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Did Avraham Go Far Enough?

On the qualities required for Jewish leadership: Torah from the front room of a mid-century Tel Aviv hostel

If you walk down Lillenblum Street today in the centre of Tel Aviv you will find financial institutions alongside French delicatessens and expensive gyms.

But if you had ventured that way from the 1930s to the 1960s, you may have come across a small hotel restaurant owned by Rav Yosef Zev Lipovitz and his wife Bayla. It sat at a short distance from the location during the 1940s of the Haganah high command headquarters.

Rav Lipovitz was born in Trastina near Bialystok in 1889 and studied in the great yeshiva of Slobodka becoming a leading disciple of both rashei yeshivot, the Talmudist Rav Mordechai Epstein and the mussar master Rav Natan Tzvi Finkel, better known as the Saba of Slobodka. Alongside many others who would go on to be luminaries of the Jewish 20th century, he went on to study at the University of Berlin, before moving with his wife to Tel Aviv in 1924.

He was not an ambitious figure and did not assume positions of public leadership. Instead after teaching Talmud for a few

years at Yeshivat Tel Aviv the Lipovitzs opened their small hotel-restaurant on Lillenblum St. For the next thirty years or so their front room became a kind of salon, a gathering place for everyone from simple labourers, to intellectuals and *gedolei Torah* to learn Torah with the Eastern European master and have them illuminate the momentous events of the world around them.

Today he is largely forgotten. He died childless in 1962 with the only work published in his lifetime being a beautiful commentary on Megillat Ruth, Nahalat Yosef. After he died his wife sold all of her possessions, down to her wedding ring to be able to finance the publication of three further volumes of his writings.

We will revisit the remarkable commentary on Megillat Ruth a number of times throughout this series, especially in advance of Shavuot. For this week's column however we will focus on a section of the introduction to Nahalat Yosef in which Rav Lipovitz sketches a model of Jewish leadership.

In Rav Lipovitz's scheme, Hashem looks for leaders with an unshakeable empathy for those around them - even, and perhaps

**רפואה שלמה מהרה
לליעם יעקב ניסן בן אורה**

especially, when the behaviour of that population leaves much to be desired.

Noach in this sense is a tragic figure - able to save himself and his family but unwilling to argue with God on behalf of the doomed people around him.

It is Avraham, in this week's parsha, who is the first to demonstrate this model of leadership when he pleads to save the inhabitants of corrupt Sedom.

Quoting the midrash, Avraham argues, 'if it is a world you desire there can be no strict justice, but if it is strict justice you desire then there can be no world' (Bereishit Rabba 49). It is for such heroic hutzpa that Avraham is chosen by God to become the progenitor of Am Yisrael.

Avraham argues that if fifty righteous people are to be found then Sedom must be saved. When that number cannot be found Avraham eventually reduces the minimum number all the way down to ten. When ten are not to be found then Avraham concedes the argument. In the usual version of this approach, ten represents some threshold below which Sedom cannot be saved. Perhaps ten - a minyan - are a minimum kernel to influence the overall society in a positive direction.

At this point Rav Lipovitz takes this well-known overall approach to Avraham to a surprising conclusion that I have not found elsewhere.

Upon hearing that not even this number of righteous people existed in Sedom, 'Avraham should have continued his prayer rather than bringing it to an end. For when he heard that there were not even ten righteous people in Sodom, he fell silent. Scripture states: "The Lord went His way when

He had finished speaking to Abraham" (Genesis 18:33). Rashi explains: "Once the advocate fell silent, the judge departed."

The Holy One, blessed be He, as it were, was waiting for Abraham to say something more. Abraham should have added: "Master of the Universe, let me be their atonement," but he did not say this.

For Rav Lipovitz Avraham never should have stopped at ten!

It will eventually be Moshe Rabbeinu who will take the radical final steps that Avraham did not, demanding that God 'erase me from Your book' if He will not save Israel.

No plaque marks the building where Rav Lipovitz lived and taught on Lillienblum Street. But the words of the righteous are their own memory. In a week of momentous elections, may we merit that his Torah not only be remembered but that his demanding vision of Jewish leadership be embodied by those we elect to lead us. ■

Rabbi Joe Wolfson is the rabbi and co-director of JLIC TLV — a new, vibrant community serving young religious olim in Tel Aviv, generously supported by the Mayberg Foundation. He and his wife, Corinne, both grew up in the UK and served as directors of JLIC NYU in downtown Manhattan from 2015 to 2022.



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