

The Transformative Capacity of a Minyan

In Tribute to Sigi Laster, Gabbai Emeritus of JCOT Daily Minyan

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If one can manage to find his way past the sheer audacity of Avraham's chastising the Almighty for contemplating destroying all of Sodom, including the righteous, there is something very peculiar regarding the argument Avraham appears to be articulating.

On the one hand, Avraham is suggesting that it would be a terrible miscarriage of justice for the Almighty to allow the innocent people of Sodom to perish in the destruction of the entire city. Surely, Avraham argues, they deserve a separate judgment. Certainly, Avraham pleads, it would not be in keeping with God's status as 'judge of the entire Earth' to allow such a travesty. On the contrary, as Avraham says with such mendacity, it would be a desecration of God's sanctified and lofty status to allow such a miscarriage of justice.

Fair enough. Avraham is arguing, it would seem, for each individual to be judged on his or her merits, and against 'collective punishment'. And yet, if that is the crux of Avraham's argument, how can Avraham, at the very outset of his Divine quarrel, suggest that the Almighty should forgive the entire city on account of the righteous people who live there? Does this request not directly undermine Avraham's central argument? If Avraham is prepared to suggest collective justice for leniency, that is, to forgive the guilty majority on account of the righteous minority who live there, does the Almighty not, at the very least, have an equal right to impose collective justice for guilt, and to condemn the innocent on account of the guilty majority?

On the basis of Rashi's interpretation of the entire dialogue, in which he posits that Avraham was pleading not just for Sodom, but for its four suburbs (Amorah, Admah, Tzivo'yim, and Tzo'ar), if each of these five locations had at least a quorum of ten righteous¹ individuals, something tantalizing emerges: Avraham's premise indeed remains that each individual deserves his own accounting, and yet, if an individual lives in a city with a quorum of ten righteous individuals, then, remarkably, each individual in the city is cast in a new light. The standing of each person in the city, even those who are not themselves part of the minyan, would be transformed, and he or she would be deserving of clemency.

Thus, in subsequent stages of the conversation, when it becomes clear that each of these five locations, tragically, does not have ten righteous individuals, Avraham, in Rashi's accounting, continues to plead for four of the cities, and then three, and then two, and then just one. Yet, the central argument remains the same: any individual who lives in a city with a quorum of the righteous is, at some level, deserving of clemency.

Avraham's challenge to the Almighty in the context of the destruction of Sodom is a crucial source illuminating the transformative nature of a minyan. A minyan not only impacts those who participate, but transforms a community. It, astoundingly, gives each individual associated with that community a new standing, simply by virtue of residing in a community with a minyan.. It powerfully attests to the significance of participating in a minyan oneself, not only insofar as it enhances one's own prayer, which it certainly does,

¹ Hence, Avraham's initial suggestion of fifty; ten righteous individuals per location.

but on account of the impact that it has on the community. Small wonder, then, that the Sages of the Talmud associated participation in a minyan with the virtue of good neighborliness².

As a congregation, the very core of our communal life is our daily minyan, both in the morning and in the evening. Coming to minyan is a serious commitment, and is no small thing to ask. However, it is, without exaggeration, the foundation of everything to which we aspire in our community. If a minyan of righteous people could save a thoroughly wicked place such as Sodom, one can only begin to imagine the impact of a strong and robust minyan in a community of the righteous, such as the one in which we are privileged to live.

² See Brachot 8a. One should not understate the value of such good neighborliness. See Avot 2:12, in which R. Yosi Ha-Kohen identified the path to which one ought to cleave, above all others, in life.