

Avraham came forward and said, “Will You even obliterate righteous with wicked?” (18:23)

Avraham *Avinu* took the decree to obliterate Sodom seriously. Indeed, *Rashi* teaches that the word *vayigash*, “and (Avraham) came forward,” has three connotations – each one apparently applying to our Patriarch. We find “coming forward” used with regard: to war; to conciliation; and to prayer. Avraham undertook all of these approaches. He spoke strongly, arguing forcefully to establish his point; he appealed to Hashem to have mercy; and he prayed. He did all of this for the people of Sodom! Why? These were the most reprehensible people of the time. They made life miserable for anyone who had the misfortune to spend a day in their “welcoming” community. They tortured the poor and brutally killed anyone who lent them assistance. Yet, Avraham was prepared to speak forcefully with Hashem on their behalf. How are we to understand this?

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, contends that this is the result of *rachmanus*, pure compassion. Unadulterated sympathy, selfless pity on another human being, knows no bounds. It traverses race, color and level of evil. Regardless of a person’s background, the *baal rachmanus*, compassionate person, cares deeply about the welfare of the other and reaches out to assist him, regardless of his past, present or future. Right here and now, he is in need. Hashem was about to issue a decree against the Sodomites. Avraham was well aware of their history, their evil, their blatant cruelty to others less fortunate than they. Yet, he prayed for them. Why? He pitied them.

Truthfully, we should not be taken aback by Avraham’s behavior. His compassion parallels that of Hashem, Who came to Avraham knowing that the Patriarch would speak in their defense. Hashem has compassion for all of His creatures, regardless of the unmitigating evil which some of them impose upon others. Avraham was only following suit.

If this is the case, why did Avraham not have the same compassion in his heart for the generation which built the Tower of Bavel? *Chazal* teach that the tower was built when Avraham was forty-eight years old. He saw what the people were doing, and he was acutely aware why they were building the tower, so he cursed them. He not only did not want them to succeed in building the tower, but he wanted to see them punished. Were they that much worse than the Sodomites for whom Avraham prayed?

Rav Sholom explains that the difference lies in the fact that Avraham saw with his own two eyes the sin which the *dor haflagah* had perpetrated. The sins of the Sodomites were hearsay, delivered by word of mouth from travelers. Additionally, Hashem informed him of their iniquity. At the end of the day, however, he did not actually see the Sodomites actively engaged in their nefarious behavior. Concerning the *dor Haflagah*, it was a different case altogether. He heard the tumult and saw the people building the tower. When one sees the sinner in action, it is much more difficult to justify his behavior, regardless of the spectator’s level of compassion.

Perhaps we can offer an alternative reason for Avraham's lack of compassion for the *dor Haflagah*, although he had manifested incredible forbearance for the Sodomites. The sins were different. The Sodomites were terribly sadistic people. The lack of human decency and the brutality with which they treated the unfortunate person who fell into their hands were beyond cruel, but their deeds could somehow be defended, because to be such a victimizer one must himself have been a victim. A mean person must have been mistreated as a youth. A cruel person probably had once been the victim of cruelty. When the sin is one of inappropriate *middos*, defective character, there is always someone else upon whom to lay the blame. It may be compared to abuse in its many forms. The present-day abuser himself has at one time been a victim of abuse. Thus, it is not necessarily all his fault. There is room for compassion – regardless how far from deserving the sinner may seem to be.

The *dor Haflagah* was guilty of heresy. It was not the people's characters which were deficient; it was their minds. A person thinks what he wants to think, believes what he wants to believe. While it is true that environment plays a role in shaping one's thought process, an individual does not have to himself be a victim in order to victimize others. The evil of that generation was wrought against Hashem. Indeed, the people worked in a unified manner to build the tower upon which they would rebel against G-d. No mitigating circumstances warranted any sort of compassion for them. They were miscreants who deserved to be cursed, because they were undermining the Hand that was feeding them.