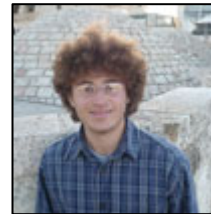




A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

by David Eisenstein



In the midst of the stories about Avraham we encounter an extraordinarily interesting tale, that of the destruction of Sodom. The preface to the destruction where Avraham has a debate with G-d, the story of Lot inside the city itself, and then the Rain of Fire and Sulfur that comes from the heavens to obliterate Sodom and what it stands for from the face of the earth. Throughout these chapters we can see incredible lessons about G-d, the role of the Jewish people in this world, the nature of Sodom (which is known by many people as an epitome of evil within the context of the Torah), and about Avraham himself.

I would like to define the beginning of this tale at the dialogue between G-d and Avraham that prefaces the story of the destruction. There are phenomenal ideas here, including that G-d speaks to Avraham at all, seemingly encouraging him to become involved in the events that are to come. As the sole Jew in the world, Avraham has a responsibility to step up to the plate, come into his own. He appears to do exactly that.

When Avraham comes forward to enter into this role of arguing on behalf of Sodom, of trying to find mercy for them in the eyes of G-d, the Torah chooses the verb *Va'yigash* which translates literally as stepping forward, but carries within it a deeper idea of stepping into a more pronounced role in the world. When the Torah, or more precisely G-d, chooses this specific verb, we instantly can see that the character whom is stepping up is really coming into his own and embracing or finding his unique and powerful role in the world.

The classic example here is found not surprisingly, at the beginning of Parashat *Va'yigash*. Joseph, heretofore unrevealed to his brothers, has planted a golden goblet in the sack of his youngest brother Benjamin, and is threatening to imprison Benjamin, to literally make him his slave. Furthermore, he tells the other ten brothers that they are free to go.

The situation facing the ten brothers is even more intense when seen in the context of their earlier decision to sell Joseph into slavery. The reason given for this sale - for their jealousy - is that Joseph was the clear-cut favorite

of their father Jacob. Moreover, Joseph dreamt that he would be the master over his brothers, and really embraced this role as the favorite. After Joseph was eliminated from the picture, the brothers perhaps assumed that the household situation would return to a more equal plane. But this simply did not occur. We see that Benjamin replaced Joseph as the favorite son, and the brothers would have to have been rather blind to miss that.

So now we return to Egypt, the ten brothers have an opportunity to again eliminate the favorite, and this time they will not even have to take action. The only action they have to take is no action, and the favored and perhaps hated children of Rachel will be forever removed from their household. But one brother steps forward. Judah, the forefather of the future kings of Israel, of the Davidic Dynasty, steps forward into and embraces his leadership role. That is the power of the word *Va'Yigash*.

That is what Avraham appears to have accomplished here. In the immediate aftermath (three days later according to Rashi) of the Circumcision where he physically symbolizes his connection to G-d as the original father of the Jewish people he has gained the ability to speak on behalf of the world, and at the first opportunity he steps forward into this role, embraces it, and defends the epitome of evil that is the cities of Sodom. He seeks the goodness even in this culture that is so detrimental to the world that it has been decreed that they will be wiped out from the face of this earth.

However, everything is not quite that simple. We have a bit of an issue... if Avraham had really finished becoming who he was supposed to be here, if he had come into his own and really embraced his full potential, then why would the Torah continue telling us all of these tales about him? Most poignantly, why would he immediately, after the story of Sodom, go down to the city of Garar and go through almost exactly the same sequence of events that had occurred in Egypt at the very beginning of his story? Something here is a little off; there is a piece here that we are missing. So, what is it?

The first and best place to start looking would be in the story of Sodom itself, some detail that we missed which may have powerful ramifications. Luckily, a perfect example of this can be found at the close of Avraham's conversation or debate with G-d about the impending destruction of Sodom. Genesis 18:33 reads as follows according to the Artscroll translation:

“Hashem departed when he had finished speaking to Avraham, *and Avraham returned to his place*” (italics mine).

This ending to this verse is strange, especially when viewed in accordance with the fact that the Torah never mentions anything extraneous. The Torah is written by G-d and is exact and perfect in everything that it relates and discusses. So what exactly is the significance of this phrase “and Avraham returned to his place”? Why is this here? What can we learn from it? Most importantly, will we see some semblance of an answer, the beginnings of an idea, as to what exactly happened in the story of Sodom that forced Avraham to seemingly revert to where he was on the first steps of his journey.

The simplest way to explore the ramifications of this verse is to do exactly what we did earlier with the word *Va'yigash*; look up other instances in

the *Tanach* where we encounter this phrase of someone returning to his place. We are once again in luck; this phrase appears only twice more within the text of the Torah, and in two additional times later in the *Tanach* in the book of Samuel.

This phrase appears at the conclusion of the story of Jacob living in the house of Lavan. The Torah tells us about the many years of servitude, the tricks of Lavan against Jacob, the growth of Jacob's household, and then Jacob's eventual escape from Lavan's house. Lavan chases after him with a large force, but he is then confronted in a dream by G-d himself, and makes a treaty with Jacob "in the name of the G-d of Avraham and the G-d of Nachor." The next morning Lavan wakes early, kisses and blesses his children, and finally "*returns to his place*".

Well after reading that story... I still am having difficulty understanding the implications of "*returning to his place*", so let us explore the final example of this phrase in the Torah and hopefully we will have a flash of insight.

The third situation in which the Torah describes someone "*returning to his place*" is by a famous enemy of the Jewish people, the prophet Balaam. Balaam, working at the behest of the Midianite King Balak, attempted to curse the Jewish people on no less than four separate occasions. Each time was a failure of epic proportion, as Balaam not only failed to curse the Jews, but in fact spoke eloquent blessings on their behalf. The most interesting blessing, or prophecy, of the four is the final one. This one is prefaced by an argument between Balaam and Balak, as Balak is unsurprisingly incensed by Balaam's continued failures and blessings. Balaam responds to Balak by saying, "I cannot transgress the words of Hashem to do good or bad on my own. Whatever Hashem speaks, that I shall speak". He then launches into a brilliant blessing.

However, immediately after finishing his final prophecy, Balaam gets up, and "*returns to his place*". And we can take this example one step further, for his next action is to once again attempt to destroy the Jewish people, this time by sending Midianite women into the Jewish camp in an attempt to attack the morality and very G-dliness of the Jews.

I believe that from this example we can see the implication, the meaning hidden in the phrase "*returned to his place.*" What is happening here is that Balaam has finally figured it all out, he has reached understanding, that as a prophet connected to G-d on a level that the sages teach was comparable to Moshe, he does not have control over his mouth. His prophecy is nothing more or less than a vehicle for revealing G-d's words in this world. Balaam, an enemy of the Jewish people, has an epiphany. But then he returns to his place, he goes back down to where he was. He takes this sudden and shocking understanding, and does nothing with it. He even goes so far as to seek another path through which he can endeavor to destroy the Jewish people.

Following along our trail back to Lavan now... Lavan also reached an understanding that had previously been completely hidden from him. Up to this point, despite having viewed the miracles that had permeated his home during Jacob's stay there, he had not intellectualized the truth of G-d. He

continued to cleave to his idols. But during this final confrontation with Jacob he also gets it. He also has this understanding, this epiphany, forging the covenant in the name of the G-d of Avraham! But he also does not act. He gets up in the morning, kisses his children, and returns to his place.

Now this example is not quite as extreme as Balaam, because Lavan is coming from a different place than Balaam was, but the implication of the stories are incredibly similar. This phrase of someone returning to his place is indicative of a lost opportunity. A man reaches a sudden brilliant, even blinding understanding, but somehow misses something, misses the point, misses his opening. And I would venture to say here that Avraham has experienced something similar. G-d came to him with the news of the impending destruction of Sodom. G-d himself wanted the input, the discussion with Avraham, the Jew, before destroying the city!

But yet it appears that Avraham missed something, he did not quite fully recognize his potential and accomplish all that he could in this situation. Now it must be noted that I am by no means diminishing Avraham here, he is still the forefather of the Jewish people, an extraordinary figure and role model for everyone, but the Torah does not whitewash its heroes. The Torah tells us when our forefathers perhaps missed something, even if they barely missed it, because we can learn from the situation.

So what should we learn? First we should learn from the way that Avraham dealt with the realization that he made this mistake. We see that immediately after the destruction of Sodom, when we can presume that Avraham began to understand that he missed something. Avraham returned to the location of his discussion with G-d and gazed back down onto the now destroyed city, the pillar of smoke that was rising from its ashes. In fact we see that Avraham woke early in the morning to overlook the city, he hurried to the location, he began the difficult fight to understand exactly what his mistake was. He did not hide, he returned.

Now I am quite sure that there are many other lessons we can see here as well, if we can understand first what exactly caused Avraham to just barely miss something here and second if we can understand what exactly it was that he missed. Unfortunately, at this point I simply do not have an answer to either of those questions. I have ideas; perhaps he should have been more aggressive in fighting for the preservation of Sodom. Perhaps he himself should have gone down to rescue his nephew, on a more extreme note; perhaps he should have even participated in the destruction of Sodom somehow. For right now, as Rav Binny would say, this question is better than the answer, so I will have to continue searching.

But returning to the original lesson, we see here an amazing lesson, that Avraham after missing a little something wakes early in the morning and practically leaps to find out what his mistake was, to better himself, to take advantage of the next opportunity. This is an incredible lesson for myself here at Orayta. I chose to come to this Yeshiva for a wide-ranging variety of reasons, but one of which was that I felt I missed an opportunity in high school. I do not think that I failed during those four years, but I was provided with innumerable chances, and I did not take advantage of as many as I could have. This year all of us at Orayta have an incredible opportunity to follow in

the footsteps of Avraham and find a way to make up for lost opportunity. It is certainly possible to make this jump, especially in the unbelievable atmosphere that we have here in the old city of Jerusalem. I believe that we can, and will, face our own tests this year, it remains to be seen what we will be able to do with them.

David graduated from the Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago where he was a National Merit Scholar. He was on the school's varsity wrestling team and editor of the high school yearbook. After Orayta, he will be attending Brandeis University.

His favourite part of Orayta is:

The friendly atmosphere here. I love it how we can be learning together in the Beit Midrash and then we'll go back to the dorms and play chess during break or watch a film together .We have a pretty strong chevra here.