

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*

This parasha series is dedicated  
in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

\*\*\*\*\*

This shiur is dedicated  
in memory of Howard (Haim) Greenspan z"l.

\*\*\*\*\*

PARASHAT VAYERA

The Way of God and the Way of Righteousness and Justice

By Rav Yaakov Medan

INTRODUCTION

"He placed, eastwards of the Garden of Eden, the keruvim... and the revolving flaming sword to guard the way' – this refers to the 'way of the world' (derekh erez). 'The tree of life' – this teaches that derekh erez precedes the tree of life. And the tree of life is none other than Torah, as it is written, 'It is a tree of life for those who grasp it.'" (Tana Devei Eliyahu Rabba, 1(

In this statement, as in many others, Chazal clarify their attitude towards these two foundations of man's obligation in the world. The two sides of the scale that represent man's labor are "derekh erez," good character traits, good deeds and interpersonal relationships – on the one hand, and faith, Torah, fear of Heaven and man's relationship with God – on the other hand. What is the ratio between these two? Which is more important? Can there be a contradiction between them? And if so, how can it be bridged?

We shall examine this question from the perspective of the path chosen by the founder of our nation. On the one hand, Avraham was the first and firmest believer in One God, in a world that was immersed in idolatry:

"Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: From the time that God created the world, there was no one who called Him 'Master' until Avraham came along, and called Him 'Master.'" (Berakhot 7b(

On the other hand, Avraham also established a doctrine of kindness, hospitality, compassion, righteousness and justice:

"For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of God, to perform righteousness and justice." (Bereishit 18:19(

What, then, is the proper balance between these two values – faith, on the one hand, and righteousness and justice, on the other – which mold Avraham's world?

I shall address this subject through four acts that Avraham performs: circumcision and the akeida, on the one hand, and his hospitality towards the three guests and his battle on behalf of Sedom, on the other. It should be clarified here that when I speak of "Torah" in general, and of Avraham's tent in particular, I refer not only to Torah study in its narrow sense, but to everything involved in man's cleaving to God, including faith in and acceptance of the Shekhina, fear of God, and selflessness in performance of mitzvot. The command to sacrifice his son was Avraham's most critical test in the fulfillment of these values, and so I have added – for reasons that will become clear further on – the test of circumcision as well.

## PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEMS

A study of the story of the angels who reveal themselves to Avraham and of the stories that follow it (the news of the impending pregnancy and birth of Yitzchak, the negotiations over the destruction of Sedom) gives rise to questions regarding the contents, interpretation and meaning of the stories. The commentators address all these questions, proposing various understandings. I shall discuss some of these and pave a path in between them, along the way encountering additional stories which, in my view, raise similar issues.

The principal questions that we shall attempt to solve are as follows:

" .1God revealed Himself to him at Elonei Mamrei as he sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold – three men..." (18:1-2). The substance of God's revelation to Avraham is omitted here: was there no content? And if there was – what was it? This question is all the more striking in view of the obvious parallel between "God revealed Himself to him" in our parasha, and "God revealed Himself to Avram" in the episode concerning his circumcision (17:1.)

.2What connection is there between verse 1 and verse 2, between "God revealed Himself to him" and "he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold – three men"? Are the two verses describing the same event, or are they two separate events? And if we understand the text on the literal level, so that they refer to two separate events – we face a real difficulty: how could Avraham "abandon" God, in the middle of His revelation, and turn his attention to three men?

" .3He said: My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass over your servant." Is this verse meant to be a continuation of verse 2, such that "adonai" (my lords) is the plural of "adon," referring to the three visitors, or is it the continuation of verse 1, describing God's revelation, such that "Ado-nai" is a holy Name, referring to God?

.4The purpose of the story of the encounter with the three angels is not clear. The narrative opens with a detailed account of Avraham's trait of hospitality, and ends with the news of the imminent birth of a son. Is this a single story with two independent, unrelated purposes?

.5What is the need for the angel's message that a son will be born in a year's time after Avraham has already been told this by God Himself, on the occasion of his circumcision: "...whom Sara will bear to you at this season next year" (17:21)? [1]

From the continuation of the parasha, describing the argument between Avraham and God over the fate of Sedom, further questions arise:

.6God testifies, concerning Avraham: "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of God, to perform righteousness and justice." What is the meaning of this testimony? Why does God need to "ask permission" from Avraham before annihilating Sedom?

".7I shall descend, then, and see whether it is as the cry that comes to Me that they have done..." What is the meaning of this "descent" by God? What is the difference between "looking out" at man from the heavens (as in, "Look out from Your holy abode" [2]) and "descending" to earth?

.8The order of the verses in this parasha is not clear. Seemingly, the order should be:

"The men got up from there and looked out over Sedom, and Avraham went with them, to see them off... The men turned from there and went towards Sedom, while Avraham still stood before God.

And God said: 'Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am going to do? But Avraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed through him...' And God said: '(Because) The cry of Sedom and Amora is great, and (because of) their sins, which are very many – I shall descend, then, and see whether it is as the cry that comes to Me that they have done – (in which case) to destroy; and if not, I shall know'.

Avraham approached and said: 'Will You then annihilate the righteous together with the wicked'?"

But the actual order is different:

"The men got up from there... and God said: 'Shall I hide from Avraham...' And God said: '(Because of) the cry of Sedom and Amora, for it is great... I shall descend and see'...

And the men turned from there and went to Sedom...

And Avraham approached and said: 'Will You then annihilate the righteous together with the wicked'?"

Why does the narrative not follow the logical order of the verses?

.9Seemingly, the angels are sent in order to destroy Sedom, as we are told explicitly: "We shall utterly destroy this place, for their cry is great before God, and God has sent us to destroy it" (19:13). How, then, are we to understand the negotiations between Avraham and God concerning the fate of the city, after the angels have already been sent to destroy it? And if God knows in advance that there are not fifty righteous people to be found in Sedom – and not even ten – then what makes this "argument" so important that the Torah records it at such length? Surely it is nothing more than an unfounded illusion on Avraham's part?

.10Avraham's argument against God's judgment seems to be groundless. His claim is logical – that the Judge of all the world should not put righteous people to death along with the wicked. But how does this lead to the conclusion that God should forgive the entire city – including the wicked majority – on account of the few righteous men that he hopes to find there? If the punishment of the righteous on account of the wicked represents a distortion of justice, then surely leaving the wicked alive in the merit of the righteous is no less a travesty. Why, then, does Avraham demand this of God?

.11We questioned above the connection between the hospitality that Avraham shows towards the angels, and the news concerning the birth of his son; we have also mentioned the parallel connection between the hospitality shown towards the angels by Lot and the overthrow of Sedom. We may also ask, what is the connection between these two narratives? Why do the same angels descend with four different roles: to visit Avraham, to tell him that he is to have a son, to visit Lot, and to bring destruction to Sedom? What is the connection between the birth of Yitzchak and the destruction of Sedom?

.12Why are three angels required to tell Avraham about the son that he will have, while only two are required to destroy Sedom?

.13Finally, there is a moral problem that gnaws at the very center of the parasha, although it has no connection with the literal text. How can Avraham – who never questions God's decree with regard to the akeida, who goes off to slaughter his son with not a word of protest or argument – become so passionately defensive with regard to Sedom, addressing such harsh words to God? Is the command to offer his son as a sacrifice more moral than the overturning of Sedom?

As noted above, the commentaries address most of the above questions. I shall discuss their explanations briefly, with a view to clarifying my own understanding of this parasha.

## PART I: THE MEANING OF THE REVELATION AT ELONEI MAMREI

### A. Rashi: "God Appeared to Him" – To Visit the Sick

Concerning our first question – what need there was for God to appear to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei – the commentators are divided into three main camps.

Rashi (and Ramban [3]) regards God's revelation as bearing relation to the prior revelation informing Avraham of the covenant of circumcision. The latter is narrated in a similar style:

"Avram was ninety-nine years old, AND GOD APPEARED TO HIM, and said to him: I am E-l Sha-dai; walk before Me and be perfect." (17:1)

In chapter 17, God commands Avraham concerning circumcision. Avraham fulfills the command, and then God appears to him a second time at Elonei Mamrei. The advantage of this interpretation is that, as we have noted, it explains why the expression, "God appeared," is repeated twice.[4]

Concerning the purpose of the revelation after the circumcision, Rashi and Ramban are divided. Rashi explains that God came to visit Avraham:

"To visit the sick... this was the third day following his circumcision, and God came to inquire after his welfare." (Rashi on 18:1)

This explanation requires some clarification and expansion: if God is not coming in order to HEAL Avraham [5], then what is the significance of He Who knows everything coming to inquire after Avraham's health?

Rashi may solve this problem in his interpretation of the words, "in the heat of the day:"

"God drew the sun from its sheath, in order that he would not be disturbed by visitors." (18:1)

In Rashi's view, perhaps the "drawing of the sun from its sheath" – God's creating oppressive heat – is part of the Revelation of the Shekhina to Avraham. If this is true, then there is a parallel between the appearance of the Shekhina at the tent of the hospitable Avraham and its appearance later on in Sedom, where hearts are hardened towards guests:

"The sun came out over the land... and God rained down upon Sedom and upon Amora brimstone and fire, from God, from the heavens." (19:23-24)

In both places, the Shekhina appears in the blazing sun, but there is an important difference: in Elonei Mamrei the sun comes out in order to help the weak Avraham, to ensure that he will not be troubled by guests [6], while in Sedom the sun emerges to rain fire down on the city's wicked inhabitants. This is reflected in certain respects in the words of the prophet Malakhi:

"For behold, the day is coming that burns like an oven, and all those who act arrogantly and those who perform wickedness will be like straw, and that day that is coming will burn them up... while to you, those who fear My Name, there shall arise a sun of righteousness with healing in its wings." (Malakhi 3:19-20)

Or, in the words of the Gemara:

... "Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: There is no Gehenna in the World to Come; rather, God removes the sun from its sheath: the righteous are healed by it while the wicked are judged by it, as it is written: 'While to you, those who fear My Name, there shall arise a sun....'" (Nedarim 8b)

There is another difference between the two phenomena: the sun that shone on Sedom prevailed over the wicked people who locked their houses in the face of guests, and destroyed them. Avraham - who wanted to receive guests - "prevailed," as it were, over the appearance of the Shekhina and the accompanying heat of the day, and God sent him guests so that he would not suffer anguish:

"God drew the sun from its sheath, so as not to trouble him with guests. But when He saw that [Avraham] was anguished because no guests were coming – he brought him angels in the form of men." (Rashi, 18:1)

Rashi may be hinting at the same idea further on: "He told God to wait for him while he ran to welcome the guests" (Rashi on 18:3), or, in the words of Chazal (Shabbat 127a): "Hospitality is greater than receiving the Shekhina".

God revealed Himself to Avraham in order to visit and comfort him in his weakness "in the heat of the day" – in other words, in the form of the sun that was removed from its sheath in order to help him, in his weakened state, so that he would not be troubled with guests. But Avraham's hospitality "prevailed," as it were, over God's intention in visiting him, and so Avraham took care of his guests.

According to the above explanation, we now understand God's purpose in visiting Avraham: to assist him in his illness, so that he would not have to exert effort – and this is the essence of the mitzva of visiting the sick. [7]

## B. Contrast Between Circumcision and Hospitality

The problem with Rashi's interpretation is the structuring of the parashot, as well as the words, "He lifted his eyes and saw" (18:2), instead of, "Avraham lifted his eyes." Both of these elements connect the revelation at Elonei Mamrei with the story of the angels that follows it, rather than with the circumcision that precedes it. According to Rashi's explanation, "God appeared to him at Elonei Mamrei" should have been written at the end of the story of the circumcision, while the new story should begin with Avraham lifting his eyes and seeing the three men standing at the entrance to his tent.

However, it may be possible to solve this problem. God appears to Avraham to visit him because he is weak and ill, on the third day following his circumcision; thus, the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is connected to the preceding parasha – the circumcision. At the same time, the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is also related to the following story – in accordance with the literal text and the structuring of the parashot. In contrast: despite his illness, and despite the heat of the day and God's revelation to him so as not to trouble him with guests – Avraham looks for potential guests and takes more trouble over them than he is obligated to do. This is in complete contrast to the people of Sodom: although they are quite healthy and the guests reach the city at evening time, rather than during the hottest part of the day – they make no effort to show hospitality; on the contrary, they even attempt to abuse them.

We may take Rashi's line even further, and regard this contrasting connection in a more fundamental light. By its very nature, circumcision is meant to set Avraham's descendants – holy seed – apart from the other nations.[8] Eliyahu, the angel who oversees circumcisions – like Pinchas, his predecessor [9] – guards against gentiles intermingling with families of Israel.[10] The Midrash ascribes to Avraham the concern that, following his circumcision, the wayfarers that come by will be different and distinguished from him. God confirms his thoughts and makes it clear that the purpose of his circumcision is indeed to set him aside from the nations of the world, dedicating him to a life of holiness:

"He said: 'Up until my circumcision, the wayfarers would come to my home [- now will they refrain from doing so?]' God replied: 'Up until your circumcision, uncircumcised mortals would visit you. Now, I and My entourage shall be revealed to you.' As it is written: 'He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold – three men were standing before him.'" (Bereishit Rabba 48:9)

The sun, which had emerged from its sheath while God was revealed to Avraham, in order to distance guests from his tent, was therefore not meant only to ease Avraham's discomfort, but to set forth a new path for him in Divine worship. Until then, Avraham had been uncircumcised, with no distinction between him and other people, and therefore he would mingle with them and invite them into his home. Until then, Avraham had been the father of Yishmael and the husband of Hagar. Following his circumcision, distinguishing him from other people, he would no longer have regular guests visiting him; at the entrance to his tent the very Shekhina reveals itself.

Avraham, sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day and in anguish over the lack of guests to invite (whether because of the heat or because he is now distinguished from them, through his circumcision), does not accept God's answer – that from now the revelation of the Shekhina will replace the hospitality that he used to practice. And so he creates a new path in serving God: a path of "hospitality is greater than receiving the Shekhina" (Shabbat 127b). Even after being distinguished from the nations of the world through his circumcision – he will receive them in his tent. He will not forego the mitzva of hospitality.

According to the approach of the Midrash Rabba, proposing that the issue of hospitality was a fundamental one and not just an incidental practical question that arose because of Avraham's weakness, it is possible that Avraham's request – "My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass from before your servant" [11] - may also have signified a fundamental request of God. This is not just a practical request – that God Who has revealed Himself to him should wait until he has taken care of his guests – but rather a more profound one: although Avraham has chosen the path of hospitality, which would seem to contradict the path of circumcision (by being distinguished from the nations of the world), Avraham nevertheless asks to merit having God reveal Himself to him. Although immoral idolaters continue to visit him, Avraham asks to continue having the merit of receiving the Shekhina.

Let us summarize briefly what Rashi's approach seems to be teaching us. The essence of the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is related to Avraham's circumcision. God, Who commanded him to perform the operation, comes to assist him in his debilitated state. The essence of God's assistance is the fact that He draws the sun from its sheath in order that Avraham will not be troubled by guests, and this assistance is presented in contrast to the punishment of the people of Sedom, in the words, "the sun came out over the land." The connection between the revelation and the continuation of the story lies in the fact that Avraham refuses to accept this assistance; he actively takes care of his guests. Midrash Bereishit Rabba deepens the chasm between the two approaches – that of God and that of Avraham – by noting that both symbolize paths in Divine service: personal communion with the Shekhina vs. hospitality. The Gemara explicitly values the latter over the former: "Hospitality is greater than receiving the Shekhina," but Avraham asks God to allow him to walk both paths. As we shall see further on, his request is granted.

### C. Rambam and Rashbam

Another set of commentators – Rambam, Rashbam and others – draw a connection between the ambiguous revelation at Elonei Mamrei and the three angels that Avraham sees. In their view, there is no direct link between the revelation and the preceding episode of the circumcision. The content of the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is the news that the three angels come to tell Sara. The correspondence between "God revealed Himself to Avram" in chapter

17 and "God revealed Himself to him" in chapter 18 indicates that in both cases there is news of the imminent birth and the laughter that follows.

In their view, the relationship between verse 1 ("God revealed Himself to him at Elonei Mamrei") and verse 2 ("He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing before him") is one of general vs. particular; from verse 2 onwards the Torah describes the revelation noted in verse 1 and reveals its content. According to this explanation, "Ado-nai" is a Holy Name, referring both to the most senior of the three angels and to God, Who has revealed Himself to Avraham, since the senior angel carries God's Name within him.[12]

#### D. Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor and His Followers

If we wish to avoid the position into which Rashi's approach forces us – that God's revelation at Elonei Mamrei had no defined verbal content – as well as the difficulty that arises from the interpretation of the Rasbham and Rambam, according to which the story is narrated in the form of "general and particulars," with the three angels presenting the specifics of the revelation [13], then we have no choice but to adopt the approach of R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Radak and Abarbanel. According to the latter group, God reveals Himself to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei in order to tell him about the sin of Sedom and the imminent punishment, as the Torah goes on to describe.

"The reason for this vision, and its purpose – on the level of the literal text – is to tell Avraham of the wickedness of the people of Sedom and of their sins, and the destruction that is soon to befall them." (Abarbanel)

This approach gives rise to a most serious difficulty: what is the meaning of the break between the revelation and the story of Sedom? How is it possible that God reveals Himself to Avraham in order to tell him about Sedom, and Avraham "leaves" God and goes to take care of his guests?

We could perhaps counter with the Gemara in Shabbat, quoted above – that hospitality is a greater deed than receiving the Shekhina, and therefore Avraham leaves off his audience with God (until He tells him of the plan to destroy Sedom) and goes off to attend to his guests. But this would be problematic. Before, we were talking about a minor revelation, with the Shekhina visiting Avraham's tent in order to assist him in his incapacitated state or to show him honor. In this situation, the relationship between "receiving the Shekhina" and showing hospitality is that of a permanent mitzva vs. a mitzva that will pass, and the passing mitzva takes precedence.[14] The situation may be compared to a person who is engaged in Torah study (a permanent mitzva), who is obligated to stop learning in order to perform a time-specific mitzva even though "Torah study is [o] grea[value] than sliv" (Megilla 16b), and even though "Torah study is considered equal to all of them" (Peah 1:1.)

All of this, as stated, assumes that the revelation was a "routine" one – like a permanent mitzva. But according to the interpretation of Radak and others - that God came to speak with Avraham about a specific matter – it is difficult to accept the possibility that Avraham "abandons" God, Who has come to talk with him, in order to attend to mortal guests. This situation resembles more closely a person engaged in prayer: he would certainly not stop his prayer in the middle in order to take care of guests, since "Even if the king asks after his welfare, he should not reply" (Mishna Berakhot 2:1). Indeed, the commentators who explain that the purpose of the revelation at Elonei Mamrei is to tell Avraham about Sedom, all

grapple with this problem, each explaining the interruption by the story of the three men in a different way.[15]

Let us propose the following hypothesis, essentially similar to what we said above in connection with Rashi's approach: perhaps the connection between our parasha and the story of Sedom is meant to represent a contrast. In explaining Rashi's approach, we discussed the connection between the sun that God drew from its sheath in order to help the hospitable Avraham in his illness, and the sun that emerges over the land to rain fire over Sedom, where guests are unwelcome. If we look at Radak, whose explanation contains neither the sun nor Avraham's hospitality (it focuses, rather, on angels in a prophetic vision), we may explain that there is a contrast between the childless Sara and the hope conveyed in the news of her impending pregnancy, on the one hand, and the complacent Sedom sentenced to annihilation, on the other. I shall discuss the nature of this contrast at greater length further on.

Abarbanel proposes a different understanding. In his view, the story of the three men (which took place in reality, not in a prophetic dream, and in which men appeared, not angels) did not interrupt and come between God's revelation to Avraham and God's words to Avraham concerning Sedom; rather, the two events happened together. God's revelation and speech to Avraham happened at the same time that Avraham was taking an ox, bringing milk and butter before his guests, and giving instructions to Sara, his wife, and to his attendant. According to this explanation, this double-story is meant to demonstrate the way in which God was revealed to Avraham. Unlike other prophets, who required special preparations in order for God's word to be revealed to them, God's word was revealed to Avraham while he was engaged in matters of this world. This is a higher level of revelation, and the intention of the text is to express praise for Avraham after his circumcision [16:]

"For previously, while he was yet uncircumcised, the spirit of prophecy would come to him only in a special, prepared place and following a preparatory procedure with a nullification of the senses... but after he was circumcised he was so close to God... that he 'lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing before him, and he ran towards them' – without waiting for God to depart from him." (Abarbanel ad loc.)

## PART II: SEDOM'S VERDICT

### A. Why Does God Consult Avraham? The Commentators Respond

Let us now discuss what the various commentators have to say about God consulting with Avraham with regard to Sedom, and the meaning of the verse explaining this phenomenon:

"For I know him, that he will instruct his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of God, to perform righteousness and justice, in order that God may bring upon Avraham that which He spoke to him." (18:19)

Here, again, the commentators fall into three main categories.

a. Rashi and Rashbam connect God's consultation with Avraham with the promise of the land. Since God is coming to destroy this portion of land, which was promised to Avraham,

He tells him the reason for it. As we know, in Sedom it was not only the people who were destroyed, but also the very land itself:

... "That all the land is burned with brimstone and salt; it is not sown nor does it bear, nor will any grass grow on it, like the overthrow of Sedom and Amora, Adma and Tzevoyim, which God overthrew in His anger and in His wrath." (Devarim 29:22)

Rashbam goes on to explain that with the words, "In order that God may bring upon Avraham that which He spoke to him," the Torah refers to the inheritance of the land. The problem with this explanation is that there is no explicit mention here of the inheritance of the land.

b. Ramban, Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor and other commentators explain that the story of God's consultation with Avraham concerning Sedom is meant to express Avraham's great spiritual stature following his circumcision: God does nothing in the world without notifying and consulting with him.[17]

c. Most of the later commentators (Abarbanel, Seforno, Malbim, Netziv and others, as well as Radak and Chizkuni on "for I know him") tend towards a third interpretation. God tells Avraham about Sedom so that on this basis Avraham will command his household after him to perform righteousness and justice; he will teach them about the punishment of Sedom and will warn them not to follow the path of wickedness. These commentators raise further ideas about what it is exactly that Avraham will teach his children concerning Sedom; we shall not elaborate here.

But these explanations are likewise insufficient. On the one hand, it is difficult to read a warning of punishment to Avraham's descendants into the verses, as Radak and his school would suggest. The verses themselves, explaining why God tells Avraham about Sedom, exude love for and closeness to Avraham, rather than rebuke and warning. Indeed, this reflects the opinion of Ramban quoted above. But the commentators who adopt Ramban's approach fail to explain the nature of this special quality that the verses would attribute to Avraham, according to their view – his inclusion in God's deliberations and management of the world, and what need there is for it. Further on, I shall attempt to answer this question, arising from Ramban's approach – which I shall adopt on this issue.

The commentators devote little attention to the other questions presented at the outset; only Abarbanel addresses almost all of them, and solves them in accordance with his exegetical approach. But our final question – why Avraham fails to protest against the command to slaughter his son at Har Ha-Moriah as he protested against the verdict of Sedom – finds no response.[18] The rest of our discussion on the parasha will be devoted to this question.

## B. Why God Consults with Avraham – A New Proposal

In my view, the key to answering all these questions is to be found in a midrash quoted by Rashi:

"As he sat' – The text says that he sat. He wanted to stand up, but God said to him: You sit; I shall stand. And you will thereby provide a sign for your descendants, that in the future I shall be present among the judges as they sit, as it is written, 'God stands amongst the Divine assembly.'" (Rashi 18:1)

The accepted interpretation of God's "standing amongst the Divine assembly" is in accordance with Rashi and the other commentaries on Tehillim: that God is present in the counsel of the judges, to judge together with them, as one of them (or perhaps even as the President of the court).[19] This would appear to be borne out by the continuation of the verse: "in the midst of the judges shall He judge" – that God Himself renders judgment among the other judges.

However, this interpretation fails to explain the words of the Midrash Rabba quoted above. The midrash treats the word "standing" literally: in a Jewish court the judges sit, while God stands. But the President of the Beit Din sits, like the other members of the court; in fact, he is given the seat of honor. Furthermore, in the image created by the midrash, Avraham sits while God stands before him after He has come to his tent.

It would seem that the midrash in our parasha is interpreting God's standing in Avraham's tent in the spirit of, "The men who have the argument shall stand before God, before the kohanim and the judges" (Devarim 19:17). God, as it were, is standing before Avraham as a plaintiff standing before the judge.

The parallel that we have noted throughout, between the angels' visit to Avraham's tent and their visit to Lot, supports our thesis. When God reveals Himself to Avraham, we are told: "as he sat AT THE ENTRANCE TO HIS TENT" (18:1). When the angels appear before Lot, we read: "Lot sat at THE GATES OF SEDOM" (19:1). This would suggest that Lot sits at the gates of Sedom as a judge, and Rashi indeed comments: "On that day they appointed him a judge over them." [20]

Another parallel, similar to the one between the entrance to Avraham's tent and the gates of Sedom, is to be found in the Torah's discussion of a betrothed girl who has relations with someone else; this, too, appears in a judicial context:

"They shall bring the girl out TO THE ENTRANCE OF HER FATHER'S HOUSE and the men of her city shall stone her with stones, that she may die... You shall bring out both of them TO THE GATES OF THAT CITY, and stone them with stones, that they may die..." (Devarim 22:21-24)

This parallel would seem to suggest that we may view Avraham, sitting at the entrance to his tent, as a judge, and God – Who comes before him – as the plaintiff, as it were.

The midrash, in drawing the parallel between Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent and the judges in whose counsel God stands, is connecting verse 1 – "God appeared to him" – with the story of Sedom. Upon this view, the revelation to Avraham is meant to tell him about the fate of Sedom. The story of the three visiting angels interrupts this matter, and after they leave, the Torah returns to the original subject – as R. Yosef Bekhor Shor explains.

But while Radak and Abarbanel, who adopt this interpretation, explain that the revelation was meant to teach Avraham that he should warn his children and his household after him not to follow the ways of Sedom and Amora in order not to meet the terrible fate that befell these cities – i.e., God appears as the Judge and Avraham as one witnessing the judgment – the midrash would seem to present God as bringing the judgment of Sedom before Avraham, who sits as a judge at the entrance to his tent. God, according to the midrash, appears as a plaintiff against Sedom, suing over the cry of the city; God – the plaintiff – stands with the

people of Sedom – the defendant – before Avraham, who sits in judgment. Avraham is required to come to a verdict concerning the punishment that God – the plaintiff – wants to bring upon Sedom.

Chazal note the difficulty in presenting Avraham as a judge of God's actions. They interpret the verse, "Avraham was still standing before God," as a correction:

"'Avraham was still standing before God' – it should say, 'God was still standing before Avraham;' this is a scribal correction." (Rashi 18:22, based on the midrash)

Nevertheless, the idea of God standing, as it were, before a mortal judge, before the judges of Israel, is to be found explicitly in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 6b:)

"The judges should know Whom they are judging, and before Whom they judge, and Who is destined to hold them culpable"....

Likewise, we may note Rashi's comment on Divrei ha-Yamim II 19:6 – "Your hearts should be, in each and every case, as though God was standing before you in judgment".

Let us be more precise: God appears in Sedom's case not only as the plaintiff, but also as the judge, as Avraham declares: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?!" But at the same time, God's case is brought before Avraham, and his role is somewhat like that of an appeals court. Indeed, God accepts Avraham's opinion and ultimately declares, at the end of the session: "I shall not destroy for the sake of the ten!" (18:32.)

### C. When Is the Fate of Sedom Sealed? The Commentaries' Position

Our conclusion from the midrash – that Avraham sat on the seat of judgment concerning Sedom – brings us to understand Avraham's role in the argument differently than most of the commentaries. It also leads us to further conclusions as to the meaning of the entire episode.

According to the commentators quoted above, God simply notifies Avraham as to what He is going to do to Sedom. He reveals to him the decree that has already been passed, in order that he will guide his household and teach them about sin and its punishment, because Avraham is the lord of the land, or God's close associate. Rashi writes: "Shall I then destroy the children without notifying the father, whom I love?" (18:17), and the other commentators concur with this interpretation. Ramban explains that Avraham could have changed the decree through his prayer (has the people of Sedom been deserving of this), but even he agrees that the decree had already been passed.

The problem here concerns the meaning of the words, "I shall descend, then, and see whether it is as the cry that comes to Me that they have done – (in which case) to destroy; and if not, I shall know" (18:21), which would seem to imply that the fate of Sedom has not yet been sealed.

Radak notes that Sedom's fate had already been sealed by the time God spoke to Avraham:

"Even though everything is revealed and known to Him, this is written in order to teach man not to be hasty in judgment".

Chizkuni and Ramban likewise grapple with this problem, each solving it in his own way.[21] Both maintain that God had already reached His judgment, and His descent to observe Sedom was meant only to bear out the truth of His judgment in the eyes of man.[22] Even Rashi, who maintains that the verdict of Sedom was not yet finalized, posits that its share of wickedness was complete; God still gave the city a final opportunity to repent:

"If they persist in their rebellion, 'destruction' is what I shall bring up them. But if they do not persist in their rebellion – 'I shall know.'" (Rashi on 18:21)

Only Abarbanel (and, in a similar vein, Malbim) understands Sedom's judgment as not yet final. God descended to Sedom in order to test the people and view their actions. This descent is actualized in the arrival of the two angels in Sedom; they come to see how the people of Sedom treat their guests. Abarbanel writes:

"For this purpose God sent His angels there, to perform an experiment and a test, [to see] whether the people of Sedom would actually do what they had planned and agreed to do or not, for the matter was dependent on their actions".

In other words, when God spoke to Avraham, the people of Sedom still had the power to steer their verdict in the direction of God's mercy, had they received their angelic guests properly. The angels were not originally sent with the mission of destroying Sedom. They were angels of mercy. They came to give Sedom an opportunity to follow the path of Avraham, to perform hospitality. It was only the wicked reception that the people of the city extended to the angels that sealed their verdict. It was this that changed the approach of mercy into strict justice.

"This was the sin of Sedom, your sister: she and her daughters had pride, they were sated with bread and peace and quiet, but they did not strengthen the hand of the needy and destitute." (Yechezkel 16:49)

#### D. The Argument Over the Number of Righteous

Whether we adopt the approach of Abarbanel or that of the other commentators quoted above, the emphasis is on the sin of Sedom and the consequent punishment. According to most of the commentators, the fate of Sedom is sealed because of the sins that preceded God's revelation to Avraham; according to Abarbanel, it is sealed once the angels visit there. The possibility that the righteous people of Sedom will save the city from its punishment appears nowhere. This possibility is nothing but an innocent hope that burns in Avraham, who is unfamiliar with the city and unaware of the behavior of its inhabitants. There are not fifty righteous people in Sedom, nor even ten. It is an altogether wicked place, and its punishment is determined accordingly.

The problem here is that this conception pushes to the margins the possibility of saving the city. Avraham is not asking that God forgive the sin of Sedom. He makes no attempt to judge the people of the city favorably, he does not ask God to be tolerant, nor does he try to bring the people of Sedom to repentance. The sole anchor of salvation to which Avraham ties his hopes is that the righteous people of Sedom will protect the city. If this possibility is not a realistic one, then what has Avraham achieved? For what reason does the Torah record, at such painstaking length, the claims that Avraham raises in defense?

These questions, difficult to begin with, become more so in light of the approach that I introduced above, according to which Avraham sits in judgment, and in light of my proposal that the entire revelation at Elonei Mamrei was meant to include Avraham in the judgment of Sedom. If we adopt this approach, it is certainly very difficult to view Avraham's participation here as something marginal, unrealistic, misguided and ultimately ineffective.

I propose, as does Abarbanel, that when God spoke to Avraham, the fate of Sedom was not yet sealed. God, by informing Avraham, "I shall descend, now, and see," refers to the descent of the angels to Sedom to test its inhabitants' measure of hospitality. Until the people of Sedom come to assault the angels, the city's measure of wickedness is not yet complete.

In my view, this serves to explain the difficulty arising from the order of the verses, as discussed at the outset. The logical order of the verses would seem to be:

"The men got up from there and looked out over Sedom, and Avraham went with them to see them off." (18:16)

"The men turned from there and went to Sedom, while Avraham was still standing before God." (18:22)

"God said: Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am going to do?" (18:17)

But in the text, verse 22 ("The men turned from there and went to Sedom") follows immediately after the statement, "I shall descend, now, and see." In other words, it is the same event: God descends to Sedom (in the form of the angels' arrival) in order to test them and evaluate their actions.

The full order of events is therefore as follows: the angels look out over Sedom, then God hears the cry of the city and wants to descend to see and test them. Then the men turn to go towards Sedom in order to test the city, and Avraham comes to appeal the verdict.

However, contrary to Abarbanel, I believe that the people of Sedom were not tested through their treatment of guests – or, at least, that this was not what sealed their fate. In my understanding, Avraham was well aware of the nature of Sedom's inhabitants. Chazal expound at length, in the Midrash, on an earlier test performed in Sedom – not by God, sending His angels, but rather by Avraham himself, who sent Eliezer to test the people of the city. Although he knew them, Avraham brought his claim before God that the entire city should be saved on account of the righteous people in its midst.

Rashi explains the calculation of the number of righteous people on whose behalf Avraham presents his claim. When he pleads for fifty, he refers to the possibility that there are ten righteous people in each city of the Sedom district. When he asks on behalf of forty-five, he has in mind nine people in each city, with God joining them to form a "minyan." When he reaches the number forty, he is thinking of saving only four cities, and likewise when he speaks of thirty, twenty, and ten. From this, it would appear that just as he hoped that forty-five righteous people would save five cities, he likewise calculated that thirty-six could save four cities, with the addition of "the Righteous One of the world" – God Himself. Likewise, twenty-seven could save three cities, eighteen could save two cities, and (as Rashi notes) nine

could save one. In Rashi's view, Avraham did not ask on behalf of eight, because Noah and his family numbered eight, and their merit was not enough to save the world.

In my view, this explains Avraham's claim as to "righteousness and justice." If God would destroy righteous people together with the wicked – according to his argument – Divine justice itself would be harmed; hence Avraham says, "Will the Judge of all the world not perform justice?" God wants to reveal to Avraham the "path of God, to perform RIGHTEOUSNESS and justice." The righteousness is that even when there is less than a minyan of righteous people in each city, God – Who is the Righteous One of the world – will join them to form a quorum, saving the wicked Sedom and its environs from annihilation.

As I understand it, the nine righteous people on behalf of whom Avraham asks that Sedom be saved are Lot and his wife, his two married daughters and their husbands, and his three unmarried daughters: the two whom Lot wanted to send into the hands of the mob in order to save his guests, and his other daughter, Plotit, who was killed on that day by the people of Sedom for having given some of her bread to a poor man. It was because of Plotit's cry that God descended to judge Sedom.[23] The Midrash recounts:

"Rabbi Yehuda said: It was announced in Sedom that anyone who gave bread to a poor or needy person would be burned with fire. Plotit, Lot's daughter, was married to one of the prominent men of Sedom. She saw a certain poor person on the street in the city, and her heart was anguished. What did she do? Every day, when she went out to draw water, she would bring in her jug some of whatever she had at home, and she would feed this poor man. People asked: What does this destitute person live on? And when the matter became known to them – they brought her out to be burned. She said: Master of the Universe, do justice for me! And her cry came before the Throne of Glory.

At that moment God said: 'I shall descend now [and see], if the people of Sedom have done as the cry of this girl – I shall overturn its foundations.' The text does not say, 'according to their cry,' but rather 'according to her cry' [in the Hebrew, the reference is ambiguous – it appears to refer to the city, but may in fact have some other feminine singular object]." (Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera 83, and also, in somewhat different form, in Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 25(

Thus, Lot's family numbered nine. With the addition of the "Righteous One of the world," they were a "minyan," such that Sedom could be saved in their merit.[24]

In my view, God accepted Avraham's judgment – for He had appointed him a judge by coming to his tent. Moreover, although Plotit had died (without Avraham's knowledge), and although Lot's wife, his married daughters and their husbands were adherents of the way of Sedom, and although they were not worthy of having Sedom saved in their merit – nevertheless, God would show favor to Sedom even for the sake of Lot alone [25], and all because of the principle that Avraham invoked in his judgment. Proof of this may be brought from Tzoar, a city that had been saved in the merit of the righteous man who fled there, even though he had none of his party with him (except for his two unmarried daughters:(

"He said to him: I have accepted this thing, too, that I will not overthrow the city concerning which you have spoken. Make haste and flee there..." (19:21-22(

E. When Is the Fate of Sedom Sealed? My Position

We may therefore say that Sodom's test with regard to the angelic guests was a success. One Sodomite put his life on the line and invited them into his home. This righteous man, Lot, had the power to save the entire city.

But then comes the story of all the people of the city surrounding the house. Abarbanel, as we mentioned, concludes that the city's measure of wickedness was complete when they demanded, "Bring them out to us, that we may know them" (19:5). In my view, it was not at this point that God finally decided to destroy them. Even at this point, the angels did not declare that the destruction was imminent. Rather, the fate of Sodom was sealed over a different sin:

[The people of Sodom] said: Move away! And they said: This one came to sojourn with us, and has become a judge! Now we will be worse to you than they." (19:9)

It was then, and only then, that the angels act:

"The men put forth their hand and brought Lot into the house to them, and closed the door. And they struck the people at the door of the house with blindness, from young to old, so they could not find the entrance. And the men said to Lot: Who else do you have here? Son-in-law and your sons and daughters and whatever you have in the city – bring it out of this place, for we are going to destroy this place." (19:10-13)

The people of Sodom intended not only to do evil to the guest, but also came to do evil to Lot, the only righteous man among them, for having welcomed guests hospitably. They no longer recognize his citizenship or his status as a judge; they declare, as though he were a stranger, "This one came to sojourn" – in the finest tradition of Sodomite treatment of strangers and wanderers. With their own hands, the people of Sodom sever their connection with Lot. Lot would be forced to leave, to flee the city, even were it not about to be destroyed. The angels, in pulling Lot towards them and closing the door, are merely giving expression to the existing situation – the barrier that has suddenly sprung up between Lot and his townspeople. Lot leaves the city no longer a judge and no longer a citizen with equal rights. It is on this point that Sodom's fate is sealed. Not a single righteous person is left in the city.

I draw a sharp and clear distinction between the filling of the cup of wickedness of this city of blood, and its final verdict. These two – the sin and the judgment – are separated by Avraham's claim concerning the righteous people to be found there. So long as these are in its midst, God must not destroy it.

According to my understanding, Sodom's measure of evil was complete already twenty-five years prior to its destruction. The text tells us, "The people of Sodom were exceedingly evil and sinful to God" (13:13); immediately thereafter, we read of the war of the kings and the fact that the five cities of the plain fall into the hands of Kedarla'omer and his partners. Sodom and its environs are saved from the fate they deserve in the merit of the "one who sojourns among them" – Lot. Avram, who hears that his nephew has been captured, pursues Kedarla'omer, and in the act of saving Lot he also restores the women, the people and all the property to the king of Sodom. God shows favor to Sodom because of Lot, who dwells there. Now that the cry of the city has risen, God once again agrees to show favor because of the righteous man in its midst. But the people of Sodom, who twenty-five years earlier [26] had

accepted Lot to live with them, now banish him. And when not even the single hospitable person who once lived there is left in the city, it no longer has any protection: "for we are going to destroy this place" (19:13.)

#### F. Verdict for the Individual and Verdict for the Public

What we have said above would seem to solve another problem posed at the beginning of the shiur. We noted that God wants to destroy the entire city of Sedom, with no distinction between righteous and wicked, and this indeed is what Avraham argues: "Will you destroy the righteous together with the wicked?" But in Avraham's "judgment" the justice meted out seems no less distorted: "Will you destroy and not show favor to the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people who are in its midst?" (18:24). Seemingly, the proper solution would be to put to death the wicked people and to save the righteous, as indeed we read ultimately at the end of the story: Lot is saved while the city is destroyed. This simple solution is not raised by either God or Avraham! God and Avraham share the view that there is one verdict for the city as a whole, with no distinctions to be made.

The problem of the relationship between the collective and the individual exists in any ruling pertaining to the public; I shall not elaborate on this issue here. Suffice it to say that the same judgment applies to the entire collective. So it is in the mitzva to wipe out Amalek: the individuals are judged as part of the collective to which they belong, and so it is in all the prophecies with God's decrees on the nations because of their sins. As an example, we may consider the judgment of Ninveh in the Book of Yona. Had the inhabitants of Ninveh not repented, the city would have been overthrown, and "more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who did not know their right hand from their left, as well as much livestock," would have died (Yona 4:11). God has mercy on them only after the people of Ninveh engage in repentance. Likewise the judgment of Sedom, except that instead of repenting, they sink even deeper into their corruption. God and Avraham agree that a single verdict applies to the entire city, but God judges it according to most of its inhabitants, while Avraham argues for the measure of compassion – that God should show favor even for a small minority – and his argument is accepted.

The unacceptable solution – to save the righteous man by removing him from the city and separating him from its wicked people sentenced to death – is one that represents neither the measure of justice nor the measure of compassion. It was the solution created by the people of Sedom, who raised a barrier between themselves and the single righteous man among them. It was also the solution created by the visiting angels, who took the line adopted by the people of Sedom a step further: they pulled Lot to their side of the divide, closed the door, and thereby drew an eternal separation between Lot and the people of the city.

I have treated this matter at length in order to clarify the enormous weight that is attached to Avraham's claim that Sedom should be saved for the sake of its righteous inhabitants. This argument was a realistic one, and on the basis of it the city was to be saved. Avraham's judgment is a true one. Concerning Sedom's verdict, Avraham sits in judgment at the entrance to his tent, at the time when God is revealed to him at Elonei Mamrei, standing before him like a person standing before a judge.

### PART III: CRITICISM VS. FAITH

## A. "Far Be It from You" – Really!?

Let us return to the matter of the debate between the two judges – God and Avraham. On the one hand, we cannot cast any doubt on the truth of God's judgment, for wanting to destroy Sedom despite the possibility that a minority of righteous people may live there. On the other hand, we have seen that God accepts Avraham's argument and his demand that the wicked be saved in the merit of the righteous. How is it possible for there to be two different verdicts, each of which is true?

Perhaps the solution to this dilemma is hinted at in God's words to Avraham: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of God, to perform RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUDGMENT, in order that God may bring upon Avraham that which He spoke concerning him" (18:19.)

A true judgment has two elements: righteousness and justice. Justice (*mishpat*) represents the exact ratio between the sin and the punishment, with no other consideration, in the spirit of the maxims – "Let justice bore through the mountain!" or "We do not have mercy in justice." Righteousness (*tzedek*) involves the inclusion of another element in the ratio between the sin and the punishment, in the spirit of the maxim "The law is with you – but give to him" (*Chullin* 134a). Although in monetary matters a doubtful case is usually decided in favor of the owners, we are commanded that when it comes to a question regarding money set aside for charity, the destitute recipient should be favored. The law must contain another element – mercy, compassion, an aspiration to maintain the world despite its shortcomings.

The strict law (*mishpat*) requires that Sedom be demolished, for a great majority of the inhabitants are sinners. The single and indivisible verdict of the city requires, therefore, that the righteous die together with the wicked. But righteousness (*tzedaka*) requires a softer verdict. Since there are some righteous people in the city, and they are not deserving of death – even though they are the majority – compassion and mercy come to bend the verdict such that God will show favor to the wicked and not destroy the righteous.

Both of these approaches represent truth, and it is they that stand at the foundation of the argument. Ultimately, God decides to lean towards mercy, in accordance with Avraham's approach.

If we are correct in assuming that the two approaches that we find concerning the fate of Sedom are related to the two terms that the Torah uses – "righteousness" (*tzedaka*) and "mishpat" (justice), then it seems that we may take another step and address another of the questions that we posed at the outset. For what reason did God see fit to include Avraham in the judgment of Sedom, and what is the meaning of the justification, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him..."? The commentators, as quoted above, discuss only why God elected to reveal to Avraham His decision concerning Sedom, but the question posed here is a different one: why did God include Avraham in the decision itself?

According to what we have said, the "righteousness and justice" that Avraham will command his children and his household after him do not stand in direct opposition to the lack of righteousness and justice practiced by the people of Sedom.[27] They are not even the reason for God's love for Avraham, nor for his promised inheritance of the land. They are nothing

more than the reason for God telling Avraham of the justice and truth of His judgment, and asking for his agreement. If Avraham does not understand the justice of God's judgment, he will not be able to command his children and his household after him to "observe the way of God, to perform righteousness and justice." He will not understand that God's way is the way of righteousness and justice, nor will he understand that the way of righteousness and justice is the way of God.

If, heaven forefend, Avraham sees some injustice in God's judgment, he will be able to educate his children and disciples in only one of two ways – and either way this education will be flawed. He may educate them to observe God's way, even though it is seemingly not the way of righteousness and justice, or he can educate them in the way of righteousness and justice, even though it is seemingly not the way of God. In order to be able to command his listeners to observe "the way of God to perform righteousness and justice," it is critical that he understand that God is indeed a just Judge, and he must agree to God's judgment. Only in this way will Avraham's children be able to observe the mitzva, "You shall follow the Lord your God" – "just as He is a just Judge, so shall you judge justly." [28] For this purpose, God revealed to him the judgment of Sedom, asked for his approval, and from the two of them – God and Avraham – emerged the way of righteousness and justice, by which the people of Sedom were judged, and in which Avraham is commanded to educate his children and his household after him.

All of the above gives rise to a principle in God's management of the world, and it is worth expanding a little on this matter. The justice of God's handling of the world and the truth of Divine retribution, by which God judges His creations, must not only be done; they must also be seen and understood, in order to be done by man. This is in order that there not arise, heaven forefend, a contradiction between the "way of God" and the "way of righteousness and justice;" in order that we be able to maintain justly the command, "You shall follow the Lord your God." The prophets, who would seem to argue against God's judgment in the world [29], did not argue against the actual justice of God's decisions, but rather argued that it was not apparent, that one could not educate in the light of what mortals were able to see.

On the basis of this view, it is permissible – and in fact desirable – to examine God's management of the world. It is permissible and even desirable to ask questions, and to argue about what we see in order to understand it. It is not good for a person to declare himself too small and insignificant to try to understand, to accept God's judgment as is and to believe blindly in its justice. After all, it is in light of God's judgments that a person must educate himself and his children to observe the way of God to perform righteousness and justice, and therefore a person must do everything he can in order to understand it and to identify with it.

B. "Here I am"!

Nevertheless, it would seem that even as we try to explain Avraham's path, judging God's verdict regarding Sedom, addressing harsh words to the Holy One concerning the need for righteousness together with justice – and even if we understand the importance and need to educate his children as to that path – it is difficult to rid ourselves of the sense of discomfort at Avraham's audacious words to God: "Far be it from You; will the Judge of all the earth not do justice"?

No matter how strongly we emphasize the need to question God's handling of the world in order that we will be able to educate accordingly, it is difficult to ignore the danger inherent

in this approach. There is only a fine line dividing this from the path of Iyov, who temporarily lost his wholehearted faith in the justice of God's judgment, and from the line adopted by Elifaz, one of his close friends: "And you say, What does God know? Does He judge through the thick cloud?" (Iyov 22:13.)

How can a person be sure that he will be able to distinguish between examining the truth of God's judgments for educational purposes, and examining the truth of His judgment out of doubt and with questions as to whether God is indeed a Righteous Judge? How can Avraham be certain that the personal example he set for his descendants in addressing God so impudently will be a desirable one, and not – heaven forefend – an opening to the way of Iyov in his time of suffering, a path defined by Chazal as "insult and blasphemy" (Bava Batra 16a)?[30]

The akeida came to answer this question. Many commentators and philosophers have addressed the magnitude of the test involved in the akeida. Many of them have not explained it as a test regarding the natural compassion of a father for his son. Perhaps the reason for their doing so was because of the claim brought in the name of the "mother of the sons" during the period of the forced apostasy – the mother who instructed her own children to sacrifice themselves upon the altar of Sanctification of the Name of God: "Go and tell Avraham, your forefather: You bound only one son; I sacrificed seven" (Gittin 57b). Perhaps they did so because of similar claims that arose throughout the course of Jewish history, by parents who sacrificed their children for the sanctification of God's Name, thereby making the test of sacrificing an only son too "routine" to be perceived as the climax of our forefather Avraham's faith.

Indeed, aside from the test of selfless devotion, Avraham was faced with another test in the akeida, perhaps no less powerful than the first: it was a test of his faith in God Who had revealed Himself to Avraham as the God of righteousness and justice. A God Who sentences Sedom to annihilation because of the cry of a single girl – how will He respond to the cry of an elderly mother, whose only son is taken from her to be slaughtered on Mt. Moriah? Can there be any answer to this question concerning a God of righteousness? Is the God Who sealed one covenant after the next with Avraham, promising him the land and descendants who would inherit it, and Who now comes and rips all of this to shreds with the terrible command, "Offer him up there as a sacrifice" – is this then the God of justice?

God allows Avraham three full days to raise and ponder these difficult questions. BAvraham, throughout these days, offers only one word to his Creator: "Hineni" (Here I am) (22:1). In all four hundred and eighty verses of the Book of Iyov, this word appears nowhere. Those three days of silence and acceptance of God's judgment, while Avraham walked towards the land of Mo, remove any shadow of doubt that the path that he beqto mankind is one of "and blasphemy," like that of Iyov. That single word of Avraham as he accepted God's command – "hineni" – places a very tall barrier between Iyov, who questioned God's way of righteousness and justice out of doubt in its existence, and Avraham, who – with perfect faith and with no possibility of finding any answer to his questions as to the way of his God and Educator – accepted his command with love.

### C. The Difference between the Two Decrees

Avraham, then, adopts two paths which seem to contradict one another. In the story of Sedom, he uses strong words to express his opinion concerning God's judgment: he argues

with God, refusing to budge until his demand for a righteous judgment is accepted. In contrast, when it comes to the akeida, he accepts God's unfathomable and seemingly unjust decree. He accepts it in silence, with no appeal, with perfect faith. The obvious question is: what is the difference between these two instances?

Before answering this question, let us try to understand another aspect of the akeida. What is the meaning of the opening words of that narrative - "It was, AFTER THESE THINGS, that God tested Avraham" (22:1)?

To which event is the Torah juxtaposing the akeida, by using the words "after these things"? Rashbam and Radak – each in his own way – connect this parasha to Avraham's covenant with Avimelekh, which is mentioned in the verses immediately preceding the akeida. Rashi goes further back, to the feast that Avraham held in honor of Yitzchak's weaning, and elsewhere he goes even further backwards, to the episode of Avraham's circumcision.[31] Other commentators (Malbim and others) understand this phrase as referring to all the tests that God presented to Avraham.

I propose here a different interpretation. The narrative immediately preceding the akeida is, as we have noted, the covenant between Avraham and Avimelekh. This story represents, in my view, an independent unit that is related only indirectly to the order of events, and therefore it has its own introduction: "It was at that time..." (21:22).[32] The story of the akeida therefore follows on the previous event, namely, the story of Yishmael's eviction.

The banishing of Yishmael is counted as one of the ten trials with which God tested Avraham. Avraham loved both his sons; he wanted both to inherit the promised land. It was bad, in his eyes, to banish Yishmael, but he upheld his Creator's command, which contained something of a consolation: "Let it not be bad in your eyes concerning the boy and concerning your handmaid... for your descendants will be called after Yitzchak" (21:12).

After these events – after Avraham send Yishmael away, consoled by the fact that he still has Yitzchak – God comes and commands him: Go and slaughter Yitzchak, your only son (i.e., the only one remaining to you). In my view, the juxtaposition highlights the common content of the two tests: the banishing of Yishmael and the proposed slaughter of Yitzchak. Avraham will remain with no children, with no successor.

Let us return to our question: what is the reason for the difference between Avraham's reaction to the decree of Sedom's destruction and his reaction to the decree of the destruction of his household? We emphasized above that Avraham assumes the right to judge God's judgments, to demand righteousness of God, and he expresses this sharply. On the other hand, God presents Himself at Avraham's tent like someone who comes before a judge, and He agrees with him. All of this happens for one reason: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, that they should observe the way of God to perform righteousness and justice" (18:19). All of this happens in order that Avraham will be able to teach the way of God - which is the way of righteousness and justice – to his sons, his descendants, to the nation that will arise from him.

In the akeida (and the expulsion of Yishmael, which is recounted prior to it), God commands Avraham to upset and bury his entire future as the founder of a nation, as an educator of his descendants, as a leader. Here there is no room for questions concerning God's way. For Avraham is left with no one to educate as to the way of God – the way of righteousness and

justice. Here there is room only for perfect faith, faith that is not accompanied by any explanation or even a thread of logic, for "The Rock – His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice; a God of faith with no injustice, righteous and upright is He" (Devarim 32:4.)

In both tasks – scrutiny of God's ways and perfect faith in Him – Avraham is admirably successful.

In light of the above, we may solve another of our original difficulties: why does the story of the three angels interrupt in between God's revelation to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei, as he sits in judgment at the entrance to his tent, and His words to him concerning the judgment of Sedom later on? The three angels come to tell Avraham about the son that will be born to him. This news is critical, and specifically at this point. It is only once Avraham has been told that he will have a son, that he is given a new role in the world: "that he will command his children and his household after him." Only once he knows that he will have a son does God come to tell him of His actions in the world, teaching Avraham the Divine way of righteousness and justice.

#### D. On Hospitality and Visiting the Sick

We have already noted above that the story separating God's revelation to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei and the argument concerning the judgment of Sedom is a double story. In addition to the news of Yitzchak's birth, there is also an elaborate description of the hospitality that Avraham shows the three men. We have already explained the significance of the first element; we must now explain the significance of the hospitality within the chain of events, whose climax is the argument over the fate of Sedom.

We could suggest a simple explanation for the location of this description in our story: through the warm welcome that Avraham extends to his guests, he proves that his way is one of kindness, righteousness and justice, thereby proving that he is worthy of being the one who will command his children and his household after him to observe this way. Indeed, immediately after being told that Sara will give birth to Yitzchak – whom Avraham is destined to educate and command in God's ways – God includes him in the judgment in order that he will educate in light of this path. But in my view, this explanation does not suffice; we shall go back to the beginning.

We explained above the teaching by R. Chama in the Midrash Tanhuma, maintaining that God's appearance to Avraham at Elonei Mamrei was an act of visiting the sick. We discussed at length the question of how Avraham could desert God in mid-conversation and run off to attend to his guests, and we proposed an explanation of Rashi's comment concerning the sun, based on the Midrash Rabba. We concluded that the text is trying to combine two opposing paths: one of Divine revelation, and the other of tending to ordinary mortal guests. Avraham tries to bridge these contradictory paths, and the final outcome indicates that "hospitality is greater than receiving the Shekhina".

In light of the above, let me propose a different understanding. Receiving the Shekhina and showing hospitality to mortal guests are not necessarily contradictory. On the contrary, they are identical paths. Let me explain: there are two positive traits, both related to the path of righteousness, that we may learn from our parasha: visiting the sick [33], and hospitality. In many places, Chazal mention these traits together:

"These are acts whose fruit a person enjoys in this world, while the principal reserved for him in the World to Come... and hospitality and visiting the sick..." (Tosefta Pe'ah 1:1)

Indeed, these traits are similar to one another. Both involve hosting; in both cases, a positive and warm connection is forged between the host and the guest. In the case of visiting the sick, the guest comes to perform a kindness for the host; he comes to assist him in his work. In the case of hospitality, the host performs kindness for his guests, preparing food and a place for him to sleep.

This, then, is the order of events. Avraham is weak because of his circumcision, and God performs a kindness to him and comes to assist him. Avraham welcomes the Shekhina that appears at his tent in the very same way that the Shekhina is revealed to him: through the very act of showing hospitality for the three wayfarers arriving from the desert. In short: God is revealed to Avraham as visiting the sick, and Avraham welcomes Him by fulfilling the mitzva of hospitality towards the three men who happen to pass by at that moment. Avraham, therefore, simultaneously performs two mitzvot: hospitality as well as "you shall follow the Lord your God," since he is acting in precisely the same way as God in His appearance to him; he is following the way that is the "twin" of the way in which God reveals Himself to him.

It turns out that Avraham is worthy not only of commanding his children and household after him as to the way of righteousness and justice; he is worthy of commanding them to observe THE WAY OF GOD in performing righteousness and justice, and in fulfilling the command, "You shall walk after [the way of] the Lord your God" – just as He performs kindness, so shall you perform kindness" (Sota 14b). From now on, God includes him in His judgment. God proves to Avraham in the judgment of Sedom that His way is one of righteousness and justice, in order that he will be able to teach this way to his children, and establish the future nation that will bear the standard of God's way in the world.

I shall return to this subject below, concerning the judgment of Sedom. But let us first turn our attention to the news of the imminent birth of a son that is uttered on this occasion.

#### E. Two Notices of Yitzchak's Birth – Why?

On two occasions, God tells Avraham about Yitzchak's birth: in parashat Lekh-lekha and in parashat Vayera. Both announcements are introduced with the same words: "God appeared to Avram" (17:1), and "God appeared to him" (18:1). The first occasion is prior to his circumcision; the second is afterwards.

But Avraham's reaction to the two revelations is quite different. In the first instance we are told, "Avram fell upon his face" (17:3), while the second time we read, "He saw and he ran towards them" (18:2). Before his circumcision, his reaction is one of self-nullification before the glory of the Shekhina; he falls upon the ground before God. After the circumcision, his reaction is one of activity: not self-nullification and self-effacement, but rather walking in the way of God.

There are two levels of receiving the Shekhina. The first is awe, leading to self-effacement and inaction; the second is love, leading to activity and a person's desire to imitate his Creator. The first level represents that of Avraham prior to the circumcision, while the second represents his level afterwards. This difference may explain why Avraham is told twice about

Yitzchak's birth: first in a revelation before he is circumcised, and then – three days later, on the third day following his circumcision – by the angels.

In the first revelation, Avraham is told that he will be distinguished from the nations and set aside for Divine service. The news of the birth comes hand in hand with the rejection of Yishmael. Avraham asks of God, "If only Yishmael may live before You" (17:18), and God replies with reservation:

"But Sara your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Yitzchak, and I shall establish My covenant with him as an eternal covenant for his descendants after him. And concerning Yishmael I have heard you... I shall make him a great nation, but My covenant I shall establish with Yitzchak, whom Sara will bear to you at this time next year." (17:19-21)

The most prominent element of the news about Yitzchak is the contrast between him and Yishmael. Although Yishmael, too, will be blessed, he is rejected from the eternal covenant through which God gives Avraham the land of Canaan. Indeed, when Yitzchak is born, Sara demands that Hagar and Yishmael be banished, for the same reason that was stated already prior to Avraham's circumcision: "Banish this maidservant and her son, for the son of this maidservant will not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak" (21:10). Chazal address this point and comment: "God said to him: Up until your circumcision, uncircumcised mortals used to visit you; now – I Myself will be revealed to you" (Bereishit Rabba 47.)

The second announcement concerning the birth of Yitzchak, uttered three days later at the entrance to the tent in Elonei Mamrei, is completely different. It is conveyed to Avraham not while he falls upon his face, but while he is busy with his guests. Here, the essence of Yitzchak's birth is not meant to sever Avraham from Hagar and Yishmael, but rather to establish the nation that will walk in God's path – the path of righteousness and justice – and bear God's Name in the world. Already at the very beginning of Avraham's new path as the forefather of God's nation, he decides that the way of righteousness will be directed towards trying to save the wicked people of Sedom, to repair the entire world and bring it closer to God. In this scene, Yitzchak is not the inverse of Yishmael, the mocker, but rather the inverse of Lot, who was scorned in the eyes of his sons-in-law. In the previous parasha, Yitzchak – who is destined for a covenant that separates him from the rest of the world – is the opposite of Yishmael, whose "hand is upon all, and the hand of everyone is upon him." In our parasha, Yitzchak – who is destined to teach the way of righteousness – is the opposite of Lot, who is severed from Sedom, having failed to influence even his own daughters and his sons-in-law and convince them to join him. Yitzchak, whose birth is announced in the story of Avraham's hospitality, and in whose virtue Avraham is appointed to sit with God in judgment – is the one whose descendants, destined to bear the banner of the way of God, the way of performing righteousness and judgment, will rectify the entire world in the Kingship of God.

The two announcements as to the birth of Yitzchak are not only contrasting but also complementary, just as the two revelations of God to Avram-Avraham – one before the circumcision and the other follow it – complement one another.

#### F. The Four Missions of the Angels

We listed above the four missions entrusted to the angels: they visit Avraham's home, they tell him about the imminent birth of Yitzchak, they visit Sedom and Lot's home, and they

destroy Sedom and the cities of the plain, saving Lot.[34] We asked whether these four missions are connected in any way, or whether their occurrence together is incidental.

We noted above the connection between the first two missions: The Shekhina is revealed at Avraham's tent with a manifestation of the trait of visiting the sick, and Avraham receives the angels with the trait of hospitality. Then Avraham is chosen as the person to establish the nation that will observe "the way of God, to perform righteousness and justice," and he is told that a son will be born to him. With this news, Avraham becomes worthy of having God tell him of the ways of His righteousness and justice, in order that he will be able to educate his children and his household in those ways. He is then required, therefore, to express his opinion of God's justice concerning Sedom, and he adds the element of righteousness. The hospitable Avraham imparts some of his righteousness upon the judgment of Sedom, whose measure of evil is complete because "it did not uphold the hand of the poor and destitute" by not showing hospitality. The angels, who tested Avr's hospitality and his worthiness for his future appointment, were the same ones sent to test Sedom. One angel – the one within whom God's Name resides [35] – stands before Avraham and declares, "I shall descend, then, and see" (18:21). The other two – the two witnesses – go down to test Sedom with the same test that was presento Avraham. In the test of Sed, Lot – who welcomes the guests – emeinnocent, while Sedom is judged guil.

It would seem that the saving of Lot resembles the news of Yitzchak's birth. Lot is permitted to take his family with him, although his sons-in-law and married daughters did not participate in the mitzva of hospitality. In my view, they were shown a kindness that they did not deserve in order that Lot would be able to establish his name and have descendants to survive him. Hence, Lot receives the reward of his hospitality with a kindness that is reminiscent of the kindness shown to Avraham, his uncle: descendants that would be born from him, the right to establish a nation, the continuity of generations. At the point of losing hope, at the moment of his drunkenness – a stupor born of despair [36] – his daughters assume for themselves the right of 'yibum' and establish his seed for his vanished family, just as a woman whose husband has died childless is obliged to establish his seed.[37]

Hence, the four missions of the angels are four links in the same chain: the test and reward for Avraham, and the test and respective retribution for the people of Sedom and for Lot.

## PART IV: THE KNOWLEDGE

### A. "For I Know Him"

The subject that has occupied us thus far is the role and destiny that God entrusts to Avraham: to establish a nation that will bear the sign of God's providence in the world, and to educate this nation in light of the understanding that the way of God is the way of righteousness and justice. In other words, he and his seed will fulfill the commandments of kindness, righteous and justice not just as independent values, but as an expression of the command, "'You shall walk in the way of the Lord your God' – just as He performs kindness, so shall you perform kindness." Let us now address this concept of walking in the way of God.

The commentators address the significance of God's knowing – "For I know him." Most (the Targum Yonatan and Onkelos, Ba'alei ha-Tosfot, Seforno and others) explain this in accordance with its meaning in most places in Tanakh, as referring to intellectual awareness: God knows Avraham and knows his ways. This explanation poses a difficulty because of the following expression, "that" (Iema'an), which usually introduces a description of purpose, while in our context it introduces the description of a reason.[38] Most commentators who adopt this interpretation explain that the description of purpose connects to what was said previously: God reveals to Avraham what He is going to do to Sedom in order that he will instruct his children and household after him.

But Rashi and others who follow his opinion explain the words, "For I know him," as an expression of love and closeness, as in, "Naomi had a kinsman [lit.: 'one who was known'] of her husband" (Ruth 2:1), "Adam knew Chava his wife" (Bereishit 4:1), etc.[39] According to this understanding, God drew Avraham close and loved him in order that he would command his household to walk in the way of God. Hence, the revelation of the judgment of Sedom to Avraham is an expression of God's love for him.[40]

Furthermore, we may say that according to Rashi's explanation, the love and bond between God and Avraham are the motivation for Avraham and his household not only to serve God, but to act in accordance with His actions, to fulfill the mitzva of "You shall walk in the ways of the Lord your God." In other words, awe – such as the awe of a servant for his master – is the main impetus for observing God's mitzvot as divine commandments, and this motivation is particularly suited to the mitzvot between man and God. Love – such as the love between a son and a father, or the bond and cleaving to God – is the main impetus for the desire to act in accordance with God's actions, to develop good character traits – essentially, the commandments between man and his fellow man.

#### B. "That I May Know You"

A similar "knowing" and "instruction" is to be found in the case of Moshe:

"Moshe said to God: See, You say to me, 'Bring up this nation' – yet You have not told me whom You will send with me. But You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.' So now, if I have found favor in Your sight, please show me Your way, that I may know You, that I may find favor in Your eyes." (Shemot 33:12-13)

Likewise, in God's response:

"For you have found favor in My eyes, and I will know you by name." (Shemot 33:17)

Moshe is the messenger who leads the nation of Israel in accordance with God's word, "for I shall not go up among you" (Shemot 33:3). Moshe assumes upon himself the mission of leading them in the same path that God has guided them thus far. In order to walk in God's ways, he asks to cleave to Him and to know Him. Moshe, who seeks to lead the nation in the ways of God, merits that "God spoke to Moshe face to face, as a person talks to his neighbor" (Shemot 33:11), and he asks further: "Please show me Your ways, that I may know You" (ibid. 19). Indeed, God grants his request and shows him His ways:

"He said: I shall make all My goodness pass before you... and I shall be gracious to whom I shall be gracious, and I shall have mercy on whom I shall have mercy." (Shemot 33:19)

Knowing God and knowing His ways means knowing His goodness, His kindness and His mercy, and following His ways: "Just as He shows kindness, so shall you show kindness." Later on, God tells Moshe of His ways – the way of the thirteen attributes of mercy.

When God shows him this path, He says: "You shall see the back of Me, but My face shall not be seen" (ibid. 23). This may be understood as a "hiding of God's face," as opposed to the level of, "God spoke with Moshe face to face." According to this understanding, the hiding of God's face was caused by Moshe's rejection of God's proposal: "My Presence will go (with you) and I shall give you rest" (33:14). But, alternatively, we may understand "You shall see the back of Me" as a positive development, as Chazal teach: "He wrapped Himself before him like a prayer leader" (Rosh HaShana 17b.)

The prayer congregation sees only the back of the leader, not his face. The prayer leader leads the congregation after him in prayer. He reads, they respond after him. The same applies to God, Who makes His traits known to Moshe and teaches him to follow in His ways – the ways of kindness and compassion.

"God performs righteousness, and judgments for all those who are oppressed. He made His ways known to Moshe, and His acts to the Children of Israel. God is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and full of kindness." (Tehillim 103:6-7)

God's way is the way of righteousness and justice, as we are told concerning Avraham. His way is also the path of kindness and mercy, as we are told concerning Moshe. In both cases, "knowing God" – attachment and cleaving to Him, walking in His ways – teaches the Children of Israel the positive traits and the ways of God. This is the path of Avraham's children and household, and this is the path of the nation and disciples of Moshe. God knows them, and they know Him.

### C. "Has She Not Informed Me"

One of the harshest prophecies concerning the destruction of the Temple is Yirmiyahu's lament (Yirmiyahu chapter 9) concerning the speech of his generation, which addresses lying, tale-bearing and evil gossip. However, Yirmiyahu views the root of the sins pertaining to speech as something else:

"They proceed from one evil to the next; they have not known Me, says God... through deceit they refuse to know Me, says God." (9:2-5)

The connection between the sins of speech, the treason and the gossip, and the lack of knowledge of God is spelled out at the end of the prophecy:

"So says God: Let the wise man not glory in his wisdom, nor the valiant one glory in his val; let the rich man not glory in his wealth. Let he who glories rather glory in this: that he understands and knows Me, for I am God Who performs kindness, justice and righteousness in the land, for it is these that I desire, says God." (9:22-23)

Knowing God means cleaving to Him, walking in His ways. The way of God is the way of kindness, righteousness and justice. Only one who does not know God engages in the opposite of

these tr: slander, lies, tale-bearing, etc. There, the prophet Hoshea likewise cries out: "There is no truth, and no kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land!" (4:1.)

Quite explicitly, Yirmiyahu says before King Yehoyakim, concerning his father King Yoshiyahu:

"Did your father not eat and drink and perform justice and righteousness – then it was good for him? He judged the cause of the poor and destitute – and it was good. Was this not knowledge of Me?" (Yirmiyahu 22:15-16)

The way of Yoshiyahu is the way of Avraham. Because of it, God knew Avraham. In fact, God taught Avraham His justice and righteousness in Sedom in order that Avraham would know God and His way – the way of righteousness and justice – and bequeath it to his children.

NOTES:

This article was originally written (in altered form) in memory of a beloved student, David Cohen, who fell in battle against terrorists in Lebanon. "Land – do not cover his blood; let there not be a resting place for his cry".

[1]Later on in the parasha, we find a parallel story: the description of the hospitality shown to the angels in Lot's house. There, again, the arrival of the angels serves two purposes: the overthrow of Sedom on the one hand, and the saving of Lot on the other. The connection between these two purposes is more apparent than the connection between the two purposes of the angels who visit Avraham, but I shall deal with that below.

[2]See also Tehillim 14 and 53.

[3]Despite the exegetical resemblances, Ramban's approach is very different from that of Rashi. In his view, God appears to Avraham for the purposes of revelation and to honor Avraham following his circumcision; with the same honor in mind, He consults with him concerning the fate of Sedom.

[4]Another advantage of this explanation relates to the interpretation of the verse, "God appeared TO HIM at Elonei Mamrei." Because the text does not repeat "to Avraham," but says only "to him," we may deduce that this was the continuation of the same story. For further discussion of this point, see Ramban and Rabbeinu Bechaye. Abarbanel rejects this textual analysis in light of another reading; see ad loc.

[5]In Rashi's view, healing Avraham was the task of Raphael, one of the three angels who came to Avraham thereafter (see Rashi 18:2), with no connection to God's revelation to him. Malbim admittedly connects the appearance of Raphael (as Rashi suggests) with the revelation itself, but the other commentators on Rashi maintain the same position that I have explained.

[6]Compare Rashi on 32:32: "'The sun shone upon him' – for his benefit; to heal his limp".

[7]Compare Melakhim II 8:29 – "Achaziyahu... went down to see Yoram ben Achav in Yizre'el, for he was ill." Targum Yonatan translates, "to assist Yoram." Compare also Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbalah on our parasha, as well as the Gemara in Nedarim.

[8]See Malakhi 2:10-12.

[9]See Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 771 – "Pinchas is Eliyahu".

[10]See Malakhi 3, and compare Pinchas's reaction to the act of Zimri ben Salu with Kozbi bat Tzur to the reaction of Eliyahu to the marriage of Achav and Izevel.

[11]According to Rashi's second explanation, the name "Ado-nai" here is a Holy Name. Verse 3 continues verse 1, and Avraham turns to God Who has appeared to him. The Gemara (Shabbat 127) interprets accordingly, and I have adopted this approach.

[12]Rashbam explains: "'God said to Avraham, why then does Sara laugh?' - this is the angel talking, for there was no revelation other than the arrival of the angels." He also continues this line in explaining, "God said: Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am going to do?," as well as "Avraham was still standing before God," and that the entire argument concerning Sedom was conducted between Avraham and the angel. He explains in the same way why only two angels came to Sedom: for the third, the senior one, remained with Avraham.

[13]It should be remembered that according to the literal text, Avraham saw three men, not three angels, and the food that he serves to them is understood as an act of hospitality, not a sacrifice. If Avraham did not discern that the three men were in fact angels, then it is difficult to claim that their appearance before him constitutes a revelation.

[14]The Netziv, in Ha'amek Davar, writes: "For this is the will of God – that a practical mitzva should defer this mitzva that has no fixed measure or time".

[15]Radak adopts Rambam's approach in this regard, maintaining that the sight of the three men was a prophetic vision. He explains that God Himself - before speaking with Avraham about Sedom – told him, prophetically, through an angel, about the birth of Yitzchak. Radak fails to explain why the text interrupts with the news about Yitzchak in the middle of a revelation that is supposed to be about Sedom.

[16]Compare Guide of the Perplexed III:21.

[17]Likewise in the words of the prophet Amos: "The Lord God will not do anything without revealing His counsel to His servants, the prophets" (3:7.)

[18]See article by Rav Yehuda Shaviv, "Mussar vs. Mitzva – the Akeida," Megadim I, which was devoted to this problem.

[19]Another interpretation that arises in the commentaries is that this refers to the Heavenly court.

[20]This is the meaning of the word, "gate" in many places in Tanakh. See, for example, Devarim, end of chapter 16, chapter 17, chapter 22, Iyov 29 etc.

[21]Chizkuni: "Everything is known before Him, but [He entered this discussion with Avraham] because of the Trait of Mercy, which requested mercy on their behalf." Ramban writes: "According to the literal meaning, [this dialogue] is because He wanted to reveal the matter of Sedom to Avraham, and to inform him that there was not one there who did good".

[22]Or to the trait of mercy, and to Avraham, according to Chizkuni and Ramban.

[23]Bereishit Rabba 49:13 presents a different calculation.

[24]The reader asks: was Lot's wife a righteous woman? Did she not sin with salt? And were his sons-in-law righteous – was Lot not scorned in their eyes? All of this is true. But Noach's son Cham was likewise not a righteous man worthy of having the world saved in his merit, and nevertheless he is counted as one of the eight. It appears, therefore, that not necessarily every person is evaluated individually; if the head of the household is righteous, his household is considered thus.

[25]Later on, Moshe walked in Avraham's footsteps, demanding that God forgive the entire nation in the merit of a single righteous man: himself. "Now if You will forgive their sin – and if not, erase me from Your book that You have written" (Shemot 32:32). There, indeed, we find that God shows favor to the entire nation in the merit of a single man.

[26]See Rashi 19:20.

[27]To a certain extent, this contrast must be true. I shall employ it further on.

[28]This is based on the Gemara (Sota 14a:(

"Rabbi Chama said in the name of Rabbi Chanina: That which is written, 'You shall walk in the ways of the Lord your God': is it then possible for a person to walk in the way of the Shekhina? Are we not told, 'The Lord your God is a consuming fire'? Rather, this means that we must imitate His traits: just as He clothes the naked, so you shall clothe the naked. God visits the sick... likewise you shall visit the sick. God comforts mourners – so shall you comfort mourners. God buries the dead – so shall you bury the dead".

[29]See, for example, Yirmiyahu 12:1-3; Chabakuk 1, etc.

[30]Chazal address at length the contrast between Avraham and Iyov; I shall not elaborate here.

[31]These two interpretations are to be found in Sanhedrin 89b.

[32]Similar to this is the story of Yehuda and Tamar, which is likewise introduced with the words, "It was at that time that Yehuda went down..." (38:1). It represents an independent unit in the middle of the story which is devoted to the sale of Yosef. Accordingly, just as "Yosef was taken down to Egypt" (39:1) follows on "the Midianites sold him to Egypt, to Potifar..." (37:36), even though the story of Yehuda and Tamar interrupts in the middle, so in our parasha the akeida follows chronologically after the story that precedes "it was at time"....

[33]See the Gemara in Sota 14b quatabove.

[34]Rashi divides the angels' tasks differently, see ad loc.

[35]See Rashbam here and Ramban on Shemot 23:21.

" [36]Give strong drink to one who is ready to die, and wine to the bitter of spirit; let him drink and forget his poverty, and not remember his toil any more" (Mishlei 31:6-7.)

[37]I have written about the parallel between the daughters of Lot and the mitzva of yibum in my article, "Amar Naval Be-libbo," Megadim 4.

[38]God did not know Avraham in order that he would teach his descendants (as the usual meaning of "lema'an" would indicate"), but rather BECAUSE he was going to do this (as the word "ki" would usually indicate.)

[39]See Tehillim 1:6: "For God knows the path of the righteous." There, too, the commentators are divided as to the meaning of "knowing," because of the syntactical difficulty of the verse. It should be noted that there is a connection between these two meanings of the word "knowing." See Guide of the Perplexed I:68.

[40]See Rashi, "Shall I hide" and "For I know him".

Translated by Kaeren Fish