YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law**

**By Rav Dr. Judah Goldberg**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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***Shiur* #31**

**Pursuit of the Ethical Life (2):**

**The Ways of Sedom and the “Way of God”**

In this *shiur*, we will continue our analysis of *Bereishit* 18-19, which pits Avraham, the paragon of charity and kindness, against the ruthless, coldhearted city of Sedom. At the center of this narrative, God specifically highlights these qualities of Avraham in explaining why he ought to learn about Sedom’s impending destruction:

God said: “Shall I hide from Avraham what I am doing? For Avraham is destined to become a great and large nation, and all of the nations of the earth will be blessed through him! **For I have known him in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of God to do charity and justice, so that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him.”** (*Bereishit* 18:17-19).

In this incredible passage, Avraham has been plucked from the bleachers of history to stand by God’s side in the judgment of Sedom, further enmeshing their respective destinies. However, these particular verses require careful examination, in order to better elucidate exactly what Avraham’s role is and why it is thrust upon him here.

**“Avraham, My Servant” (*Bereishit* 26:24)**

What, exactly, is God seeking when he declares that He cannot hide His intentions from Avraham? At one level, Radak explains that this revelation is informative. In commanding his children to “keep the way of God to do charity and justice,” Avraham will be able to illustrate what happens to those who betray God by pointing to Sedom.[[1]](#footnote-1) Lest someone later suggest that Sedom’s destruction was an act of nature, Avraham can bear direct witness to the Heavenly judgment that preceded it.[[2]](#footnote-2) At a different level, Radak and others explain that God is sharing His plans with Avraham out of courtesy.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this case, God is according Avraham respect but still maintains exclusive ownership of His judgment.

An opinion in *Midrash Rabba*, however, describes God’s attitude differently:

Shemuel bar Nachman said: It is like a king who had an adviser and would not do anything without his consent. One time the king considered doing something without his consent. The king said, “Did I not make him my adviser so as not to do anything without his consent?”

R. Yudan said: Thus said the Holy One, Blessed Be He: “Did I not call him ‘the man of My counsel’ (*Yeshayahu* 46:11), so as not do to do anything without his consent?” (*Bereishit Rabba* 49:18 [Theodor-Albeck ed.])

The *Midrash Rabba* offers an interpretation which is at the same time literarily appealing and theologically fraught. At face value, God is seeking Avraham’s input into Divine judgment and inviting him into dialogue. Furthermore, the absurdity of this suggestion is only amplified by the subsequent verses, in which Avraham fully complies! Thus the Torah gives witness to one of the most riveting conversations in history, in which Avraham faces off with the “Judge of the whole earth” about the nature of His own justice and its manifestation in Sedom.

Without addressing the theological quandaries that this episode raises, we can make some simple observations about God’s interaction with Avraham in this context. According to *Midrash Rabba*’s description, God appears to Avraham not as Supreme King or Commander, but as an intimate friend who seeks out his confidant. From his side, Avraham seems far from overwhelmed by the situation. He is humble but bold, cautious yet ready to defend his position.[[4]](#footnote-4) Apparently, God has sought out a partner for Himself and has indeed found a worthy one.

More than any other narrative, this story exemplifies the covenantal, cooperative nature of *berit Avot*, which we previously explored in *shiur* #4. In contrast to *berit Sinai*, at whose heart lie commandments and a Commander, *berit Avot* represents an invitation to fellowship with the Infinite One, Who, astonishingly, is ready to partner with mere mortals and share, in every sense, His vision with them. And if this is true regarding *berit Avot* as a whole, nowhere is it more explicit than with Avraham. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes:

God addresses Himself to Abraham not in the commanding, authoritative tone of the Lord but in the comradely, friendly manner of a fellow wanderer. He wants a covenant with him. God, as it were, is lonesome, and He is anxious to find a companion. Fellowship between God and man is the motto of Abraham’s life. (*Emergence of Ethical Man*, pp.154-155)

Moreover, God seeks not only a companion, but a genuine collaborator:

Abraham discovered that God and man are partners. God’s mastery was replaced with partnership, a covenant by virtue of which two parties assume mutual obligations to each other. At this point, the covenantal community was born.[[5]](#footnote-5) (*Abraham’s Journey*, p. 87)

God creates a space for Avraham’s input and empowers him to be a terrestrial partner in His grand project.[[6]](#footnote-6) God is open to input and ready for critique, and Avraham spares neither.

Finally, though this partnership reaches its literary peak in the context of Sedom’s judgment, this episode, I believe, simply reflects the full extent of Avraham’s relationship with God, rather than an exceptional case. Purposely, I think, God does not refer at all to Sedom in his preamble: “Shall I hide from Avraham,” God asks open-endedly, “what I am doing?”[[7]](#footnote-7) God is making a general statement about Avraham’s role and standing, which is not limited to just this event. Thus the Sages appropriately cast Avraham as a comprehensive royal adviser who never leaves the king’s side, rather than as a commoner who is on one occasion summoned for consultation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Why Sedom?**

Yet, we can still ask: What spurs this particular conversation? Even if this degree of intimacy with God is the rule for Avraham, rather than the exception, why do we find God consulting Avraham specifically about Sedom and not with regard to other decisions? Multiple commentators explain that God is respecting Avraham’s personal interest in the fate of Sedom. Rashi, following an opinion in *Midrash Rabba*, explains that Avraham has just been named “father to the multitude of nations” (*Bereishit* 17:5) and therefore deserves to be informed if his “children” are to be punished.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Or Ha-chayim* suggests that Avraham has a more direct interest in the people of Sedom specifically, as he personally rescued them from captivity (see *Bereishit* 14:16).

Rashi, together with Rashbam and following another opinion in *Midrash Rabba,* also suggests that since God has already granted the Land of Israel to Avraham, He will not make any seismic changes to the territory without first consulting him. Rashbam finds further textual support for this approach in the final phrase, “that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him,” which refers, he suggests, to the promise of the Land of Israel. Thus the Rashbam reads verses 17-19 as follows: since God knows that Avraham will transmit his values to his children, who will thereby deserve to inherit the Land of Israel, therefore God must involve Avraham in His redesign project upfront.[[10]](#footnote-10) The key element that links Avraham to the judgment of Sedom, then, is the Land of Israel.

The Ramban however, shifts the focus to the content of the consultation. God may not call upon Avraham in setting the weather patterns or arranging marriages, but “charity and justice” — more, the interplay between them — is Avraham’s trademark. Therefore:

Revelation to him is appropriate, for I know about him that he recognizes and understands that I am God Who “loves charity and justice” (*Tehillim* 33:5) — that is, that I mete out justice only with charity. Therefore, he will “command his children and his household after him” to adhere to his[[11]](#footnote-11) way.

According to the Ramban, God is saying that He sees “eye-to-eye” with Avraham. Avraham keenly perceives God’s balance of justice and generosity and has personally adopted it as the legacy that he wants to pass on to his children. God trusts Avraham that “if through the path of ‘charity and justice’ [the Sodomites] can be exonerated, he will pray[[12]](#footnote-12) to Me to leave them, and it will be good; and if they are thoroughly guilty, he, too, will desire justice for them. Therefore, it is appropriate that he enter into God’s secrets.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Furthermore, according to this approach, the ensuing dialogue about justice and tolerance is not merely a byproduct of Avraham’s attempt to save Sedom but is exactly the conversation that God invites and anticipates.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Replacing Sedom**

The irony of the situation, of course, is that Avraham is being recognized for excelling exactly where Sedom fails. His “*tzedaka*,” R. Mordechai Breuer notes, stands specifically in contrast to the “*tze’aka*” (cry) that emanates from Sedom (*Bereishit* 18:20-21, 19:13), a play on words that appears elsewhere in *Tanakh*: “He hoped for justice, but behold, a blemish; **for *tzedaka*, but behold, *tze’aka***” (*Yeshayahu* 5:7).[[15]](#footnote-15)

More, Avraham is invited to weigh in on God’s balance of charity and justice specifically regarding those who utterly reject this “way of God.” In the Torah’s narrative, we will soon learn about the Sodomites’ contempt for charity, in contrast to Avraham’s overflowing generosity, as we explored in the previous *shiur*. Furthermore, unlike the anarchic, lawless generation of the Flood, the Sodomites certainly embrace justice, but to a fault. According to the Sages’ descriptions, they adhere rigidly to a warped legal code that sanctions the abuse of the downtrodden and could not be tempered by any intuitive sense of fairness.[[16]](#footnote-16) By balancing justice with benevolence and praying for the people of Sedom, Avraham is paradoxically extending to them exactly what they categorically refute and for what they are being judged.[[17]](#footnote-17) In this intricately woven plot, the ways of Sedom, the way of Avraham, and the “way of God” all converge.

Thus the Maharsha observes that the virtues that verse 19 enumerates correspond exactly to those for which Sedom, according to the rabbinic tradition, is being judged: “It seems that [the Talmud] is noting through these stories of the people of Sedom that the following three traits were absent: kindness, justice, and charity.” Accordingly, he suggests a novel reading of verses 17-19:

I cannot “hide from Avraham what I am doing” — to Sedom because of their various transgressions, for it is not fitting to hide from him their sins; for he will be a great nation etc. — and it is not fitting that his progeny will possess these sins for which I am punishing Sedom. Necessarily, “I have known” — meaning, I have made known to him their sins; “in order that he may command his children”—**not to imitate [the Sodomites], but rather the opposite**; “that they may keep the way of God,” etc. — that is, to monitor the roads for travelers… and also to command “to do charity and justice” — its simple meaning; “so that God may bring etc.”—for if he does not command his children thus, they will be punished, God forbid, like Sedom**.**

Echoing the Radak’s comment, the Maharsha sees in this revelation a warning, but he adds that it is a specific directive to the children of Avraham to substitute Sedom’s errant ways with the “way of God,” charity, and justice. If they instead emulate Sedom’s ways, they will share her fate.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Moreover, if we follow the Maharsha’s interpretation but instead render “*yedativ*” as “I have designated him” (as the Ramban considers),[[19]](#footnote-19) then God is saying that he has singled out Avraham specifically so that his children will replace Sedom. God is eradicating Sedom to make room for a new world order, founded upon the “way of God.” Upon the ashes of Sedom, a “great and large nation” will rise that is steeped in the ethical legacy of Avraham and will thereby bring blessing to all of humanity.

Through the Maharsha’s commentary, we also gain deeper understanding into the seemingly arbitrary intertwining of the prediction of Yitzchak’s birth with the destruction of Sedom. As my teacher R. Menachem Leibtag notes, these two events are linked not only by their textual juxtaposition, but by the angels who have been given both missions.[[20]](#footnote-20) Apparently, these two developments are intrinsically connected. Sedom’s imminent destruction clears the way for a new, upstanding nation that will emerge from Avraham’s future son, and Avraham’s hospitality forms the perfect backdrop for this announcement. Consequently, the miraculous birth of Yitzchak is not merely the fulfillment of a promise or a personal reward but is predicated upon the destiny that God has imagined for Avraham — “that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of God to do charity and justice.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

**The Paradox of Avraham’s Prayer**

Sedom’s day of reckoning, then, is directly relevant to Avraham and his mission. As the former paves the way for the latter, we better understand now why God shares His plans with His loyal servant; but we also learn to see Avraham’s beneficence in an entirely different light. Sedom’s fall is necessary for Avraham’s rise, for his message will never take root in soil contaminated by her influence. Nonetheless, R. Soloveitchik observes, “Abraham pleaded for Sodom, knowing that its survival meant his own defeat” (*Abraham’s Journey*, p. 170).

Here, R. Soloveitchik argues, in this act of ideological martyrdom, Avraham’s *chessed* reaches its peak. But the “way of God,” in its full glory, apparently will not settle for anything less, and precisely through this selfless gesture does Avraham’s legacy reach new heights. In the fires of Kasdim and, later, at the *Akeida*, Avraham sacrifices for the sake of his theology, and here he does so for the sake of “charity and justice.” In each case, specifically through sacrifice he achieves further salvation.

In altruistically praying for those who utterly reject *chessed*, Avraham actualizes that value to its fullest and thus grows worthy of taking their place. Paradoxically, through his opposition to Sedom’s demise, Avraham is initiated into the very role that its destruction makes room for. More, he raises the bar even higher for what that role will be for “his children and his household after him.” For true disciples of Avraham, there is no person, or city, unworthy of empathy and no conflicting interest — even the viability of the mission itself! — that will get in the way.

In self-negation, Avraham finds himself and his purpose. More, he outlines a soaring vision for all those who aspire to follow in his footsteps and accept God’s invitation to partnership — “so that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him.”

**Conclusion**

In the next *shiur*, we will continue with our analysis of these central verses and see how they shed light on the surrounding narratives.

**Questions or Comments?**

Please email me directly with your feedback at judahlgoldberg@gmail.com!

1. See *Devarim* 29:22, as well as Ramban’s addendum to his commentary on *Bereishit* 19:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Radak understands the final phrase of verse 19, “so that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him,” as an integral part of Avraham’s teachings. His “command” to his children and his household will include the elements of reward and punishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Rashi and Rashbam, as well as the various formulations in *Bereishit Rabba* 49:2. Also see Radak on 18:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Bereishit Rabba* (49:8; quoted by Rashi on 18:23), which states that Avraham comes ready to fight, to cajole or to pray, as necessary. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Loneliness, on the one hand, and partnership with God, on the other, are recurring themes in the Rav’s published works. See, for example, *Abraham’s Journey*, pp. 38, 87-89, 95-96, 160-166; *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, pp. 149-161; and *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday, 2006), especially Section V. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Soloveitchik also suggests that this tone is captured by God’s visit to Avraham at the opening to Chapter 18, which does not involve any dialogue. The visit is one of intimacy and communion, without specific content (*Abraham’s Journey*, pp. 160-161; also see Ramban and Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, trans. Aryeh Newman [Jerusalem: 1973], p. 163; however, see R. Yosef Bekhor Shor). Also see R. Ezra Bick, “The Changed Abraham,” *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach - Bereshit* (Jerusalem: 2011), pp. 153-158, available at <http://etzion.org.il/en/avraham-and-angels> and R. Yonatan Grossman, *Abraham: A Story of a Journey* [Heb.] (Tel Aviv, 2014), pp. 183-188. R. Grossman adds that the partnership between God and Avraham is further highlighted by the summary verses of 19:27-28, in which Avraham returns to “the place in which he stood before God” to give witness to the final outcome of their conversation (206). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Also see R. Grossman, “*Abraham*,” p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. My teacher R. Menachem Leibtag once commented that this is not the first time that God seeks counsel about the corporeal world in *Sefer Bereishit*, according to rabbinic interpretation (see *Sanhedrin* 38b). However, His earlier consultations — regarding the creation of humankind (1:26) and the judgment of the Tower of Bavel (11:7) — are with celestials. In Avraham, God finds a terrestrial — and therefore, perhaps, more appropriate — partner and no longer turns to His heavenly court in the text. In particular, we can note the contrast between *Bereishit* 11:7, in which God “descends” along with His heavenly court in order to judge the Tower of Bavel, and 18:21, in which God descends alone and is there joined by Avraham (18:23).

Furthermore, R. Yoel Bin-Nun argues that this role of a prophet — not as messenger of God but as negotiator and defender of the people — continues throughout *Tanakh*. Moshe, for instance, embodies both roles, as messenger par excellence but also as defender, like Avraham, at God’s invitation (*Shemot* 32:7-14; “*Nevuat Ha-tefilla shel Avraham*,” *Pirkei Ha-avot*, 81-102, available at: <http://files8.design-editor.com/92/9266067/UploadedFiles/95552BF7-02F4-827A-EE1B-92E2920E12FB.pdf>). Also see *Tanchuma*, *Vayera*, 6, 8; *Bereishit Rabba* 49:9; and Sharon Rimon, “The Prophet in Prayer,” available at: <https://etzion.org.il/en/prophet-prayer>. It was originally published in Hebrew as “*Ha-navi Ha-mitpalel*,” *Torat Etzion: New Readings in Parashat Ha-shavua* (Jerusalem: 2014), pp. 189-193, [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Also see Radak, who similarly interprets verse 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Also see R. Yosef Bekhor Shor. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to R. Chavel’s edition. Standard printings read “My.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Avraham’s negotiation with God is identified by the Sages as a form of prayer. See Onkelos on 19:27; Targum Yonatan on 18:23, 27; *Berakhot* 6b, 26b; and footnote #4 above. Also see R. Bin-Nun, “*Nevuat Ha-tefilla*,” p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Also see Rimon, “The Prophet in Prayer.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Midrash Tanchuma* also depicts God as inviting Avraham into dialogue about Divine justice. However, according to the *Tanchuma*, God is not eliciting Avraham’s input, but seeks to explains Himself:

R. Levi said: Why did the Holy One, Blessed Be He, reveal [His intentions] to Avraham? Because he would speculate about the generation of the Flood, saying that it cannot be that there were not twenty righteous people among them, or [at least] ten, in whose merit the Holy One, Blessed Be He, could have suspended their [judgment]. Therefore, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, said, “I will reveal to [Avraham], so that he not wonder if even in Sedom there were righteous people.” Behold, [God] barely managed to tell him — “And God said, ‘Shall I hide from Avraham?’” (*Bereishit* 18:17) — once He told [Avraham] the whole matter, what did he respond? “Avraham approached and said, ‘Will you consume the righteous with the wicked?!’” (18:33) (*Vayera*, 5)

In other words, God is inviting Avraham to voice apparently longstanding concerns about Divine justice, as evidenced by just how quickly Avraham does so. Though the tone, according to this reading, is no longer cooperative, God’s desire to explain His ways to Avraham (in contrast, for example, to Iyov — see R. Bin-Nun, “*Nevuat Ha-tefilla*,” 84-89) further underscores how much He sees Avraham as a true partner who must understand if he is going to participate and emulate. Also see Radak on 18:1, as well as R. Yaakov Medan, *The Word is Very Near – Breishit* [Heb.] (Tel Aviv: 2014), p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “*Yerushalayim*,” *Pirkei Moadot* (Jerusalem: 1993), 330. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See *Sanhedrin* 109a-b, as well as the Maharsha’s comment there: “Though these wicked [Sodomites] should certainly not be considered sympathetically, nonetheless it seems from all of these stories that they did not want to steal outright, but rather would cheat people through their deceptive laws and judgments.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See R. Breuer, “*Yerushalayim*,” 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Also see Chizkuni on 18:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See *shiur* #3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Also see R. Soloveitchik, *Abraham’s Journey*, pp. 169-170. Parenthetically, R. Leibtag (<http://www.tanach.org/breishit/vayera/vayera.htm>) suggests a different relationship between Avraham’s ethical mandate and Sedom’s failures than that which we proposed. Sedom only faces destruction because there is no moral leadership in the world. As God accedes to Avraham, were there even ten righteous individuals in Sedom, the city might have been salvageable. Avraham is elected so that his children and followers can spread the “way of God” and thereby avert future corrupt societies. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Also see *Meshekh Chokhma*, *Bereishit* 18:10; Leibowitz, pp. 166-167; and R. Amnon Bazak, “Avraham and the Angels,” available at <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/avraham-and-angels-0>. The latter was originally published in Hebrew as “*Avraham Ve-hamalakhim*” in *Torat Etzion: New Readings in Parashat Ha-shavua* (Jerusalem: 2014), pp. 181-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)