



The Righteous With the Wicked

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In this week's *parashah*, Avraham argues with God over the divine decision to destroy Sodom completely. Avraham and God agree that Sodom is wicked and that terrible things happen there. So what, then, is the basis for Avraham's plea? Why does he resist God's plan to punish and overturn Sodom? What are Avraham's arguments as he tries to stop the city's total destruction?

The entire debate arises from a moral and interpretive question embedded in Avraham's bold challenge: "Will You sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"

A. Will You sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

Avraham's arguments begin with a call not to kill the righteous:

בראשית יח:כג

²³וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵף תִּסְּפֶה צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע: ... חָלְלָה לְךָ מַעֲשֵׂת כְּדִבְרֵי הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק
עִם־רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כְּצְדִיק כְּרָשָׁע חָלְלָה לְךָ הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:



Genesis 18:23,25

²³Avraham approached and he said, “Will you sweep away the righteous along with the wicked? ... ²⁵Far be it from You to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, and make the righteous like the wicked—far be it from you! Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice!?”

Behind Avraham’s words lies an assumption: there are people in Sodom who are not wicked, and it is impossible to destroy the city without harming those righteous individuals who inevitably live within it. Rabbeinu Behaye¹ explains the cost of such destruction and presents Avraham’s argument to God in these terms:

רבינו בחי" בראשית יח:כג

חלילה לך אפילו במדת הדין להמית צדיק עם רשע, שאם כן יהיה כצדיק כרשע ותבטל הבחירה והעבודה, ותרבה הכפירה בעולם.

Rabbeinu Behaye on Genesis 18:23

Far be it from You—even in the attribute of justice—to kill the righteous with the wicked. For if You do so, the righteous and the wicked will be equal, free will and service will be nullified, and heresy will increase in the world.

In other words, if those doing right are killed together with the guilty, the very foundation of free will collapses. If choosing good brings no difference in outcome—if the righteous die for the sins of the wicked—then why should anyone choose the path of righteousness? According to this reading, Avraham’s argument is that God’s intended action threatens the entire structure of human moral choice.²

¹ R. Behaye ben Asher (Spain, 1255-1340).

² One might also ask whether divine reward similarly challenges free will—for if one acts only out of desire for reward rather than a genuine commitment to goodness, is the choice truly free? A full discussion of the relationship between reward and free will, however, lies beyond the scope here.



B. Will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it?!

Avraham's second argument is that the very existence of righteous people should serve as a reason to forgive: "הֲאֵף תִּסְפֶּה וְלֹא תִשָּׂא לְמִקּוֹם - Will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it?!" (Genesis 18:24). This plea—that the wicked be spared on account of, or at least in light of, the presence of the righteous—defies ordinary logic and human morality. It is a call for God to tolerate, to bear, to accept, or even to absorb evil; to refuse to let the wickedness of others dictate God's response.³ In essence, Avraham asks that human society be judged by the merit of those who choose good and justice, rather than condemned because of those who choose corruption and wrongdoing.

C. "Will You then..."—with anger?!

Onkelos in the ancient Aramaic translation of the Torah explains that God intends to destroy Sodom "in anger" (Onkelos on Genesis 18:23).⁴ According to this reading of the biblical verses, God is angry, and Avraham is responding to that anger. This reading is reinforced by Avraham's repeated pleas later in the passage: "אֵל נָא יַחַר לֹאדֹנִי וְאַדְבֵּרָה - Please, let not my Lord be angry, and I will speak..." (Genesis 18:30,32).⁵ Rashi explains Onkelos' interpretation of Avraham's words as a challenge: "הֲאֵף יִשְׂיֵאךְ שְׂתִסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע - Will anger lead You to destroy the righteous with the wicked?" suggesting that such a sweeping punishment would stem from wrath rather than justice.

Some *midrashim* even reverse the dynamic, portraying God as the one concerned about God's own anger, Who therefore consults Avraham before acting. As it says in Midrash Tanhuma

³ It should be noted that Rabbenu Behaye's claim—that free will is undermined if everyone, including the righteous, is punished—also applies in a reality where no one is punished, not even the wicked. Perhaps this is why Avraham moves on to his next argument: a request for a kind of forgiveness or acceptance of Sodom's sin. And perhaps, for the same reason, God ultimately removes Lot and his family—leaving no righteous people in the city.

⁴ He is translating the word "אף - *af*" in its meaning "anger" rather than "then."

⁵ Though the anger there might be a result of Avraham arguing with God.



אפילו בשעה שהקב"ה כעס על סדום מפני מעשיהם הרעים, ובקש הקב"ה להפוך את" (Buber, VaYera 6): "Even when the Holy One became angry with Sodom for their evil deeds and sought to overturn it, God did not seal their fate until God took counsel with Avraham." Either way—whether the concern comes from Avraham or from God—the message is the same: anger is a force that works against justice and righteousness. Therefore, anger should not be the motivation to destroy the city.

D. "And You, the Righteous One of the World, Join Them!"

In the interpretations we have seen, Avraham's plea not to destroy Sodom stems from his desire that humanity retain a reason to choose good and justice. He asks God to tolerate sin—to look at the good within humanity rather than its evil—and warns against acting out of anger. Yet this final interpretation goes further: it calls not only for restraint, tolerance, or acceptance, but for active involvement.

The Ramban explains that Avraham expects God to join the "righteous" people of Sodom and, by doing so, to tip the balance in favor of saving the entire city. Avraham's expectation is that God not remain merely a neutral judge, nor aligned against Sodom, but rather stand with the small minority of good people within it—so that their merit might save the whole.

To explain: Avraham pushes God to accept that if there are fifty righteous in the city it will not be destroyed (Genesis 18:24). Rashi wonders why Avraham begins with the number fifty. He assumes that ten righteous people would suffice to save a city, and since Sodom consisted of five cities, that would mean ten per city.⁶ But then Avraham proposes forty-five—how could forty-five righteous people be enough to save five cities? The Ramban answers: "Nine for each city, and You, the Righteous One of the World, join them." In this reading, Avraham asks

⁶ See his comments to 18:24.



God Himself to join the righteous of each city—thus completing a quorum of ten that could redeem it.⁷

What all of Avraham's arguments share is that their focus is not Sodom—it is God. Avraham turns the spotlight on God's decision, God's conduct, and their consequences. In a sense, Avraham asks God to turn God's gaze inward—to look at Himself—and, in doing so, to see that there is reason to reconsider Sodom's fate.

Avraham is, in effect, asking God: Do You wish to govern Your world in such a way that the righteous perish with the wicked, rendering free will and moral choice meaningless? Do You want to allow wickedness and the wicked to dictate Your actions? Do You wish to act out of anger—a force that blinds from seeing justice? Do You wish to remain a neutral judge, or to engage in the world and tip the scales toward the righteous?

Avraham's essential demand is that, when faced with evil, we must not forget to turn the spotlight on ourselves—lest we allow wickedness and the wicked to dictate our behavior. His fourfold call, then, is this: in the face of great evil, search for the good that surely exists, do not let anger rule, do not let wickedness define your actions, and have the courage to draw near—to join with the righteous who are surely there.

⁷ It is interesting to note that the demand to join the righteous is hinted at in this *midrash* also with regard to Avraham himself, in the claim of the Or ha-Hayyim (to Genesis 18:33; R. Hayyim ibn Attar from Morocco, c.1696-1743) that Avraham could have saved Sodom had he been present there: "וְאִפְשָׁר שֶׁאֵם הָיָה אֲבְרָהָם בְּקִרְבָּהּ - וְשָׁל סָדוֹם הָיָה מְמַלֵּט כָּל הָעִיר - And it is possible that if Abraham had been among the people of Sodom, he would have rescued the entire city." And another point about this reading: Avraham's choice not to view Sodom as a single, unified whole, but rather to divide the totality of the city into parts—individuals, some righteous and some wicked; a city that contains nine of the ten righteous people needed for its salvation, and so on—allows for a different perspective on it.

