

THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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PRAYER IS NEVER IN VAIN

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

It is written, "And the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against the L-RD exceedingly" (Gen 13:13) and "the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is indeed exceedingly heavy" (Gen 18:20). Despite this, Abraham prayed to try and save them in the name of divine justice: "Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are ..." (Gen 18:23-24).

Several points need to be clarified:

1. Without doubt, G-d knew that in Sodom there existed neither fifty, nor forty, nor even a single innocent man. What then is the reason for the drawn-out discussion between G-d and Abraham? G-d told Abraham, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will forgive ... I will not destroy if I find there forty-five ... I will not do it for the sake of the forty ..." (Gen 18:26-29). G-d could have told Abraham, "Know that there are not even ten righteous men in all the city." What is the reason for this exchange between G-d and Abraham? We know that in the Torah, not one letter is superfluous. What's more, if there had been ten righteous men in Sodom, G-d would not have destroyed the city because of their merit, but in fact there were no innocent men at all to be found there.

2. The commentators ask another question: Why is it written,

"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"

We know that the people of Sodom were extremely wicked: "They knew the Master of the world and yet wanted to revolt against Him" (Sanhedrin 109a). "They were eager to satisfy their desires and their lusts" (Bereshith Rabba 41:10; Tanhuma Vayera 7). They were so perverse that it was difficult for them to have faith in the Creator of the Universe. Their depraved behavior put the existence of the world in danger, a world "built on kindness" (Ps 89:3), as they plunged it towards destruction by their licentiousness and denial of all the fundamental concepts that justify its existence.

They knew that after the flood, G-d took an oath to never again destroy the world (Shavuot 36a; Bereshith Rabba 34:10), and they took advantage of this promise to commit their abominations, thinking that they would not be punished. In order to satisfy their desires, their perversions became ever more provocative. Nevertheless, they were no worse than the generation of the flood, of which it is written, "the earth is filled with violence because of them" (Gen 6:13), a generation that sinned in double measure – as much against others as against G-d.

First of all, G-d desired to hide from Abraham His intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because He knew that Abraham would pray in order that even the wicked repent. As it is written, "That sins disappear from the earth" (Ps 104:35). It is not written

"sinners", but "sins" (Berachot 10a). But G-d didn't want them to be saved, and He didn't send them a prophet to reprimand or correct them, as He did for the generation of the flood, who were warned by Noah (Sanhedrin 108a), and as He did for the city of Nineveh, who were sent the prophet Jonah.

In fact, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were worse than those of the generation of the flood, of whom our Sages said, "Noah built the ark for 100 years, and during this entire time he called on them to repent" (Sanhedrin 108b). But they didn't listen to him, for they had "corrupted their way upon the earth" (Gen 6:12). Even if G-d had sent a prophet to publicly rebuke the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, they would not have listened to him, for a man is not naturally inclined to agree that another man is right, even if sent by G-d. It is in a wicked man's nature to steal and commit robbery, even though he knows without doubt how serious it is. There arrives a time when nothing can correct such a man, to the point that even Abraham (to whom his servant Eliezer recounted the intrigues of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah) did not go and reprimand or exhort them to repent. Actually, why not? It is because he knew that he was incapable of correcting them. First of all, G-d hid from Abraham His intention to destroy them, for He knew that Abraham would have

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tried to oppose such a decree and that he would have, without doubt, shaken heaven and earth in order to save them from annihilation.

Yet in saying, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" G-d wanted that Abraham's pleading on their behalf benefit the Children of Israel. If G-d had hidden from Abraham the punishment awaiting the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (something that would be known afterwards), Abraham would have been distraught. He would have also worried that if the Children of Israel were to sin, G-d would hide their punishment as well, and if they are deprived of the chance to correct themselves, the decree would be signed and the punishment would follow.

In other words, G-d thought, "It is not possible for Me to hide from Abraham what I am about to do to Sodom, since he will pray in their favor and his prayer will not be in vain – it will benefit his offspring." This is confirmed by what is written immediately afterwards: "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him." Abraham would make sure that the Children of Israel would not be like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, for they would receive a proper education and follow in the footsteps of their father. Even if they would sin, it would not be through malice (as did the people of Sodom and Gomorrah), but rather because the evil inclination had pushed and overwhelmed them, in the same sense as: "It's the yeast in the dough that's the cause" (Berachot 17a). Without a doubt, the Jewish people don't lack righteous individuals, and so G-d couldn't hide from Abraham the punishment awaiting Sodom and Gomorrah, for his prayer would benefit his children.

Now we can also understand the pleading of Abraham, who asked for mercy on behalf of fifty, forty, thirty ... ten righteous individuals. G-d did not reveal to him that there wasn't even one righteous person in Sodom because He wanted Abraham to continue praying for their survival. This was done in order that his prayer may help his descendants after him, for if in the future G-d were to raise an accusation against Israel, the merit of this act (Abraham's prayer for the wicked) could be presented in Israel's defense.

Abraham greatly feared arousing divine wrath because of his insistence, yet despite this he continued to pray in favor of the culprits. That prayer is an assurance for the Children of Israel that they will always be warned before being punished. In addition, Abraham prayed without respite concerning

the number of righteous individuals, until G-d told him that there were none at all in Sodom, and that they are all guilty to the highest degree. At that point Abraham kept quiet. But this prayer will protect his children, and in addition it has the merit of hiding from Satan – from the forces of evil – the sins of Israel, so that he cannot accuse them. If he wanted to accuse them, the prayer of Abraham on behalf of the wicked will protect them. The accuser will then have to give up because the sins of Israel are surely not worse than those of people of the Sodom for whom Abraham interceded.

This is an important teaching valid for all times. This shows us that when one prays to save the wicked, such a prayer protects the one who pronounces it (as well as his descendants) from the accusations of Satan. In addition, before punishing, G-d sends warnings to the offenders – suffering that should bring them to repent – as it is written, "The L-RD desired to oppress him and He afflicted him" (Isa 53:10). The Sages explain: "Suffering is for the good of man" (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabba 13), and "Israel corrects its ways because of suffering" (Menachot 53b). In effect, G-d desires that offenders repent and correct themselves of their faults, which is why He doesn't hide punishment, something that would definitely annul the possibility of prayer and repentance.

Now we can understand why G-d revealed to Abraham what He was about to do. This revelation is truly a kindness to Israel, given that Abraham proved his devotion to them.

We may be permitted to think that Abraham prayed on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah well before G-d revealed to him what He was about to do. Yet after this revelation, Abraham put himself in danger by taking the risk of awakening divine wrath against him. But no, G-d didn't show His anger; on the contrary, He allowed him to plead for a long time because He desired that this prayer benefit the Children of Israel for all generations.

This is why it is written, "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may observe the way of the L-RD, to do righteousness and justice..." (Gen 18: 19). Despite all the tests and obstacles that Abraham went through, his actions constitute a lesson for us, and he provides merit for his descendants so that they may overcome tests, repent of their sins, and serve G-d with complete devotion.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM

Rabbi Haim Pinto of Casablanca

Rabbi Haim Pinto of Casablanca, also known as Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan (the small) to distinguish him from his grandfather, Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol (the Great), was born in Essaouira in the year 5625 (1855) and left this world on Heshvan 15, 5698 (October 20, 1937). Aside from being the grandson of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol (who is buried in Mogador), he was also the son of Rabbi Yehudah Pinto. The house in which he lived in Casablanca, located at 36 Commandant Provost, has become a place of pilgrimage for the Jews who come there and light candles.

The two sons of this saint, Rabbi Raphael Pinto (known as Baba Raphael) and Rabbi Meir Pinto (known as Baba Meir) rejoiced in the prestige of the family. Their assassinations in 1980 stunned the populous and the faithful of the family.

By way of pious habit, he would collect money from people to distribute to the poor, and after having finished to allocate the funds, he would wash the scarf used for the collection. Once he was asked why he did this, and he replied that there was nothing filthier in the world than money – “I wash my scarf, therefore, to purify it of this dirt!” Indeed, he lived from the money that we gave, yet he always said, “Money is filthy!”

He had yet another pious habit. Every day he would come to the home of a poor person and would ask, “What did you prepare today to eat? I would like to taste what you cooked!” We know very well what a poor person eats: Vegetables, a piece of bread (or else some bread with tea and a salad of vegetables), and that’s it. The saintly Rabbi Pinto, may he rest in peace, sat down with them, ate of their bread, brought them joy, and blessed them upon leaving. He didn’t always like to eat at the table of the rich. He would say that the Shechinah and blessing reign more over the table of the poor than of the rich. He would say that the fear of G-d was acquired precisely in destituteness and poverty.

He was renown for his modesty and his gift of prophesy, as testified by the following story:

More than 75 years ago (circa 1924), Rabbi Haim Pinto was performing the blessing for the new moon

(a prayer that is said monthly while standing outside at night). After the blessing, he said the following to those who were accompanying him: “What have we just said in the blessing? Keshame Sheanachnu Mhtrakdim... [“Just as we leap up (towards You and we cannot touch You)...”], I promise that some of you will merit to see the day that men will reach all the way to the moon and leap upon it!”

The faithful present asked him, “Is that possible?”

He replied, “It will happen!”

His Hilloula is Heshvan 15.

May his merit protect us, Amen.

Eishet Chayil

LAWS OF PRAYER: SHACHARIT, MINCHA, AND ARVIT

- According to Halachah, a woman who has performed the Shacharit prayer is exempted from doing the prayer of Mincha. However, by measure of piety, it is good for her to do it, as well as the prayer of Arvit. However, she does not have to recite Lahminahzeiha and other similar texts; she only needs to recite the Amidah. Ashkenazim are accustomed to performing the three Amidot every day, according to the opinion of Rama. Women are equally obligated to perform the prayer of Shabbat and Yom Tov.

- When women are performing the prayer of Arvit, they do not have to recite the blessings for the Shema, Emet Ve’emunah, or Hashkivainu; it is sufficient for them to recite the Amidah. A woman who, by measure of piety, also desires to recite the Shema with its blessings should not mention G-d’s name in the following blessings: Ma’ariv Aravim, Ohel et amo Israel, Gaal Israel, and Shomer et amo Israel la’ad. She will recite these prayers without mentioning G-d’s name.

- Women are obligated to recite the Shema prayer at bedtime (Kriat Shema al hamita) as well as the Hamapil blessing with the mention of G-d’s name. (Certain authorities comment that it is not customary for women to recite the Shema prayer at bedtime, or the Hamapil blessing).

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Merit for all (A teaching of the Maggid of dubno)

And the L-RD said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am about to do?' (Gen 18:17). Sodom and Gomorrah were two large cities in Canaan. They were located near the Dead Sea, and in the time of Abraham Avinu, the people who lived there were great wrongdoers. For numerous years already, they refused to follow G-d's commandments and behaved with cruelty toward their neighbors. HASHEM decided to punish them by destroying their two cities. However before anything, He wanted to inform Abraham Avinu of His plans. Why? Because Abraham, as one reads in the next verse, was to become the father of a great nation. This explanation for the reason behind why G-d revealed His plans to Abraham seems strange. Is there a connection between the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah and the future of Abraham Avinu?

The Maggid of Dubno explains this to us by means of the following parable:

Two merchants were traveling together on the road to Leipzig for some business. Reb Shlomo was in the spice business and Reb David, who was much younger, sold hardware equipment. This was Reb David's first trip. As for Reb Shlomo, he had been coming to Leipzig for so long that he couldn't remember the first time he visited. He therefore showed his young companion the marketplace, teeming as it was with people. They passed in front of the displays of fruit, vegetables, and meat, then arrived at an area reserved for clothing merchants, who were lined up one next to the other. The two companions then slowed their pace and looked with great interest at the well-made suits and the stylish coats. But when they found themselves in front of the children's clothing section, Reb Shlomo could no longer contain himself.

"Let's stop for a minute," he suggested.

He remained speechless in front of the gamut of marine blue outfits, cut by a master craftsman. He pointed out to the merchant one of them in particular, decorated with tiny, gilded sparkling buttons.

"How I would love to purchase that outfit for my Avramel" he said, wonderstruck. "But I'm afraid that it might not fit him. What a shame it is that I don't know his exact size. If the outfit is too small, I will have spent money for nothing. I think that it's best if I don't take it."

Reb Shlomo still admired that suit, but with a sad smile. He then put it back in its place as he sighed heavily, so much had he regretted not being able to see his son dressed in it one day.

While Reb Shlomo was lost in thought over Avramel, Reb David didn't stay still. Three little outfits of different size, chosen with care, were well folded and placed on the counter. Reb David was busy bargaining with the salesperson to get the best price.

Surprised, Reb Shlomo asked, "But how do you know what size to choose? And what will you do with these clothes if they don't fit him?"

"I understand your surprise," Reb David responded, as he made sure not to offend him. "Thank G-d, I have five sons at home. The one that doesn't fit Yaakov will surely fit Mosheleh, and if not, Shimon. And if none of them fit, well, I'm still young – the Master of the world will give me, I hope, other sons! I'll then put them away for one of my future children. Your situation, however, is different. You have no interest whatsoever in doing what I'm doing because Avramel is your only son. As far as I'm concerned, it would be a shame not to take advantage of the occasion to purchase clothes of such good quality. In any case, at one point they'll eventually go to one or another of my sons."

G-d saw that kindness was a dominant feature in Abraham Avinu's home. And so He knew that when Abraham Avinu would hear that Sodom and Gomorrah were in danger of being completely destroyed, he would plead their cause and try everything to save them. G-d didn't want to change His decree, but He nevertheless wanted Abraham to pray. Why? Because Abraham Avinu "was to become the father of a great nation" and his numerous descendants would benefit from the merits that he would acquire. And if these merits would not help some of his children, they would help others (just as the three outfits purchased by Reb David in the Maggid's story). The father of a large family invests for all his children and grandchildren. Likewise, Abraham Avinu accumulated merit for all the generations to come.

Even if Sodom and Gomorrah were not meant to escape destruction, the prayers of Abraham were not uttered in vain. G-d desired his prayers, not for the benefit of these two cities filled with wrongdoers, but for the future benefit of the people of Israel.

The great merit of all the prayers of our fathers, along with their mitzvot and good deeds, remains an immeasurable great heritage for us even until today. Across the entire world, Jews turn toward HASHEM and implore "For the love of our fathers who trusted in You, and to whom You taught the laws of life, be good as well to us and guide us on the right path."