

Parsha Potpourri

Parshas Vayeira – Vol. 22, Issue 4

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וד' אמר המכסה אני מאברהם אשר אני עשה ואברהם היו יהיה לגוי גדול ועצום (18:17-18)

Before destroying the city of Sodom, Hashem felt that He must first inform Avrohom about His plan. When Avrohom heard about Hashem's intentions for Sodom, he began negotiating on their behalf and beseeching Him to rescind His decree. Hashem accepted Avrohom's proposal (18:32) to spare Sodom if it contained even 10 tzaddikim, but since it did not, Sodom was overturned. At first glance, it seems Avrohom's tefillos were for naught.

In Parshas Nitzavim, the Torah discusses several terrifying curses that will befall the Jewish people in the future if they do not obey the Torah's laws. One of the curses (Devarim 29:21-22) is that a catastrophic destruction like that of Sodom will take place, during which the land will be burned by sulfur and salt and completely overturned, rendering it sterile and incapable of growing any produce.

Despite all the travails we have endured over the course of our lengthy exile, this threat has not been fulfilled. Jewish cities have never been obliterated to the extent that they cannot produce plants and resemble the annihilation that took place in Sodom. Does this mean, G-d forbid, that we are condemned to one day suffer devastation far greater in magnitude than anything we have previously experienced?

The Satmar Rebbe, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum, suggests that although Avrohom's entreaties could not save the original Sodom from destruction, they were not in vain. Hashem agreed that if He found 10 righteous individuals in the city, He would spare it. Why did Hashem make this seemingly hypothetical statement instead of simply informing Avrohom that his request was unrealistic?

The Satmar Rebbe explains that although Sodom did not contain 10 tzaddikim and was therefore razed, Hashem's consent to Avrohom's request was eternal, and as long as we have righteous people in our midst, we are shielded from this horrific threat befalling us. The Torah alludes to this when it says (Bereishis 18:22) that Avrohom was still standing before Hashem, hinting that the prayers he uttered eternally remain before Hashem to protect his progeny. Additionally, when Hashem responded to Avrohom's proposal, He said (Ibid., 18:26) **אם אמצא בסדום** – if I will find (enough tzaddikim) in Sodom, specifically using the future tense to hint that this condition applies to future generations as well.

This explanation also helps us understand why the Torah stresses that Hashem felt compelled to notify Avrohom about His plan because the Jewish nation would be descended from him. Why was this relevant to Hashem's intention to destroy Sodom? Because Hashem knew that Avrohom's petitions on behalf of Sodom would benefit his offspring down the line, it was imperative that he be told and given the opportunity to make his suggestion.

In addition to giving us a new appreciation of a well-known episode in the Torah, this insight can also give us chizuk when we pour our hearts into our tefillos with a specific outcome in mind but do not get what we asked for. In such situations, it is only human to feel dejected and wonder if perhaps our supplications were for naught. When we see that Avrohom's pleas on behalf of Sodom seemed to fail, only to be invoked on behalf of his descendants thousands of years later, it should help us understand that no prayer is ever in vain.

ויאמר אל תשלח ידך אל הנער ואל תעש לו מאומה כי עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך ממני (22:12)

As Avrohom was about to slaughter his son Yitzchok, a malach (angel) called out to him and ordered him to stop, explaining that "Now I know that you fear G-d, since you did not withhold your only son **ממני** – from me." Since Avrohom was preparing to offer Yitzchok to Hashem, not to the malach,

why did he say, “You did not withhold your only son from *me*” – implying that Yitzchok was going to be offered to the angel – instead of the seemingly more accurate **מִמֶּנִּי** – from Hashem?

The Mishnah in Avos (4:13) teaches that when a person does a mitzvah, he acquires an advocate, and if he sins, he acquires an accuser. What is the nature of these defenders and prosecutors? The Maharsha (Shabbos 32a) explains that all our actions create angels, which influence our lives from that point onward. When we do mitzvos, we create good malachim that seek to help us, and when we transgress, we generate bad angels that testify to our iniquities, a principle that can be used to explain numerous Talmudic statements.

The Gemara in Makkos (10b) teaches that **בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה מוליכין אותו** – in the path that a person wants to go, they lead him. Seemingly, it would have been more appropriate to say **מוליך אותו** – Hashem leads him. Who are the multiple figures referred to by the plural **מוליכין** that guide a person in the way he desires? The Maharsha explains that the angels produced by a person’s deeds take him in the direction he wishes to travel.

Similarly, the Gemara (Shabbos 119b) says that when a person returns home from shul on Friday night, two angels accompany him and bless him that the state in which he finds his house will be its condition again the following week. Although most people assume that these escorts are special Shabbos angels, the Maharsha asserts that they are the malachim created by each person’s good deeds and misdeeds.

Extending this idea, the Vilna Gaon adds that the form of each angel corresponds to how the mitzvah that produces him is performed. For example, if a person does a mitzvah while his mind is elsewhere, the malach generated from that mitzvah will also be distracted when advocating for him. If he performs a mitzvah halfheartedly and without feeling, the resulting angel will be blemished and lack passion when arguing on his behalf. If a mitzvah is done without *zerizus* (alacrity), a lazy malach will be created.

With this introduction, the Vilna Gaon notes that the malach told Avrohom, “Now I know that you fear Hashem.” As great as angels are, they do not know what is inside a person’s heart, so how could he make this evaluation? The Vilna Gaon explains that the angel speaking to Avrohom was not any arbitrary malach. It was the angel that was just created when Avrohom successfully passed the test of the Akeidah.

When the malach said **מִמֶּנִּי** (from me), he did not mean that Avrohom did not withhold Yitzchok “from me,” but rather that he examined himself and discovered that he was complete in every way. Even though we might have expected Avrohom to feel a small degree of reluctance and hesitation as he prepared to sacrifice his beloved son, the resulting malach realized that he had no blemishes or deficiencies, and **מִמֶּנִּי** – from my perfection, I can discern that you truly fear G-d.

Rav Yisroel Reisman adds that this concept can help us understand why we say in Unesaneh Tokef that malachim will tremble in terror, which is difficult to comprehend. Since angels lack free will, they should not be held accountable for their actions, in which case there is no reason for them to fear the Day of Judgment.

Based on the Maharsha and Vilna Gaon’s explanations, we now appreciate that although there are no grounds on which to judge the malachim directly, the people whose deeds produced the angels are being judged. If those people do teshuvah, they transform their transgressions into merits, and correspondingly, their accusing angels into defending ones. Similarly, repenting for doing mitzvos lackadaisically or without full concentration repairs the blemishes in the angels that were formed. Thus, we stress that even the malachim are in awe of what transpires on the Yamim Noraim, as these days are so potent that they have the ability to permanently alter the angels.

At the same time, this idea reminds us how important it is to do mitzvos enthusiastically and with full *kavanah* (concentration), as the way we perform the mitzvah directly impacts the malach produced as a byproduct. Ideally, we should strive to remain attentive and engaged when doing mitzvos for Hashem’s sake, but as an additional motivation, we should remember that if we want our heavenly advocates to be fully focused on doing our bidding without any distractions, it is up to us to give them that ability by ensuring that we are fully invested and present when doing the mitzvos that create them.

Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources that discuss them):

- 1) Because Lot's wife violated the order not to look back at the destruction of Sodom, she turned into a pillar of salt (Bereishis 19:26). Did she first die and then become a pillar of salt, or did the transformation occur while she was still alive? (Shu"t Igros Moshe Yoreh Deah Vol. 1 230:8)
- 2) Rashi writes (19:31) that Lot's daughters assumed the entire world had been destroyed, leaving no man with whom they could conceive children, except their father Lot. How could they think nobody was still alive when they fled with Lot to the town of Tzo'ar, whose inhabitants were spared as per his request to the angel (19:18-23, 30)? (Tosefos Rid, Paneiach Raza, P'nei Dovid)
- 3) Shlomo writes in Mishlei (13:24), "He who spares the rod hates his son." Where do we find an example of this in Parshas Vayeira? (Shemos Rabbah 1:1, Ichud B'Chidud 5777)
- 4) Five events in Sefer Bereishis are described as taking place ביום השלישי (on the third day), one of which appears in Parshas Vayeira. How many can you identify? (Torah Teasers)

Answers to Points to Ponder:

1) The Gemara in Niddah (69b) relates that the people of Alexandria asked 12 questions to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: three of them were intelligent questions about matters of halacha, three of them were questions about areas of Aggadah, three of them were foolish questions, and three of them involved issues of derech eretz. One of the questions categorized as foolish was whether Lot's wife renders those who come into contact with her impure like a dead person. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi responded that only dead people cause impurity, but not pillars of salt. **Rav Moshe Feinstein** questions why this is considered a silly question when the Mishnah in Ohalos (2:2) discusses various cases of decayed and decomposed bodies that still impart impurity. He answers that Lot's wife must have been turned into a pillar of salt while she was still alive, and since she never died, the question was deemed foolish.

2) The **Tosefos Rid** explains that after the destruction of Sodom and its surroundings, those who survived were scared to leave their homes. Even though the daughters of Lot fled to Tzo'ar, when they surveyed the scene and saw nobody traveling outside, they feared that the residents of Tzo'ar as well as the entire world had been killed except for them and their father Lot. Alternatively, the **Paneiach Raza** suggests that their concern was not that they were the only remaining people in the world, as they were certainly aware that the town of Tzo'ar, and presumably other cities as well, had escaped the destruction. However, they feared that they would be viewed as wicked Sodomites and none of the survivors would be interested in marrying them. The **Chida** prefers the first explanation, arguing that they would not have engaged in such unconscionable behavior due to a mere doubt about their marriage chances.

3) The **Midrash** says Avrohom never chastised Yishmael due to his love for him. The lack of rebuke led Yishmael to abandon his righteous ways, which caused Avrohom to hate him and send him away. In contrast, Avrohom disciplined Yitzchok, which caused him to respect his father and strive to emulate him.

4) Avrohom saw the place where the Akeidah was to occur on the third day of his journey (Bereishis 22:4). Lavan was informed that Yaakov ran away on the third day after he fled (Ibid., 31:22). Shimon and Levi attacked the city of Sh'chem on the third day after its males circumcised themselves (Ibid., 34:25). Pharaoh had a birthday party on the third day after Yosef interpreted the dreams of the butler and baker (Ibid., 40:20). Yosef released his brothers from jail on the third day after he accused them of being spies (Ibid., 42:18-20).

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