

Genesis 18:17 is among the more dramatic human empowerment verses in the Torah: “G-d said: Am I hiding from Avraham what I plan to do?” Why G-d feels compelled to share His plans with Avraham is the topic of this week’s question sheet.

My favorite explanation of G-d’s compulsion is Meshekh Chokhmah’s, He suggests, or at least says something that suggests, that Avraham had just finished saving the people of Sodom at great personal risk, and thus would have been psychologically devastated to see his great accomplishment destroyed without warning. Others narrow this point to the specific figure of Lot.

These explanations, however, don’t seem to account well for verses 18-19, which seem to be the text’s explanation of G-d’s compulsion.

“But Avraham will indeed become a great nation, and all the nations of the land will be blessed through him. For I know him (or: for I have identified him. Or: For I have distinguished him) so that (or: because) he will instruct his children and household after him (or: to follow in his footsteps). They will be careful to follow the Path of G-d, to do tzedakah (justice. or: charity. Or: righteousness) and mishpat (equity or: justice. Or: legality). So that G-d will bring upon Avraham that which He spoke regarding him.”

Some focus on “will become a great nation” as the particularistic cause (this is his land, and he’ll need all of it because his descendants will be numerous, so it shouldn’t be destroyed without his knowledge). Others, universalistically, take the key phrase to be “and all the nations of the land will be blessed through him”, reading this as a continuation of the promise associated with the name Avraham that he will be the father of many nations, and arguing that parents must be informed before children are punished.

Seforno suggests (this is not a reading of which I am fond; atypically for Seforno, it gives the text less significance than is warranted) that the section should be read as “Why not tell him? After all, he will use it as an object lesson for his children, using it to remind them to carefully follow the path of G-d etc.”

A midrash can be read as suggesting that the key phrase is “tzedakah umishpat”, meaning that Avraham is capable of appreciating the need for justice despite his naturally charitable instincts. This would imply that 18-19 are not why G-d tells Avraham, but why telling him isn’t out of the question. This creates more room for Meshekh Chokhmah above.

Another midrash can be read as suggesting that Avraham, as one dedicated to tzedakah umishpat, would not have accepted the destruction of Sodom had he not been coopted to serve as defense counsel in the trial and thus seen G-d’s jurisprudence firsthand.

## Questions

1. I have not yet found anyone who sees the causal phrase as “so that G-d will bring upon Avraham that which He spoke regarding him”. Can such an interpretation be constructed? What would “that which He spoke regarding him” refer to?
2. Which of these explanations fit(s) best with Avraham’s reaction to G-d’s revelation?