LEHRHAUS Over Shabbat

Vayeira

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing articles that were previously scheduled. In this way, we hope to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

AVRAHAM AND SODOM: TO PRAY AGAINST GOD

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Our God's a righteous God—forgiving, too!
A truth upon which all men may agree.
Because our God is just, He'll punish you.
Because He's merciful, He'll pardon me.
-Laurence Perrine, "Justice and Mercy Reconciled"

What are the limits to compassion? When does mercy become unjust? Issuing judgment informed by mercy will favor the defendant, but in the gavel's same thump, it comes at the victim's expense; in tipping the scales for one party, by its very nature, justice becomes imbalanced. How to correctly maneuver the roadways of *din* and *rahamim*—strict justice and merciful compassion—becomes improbable, if not nearly impossible.

Enter God to adjudicate on the case of Sodom, a city bursting at its borders with cruelty, immorality, and evil. As victims' cries pierce the divine ears (cf. *Bereishit* 18:21), a verdict comes swiftly: destruction. Enter the defense. Avraham, God's chosen one (cf. *Bereishit* 18:19), mounts the podium to advocate on Sodom's behalf in a famed dialogue. He weighs upon God's scales of justice by petitioning for peace. It is balance that Avraham's counterarguments seek, and it is God who must concede or resist.

This scene perturbs the reader. Can humans question and combat God? What could the mind know that God does not? Can the divine will be unjust? These questions frame the discomfort felt

in encountering the text, in placing God under examination and daring to wonder if the Almighty is truly all-good.

But this saga speaks to more than the particulars of Sodom's fate. For if the Torah solely intended to relate Avraham's initial protests against God, why expend nine *pesukim* on superfluous details? In exploring this section, this essay suggests that Avraham, God, and Sodom more significantly speak to the turmoil humans face in a world fraught with cruelty and reliant on compassion. How far can one—how far *should* one—expand the perimeters of compassion, and who is deserving of such benevolence? Between God's morality, God's word, and God's will, we are left to navigate competing values while toying with the fate of human victims and human perpetrators.

I. Divine Hesitation and Divine Justice

After Avraham displays his potency for kindheartedness when approached by the three angels in Mamrei, the Torah draws attention to the transition toward a new act: "The men arose from there and *va-yashkifu* on the faces of Sodom," the text says, with "Avraham walking with them to send them" (*Bereishit* 18:16). The inclusion of an innocuous *pasuk*, merely denoting the conclusion of a meeting, carries an eerie foreshadow. "*Va-yashkifu*," literally meaning "and they looked upon," signals an ominous sense of peril. *Midrash Tanhuma* senses the word's connotation of brewing disaster, pain, trouble.[1] Hidden within the text is a quiet prediction of Sodom's impending doom, solidified by the angels' silent gaze.

Radak, interestingly, feels compelled to clarify that "the men arose from there" means that they arose "from Avraham's home," as if the reader could not intuit that detail from the text's natural transition from the previous scene, placed at Avraham's home. Perhaps, we can suggest, there is a need to emphasize Avraham's home as the point of departure. This saga begins from the shelter of safety, the tents of compassion, removed from the open plains of real life. And now, suddenly, as Avraham practices the final act of hospitality by escorting his guests from the quietude of the home, he catches the scent of calamity. Calm and catastrophe meet.

Then God arrives in the text and confides in the reader what is to occur. "*Ha-mikhaseh* from Avraham that which I will do?" God rhetorically asks (*Bereishit* 18:17). "Shall I cover, conceal, protect"—*ha-mikhaseh* denotes an inner conflict within God, an insight into His clashing wills, so to speak, to obfuscate or to reveal. The word also signifies a protective element, as if God's plan is vulnerable, susceptible, to change and in need of shelter. Though His blueprint is subject to revision, He dares not conceal it from Avraham. The words are expressed "in astonishment," Rashi says, an impossibility that God would never

[1] See *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Ki Tisa* 14. The same *amora*, R. Alexandri, is quoted in the *Yerushalmi* as interpreting this root word to mean "curse." See *y. Ma'aser Sheni* 5:5.

entertain.[2]

"I gave him this land, and these five towns are his," Rashi writes for God's rationale. "I called him… 'father of a multitude of nations.' Shall I destroy the children and not notify the father, he who is lover of Me?"[3] This reading sees God's hesitation emerging from personal affinity and obligation. Avraham has been earthly partner to the heavens; should he now be excluded from its plans? He is "lover of Me." Bekhor Shor connects this *pasuk* to the prophet Amos, who said, "Because my Master Hashem does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7).[4] Avraham is a beloved of God, befitting to receive His inner thoughts, so, in his merit, God shared. For Seforno, however, publicizing the justice of divine will is at the center of God's doubt. Rather than stemming from His personal attachment to Avraham, God's reasoning to reveal emerges from His own resistance to concealing His goodness—a goodness that compels God to bend the arc of justice so far as to allow Sodom's repentance by only 10 righteous individuals (as seen in the concluding *pesukim*).[5]

The two *pesukim* that follow provide greater footing to understand God's words:

> And Avraham is to become a great, strong nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. For I knew him in order to command his sons and his home after him, that they should guard the way of Hashem, to do righteousness and justice, in order for Hashem to bring upon Avraham that which He spoke upon him. (*Bereishit* 18:18-19)

Ramban understands that it befits the father of nations, God's quintessential partner in this universal project, to enter into the "council of God" and plead for mercy for those nations.[6] God then says:

> *Za'akat* Sodom and Amorah is so exceeding, and their sin is so *khavedah*; I will descend and I will see whether they have completely acted according to the outcry for help that has reached me, and if not, I will know. (*Bereishit* 18:20-21)

"*Za'akah*" is a raw scream, an outcry of distress, originating in human experience—pain, suffering, helplessness. It is born from subjective experience. The sins being *khavedah* denotes their heaviness, the weight and significance measured objectively and quantitatively. In both respects—the objective and the subjective—God has reason to fear for their society.

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[2] Rashi to *Bereishit* 18:17, s.v. "*ha-mikhaseh ani*."
[3] Rashi to *Bereishit* 18:17, s.v. "*asher ani oseh*."
[4] Bekhor Shor to *Bereishit* 18:17, s.v. "*ve-hashem amar ha-mikhaseh*."
[5] Seforno to *Bereishit* 18:17, s.v. "*ha-mikhaseh ani*."
[6] Ramban to *Bereishit* 18:18, s.v. "*ve-Avraham hayo yihyeh*."

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor, and others attribute those bellowing screams to the victims.[7] Interestingly, both Ibn Ezra and Bekhor Shor characterize Sodom's actions as "*hamas*"—the same word God uses toward Noah in explaining the impending flood: "The end of all flesh comes before Me because the earth is filled with *hamas* because of them, and behold, I will destroy them with the earth" (*Bereishit* 6:13).[8] That reading echoes familiar warning signs in God's words: destruction is upon them.

Yet, God will investigate the matter. Rashi cites this as an example for judges to rule only following serious inquiry and inspection into the matter.[9] The "due process" of divine justice remains intact.

To find illustration of Sodom's misdeeds, an important factor as we will soon see, we turn to rabbinic sources. *Sanhedrin* 109a-b depicts utter societal evil among the people: They would position individuals before flimsy walls, tip the walls to kill them, and claim their property; mete out people's stored treasures and snatch them; offer charity to the poor and refuse to sell, effectively starving and killing them; torture a charitable woman by lathering her with honey and baiting hornets, to cite a few. Sodom's culture was attuned to callous manipulation, theft, and murder.

God's word of the *za'akah* and sins of Sodom was told to Avraham, Rashi says, thereby laying out the situation at hand.[10] That point marks the foggy scope of this scene—what happens next is known to God alone. The *Midrash Rabbah* fills in this gap with more movement:

> "I will descend" ... R. Abba bar Kahana said, "It teaches that the Place opened for them a door of *teshuvah*, as it says, I will descend and I will see whether they have completely [*kalah*] acted according to the outcry for help that has reached me'—they are liable for destruction [*kelayah*, related to *kalah*]—'and if not, I will know,'—I will make known the attribute of *din* [strict justice] in the world." ... There was a case with two girls that went down to drink and to draw water. One says to her friend, "Why is your face sickly?" She said to her, "[My] food supply is finished and [I am] already close to dying." What did [her friend] do? She filled her pitcher with flour and swapped; one took what was in the hand of the other. And since they [the people of Sodom] were enraged, they carried her [the

[7] Rashi to *Bereishit* 18:21, s.v. "*ha-ketza'akatah*"; Ibn Ezra to *Bereishit* 18:20, s.v. "*za'akat Sedom*"; Bekhor Shor to *Bereishit* 18:20, s.v. "*za'akat Sedom va-Amorah ki rabbah*."

[8] Ibn Ezra to *Bereishit* 18:20; Bekhor Shor to *Bereishit* 18:20. See also my recent essay on the responsibility placed on Noah by God in the context of the flood, available at https://thelehrhaus.com/timely-thoughts/noah-and-the-trauma-of-heroic-destiny/.

[9] Rashi to *Bereishit* 18:21, s.v. "*eiredah na*."

[10] Rashi to *Bereishit* 18:20, s.v. "*va-yomer Hashem*."

> friend] off and burned her. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: "Even if I wish to be silent, the fate of this girl does not allow me to be silent." This is what is written: "its outcry for help"; it does not say "their outcry for help," rather it says "her outcry for help," and this is the fate of the girl. [the suffix of the Hebrew could refer to "its" as the city—a feminine noun—or it could read "hers."][11]

"The Place" [*ha-Makom*], God's name implying open expansion and possibility, propped open the doors of *teshuvah* for Sodom. The Judge provided ample opportunity for change, for Sodom to generate a new self and thus a new decree. So, God left His chambers, so to speak, and ventured to peer into the city's happenings to see if a new reality dawned upon the people. Instead, God witnesses the instinctive and selfless kindness of a young girl seeking to catch her friend from falling into the abyss of death. Innocent, simple, is her act: provide nourishment to save her life. The people are enraged—*hirgishu,* meaning a "tumultuous, storming" rage; the intensity of nature's inflamed behaviors incenses them to act. The girl is burned for her "crime." The frustrating absurdity of Sodom is inconceivable. Kindness is not only not performed, but it is censured. This anecdote models the culture: do good at your own risk.

In response, God capitulates to the reality of the situation. "Even if I wish to be silent," He woefully says, "the fate of this girl does not allow me to be silent." In almost blasphemous terms, the *Midrash* ascribes a complacent attitude to divine justice, an instinct to disregard evil and neglect a just order. By chance, by the sorrowful end of this young girl, God is moved to action. His "wish to be silent" is disrupted by her doom. Perhaps this unorthodox risk is taken to demonstrate the extent of God's mercy, how God yearns so greatly to rule by unbounded compassion—second chances, exceptions, rule bending. At some point, the cost of mercy enacts stricter judgment on the victim, as in this case: should God have granted Sodom His divine grace? Could His actions truly be considered compassionate toward the girl burned at the stake? The privilege of silence was not afforded in this case. The investigation was over.

Without explicit resolution in the Torah, the narrative leaves God and returns to Avraham and the angels: "And the men turned from there and they went to Sodom, and Avraham remained standing before Hashem" (*Bereishit* 18:22). This "standing" is read by some as a prayer requesting mercy.[12] What ensues, then, illustrates his prayer, that turning toward communion with God for a new resolution for Sodom.

II. The Cradle of Prayer

"*Va-yigash* Avraham, and he said, 'Will You really

[11] *Bereishit Rabbah* 49:6.

[12] Seforno to *Bereishit* 18:22, s.v. "*va-yifnu mi-sham ha-anashim ve-Avraham odenu omed*'; Ha'amek Davar to *Bereishit* 18:22, s.v. "*ve-Avraham odenu omeid*."

snatch up the righteous with the wicked?'" (*Bereishit* 18:23). There is an abrupt entrance of Avraham onto the scene, opening what initially sounds like a monologue against God. Ramban explains that Avraham was unaware that God knew that no righteous people existed in Sodom, that He was, in fact, only snatching the wicked along with the wicked.[13] Avraham hoped to suspend destruction on account of the righteous, pardoning all on behalf of the good few.

That first word, "*va-yigash*," means that Avraham drew near, came forward, approached God. It captures this moment of intimacy, mixed with vulnerability and confrontation. *Bereishit Rabbah* features a tripartite debate regarding *va-yigash*'s meaning.

> "And Avraham approached, and he said..." R. Yehudah, R. Nehemyah, and the Rabbis [disputed]. R. Yehudah says, "Approaching for war" ... R. Nehemyah says, "Approaching for appeasement" ... The Rabbis say, "Approaching for prayer."[14]

The three suggestions capture the three essential views of Avraham's advancement. R. Yehudah sees Avraham warring against God in the name of what is right, what is just; he and God are fellow combatants. R. Nehemyah senses Avraham's servitude at play, the lowly, meek servant seeking to calm his Master lest His anger subsume His better judgment; Avraham is acting in God's best interest. For the Rabbis, it seems the preceding two views are unified: Avraham approaches to pray, for there is a dynamism within prayer that invokes appeal and apprehension, warring words and pleading petitions. Indeed, that is the method Avraham invokes in the eight following *pesukim* (*Bereishit* 18:24-25, 27-32) in which he speaks.

We will quote the remaining dialogue between God and Avraham and subsequently follow its development in greater detail.

> *Avraham:* Perhaps there are 50 righteous people within the city—will You really snatch up and not endure the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people within it? Far be it from You, doing such a thing, to execute the righteous with the wicked, and it would be that righteous is like wicked. Far be it from You—shall the Judge of all earth not perform justice?
> *God:* If I find in Sodom 50 righteous people within the city, I would endure the whole place for them.
> *Avraham:* Behold, I have begun to speak to my Master—and I am dust and ashes. Perhaps the 50 righteous people will be lacking five. Will You destroy for five the entire city?
> *God:* I will not destroy if I find there

[13] Ramban to *Bereishit* 18:23, s.v. "*va-yigash Avraham va-yomar ha-af tispeh tzaddik im rasha*."

[14] *Bereishit Rabbah* 49:8.

45.
Avraham: Perhaps You will find 40.
God: I will not act for the sake of the 40.
Avraham: Please do not let my Master be incensed, and I will speak: perhaps 30 will be found there.
God: I will not act if I find 30.
Avraham: Please, I have begun to speak to my Master: perhaps 20 will be found there.
God: I will not destroy for the sake of the 20.
Avraham: Please do not let my Master be incensed, and I will speak but another time: perhaps 10 will be found there.
God: I will not destroy for the sake of the 10.

The verbose passion oscillates throughout for Avraham. Whereas he begins with lengthy exposition, he soon reverts to terse statements—"Perhaps You will find 40"—only to intermittently lengthen his pattern—"Please do not let my Master be incensed..." Matched to God's response, Avraham's prayer almost seems like a soft dance, following a choreography to match the movements in the dialogue. The steps waver between forceful language ringing of combat ("Far be it from You!") and soft demeanor of meekness ("Please, I begin to speak to my Master"). To understand the cradle of prayer, we will first glimpse into the patterned language of Avraham, before we return for a conceptual overhaul.

III. The Prayer for God

Avraham's "topic sentence," if you will, conveys his struggle: "Will You really snatch up the righteous with the wicked?" Setting aside the tactful presentation, he is troubled by God's willingness to issue collective punishment. But in a sly equivocation, he then argues that God should not merely spare the righteous, but rather God should spare the wicked as well, for the sake of the righteous. Avraham pushes his case to maintain that all should be saved. He puts forth:

> Perhaps there are 50 righteous people within the city—will You really snatch up and not *tisa* the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people within it? Far be it from You, doing such a thing, to execute the righteous with the wicked, and it would be that righteous is like wicked. Far be it from You—shall the Judge of all earth not perform justice? (*Bereishit* 18:24-25)

Avraham imagines a revolutionized Sodom whereby the city is good *enough*, wholly capable of withstanding God's wrath. "*Tisa*"—endure or sustain—suggests a period of time, a window of endurance and not an eternal commitment. There is an urgency to Avraham, a *chutzpah* that almost haphazardly dictates his impulse. "Far be it from You, doing such a thing," he audaciously says, "to execute the righteous with the wicked." "Shall the Judge of all earth not perform justice?" This skirmish with apparent absurdity mitigates his

hesitance in addressing God. Based on the *Midrash Tanhuma*, Rashi explains Avraham to insist God practice *true* justice, as opposed to (in Gur Aryeh's words) "*stam* justice," one that is general, indefinite, and arbitrary.[15]

Avraham is moved to audacity by his outrage over an apparent divine abuse. *Bereishit Rabbah* draws this discourse with imagery of Noah and the flood. "You violate Your vow [not to bring another flood]!" Avraham cries. "A flood of water You do not bring, but a flood of fire You bring?!... If You want a world, then there can be no *din*, and if You want *din*, then there can be no world… If You cannot give in a little, then the world cannot exist."[16] Avraham confronts God with a truth to which He was seemingly oblivious: You cannot have justice and a world—God cannot insist on *din* and sustain the world. Avraham senses God is inching toward cataclysmic ends reached hundreds of years prior. In Seforno's reading, he says, "For in Your being Judge of all the world, if You judge all of it based on the majority [in issuing judgment], You will undoubtedly destroy it forever, for the majority of people are wicked."[17] He cannot afford for God to wipe clean the slates once more, to extinguish the flames of life. The fearlessness in his words, undergirding his message, approaches God in an unprecedented manner. And yet, God matches his challenge: "If I find within Sodom 50 righteous people within the city, and I will endure the whole place for their sake." (*Bereishit* 18:26).

If God could find 50 righteous people within Sodom, Rav Hirsch says, that would demonstrate the city's potential for repentance; after all, if the city can tolerate the good individuals—of whom some likely protest—then there is hope in its future.[18]

As for the seemingly arbitrary "50" that Avraham offers, Rashi explains that there were five locales within Sodom; each, he reasoned, needed 10 people to be saved.[19] Avraham's strategy, following Rashi's commentary, is to gradually "drop" a city that does not have 10 to save—40 righteous will save four locales, 30 three, 20 two, and so on. (Interestingly, but not for our discussion, Avraham does not consider that the distribution could not be proportional, such as one town hosting 46 righteous, while the other towns have one each, only justifying saving the one locale.)

With an almost shattering realization, Avraham reverts to meekness: "Behold, I begin to speak to my Master—and I am dust and ashes," he prefaces. "Perhaps the 50 righteous people will be lacking five. Will You destroy for five the entire city?" Rashi understands that Avraham's suggestion of 45 is that each town could hold nine and God could substitute for their tenth, hence why he does not say "perhaps there will be 45" and instead says "will be lacking five"—by including God, the count would effectively function as 50 righteous people and save all five

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[15] Rashi to *Bereishit* 18:25, s.v. "*ha-shofet kol ha-aretz*"; Gur Aryeh to *Bereishit* 18:25, "*mishpat emet*."

[16] *Bereishit Rabbah* 39:6.

[17] Seforno to *Bereishit* 18:25, s.v. "*ha-shofet kol ha-aretz*."

[18] Rasha"r Hirsch to *Bereishit* 18:26.

[19] Rashi to *Bereishit* 18:24, s.v. "*ulai yesh hamishim tzaddikim*."

locales.[20]

"*Ho'alti*," here translated as "I have begun," hints at Avraham's daring. That is because Avraham is like "dust and ashes"—an expression that the *Midrash* sees as a reference to his origins and near death at the hands of Nimrod.[21] More than a sentiment of indebtedness to God, this reading hints at an openness toward 'second chances.' Avraham was saved from death when Nimrod ordered him to enter the flames, and today, he stands as God's trusted confidant; perhaps Sodom could achieve a similar turnaround.

God's responses throughout the dialogue remain stoic and brief ("I will not destroy for the sake of..."). There is insignificant variation and no commentary as well as no acknowledgment of Avraham's humble overtures and apologies. The only changes appear in Avraham's language, which still largely remains the same. His prefaces center around his discomfort with challenging God ("Please do not let my Master be incensed, and I will speak," "Behold, I have begun to speak to my Master," "Please do not let my Master be incensed, and I will speak but another time"). While an analysis of the minutiae in his words could reveal greater meaning, for our aims, we can conclude that Avraham expended his same strategy: confront and withdraw, demand and placate. Both elements of the *Midrash* are found—approaching to war and to appease.

The dialogue's conclusion arrives when God accepts Avraham's final terms: "I will not destroy for the sake of the 10" (*Bereishit* 18:32). Within the narrative, the storyline is simple and coherent: God plans to destroy Sodom for its crimes, and the human, hopeful Avraham begs for mercy and justice, pleading to sway God's way. Outside the text, however, we are left to contend with troubling questions: How can God rule unjustly? Does He require humans to recourse His sometimes failing will? Are those subjected to God's judgment left to suffer when they lack advocates of Avraham's stature?

Indeed, these questions are troubling. But they are not solely tied to this case of Sodom. Every time one lifts the *siddur* to pray, are we not met with these same queries? In fact, this episode itself is conceived as Avraham's prayer to God: he beseeched the divine to fight for justice and to beg for mercy. In some sense, it is best characterized not as his prayer *to* God, rather it is his prayer *for* God.

IV. Prayer as Self-Transformation

> It is necessary that prayer be clean of any idea of changing will and affecting response in God's law, which is deceitful knowledge in relation to divinity and brings about the destruction of the orders of human perfection.[22]

What Rav Kook writes here unequivocally contradicts the story of Sodom. Avraham prayed for Sodom. He explicitly sought to change God's

[20] Rashi to *Bereishit* 18:28, s.v. "*ha-tashhit ba-hamishah*."
[21] *Bereishit Rabbah* 49:11.
[22] Rav Kook, *Olat Re'iyyah, Inyanei Tefillah, Ha-Drakhat Ha-Tefillah,* 2.

will. He hoped to change God's decree. Rav Kook's words apparently attribute his actions to the

"destruction of the order of man's perfection."

For Rav Kook, to suggest that one can "better" God by proposing new suggestions or demanding new realities is tantamount to heresy, for it essentially depends on denying God's omniscience: if one's argument and plea is "new information" to God, then He cannot be all-knowing, and if God already knows one's forthcoming words, then God already accounted for them. The first case denies God, and the second case denies prayer.

Returning to Ramban's comment cited earlier, we see that, in fact, God already knew no righteous people existed in Sodom, and further, He knew that Avraham would continue to wager for lower figures. Thus, God remains all-knowing. We are left to wonder: wherein lay the purpose to Avraham's prayer?

Commenting on Avraham's first request for 50 righteous (*Bereishit* 18:25), Rav Hirsch's take offers some insight:

> This whole—to call it that—dialogue between Abraham and the Judge of the world, in which the dust-covered man dares to step before the face of God with his feeling of justice and finds approving approval, is finally a guarantee of the divinity of that voice in us which right and duty pleaded in us. As much as we are *epher* and *aphar*, made of dust and crumbling to ashes, not everything about us is dust and ashes. In this body of dust and ashes lives a breath of his eternal Creator and an echo of his spirit. Humanity and justice and all spiritual and moral goods of mankind are certified by this divine echo in every human being's breast, and secured beyond all dust and ashes, teachings of materialistic wisdom.

These scenes and events were never going to change God's plans; after all, could Avraham present a case for which God Himself has not already thought? The Torah's descriptions of God's mind or plan changing are merely optical descriptions, what appears to be happening, not the theologically sound realities. In Avraham's prayerful protests arose the divinely innate demanding of justice for humanity, the premier moral goodness embodied in the soul. Prayer, then, as Rav Hirsch, Rav Kook, and others write elsewhere, is an exercise of self-transformation, the realization of God's highest ideals within the praying human.

While the face of Sodom's trial appears a parry of equals, of God and human, its reality conveys a truth of human prayer. To face injustice and open the *siddur* is to yearn for God's ideals of righteousness, compassion, and justice. Avraham's grappling with God—his outrage over collective punishment, his indignation at divine wrongdoing, his recusal to humility, and his concession to reality—can be likened to the inner

currents of one's mind during prayer. The tossing and turning of the heart, the longing and reaching

of the soul, are the choreography of prayer.

The practice of Avraham's prayer appears as fury-charged screams, but its function exists as channeling God's highest will. God wants to translate His compassion to humans, and that is precisely what Avraham achieved.

Midrash Tanhuma says that when humans sin, God entreats an advocate to plead on their behalf.[23] In toiling with God, morality, justice, and humans, Avraham became such an advocate. He swam in the rivers of compassion and arrived at the shore of God's courts. Avraham's transformation of self arose to its completion.

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AVRAHAM'S TEST OF LOYALTY

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I.

Akeidat Yitzchak is often read through a moral lens, drawing the focus onto Avraham's willingness to murder his son and God's demand that Avraham do so. But there are other ways to read the *akeidah*, treating not theoretical, philosophical questions but matters relating to Avraham's trajectory in the context of the rest of his life as told in Genesis. From this perspective, the *akeidah* serves a purpose often overlooked, as Avraham is offered an opportunity to finally prove his loyalty to God.

Such an idea may seem, at first, an overreach. Where lies Avraham's disloyalty? This is, after all, the Avraham who follows God into the unknown (Gen. 12:1, 4); who looks only to God as his source of wealth (14:22–23); and circumcises himself at God's behest (17:24). But there are hints of another Avraham: An Avraham whose faith in God's promise is lackluster (cf. Ramban to 12:10); whose faith in God's protection is weak (12:11–16); and who questions God's ability to bring him a son (15:2). Avraham's most questionable act is his interpretation of a divine command that leads him to send his son and concubine off to die in the desert (21:1–21). This final situation casts a sharp light on Avraham's loyalty and leads God to test him with the *akeidah*.

II.

The story of sending away Hagar, merely twenty-one verses long, is easy to misread as an example of Avraham's loyalty to God. Following Yitzchak's birth, Sarah grows enraged by Yishmael's presence and demands that Avraham cast out Yishmael and Hagar, his son and concubine, insisting that Yishmael not share in Yitzchak's inheritance:

[23] *Midrash Tanhuma, Vayera* 8:1.

> She [Sarah] said to Avraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Yitzchak." (21:10, trans. NJPS)

Disturbed by this demand and the thought of losing a son – "the matter greatly distressed Avraham" (v. 11) – Avraham nonetheless agrees following God's intervention: "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says…" (v. 12). Thus, the next morning Avraham sends Hagar and Yishmael off with some supplies. It seems clear from the verses themselves that, though Avraham is hesitant to follow Sarah's demand that he send Hagar and Yishmael away, God's instruction to do so sways him. In other words, Avraham sends Hagar and Yishmael away, not motivated by Sarah, but by God's command.

The details, however, paint a more complex and questionable image. One thing that is clear from the Avraham story is his vast wealth, implied at many points in the narrative and explicitly noted in 13:2. It is also clear that he possesses the resources to send someone comfortably on a long journey to another country, as seen when he sends his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak in chapter 24. And so, as Avraham sends off Hagar and Yishmael, it is worth considering the route not taken. Why would Avraham only give Hagar such meager provisions, "some bread and a skin of water" (21:14), when he could so easily give more? As noted by Jon D. Levenson, it is highly unlikely "that one skin of water will suffice a young woman and her child lost in the desert" (p. 75). Avraham isn't sending Hagar and Yishmael away, he is sending them off to die! This intention is reinforced by God's miraculous saving of Hagar and Yishmael when Yishmael is on the cusp of death in the very next verses (vv. 15–19). Though this is not the first time Avraham has shown cruel indifference towards Hagar, (cf. 16:6), his active participation in their death is striking. That Avraham never sees neither Hagar nor Yishmael again underscores that the reader should assume that Avraham thinks them dead. [Indeed, the *midrash* (*Gen. Rabbah* 61) that claims that Keturah, Avraham's wife following Sarah, is Hagar blunts the horror of chapter 21, because it ensures Avraham was reunited with a woman he had thought dead at his own hands.]

All this is to say that, though a simple reading of this story shows an Avraham who is only following God's command – "whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says" (21:12) – a closer look reveals his follow-through to be not only cold-hearted but also based on a particular interpretation of God's instruction. God does not demand that Avraham treat Hagar and Yishmael with such cruelty. Why doesn't Avraham send them with, at minimum, enough provisions to make it *somewhere?* Why, instead, does Avraham send them off to die? This is what motivates God's test. Avraham has a hand in Hagar and Yishmael's near-death, a death not commanded by God. God now must clarify if Avraham's motivations were pure.

III.

There is another Biblical story that, when viewed through a particular lens, illuminates God's purpose with the *akeidah:* Shaul's slaughter of all but one of the Amalekites (I Samuel 15). Despite

being commanded by God to slaughter all of Amalekites in response to their attacking of the Jewish people as they left Egypt (Exodus 17:8–14), Shaul spares Agag, king of Amalek, and takes of the booty, flouting God's command (I Sam. 15:9). The issue, claims R. Aharon Lichtenstein, is not in God's order to commit genocide per se – however hard that may be to stomach – but in Shaul's selective observance of the command (*By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, p. 126):

> The only justification [to killing the Amalekites] lies in it being a response to an unequivocal divine command. Therefore, if Shaul had been motivated in his actions purely by fear of God, by obedience to the *tzav*, then he should have followed the command to the letter. … Now, if he didn't kill Agag but killed everyone else, what does that indicate? It indicates that what motivated him in killing the others was not the *tzav* of God, but rather some baser impulse, some instinctive violence. And the proof is that he killed everyone, but spared his peer, his royal comrade. … He killed [the Amalekites] not purely due to a divine command (which is the only thing that can overcome the moral consideration), but rather out of military, diplomatic or political considerations.

A clear, unequivocal, divine command when followed faithfully can trump morality's governance – so claims R. Lichtenstein. But, Shaul's selective observance of that command indicated a different motivation: not the victory of divine command over morality but the using of a divine command to excuse morality and justify horror, the genocide of Amalek. Once Shaul is ignoring God, each Amalekite death is unjustified, a murderous, morally objectionable act done for mere diplomatic reasons. Shaul's sin lies in his disloyalty; his deviation from God's instruction renders these horrific actions his own.

Such a concern lies at the heart of Avraham's banishment of Hagar and Yishmael. By giving Hagar neither enough provisions nor any resources for her and Yishmael to survive their exile, one question demands an answer: where do Avraham's loyalties lie? Were his actions purely due to a divine command – as a simple reading of the story indicates – or motivated out of other considerations, such as sharing Sarah's cruelty? This question not only haunts the reader but also God, as it were. Does Avraham's mercilessness in sending Hagar and Yishmael off reveal an Avraham using God's command to justify horror? How can God know that Avraham was following Him?

The very ambiguity of Sarah's demand amplifies the question. She uses the word *garesh* to demand Hagar and Yishmael's exile (21:10). But the word has ambiguous connotations. Though translated as "drive out," several other occurrences of the word imply a darker meaning. When God says that He will "drive out" the other

nations from the Land of Israel (Ex. 34:11), for example, it is hard to imagine this statement implying anything other than destruction and death. Is this what Sarah means, using polite language to mask an ugly request? Her history with Hagar makes it likely. But it cannot be that this is what God endorses, given that God saves Yishmael's life (Gen. 21:17–21).

And so, when Avraham sends Hagar and Yishmael off to die in the desert, whose command is he following, Sarah's or God's? Does he use God's instruction to justify his (attempted) murder of his concubine and son, revealing a selective loyalty to God? Or does he truly believe God wants him to kill Hagar and Yishmael? This is not outside the realm of possibility – Avraham has already considered the possibility that God would desire Yishmael's death (17:18), fearing "God will kill Avraham's older son to make room for the younger one who is to be the true ancestor of the covenanted people" (Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, 51). Though God then assures Avraham that Yishmael will still live (v. 20), Avraham might think that God's agreement with Sarah is a change of mind – after all, Avraham believes God can change His mind, as he makes clear in the story of Sodom (18:23–33).

Thus the question of Avraham's loyalty. There is no clear way to process what motivates Avraham from his actions thus far. But there is a way to discover where his loyalty truly lies: a test. A replication of the same situation with similar conditions where the only command is divine and there can be no ulterior motive to Avraham's actions. Avraham must be willing to do to Yitzchak what he did to Yishmael. If he fails, his (almost) murder of Yishmael was an act of cruelty in which he used God's command as justification for a baser violence. But, if Avraham is willing to sacrifice Yitzchak, it shows his loyalty lies only with God.

IV.

There is no need to keep up any suspense. Every reader of chapter 22 sees clearly that Avraham passes this test and thus his motivations for sending Hagar and Yishmael off to die emerge only out of God's command and no other. What often goes unnoticed is how strongly the chapter reinforces the link between the *akeidah* and Avraham's banishment of Hagar and Yishmael, showing it to be a clear replication of the previous chapter. But it also invokes Avraham's loyalty by calling back to his first act of obedience: God's initial call of *lekh lekha* and his response, in a mirror formulation that is remarkably similar. Not only does the phrase occur only twice – in this chapter (v. 2) and in 12:1 – but both verses contain three terms of increasing specificity and the demand that he travel to an unknown location to be revealed at a later point (Canaan and Mount Moriah). Avraham's first act of loyalty has God tell him to leave *me-artzekha, umi-moladtekha, umi-beit avikha* – from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house (12:1) – while his test of loyalty has him sacrifice *et binkha, et yehidekha asher ahavta, et Yitzchak* – your son, the favored one you love, Yitzchak (22:2). Chapter 22's opening verses can thus be read either as the beginning of the test – until this point, Avraham has followed God's instruction, beginning with *lekh lekha;* now, he must prove that he still does

by following a new *lekh lekha* – or as a reminder to the reader of his unquestionable loyalty that will be reaffirmed by the end of the chapter. Either way, that the Torah introduces this new call with the words "some time afterward" implies a direct connection to the preceding narrative and thus the prompt of the test, the sending off of Hagar and Yishmael.[1]

From this point on the Torah continually recalls to Avraham's sending off of Hagar and Yishmael both in its language and imagery.[2] Following both divine commands Avraham rises early in the morning (21:14, 22:3). In both situations Avraham takes (*va-yikkah*) the object that will cause the death – the minimal water that will bring Yishmael's dehydration and the wood upon which Yitzchak will be burned – and places it (*sam al/va-yasem al*) upon the victim (21:14, 22:6). Avraham is thus repeating every stage of his sending off of Hagar and Yishmael with Yitzchak. Just as he could have changed his plans for Hagar and Yishmael at various junctures but did not, so too does he have an opportunity to change his mind about sacrificing Yitzchak. The choices he must continue to make during *Akeidat Yitzchak* are the same choices he made when sending Hagar and Yishmael off to die.

The stories are resolved in similar ways, too. Both victims are spared by angelic intervention at the behest of God (21:17, 22:11) with the angel referring to both children not by name but as *na'ar,* a "youth" (21:18, 22:12). Both deaths are averted by the sudden noticing of a solution. Hagar is shown a well, while Avraham sees the ram to replace Yitzchak (21:19, 22:13). That God should save Yitzchak from Avraham in a manner similar to how He saved Yishmael from Avraham's actions emphasizes that *Akeidat Yitzchak* is a replaying of Avraham's sending off of Hagar and Yishmael, underscored by the Torah's reference to both Yitzchak and Yishmael as an anonymous *na'ar:* both *ne'arim* who need God's intervention following Avraham's actions.

The *akeidah* should thus not be read as a distinct narrative but as a continuation and resolution to what comes before. Having so willingly sacrificed Yishmael, Avraham repeats the same act with Yitzchak and, in so doing, reveal the motivation behind his earlier action. This also explains why God's intervention only happens at the very moment Avraham is about to slaughter Yitzchak (22:10–11). Only when Avraham is truly willing to repeat what he did to Yishmael can his test be deemed a success. Likewise, this explains why God learns something from the *akeidah,* that He "now knows" that Avraham truly fears God (22:12), a term replete with connotations of loyalty.[3] Until the very moment Avraham is willing to kill Yitzchak his loyalty is uncertain. Only when he fully shows his previous action – his sending off of Hagar and Yishmael – to have been motivated

[1] Though there is a narrative between the two episodes (Gen. 21:22–34) in which Avraham makes a pact with Avimelekh, the story of Avraham's banishment of Hagar and Yishmael is the narrative that shares a clear linguistic link with the *akeidah,* as seen below.

[2] Many of these comparisons are drawn from Levenson's *Inheriting Abraham,* 75–84.

[3] Cf. Jon. D. Levenson, *The Love of God* (Princeton University Press, 2016) 29–36.

solely by divine command does God learn that Avraham's previous actions were also solely predicated upon the divine command.

When read together, chapters 21 and 22 present both the question and resolution of Avraham's loyalty. Though Avraham shows a willingness to kill Hagar and Yishmael, the *akeidah* story clarifies that his actions were motivated solely by God's command. Reading the *akeidah* not as a philosophical story but as a true test of Avraham's faith and a clarification of his motivations allows for a rich understanding of these two stories.