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Vayeira 5783

Putting a Bad Conscience to Good Use

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered October 29, 1966)

The story of the Akeda, which we read this morning, is, together with the revelation at Sinai, the central event in Jewish history and religion. One of the most remarkable aspects of this episode is the one word by which Abraham accepts upon himself this historic trial and its mental agonies and spiritual sufferings. God called to him, "Abraham!" and, in magnificent simplicity, the response is forthcoming: Hinneni, "Behold, here I am," or, "I am ready."

One of the commentators, R. Abraham b. Rambam--the only son of Maimonides-- emphasizes the quality of this response by contrasting it to that of Adam. He writes, *mah rav ha-hilluk*, "How great the difference," *bein maamaro hinneni, u-maamar zikno Adam va-ira ki erom anokhi va-ahavei*, between Abraham who answered the Divine call with the word *hinneni*, and Adam who, when God called out to him, "Where are thou?" answered, "I saw that I was naked so I hid."

Now, this comparison is somewhat disturbing. The answer of Adam, is, after all, the response of a human being pursued by God who demands an explanation for a terrible failure, whereas Abraham's response is to a Divine call not necessarily connected with any human offense. Is this not, then an individual comparison? Is not Abraham great enough in his own right and without seeking to enhance his reputation at the expense of his grandfather Adam?

The answer I wish to offer is one which, I believe, not only justifies the comment of R. Abraham b. Rambam, but has the widest ramifications both for a proper understanding of the Bible and for our own lives. This answer is that both--Adam and Abraham--were, in a sense, being reprimanded!

The story of the Akedah begins with the words *va-yehi ahar ha-devarim ha-eleh*, "and it came to pass after these things." What things? asked the Rabbis. In their answer

they indicate that the words of the Bible imply some severe introspection. *Ahar hirhurei devarim shehayu sham*; the Akedah took place after deep meditation and self-analysis by Abraham. Abraham, according to the Rabbis, was troubled. He had a bad conscience which caused these *hirhurei devarim*, these introspective sessions. The Akedah was a kind of punishment, it was brought on by Abraham's errors.

What is it that troubled Abraham? There are several interpretations (see Bereshit R. 55). One of them (a Midrash cited in "*Kav ha-Yashar*") refers to the special celebration arranged by Abraham in honor of the weaning of his son Isaac. The Bible refers to that party as *mishteh gadol*, a great feast. Our tradition maintains that the greatness of this banquet was due to the guests who attended: *gedolim hayu sham*, a party which was attended by all the giants of the time. Shem attended, Eber was there, Og was one of the guests-- all the crowned heads of the ancient Near East were at the great party that Abraham had prepared. But this is precisely where the trouble lay: the *gedolim*, the great ones, were there; but there was a complete absence of *ketanim*, small people, ordinary human beings, the poor and the marginal and the unwanted. Certainly Abraham, who was renowned for his hospitality over all else, should have known enough that at his personal *simhah* he ought to have as major participants also the poor and rejected. Abraham's conscience troubled him; had he not contributed to a subtle transformation and dangerous degradation of the virtue of *hakhnasat orhim* from hospitality to mere entertainment? For this should be an occasion for the uplifting of the down-trodden spirits, not the name-dropping of high and exalted personages.

But whatever occasioned Abraham's troubled conscience, it was responsible for the Akeda episode. So

that the divine call to Abraham was a conscience-call. What R. Abraham b. Rambam meant, then, was that both Adam and Abraham responded to the call of a bad conscience-- Adam for the eating of the forbidden fruit, and Abraham for his omissions at the *mishteh gadol*--but: that is where the comparison ends. When it came time to the responses of these two individuals: *mah rav ha-hilluk*, how great the difference!

When Adam sinned and heard God calling him, he said *et kolekha shamati ba-gan*, "I heard Thy voice in the garden"; in the underbrush of his mind there takes place a rustling of a primitive conscience. *Va-ira ki erom anokhi*, there is a sudden awareness of his nakedness, of shame and disgrace; and so what does he do?--*va-ehavei*, he withdraws, hides himself, denies that he ever did anything wrong, he runs away and, when confronted by God, he blames his wife or the serpent...

How different is Abraham! God calls him and his response is: *Hinneni*, "Here I am!" I am willing to harness my bad conscience to a good use. I am ready to go through an *akedah*, to overcome the past by creative achievement in the future, teaching the world the real meaning of faith and the lengths to which one must go in order to uphold it. Rashi tells us of that word *hinneni* that it implies *leshon anavah*, *leshon zimmun*-- it is the language of both meekness and preparedness. Indeed so, it is the language of *anavah* or meekness because it reveals a bad conscience; and it is the language of *zimmun* or preparedness, because Abraham is ready to do something about it: he is ready to take the bad conscience and make good use of it.

So the difference between Adam and Abraham is in what to do with a bad conscience: whether to hide or to use it. And *mah rav ha-hilluk*, what a difference there is between them! A bad conscience irritates the mind and the heart, until that bad conscience is either repressed or converted into something creative and constructive. It is much like the grain of sand that is either expelled by the oyster from under its shell, or transformed into a shiny and precious pearl.

This example of Abraham has been repeated at chosen moments throughout history. The Nobel prizes which were awarded this past week or two are such an example. Noble is a man who gave a fortune for awards to those who contribute to the advancement of peace in the world. Why did he do this? --it was an effort to overcome his bad conscience for having created dynamite and made war more destructive. Many of the greatest Torah scholars in

our history were people who brought to their spiritual and intellectual endeavors a special passion that arose from the knowledge of having strayed in their youth.

The same holds true for philanthropy. I knew a man, out of town, who was very generous in his endowments of various communal institutions. As so often happens, others did not begrudge him this mitzvah. They pointed to certain incidents in his past which were not luminous examples of all the great virtues. What should be the Jewish reaction? It should be: marvelous! God bless that man! The greatest communal institutions were built by people who knew how to use a bad conscience and convert it to good use. Hospitals, schools, synagogues, welfare institutions of all kinds, are the products of people who have learned from Abraham to take their *hirhurei devarim* and use it to say *hinneni* to the call of God. And who, after all, is there who is so saintly that he never has an occasion for a bad or troubled conscience? On the contrary, any man or woman who honestly feels that he or she has no bad conscience at all, should have a bad conscience for being so insensitive as not to have a bad conscience! Would we rather that a man have no conscience at all, that he be a moral idiot? Or would we rather that he be like Adam who responds with the *ve-ehavei* that he hide himself, that he deny his past, that he evade his responsibility? Certainly the transformation of guilt into philanthropy has a respectable precedent in the *hinneni* of Abraham.

The State of Israel was built by Western democracies reacting to a bad conscience of cosmic dimensions: insensitivity to Jewish suffering under Hitler and the turning away of the Jewish refugees from the shores of Palestine. But finally the democracies learned, in however small a measure, to put their bad conscience to good use and not to oppose the founding of the State of Israel. Of course, the good use that ultimately resulted can in no wise equal the enormity of the crime which they witnessed in silence; but at least it was better than the kind of reaction of which Adam is the stereotype.

The history of Christianity towards the Jew is a historic disgrace. Any sensitive human being who happens to be Christian ought to go throughout life with a bad conscience because of his religion. So that when the Catholic Ecumenical Council offers a declaration concerning the Jews which puts us in somewhat better light than has been true in the past, or when Billy Graham and his Evangelists announce, as they did this past week, that they apologize to the Jews--this is an attempt, which

although only partially successful and inadequate, and disregarding for a moment some of the subtle implications of which we must be aware, is at least an attempt to make good use of a bad conscience.

To some extent, though not completely, even American Jewry support of the State of Israel--whether the UJA, or the Yeshivot, or other institutions-- is a form of expression of a bad conscience. Many American Jews feel that we were safe during World War II while our fellow Jews suffered. After 1948 there was a State of Israel ready to receive us, yet we have not gone nor have many of us sent our children to settle there. If we feel a troubled conscience, that is a good and healthy sign, for it ought to be troubled! But we have learned how to put that bad conscience to good use-- and that is in our unfailing support of the State of Israel and its great institutions.

All this brings me to a painful point: painful not because it is controversial, but because it should at all be necessary. I refer to the attitude of Jews to certain minorities in this country.

I would like to state at the outset that I prefer to see the problem in its true perspective without any extremist appeal. We Jews, as Jews, are not responsible for the condition of Negroes in the United States. Our grandfathers were not slaveholders who devised this cruel and inhuman system. When the Negroes were being emancipated in the 1860s, we too were being emancipated in the ghettos of Europe. Indeed, on this very day of October 29th, in 1833 in Austria, we experienced our very first instance of legal political emancipation.

Nevertheless, we have participated in a growing economy which has to a large extent thrived on the exploitation of minorities, and we have shared deeply held prejudices about them. One need not masochistically excuse bigots like Leroy Jones and embrace other fanatics of the Black Power movement in order to appreciate that all whites suffer, or should suffer, some degree of a bad conscience.

The question is, what shall we do about it? Not to feel any guilt, any troubling of the conscience, is a sign of our own moral failure. We must experience some *hirhurei devarim*. Yet to go overboard and dedicate our whole life to civil rights, to make of it an ersatz religion to replace Judaism, to concentrate only on the right of others, while ignoring the preservation of our own community here and overseas-- is to lose perspective and to reveal an inner moral weakness while we try to strengthen ourselves

morally in some other direction. But in between these two extremes there are two ways, one which is right and one which is wrong. The pattern of Adam is to hide and shift the blame--to Black Power bigots, to the hoodlums who riot in Watts, to Negro anti-semitism. We conveniently ignore the fact that in whole sections of our country there are whites who hold power and yet we have tolerated it; that hoodlums come in all colors; and that while Negro anti-Semitism is terribly troubling, we have had some degree of experience with white anti-Semitism--six million killed in our time alone! And thus, like Adam, we suppress our bad conscience and we become part of that insidious "backlash" movement.

But the pattern of Abraham is not that at all. The people of Israel do not participate in backlash or frontlash or sidelash. The descendants of Abraham do not lash--at all! Rather, they attempt to respond constructively and creatively and sympathetically. Within this framework of putting the bad conscience to good use there may be several techniques about which well intentioned people may disagree. But they will not allow side issues to becloud their main goal of finding a clear and moral way out of our country's painful racial dilemma.

Adam's reaction justifies the cynical definition of conscience by H.L. Mencken as "an inner voice that warns us that somebody is looking." Abraham's response-- that of readiness to experience God's trials and teach the world how great must be the dedication of the man of faith-- this response cares only for God's call and answers with the *hinneni* of a creative conscience.

In the "Ethics of the Fathers," before enumerating the ten trials to which Abraham was subject, the Mishnah tells us that there were ten generations from Adam to Noah, and ten again from Noah to Abraham, during which time the world became successively worse. In other words, it took twenty generations for mankind to learn what to do with a bad conscience. In our own time, with our accelerated pace of living, we cannot afford the luxury of waiting quite that long before learning--in our lives, as Jews, as Americans, as human beings--the difference between Adam and Abraham in what to do with a bad conscience.

In the words of R. Abraham b. Rambam, *mah rav ha-hilluk*-- what a difference between them!.

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Still He Delayed

Dr. Erica Brown

He who hesitates is lost,” goes the well-known proverb. I heard this as a teenager for the first time and wondered what it meant. I get lost when I don’t know directions. I don’t get lost when I take too long to make a decision. Or do I?

There’s an incredible moment in Parshat Vayera that happens just as the sun is about to rise. It’s the time of day when possibility opens, when another morning is about to unfold and with it, a sense of limitlessness. It’s the moment that explains why he who hesitates is lost. Tentativeness can make us unsure of who we are. Our indecision can make us feel untethered. It is at this liminal hour when Lot was approached by an angel with an important message: he told Lot to save himself and his family from the catastrophe about to plague Sodom and Gemorrah:

As dawn broke, the angels urged Lot on, saying, “Arise, take your wife and your two remaining daughters, lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city.” Still he delayed. (Gen. 19:15-16)

Lot ignored the metaphor of the dawn. With doom on the horizon but the glimmer of light that this day could be different for him and those he loved, “still he delayed.” Rashi writes that Lot delayed to save his property, putting money above his life and that of his family. Radak, a medieval French commentator, expands on this reading. In Genesis 19:12, at an earlier stage, the angel permitted Lot to take what he could with him. As time passed, every hour became increasingly consequential. Lot was forced to forego his possessions and leave at dawn with only the clothing on his back. Hesitation has its costs. Still Lot wasn’t ready.

The Hebrew word used for delay in the verse is “*vayitmameha*.” The root of this word is “mah” – which sounds like the Hebrew for “what.” It is as if in delaying, we are asking what, what, what shall I do? The word itself sounds like the hesitation that it represents. It only appears in *Tanakh* 9 times. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance* also defines this word as to question, to be reluctant, to linger, to stay, or to tarry.

Its second appearance in Genesis also comes at a life-threatening time. Judah petitioned Jacob to allow him to bring Benjamin down to Egypt at Joseph’s command. Every delay brought the family closer to starvation: “For we could have been there and back twice if we had not *delayed*”

(Gen. 43:10). The word’s association with food appears again in Exodus as we were leaving Egypt: “And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not *delay*...” (Ex. 12:39). The prophet Habakkuk awaited a prophecy, no matter how long it took to come to fruition: “Even if it *tarryes*, wait for it still; for it will surely come, without delay” (Hab. 2:3). A psalm tells us never to put off a mitzva: “I have hurried and not *delayed* to keep Your commandments” (Ps. 119:60).

Lot characteristically miscalculated and misjudged the long-term implications of his actions, always missing opportunities. He consistently, until his very end, made poor decisions. This time was no different. He could have been heir to Abraham and the next leader of a new nation. Instead, he fathered two sons through incest who grew into two nations that were arch enemies of the Jews. There are long-term implications of inaction.

Several years ago, management consultant and bestselling writer Ron Carucci wrote that, “Too many leaders avoid making tough calls” (“Leaders, Stop Avoiding Hard Decisions,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 13, 2018). He conducted a 10-year longitudinal study of more than 2,700 leaders and found that 57% of new executives confronted decisions that were “more complicated and difficult than they expected.” As a result, many leaders make excuses for not making hard decisions because they don’t want to lose status with followers. Carucci boils down these excuses into three common phrases:

“*I’m being considerate of others*” is a catch-all statement of avoidance. Leaders put off decisions because morale is low, yet it usually gets lower when those in charge evade honest conversations; this only leads to greater dysfunction. Ignoring problems to avoid disappointing people also means putting off creative solutions and leaving those very people “demoralized and confused by their leader’s deceit.” Decision that should have been made weeks, months, or years ago have been intentionally avoided.

“*I’m committed to quality and accuracy*.” Some leaders have difficulty making decisions that have a long-term impact because not knowing outcomes generates high levels of anxiety. They fear looking stupid, Carucci observes, so they ask for more data or seek prolonged consultations. They often ask too many people. “Taking

action in the face of incomplete data,” Carucci writes, “is an executive’s job. You sometimes won’t know if the decision was ‘right’ until long after it’s made.” When leaders avoid hard decisions because of these factors, they communicate that looking right is more important than doing what’s right.

“*I want to be seen as fair.*” It’s not hard to understand why leaders want to be seen as caring and just. To avoid playing favorites, however, they risk creating environments where everyone is praised equally or no one is. This, Carucci argues, is also unfair and disrespectful. High performers need acknowledgement if you want great organizations. People who underperform also need to know, even if some difficult decisions and conversations follow.

When leaders repeatedly make excuses for inaction, they are, in effect, telling others that self-interest and self-protection are more important than the organization, the family, or others in their orbit. When Lot and his family were forcibly brought outside Sodom, they were not subtle in their demand: “Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away.” But Lot said to them, ‘Oh no, my lord!

The Morning After

Rabbi Joshua (*The Hoffer*) Hoffman z”l

This week’s parsha reaches its crescendo with its account of the akeidah, in which Avrohom, responding to a prophetic call, willingly takes his son Yitzchok to Mt. Moriah to bring him as a sacrifice to God. The two were accompanied by Eliezer, Avrohom’s servant, and Yishmoel, Avrohom’s son from Hagar, until they reached the mountain, but, at that point, father and son continued on alone, leaving the two attendants behind. At the last minute, when Yitzchok is tied to an altar and Avrohom is about to slaughter him, an angel of God commands him to desist from his intended action, he brings a ram as a sacrifice instead, descends from the mountain and begins his trek back home. Interestingly, the Torah, in its description of Avrohom and Yitzchok’s trip to Mt. Moriah, *repeatedly* notes that the two of them walked together - ‘yachdav.’ The rabbis tell us that this implies a oneness of determination, on the part of father and son, both willingly going to fulfill God’s command. After the akeidah, when Avrohom descends from the mountain, we are told, “Avrohom returned to his young men, and they stood up and went together (yachdov) to Be’er Shova”

You have been so gracious to your servant and have already shown me so much kindness in order to save my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me, and I die” (Gen. 19:17-19).

Once again, Lot made excuses. Even when given another chance, he could not commit and, thus, brought doom to his family. On some level, Lot never truly left Sodom. In *Morality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “Moral hazard occurs when one party is involved in risktaking, but knows that, should the decision turn out to be a bad one, someone else will pay the price. When this happens, there is a distortion in the decision-making process.” Lot’s distortion had immense moral implications for his family and eventually for our history.

Abraham picked up his life, changed it for the good, and changed the known world as a result. Lot, however, ended his life in ignominy. Ambivalence is rarely neutral. Indecision is also a decision. It’s a decision to abdicate responsibility. It does make us feel lost. Yet every day, we wake up to a new dawn and the new decisions dawn brings. With each rising sun, we have another chance to rise, to shine, and to make better choices.

(Bereishis 22:19). Where was Yitzchok? Ibn Ezra says that it is understood that he was with Avrohom, although the Torah does not mention him explicitly. However, the midrash, cited in Targum Yonasan (scholastically known as Pseudo-Yonasan) says that he went to study in the yeshiva of Shem for thirty years. A somewhat similar comment can also be found in Bereishis Rabbah. A number of explanations of this midrash have been offered over the years, some of which I would like to mention, as a kind of foil to the explanation that I will then suggest.

My teacher, Rav Aharon Soloveichik, zt”l in his book *The Warmth and the Light*, mentions the midrash we cited above, and asks why Avrohom decided, now that Yitzchok was already thirty-seven ears old, according to one midrash, to send his son to yeshivah. Why hadn’t he sent them there before? Rav Aharon explains that previous to the akeidah, Avrohom was not willing to part with his beloved son, even in order to learn Torah. Moreover, he felt, where could there be a better place to learn Torah than his own house, where Avrohom could personally teach him the Torah which he, as the rabbis tell us, intuited on

his own? God wanted to show Avrohom, through the trial of the akeidah, that he was capable of making the supreme sacrifice, of offering his son up to God completely, and, therefore, he was certainly capable of the small, daily sacrifice of having his son study Torah away from home. Avrohom, learning this lesson, decided it was now time to send Yitzchok away to learn at the yeshivah of Shem, and that is why he is not mentioned in the Torah as descending the mountain together with his father.

Rav Aharon's explanation of the midrash helps us to understand, from Avrohom's point of view, why he now sent Yitzchok away to study in a yeshivah. However, it does not explain what the purpose of Yitzchok studying in an out-of-town yeshivah was. Moreover, even with Rav Aharon's explanation, we still need to understand why the Torah tells us that Avrohom and his two attendants walked '*yachdav*' - together - implying a similarity of purpose. This term, while appropriate in the case of Avrohom and Yitzchok walking together, hardly seems appropriate in connection with Avrohom walking from the akeidah with Ellizer and Yishmoel. Why, then, is it employed? Rav Mordechai Gifter, in his *Pirkei Torah* to parshas Vayeira, cites the Targum Yonasan, and also discusses the use of the word *yachdav*. Dealing with the second point first, Rav Gifter writes that Avrohom, out of his great humility, did not display, in an outward way, the spiritual heights he had reached on Mt. Moriah to Eliezer and Yishmoel. Rather, he continued to act as he had before, in way that he could continue to relate to his two attendants, on their lower level. Yitzchok, however, achieved the status of an '*olah temimah*,' or an unblemished offering, at the akeidah, and he had to go to the yeshivah of Shem and study for thirty years in order to maintain that level. This explanation, however, makes an assumption about the course of study in that yeshivah which may not be supported by another midrashic source, as I would like to demonstrate.

The midrash in the beginning of parshas Vayeitzei tells us that Ya'akov, on his way to Charan, in flight from his brother Eisav, went to the yeshiva of Ever and studied Torah there for fourteen years before continuing his journey. What was it that he studied there for all those years, that he had not already learned during his long years as one who dwells in tents and studies Torah? Rav Ya'akov Kaminetsky, in his *Emes L'Ya'akov*, explains that Ya'akov was about to leave Eretz Yisroel, and he needed to learn how to apply his learning to the different conditions he would encounter in exile, having to deal with people such

as Lavan who were idolaters as well as being dishonest. Ya'akov's great success in building a large family that recognized God and was devoted to His service testifies to the fact that he learned his lessons well during those extra years of study in yeshivah. Based on Rav Ya'akov's explanation of Ya'akov's experience, we can now go back and better understand how both Avrohom and Yitzchok comported themselves in the aftermath of the akeidah.

Contrary to what Rav Gifter writes, that the use of the word *yachdav* in regard to the relationship between Avrohom and his two servants as they left the scene of the akeidah indicates that Avrohom, out of his humility, comported himself on their level, I would like to suggest that he sought to elevate Eliezer and Yishmoel to his level. The midrash tells us that the reason Avrohom left the two attendants behind at the foot of the mountain is that when he saw a divine cloud hovering over the mountain, he asked all three - Yitzchok, Eliezer and Yishmoel what they saw. While, the two attendants replied that they merely saw a mountain, Yitzchok replied that he saw a mountain with divine cloud hovering over it. Avrohom then understood that Eliezer and Yishmoel would not be able to take in what was about to happen on the mountain, and therefore told them to wait for him while Yitzchok and he continued on. However, when he returned, he was determined to communicate something of his experience to them, and, so they walked together. The result of Avrohom's efforts can be seen in Eliezer's subsequent trip to Charan to find a wife for Yitzchok. He encountered a family of idolaters, and described to them the experiences he had in seeking a proper match for Yitzchok, emphasizing God's providence throughout. By the time he finished, these former idolaters said that it was all from God. As my teacher, Rav Herzl Kaplan, zt"l. explained, this is the meaning of the statement of the rabbis, that the conversations of the servants of the patriarchs are dearer than the words of Torah themselves. Yishmoel, too the rabbis tell us, underwent a process of repentance, and joined Yitzchok in burying Avrohom when he passed away. Thus, Avrohom was able to bring his experience at the akeidah down into this world, and use it as a source of inspiration to motivate his two attendants to reach new spiritual heights.

Yitzchok, on the other hand, was so changed by the event of the akeidah that he was described as an '*olah temimah*,' a perfect sacrifice, and was unable to interact with people in a way that would elevate them. He therefore needed to go to the yeshivah of Shem and learn how to

do just that, as his son Ya'akov would later need to do before he encountered the idolaters in Charan. Once Yitzchok returned from the yeshivah and confronted the Pelishtim, as we learn in parshas Toldos, he, too was able to

interact with them in a way that convinced them of God's providential hand in this world, until Avimelech, king of the Pelishtim, referred to him as being 'blessed of God' (Bereishis 26:29).

The Power of Our Little Minyan

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh

(Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur given at Gruss Kollel on November 17, 2016)

One of the many fascinating episodes in this week's Parsha is Avraham's argument with Hashem about Sodom. And in the preface, Hashem says: *Ha-mechaseh Ani me-Avraham asher Ani oseh*—can I hide this from Avraham? And then, if we skip two psukim, Hashem says: I will not hide it from Avraham. *Va-yomer Hashem za'akas Sedom va-Amora ki raba ve-chatasam ki chavda me-od*. And he tells Avraham everything, and they have a lengthy conversation. In between, Hashem goes on a little tangent about Avraham. *Ve-Avraham hayo yihyeh le-goy gadol va-atzum, ve-nivrechu vo kol goyei ha-aretz*. He will become a great nation and a blessing to the entire world. *Ki yedativ le-ma'an asher yitzaveh es banav ve-es beiso acharav*—I know he will command his household after him. *Ve-shamru derech Hashem la'asos tzedaka u-mishpat*—he will keep the way of Hashem, etc. to show how great Avraham is. Why is it necessary to mention Avraham's greatness? And how is this relevant to the fact that Hashem will let him know and not hide anything?

There are many pshatim. Rashi brings a midrash that Hashem just recalled the praise of Avraham, even though it was not relevant to this conversation. Rashbam says (and Rashi himself interprets similarly): What does the fact that Avraham is so great have to do with the fact that Hashem should tell him His plans for Sodom? Because I promised Avraham to make him into a great nation and to give him this land—Eretz Yisroel. And Sodom and Amora are a part of it, and it is not right that I should overturn a portion of this land without checking with him first—because I gave him this ba'alus. That's a more technical explanation. The Ramban says: Avraham understands the right derech and shares my values. Therefore, I can discuss with Avraham and let him into my inner circle because he understands where I am coming from—how I run the world. Hence, he can intelligently participate in this conversation.

However, the Or Hachaim ha-Kadosh has a deeper pshat—which I think is even more representative

of pshuto shel mikra. He says that it's not just that Hashem, technically, needs to ask Avraham's permission because He is destroying his land. Or—like the Ramban's perspective—that he is a proper person for this conversation because he understands Hashem's perspective. The Or Hachaim says: This destruction of Sodom has to do with the entire theme of the Parsha—the birth of Yitzchak and, therefore, the continuation of Avraham's Mesorah and the creation of Klal Yisroel. He says: Avraham will become a great nation, *ve-nivrechu vo kol goyei ha-aretz*—he will be a blessing to everyone else. I do not only want Avraham to become a great nation. I want him to be a blessing to the entire world. *Ki yedativ le-ma'an asher yitzaveh es banav ve-es beiso acharav*. Avraham is going to direct people to keep the way of Hashem. What does that entail? Or Hachaim asks: What was Avraham supposed to learn from this conversation? On the basic level, he understood that evildoers do not escape punishment while the righteous acquire their reward. But on a deeper level, says the Or Hachaim, Avraham learned from this conversation that Sodom and Amora—a little self-contained world—were destroyed because they were so evil. But had there been a tiny community of tzadikim among them—just a bare minimum minyan of ten—they could have changed everything and changed the fate of the whole city from destruction to salvation. He says: That's exactly the lesson Hashem wanted to teach Avraham. Now that you are going to have Yitzchak and found a nation, *ve-nivrechu becha kol goyei ha-aretz*. What's the purpose of your nation? What's the purpose of having Yitzchak and building Klal Yisroel? Not just for the sake of the few people who are tzadikim! Because even if there are 8 billion people in the world, a small community of tzadikim can make a difference between the world being hopeless and doomed and the world that has hope for salvation. *Asher yitzave es banav ve-es beiso acharav. . . la'asos tzedaka u-mishpat*. Hashem says to Avraham: Your children are

going be that minyan of people in the world that could become Sodom, and change its fate to the fate of Geula. And that's what Avraham took out of that conversation. And I think that the *nafka mina* for us is exceedingly clear. Everyone has their opinions of what's going on in the world. But one thing is for sure. Compared to the standards of the Torah, the world we live in sometimes seems hopeless. Sometimes it seems that the conduct of the people in the world is a far cry from what we believe it should be. People have descended into such aveiros. What's our job under these circumstances? What are we supposed to do for this world? Hashem is telling Avraham here: You should cultivate your community. Stand for what is right. Be *korei be-Shem Hashem*. If you can build a *kehila* and *mechazek* your friends and family to do the right thing, stand for *Shem Hashem*, and walk in the *derech of tzedaka u-mishpat*, then there is hope for the entire world. As long as you preserve this *Mesorah*, someday, you will be *mashpia* on the world. Not only will you be fulfill *lema'an*

havi Hashem al Avraham es asher diber alav but also *ve-nevrechhu bo kol goyei ha-aretz*. And it's our job to be frum for ourselves and to do the right thing no matter what anyone says. We must remember that the reason Hashem placed us in this world—the reason why the *Klal Yisroel* is here—is to do the right thing. And if we do the right thing, there is hope that eventually everyone will come around. There will be a *brachah* for the entire world that will help destruction turn into an ultimate possibility of all the nations being *korei be-shem Hashem*—*Ki az ehfoch el amim safu vrura likro chulam be-Shem Hashem*, etc. Avraham was *korei be-Shem Hashem*. Our job is to be *korei be-Shem Hashem*. And eventually, we will save the world with that. And the entire world will realize and be *korei be-Shem Hashem* just like our little minyan—the *Klal Yisroel*. We are that minyan. *Klal Yisroel* are the *asara tzadikim* in the city who are going to make a difference to the entire world and bring it to *Geula*. *Shabbat Shalom*.

The Divine Temple and the Human Heart

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Everything was at stake. From Avraham's love for his son to his reputation as a man of G-d- it was all on the line. At the tail end of his career, the first person to discover Hashem was summoned to the ultimate religious trial. Would this courageous pioneer forfeit everything he had accomplished, both personally and professionally, to obey an incomprehensible divine command? Could he pull the trigger and sacrifice his own son acting upon an instruction delivered by a G-d he believed in, but had never actually seen. Everything was at stake atop that windswept mountain during the binding of Isaac.

Though his internal conscience could not decipher this unusual command, Avraham willingly submitted. During his three-day travel to the mountain, he struggled to reconcile this puzzling demand with his own moral instinct. Unable to understand this frightful request, Avraham suspended his own moral conscience in favor of the divine will. In doing so, he passed the basic test of religion and carved a template for our own religious experiences.

Synchronicity and Submission

As Hashem is compassionate and desires human

prosperity, His will is synchronous with human interest. Studying His word and obeying His will improves both our personal lives and the overall human condition. Religion isn't meant to stifle or suppress human experience, but to empower and enhance it. There is no clash between the divine will and the human heart. It may not be immediately obvious, but every divine instruction improves the human experience. Hashem isn't arbitrary and doesn't issue vacant or purposeless commands. As we mature religiously, we discover deeper understandings of this overlap between religion and human benefit. There is no conflict between the human heart and the divine temple. Hashem created each and they coincide.

However, everyone, at some point, arrives at that mountain and experiences an *akeidah* moment, in which they cannot decipher the mystery of the divine will. At some point, we all face the Avraham challenge: can we suspend human reason, silently obey the divine mystery and submit to the will of a higher being? Avraham programmed that ability within every Jew, and we have been faithfully perpetuating his legacy ever since. As much as we endeavor to reconcile religion with human interest, we always fall short. At that stage, when we are riddled by Hashem's indecipherable will, our obedience and

submission kick in to ensure durable religious commitment even absent of human understanding. Faith is part reason, and part trust.

Humans and Robots

Yet, for all his submission to divine instructions, Avraham isn't portrayed as a hollowed out and unemotional automaton. In theory, the most efficient way for him to kill his son would be to take his emotions out of the equation, numb his feelings, objectify his son and act dispassionately. By muffling his emotions, Avraham can dispense this terrifying act which his conscience rails against.

Yet, Avraham is portrayed as a loving father, not an indifferent robot or a crazed fanatic. The torah's description of the akeidah contains ten terms which derive from the word 'av', denoting a father, or from the term 'ben', denoting a son. These terms are completely redundant, as we are well aware that Yitzchak is Avraham's son. The recurring references to a father and son underscore that neither father nor son abdicated their affection for one another, even as they proceeded toward the unimaginable. They retained their humanity and deepened their relationship, even though they chose to prioritize the will of Hashem over human instinct.

Likewise, the midrash reports that until the very last minute, Avraham prayed to Hashem to rescind the harsh decree. Even though Avraham knew that fulfillment of this command would reshape religious history, he still desperately pleads for a way out. To do any less would have rendered him a monster. He realizes that, in the end, if the decree isn't repealed, he will have no choice but to obey Hashem's instructions. However, he continues to pray for a reversal, hoping that he could avoid this fearsome challenge. There is absolutely no contradiction between his readiness to execute divine will and his praying to avoid that test. Bending his will to Hashem's will isn't meant to eviscerate his natural human feelings for his beloved son.

Finally, the midrash describes the actual moment in which the sacrifice "almost" occurred. Isaac is tightly bound, as his father raises the knife to perform the sacrifice. Tears flow down the father's cheeks as he recognizes this to be his final goodbye to his son. Even though Avraham's heart is overjoyed at obeying the divine command he still

sobs at the thought of killing his son.

Many Chambers

Hashem fashioned our hearts into multi-chambered organs because He expects us to simultaneously sense multiple, and often clashing, emotions. On that day Avraham's heart was suffused with both joy and sadness. He submitted his decision to divine authority, but preserved his humanity and his conscience. Hashem expected no less. He desired a kind and sympathetic father standing upon a mountain, rather than a cold manikin emptied of the noble impulses which Hashem Himself implanted. Avraham's heroism consisted not only in his submission to Hashem, but also in his preservation of his humanity.

Two Systems

Hashem delivered two "guidance systems" by which we live our lives. One is a religious system, a list of commandments, a roster of 613 do's and don'ts distilled within the Torah. Additionally, He vested us with common sense and moral intuition, a sense of right and wrong which provide a navigational compass. In the rare cases in which these systems appear to clash, faith demands submitting the human heart to divine code. However, these akeidah-like cases are very rare.

More often, the divine law and the pure human heart complement each other. Even if a decision isn't directly legislated by the Torah, it should still be inspected based upon moral conscience. When we listen to our inner virtue we are listening to a divine whisper, even if it isn't a divinely articulated commandment.

Thankfully our world is benefiting from a religious surge, as Torah study and Halacha observance are each on the rise. We have access to more Torah knowledge and greater familiarity with the first system of Hashem's law than in the past. Sometimes though, the emphasis upon halacha mutes our inner voice of human conscience and morality. Many of life's decisions lie outside the purview of halacha, but must still be shaped by common sense and moral intuition. These moral instincts were planted by Hashem, and we should listen to their murmur. Hashem speaks to us through His torah, but he quietly whispers to us through our conscience. Religion moves in stereo.

The Merits of the Wicked of Sodom

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's sedra, Parshas Vayeira, the Torah continues its narrative of the life - and trials - of Avraham and Sarah. The sedra begins with the visit of the three angels (guests) to the tent of Avraham and Sarah. From this chapter we learn about bikur cholim (visiting the sick), hachnasas orchim (welcoming guests), and that Hashem's yeshua can come at any time. The narrative continues with Avraham davening to Hashem to save the cities of Sodom and Amorah; the visit of the angels to the home of Lot; the destruction of Sodom and Amorah; Lot's relations with his daughters in the cave; Sarah being taken by Avimelech; Yitzchak's birth and Yishmael's banishment; and the watershed event of Akeidas Yitzchak.

Avraham becomes the father and founder of our nation for many reasons, which are seen through his different trials and tests from the time we meet him (end of Bereishis 11) to the day he dies (Bereishis 25:8): his faith in One G-d, his professing this faith to the world, his acts of chessed for others, his teaching others, his righteousness and courage, his negation and selfless devotion to the command of Hashem.

In addition to all this, it is in our sedra that something astonishing occurs. It has been twenty generations from Adam to Avraham, and for the first time since the creation of man, Avraham introduces a new concept to the world (and our nation): prayer on behalf of others that seems to challenge G-d's Divine intention and plan.

When Hashem told Noach that He was going to destroy the entire world, "Noach did all that Hashem commanded him to do": he built the ark and saved himself and his family, just as G-d said.

When Hashem told Avraham what He was about to do - in the words of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (Bereishis 18:17-19), "G-d had said: I have revealed My plan to you (the angels); how can I keep it from Avraham? After all, he, too, is none other than a messenger of G-d on earth, and it is right that he should know of My decision, so that he succeed in carrying out his mission" - Avraham challenged and negotiated with G-d, and prayed on behalf of the people of Sodom.

Instead of accepting the Divine decree at face value, Avraham entered into the battle of prayer, in an effort to change Hashem's mind (keviyachol). This was a pattern that Moshe would adopt and follow in his rule as leader.

In what merit does Avraham plead with G-d? If there are fifty righteous in the city, will You not forgive for the sake of the fifty? הַלְלָה לְךָ מֵעֵשֶׂת כְּדָבָר הַזֶּה, לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע, - It would be a profanation to You to do such a thing, to kill the righteous along with the wicked... Shall the Judge of all earth not do justice! (ibid, v.25). If there are forty-five righteous, if there are forty, if there are thirty, twenty... and final negotiations: what if there are ten righteous men? In each case, G-d said for the sake of the righteous He would not destroy the cities.

Why, if there were fifty righteous amongst the wicked, would the wicked merit salvation? Was it simply because the righteous carry the wicked, or do the wicked actually have a merit of their own which will stand for them in their defense?

Offering a unique, powerfully relevant and timely perspective, Rav S. R. Hirsch writes, "G-d responds: If, even in a state such as Sedom, there are fifty righteous individuals who can publicly live a pure and upright life, and who can even stand up publicly as champions of purity, justice and humanity, then I will spare the sinners, not merely for the sake of the righteous individuals in Sedom - but בְּעַבְרָם (v.26), for their own sake, because of the very fact that these righteous still live among them; because of the very fact that the wicked still tolerate the righteous and allow them to remain. This itself is sufficient proof that the measure of guilt is not yet full, the degeneration has not yet reached the lowest level.

"The progressive development of evil has not yet come to completion, as long as the wicked stop at mere derision. As long as the wicked publicly tolerate the righteous, despite subjecting them to ridicule and insult; as long as the wicked do not prevent the righteous from acting; as long as honesty and the fear of G-d are regarded as foolish but not yet criminal, then the wicked have not yet sunk to the lowest possible level.

"Only when they no longer merely ridicule the righteous, but bare their teeth at them; only when they begin to regard benevolence as a crime against the public welfare, and benevolence is prohibited, impeded and punished - only then has the evil reached its culmination, the level of 'aino ma'ni'ach li'a'cheirim la'asos - he does not allow others to do' (i.e.: he prevents others from serving

Hashem).

“Thus, (G-d told Avraham that) the sin of the Emorites was not yet complete (Bereishis 15:16), as long as Avraham and his household were permitted to build an altar to the G-d of truth and loving-kindness. So too, the sentence of Sedom, was not sealed, as long as it was not clear that the evil had reached the ultimate depths of depravity” (The Hirsch Chumash, Feldheim, p.426-427, Commentary to Bereishis 18:26).

As we look at the world around us, Rav Hirsch’s words, first published one hundred and fifty years ago, reveal a startling insight into society today. When honesty and faith become sins in the eyes of mankind, when righteousness is no longer tolerated, when morality is so

corrupted that immorality becomes the new saintliness, when benevolence is considered a crime against the public welfare, and when champions of justice are portrayed, punished and vilified as the wicked amongst us, it is then that we know that society has reached the ultimate depths of depravity.

As we continue to live in exile amongst the nations of the world, and pine for the ultimate redemption when ‘Hashem will be One and His Name will be One’ (Zechariah 14:9), we must continue to battle the insidious societal forces that surround us, and ensure that we live our lives in a way that G-d’s Name, the truth of Torah, and our Code of Law always remain our guide in life.

Want To Be a Tzaddik? Just Think About It

Rabbi Yehuda Mann

In this week’s parshah Sarah gives birth to Yitzchak, who ultimately follows in the footsteps of our forefather Avraham and continues to establish the Jewish People. Sarah is concerned for his education and/or safety and doesn’t want Yitzchak to be influenced by Yishmael, who she sees as “mitzachek”. (Bereishit 21:9) Rashi explains that this means Yishmael was busying himself with 1) murder, 2) idol worship, or 3) adultery. One thing seems clear at this stage Yishmael was a terrible person.

However, when Yishmael and Hagar were banished from Avraham’s house and Yishmael was about to die of thirst, Hashem decided to save Yishmael. Rashi tells us that there was a discussion between Hashem and the angels at the time. The angels claimed that Yishmael shouldn’t be saved since his offspring would be enemies of Israel in the future. Hashem asked, “Currently, is he righteous or wicked?” The angels answered that currently he was righteous. Hashem declared, “In that case, I value him according to his current status. Therefore he will be saved, because he is a tzaddik...” (Rashi to Bereishit 21:17)

How could Yishmael be defined as a tzaddik when Sarah banished him for being either a murderer, an idol worshipper or involved in adultery?

The Talmud (Kiddushin 59b) tells us that if a man says to a woman, “Be betrothed to me on the condition that I am a righteous man,” then she is betrothed even if he was a completely wicked man. This is because perhaps in the meantime he had thoughts of repentance and became righteous. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik notes (Harirei

Kedem 1:41) that usually, in order to change one’s status from wicked to nonwicked there is a process that includes viduy verbally confessing the sins one has done. So how can we suggest that this wicked person became a tzaddik by simply having thoughts of repentance?

Rav Soloveitchik establishes the idea that one should distinguish between two terms a tzaddik and a baal teshuvah. In order to become a baal teshuvah one needs to indeed go through the long teshuvah process that includes confession. However, in order to become a tzaddik, one simply needs to have a thought of repentance *hirhur teshuvah*. The idea of being a tzaddik, a righteous person is not that currently I am doing great things, but rather that I intend and aspire to be good and do good. Once a person is going in the right direction, hoping to do good he immediately gains the status of a tzaddik.

For that reason, says Rav Soloveitchik, the woman is still betrothed even though the man was not really righteous because maybe, for a split second, he had in mind to change his ways in life and to direct himself towards doing good. From that moment, he really is considered a tzaddik.

With this idea, we could suggest that Yishmael also suddenly became a tzaddik. Indeed, in the house of Avraham and Sarah he did terrible things three of the most terrible transgressions a person can do but we see that he tried suddenly to communicate with Hashem. “Hashem heard the cry of the boy.” (Bereishit 21:17) The boy is crying out to Hashem, and is starting to direct his ways in a different direction, towards Hashem.

We learn from this entire parsha how easy it is to start to change ourselves. All we need to do is to decide that from now on we will try to be good and do good. From the

moment we make that decision, we can reach the status of a tzaddik.

We Have No Right to Judge

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Although Avraham initially mistook the three angels for ordinary travelers, he most certainly came to the realization that they were angels – at very least, when they informed him that his wife, Sara, would miraculously beget a child within a year. Yet, the impression we are given from the text is that Avraham continued serving and hosting the angels even after it became clear to him that these were not human beings, but heavenly beings who had no need for food.

Rav Nosson of Breslav, in *Likutei Halachos* (Hilchos Se'uda, 5:49), explains that Avraham continued serving the angels because he wanted them to experience the spiritual challenges that we human beings face in our physical world. The angels have no physical drives, no sinful temptations, and no negative impulses. They are instinctively drawn to do precisely what God instructs them to do; they have no inner resistance, no desires that they need to oppose in order to fulfill Hashem's will. This is why, as Chazal describe in numerous contexts, the angels prosecute against us in the heavens. Already at the time of creation, the angels argued that human beings should not be created, because they are so flawed. When Moshe Rabbeinu ascended to the heavens to receive the Torah, the angels demanded that the sacred Torah not be entrusted with frail, blemished human beings. They view us harshly and critically, because they are oblivious to just how difficult it is for us physical creatures to live a pristine, spiritual life here in our world.

Avraham wanted to silence the angels by showing them what kind of challenges we face, the fierce struggle that we need to wage to avoid wrongdoing. He served them a large meal so they could experience physicality, understand what being human is like, so they will stop prosecuting against us.

During a recent trip to Israel, I met with a certain rav who was telling me about a time when he consulted with one of the gedolim regarding a dilemma he faced in his community. The gadol urged him to continue showing kindness and compassion to the individual in question, regardless of what he did.

“If you were in his situation,” the gadol said to this rav, “you might not have passed the test, either. You have no idea what he was going through, the struggles and challenges he had that led him to do what he did.”

This is such an important lesson for all of us. Just as angels cannot fully understand the challenges facing human beings, we are not aware of the myriad internal struggles which our fellow is waging. We have no right to judge those who have acted wrongly, because we cannot know whether we would have passed the tests that they faced, whether we would have withstood the religious and moral challenges that they deal with. We need to live with greater compassion and greater sensitivity, humbly recognizing that we will never fully understand other people's unique struggles.

Sodom: The Home of Institutionalized Evil

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to have lived in Sodom? There are, after all, many places in the world, even today, that are perfidiously evil. But what specifically was it about Sodom that repulsed G-d so profoundly that He felt compelled to destroy it?

In Genesis 13:13, scripture depicts the inhabitants of

Sodom: וְאֵנְשֵׁי סְדֹם רָעִים וְחָטְאִים לְהִשָּׁם מְאֹד, *and the people of Sodom were wicked and sinful toward G-d exceedingly.* What is the meaning of the word “exceedingly?”

According to the Midrash, (Talmud, Sanhedrin, 109b), there was a particularly pernicious perversion to the evil of Sodom. The Midrash suggests that the people of Sodom even practiced mitzvot, such as the mitzvah of הַקְנֵסֶה

אֲוֹרְחִים—Hachnasat Orchim—of hospitality and welcoming guests, but in a perverted manner. Travelers arriving in Sodom, would be “warmly” welcomed by the Sodomite people. If the guest were tall, he would be placed in a hotel with short beds. If the guest was short they would place him in a hotel with long beds. To make certain that the guest was entirely “comfortable,” they would either stretch the guest’s limbs and pull them out of their sockets, or amputate their limbs to make certain that they fit the beds properly. The Midrash is obviously underscoring the fact that the Sodomites did believe in the value of hospitality—but in a most perverted way.

Similarly, the Midrash, (Talmud, Sanhedrin, 109b), expands on the verses, Genesis 18:21-22. In those verses G-d says that because the outcry of Sodom and Gemorrah has become so great and because their sin is so very grave, אֲרִדָּה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה, הַכְּצַעְקוֹתָהּ הַבְּאֵה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ כָלֵה, וְאִם לֹא, אֲדַעַה. “I [G-d] will descend and see if they act in accordance with its outcry which has come to Me—then destruction. And if not, I will know.”

Now the word הַכְּצַעְקוֹתָהּ could refer to the cry of the city Sodom. However, the Midrash suggests that since the word is a feminine possessive, and literally means “her cry,” that it refers to the cry of a woman. The Midrash says that there was a young woman in Sodom, (they say it was actually Paltith, the daughter of Lot), who had compassion on a newly-arrived poor person. Now the laws of Sodom declared it illegal for anyone to help any poor person. In fact, a popular sport in Sodom was to watch poor people languish from hunger and die of starvation. So, when the Sodomites noticed that this particular poor person was not dying of hunger, they sent their Sodomite “FBI” agents to investigate. It was soon discovered that Paltith, the daughter of Lot, was secreting food to the unfortunate soul. Paltith was then taken out and smeared with honey so the bees would sting her to death, or burned alive at the stake. The cries that G-d hears, and to which He responds, were the cries of poor Paltith.

Further in the biblical narrative, when Lot takes the guests, (who are really angels), into his home, and the people of Sodom come to presumably sexually attack them, Lot pleads with his Sodomite neighbors, Genesis 19:7, אֶלְאֵלֵינוּ, נָא אַחֵי תְרַעְוּ, “I beg of you my brothers, do not act wickedly. I have two daughters,” Lot says, “who have never known a man. I shall bring them out to you, and do to them as you please. But to these men do nothing, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof.” Once again, we see the

perversion of a good value. Lot is surely trying to protect his guests, but at the same time, he is prepared to throw his daughters to the “wolves” who will undoubtedly ravish them. A normal parent would do everything in his power, even give up his life, to save and secure his children.

We see that Sodom had so perverted the values of humanity, that virtue in Sodom had become vice, and vice had become virtue.

Elie Wiesel tells a fascinating story of a prophet who comes to Sodom, and begins to prophecy that Sodom will be destroyed if the people do not repent. At first, the people of Sodom are amused that any prophet would have the temerity to come to the most wicked place on the face of the earth, to try to persuade them to repent. After a while, they tire of his presence and of his haranguing prophecies and begin to taunt him and beat him, heave garbage at him, and make his life miserable. But the prophet was not to be deterred, and remained determined to continue his urgent prophecy.

After two or three years, a young child approached the prophet. “Mr. Prophet,” he said. “Of all the places on earth, why did you choose to prophecy in Sodom? You know its well-deserved reputation for being the most evil place on the face of the earth?” The prophet replied, “When I first arrived and began to prophecy, I truly believed that my words would be effective, and that the people of Sodom would heed my warnings and repent.” “But you see,” said the youngster, “Your words have fallen on deaf ears, and you are now the object of scorn and ridicule. Why then do you continue to prophecy?” Responded the prophet, “When I first began to prophecy, I thought I would change the people of Sodom. Now I continue to prophecy, in the hope that the people of Sodom do not change me!”

While, thankfully, most of our world is not Sodom, there are sinister Sodom-like elements to be found in many parts of the globe. If we think that we are protected from the influences of Sodom, we are gravely mistaken. Of course, it is vitally important to make every effort to live in healthy environments where we can raise good and moral children. And, yet, at the same time, no matter how positive the environment, there will always be negative elements. And so, it is incumbent upon us to continue prophesying—so that Sodom doesn’t change us, so that the destructive negative influences don’t impact on us, and that we and our families will be able to live good and noble lives.