

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayeira

Avraham's Prayer for the People of Sodom

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אִם אֶמְצָא בְּסֹדֹם חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וְנִשְׂאָתִי לְכָל הַמָּקוֹם בְּעִבּוּרָם.

Hashem said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous people in the midst of the city, then I will spare the entire place on their account." (Bereishis 18:26)

Upon hearing of Hashem's plans to destroy the five cities in the plain of Sodom Avraham begins to pray on their behalf. In fact, this is actually the longest conversation by far recorded in the Chumash between Avraham and Hashem, as Avraham proceeds to try and negotiate the minimum number down from fifty to forty-five, to forty, to thirty, to twenty and ultimately, to ten.

Forty and Thirty – "I will not act" / Twenty and Ten – "I will not destroy"

It is interesting to note that although on a superficial level, Hashem's response seems to be uniform as Avraham continues to pray for lower and lower numbers of tzaddikim, in fact, the response changes at a certain point.

- In response to Avraham asking what will happen if there are forty tzaddikim, Hashem says, "לא אַעֲשֶׂה – I will not act." This is also the response when Avraham asks if thirty tzaddikim will be found.
- However, when Avraham proceeds to ask regarding twenty and ten tzaddikim, Hashem responds, "לא אֶנְשֹׁחֶיֶת – I will not destroy."

What is the difference in meaning between these two responses? Presumably, when Hashem He will "not act," it means He will not act in destroying the cities!

The Meshech Chochmah explains that there is in fact a significant difference between these two responses.

The words "I will not destroy" indicate that Hashem will not go so far as destroying the

cities,¹ however, the inhabitants will not escape some other form of punishment. In contrast to this, when Hashem says “I will not act,” it means that He will not act *at all*, and they will be spared from punishment altogether.

Why would the different numbers elicit these two different responses?

The presence of forty tzaddikim within the five cities gives an average of eight per city. Similarly, thirty tzaddikim means an average of six per city. That number of tzaddikim is enough to spare the city entirely. However, a total of twenty tzaddikim would mean only four per city, and ten tzaddikim only two per city. Such a minimal presence may be enough to spare the cities from being destroyed, but it will not spare them from some other form of punishment.

What lies behind the distinction between these numbers? The Meshech Chochmah proceeds to quote the Ibn Ezra who states that our pesukim contain an allusion to the halachah received by Chazal – and derived through midrash halachah from pesukim elsewhere,² that matters of *kedushah* require a *minyan* (quorum of ten). Therefore, an average of eight or even six tzaddikim still represent at least the majority of a *minyan*, while an average of four or two does not partake even of that quality, resulting in the two very different responses of “I will not act” versus “I will not destroy”.

The Anomalous Response

However, there is a response to one of Avraham’s pleas which does not seem to fit with the above explanation. When Avraham initially asks what will happen if there are not fifty tzaddikim in the cities, but forty-five, Hashem responds:

לֹא אֲשַׁחֵת אֶם אֶמְצָא שָׁם אַרְבָּעִים וְחַמְשָׁה

I will not destroy if I find there forty-five

This is very difficult. If the presence of forty or even thirty tzaddikim is sufficient to spare the cities entirely, then this should certainly be the case with forty-five! Yet, as we have noted, Hashem’s response, “I will not destroy,” implies that they will be punished. Why would the forty-five tzaddikim not protect the city at least as much as forty or thirty? The answer to this question contains what the Meshech Chochmah himself refers to as “a great lesson.”

Din v’Cheshbon – Cost and Opportunity Cost

An expression commonly used by Chazal to refer to the accounting each person will need to give for his deeds is “*din v’cheshbon*,” which literally translates as “judgement and reckoning.” What is behind this double expression? Are the “judgment” and the “reckoning” not about the same thing?

The Vilna Gaon³ explains that “*din*” refers to the judgement a person will receive for

1 The Meshech Chochmah concurs with the mefarshim who understand that even as the numbers of tzaddikim who might be found decreased, Hashem’s response still reflected their protective powers for all the five cities. Cf Rashi to pasuk 29.

2 See Berachos 21b and Sanhedrin 2b. In his peirush, Rav Copperman notes: The idea of perceiving the pshat of a pasuk as alluding to a concept which is derived by Chazal through midrash halachah from a different pasuk is something which will become trademark of the Meshech Chochmah himself (along with the Vilna Gaon, R’vid HaZahav and Netziv). Here the Meshech Chochmah is demonstrating that this approach has a precedent in the Rishonim, in this instance, the comment of the Ibn Ezra regarding the significance of a minyan.

3 Peirush to Pirkei Avos 3:1.

things they should not have done. In contrast, “*cheshbon*” refers to the reckoning of all the good things they could have done while they were doing the wrong thing. To have neglected to achieve good in the world is no less a sin than to have perpetrated wrongdoing, and will also need to be accounted for.⁴

As the Meshech Chochmah proceeds to explain, the question of how to quantify the *cheshbon* for the good foregone depends on how much good could have been achieved, and thus may vary depending on the opportunities available at that time and place. For example, a person who needs to do *teshuva* but neglects to do so has thereby incurred a *cheshbon* in terms of the good he could have achieved. The very same inactivity will incur a vastly different *cheshbon* if the day in question is Yom Kippur, where *teshuva* is so critical – and so effective! The greater the good one could have achieved through his actions, the greater the indictment for remaining inactive.

Turning our attention back to the cities of Sodom, any individual who was not a tzaddik would thereby incur both “*din*” for living as a rasha, as well as “*cheshbon*” for not being a tzaddik. Nonetheless, Hashem informed Avraham that the presence of even the majority of a minyan of tzaddikim – a total of forty or thirty – could counterweigh such a dire situation and spare the cities entirely. However, if there would be forty-five tzaddikim, the cities could no longer be totally spared. For even though the protective power of forty-five tzaddikim is greater than that of forty or thirty, the indictment of those cities containing that number of tzaddikim is immeasurably increased.

The Gemara⁵ states that one who completes a minyan receives reward equivalent to the entire minyan, for it was he who enabled it to achieve its status. In this situation, with each city needing only one person to complete a minyan of tzaddikim in that city, each and every individual’s *cheshbon* indictment now reads not only “you could have been a tzaddik,” but rather “there were already nine, you could have been the tenth person who completed the minyan!” With every wicked person in those cities facing such a dramatic increase in his “*cheshbon*”, the collective wickedness of those cities would thereby rise to such proportions that even the protective power of nine tzaddikim per city would not be sufficient to spare them from at least some form of punishment.

Beneficiaries

In the end, as we know, Avraham’s prayers could not save the people of Sodom, as the amount of those who could be considered tzaddikim numbered less than even his lowest plea. Nonetheless, in addition to the fact that no prayer ever goes in vain, the Meshech Chochmah has shown how this prayer can help us, beckoning us to heed its underlying message of ensuring to ask ourselves not only “What am I doing?” but also “What *could* I be doing?”

⁴ In the words of my father, Rabbi Isaac Bernstein zt”l, “*din*” relates to sins of *commission*, while “*cheshbon*” relates to sins of *omission*.

⁵ Berachos 47b.