

Eradicate Evil, Not Your Neighbor

PARSHA INSIGHTS - VAYAIRA (5758)

WHY WOULD ANYONE DAVEN FOR THE PEOPLE OF SEDOM?

“Avraham came forward (*vayigash*) and said, ‘Will You actually wipe out the innocent together with the guilty? Perhaps there are fifty innocent people in the city. Would You still destroy it, and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty innocent people inside it?’” (*Perek Yud Ches* [chapter 18], 23-24). *Rashi*, based directly on *Beraishis Rabba* 49:8, remarks that the term “*vayigash*” denotes three things: An approach for warfare (harsh words), appeasing words, and prayer. *Rashi* points out that Avraham, in his entreaty for the wicked inhabitants of Sedom, came forward with all three plans - he would utter firm words if necessary, he would attempt to pacify Hashem’s anger at Sedom, and he would even beg and plead for the survival of the inhabitants.

The perplexity does not need to be unearthed; it is obvious. How could Avraham *Avinu* [Abraham our forefather], model of hospitality, master of *chesed* [kindness], embodiment of Torah values and morality, plead on behalf of the sinful and corrupt people of the Sedom region?

Let us begin with the *Midrash Tanchuma* on our *parsha* [Torah portion], letter *Ches*. Hashem does not wish to declare people guilty, if at all possible. This is indicated clearly by the *pasuk* [verse] in *Yechezkel* [Ezekiel] 18:32: “**I do not desire a person’s death, says Hashem...bring yourselves back in repentance, and you will live.**” G-d only wishes to find merit with His creatures. Similarly, says the *Midrash*, when the inhabitants of Sedom became horribly sinful, Hashem revealed His plan of destruction to Avraham SO THAT AVRAHAM WOULD ATTEMPT TO DEFEND THEM. This is the meaning of the *pasuk*, “Shall I hide from Avraham what I am going to do?” (18:17). Immediately, Avraham began to build his case to defend the sinners.

This idea is summarized by the *Netziv* of Volozin in his opening comments to *Sefer Beraishis* [the Book of Genesis]. “This was the praiseworthiness of the *avos* [forefathers]. Besides the fact that they were righteous and saintly, and they loved Hashem to the greatest extent humanly possible, they were also ‘*yesharim*’ [upright and humane toward all people]. This means that they behaved toward the gentiles, even despicable idolaters, with love, and they were concerned for their welfare, since this attitude is crucial for the continuance of the universe. We see, how much effort Avraham expended to *daven* [pray] for Sedom, EVEN THOUGH HE DESPISED THEM AND THEIR KING WITH THE UTMOST HATRED BECAUSE OF THEIR WICKEDNESS. Even so, he desired that they continue to exist. And this is literally like (Avraham’s name, which means) a father of a multitude of nations; even though the son does not go in the proper path, he (the loving father) seeks his welfare.”

Thus, our noble leaders ALWAYS seek to find *zechus* [merit], in G-d’s creatures. There is still the potential for them to do *teshuva* [repent], so why obliterate them? In fact, it is Hashem’s will that this be **our** attitude, according to this *Midrash Tanchuma*. Avraham, in particular, filled this role, says the *Netziv*, since his name indicated that he was supposed to be a parent to all the nations. Nevertheless, we DO have an obligation to pray that SINS be eliminated from the world, as we will now demonstrate.

The *Gemara* is in *Brachos* 10A near the top of the *amud* [page], and you have probably heard of it. There were some vicious men living in the neighborhood of Rebbi Meir, and they were causing him much anguish. Rebbi Meir *davened* [prayed] that they should die. His illustrious wife, Bruria, questioned her husband’s strategy. “What is your opinion? Is it because it is written (*Tehillim* [Psalms] 104:35), ‘*Chataim* should be eliminated from the earth’? (Do you read the word ‘*chataim*’ to mean sinners - the PEOPLE who commit the transgressions?) But does it say that SINNERS should die? No, it says that SINS should be eliminated. (The prayer is that the *yaitzer hora* [evil inclination] to do the *avairos* [the transgressions], cease to exist, NOT that the people who commit the *avairos* should be destroyed.) Furthermore (continued Bruria), look down at the end of the *pasuk*: ‘And evil people they will no longer be.’ Since the sins will stop, they (those people who had been sinning) will no longer be wicked people!” In other words, Bruria urged her husband, Rebbi Meir, to pray that these *reshaim* [wicked people] do *teshuva*, NOT that they should die. If they would repent, they would no longer be *reshaim*. The *Gemara* records that Rebbi Meir DID *daven* as his wife suggested, and these formerly vicious individuals repented. Bruria’s plan worked perfectly.

We see from this *Gemara* that the attitude of Avraham Avinu, to maintain hopeful thoughts even about *reshaim*, prevailed in the mind of Bruria. In fact, her renowned husband, Rabbi Meir, adopted her policy, and the outcome was quite positive.

Doesn't it seem puzzling that one person could pray for another to repent? Isn't this decision in the hands of the sinner alone, to choose the proper path? Various interpretations exist to explain this, but the *Ahavas Aisan* remarks that Rabbi Meir could have been *davening* [praying] based on the following concept. The fear created as a result of seeing other people punished or suffering can inspire one to *teshuva*. This was Rabbi Meir's *tefilla* [prayer], that his evil neighbors be moved to *teshuva* as the result of witnessing others being chastised by Hashem for their sins. The ultimate decision to move closer to Hashem always rests with the individual, but the Master of the Universe is capable of creating external stimuli to hasten and encourage the process. Yes, the *tefilla* did its job.

All of this becomes very practical when we look at various *tefillos* [prayers] we ourselves say. Some are daily, and many are on the *Yamim Noraim*, [the Days of Awe]. In the weekday *Shemoneh Esreh*, we pray "v'chol ha'risha k'rega tova'ed" [may all evil end as in a moment]. In the *Siddur Otzar Hatefillos*, the *Iyun Tefilla* brings our exact discussion. He comments that this wording of the *Shemoneh Esreh* is fashioned after Bruria's brilliant dialogue, that we must hope for the demise of the *yaitzer hora* and the sins it causes, not the termination of those who do the sins. Consequently, we do not *daven* that the DOERS of evil perish, but that the EVIL will cease to exist. In fact, adds the *Iyun Tefilla*, most of our prayers are about the termination of evil, not the death of the *reshaim*. In the second paragraph of *Aleinu*, we request that the idols and abominations be obliterated and cut off, but we *daven* that those who serve them do *teshuva*. And Rav Boruch Halevi Epstein, in his *sefer* [book] called *Boruch She'amar* on page 351, remarks that the same theme prevails on *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*. "And all the evil should vanish like smoke" is the proper version of the *tefilla*; we are to *daven* for the end of all wickedness, NOT for the extermination of *reshaim*. Those people should rather repent and become devoted servants of Hashem.

Unless the Torah specifically tells us to annihilate evildoers, as in the nation of Amalek, we are to hope for their return to *avodas* [service of] Hashem, and this should be our prayer. May this attitude of Avraham Avinu be a genuine inspiration for us all.

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