

## **Parashat Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24). Lucy Steinitz. 11/16/2024**

Parashat Vayera contains the Torah's account of the cataclysmic destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, four of the five major "cities of the Plain." Following their demise, these cities became synonymous with extreme sinfulness and corruption, both throughout Tanakh and in today's parlance.

But wait, there is a lot more to this story – something from which I think we can take a lot of guidance these days. That has to do with Abraham's values and his character, which lie at the very foundation of our heritage. I am speaking here of the courage and compassion with which Abraham pleaded with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah – his logic, his empathy, and his sense of justice. When God revealed His plan to destroy these two cities due to their wickedness, Abraham asked God to spare the people. In fact, Abraham engaged in a lengthy conversation to mediate for the cities. He pleaded with God to save the towns if there were 100 people without sin, or 50 or even ten. Abraham spoke truth to power, not once but three times. He advocated strongly, even though both towns were full of strangers to him – that is, he had no close family or personal connection.

Abraham raised the specter of criminal justice reform. The innocent shouldn't suffer because their neighbors committed evil. His arguments didn't help Sodom and Gomorrah – with a few exceptions – but it built a foundation upon which our values stand to this day.

This is what's so extraordinary to me. How many people become activists – or do anything, for that matter – for people and communities where we don't know anyone and have no connection? Abraham's actions bore no self-interest. Well beyond

his own family, he thought of all the people who would be affected. My reading is that he was motivated purely by justice and empathy. Not everyone in these communities could be bad, Abraham reasoned. What about the women, children, the elderly, or people with disabilities? He didn't single out these sub-groups, but he pleaded with God based on the assumption that evil and sinfulness are not pervasive. He cared about the innocent people, even if there were only ten of them.

Just think of this: Empathy in Tanakh, smack-dab in the beginning of the Bible. What a great foundation for our Jewish identity and our history! Speaking truth to power right here at the near beginning of Genesis! L'havdil, but wouldn't it be good if the Israeli government would care a little more about the killing of innocent lives as it seeks to root out the infrastructure of Hamas and Hesbollah? Or our own new government, around the world? What meaning does Abraham's argument – and above all his character -- hold for us now, shocked as most of us still are, after the election?

Speaking Truth to Power is not a simple act, once done and you're through. When you think about it, Abraham's care for the stranger and his willingness to argue with God, defying the status quo, is a complex ethical stance – modern in its sense of justice and fairness, underpinning Jewish values to care for others -- even others of a different faith or identity -- as you would want to be cared for yourself.

Abraham's compassion for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah reveals the heart of a man who cared greatly for the strangers, including those who did not follow God. Though many, perhaps most, of Sodom's citizens had committed sins, Abraham did not wish to see their destruction. Maybe he figured, he wasn't perfect either. Maybe he also figured that the people of the Plains should be

given a second chance. As we say in the prisons where I sometimes volunteer my weekends, no one should be completely defined by the worst thing they have done.

When arguing with God, Abraham expresses empathy. But let's take a minute: What is empathy, and how does it fit into our Torah, just a few chapters from B'raishit?

Empathy is the ability to feel, understand and respond to others' emotions in a way that supports others, while being able to distance oneself from them to avoid finding oneself in distress and suffering. Empathy is complex, multi-layered, and sophisticated, and contains three complementary skills:

- (1) cognitive empathy, or understanding of emotions
- (2) affective empathy or sharing of emotion, and
- (3) emotional regulation, that distinguishes between the emotions of others and one's own.

Bravo, Abraham. He tried his best to save the people of Sodom and Gemorrah. (1) He argued on cognitive grounds – speaking rationally about a 100, 50, or just ten righteous persons. (2) He argued on affective grounds, sharing his passionate plea, his deep emotion, about how devastating the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah would be. And (3) He showed emotional regulation, arguing for others, and not for himself. Once again, Bravo Abraham.

Unfortunately, Abraham's request for these cities to be spared was ultimately denied. This is not surprising: God sometimes (often?) says "no" to our requests, too, even when we pray with good intentions. We are taught that Adonoi may have other plans that we do not understand, yet these are part of His perfect will.

Although Abraham's mediatory work did not result in the sparing of

the cities, it did bring about the salvation of Abraham's nephew. We can also say that the purity of Abraham's advocacy on behalf of others was important: A for effort. This is true for our advocacy efforts today, too. After Kamala Harris lost the election, how many of us could say, "at least we tried?" At least we tried to do what we thought was right and good for this country and for the world. That mantra, "at least we tried" comes from Abraham and I dare say we'll be saying many times in the next four years.

What are the other lessons we can learn from this part of the parsha? Like Abraham, we are called to have great compassion for others, including those whose lives do not follow God's ways. "At least we tried" means that we must accept that we may ultimately lose in our advocacy efforts, just as Abraham did. But it is the effort that counts. Abraham's advocacy for human rights, for mercy and compassion is our legacy today. He spoke truth to power. Like Abraham, we can only control our own actions, not the outcome. But what we do matters.

Some of you, like me, received an email from Jamie Raskin last week, pleading with us to keep on modeling true democratic citizenship in the face of the Harris-Walz defeat. He reminded us that our values have never been a mistake. And then Raskin ended by quoting EB White: *Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day.*

We may waver, of course – just as Abraham did. Abraham's values may have remained steady through the end of the parsha, but, as we read later in the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22 1-19), his behavior changed. Contrast Abraham's pleas to God about Sodom and Gomorrah with the Akedah, one of the most troubling tales in the Bible. I choose to believe that Abraham remained compassionate and still had empathy for others. God, on the other hand, did not

give the same impression. Is God so blind to human suffering after killing virtually all the people of Sodom and Gemorrah that He then asks Abraham to do the same with his beloved son Isaac?

When Abraham responds to God in the Akeda, Abraham doesn't argue. He doesn't protest or, seemingly, express any emotion at all. Despite God's destruction of four cities that Abraham witnessed just a few years earlier, Abraham trusts God. You may say this is a sign of Abraham's great faith, or you may see this as his meekness or as a sign of trauma. But the "fact" remains that, under these fraught circumstances, Abraham didn't waver in his obedience to God's demand. No argument, not even a whimper.

Most Biblical scholars interpret the Akedah as the ultimate test by God of Abraham's faith, that Abraham is ready to obey no matter what God asks of him. Only when Isaac is bound like an animal and about to be killed, does God determine that Abraham has passed the test and Isaac is freed. After emerging from this terrible ordeal, the interpretation is that Abraham had proven his great faith, his religiosity, and his spiritual strength, which makes him worthy to be our forefather.

But really, there are two very different Abraham's here that we must somehow reconcile. Looking back from our vantage point today, here comes your questions:

(1) Which Abraham do you think was more Jewish? The one who argued truth to power on behalf of strangers, that their life should be spared? Or the one that trusts God to the extreme, demonstrating his great faith in God's wisdom and ultimate righteousness? In other words, which of these two Abrahams – that is, in which of these two stories – do you find the true "father of Judaism?"

(2) And finally, with relevance to our post-election reassessment, what lessons can we learn from our earliest ancestor about trying to protect the innocent, seek justice, and advocate with empathy, even when prospect for success look very dim?