



One who assesses the Rabbis as brilliant thereby admits he can accurately determine truth, i.e., that they are brilliant. And if he can determine truth, he then contradicts himself when saying he cannot argue with them. For if one can determine truth, and does so in a specific case, he must disagree with anyone who opposes that truth. **Regardless of who it is.**

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Weekly Parsha

Vayerah

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Three Men who Visited Avraham

And Hashem appeared to him at Elonai Mamrai and he was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. And he lifted his eyes and there were three men

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GOD'S DECREE OF SODOM

the Wisdom of the Verses

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Lately, I have been concentrating on articles that focus on how to learn the Torah's verses. I have been compelled to do so, as more and more often I hear others repeating what they've learned, and it is disappointing. Disappointing because they have not been exposed to God's brilliant method of revealing ideas through the very text. I hear notions that do not fit the text, and notions that are not true. Teachers themselves are not aware of how God hides and reveals Torah insights. This forfeits the transmission and the delight possibly imparted. The only way to correct this problem is through many examples. Once a Torah student is exposed to the precise and insightful methods God uses in constructing the verses, that student will become imbued

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An Assyrian planisphere, or star chart, from about 700 B.C. which may depict events recounted by Sumerians from around 3123 B.C. This clay tablet that has baffled scientists for 150 years has been identified as a witness's account of the asteroid suspected of being behind the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

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Weekly Parsha

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standing before him. And he ran towards them from the opening of his tent and he bowed to the ground. (Beresheit 18:1-2)

The opening passages of Parshat VaYerah are the subject of an intense debate among the commentaries. The first passage of the parasha relates that Hashem appears to Avraham. However, the Torah does not explain the message that Hashem imparts to Avraham or the purpose of this prophecy. Instead, the Torah immediately tells us that Avraham observes three travelers and invites them into his home. The Torah then explains that one of these travelers reveals to Avraham and Sarah that in the coming months she will give birth to Yitzchak. The Torah then describes the departure of the travelers towards Sedom.

The Torah relates that after the departure of these travelers, Hashem does enter into an extensive conversation with Avraham. He tells him of the approaching destruction of Sedom and its surroundings. The Torah describes Avraham's intercession on behalf of the citizens of Sedom and Hashem's acquiescence to Avraham's request that Sedom be spared if ten righteous individuals can be found among its residents.

Next, the Torah resumes describing the activities of the travelers who visited Avraham. They are now described as two melachim – a term that can be translated as messengers or angels. The Torah describes their arrival to Sedom and their encounter with Lote – Avraham's nephew. Lote insists on hosting the melachim. The citizens of Sedom demand that Lote turn over to them his guests. He refuses. The melachim drive off the hostile mob. They destroy Sedom and its environs, saving Lote and his daughters.

The account ends with a description of Avraham looking upon the devastation of Sedom and reiterates that Hashem destroyed Sedom, and on Avraham's behalf, Lote was spared.

Many commentaries note that although the parasha begins with Hashem appearing to Avraham, no account is provided of the details of this prophetic event. Instead, the Torah ends or interrupts its description of Avraham's prophecy and begins a new narrative – the description of the visit of the three travelers to Avraham. What was the prophecy that is suggested by the opening passage and why does the Torah not reveal its content?

Maimonides suggests that in fact the Torah does provide a detailed description of the prophecy received by Avraham. The narrative describing

three travelers that appeared before Avraham is not an account of an actual event. It is a description of the prophetic vision that Avraham received. These three travelers did not actually come to Avraham's home and speak with him and Sarah. Instead, they appeared in the prophetic vision introduced by the first passage of the parasha.[1]

Nachmanides strongly opposes this position. He asks a number of incisive questions on Maimonides' interpretation of the passages. However, one question stands out as the most compelling criticism of Maimonides' position. According to Maimonides, the travelers who visited Avraham were not actual material beings existing in and interacting with the material world. In Maimonides' opinion, these travelers existed in Avraham's mind. Yet, the Torah describes these travelers or angels as interacting with the world around them. These same travelers arrive in Sedom and accept Lote's hospitality. They enter into battle with the mob that attacks his home and they rescue Lote and his daughters from the devastation that they bring upon the city. If these men or angels existed only as a vision in the mind of Avraham, how did they emerge from this vision and interact with and participate in actual events in the material world?[2]



And Avraham arose early in the morning to the place at which he stood before Hashem. And he looked upon Sedom, Amorrhah, and the entire Land of the Plain. And he saw smoke rising from the earth like the smoke of a furnace. And it occurred that when Hashem destroyed the Cities of the Plain, G-d remembered Avraham. And He sent forth Lote from the upheaval, when he devastated the cities among which Lote dwelled.

(Beresheit 19:27-29)

Don Yitzchak Abravanel deals extensively with Nachmanides' objection. In order to fully appreciate his response to Nachmanides, the above passages must be considered. These passages are among the most difficult in the narrative. They appear at its end. The Torah has completed its account of the destruction of Sedom and the rescue of Lote. It then describes Avraham rising in the morning and returning to the place of his prophecy. He looks upon Sedom and observes the devastation that has befallen the city. Then, the Torah again relates that Hashem destroyed Sedom and saved Lote because of His relationship with

(continued on next page)

Avraham. What is the message of these passages? Why does the Torah tell us that Avraham returned to the place of his prophecy and observed the fate of Sedom? Even more odd is the Torah's reiteration of Sedom's demise and Lote's rescue. This seems completely superfluous!

Avranel explains that these passages are fundamental to understanding the preceding narrative. According to Avranel, the entire narrative describing the experiences of the travelers to Sedom, their interaction with its citizens and Lote, the destruction of Sedom, and the rescue of Lote was all part of Avraham's vision. Avranel explains that Nachmanides is mistaken in assuming that these travelers actually interacted with the people of Sedom or with Lote. Avraham experienced a prophecy that the Torah describes in exhaustive detail and all of these interactions are part of this prophetic vision. These details are not events that actually occurred in the material world.

Now, the meaning and significance of the above passages emerges. Avraham saw in his prophetic vision the destruction of Sedom and the rescue of his nephew. He arises in the morning and looks out upon Sedom. He observes the reality of the devastation that he had seen in his vision. Then, the Torah explains that events Avraham observed in his vision represented a parallel set of events in the real world. In the material world, Sedom had been destroyed and Lote saved. This final passage is not at all superfluous. It is the key to understanding all that has preceded it. It reveals that the preceding narrative was a vision and that that vision reflected events that unfolded in the material world.

The task remains to understand the meaning of Avraham's vision regarding Sedom. This part of the vision begins with Hashem revealing to Avraham His plan to destroy Sedom and Avraham's intervention. Avraham's intercession ends with an agreement that Sedom will be spared if ten righteous individuals can be found among its citizens. In the next part of the vision, Avraham observes the arrival of the travelers in Sedom, their interaction with the people of the city and with Lote. He is seeing – in his vision – the testing of the people of Sedom. Hashem is examining the citizens of Sedom and determining whether there are – in fact – ten righteous among its citizens. In his vision, the citizens mass against Lote and his guests. The entire citizenry joins in the attack. No one protests the mindless violence of the mob and no one demurs. There are not ten righteous individuals in the city. But Avraham's vision is not limited to observing the testing of Sedom. He also

observes his own nephew, Lote, put to a terrible test. Lote responded well enough to be saved from the fate of his fellows.

How closely did this vision characterize the events that actually unfolded in Sedom? We cannot know. The objective is not to communicate exactly how the people of Sedom were tested and how Lote proved his worthiness. Instead, the intent was to reveal to Avraham the outcome of the agreement he negotiated with Hashem. Somehow, the people of Sedom were tested. Ten righteous individuals did not reveal

themselves but those few righteous people who lived in Sedom – Lote and his daughters – were spared.[3] ■

[1] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 2, chapter 42.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban/Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 18:1.

[3] Don Yitzchak Avranel, Commentary on Moreh Nevuchim, volume 2, chapter 42.



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(Sodom continued from page 1)

Weekly Parsha

with an appreciation for Torah over all else he or she encounters. This is what we call "Love of God". We cannot know "Him" so as to love Him, but we can know some of His wisdom, on a human level. We love God through seeing His wisdom. And although it is minute wisdom, to us, it can be remarkable. For this reason, we must not be satisfied with mediocre explanations and mere possibilities; we must insist on understanding why each word is found in each verse. I intend to show such an example now.

In this week's parsha God says the following:

"Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do? And Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God, performing charity and justice, so that God will bring upon Abraham what He has spoken."

And God said [to Abraham], 'the cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me I will annihilate them; and if not, I know'." (Exod. 18:17-21)

We understand from the following verse 18:25 that Abraham had a clear understanding of God – God would never kill the righteous on account of the sins of others: *"Far be it to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, and the righteous and the wicked would be equal, far be it...the judge of the Earth would not do justice?"*

Abraham was correct in this exclamation. This was Abraham's knowledge of God all along: the wicked deserve punishment, and the righteous do not. This is justice.

However, God said earlier *"Shall I keep hidden from Abraham what I plan to do?"*

This is the first lesson: there are areas of knowledge which man cannot penetrate. And this is rightfully so, for man cannot possess all knowledge; only God does. Therefore, God expresses a sentiment to the Torah reader that if He does not disclose His wisdom on this topic of 'justice', Abraham will remain in the dark...it will be "hidden" from Abraham.

God also expressed His reasoning for inviting Abraham to investigate this matter: *"Abraham will surely become a great, mighty nation, and all nations of the land will be blessed due to him. For he is beloved on account that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God performing charity and justice..."* That is, God wishes the world to

increase in their knowledge of Him. And since Abraham teaches his household of God's ways (and greatly benefits other nations by rebuking their idolatry, as Sforno states), God imparted to Abraham greater knowledge of morality. Examining the world or theorizing moralistic philosophy cannot uncover the secret we are about to discuss. That is the meaning behind the phrase *"Shall I keep hidden"*. God therefore opened up a new area of knowledge so that Abraham should learn, and teach others.

The glaring question is this: If God decides 'not' to hide this secret, where in this account do we see God informing Abraham of it?

Somehow, Abraham knew to ask God whether He would spare the wicked, based on numbers of righteous people. This mercy was not what Abraham knew before...this was the new piece of information God disclosed and did not hide. He assured Abraham that if at least 10 righteous people were in Sodom, He would spare all of them, even the wicked.

So we now know the secret: previously, Abraham assumed the wicked must die – no exceptions. But now Abraham understood that God's mercy can allow wicked people to remain, provided there exists the influence of at least 10 righteous people can turn them back towards

repentance and God. We understand this.

But again: from where did Abraham derive this new concept of mercifully sparing the wicked people on account of the righteous? God does not say this in the entire account!

However, God does talk. The hints must be in what He told Abraham. Read it again:

"And God said [to Abraham], 'the cry of Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is greatly heavy. I will descend and see if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me, I will annihilate them; and if not, I know.'"

This is from where Abraham derived the new concept that God will spare the wicked.

Do you see the hint?

Do you see any questions?

I have one: If their sin is "greatly heavy", why should they not receive punishment? This is compounded by God's very words, "if in accordance with their cry that comes to Me, I will annihilate them". God is saying that in accordance with their corruption, they deserve annihilation. Yet, God says there exists the possibility of Him 'not' annihilating them! Now, if their current state of sin requires God's punishment, for what reason would God abstain? There is only one possibility where the merit to save them exists: the righteous inhabitants.

Abraham listened to God's words, "in accordance with their state, they deserve annihilation." But God also said a possibility exists that they will be spared. In God's very words was the clue. Abraham now realized a new concept: God does not work with strict justice, but He also performs charity, "tzedaka". Abraham knew about tzedaka, but he did not know all of its applications. It was necessary that God teach him this specific case. We might even add that God's concluding words "I know" are meant to indicate to Abraham that this knowledge is what "God" knows, and not man. It is concealed until God imparts it through this prophecy. God intended to teach that this idea is of a concealed nature. He taught this to us through the future-given Torah narrative *"Shall I keep hidden"*, and He taught this to Abraham through the words "I know".

Thus, God taught Abraham a new idea in justice that man could not arrive at alone: the wicked could be spared. And He also taught him that there are ideas, which are concealed if God does not offer man clues.

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(Sodom continued from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

We learn that God presented just enough clues in His words to allow Abraham to think into the matter. Once he realized this new concept, the next question was how many righteous people are required to save the wicked.

But why did God inform Abraham in such a subtle manner?

God does so as this increases a person's intelligence, his reasoning power. Just as a Talmudic scholar is not born with his skills, but gains them over decades of practice...Abraham too grew in his capacity to reason for himself through this experience. With thought, Abraham questioned his current beliefs and principles. Abraham moved beyond his previous boundaries, and excelled to greater wisdom.

Many times we prevent ourselves from alternative choices, simply because we are incapable of reasoning out all possibilities, or due to false assumptions. For example, a student may accept all ideas in books, simply due to his mind being crippled by the false notion that "all books must be true". People are quite impressed by authors and feel each author knows about what he or she writes. But once the student sees an error in one book, this broadens his horizons and he will never again blindly accept any notion, just because it's printed.

A wise Rabbi once cited Rav Moshe Feinstein's critique of the Ramban. Ramban condemned Abraham for leaving Canaan and descending to Egypt due to the famine. Rav Moshe zt"l said that Ramban's comment should be torn out of the Chumash. The lesson: even Ramban can be wrong. But we incorrectly tend to shy away from such statements. We fear reputations. But you must know that the greatest of our teachers – Maimonides – openly invited anyone at all to correct his errors. Maimonides did not feel infallible; he admitted that those below him in wisdom could correct him. No one is always correct.

People sometimes say, "Who am I to argue with Ramban?" This means they credit Ramban, or any Rabbi, as possessing tools to attain accurate understanding. But God did not give Ramban alone the Tzelem Elokim – intelligence. God gave it to every human. He did so in order that we engage it, and not make such statements. If we continually refrain from challenging our teachers, we reject God's will that we employ this great gift of intelligence. Of course we are respectful of all Torah scholars and teachers. But as one Talmudic Rabbi said, he cherished questions on his words more than words of support.

Furthermore, any person who assesses the Rabbis as brilliant thereby admits he can accurately determine truth, i.e., that they are

brilliant. And if he can determine truth, he then contradicts himself when saying he cannot argue with them. For if one can determine truth, and does so in a specific case, he must disagree with anyone who opposes that truth. Regardless of who it is. It is a false humility, or a corrupt mind that will at first passionately support his view, and then back down when he learns a Torah scholar holds the opposite. If he was firm on his understanding at first, he must be honest and say he disagrees, regardless of whom he opposes. Again, the Torah commentaries disagree with each other, and do not blindly accept even the words of those far greater than them. A Talmudic Rabbi once said, "Had Joshua bin-Nun said it, I would not hear it". (Tal. Chullin, 124a)

Although I carried an awe of the Rabbis from youth, once I heard Rav Moshe's critique of Ramban's words, I realized that no one is infallible. This was one of the greatest lessons that had the most dramatic affects on my studies. Furthermore, there is no Torah obligation to accept any idea outside of halacha. In matters of philosophy, there is no "psak" – ruling. Many times people say, "Maimonides is only a minority view, I need not follow him". Their error is in applying halachik principle of "majority rule" to hashkafa – philosophy. The Torah teaches, "According to

'law' that they will teach you and the judgment that they will tell you, you should behave. You should not deviate from that which they tell you to the right or left." (Deut. 17:11) This means the Rabbis have authority on 'laws' and nothing more. Not philosophy.

Additionally, a wise Rabbi once taught that no one – not even great Rabbis – can tell you what you think. Meaning, it is impossible that anyone be compelled to believe something, which they do not. Yes, in halacha I can be compelled to 'act'. But philosophy is all about our beliefs. Thus, there cannot be a ruling on philosophy. This is something we come to on our own. Either we accept a belief, or we don't. And if I do not believe something, no one can possibly force that belief.

The refusal to accept popular opinions was Abraham's greatest trait. It was through questioning what he was taught, that he discovered the error of his father and that entire idolatrous generation. This trait led him to discover God after 40 years of study on his own. There were yet areas that Abraham could not penetrate, but God assisted him. God also assists us in the form of His Torah. And if we continue to question the Torah, as is God's will, we will then unlock numerous other 'hidden' treasures.

The verses are truly astonishing. ■

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RESEARCHERS: Asteroid Destroyed Sodom & Gomorrah

Tuesday, April 01, 2008



A clay tablet that has baffled scientists for 150 years has been identified as a witness's account of the asteroid suspected of being behind the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Researchers who cracked the cuneiform symbols on the Planisphere tablet believe that it recorded an asteroid thought to have been more than half a mile across.

The tablet, found by Henry Layard in the remains of the library in the royal place at Nineveh in the mid-19th century, is thought to be a 700 B.C. copy of notes made by a Sumerian astronomer watching the night sky.

He referred to the asteroid as a "white stone bowl approaching" and recorded it as it "vigorously swept along."

Using computers to recreate the night sky thousands of years ago, scientists have pinpointed his sighting to shortly before dawn on June 29 in the year 3123 B.C.

About half the symbols on the tablet have survived and half of those refer to the asteroid. The other symbols record the positions of clouds and constellations. In the past 150 years scientists have made five unsuccessful attempts to translate the tablet.

Mark Hempsall, one of the researchers from Bristol University who cracked the tablet's code, said: "It's a wonderful piece of observation, an absolutely perfect piece of science."

He said the size and route of the asteroid meant that it was likely to have crashed into the Austrian Alps at K f ls. As it traveled close to the ground it would have left a trail of destruction from

supersonic shock waves and then slammed into the Earth with a cataclysmic impact.

Debris consisting of up to two-thirds of the asteroid would have been hurled back along its route and a flash reaching temperatures of 400 Centigrade (752 Fahrenheit) would have been created, killing anyone in its path.

About one million sq kilometers (386,000 sq miles) would have been devastated and the impact would have been equivalent to more than 1,000 tons of TNT exploding.

Dr Hempsall said that at least 20 ancient records describe a devastation of the type and on the scale of the asteroid's impact, including the Old Testament account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the ancient Greek myth of how Phaeton, son of Helios, fell into the River Eridanus after losing control of his father's sun chariot.

The findings of Dr. Hempsall and Alan Bond, of Reaction Engines Ltd., are published in a book, "A Sumerian Observation of the K f ls Impact Event."

The researchers say that the asteroid's impact would explain why at K f ls there is evidence of an ancient landslide 3 miles wide and a quarter of a mile thick. ■

Editor's Note: Mesora reports such findings as points of interest – not as endorsements.

Letters



Letters

from our

READERS



Jack: Would you care to elaborate a little further on this point that Rambam makes in this section of "The Guide to the Perplexed"? Especially to the statement, "when all peoples keep Sabbath on the same day"? The Chicago Press Edition is even more expressive when it states: "all people refrain from work on one and the same day." Is he saying that there is a point in time when individuals or eventually all of humanity will refrain from work when they understand the principles connected with the day, the Sabbath?

How does his understanding coincide with the Talmudic statement about non-Jews being worthy of death if they keep the Sabbath by refraining from work?

Dover Edition:

"Therefore we are told in the Law to honour this day; in order to confirm thereby the

principle of Creation which will spread in the world, when all peoples keep Sabbath on the same day."

Chicago Press Edition:

"For this reason we are ordered by the Law to exalt this day, in order that the principle of the creation of the world in time be established and universally known in the world (or "in existence") through the fact that all people refrain from work on one and the same day."

Mesora: Rambam does in fact say that all "sons of man" will observe the Sabbath on the same day, referring to the future, and the Talmud's prohibition refers to today. This is my understanding. ■



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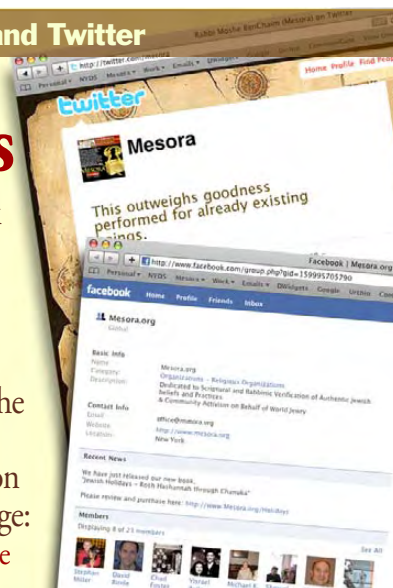
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