

## What if there should be fifty righteous persons in the midst of the city? (18:24)

The *pasuk* seems to be emphasizing *tzadikim b'soch ha'ir*, "righteous persons in the midst of the city". Simply, this means that these virtuous men do not play out their righteousness only in the private sphere, but also in the midst of the city. It might not be convenient for some to express their religious beliefs in public – such as when it means adhering to the standard uniform of an observant Jew, i.e. *tzitzis*, *yamulka*– yet, they do so out of religious conviction. Hashem was setting the standard: a righteous person at home and in the street. (We have also been plagued with the disease of those who publicly flaunt their religious affiliation, but, in private, they have no qualms about acting in a most reprehensible manner, unbecoming a Jew.)

**Harav Zalmen Sorotzkin, zl**, suggests that the term *tzadik*, righteous person, is a relative one. He relates that once while traveling by train, he overheard a group of assimilated young men bragging about their negative religious conquests. On *Yom Kippur*, they ate and drank to their hearts' content as they played cards. One of their friends who was listening intently asked, "Did all of your friends join in the reveling?" "Yes, they all attended" was the quick response. "What about so and so (one of their peers who rarely attended public functions)?" "No," they replied, "he did not join us. He is a big *tzadik*. He fasts on *Yom Kippur*."

*Rav Zalmen* writes that he derived an important lesson from their response. The term *tzadik* is relative. An individual can desecrate *Shabbos*, eat non-kosher food, gamble with the worst of them, but, if he fasts on *Yom Kippur*, he is considered a *tzadik*! In contrast to the above story, *Rav Zalmen* relates that he once had to vet a student of a prominent *yeshivah*. Upon speaking to his *rebbeim*, he was informed that they had questions concerning his level of *yiraas Shomayim*. Apparently, upon occasion, he was guilty of perusing secular periodicals.

When the *Lutzker Rav* heard this, he deduced that there exists a wide gap between the *rasha*, wicked/evil person, measured according to *yeshivah* standards, and the interpretation of *tzadik*, righteous person, as contrasted with a secular, assimilated environment. The *yeshivah rasha* was light years above the *tzadik* of the train set.

We now understand that when Avraham presented his defense of Sodom and asked Hashem that the people of Sodom be spared in the merit of fifty *tzadikim*, he was certain that there were not fifty righteous individuals in Sodom. Yet, there were "Sodom *tzadikim*," who, relative to the miscreancy that was rampant in the city, were considered righteous. Avraham asked for fifty *tzadikim* in the "midst" of the city – in comparison to the rest of the city. These people were certainly not righteous, but they did not act as nefariously as the others.