

## Parashat Va'yera

Taught by Steve Bailey

### AVRAHAM PLEADS THE CAUSE

TEXT: Ber. 18:17-33

<sup>17</sup> Then HaShem said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? <sup>18</sup> Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. <sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of HaShem by doing what is right and just, so that HaShem will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him."

<sup>20</sup> Then HaShem said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous <sup>21</sup> that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached Me. If not, I will know."

<sup>22</sup> The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before HaShem. <sup>23</sup> Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you include the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup> What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? <sup>25</sup> Far be it from you to do such a thing! —to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike! Far be it from You! Does not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

<sup>26</sup> HaShem said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

<sup>27</sup> Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to HaShem, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, <sup>28</sup> what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?"

"If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

<sup>29</sup> Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?"

He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it."

<sup>30</sup> Then he said, "May HaShem not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?"

He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

<sup>31</sup> Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to HaShem, what if only twenty can be found there?"

He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it."

<sup>32</sup> Then he said, "May HaShem not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?"

He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

<sup>33</sup> When HaShem had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

Avraham and Sarah had just been informed that next year, Sarah (ninety years old and menopausal) would have a son. Both of them laughed at the absurdity of such a birth (17:17 & 18:12). Immediately thereafter, Avraham is told about Sodom. With this background we can approach the study of our verses:

1. Why did God wish to disclose His plans to Avraham (v.17)?
2. What is the connection between Avraham's mission (vv.18-19) and God's plan to destroy Sodom?
3. How is it conceivable that Avraham should accuse God of gross injustice (v.25)?
4. What sense was there to bargain with God over the number of innocent people to save (vv.26-32)? It is equally unjust for God to kill one innocent person as 100 innocent people!

To address the first question, Rav S.R. Hirsch reminds us that God had just promised an heir to carry on the covenant (see 17:4-9, 21). It follows that the disclosure had to be related to Avraham's role, both personally and towards his heirs. Indeed in the next two verses we see that Avraham's ultimate goal is to be the father of an influential nation through whom all nations will be blessed (refer back to the purpose of Avraham's name change in 17:5-6), and this is to be accomplished by transmitting the "way of God" -- to do "*tzedakah*" and "*mishpat*" to his descendants.

Verse 19 begins with an unusual phrase "*ki y'dativ*" which is usually translated "for I have known him." But this doesn't fit well with the next phrase and besides, it doesn't say anything significant -- of course God knows Avraham! Rav Hirsch explains that here in v. 19, it means "For I have given Avraham *my special care and attention* so that he (showing Me equal concern) will command his children that they may keep the way of God to do '*tzedakah*' and '*mishpat*,' so that, in turn, (since they will thereby keep the covenant) I may bring upon Avraham all that I have said (i.e., that he will be the source of blessing to all civilization)." Thus, we must view the imminent incident of Sodom as instructive to Avraham's charge to teach his descendants to "keep the way of God to do "*tzedakah*" and "*mishpat*." To understand the connection, we need to analyse these two Hebrew words.

Although they appear together often, the two terms reflect different concepts. "*Tzedakah*" from the root (*tz-d-k*) refers to *absolute social justice* -- especially expected benevolence towards others -- based on one's duty and responsibility towards God. It is objective social justice using as a standard, what is "right" according to God's system of values and ethics as revealed in the Torah. It is not personal benevolence based on subjective, social feelings (acting out of *feeling* kind, charitable or gracious).

In contrast to "*tzedakah*," "*mishpat*" (social law) refers to a society's legislated social laws based on the current governing body's views of the balance of power among its citizens. It is a *relative* standard of morality based on changing legislation.

In the ideal Jewish nation "*tzedeK*" and "*mishpat*" have the same absolute base (i.e., God's will), but in other societies, "*mishpatim*" are not necessarily tied to ethics and morals (the separation of Church and State). Sodom is a case in point; they had social law but not

social justice. As a society they legislated the view that "what I have (wealth, food, shelter) is mine, if you are a have-not, that's your problem -- we are not a welfare State!" (see Pirkei Avot 5: "What is mine is mine, what is yours is yours... This is the attribute of Sodom"). So they welcomed Lot, who was wealthy and could profit them, but rejected strangers, beggars and others suffering unfortunate economic conditions. All hospitality, kindness, charity or community support was outlawed as a societal value. This was "*mishpat S'dom*", the legislated social law of Sodom; there was no sense of responsibility to any one other than themselves.

Now, God wishes to teach Avraham -- and his children -- that this is not "the way of God." Avraham, the welcomer of strangers, the hospitable host, the kind and charitable model, stands in direct opposition to the Sodom society. Avraham is to transmit to his descendants the *inseparable* relationship between "*tzedakah*" and "*mishpat*"; our relationship to our fellow human being is based on our duty to God and His notion of social justice (as will be expressed in the teachings of the Torah).

Now the last two questions.

Beginning with verse 23, we are shocked by Avraham's "chutzpah"! He apparently accuses God of blatant injustice and then proceeds to bargain for the lives of innocents! It is not unlike a situation in which a hijacker threatens to blow up an airplane with both his political enemies and his own sympathizers aboard. The negotiator says, "Are you going to blow up the plane with your enemies and friends alike? If there are 50 innocent friends of yours, will you still blow up the plane? 45? 40? 30? 20? 10?" Avraham is not dealing with a crazed, irrational criminal, but ("*l'havdil*") with the Master of the Universe who is absolutely just! So what is this negotiation about?

First of all, says Rav Hirsch, v. 25 is to be understood rhetorically (not as an accusation), as an *unacceptable hypothesis*: "It would be sacrilege that God could kill the righteous with the wicked, such that the righteous would be as the wicked...." That hypothesis is rejected out-of-hand. Now we have to look at vv. 23-24 and see what Avraham really was asking.

The key word is "*tispeh*". Unlike the word "*lehamit*" (to kill) that we find in v.25, this word means "*to include in misfortune*" (see Bamidbar 16:26 -- "Turn aside...Lest you be *included* ("*tisaphu*") in their crime"). Rav Hirsch also notes the double emphasis in v.26 on "*in Sodom...in the city*" as indicating that the *location* of the righteous people was critical to the negotiation.

So now, let's translate the two verses (vv.23-24): "Avraham approached and said: `Will you also include the righteous in the misfortune of the wicked? If there are 50 righteous people (actively preaching and influencing) within the city, will you also include them (in the misfortune of destroying the city) and not forgive the (whole) place for the sake of the 50 who are (found) in it?'" In other words, says Rav Hirsch, the issue is *not* the possible

killing of the righteous with the wicked (which would violate justice), but whether God will cause suffering to the righteous (include them in the misfortune) since they have been actively investing themselves, ceaselessly working in the city, trying to bring about a change to what is ethically right ("righteous" means "right"). [Avraham, being such a person himself, empathized completely with these righteous people and their potential failure -- after all he failed to influence his own nephew, Lot]. So Avraham's appeal was: if there are 50 such people who will be emotionally crushed by their complete failure and ineffectiveness, will You spare the city for their sakes? This way of taking it, borne out by the careful reading of the text, shows Avraham's appeal to be reasonable and sensitive.

How about the bargaining? Well, since this is no longer an issue of killing innocent people, we can view it as Avraham bargaining about the *point at which the number of the righteous is potentially influential enough to tolerate the evil of the whole city!*

If there are 50, 40, 30,...there is a significant enough group to influence others. But less than 10 (the minimal number to designate a social entity) would be considered just a few "crazies" who could be ignored -- so the number stops at 10.

Rav Hirsch ends the analysis with a notable comment: Avraham is to learn from this -- and teach his descendants -- that, although those who "keep the way of God" (the Jewish nation) will always be a small minority in the midst of the nations, as long as civilization tolerates even a small number of God's representatives, there is hope for a better world. It is only when the Jews are so small in number and influence, such that the world will ignore us, that we must despair for the future. Thankfully, that is not the case.