



PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

RABBI MENACHEM PHETERSON

ואקחה פת לחם... ואל הבקר רץ אברהם

"Let me take a morsel of bread... and Abraham ran to the livestock." (Genesis 18:5-7)

Our sages note a fascinating contrast between the actions of Abraham at the beginning of this week's parsha and the actions of Ephron the Hittite at the beginning of next week's parsha.

In our parsha, Abraham was visited by three angels who appeared to him as weary travelers in the desert. Hurrying from his tent to greet them, Abraham begged them to rest awhile under the shade of his tree and to allow him to fetch them some bread with which to refresh themselves. After they agreed, Abraham prepared them a feast, slaughtering three calves so as to present each one of them with a tongue marinated in mustard!

Our sages teach us that righteous people say little but do much; Abraham spoke only about fetching some bread but ended up providing them with a banquet.

This is not true, however, of wicked people, who "say much but do not do even a little." This may be seen from the actions of Ephron in next week's parsha (Genesis 23:8-16). When Abraham wished to purchase the cave of Machpelah in which to bury his wife Sarah, Ephron insisted at first on giving it to Abraham as an outright gift. When Abraham made it clear that he would like to purchase the cave, Ephron charged him an exorbitant price.

Two aspects of our sages' observation are troubling. Firstly, why didn't they simply note that righteous people do much good, while wicked people do nothing? How does Abraham's saying

little relate to his doing so much, and how does Ephron's saying much lead to his failure to do even a little?

Secondly, what's so bad about what Ephron did? He offered the field as a gift, and would have given it to Abraham, had he been willing to accept it. Even afterwards, when Abraham insisted on purchasing the field for money, Ephron could have refused to part with it on any terms. While it's true that in the sale he gouged him on the price, does that make him a "wicked man"?

Rabbi Yaakov Haber points out that nobody starts out being wicked. No high school student writes in his yearbook that he hopes to make a career out of cheating and defrauding people. Generally, people start out with the best of intentions. They will even boast of all the good they intend to accomplish. They view the world unrealistically, however, because they underestimate the seductive power of evil, and are easily caught in traps which they did not foresee.

Righteous people become righteous because they never underestimate how hard it is to be good. They are afraid to promise anything, because they know that it is a whole lot easier to talk about doing something, than to actually carry it

out, and fortify themselves to get the job done, despite the inevitable excuses and glitches which will crop up along the way.

If we view the world as Abraham did, and make ourselves ready for anything, we will be able to overcome all of life's challenges.

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WORD of the WEEK

איה

The word איה — "ayeh" — "where" appears three times in the parsha: The angels visited Abraham and asked him, "Where — ayeh is Sarah your wife?" (Gen. 18:9). The mob that attacked the house of Lot in Sodom asked, "Where — ayeh are the men who came to you last night?" (ibid 19:5). And finally, when Abraham was walking with Isaac to Mount Moriah, Isaac asked, "Father, here is the fire and the wood, where — ayeh is the lamb for the offering?" The word usually used for "where" in the Torah is "eifo." What is the difference between ayeh and eifo? Generally, eifo is merely an enquiry as to the location of something, whereas ayeh is a pointed question, indicating that something should be in one place and is instead somewhere else, or that something should be here and is not. We see this the first time the word is used. After Adam and Eve sinned and hid from G-d, He asked, "Ayeka — Where are you?" Obviously, G-d knew their location, He was asking them, where are you now (hiding from Me), and where should you be? (with Me, in the Garden of Eden) (*The Beast That Crouches at the Door*, Rabbi David Fohrman).

Table Talk FOR DISCUSSION AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

G-d told Abraham of the impending destruction of Sodom, which was filled with selfish, wicked people. Abraham proceeded to negotiate with G-d over the city's possible salvation. He managed to elicit G-d's assurance that the city would be spared if 50 righteous people could be found. He continued negotiating further until he reached ten people and then stopped without asking for an even smaller number (Gen. 18:20-33).

נ) Abraham devoted his life to performing kindness and good deeds. It might seem that he would be glad that the Sodomites, who were living a lifestyle antithetical to his, were finally getting what they deserved. Instead, he prayed for their lives. Why might he have done so?

ב) If Abraham was meeting with such success negotiating with G-d, why would he have stopped at ten righteous people?

A QUESTION FOR THE RABBIS

Nachmanides asks what precisely the sin of Sodom was (Gen. 19:5). Nowhere in the text of our *parsha* is the sin that caused the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah explicitly stated. The Torah writes, "And the L-rd said, 'Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave' " (Gen. 18:20), and later we see that the inhabitants of Sodom threatened Lot and his guests (Gen. 19:4-11), which definitely gives us a clue as to their nature. The prophet Ezekiel reveals the nature of Sodom's sin quite clearly: "Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: pride, surfeit of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters; and she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49). The lesson is quite amazing! Sodom worshipped idols, engaged in sexual immorality, and certainly were guilty of many sins, and yet the prophet points out that the sin for which the city was condemned was their refusal to do kindness to strangers despite their wealth and resources (Nachmanides).

HEY, I NEVER KNEW THAT

The *parsha* begins with G-d visiting Abraham in a prophetic vision (Gen. 18:1). In this vision, three people appeared in the distance. Abraham saw them, ran to greet them, and said (ibid 18:3), "My master, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not leave your servant." He then continued to offer food, drink and comfort to the strangers. To whom did Abraham address the request not to leave? There is a debate among the commentaries whether "my masters" is plural and refers to the three men; whether it is singular and refers to the leader of the group; or whether "my master" is actually the name of G-d, and Abraham is addressing G-d Himself (Rashi, Ramban, Rabbeinu Bachya ad loc.). Rashi cites the last opinion and explains that if we read "my Master" as G-d's name then Abraham was actually asking G-d, in the middle of a prophecy, to wait while he took care of his guests! The Talmud deduces from this that "Greater is hospitality to guests than even being in the Divine Presence" (Shabbos 127a).



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