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## RESPONSIBILITY

**A**N INTRIGUING EVENT TAKES PLACE IN THE SEDRA<sup>1</sup>. In a wondrous display of Divine power, G-d was about to destroy Sodom and other nearby cities, because of the total evil of their inhabitants. However, before doing so, G-d revealed this plan to Abraham. Abraham's response was to plead with G-d that the cities should be saved.

This story, told and retold in the Torah reading over thousands of years, has had a deep effect on our consciousness as a people. The basic idea that there is an ultimate Divine source of authority ruling the world of men is central to all religious belief. Yet particularly for the Jew, an important feature of the story is the role of Abraham.

The first question is, why did G-d reveal to him this impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah? The answer to this helps us understand something about the role of the Jewish people and their great Sages among humanity as a whole. When Abraham's name was changed from Abram to Abraham<sup>2</sup>, G-d told him that this is because he was "the father of many nations". This does not only mean the nations who are physically his descendants, but humanity as a whole. G-d gave Abraham the spiritual power to be concerned about humanity and connect them with the Divine<sup>3</sup>. Further, G-d declared that through Abraham "will be blessed all families of the earth"<sup>4</sup>.

Rashi explains in his commentary on the Torah that, by being called 'the father of many nations', Abraham had been given responsibility towards the people of Sodom, as a father towards his

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children. Since G-d was now about to destroy them because of their evil behaviour, it was right for Abraham to be told<sup>5</sup>.

Obviously, Abraham was a Tzaddik, a giant of the spirit. He was distinguished not only because of his own holiness but because he was dedicated to helping others follow the spiritual teachings of morality and goodness, based on belief in G-d. G-d says that Abraham will teach his children and his household to follow the Divine path, behaving with righteousness and justice. Consequently, says G-d, he is beloved by G-d, and should be informed about what is going to happen to Sodom<sup>6</sup>.

As we know, Abraham prayed on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. He pleaded with G-d that if there were a certain number of righteous men in the cities, they should all be saved. Why? Because from Abraham's positive and optimistic point of view, the righteous people will eventually have an effect on everyone<sup>7</sup>. Abraham was seeking a world filled with righteousness.

This event teaches us about the nature of the Jew, and in particular about the ideal Jew, the Tzaddik. He seeks to promote goodness, feeling a sense of responsibility for everyone. Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), the founder of Chassidism, gives us an example of this sense of responsibility. So too do later figures, such as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, closer to our own time. The Lubavitcher Rebbe was concerned for every Jew, however far that person might have strayed from his or her Jewish roots. At the same time he felt that, as the Rambam says<sup>8</sup>, the Jewish people are responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of humanity as a whole, and promoted the theme of the Seven Noachide Laws as a moral and spiritual guideline for all inhabitants of the world.

Through the generations, going back to Abraham, great Tzaddikim are granted a sense of responsibility, spiritual vision, and the power of prayer. They use these qualities to connect the world to G-d, with the goal that goodness should prevail, everywhere.

1. Genesis chapters 18-22. 2. This event took place near the end of last week's Sedra, Gen. 17:5. 3. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Torat Menachem* vol.7, 5713 I p.163. 4. Gen.18:18; Gen. 12:3. See last week's *For Friday Night* (Lech Lecha 2011). 5. See Rashi to Gen. 18:17. 6. See Gen.18:19, and Rashi. 7. See Sanh.99b, and *Likkutei Sichot* vol.5. p.372. 8. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings, 8:10.

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SEDRA VAYERA

***LOOKING AT THE GOOD SIDE***

“Those horrible, nasty boys!” complained Chava, who had just come home from school. Her mother and her brother David listened with concern.

Indeed, it was a problem. There was a gang of young boys, aged around ten, who had become known in the neighbourhood for all the naughty things they did. They were rude to older people, stole sweets from shops and terrorized children younger than themselves.

This time Chava had seen them being very unruly on the bus. They had caused such a problem the bus-driver refused to drive until they got off. They did not want to do so, and there was a horrible shouting match between them, the driver, and a few of the other passengers on the bus.

Chava was upset, and described it all to her mother and brother. However, to her surprise, David suddenly began to speak in favour of the nasty boys.

“Look,” he said. “They are only kids, it is not their fault. Their minds are stuffed with violent things they see on TV, and they think they can behave in the same way. And another thing: how do they themselves get treated at home? Whoever is looking after each of them might be very rough and unkind. And they probably hear a lot

of arguments and shouting. You should feel sorry for them instead of just saying how nasty they are!”

“I don't know how you can stick up for them!” said Chava. “They frighten the younger children and they're horrid. I wish they would all move away from here!”

“Well,” answered David, “if they did so they will simply be unhappy and behave badly somewhere else. You should rather wish that they should become happy and good!”

Mrs Levy, the mother of Chava and David, smiled to herself. “You know, David,” she said, “you remind me a bit of Abraham in the Sedra. There were the terribly wicked people of Sodom. They did the most evil things, and G-d was going to destroy them. Then Abraham started to plead on their behalf, asking G-d to save them!”

“That's true,” said Chava. “In fact we had an interesting guest speaker in school. She told us that Abraham expresses the Attribute of Kindness: he always looked at the good side of everyone and tried to defend them, however bad they were”.

“Well, perhaps we should all try to be like Abraham,” said their mother. “Then I am sure it will be a better world - and those sad little boys will also become happier people - and good”.

Both Chava and David agreed to this idea, especially since their mother produced some chocolate chip cookies and cups of cocoa. As she sipped her drink, Chava found herself wondering if any of those boys had such a nice, caring mother...

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