

COMMENTARIES OF THE DUBNO MAGGID

PARASHAS VAYEIRA

This week's parashah records how Avraham pleaded with Hashem to save Sodom. Initially he asks for the city to be spared if there are fifty righteous men there, and Hashem agrees. Avraham then continues his plea. He prefaces his words with the following statement (Bereishis 18:27): "Behold, now, I have begun to speak with my Lord, although I am but dirt and ashes." I present here two comments by the Maggid on this statement.

1. In the *Nishmas* prayer that we recite on Shabbos and Yom Tov, we say: "Until now Your mercy has aided us, and Your kindness has not departed from us. Do not abandon us, Hashem our God, forever." What leads Hashem to aid the Jewish People, and how can we hope to gain His aid? If the aid He granted the Jews of earlier times were due to their good deeds, then we have good reason to fear now, for we are not as righteous and pure as they were. But, in fact, even the Jews of former generations were not worthy of the extraordinary aid Hashem granted them; rather, Hashem aided them out of pure kindness. Accordingly, we can hope that Hashem will aid us as well – that He will extend kindness to us just as he extended it to our predecessors. This is what we are asking for in the *Nishmas* prayer – given that Hashem's past aid to us stemmed from mercy and kindness, we ask Him to continue showing us this favor, and not to abandon us.

Similarly, in our passage, Avraham is appealing to Hashem's kindness rather than his merits. He is saying to Hashem: "I know that, up to now, the chance You gave me to speak to You was not on account of my merits – for then I would have been able to say only a few words to You, and then my merits would have been used up. Rather, although I am but dirt and ashes, You allowed me to speak with You, out of Your great kindness. And I know that Your kindness continues forever, so I ask You to let me keep speaking to You now."

2. The Gemara in *Sotah* 17a relates that, in the merit of Avraham's comparing himself to dirt and ashes, Hashem told him that He would grant his descendants two mitzvos related to dirt and ashes: the mitzvah of *sotah* (assessing whether a suspected adulteress is guilty, which involves making her drink water mixed with dirt), and the mitzvah of *parah adumah* (slaughtering a red heifer and burning the carcass, to use the ashes to make purifying water). The Maggid uses a parable to explain the connection between Avraham's words and these two mitzvos. A man made a grand banquet, and a certain saintly man was among the invitees. The host wished to seat this distinguished guest at the head table, but the guest, out of his great modesty, chose instead to sit at a lowly table in the back. The host then decided, in order to honor this man, to seat other distinguished men at this same rear table. Similarly, Avraham, in his great modesty, compared himself to dirt and ashes, but Hashem still wished to honor him. Hashem therefore raised the importance of dirt and ashes, by making each a key element of an important mitzvah.