



## Vayera

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### ***Explaining Sarah's Absence: Why Sarah is not Mentioned at the Akeidah***

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### ***Introduction***

[Genesis 23](#) tells of the death of Sarah, the first and founding matriarch of the Jewish people. Sarah is

the only one of the four matriarchs whose age is recorded at her death.<sup>1</sup> S. R. Hirsch in his commentary on [23:1](#) notes that Sarah receives a special honor in that the years of Sarah's life are framed between the words "Hayyei Sarah" ("the life of Sarah") at the beginning and end of the verse. No patriarch, not even Moses, receives this honor. Only Sarah, as the first of the matriarchs, receives all the honors and acknowledgements due to her. Jo Ann Davidson notes: "In the sparse historical style characteristic of the Genesis narrator, it is remarkable that an entire chapter (Gen. 23) is devoted to Sarah's death and burial."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Ann Davidson, "Genesis Matriarchs Engage Feminism," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 169–78, 170. Rebecca's death is not mentioned at all, but, according to [Rashi's commentary](#), only hinted at. Rachel's death in childbirth is discussed without mentioning her age

([Genesis 35: 16-20](#)). Jacob tells his sons that he buried Leah in the Cave of Machpelah ([Genesis 49:31](#)).

<sup>2</sup> Davidson, "Genesis Matriarchs Engage Feminism," 170

Sarah receives this honor, understandably, because she is a strong personality, independent, and an equal partner with Abraham. They function as a team, two people working in harmony.<sup>3</sup> “The narrator (of Genesis) seems intent that Sarah be regarded as just as critical to the divine covenant as Abraham. The reader finds the unwavering indication that it will be Sarah’s offspring who will fulfill the covenant promise—even when Abraham contends with God that he already has a son, Ishmael ([Gen. 17:18-19](#); cf. [Isa. 51:1-2](#)).”<sup>4</sup>

The main difficulty of the *Akeidah*, the Binding of Isaac ([Gen.22](#)), in relation to Sarah is to understand why she is not mentioned in the narrative. Since [rabbinic tradition](#) considers the *Akeidah* as the final test of Abraham’s faith in G-d, one could ask, if Sarah is an equal partner to Abraham, then why is she not tested as well? The question that then logically follows is: did she know about the test or not? Did Abraham tell her what G-d had asked him to do? The book of Genesis records other instances where Abraham consults with Sarah. When Abraham and Sarah descend to Egypt because of a famine, he asks her permission to say that she is his sister ([Gen. 12:11-13](#)). He marries Hagar because Sarah tells him to ([Gen. 16:2](#)). G-d tells Abraham to listen to Sarah when he is upset because she wants Hagar sent away ([Gen. 21: 10-13](#)).

## Various Explanations

Although some classical commentaries, notably Ibn Ezra, omit any connection of Sarah’s death to the *Akeidah*, the [rabbinic tradition](#) does link them. It applies a principle of exegesis termed *semikhut*, which considers the adjacency in the sequence of the events to conclude that Sarah’s death is a direct consequence of the *Akeidah*. The consensus is that when Sarah hears about the possible death of her son, she dies from the shock of the notification. As the text avoids any indication that Abraham consulted with her, this Midrashic tradition suggests that Sarah did not know that Abraham had taken Isaac to be offered as a sacrifice. Why else would the shock cause her demise?

*Midrash Tanhuma* ([Va-yeira 22](#)) has Abraham not only failing to consult with Sarah but even deceiving her:

While they were eating, he said to her: “You know that, when I was a child of three, I already knew my Creator, yet this child is growing up and still has had no instruction. There is a place a short distance away where children are being taught, I will take him there.” She

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<sup>3</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images*, Second Edition (Jason Aronson Inc., 1994): 21.

<sup>4</sup> Davidson, “Genesis Matriarchs Engage Feminism,” 171.

answered: "Go in peace."

The work *Midrash Aggadah*, [on Genesis 22:10](#), says that Abraham told Sarah that he was taking Isaac to the yeshiva of Eber to teach him Torah. A second *midrash* in *Midrash Tanhuma* ([Va-yeira 23](#)) adopts the more popular assumption that Sarah might not have known at all what was happening. This *midrash* has Isaac, immediately before Abraham is going to cut him with the knife, warning Abraham not to tell Sarah what happened: "Isaac said to him: 'Father, do not tell my mother about this while she is standing at the edge of a pit or a roof lest she hurl herself down and die.'" According to this *midrash*, Satan tells Sarah, and she dies from shock because she was previously unaware of what was going to take place.

Louis Ginzberg, in his book *Legends of the Bible*, which is a condensation of his great work *Legends of the Jews*, brings an entirely different *midrash*. Ginzberg's version has Satan coming to Sarah in the guise of an old man who tells Sarah that Abraham built an altar and offered Isaac as a sacrifice to G-d. Sarah weeps for Isaac but also consoles herself by saying that, if she had known about it in advance, she would have accepted the test:

Sarah lifted up her voice and cried

bitterly, saying: "O my son, Isaac, my son, O that I had this day died instead of thee! After that I have reared thee and brought thee up, my joy is turned into mourning over thee. In my longing for a child, I cried and prayed, till I bore thee at ninety. Now hast thou served this day for the knife and fire. But I console myself, it being the word of God, and thou didst perform the command of thy G-d, for who can transgress the word of our God, in whose hands is the soul of every living creature? Thou art just, O Lord our God, for all Thy works are good and righteous, for I also rejoice with the word which Thou didst command, and while mine eye weepeth bitterly, my heart rejoiceth."<sup>5</sup>

Ginzberg's version then has Sarah going in search of Isaac in the hope that he was not sacrificed. Satan, again in the guise of an old man, meets her in Hebron. He tells her that Isaac is alive. Upon hearing the news, Sarah dies from sheer joy.

S.R. Hirsch, in his commentary on [Genesis 23:2](#), discusses why Sarah died in Hebron. He theorizes that Abraham, perhaps, sent Sarah there to avoid

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, Second Edition (JPS, 1975): 136.

her receiving news about the death of Isaac.

### Why is Sarah not included in the *Akeidah* Test?

Postulating Sarah's death as caused by the *Akeidah*, however, does not explain why she was not included in the test. It merely links the two events but does not justify the omission. Understanding the concept of a test of God can provide some answers.

Nachmanides (Ramban) writes in his [commentary on Genesis 22:1](#) that the test is for the tested and not for the tester. The one being tested needs to realize what he is capable of. Ramban considers this as actualizing one's potential. God knows in advance what the result will be but wants Abraham and, possibly, Isaac to know what faith they are capable of. Sarah does not need to be tested.

As *midrashim* often function as a medium to answer difficulties in the Biblical text itself,<sup>6</sup> different *midrashim* also provide possible answers. [Rashi on Genesis 22:1](#) cites the [Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 55:4](#) saying that G-d tests Abraham, not Sarah, to respond to the accusations of Satan that Abraham lacks faith. Abraham alone is on trial. The [Midrash Tanhuma on the same](#)

[verse](#) uses the metaphor of a flax merchant who only strikes the flax when it is hard so that it does not shatter and a potter who only strikes the pots that will not break. The *midrash* teaches that G-d tests only the person who would pass the test, thus realizing their potential. This implies that Sarah is not mentioned either because she would not have tolerated the *Akeidah's* test of faith or would have died as a result. Abraham, therefore, out of concern for his wife, does not tell her or include her.

Interestingly, the approach of early Christian literature is quite different. David Eastman presents an analysis of a fifth century CE Syriac homily attributed to an author known as Ephrem.<sup>7</sup> According to this homily, Abraham avoids telling Sarah about the *Akeidah* because he is fearful that she would accompany him on the trip.<sup>8</sup> The homily contains extensive dialogue in Sarah's voice where she talks about her devotion to G-d and her willingness to offer her son to G-d. Eastman writes, "I would argue that the author is asserting that women's piety must remain under patriarchal control."<sup>9</sup>

Dalia Marx, a modern Israeli scholar, presents a different concept of the role of women in the religious tradition.<sup>10</sup> She writes about how

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<sup>6</sup> Zvi Ron, "When Midrash Goes Too Far," *Tradition* 46, no. 4 (2013): .28.

<sup>7</sup> David L. Eastman, "The Matriarch as Model: Sarah, the Cult of the Saints, and Social Control in a Syriac Homily of Pseudo Ephrem," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2013): 241–59.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 253.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 258.

<sup>10</sup> Dalia Marx, "'Where Was Sarah?' Depictions of Mothers and Motherhood in Modern Israeli Poetry on the Binding of Isaac," in *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination*, ed.

modern Israeli authors offer a different depiction of women than the biblical narrative. The women are strong and also willing to sacrifice themselves to build their family.<sup>11</sup> Sarah is an example of self-sacrifice because she gives her maidservant Hagar as a wife to Abraham. Marx writes, however, “That being said, it seems that women are almost always identified with the attributes of grief and loss.”<sup>12</sup>

These varied responses to the question of Sarah’s absence at the *Akeidah* reflect different understandings of the woman’s role in the Jewish religious tradition. Gila Fine, in her book *The Madwoman in the Rabbi’s Attic*, which does not explicitly address Sarah, has a fascinating discussion about stereotyping and distinct gender roles. In her chapter on the role of the woman called “Ima Shalom,” Fine describes the “doctrine of separate spheres” as follows: “public and private, outdoors and indoors, conflict and support, general principles and individual emotion – these are precisely the differences between the male domain of the outside world and the female domain of the home.”<sup>13</sup> Fine says that the rabbis of the Talmud differentiate between male public

roles and female private, family-based roles.<sup>14</sup> She also states that Rabbinic doctrine “posit[s] a distinction between *worldly matters* and *heavenly matters*; even if women are to be included in the worldly sphere of politics, they must be kept out of the heavenly sphere of religion.”<sup>15</sup> If one assumes that the rabbinic tradition derives from the Torah, then Fine’s observations about gender roles help explain why Sarah is not present at the *Akeidah*. It is not within her role or domain to be there.

The Syriac Christian approach, however, does not make this differentiation in roles. It focuses more on hierarchy or patriarchy. This is why the Ephrem homily portrays Sarah with an active, participatory role in the *Akeidah*, although Abraham does not allow her to lead.

Marx writes: “In classical as well as in modern literature, the story of the *Akeidah* serves as a core for examining either the relationship between God and the believer, or male-oriented father-child relationships.”<sup>16</sup> Fine would probably agree with this statement.

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Marjorie Lehman, Jane L. Kanarek, and Simon J. Bronner, (January 1, 2017), [https://www.academia.edu/34435812/Where\\_Was\\_Sarah\\_Depictions\\_of\\_Mothers\\_and\\_Motherhood\\_in\\_Modern\\_Israeli\\_Poetry\\_on\\_the\\_Binding\\_of\\_Isaac](https://www.academia.edu/34435812/Where_Was_Sarah_Depictions_of_Mothers_and_Motherhood_in_Modern_Israeli_Poetry_on_the_Binding_of_Isaac).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 256.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 259.

<sup>13</sup> Gila Fine, *The Madwoman in the Rabbi’s Attic*, First Edition (Maggid Books, 2024); 196.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 196.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, “‘Where Was Sarah’ Depictions of Mothers and Motherhood in Modern Israeli Poetry on the Binding of Isaac,” 255.

## Conclusion:

Sarah functions as an equal partner with Abraham in the establishment of the Jewish people.

But they have separate roles. Sarah takes responsibility for the aspect of family in the private sphere. Abraham assumes responsibility for the public, religious, ritual domain of worship and service to G-d. As the test of faith of the *Akeidah* lies within this public religious area, Sarah, accordingly, is not mentioned. Her death, however, can be linked to the news of the event, because it involves her only child, the heir of the Jewish people. She could not bear losing him. Isaac is her family and her future.

The Tanakh, in other instances, blurs the gender distinction between masculine and feminine, public and private roles. The stories of Deborah and Esther serve as excellent examples. Deborah is a prophetess and an acknowledged leader of the Jewish people ([Judges 4:4-5](#)).<sup>17</sup> Her role is in the public eye. Esther, also, as Ahashveirosh's queen, is a public figure. Although both women also utilize styles of leadership that may be indicative of typically feminine behavior, a complete analysis is beyond the scope of this article. Sarah, however, as the paradigm of the Jewish matriarch, clearly exemplifies the rabbinic concept of role differentiation.

## **Avraham and Sodom: To Pray Against God**

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**O**ur 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

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<sup>17</sup> Steinsaltz, op. cit. 116.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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](#).

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 entertain.<sup>2</sup>

"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?"<sup>3</sup> 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](#)).<sup>4</sup> 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*).<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> [Rashi to Bereishit 18:17](#), s.v. "ha-mikhaseh ani."

<sup>3</sup> [Rashi to Bereishit 18:17](#), s.v. "asher ani oseh."

<sup>4</sup> [Bekhor Shor to Bereishit 18:17](#), s.v. "ve-hashem amar ha-mikhaseh."

<sup>5</sup> [Seforno to Bereishit 18:17](#), s.v. "ha-mikhaseh ani."

<sup>6</sup> [Ramban to Bereishit 18:18](#), s.v. "ve-Avraham hayo yihyeh."

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.

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor, and others attribute those bellowing screams to the victims.<sup>7</sup> 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](#)).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> [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*.”

<sup>8</sup> [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/>.

<sup>9</sup> [Rashi to Bereishit 18:21](#), s.v. “*eiredah na*.”

<sup>10</sup> [Rashi to Bereishit 18:20](#), s.v. “*va-yomer Hashem*.”

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 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.”]<sup>11</sup>

“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

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<sup>11</sup> [Bereishit Rabbah 49:6](#).

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.<sup>12</sup> 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 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup>

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

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<sup>12</sup> [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*.”

<sup>13</sup> [Ramban to Bereishit 18:23](#), s.v. “*va-yigash Avraham va-yomar ha-af tispeh tzaddik im rasha*.”

<sup>14</sup> [Bereishit Rabbah 49:8](#).

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 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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

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<sup>15</sup> [Rashi to Bereishit 18:25](#), s.v. “*ha-shofet kol ha-aretz*”; [Gur Aryeh to Bereishit 18:25](#), “*mishpat emet*.”

<sup>16</sup> [Bereishit Rabbah 39:6](#).

<sup>17</sup> [Seforno to Bereishit 18:25](#), s.v. “*ha-shofet kol ha-aretz*.”

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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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 locales.<sup>20</sup>

“*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.<sup>21</sup> 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

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<sup>18</sup> [Rasha”r Hirsch to Bereishit 18:26](#).

<sup>19</sup> [Rashi to Bereishit 18:24](#), s.v. “*ulai yesh hamishim tzaddikim*.”

<sup>20</sup> [Rashi to Bereishit 18:28](#), s.v. “*ha-tashhit ba-hamishah*.”

<sup>21</sup> [Bereishit Rabbah 49:11](#).

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 recuse 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.<sup>22</sup>

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

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<sup>22</sup> [Rav Kook](#), *Olat Re’iyyah, Inyanei Tefillah, Ha-Drakhat Ha-Tefillah*, 2.

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 refusal 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.<sup>23</sup> 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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<sup>23</sup> [Midrash Tanhuma, Vayera 8:1.](#)