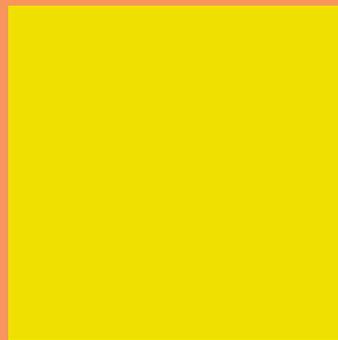


1



ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER:
DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

MODULE ONE

DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

1.1 THE STORY



Figure 1.1
The Video Clip

After an apartment block burns down, the nearby school organizes a fundraiser to assist the victims. Aaron, a Jewish boy, refuses to offer help. The apartment block has many migrants. According to Aaron, they only moved to profit from a wealthier country, and are therefore undeserving of help.

Aaron's reason for not helping has to do with a peculiar Torah story: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The burning down of the apartment block, like the burning down of Sodom and Gomorrah, is a punishment from G-d. Levi, a fellow Jewish student, doubts Aaron's interpretation. Together they enter the story in search of its meaning.

1.2 THE DOWNFALL OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH

1.2.1 SUMMARY GENESIS 18-19

The downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah takes place in **Genesis 19**, but the story actually begins earlier: in **Genesis 18!** There we read how Abraham encounters three strangers, among whom G-d finds Himself. He springs to his feet, runs to them, bows, offers every comfort, washes their feet, and together with his wife Sarah, prepares a sumptuous meal. Abraham's reception is very generous.

The Lord has heard rumors that the sister cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are evil or unjust. Since G-d vouches for justice, He cannot be indifferent. The cities must be inspected. In the event that the cities are indeed found to be evil, they will be razed to the ground. Every inhabitant will then be killed. G-d decides to communicate this plan to Abraham.

Abraham points out a problem to G-d: His plan to punish the unjust is itself unjust. "Avraham approached and said, "Will you actually sweep away the righteous with the wicked? (Gen. 18:23) After Abraham's intervention, he and the Lord arrive to a new conclusion together: the city will be spared if ten innocent or righteous people can be found.

A little later, two angels arrive in the city of Sodom. There they are hospitably received by Lot, Abraham's nephew. The text suggests that the two angels were also guests of Abraham earlier. After their arrival there is a violent incident: the inhabitants of Sodom come knocking on Lot's door and demand the two guests. They act violently and clearly want to harm the angels.

The angels blind the inhabitants of Sodom so that they cannot find the house. Afterwards, they decide to destroy the city: the wickedness of Sodom is proven. Lot and his family are allowed to escape to a nearby city.

1.3. INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY

1.3.1 HOSPITALITY - STANDING UP FOR THE OTHER

ASSIGNMENT. Read the two texts from Gen. 18 and 19 and answer the following questions.

Gen 18:

[1] Adonai appeared to Avraham by the oaks of Mamre as he sat at the entrance to the tent during the heat of the day. [2] He raised his eyes and looked, and there in front of him stood three men. On seeing them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, prostrated himself on the ground, [3] and said, "My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, please don't leave your servant. [4] Please let me send for some water, so that you can wash your feet; then rest under the tree, [5] and I will bring a piece of bread. Now that you have come to your servant, refresh yourselves before going on." "Very well," they replied, "do what you have said."

[6] Avraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quickly, three measures of the best flour! Knead it and make cakes." [7] Avraham ran to the herd, took a good, tender calf and gave it to the servant, who hurried to prepare it. [8] Then he took curds, milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it all before the men; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

Gen 19:

[1] The two angels came to S'dom that evening, when Lot was sitting at the gate of S'dom. Lot saw them, got up to greet them and prostrated himself on the ground. [2] He said, "Here now, my lords, please come over to your servant's house. Spend the night, wash your feet, get up early, and go on your way." "No," they answered, "we'll stay in the square." [3] But he kept pressing them; so they went home with him; and he made them a meal, baking matzah for their supper, which they ate.

- Compare how Lot and Abraham treat strangers. Are there differences?

- In what ways are you and your family hospitable? What customs do you have for receiving guests?

- Do you think there is still a duty today to be hospitable to strangers? Why yes/no?

- Do you think there are people today who are in need of hospitality? Why yes/no?

 The story provides an important lesson in hospitality. Abraham and Lot welcome absolute strangers into their midst, and stand up for their protection. Lot even resists the inhabitants of Sodom. **This is not the kind of hospitality that receives friends for dinner, but the one that stands up for the stranger.** Lot and his family are rewarded for this kind of hospitality and are allowed to escape the destruction of Sodom.

1.3.2 ABRAHAM'S CHUTZPAH

ASSIGNMENT. Read the text from Gen. 18 with the conversation between Abraham and the Lord. Afterwards, answer the questions

20] Adonai said, "The outcry against S'dom and 'Amora is so great and their sin so serious [21] that I will now go down and see whether their deeds warrant the outcry that has reached me; if not, I will know." [22] The men turned away from there and went toward S'dom, but Avraham remained standing before Adonai. [23] Avraham approached and said, "Will you actually sweep away the righteous with the wicked? [24] Maybe there are fifty righteous people in the city; will you actually sweep the place away, and not forgive it for the sake of the fifty righteous who are there? [25] Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous along with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike! Far be it from you! Shouldn't the judge of all the earth do what is just?" [26] Adonai said, "If I find in S'dom fifty who are righteous, then I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

[27] Avraham answered, "Here now, I, who am but dust and ashes, have taken it upon myself to speak to Adonai. [28] What if there are five less than fifty righteous?" He said, "I won't destroy it if I find forty-five there."

[29] He spoke to him yet again: "What if forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of the forty I won't do it."

[30] He said, "I hope Adonai won't be angry if I speak. What if thirty are found there?" He said, "I won't do it if I find thirty there."

[31] He said, "Here now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to Adonai. What if twenty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of the twenty I won't destroy it."

[32] He said, "I hope Adonai won't be angry if I speak just once more. What if ten are found there?" He said, "For the sake of the ten I won't destroy it." [33] Adonai went on his way as soon as he had finished speaking to Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place.

 Abraham critically questions G-d's plan. His intervention fits within the Jewish tradition of the "chutzpah", the critical frankness that cries out to G-d, against G-d, and in the name of G-d's creation and the covenant. It involves a kind of candid sincerity with which a Jew, as a full partner of the covenant, enters into discussion with the other partner, G-d.

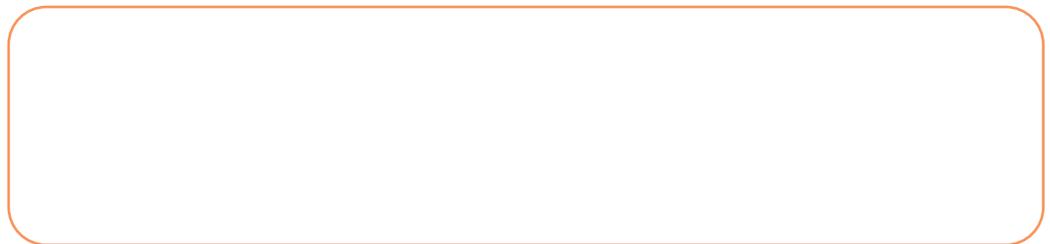
- How would you describe Abraham's attitude? Arrogant, humble, ...?



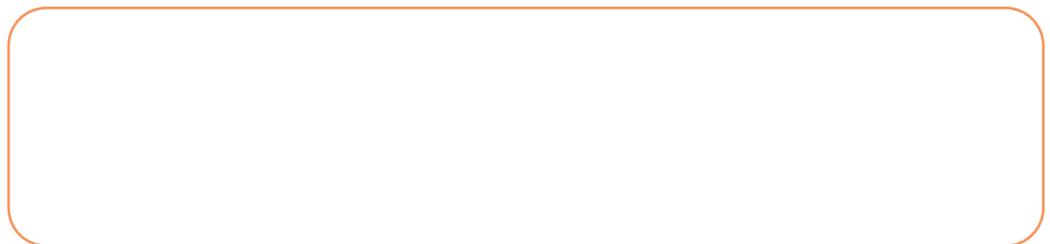
- Describe Abraham's plea in your own words.



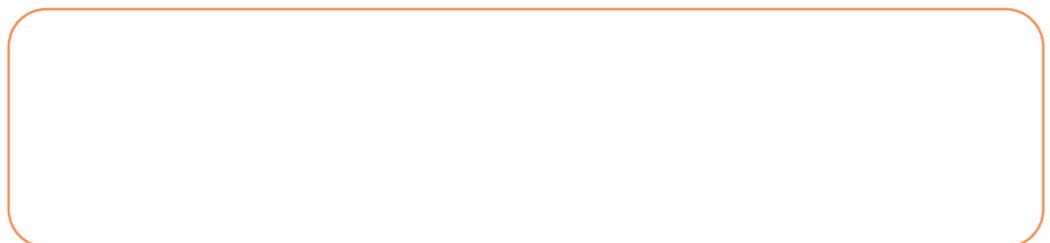
- Right or wrong. Abraham proposes a compromise to G-d.



- Abraham reminds G-d that a plan to punish the guilty can also punish the innocent. Can you associate this with contemporary events or phenomena?



- G-d changes his plan through Abraham's intervention. Do you change your mind easily?

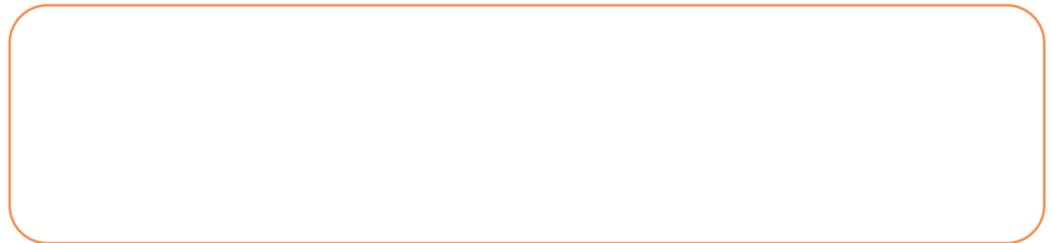


1.3.3 OUR ENVIRONMENT

Lot's reception is less extensive than Abraham's. Moreover, Lot offers his daughters to the violent inhabitants of Sodom. His aim is to protect his two guests, but this passage remains shocking to contemporary readers. Some commentators therefore believe that Lot is not as benign a character as initially appears. The difference may have to do with their location. Lot lives in the city of Sodom; Abraham lives near Mamre, in a tent in the wilderness. The story can teach us something about the interaction between humans and their environment. **The environment in which we find ourselves affects our behavior.**

ASSIGNMENT. Answer the following questions about the relationship between our environment and our behavior.

- Do you think you sometimes find yourself in a culture (environment) that does not protect the poor, weak, or vulnerable? Why do/don't you?



- To what extent do environmental factors determine our behavior? In other words, which is more important: personality or environmental factors?



1.3.4 THE EVIL OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH

After the incident at Lot's home - where the villagers come looking for the two angels - G-d decides to destroy the city. Ten righteous people could not be found. But the story is not entirely clear about what the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are. There are several passages in the Tanakh that mention the sister cities and their evilness. These passages may give an indication of what the sister cities are ultimately punished for.

ASSIGNMENT. Read the three passages and then answer the questions.

1.3.5 EZEKIEL 16: 49-50

[49] The crimes of your sister S'dom were pride and gluttony; she and her daughters were careless and complacent, so that they did nothing to help the poor and needy.

[50] They were arrogant and committed disgusting acts before me; so that when I saw it, I swept them away.

1.3.6 JEREMIAH 23:14

But in the prophets of Yerushalayim

I have seen a horrible thing —

they commit adultery, live in lies,

so encouraging evildoers

that none returns from his sin.

For me they have all become like S'dom,

its inhabitants like 'Amora."

1.3.7 AMOS 4, 11

[1] "Listen, you [lovely] cows of Bashan,
who live on Mount Shomron,
who oppress the poor and grind down the needy,
who say to their husbands, 'Bring something to drink'

[11] "I overthrew some of you,
as when God overthrew S'dom and 'Amora;
you were like a burning stick snatched from the fire;
still you haven't returned to me," says Adonai.

- Try to summarize the three passages as precisely as possible. How do they describe the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah?

- Do you think the things the three passages describe still occur today?

- What could be another contemporary sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?

1.4 GLOSSARY

Chutzpah

The word *chutzpah* is difficult to define. The meaning of this noun lies somewhere between the more extreme ‘insolence’ and the more moderate ‘impropriety’. Thus, someone with *chutzpah* is unafraid to do rather ‘daring’ things. This is also how we can describe Abraham’s intervention.

The word comes from Yiddish, and the Yiddish word in turn comes from Hebrew. In Yiddish it tends to have a negative connotation, such as ‘rudeness’ or ‘arrogance’, but this is not necessarily the case in the other languages! Within Judaism, *chutzpah* has the meaning of a critical but sincere discussion between the two partners of the covenant: G-d and a Jew. The Jew cries out to G-d, against G-d, and in the name of G-d’s creation and covenant.

In addition to Abraham, Moses also forms an example. In Exodus 32:11, Moses is at Mount Sinai when G-d informs him that the Jewish people at the bottom of the mountain are worshipping a calf. This goes against one of the Ten Commandments, so the Lord wants to destroy them all and start over with Moses. Moses thereupon enters into a discussion with the Lord, just as Abraham does in Genesis 18, and the Lord deviates from His plan. So Moses and Abraham both got *chutzpah!*

Righteous/unrighteous

Righteousness has several meanings. First, justice is a legal concept. Whatever is in accordance with the law is just. Second, justice is also a moral concept. To act justly is to act ‘rightly’, in accordance with what is ‘good’ or ‘correct’. Justice also takes practice: no one naturally does the right or good thing all the time. We encounter this idea often in the Tanakh!



Figure 1.2
Source: © Sergign /
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1.5 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

1 INT CLASSROOM DAY

The scene opens on a classroom. The final school bell rings. The kids start to pack up.

Teacher: Before you go home, there is one more thing. As you know, there was a fire in one of our city's apartment complexes. The school has decided to organize a donation campaign to help out the poor families that lived there. Try bringing in some old clothes and other things you can miss for next Monday! I'm sure those families will appreciate that very much!

Aaron (mumbles to himself): I'm sure they would.

The kids take their school bags and walk outside.

2 INT COMPUTER DAY

We see Aaron sitting in front of his computer. He gets a videocall from his friend Levi. He accepts it and a video-screen call opens up.

Levi: Hey! What's up?

Aaron: Hey, I'm good, what about you?

Levi: I'm good, actually. Have you already found some stuff to donate?

Aaron: Nope, and I'm not really planning on donating anything.

Levi: Why not? You know they lost their house and a lot of their stuff, right?

Aaron: It's not really their house, though, is it? We just let them live there free of charge.

Aaron: They're not in actual need, Aaron. I heard my parents talking about them the other day. The people that lived in those apartments are economic immigrants. They're here for cheap housing and a bigger paycheck, without contributing anything themselves. It's almost like stealing. And now I even have to give them my stuff too? I don't think so. Why don't they just go back to where they came from?

Levi: Wow man, don't you think that's a bit harsh? If people are in need, it's our duty as Jews to be just and help them.

Aaron: Not necessarily. And I don't need to talk to them personally to know them. You can see how they are on the street, they're just mean people. There's a story in the Torah that's literally about this. And in that case Hashem destroyed the bad people. It's the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Levi: I know that one! From the Book of Genesis, right? But doesn't it -

Suddenly a mysterious message appears on screen. It says: SODOM AND GOMORRA: A STORY. There's an accept and decline option. Aaron and Levi are both surprised.

Levi: What's that?

Aaron: I don't know... It says it's an invitation for the story of Sodom and Gomorrah... We were just talking about this! That's spooky...

Levi: Computers are really advanced nowadays. Do you think we should accept it?

Aaron: Sure, why not?

Aaron and Levi both click on 'accept'. The screen explodes into a kaleidoscope. A voice-over welcomes them to the story. Both of them are rather surprised.

Voice-over: Dear virtual travelers! Welcome to the Tanakh: internet edition! You have chosen the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Strap in!

Aaron: But how did it know -

3 EXT SODOM EVENING

The screen abruptly transforms into a virtual reality. The scene opens up on the city of Sodom. We see an older looking man sitting near the city gate.

Voice-over: Word came to Hashem that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were doing evil things. To see if this was true, He sent two angels. "That evening the two angels arrived in Sodom, while Lot was sitting near the city gate. When Lot saw them, he got up, bowed down low, and said, "Gentlemen, I am your servant. Please come to my home."

Levi: That's Lot, Abraham's nephew!

4 EXT LOT'S HOUSE NIGHT

Lot, together with his wife and two daughters are sitting inside the house when a mob of angry men comes knocking on their door.

Aaron: I guess those are the people of Sodom...

Voice-over: The people of Sodom yelled: "Where are you visitors? Send them out, so we can know them!" Lot was so afraid that they might hurt his visitors, that he even offered his two daughters instead. "I'll bring them out, and you can do what you want with them. But don't harm these men. They are guests in my home." But the mob didn't care. "Don't get in our way," the crowd answered. "You're an outsider. What right do you have to order us around? We'll do worse things to you than we're going to do to them."

Levi: I didn't remember this story being so violent...

Voice-over: "But the two angels in the house reached out and pulled Lot safely inside. Then they struck everyone in the crowd blind, and none of them could even find the door. The two angels said to Lot, "The Lord has heard many terrible things about the people of Sodom, and he has sent us here to destroy the city. Take your family and leave." So Lot decided to escape to a small, nearby village.

5 EXT SODOM DAY

We see Lot and his family quickly leaving the city.

Voice-over: The sun was coming up as Lot reached the town of Zoar, and the Lord sent sulfur and fire down like rain on Sodom and Gomorrah.

During this narration, fire starts pouring down, until the entire city is engulfed in flames. After an explosion both Aaron and Levi are left looking at a black screen.

Aaron: So, the story just concludes like that? I'm a bit confused now.

Voice-over: Can I ask you a question?

Aaron: Oh... Um, yeah, sure?

Voice-over: What exactly was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?

Aaron: I dunno... Unkindness? Violence?

Voice-over: Those are good suggestions. Different people have understood the story in different ways. Some think the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality, or cruelty to keep foreigners away, or mistreatment of the poor, injustice, selfishness, Do any of these things sound familiar?

Aaron: Wait, what do you mean? Am I doing those things?

The voice-over remains silent.

Aaron: I don't know, maybe I need to rethink all of this... Who are you, if I may ask?

Voice-over: Oh, I'm just the story, asking you this question.

The virtual-reality screen abruptly closes. Levi and Aaron return to their videocall.

Levi: So, uhhhh...

Aaron: You don't need to say anything. Can we meet up? I think I have an idea.

5 INT CLASS ROOM DAY

It's raining heavily outside. Aaron and Levi are sitting in class next to each other. At the front of the class room there are a lot of boxes stacked on top of each other.

Teacher: Thank you everyone for donating so much stuff! And a special shout out to Aaron and Levi, who really pulled their weight on this one! I'm sure those poor families will appreciate this very much.

Aaron (mumbling to himself; sincerely): I hope they do.

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