

Negotiations With God

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Vayeira* (Gen. 18:1 – 22:24)

By Arnold Shugarman

“Vayeira eilav Adonai b'eiloney mam'rei.”
“Adonai appeared to him near the terebinths of Mamre.”

The story of Abraham and Sarah continues. Three men (angels of God) approach Abraham's tent. Abraham extends his hospitality to the strangers. One of the strangers tells Abraham that Sarah, already 90 years old, will have a son. Sarah overhears the conversation and laughs at this idea.

The three men leave for Sodom. God tells Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah will be destroyed because of the wickedness of the inhabitants. Abraham pleads with God to save the people, but to no avail.

Two of the angels come to Sodom and are greeted by Lot who offers his hospitality to them at significant risk to his life. The angels tell Lot and his family of the impending destruction of the cities and urge them to leave. The angels warn them not to look back when they flee Sodom. Lot's wife disobeys the warning and is turned into a pillar of salt.

Abraham and Sarah travel to Gerar. Abraham introduces Sarah as his sister, and King Abimelech has her brought to him. God intervenes; King Abimelech restores Sarah to Abraham and, in penance, provides Abraham with riches.

Sarah becomes pregnant as God promised and gives birth to Isaac, who is circumcised on the eighth day following his birth. Later, Sarah demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's son, away so that Isaac would be the sole beneficiary of Abraham's possessions. Abraham does this reluctantly. Ishmael nearly dies in the wilderness, but God intervenes to save him and promises that he will become the father of a great nation.

Abraham and Abimelech have a disagreement over a water well. They settle their differences, and Abraham settles in the land later known as Philistia.

God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham prepares to comply, but an angel stops him and provides a ram as the sacrifice in Isaac's place.

This parashah provides a number of opportunities for commentary and discussion. I have chosen to focus on the discourse between God and Abraham regarding the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The men whom Abraham entertained in his tent leave on their journey and set off toward Sodom. God asks (rhetorically) if he should tell Abraham of his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of the wickedness of the people who lived there. God decides to tell Abraham of his plan because (1) God had singled out Abraham to be the progenitor of a great nation and a man whom other nations would recognize for his greatness, and (2) God wanted Abraham to instruct his children to do what is right and just in God's eyes.

The back-and-forth discussion between Abraham and God is a wonderful bargaining session. Abraham's opening statement is a challenge to God and God's justice. He asks God if He would save the city for the sake of fifty innocent people. But Abraham must know that there are not fifty righteous individuals in Sodom and Gomorrah, for now he speaks like a supplicant, pleading to God to save the cities for fewer and fewer righteous people. Finally Abraham asks if God would save the cities for the sake of ten innocents (a *minyán*). God responds in the affirmative and then breaks off the discussion. Abraham now knows that even that threshold would not be met, and he accepts God's judgment ("Abraham returned to his place").

The Torah offers many examples of people debating or pleading with God to save others, and some interesting examples of a failure to do so. While the context may be different, Cain states the antithesis of Abraham's position when he asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Noah is considered a righteous man, who happened to live in a world that was not unlike the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. When God told Noah that he was going to destroy the world because of its wickedness and gave instructions to Noah to save himself, his immediate family, and the animals of the earth, Noah did so, without question.

Abraham, too, appears to be inconsistent, at least on the surface. While he pleads the case for people he doesn't know in Sodom and Gomorrah, he doesn't argue with God when he is told to send his own son Ishmael and Hagar into the desert, knowing full well that they might suffer in the desert without adequate food and water. And when God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah, he set out to do so totally without question.

Moses is recorded as intervening numerous times to save the Israelites from an angry and wrathful God, even though Moses himself was often exasperated with the people.

Abraham does not fail God's decision to make him the man revered by many nations. When told of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham simply could have pleaded for the safety of his nephew Lot and his family. Instead he implores God to save the cities for the sake of the

righteous who may inhabit them. Unlike Noah who appeared to be indifferent to the fate of his fellow man, Abraham was their defender. Moses pleaded for the Israelites but obediently carried out his part of God's plan for the Egyptians in the Ten Plagues. And yet, when it came down to the most personal, heartrending decisions he had to make, Abraham was obedient to God's will.