

Do You Really Care?

Category: Bereishis, Vayeira

What is the proper response when a natural disaster hits our fellow citizens?

Avraham's Negotiation

From time to time, American eyes focus on some major natural disaster: a wildfire, a hurricane, an outbreak of tornadoes, a flood, an earthquake or a tsunami. We all stand by wondering, "What can we do? What should we do?" Perhaps we should send a donation. Maybe we should pray. What is our moral obligation at these times?

As always, answers for everything may be found in the parshah.

This week, we read about the ancient cities of S'dom and Amarah. G-d said to Himself, "Since I am going to destroy these cities, I have to tell Avraham first." He turned to Avraham and said, "The cry of S'dom and Amarah is so great, and their sin is so very weighty."

Avraham immediately understood what G-d was talking about: He wanted to punish S'dom and Amarah. So Avraham immediately began to plead for mercy for them, using the well-known question, "Will You actually wipe out the innocent with the guilty? ... Shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly?" In other words: maybe there are a couple of good people in town—how can it be that the good die because of the evil?

Avraham argued the opposite—let the wicked be saved by the merit of the righteous. Indeed, G-d agreed and said, "If I find fifty good people I'll pardon them all." So Avraham, like every good Jew, immediately began bargaining: "What if there are only 45? Will You destroy both entire cities for only five less?" G-d again agreed to this deal—but, unfortunately, there weren't 45 good people in S'dom and Amarah. The negotiations between Avraham and G-d continued with 40, 30, 20, and 10 individuals—but even ten tzadikim, ten perfectly good people, were not found in S'dom and Amarah by G-d.

This is how the dialogue ends: "G-d departed, and Avraham returned to his

place.”

What’s happening here? Why did G-d come to tell Avraham? Did G-d need Avraham’s permission to destroy S’dom?

The Midrash on our parshah explains: “When G-d’s creations sin and provoke Him and He gets angry at them, what does He do? He seeks out an advocate to seek their merit, and gives the advocate a path ... since the S’domites had sinned, Avraham was notified to seek their merit.” In other words, G-d came to Avraham and said, “Convince Me not to punish them.” G-d pleaded with Avraham to stop Him.

But what did G-d expect from Avraham to do that He Himself did not do?

Did You Faint?

In a 1982 talk, the Rebbe related the story of how the Polish government enacted an unjust law in the inter-war years against its Jewish citizens, and how a contingent of distinguished Jews traveled to the capitol to overturn the law.

However, they were unable to accomplish anything.

When this group visited Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, the great European Jewish leader known as the Chofetz Chaim, to report on the fruitless results, they told him how they had met with a particular government minister to present their case but got nothing done. The Chofetz Chaim rhetorically asked: “Did any one of you faint during your meeting? If the issue truly touched you, one of you should have passed out!”

When G-d told Avraham that He was going to destroy S’dom, He expected a different reaction from Avraham altogether. He expected Avraham to pass out—to care so much that he simply would not have been able to stand. Instead, G-d heard from Avraham a reasoned, well-thought-out argument about how it wasn’t “ethical” to murder innocent people along with evildoers.

But you don’t successfully sway G-d with intellectual proofs, because “all His ways are just” and are always right. What G-d wanted was for Avraham’s very heart and very blood to shout out: “G-d, don’t do that!”

There is a famous story from the Talmud (Tractate Taanis 3:8) that relates to the natural disasters that sometimes hit various parts of our country or the world. In the time of the Second Temple in ancient Israel there was a drought, and the tzadik of the generation, Choni HaMagal, was approached to pray for rain. He prayed, but no rain fell.

What did he do? He drew a circle around him on the ground and called out:

“Master of the World! Your sons have turned their faces to me ... I swear by Your Great Name that I’m not budging until you have mercy on Your sons.”

A light, gentle rain began to fall. Choni again addressed G-d: “That’s not what I asked for!” A fierce rainstorm broke out. “That’s not what I asked for! I asked for rains of blessing!” Finally, proper rain began falling.

Note that Choni HaMagal did not open with dialogue or debate with G-d. He did not invoke the “unfairness” or “immorality” of lack of rain. He simply swore that he wasn’t moving until it rained. He gave G-d an ultimatum: do exactly what I say and nothing else—I’m only leaving here on a stretcher. That’s how he succeeded in making it rain.

Don’t Enjoy Your Bread

In the biography of Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, who helped spearhead Lubavitch in Brooklyn, New York from the 1930s onward, it is recounted how in 1930 he brought several community members to privately meet with the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph I. Schneerson, of righteous memory. After they had left, the Rebbe asked Rabbi Jacobson: “How can you have such spiritually weak people in your synagogue?” Rabbi Jacobson replied, “What can I do about it?” The Rebbe responded, “I don’t know what you can do—but you certainly should not be able to enjoy your bread.”

What the Rebbe was saying was: I can’t tell you what to do—but if it really bothered you to the extent that you couldn’t eat, then you’d figure out what to do.

The same thing applies to forest fires or other such natural disasters. You can’t tell someone else what to do. Not everyone is in the same situation. Not everyone

has the same options. But you can have caring—when you care, then you'll figure out what to do.

What is the lesson to us? The lesson is that we need to truly care about our Jewishness. Our kids need to know that their parents will literally pass out if certain things happen. They need to see that you'll turn the world upside down to find Shabbos candles even when you're on vacation. They need to see that you'll change your whole schedule on Purim just so you can hear the Megillah reading.

They need to see that you truly care, just as it is with G-d.

Debates and sophisticated rationalizations will convince no one of anything.

Kids just want to know how much you really care.