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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

God informs Abraham that the people of Sodom are so wicked that He has decided to destroy them. Abraham protests: “Will You sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous people within the city, will You sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are in it?” (Bereishith 18:23-24). The conversation continues until God finally agrees with Abraham to save the city if only ten righteous people are found within.

This episode is often cited as an example of how a religious person has the right to challenge God’s decisions. Abraham certainly must have realized that if God planned to destroy Sodom, He had good reason to do so. Yet, Abraham courageously challenged God, demanding mercy for the city if even ten righteous people could be found there. God acceded. Victory for Abraham, right?

Wrong.

The city—as God knew full well—did not have ten righteous people within. God destroyed the city with fire and brimstone. Only Lot and his daughters managed to escape alive.

What were Abraham’s assumptions when he negotiated with God? Why didn’t he just ask God to spare the righteous of the city and let the wicked perish? Why did he think that ten righteous people in the city would justify God’s sparing the entire city? The general explanation offered is that Abraham believed that a “minyan” of good people had the power to impact on the rest of the community. They would set a good example, they would teach, they would turn the masses into a moral and upright society.

Abraham was courageous in confronting God. But he was also naïve. He thought that a wicked society should be spared if only ten good people still lived among them. But God had already viewed the entire city and deemed it hopelessly wicked. Even if there were ten such individuals, God knew that they were powerless to change the overall wickedness of the whole society.

What were Abraham’s thoughts after the destruction of Sodom? The Torah is silent on this. Abraham had negotiated with God in the hope of saving the city…but the city was destroyed. Abraham had gained nothing from his bargaining with God. Did Abraham learn anything from this episode?

Maybe he learned to be less naïve. Originally, he did not want to believe that a few righteous people were unable to change society for the good. He wanted to believe in the ultimate goodness within humanity. If we only speak nicely to the wicked people they will turn to righteousness. If we only give bad people a chance, they will come to their senses and become moral and just.

God taught him otherwise. The people of Sodom were absolutely corrupt, lacking elementary decency. Their society fostered and perpetuated evil. A few good people among them couldn't change them; but they would corrupt the few good people. Abraham learned that some wicked people are incorrigible. They are so steeped in evil, hatred and lies that they are beyond redemption.

But there is a twist to this story. Although God apparently wanted Abraham to be less naïve, He also appreciated Abraham's naïve belief in the possible salvation of even very wicked people. God wanted to temper Abraham's naivety but not eliminate it. After all, if Abraham was to teach monotheism and righteousness to the world, he had to maintain a belief that he could succeed in reaching everyone…or at least almost everyone.

The lesson: there are evil people in the world whose wickedness is so deep that they cannot be redeemed. Don't be a naïve believer in the goodness of all humans and in their capacity to change for the better. But don't completely give up your naivety. Keep trying, keep negotiating, keep challenging God and humanity.

Because once you lose that naivety, the fire within you dies…along with hope for the ultimate redemption of humanity.