

“And the men arose from there, and they gazed toward Sodom.” (18:16)

The *Torah* seems to place an emphasis upon the word “*mishom*,” from there, as if the place from which the men left had a special significance. Also, *Chazal* teach us that the word, “*vayashkifu*,” and they gazed, has a negative connotation indicating the detriment of that which is being gazed upon. Why would “gazing” from Avraham’s home be the precursor of something bad? *Sforno* explains that in contrast to what they observed in Avraham *Avinu*’s home, the men viewed a negative picture from his home. *Horav Sholom Shwadron, z.l.*, explains that the punishment one receives for transgression is commensurate with the degree of his understanding of the distinction between right and wrong. For instance, one who was born and raised his entire life in a cave, never seeing the light of the sun, would use candles for light – all of the time. No one would wonder why he uses candles if the sun is shining outside, since he is not aware that the sun even exists. Conversely, one who is aware of the sun’s existence would be a fool to walk in a dark place, ignoring the benefit of sunlight.

A similar idea may be applied to spirituality. Had there not been an individual of the caliber of Avraham *Avinu* in the world, undoubtedly, the Sodomites would nonetheless have been punished for their evil. The punishment however, would not have been as severe, the destruction not as final. The lack of such a virtuous, saintly individual, whose life was totally devoted to serving G-d and his fellowmen, to reaching out to others and bringing them closer to Hashem, would have somewhat mitigated their offense.

Avraham’s presence on the scene alters the situation, exacerbating the perception of their level of evil.

Avraham *Avinu* was a vibrant presence, living near enough to Sodom that its inhabitants could certainly have had a clear idea and example of how a human being should act. Indeed, the mere fact that Avraham lived there, reaching out to a pagan world, was in itself the greatest condemnation against them. Avraham, who was bed-ridden and in acute pain, went out from his house during the intense heat to greet wayfarers. He should serve as a prime example, as the benchmark of virtue and righteousness, as the paradigm for a world filled with deceit and corruption.

To be in the close proximity of a *tzaddik* is not merely good advice; it is an obligation! The *tzaddik* is a “*mechayev*,” he obliges us to greater observance. He causes greater demands to be placed upon us – upon our action – upon our activities. If we know and could learn from the *tzaddik* and we neglect to do so, we are held in greater contempt. In other words, the “*teviah*,” claim/critique, upon one who was once availed a *Torah* education, who was able to spend years studying

Torah under the guidance of *roshei yeshivah* – *talmidei chachamim*, *Torah* scholars, who exemplified virtue, piety and ethicality of the highest degree – is that much greater. He knew the correct path to follow. Why did he choose not to continue?