom in order to punish the city. Rashi's first explanation of verse 21 fits with this interpretation:

“I shall go down and see” – to teach judges that they shall not judge capital cases without having seen, as I explained in the story of the dispersion [Babel]. (Rashi on Gen. 18:21)

ארדה נא ואראה – למד לדיינים שלא יפסקו דיני נפשות אלא בראיה, הכל כמו שפרשתי בפרשת הפלגה.

What did Rashi explain regarding the story of Babel?

“And God descended to see” – there was no need to, but this comes to teach judges that they shall not convict a suspect until they see and understand. (Rashi on Gen. 11:5)

וירד ה' לראות - לא הוצרך לכך, אלא בא ללמד לדיינים שלא ירשיעו הנדון עד שיראו ויבינו.

According to this opinion,⁷ God's investigation is not actually necessary since everything is known to Him⁸ and He has obviously already decided on the proper

⁷ Based on *Midrash Tanhuma, Bereshit, Parashat Noah 18*.

⁸ See *Or HaHayyim's* interpretation ad loc., which infers this from Rashi's commentary.

punishment for Sodom. His descent to Sodom is only to model for humanity the proper way to conduct a trial.

Why does God Reveal the Sentence?

If, as this interpretation assumes, Abraham is informed only once Sodom has been condemned, we must ask: why does God tell **Abraham** of Sodom's **sentence**?

A. The Land Belongs to Abraham

Rashi suggests an answer to this question in his commentary:

It is not fitting that I do this without his knowledge; I gave him this land, and these five cities belong to him, as it says (Gen. 10:19): “The border of the Canaanite from Tzidon... and toward Sodom and Gomorrah, etc.”⁹ (Rashi on Gen. 18:17)

לא יפה לי לעשות דבר זה שלא מדעתו, אני נתתי לו את הארץ הזאת, וחמש הברכות הללו שלו הן, שנאמר (בראשית, י' י"ט): גבול הכנעני מצידון וגו' בואכה סדומה ועמורה וגו'. (רש"י שם י"ח, יז)

Rashbam maintains a similar approach in his explanation:

...And how can I destroy his land, or his neighbors' land, without his knowledge?! (Rashbam on Gen. 18:17)

...ואיך אחריב קרקע שלו או קרקע שכניו שלא מדעתו?! (רשב"ם שם)

According to this interpretation, the verses: “And Abraham will surely be a great and mighty nation”

⁹ Based on *Tanhuma Bereshit, Parashat Vayera 5*.

describe the eventual inheritance of the Land of Israel by Abraham's descendants. **Sodom belongs to Abraham**, and it cannot be destroyed without Abraham's prior knowledge.

B. God's Regard for Abraham

Another interpretation that appears in Rashi's commentary is that God reveals His secrets and plans to Abraham **due to His regard for him**:

And shall I conceal it from him, ...וכי ממנו אני מעלים,
 he who is favored before Me והרי הוא חביב לפני
 to become a great nation and להיות לגוי גדול ולהתברך
 a blessing for all nations on בו כל גויי הארץ?! (רש"י
 earth?! (Rashi on Gen. 18:18) שם, פסוק י"ח)

This interpretation also assumes that the verses mentioned above describe the inheritance of the land by Abraham's descendants; however, according to this explanation, this is not the primary reason God reveals Sodom's fate to Abraham. Rather, both God's revelation and the inheritance of the land are the result of God's affection for Abraham.

C. A Lesson on Divine Providence

Radak suggests another potential explanation in his commentary on verse 19:

So that [Abraham] will say to them כי יאמר להם (לבני
 [the members of his household], ביתו) שמרו דרך ה'
 "Keep the way of God and He will וייטב לכם, ואם לא
 be good to you, and if you do not, תשמרו יעשה עמכם

He will do the opposite...and if you say that He will not take notice of your deeds, consider what He did to Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness; lest you suppose that this was mere chance, like other places that are destroyed by natural disasters - [God] told me in advance that He would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their evil deeds." (Radak on Gen. 18:19)

בהפך... ושמא תאמרו לא ישגיח במעשיכם, ראו מה עשה בסדום ועמורה לפי שהיו רשעים, ואם תאמרו מקרה היה כמו שאנו רואים מקומות נשקעים מפני הרעש, והנה הוא אמר אלי קודם שישחיתם שישחית סדום ועמורה בעבור מעשיהם הרעים.

According to Radak's interpretation, God tells Abraham his plan to overturn Sodom to emphasize that the annihilation of Sodom is not a result of chance but a punishment for the sins of its people. This way Abraham will be able to use the story of Sodom in order to command his children and household to walk in the way of God. This will allow him **to teach his household about Divine Providence** and the divine consequences of man's deeds, while inheritance of the Land of Israel would be their reward for keeping God's word.¹⁰

10 Later in his commentary Radak adds:

...אף על פי שהכל גלוי וידוע לפניו יתברך, נכתב זה ללמד לבני אדם שלא ימהרו במשפטם, שהרי הא-ל אמר לראות... ועניין הראיה להתבונן במעשה ההוא אם יש דרך לפטרם מן העונש, כאדם שנושא ונותן בדין. וזה פתח לאברהם דרך, בזה הלשון שאמר "ואראה" כדי שיתבונן אברהם ויראה אם ימצא להם זכות להיפטר, וכדי ללמדן משפט הא-ל... וארצה שיתבונן אברהם בזה וישאלני ויחקר משפטי כדי שילמד וילמד.

Even though all is revealed and known to Him, Blessed is He, this is written in order to teach humanity not to be

C. Announcement of the Trial

Announcement of Sodom's Trial

In contrast, most commentators explain that God is not revealing to Abraham Sodom's final fate; rather, He is **giving him notice of Sodom's trial**: "I shall go down and see if what they have done is as severe as the cry that has come to Me, and if not, I will know" (Gen. 18:21). According to the simple reading of the text, God descends to see if indeed "[it] is as severe as the cry," and therefore the people of Sodom are deserving of death; if this is not so, then "I will know" – God knows what should be done with the inhabitants of Sodom.¹¹ Ibn Ezra explains:

hasty in judgment, as [even] God said "to see"... and the purpose of seeing is to **observe the deed and see if there is a way to exempt them from punishment**, as a man would negotiate a verdict. **And this gave Abraham an opening, since God said "I shall see," that Abraham could consider and see whether he could find merit for them and excuse them**, in order to teach them divine justice... **"And I desire that Abraham will take note of this, and ask Me and study My judgment, so that he will learn and teach it."** (Radak on Gen. 18:21)

According to this interpretation, judgment has been passed, but God wants Abraham to try to exempt the people of Sodom from punishment. Abraham should investigate and demand answers from God until he understands that God's judgment is just. This way, he will understand God's judgment and its application in the world, and will be able to teach his household the meaning of divine justice.

¹¹ Apparently, this is the simplest reading of the verse, but the explanation raises a question: does God truly need to descend in order to examine the people's deeds? Is He not already all-knowing? This question prompts Rashi, following the *midrash*, to explain that God is not actually investigating – He already knows, and has decided on a sentence – but He is "staging" a trial so that humanity will learn from it. However, other

In my opinion, this means: "I...ועל דעתי פירושו: shall see if they have all done אראה אם עשו כולם such evil..." (Ibn Ezra on Gen. כרעה הזאת... (אבן- 18:21) עזרא שם, כא)

Ramban proposes a similar explanation:

"I came to judge: if they sinned, I...באתי לשפוט: will obliterate them; if not, I will אם חטאו אעשה know what to do with them, 'I בהם כלה, ואם לא I will punish their sin with the rod, – אדעה מה אעשה and their iniquity with flogging'" בהם, ופקדתי בשבט (Ps. 89:33). **He notified him that their judgment had not yet been passed, and that now He will count their sins and judge them...** הודיעו כי אין עוד נגמר דינם, וכי עתה יפקוד עונם וישפוט אותם... (Ramban on Gen. 18:20)

Even Rashi suggests a similar interpretation later in his commentary:

Another possibility: I shall go דבר אחר: ארדה down to the root of their deeds. If נא לסוף מעשיהם, what they have done is as severe הכצעקתה הבאה אלי עשו, ואם עומדים as the cry, and if they insist on במרדם כלה אני their rebellion, I shall destroy עושה בהם, ואם לא them completely, and if they do

commentators (see below) explain that this investigation does not mean that God does not know, but rather that the trial is not yet finished. Even Rashi, in his commentary on verse 21 (discussed below), says that God has not yet sealed Sodom's fate, and is giving the people one last chance to repent (see also the commentary of Hizkuni and R. Bahya ad loc.).

not insist on their rebellion, I will know what to do: [their sins] shall be repaid through suffering, and I shall not destroy them. (Rashi on Gen. 18:21)

יעמדו במרדן-אדעה
מה אעשה, להפרע
מהן ביסורין, ולא
אכלה אותן. (רש"י
שם, כא)

According to these interpretations, the fate of Sodom has not been sealed and God tells Abraham that He will now finalize his judgment.

**Why does
God Reveal
the Trial?**

Why does God tell **Abraham** about the **trial** of Sodom?

This question might have an answer similar to that of the previous questions: Abraham is favored by God (as mentioned in verse 18), and therefore God tells him what is happening in the world (according to Rashi); alternatively, Abraham must learn the appropriate way to dispense justice (see verse 19), and God teaches him how to do so justly and mercifully.¹²

¹² See Radak's commentary on verse 21 cited in note 10.

D. Father and Source of Blessing

Taking another look at verses 18-19, we see that there may be another reason for God's revelation to Abraham regarding the judgment of Sodom. According to these verses, God cannot conceal Sodom's fate from Abraham for two reasons:

1. "Abraham will be a great and mighty nation, and all of the nations on earth shall be blessed by through him."
2. "For I know him, so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of God in doing charity and justice."

The first part of the verses tells of God's blessing to Abraham for the future and that he will be a source of blessing for all nations. The second part describes Abraham's loyalty to God's ways and his ensuring that his descendants will continue in this path. However, it is not entirely clear why these qualities compel God to tell Abraham his plans for Sodom.

Let us take a closer look at verse 18:

And Abraham will surely be a great and mighty nation, and all of the nations on earth shall be blessed through him.(Gen. 18:18)

ואבְרָהָם הָיוּ יְהוּה לְגוֹי
גָדוֹל וְעָצוּם וְנִבְרָכוּ בוּ כָּל
גְּוֵי הָאָרֶץ:

**"And they shall
be blessed
through him";
"And you shall
be a blessing"**

This verse is similar to the blessing that Abraham

received from God at the beginning of his journey:

And I shall make you into a great nation, and I shall bless you and magnify your name, and you shall be a blessing...and all families on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:2-3)

וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל
וְאִבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמֶךָ
וְהָיָה בְרַכְּהָ... וְנִבְרַכְוּ בְךָ
כָּל מִשְׁפָּחַת הָאָדָמָה.
(בראשית י"ב, ב-ג)

God gives Abraham a number of blessings. The first is one of proliferation: “And I shall make you into a great nation,” which also appears in our *parasha*: “And Abraham will surely be a great a mighty nation” (Gen. 18:18). However, it seems that the main element of the blessing is the unique promise that Abraham is given: in Chapter 12, “you shall be a blessing...and all families on earth will be blessed through you”; in Chapter 18, “all of the nations on earth shall be blessed through him.” What is the meaning of this unique blessing?

Abraham –
a Partner
in Effecting
Blessings

Rashi proposes the following interpretation:

“And you shall be a blessing” – והיה ברכה – הברכות
the blessings are in your hands. נתונות בידך. עד עכשיו
Until now, they were in Mine; I היו בידי; ברכתי את אדם
blessed Adam and Noah. From ואת נח ואותך, ומעכשיו
now on, you shall give blessings אתה תברך את אשר
as you see fit. (Rashi on Gen. תחפוז. (רש"י בראשית
12:2) י"ב, ב)

According to Rashi, Abraham is accorded a special status by God. Until now, God was the only one able to bless people, while from now on, a human is given

the ability to bless others – Abraham’s blessing is the **ability to bring God’s abundant good into the world.**

Revelation –
a Result of
Partnership

This interpretation explains God’s decision to inform Abraham of his intentions to punish Sodom. Abraham’s gift is no ordinary blessing; it raises him to a level above that of ordinary human beings. He becomes, in a sense, **God’s partner** in bringing good into the world. Therefore, God must tell him of his plans to punish other nations for their sins.

E. Abraham's Partnership with God

Below we will discuss the relationship between Abraham's partnership with God and God's decision to share his plans with Abraham. The commentaries offer a number of explanations:

1. God is Notifying His Partner

God's blessing to Abraham is a **sign** of Abraham's special status in God's eyes and his partnership with God in bringing blessings into the world. God cannot carry out such significant plans without notifying his partner and confidant. Therefore, when God descends in order to judge Sodom, **He notifies Abraham.**

2. God Seeks Abraham's Active Participation

Another explanation is that God's stated motivation is His **reason** for notifying Abraham. In other words, God is not only notifying Abraham of his plans; He wants Abraham to actively participate in the decision by blessing the nations of the earth and awakening God's will to bring good into the world. Especially when God seeks to judge people, He wants Abraham to be part of the process and represent mercy; God gave Abraham this task, and wants him to fulfill it.

3. Abraham Represents Humanity on Trial

At the end of his commentary on verse 17, Rashi adds

a statement that we have not yet discussed:

I called him "Abraham, father of many nations" (Gen. 17:4-5); shall I destroy his children without notifying their father, who loves Me?! (Rashi on 18:17)

קראתי אותו 'אברהם, אב המון גויים' (בראשית י"ז, ד-ה), ואשמיד את הבנים ולא אודיע לאב, שהוא אוהבי?! (Rashi on 18:17)

In light of interpretation, the verses: "And Abraham will be a great and mighty nation, and all of the nations on earth shall be blessed through him, etc." take on new meaning. The reason that God feels the need to share his plans with Abraham is related to the fact that Abraham will not only bless the nations of the world from a distance; rather, he is to be the father of those nations.¹³ What does this mean?

As a father has responsibilities towards his children, so Abraham is responsible for the nations. A father's responsibility is expressed both through

¹³ In Chapter 17, God changes Abram's name to Abraham:

...וארבה אותך במאד מאד... ואני הנה בריתי אתך והיית לאב המון גויים ולא יקרא עוד את שמך אברם והיה שמך אברהם כי אב המון גויים נתתך והפריתי אותך במאד מאד ונתתך לגויים ומלכים ממך יצאו...

And I shall greatly increase your numbers... And I, My covenant is with you, and you shall become the father to many nations, and your name shall no longer be Abram - it will be Abraham, for I have made you the father of many nations. And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations out of you, and kings will descend from you... (Gen. 17:2-6)

The simple reading of these verses is that God blesses Abraham that he will multiply and have many descendants, but it can also be understood that at this point Abraham becomes the father of all nations, and is thus responsible for them and not only for his direct descendants.

his concern for his children's education and behavior, as well as through a feeling of mercy for them. So too, Abraham's responsibility towards the nations is expressed through a **concern that they improve themselves**, and through displaying **mercy** towards them and attempting to bring good upon them.

For this reason God reveals the destruction of Sodom to Abraham – he is their father, and he is responsible for them.

What is expected of Abraham now? It seems that God expects Abraham to act as one responsible for the nations: he must either try to cause them to **repent**, or beg for **mercy** on their behalf, as does a father for his son.

According to verse 18, which reminds us of the promise given in Chapter 12 that “all families on earth will be blessed through you,” it seems that God wants Abraham to participate in the discussion of Sodom's fate and awaken God's attribute of mercy, as only he can.¹⁴

14 This allows us to understand why God does not find fault with Abraham for attempting to justify the actions of the people of Sodom and thus disrupting God's plan. In fact, God actually encourages Abraham:

אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הִיָּה דְבַר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם בַּמְּתוּחָה לֵאמֹר אֵל תִּירָא אֲבָרָם אֲנֹכִי מִגֵּן לְךָ שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד:

After these things, God's word came to Abraham in a vision, saying, “Do not fear; I am your shield, your reward is great.” (Gen. 15:1)

Seforno comments:

לא די שלא התמעטו וכיוותך בשביל מה שהצלתך אבל עם זה יש שכר לפעולתך

4. Abraham is a Partner in Justice and Mercy

Abraham
Represents
God's Way in
the World

Let us take a closer look at verse 19:

...For I know him, so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of God in doing charity and justice...
(Gen. 18:19)

כִּי יָדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט...

This verse hints to the special closeness between God and Abraham (“I know him”¹⁵) and that this closeness will be actualized when Abraham commands his successors to follow God's path. Abraham is the representative of the way of God in this world¹⁶ – “doing charity and justice.”

The Way of
God - Doing
Charity and
Justice

God notifies Abraham of the trial of Sodom since

וְאֵת שְׂגֻמַּת חֶסֶד לְאַחִיךָ וּזְוֹלָתוֹ לְהַצִּיל גְּזוּלִים מִיַּד עוֹשֵׂקִים.
Not only has your merit not been diminished for the fact that I saved you – but in fact, there is a reward for your deed, **that you did kindness to your brother and others with him, in saving victims of theft from their oppressors.**
(Seforno on Gen. 15:1)

This is despite the fact that in our narrative God seeks to destroy the people of Sodom, who were apparently none too righteous.

- 15 In the Bible, the expression “knowledge” connotes closeness, familiarity and affection, as seen in Genesis 4:1: “And Adam knew his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain,” and in Exodus 33:12: “And You said, ‘I knew you by name, and you found favor in my eyes’” (see Rashi ad loc.).
- 16 There has been much debate on the meaning of this verse, especially the meaning of the phrase “so that” [*lema'an*]. I believe that the explanation offered here captures the main idea expressed in the verse.

Abraham represents God's way of doing charity and justice in this world.

Ramban explains this idea as follows:

“For I know in him that he recognizes and knows that I am God, Who loves charity and justice; that is, I carry out justice only with charity, and thus he will command his children and his household after him to hold fast to My way.” (Ramban on Gen. 18:18)

...כי ידעתי בו שהוא מכיר ויודע שאני ה' אוהב צדקה ומשפט, כלומר שאני עושה משפט רק בצדקה, ולכך יצוה את בניו וביתו אחריו לאחוזו דרכי. והנה, אם בדרך צדקה ומשפט יפטרו, יתפלל לפני להניחם וטוב הדבר, ואם חייבין הם לגמרי גם הוא יחפוץ במשפטם, ולכן ראוי שיבוא בסוד ה'.

According to Ramban, God reveals to Abraham His plan to destroy Sodom because He knows that the path of justice and charity is of great importance to Abraham; Abraham would want justice to be done. If the people of Sodom are sinners – Abraham will be in favor of punishment for them. If they are worthy of pardon – he will pray that they should be saved. In other words, God wants Abraham's prayer not because Abraham is an external third party whose opinion matters to God, but rather because **he is God's partner in directing the world**, and he, too, is committed to upholding the divine path of “doing charity and justice.” If the people of Sodom deserve forgiveness, Abraham will pray for them – and God desires this prayer, since it is in accordance with His way. However, if the people deserve punishment,

Abraham will accept this since he too is interested in justice being done. Abraham represents God's way in the world – he is God's partner in the world, and therefore **God includes him in His major decisions**.

**The
Significance
of
Destroying
Sodom**

The decision whether or not to destroy Sodom is a loaded one: after the Flood, God promised that He would never destroy all living things again (see Gen. 8:21-22, 9:9-17). Now, ten generations later, Sodom reached such levels of moral corruption that God decided to annihilate it. The destruction of Sodom is not just a punishment of its inhabitants, but total decimation of the place – the ground, the plants, the animals,¹⁷ and finally the people. While this may

17 Sodom was a lush place before it was destroyed, as seen in Genesis 13:10:

וַיִּשָׂא לוֹט אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת כָּל כַּפְר הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי כָלָה מִשְׁקָהּ לִפְנֵי שְׁחַת ה' אֶת סֹדֶם וְאֶת עֲמֹרָה כִּגְן ה' בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאַכְבָּה צֹעַר.

And Lot raised his eyes and saw the whole plain of the Jordan – for it was well-watered before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah – like the Garden of God, like the land of Egypt, toward Tzo'ar. (Gen. 13:10)

The destruction of Sodom, therefore, turned a place of great fertility into total wasteland, as described in Genesis 19:25:

וַיִּהְפֹּךְ אֶת הָעָרִים הָאֵל וְאֶת כָּל הַכְּפָר וְאֶת כָּל יֹשְׁבֵי הָעָרִים וְצִמַח הָאֲדָמָה:

And God overturned the cities and all of the plain, and all of the inhabitants, **and the plants of the earth**. (Gen. 19:25)

And similarly, in Deuteronomy 29:22:

גְּפִרִית וּמִלַח שֹׂרֶפֶה כָּל אֲרֻצָּה לֹא תִזְרַע וְלֹא תִצְמַח וְלֹא יֵעָלֶה בָּהּ כֵּל עֵשֶׂב כְּמַהֲפַכַת סֹדֶם וְעֲמֹרָה אֲדָמָה וְצִבְיִים אֲשֶׁר הִפְךָ ה' בְּאַפּוֹ בְּחִמְתּוֹ.

A fire of sulfur and salt shall burn the land, nothing shall be planted or sprout, **and no grass shall grow there; like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah**, Admah and Tzevoim, which God overturned in His wrath and anger. (Deut. 29:22)

not be a destruction of the entire world, it is still an extraordinarily harsh measure, the likes of which had not been taken since the Flood.¹⁸

Before taking such serious action, God speaks to Abraham, since Abraham is the partner of God and is involved in this trial in two ways:

God's
Partner in
Responsibility
for the
Nations

First, as we saw in verse 18, Abraham is the father of many nations. God gave him the ability to bless these nations, and this gives him both responsibility for their actions and the opportunity to arouse mercy on their behalf.

God's
Partner in
the Way of
Charity and
Justice

Second, as alluded to in verse 19, Abraham represents God's way in the world – the way of charity and justice – and thus deserves to take part in dispensing justice. He is interested in keeping God's way; on the one hand, he will attempt to arouse God's mercy when justified, and on the other, he will accept punishment when required.

God is not only notifying Abraham that Sodom is to be judged, **He is inviting Abraham to take part in the trial.** God does not expect Abraham to sit and watch from the sidelines – Abraham is the father of many nations, who can bring blessings upon them; he is the keeper of God's way. He will stand up and express his position.

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the connection between the destruction of Sodom and the Flood, see Chagai Gross, "*Hashva'at Dor HaMabul LeAnshei Sedom*," *Alon Shevut* 128; Gideon Shaviv, "*Mabul Noach, Sedom VeMitzrayim*," *Daf Keshet* 882.

In the trial of Sodom, God asks Abraham to take up the defense while God is the prosecutor. God told Abraham of his plans because He needs him, so to speak, in order to execute perfect justice after applying every aspect of perfect mercy.

## F. The Role of the Prophet

### The Prophet – Praying before God

This is the first time that we are introduced to a person having such a relationship with God. God wished to act, and a human being attempts to alter the Divine will (as it were) through prayer. In this narrative, we learned that Abraham’s challenge to God is not contradictory to His will, nor is it insolent. It is but what God expects of him: to argue for the defense.

### The First Prophet

We usually conceive of a prophet as a messenger chosen by God to bring His word to humanity. However, the word “prophet” connotes a broader, more fundamental role. Abraham is the first person in the Torah to be called a “prophet”; the word first appears in the narrative in which Sarah is taken to Abimelech (Genesis 20).

The Torah tells of Sarah being taken to Abimelech’s home (verse 2). God is angered by this and reveals Himself to Abimelech in a dream, saying:

“And now, return the wife of the man, for he is a prophet [navi], and he will pray on your behalf, and you will live.” (Gen. 20:7)

The Rashbam comments:

“For he is a prophet [navi]” – from the word for speech [nivsefatayim]. He is familiar with Me and speaks with Me, and I love his words and

ועתה השב אשת האיש כי נביא הוא ויתפלל בעדך וחייה.

כי נביא הוא - לשון נב שפתים. רגיל אצלי ומדבר את דברי, ואני אוהב

את דבריו ושומע תפילתו. (Rashbam on Gen. 20:7)

### The Roles of the Prophet

A prophet is not only one who conveys God’s word, but one who has a special mode of communication with God. This unique communication is a result of the prophet’s special connection which God, which is expressed through his **hearing of God’s word and transmitting it to man**, and also through his ability to **speak to God, and God’s willingness to listen to his prayers**.

The prophet’s role is not only to deliver God’s message to man; it is also delivering man’s message to God<sup>19</sup> – standing before God and expressing the prayers and requests of others.

### The Prophet’s Prayer

The first time the word “prophet” is mentioned in the context of the ability to pray: “He is a prophet, and he will pray on your behalf.” The virtue of the

<sup>19</sup> According to this interpretation, the meaning of the term “prophet” [navi] can be explained by Exodus 18:19:

עתה שמע בקולי איעצך ויהי א-להים עמך הנה אתה לעם מול הא-להים והבאת אתה את הדברים אל הא-להים

“Now, listen to my voice, I will advise you, and God will be with you. You shall be for the nation before God, and you will bring their words to God.” (Ex. 18:19)

Rashi explains:

“היה אתה לעם מול הא-להים” – שליח ומליץ בינותם למקום, ושואל משפטם מאתו:

“You shall be for the nation before God” – a messenger and intermediary between them and God, and request justice of Him. (Rashi on Ex. 18:19)

The prophet’s role, therefore, is to bring [lehavi] God’s words to the nation and the nation’s words to God – and thus he receives the title of “prophet” [navi].

prophet is his ability to pray on behalf of others and have God hear his prayers.

However, this verse is not the first time that Abraham is in the position of praying on behalf of others – the prophet that prayed for Abimelech is the same one who prayed for the people of Sodom.

Abraham –  
Prophet and  
Bringer of  
Good

**Abraham, the first prophet and** the father of many nations, quite poignantly encompasses **both aspects of the prophet**: he hears God’s command and follows it, while influencing many others to serve Him. At the same time, Abraham is concerned not only with guiding people, but with blessing them as well – he prays on their behalf and uses his ability to stimulate God’s mercy and positively affect the world.

God –  
Seeking the  
Prayer of the  
Prophet

From the story of Abraham’s prayer for Sodom, we learn that prayer is not an attempt to force God, as it were, to change His will. In fact, it is the opposite – **God seeks the prophet’s prayer** and reveals His plans to the prophet to give him the chance to pray and awaken His mercy

## G. Moses’ Prayer

“Leave Me!”

Another example of this is the prayer of Moses. Moses, the greatest prophet of Israel, often prayed and asked God’s forgiveness for the nation’s sins. After the sin of the Golden Calf, God asks Moses not to pray on behalf of the nation, since He wants to punish them:

And God said to Moses, “I have seen this nation, it is a stiff-necked people. And now, leave Me, and My anger will be upon them, and I will annihilate them and make you into a great nation.” (Ex. 32:9-10)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עִמָּךְ וְהִנֵּה עִם קִשָּׁה עֵרְפָה הוּא: וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי וַיִּחַר אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאַכְלַם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתְךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל:

Apparently, God was not interested in Moses’ prayer at that point, as He wanted to punish the nation. God feared (so to speak) that Moses would awaken His mercy and that He would reconsider His punishment.

Against  
God’s Will?

Despite God’s command, Moses prays:

And Moses sought the favor of his Lord, God, and he said, “God, why should Your wrath be upon Your nation, which You took out of Egypt with great strength and a mighty hand?...” (Ex. 32:11)

וַיִּחַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת פְּנֵי ה' אֵ-לֹהָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לְמָה ה' יִחַרְךָ אִפְךָ בְּעַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּכַח גָּדוֹל וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה...

Moses seems to be committing a grave offense: Although God informs him that He **is not interested**

in prayer or awakening of His mercy, Moses disobeys and “seeks his favor.” How can this be?

Hinting to Prayer

Rashi notes this difficulty and explains verse 10 as follows:

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>“Leave me” –Moses had not yet begun to pray for them, and He says, “Leave Me”? Rather, He <b>gave him an opening</b>, and indicated to him [Moses] that <b>it was dependent on him</b> – if he prayed for them, He [God] would not destroy them. (Rashi on Ex. 32:10)</p> | <p>הניחה לי - עדיין לא שמענו שהתפלל משה עליהם, והוא אומר 'הניחה לי? אלא כאן פתח לו פתח והודיעו שהדבר תלוי בו, שאם יתפלל עליהם לא יכלם.</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

According to this interpretation, God’s words “Leave Me” are not a command to Moses and do not prevent him from praying. In fact, their meaning is: “If you leave Me – I will destroy them; however, you may choose not to leave Me, but rather to pray on their behalf and so they will be saved.” God reveals His decree to Moses so that Moses has the chance to pray and prevent its execution. “Leave Me” hints to the fact that Moses’ prayer can save the nation. God does not wish to utilize the Attribute of Justice – He wants His mercy to be stirred through prayer.

## H. Jeremiah’s Prayer

“Do not pray...I shall not listen”

Jeremiah was another prophet who prayed frequently, and he too found himself in a similar situation:

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>And God said to me, “Do not pray on behalf of this nation for their well-being. Although they fast, I shall not listen to their cry; although they bring sacrifices and grain offerings, I do not want them, for through sword, through famine and through plague I shall destroy them.” (Jer. 14:11-12)</p> | <p>ויאמר ה' אלי אל תתפלל בעד העם הזה לטובה: כי יצמו אינני שמע אל הנתם וכי יעלו עלה ומנחה אינני רצם כי בחרב ובדבד ובדבר אנכי מכלה אותם:</p> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

God asks Jeremiah not to pray on behalf of the nation so that He may punish them. Jeremiah, too, disobeys God’s request and prays:

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>And I said, “Oh, Lord, God, the prophets are telling them, ‘You will not see the sword or suffer famine. Indeed, I will give you lasting peace in this place...’ Have you rejected Judah completely? Do you despise Zion? Why have you afflicted us so that we cannot be healed?... Remember your covenant with us and do not dissolve it.” (Jer. 14:13-21)</p> | <p>ואמר אהה א-דני ה' הנה הנבאים אמרים להם לא תראו חרב ורעב לא יהיה לכם כי שלום אמת אתן לכם במקום הזה: ... הקמאס מאסת את יהודה אם בציון געלה נפשך מדוע הכיתנו ואין לנו מרפא ... ובר אל תפר בריתך אתנו:</p> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Here too, God requests that Jeremiah not pray, and Jeremiah does not listen: he prays, speaking in defense



of the nation, and begs God to cancel his decree, as he realizes that this is the true will of God.

## I. Summary

Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah understood that God reveals His plans to the prophet not merely so that he will know what is going to happen, but so that the prophet will act on behalf of humanity. God wants the prophet to take advantage of his special abilities, his close relationship with God and his ability to pray.<sup>20</sup> God wants **partners** in this world, who will arouse His mercy and bring about a **positive outcome for the world**.

20 This idea seems to be explicitly stated in Jeremiah 27:17-18:

אל תשמעו אליהם עבדו את מלך בבל וחיו למה תהיה העיר הזאת חרבה: ואם נבאים הם ואם יש דבר ה' אתם יפגעו נא בה' צבאות לבלתי באו הפלים הנותרים בבית ה' ובית מלך יהודה ובירושלם בבקה.

“Do not listen to them; serve the king of Babylon, and you will live. Why should this city become a ruin? **And if they are prophets, and the word of God is with them, let them plead with the Lord** that the vessels remaining in the house of God and in the palace of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem not be taken to Babylon.” (Jer. 27:17-18)

See Malbim ad loc.:

רצונו לומר כי נבואה שנאמר לנביא שלא בדרך שליחות רק בדרך הודעה לו לבדו בודאי הודיעו לו זה כדי שיתפלל ויבטל הגזרה”

He meant that a prophecy given to a prophet not in order to give him a mission, but only to notify him, **must be so that he will pray and bring the cancellation of the decree**.