

The Quran's Version

It's well-known that the Quran includes the story of the Akeidah, with some variations. In particular, the son is anonymous in the story, and many Muslims believe Yishmael was the one who was offered. But another story from our parshah also appears in the Quran – the destruction of Sdom – again with some variation.¹

- One interesting change is that Avraham never interacts with Hashem. The malachim tell Avraham and Sarah about destroying Sdom, and the malachim tell Avraham to stop davening for Sdom.
- Another interesting change is that Sarah laughs, not about Yitzchak's birth, but when she hears that Sdom will be destroyed; she has no mercy.
- But the change I want to discuss this morning is in the account of why Avraham davens for Sdom. They say it's because Avraham was "patient and tender-hearted."

Many Jews agree with the Quran's version, that Avraham davened for Sdom out of compassion; after all, a gemara teaches that Jews, by definition, are compassionate.² But the Torah doesn't actually say why Avraham davened for Sdom. Maybe mercy was not the motivation. That was the argument of the Ohr haChaim HaKadosh.

Rabbi Chaim Ibn Attar

November is Sephardic Month here at Eitz Chayim, and this morning we will examine an idea of Rav Chaim ibn Attar, author of the Ohr HaChaim commentary to chumash, as well as sefarim on gemara, halachah and Nach.³ He was born in the ancient Jewish community of Sale, Morocco in 1696. His family included talmidei chachamim and political leaders – more on that later – and he became a Rosh Yeshiva. Eventually he made aliyah; a shul he established in Yerushalayim stood for more than 200 years, until the Jordanians destroyed it after 1948. From Yerushalayim he moved to Akko, and he passed away in 1743.

The Ohr haChaim was a mystic, and there are amazing stories about him. Remarkably, the Ohr haChaim has a very large fan base among Chassidim; that began at the very start of chassidut. The sefer מלכי רבנות records biographies of Moroccan rabbis, and it reports that the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Chassidut, told his students one day that Mashiach ben Yosef had arrived. They checked and found that this was the day when the Ohr haChaim arrived in Yerushalayim.^{4,5}

The Ohr haChaim presented a fascinating thought regarding why Hashem told Avraham about Sdom, and why Avraham davened – and it leads to a striking lesson regarding our relationship with the non-Jews around us.

Avraham's Responsibility for Sdom

After the three malachim left Avraham's home to destroy Sdom, Hashem declared, "המכסה אני מאברהם אשר אני עושה?" How could I conceal from Avraham what I am going to do?⁶ That's unusual; does Hashem normally tell Avraham what is going to happen? Hashem didn't give Avraham advance notice of the famine in Lech Lecha, for example!

The Ohr haChaim offered two explanations for why Hashem told Avraham about the demolition of Sdom; the second one is our focus.⁸

- היות שאברהם הציל הסדומיים בהרבו ובקשתו עם לוט... נוגע הדבר אליו לדעת מה שיעשה בהם... כי הוא בדעתו העם אשר הציל עודנה לבטח וד' הוא מאבדם מבלי ידיעתו
- Rav Chaim ibn Attar said: Because Avraham saved Sdom with his sword and bow along with Lot, it would be relevant for Avraham to know what would be done to them. As far as Avraham knew, the nation he saved was still safe, and Hashem was about to destroy them without Avraham knowing.

¹ Surah 11:69-76 <https://quran.com/11>

² Yevamot 79af

³ Cheifetz HaShem on Shas, Pri Toar on the Pri Chadash, Rishon l'Tzion on Nach

⁴ Divrei Chaim Yoreh Deah 2:105

⁵ <https://mishpacha.com/a-path-all-his-own/>

⁶ See <https://derher.org/wp-content/uploads/83-tammuz-5779-yoman-visit-to-gan-yisroel-15-tammuz-5720.pdf>

⁷ Bereishit 18:17

⁸ First, he quotes a Midrash Tanchuma suggesting that Avraham was upset about the Mabul, thinking that innocent people must have died, and Hashem wanted to demonstrate that He was merciful so He let Avraham argue with Him about Sdom.

In other words, Avraham had a right to know, because he felt a sense of responsibility for the people of Sdom. Not compassion, responsibility.⁹ Now keep in mind:

- This was not Avraham's family.
- They were not kindred spirits; they were horribly abusive people before Lot moved there,¹⁰ before Avraham saved them in war,
- And after their rescue they went back to Sdom and continued that path. Hashem decided to destroy them for a reason!¹¹

But Avraham felt a responsibility for them. In fact, the Ohr haChaim concluded his comment by saying that the Torah didn't spell out why Hashem told Avraham *כי הוא דבר ידוע*, because it is obvious. Avraham's responsibility for Sdom was self-evident, to the Ohr haChaim.

An Overarching Concept

This idea that the tzaddik feels and is responsible for others is a theme across the Ohr haChaim's writing, and he applied it even when the tzaddik had no prior relationship with the people he was saving.¹²

- He described tzaddikim since the time of Adam and Chavah maintaining the world by observing Shabbat.¹³
- He criticized Noach because, as he put it, the only person Noach saved was Noach.¹⁴
- He argued that Avraham was responsible for the Canaanites, those unredeemed idolaters. At the start of Lech Lecha Hashem says to Avraham *ואברכה מברכך*, I will bless those who bless you. And for those who don't bless you? *ונברכו בכ כל משפחות האדמה*, you are responsible to bless those who do not bless you.¹⁵
- He repeatedly quoted a sentence from Mishlei,¹⁶ *וצדיק יסוד עולם*, the tzaddik is the foundation of the world,¹⁷ meaning that he is responsible for the world's welfare.

What does responsibility look like, in practice?

- As a gemara explains and the Rambam paskens, it means giving to their needy, taking care of their sick, and burying their dead.¹⁸
- As another gemara explains, Yaakov fulfilled this mission by enhancing the economy of Shechem.¹⁹
- And in our parshah, this is why Avraham davens for Sdom.

Rav Chaim ibn Attar actually saw this philosophy in action in his own home; his father, Rav Moshe ibn Attar, brokered a peace deal between King George I and Alawite Sultan Mullah Ismail ibn Sharif.²⁰ Later generations of Moroccan talmidei chachamim took the lesson to heart. Rav Shalom Messas, a Chief Rabbi of Morocco in the 20th century, was close with King Hassan II; when Rav Messas moved to Israel, the king came to the airport to receive a berachah from him. *וצדיק יסוד עולם* - the tzaddik takes responsibility for the world, even for Sdom.

The Limits of Responsibility

But there are reasonable limits to this responsibility, as Avraham learned. He davened for Sdom, but when Hashem indicated that the people were not even minimally worthy of saving, he stopped and went home.²¹

⁹ Rashi may be going in this direction as well, when he says Hashem tells Avraham because he is *אב המון גוים*. But Ohr haChaim develops the idea across his peirush, I haven't seen that in Rashi.

¹⁰ See Nazir 23a on Lot's motivation for moving there

¹¹ See Ramban on the Parshah in this week's Torat Chayim for more

¹² This may be one reason his writing resonates with Chassidim, who would develop the Tzaddik idea in powerful ways.

¹³ Ohr haChaim to Bereishit 2:3

¹⁴ Ohr haChaim to Bereishit 6:9

¹⁵ Ohr haChaim to Bereishit 12:3

¹⁶ Mishlei 10:25. See also Rav Kook in Shemoneh Kevatzim 4:131, available at https://www.sefaria.org/Shemoneh_Kevatzim.4.132.1?lang=he

¹⁷ For more examples, see Ohr haChaim to Bereishit 18:33 on how an outstanding tzaddik could have saved Sdom, and Devarim 1:37 on Moshe dying in the midbar in order to spare the Jews in the time of the Beit HaMikdash, and see

<https://olamot.net/shiurim/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%9B%D7%99-%D7%AA%D7%A9%D7%90-%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A8-%D7%94%D7%97%D7%99%D7%99%D7%9D/>

¹⁸ Gittin 61a, and see Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 10:12

¹⁹ Shabbat 33b on *ויהן את פני העיר*

²⁰ https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%97%D7%99%D7%99%D7%9D_%D7%91%D7%9F_%D7%A2%D7%98%D7%A8
<https://inlibris.com/item/bn46825/>

²¹ See Bereishit Rabbah 49:14, and the way Rashi quotes it on Bereishit 18:32

We have encountered such a limit today in Aza.

- I do feel compassion for the hospital patients whose beds sit on top of Hamas command centers, for the children whose homes sit atop Hamas ammunition dumps. I want to exercise responsibility for them, to be צדיק יסוד עולם for them as well.
- But when someone yearns to harm us, when they promise us that they will attack again and again and again – like in that video I sent out on Friday²² - then our mandate of responsibility arrives at a full stop. We cannot daven for them, visit their sick, and build up their economy, when they are dedicated to our destruction.

Today

But that sense of responsibility for our neighbors remains relevant outside of Aza, with real-world applications. Including:

- Right now we are focused on which politicians support Israel and condemn Hamas – but after the crisis we must also notice which politicians serve the entire community, not just the Jews. That includes taking time to vote for candidates we believe will serve not only our needs, but everyone's needs.
- Right now we want to know which other ethnic groups will stand by us – but after the crisis we should also stand by other ethnic groups.
- Right now we are raising funds for Israel – and I am grateful to be able to announce that our community has, Baruch Hashem and thank you, sent about \$45,000 through our Rabbi's Fund to various needs in Israel. After the crisis we should ask ourselves what we can also support within West Hempstead, for non-Jews and Jews, as Yaakov did for Shechem.²³

Our duty of self-defense renders the very idea of responsibility in Aza absurd. But outside the gates of Aza is a world which needs us, which needs the צדיק יסוד עולם. It needs Avraham's davening. It needs Yaakov's financial help. It needs the gemara's bikur cholim. It needs the lesson of Rav Chaim ibn Attar.

One Day

One last note. Generations after Avraham davened for Sdom, Moshe also took responsibility for his neighbors. He fled from Egypt and arrived at a well in Midian, and he saw Midianite women being harassed. Rather than mind his own business, he took responsibility and helped them – and he married one of them, Tzipporah. Her father, Yitro, turned around and helped Moshe and Klal Yisrael, innovating our judicial system. Rav Chaim ibn Attar²⁴ pointed out that this story teaches us that responsibility is a two-way street, and non-Jews will reciprocate and benefit us as well.

When we fulfill צדיק יסוד עולם and take responsibility for the nations around us, then we, like Moshe, will stand to benefit as well. May all of this happen soon.

²² See the Hamad interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jU918XaUxQ>

²³ Granted that Shechem backfired

²⁴ Commentary to Shemot 18:21