

Vayera
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This sedra starts with the notice of the birth of Isaac from the three angels and ends with the near death of Isaac at his father's hands, saved only by an angel. In between we have the story of Lot and Sodom, which began in last weeks sedrah.

There we had the war between the 4 kings and the 5 kings, which always seemed to me a side story, a meandering in the biblical narrative. But this does set the picture, of Lot and his family and flocks choosing the valley, while Abraham chose the hill country. High places are favoured in the bible. We saw that God didn't favour the people in the valleys. At Babel, and now he doesn't really think much of Lot's decision to go down to the Jordan valley. Just in passing as if to emphasize the dislike of valleys, we are told that the Sodomites were very wicked sinners (13:13).

In last weeks sedrah, after a 14 year campaign, the 4 kings from across the middle east defeated the 5 local kings, including Bera king of Sodom, and captured Lot and his family prisoner. Abram heard about this and with his 318 men went to release Lot and bring him back, and also defeated the 4 kings after chasing them as far north as Damascus.

We learnt a little about Abram's prowess as a warrior, his loyalty to his family, and a bit about rules of war, and perhaps the compromises one makes in war. But all of this seemed a side story, a long way off from the important messages about Abraham, the founder of our nation.

And this weeks sedrah is full of those important messages. Abraham has an opportunity to display the hospitality which is a key mitzva we learn from this ancestor of ours, and the 3 visitors demonstrate the mitzva of visiting the sick, bikkur holim. Abraham is told that the promise that he and Sarah will have a child is about to be fulfilled, and this time they tell Sarah, since it seems as if Abraham forgot to tell her.

At this point, the narrative takes us again to Sodom. We read v16

וַיִּקְמוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיִּשְׁקֹפוּ עַל־פְּנֵי סֹדֶם וְאֶבְרָהָם הֵלֵךְ עִמָּם לִשְׁלָחָם:

The anashim set out from there and looked down toward Sodom, Abraham walking with them to see them off.

We all know the story of how Abraham bargains with God over the destruction of Sodom. The problem is whether or not to kill the non-evil inhabitants of Sodom along with the evil ones. Now, the word in the text for the non-evil is Tzaddikim, which is generally translated as the righteous, although some translations use 'innocent'. We'll look at this in a minute as its an important distinction.

And the introduction to this story is interesting.

After we read about "Abraham walking with them to see them off." we have a very significant interlude before the haggling over numbers begins.

God says, presumably in a theatrical aside to no one in particular, or maybe to the angels, but certainly not to Abraham -

17 וַיְהִיָּה אָמַר הַמַּכְסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה:

“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”

18 וְאַבְרָהָם הָיוּ יְהִיָּה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְעַצּוֹם וְנִבְרָכוּ-בּוֹ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:

since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and **all the nations of the earth** are to bless themselves by him?

19 כִּי יִדְעֹתָיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת-בָּנָיו וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרֹךְ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת

צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הָבִיא יְהוָה עַל-אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר עָלָיו:

For I have singled him out, **that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of יהוה by doing what is just and right, in** order that יהוה may bring about for Abraham what has been promised him.”

20 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה וַעֲקַת סֹדֶם וְעִמְרָה כִּי-רָבָה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כְבֹדָה מְאֹד:

Then יהוה said, “The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave!”

21 אֲרֹדֶה-נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה הַכַּצְעֻקָתָהּ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ וְכִלָּה וְאִם-לֹא אֲדַעָה:

I will go down to see **whether they have acted altogether** according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note.”

22 וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֹמָה וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדֵנּוּ עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:

The anashim went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before יהוה.

So God first debates with himself or his angels whether he should just destroy Sodom without informing Abraham – he says – I could hide from Abraham what I am doing –

But what would that mean for how Abraham’s legacy?

If Abraham and his descendants are to “keep the way of the Lord, doing what is just and right” – and if I - God – go down and destroy the tzaddikim and the guilty together at Sodom, then all the nations of the world will think that that is what is just and right. They’ll think its OK to destroy the evil and the tzadikkim together.

But if I - God - let Abraham know what I intend to do, and give him the opportunity to try to argue with me that I should not destroy the tzaddikim and the guilty together, then the world will know what is really just and right – it will be Abraham’s gift to the world that will shine down the generations. That might mean Sodom is not destroyed, but that would be an acceptable cost for the world knowing what is right and just. But it’s for Abraham to seize this opportunity – God doesn’t do it for him.

So this is a key step in the development of morality - the way of the Lord is to do what is just and right- צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לַעֲשׂוֹת דְרֹךְ יְהוָה – which here means not destroying the tzaddikim along with the guilty.

As Nahum said two weeks ago, God starts off with quite a different morality – in the generation of Noah, only Noah’s family were spared the destruction of the flood. Noah was a Tzadik, the rest of humanity was destroyed. No gradations of evil. Children, babies, the less-evil, the ones who didn’t quite make it to the standard of a Tzadik – they were consigned to the watery deep

Now, (how many years later?) God is going to admit that maybe this was a bit extreme. Maybe God's morality has developed since the time of the flood?

So God admits in v21 that he needs to 'go down and check it out' and not just fling destruction down on Sodom without being certain.

But before he figuratively goes down to take a look, he gives Abraham the opportunity to claim the moral high ground – challenge God on what is good and just.

The narrative states that

וְאַבְרָהָם עֹמֵד לְפָנָי יְהוָה

Abraham was still standing before God.

Abraham didn't walk away.

Abraham is going to take that opportunity.

And while in the soliloquy God talks about "what is right and just" Abraham intuits for himself what that means in practical terms – will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked ones.

Richard Elliot Freedman says that this is the first time in the Bible that a human challenges a divine decision. Moses will take this even further on at least three occasions, but this is an inflexion point in the relationship between man and god. Noah couldn't do this. And at the end of the sedrah, Abraham isn't able to challenge God at the Akedah

But he does now, and its not over his son, but over the evil sodomites.

23 וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאַף תִּסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע:

Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the tzaddikim along with the wicked?"

אוֹלַי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הַזֶּה הֲאַף תִּסְפֶּה וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא לְמַקְוֶה לְמַעַן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְדִּיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּהּ:

What if there should be fifty tzaddikim in the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the fifty tzaddikim who are in it?

Should we be using innocent, as the JPS, and Everett Fox translate Tzadik or Righteous as the Koren and Hertz translate. There is a world of difference, and in today's world, the different translations are very charged.

Noah was a Tzadik, a righteous man, not an innocent.

The Torah uses another word for the innocent Naki alongside Tzaddik

Ex 23 7

מִדְּבַר-נִשְׁקָר תִּרְחֹק וְנָקִי וְצַדִּיק אַל-תִּהְרֹג כִּי לֹא-אֲצַדִּיק רָשָׁע:

Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked.

From section on law and justice rather than God's destruction – but it makes a distinction

And the Gur Aryeh [notes on these verses](#)

there were no truly righteous individuals in these cities there were some that appeared so. This is hinted at in the spelling of the word *tzaddikim* — “righteous ones” — which is written defective (i.e. missing a *yud*) throughout this passage.

Innocents don't figure very highly in the biblical tales of wars – there may have been a decree to not uproot fruit trees during a siege, but protection of innocents rather than the righteous isn't a theme in the *tnach*, so the simple meaning of Abraham's words are probably that he is pleading for the righteous, not the innocent. There are later sources that argue for the protection of civilians at time of destruction, and Maimonides states in his laws of war that when besieging a city one should always leave one escape route for the inhabitants to leave through if they want to.

As we know, Abraham and God haggle over the minimum number of Tzadikim in Sodom who could prevent the city from destruction

45

40

30

20

10

Even for 10 tzadikim god vows not to destroy the city

Now Abraham surely knows that Lot and his family don't make up the numbers - they aren't the 10 people for whose sake Sodom would be saved,. We aren't sure how many people were in his family, but Lot's willingness to offer up his virgin daughters to the mob indicates that Lot isn't likely to be classified as a tzadik, and probably that would go for most of his family.

Why 10? One answer is that Noah and his family were only 8, and they couldn't save their generation, so 10 might be the minimum.

As well a moral duty to try to save the innocent, from sharing the same fate as the majority of evil inhabitants in the town, there is another reason why the righteous, not the innocents, are the ones who should be spared – and this is because there is always a chance, or a hope, that those righteous individuals can have an impact on the majority.

Etz Hayim make the observation on todys sedrah that if a community can produce a subculture of righteous people, and if they involve themselves within the city, trying to change it, then there is hope for the community. But, if the righteous are only isolated individuals who avoid or are barred from being involved in the affairs of the city, there is no hope. One can only extricate them and condemn the rest.

On this theme, Reb Nahman of Bretzlov said that when we look at others carefully, we should always search for their good attributes. Even when it is a person who conducts himself badly or immorally, even then, we

must see the good in them since it is impossible that there is a person – even the most corrupt one – who does not occasionally do good deeds.

And he says - Our patriarch Abraham does not ask God to ignore the sins of Sodom for a handful of people. He asks God to shine a light on the righteous people who live in Sodom and focus on the good in it, thus allowing the people of the city to undergo a process of real transformation.

So what do we see in this story told through the two sedrot of Lech lechah and Vayera.

God chooses to give Abraham the opportunity to put down a marker for the moral behaviour that will be the hallmark of the people of the God – we can interpret this as a plea for the innocent, or as the wish that the righteous should be spared not just to carry on their self contained righteousness, but because their morality can both save and transform the city

Finally – this is the first time man successfully challenges God. The 1st time was at Bavel, which didn't go so well for man. But this time, the relationship between man and God is fundamentally different after this story. And the challenge is about our, and God's, moral behaviour