

Classes this week are dedicated to the memory of **Fanya Gottesfeld Heller z"l** Renowned author and lecturer on holocaust loyal friend and partner of Matan her yahrzeit is this Friday, י"ב בחשוון (30.10)

**Matan – A Tradition of Machloket: Great Debates in Jewish History, Thought, and Halakha
Part 2 – Avraham Arguing with God**



בראשית פרק יח

- (א) וירא אליו יקוק באלני ממרא והוא ישב פתח האהל כחם היום:
- (ב) וישא עיניו וירא והנה שלשה אנשים נצבים עליו וירא וירץ לקראתם מפתח האהל וישתחו ארצה:
- (ג) ויאמר אדני אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל נא תעבר מעל עבדך:
- (ד) יקח נא מעט מים ורחצו רגליכם והשענו תחת העץ:
- (ה) ואקחה פת לחם וסעדו לבכם אחר תעברו כי על כן עברתם על עבדכם ויאמרו כן תעשה כאשר דברת:
- (ו) ויאמר שוב אשוב אליך כעת חיה והנה בן לשרה אשתך ושרה שמעת פתח האהל והוא אחריו:

(ז) ויקמו משם האנשים וישקפו על פני סדם ואברהם הלך עמם לשלחם:

(יז) ויקוק אמר המכסה אני מאברהם אשר אני עשה:

(יח) ואברהם היו יהיה לגוי גדול ועצום ונברכו בו כל גויי הארץ:

(יט) כי ידעתי למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך יקוק לעשות צדקה ומשפט למען הביא יקוק על אברהם את אשר דבר עליו:

(כ) ויאמר יקוק זעקת סדם ועמרה כי רבה וחטאתם כי כבדה מאד:

(כא) ארדה נא ואראה הכצעקתה הבאה אלי עשו כלה ואם לא אדעה:

(כב) ויפנו משם האנשים וילכו סדמה ואברהם עודנו עמד לפני יקוק:

(כג) ויגש אברהם ויאמר האף תספה צדיק עם רשע:

(כד) אולי יש חמשים צדיקים בתוך העיר האף תספה ולא תשא למקום למען חמשים הצדיקים אשר בקרבה:

(כה) חללה לך מעשת כדבר הזה להמית צדיק עם רשע והיה כצדיק כרשע חללה לך השפט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט:

(כו) ויאמר יקוק אם אמצא בסדם חמשים צדיקים בתוך העיר ונשאתי לכל המקום בעבורם:

(כז) ויען אברהם ויאמר הנה נא הואלתי לדבר אל אדני ואנכי עפר ואפר:

(כח) אולי יחסרון חמשים הצדיקים חמשה התשחית בחמשה את כל העיר ויאמר לא אשחית אם אמצא שם ארבעים וחמשה:

(כט) ויסף עוד לדבר אליו ויאמר אולי ימצאון שם ארבעים ויאמר לא אעשה בעבור הארבעים:

(ל) ויאמר אל נא יחר לאדני ואדברה אולי ימצאון שם שלשים ויאמר לא אעשה אם אמצא שם שלשים:

(לא) ויאמר הנה נא הואלתי לדבר אל אדני ויאמר לא אשחית בעבור העשרים:

(לב) ויאמר אל נא יחר לאדני ואדברה אך הפעם אולי ימצאון שם עשרה ויאמר לא אשחית בעבור העשרה:

(לג) וילך יקוק כאשר כלה לדבר אל אברהם ואברהם שב למקומו:

רש"י בראשית פרק יח

אשר אני עושה - בסדום, לא יפה לי לעשות דבר זה שלא מדעתו, אני נתתי לו את הארץ הזאת, וחמשה כרכין הללו שלו הן, שנאמר (י ט) גבול הכנעני מצידון וגו' בואכה סדומה ועמורה וגו'. קראתי אותו אברהם, אב המון גוים, ואשמיד את הבנים ולא אודיע לאב שהוא אוהבי:

רש"ר הירש בראשית פרק יח

(יז - יט) וה' אמר - כנראה אל המלאכים, כאשר שלח אותם לדרכם. גליתי לכם את עצתי אשר יעצתי, והיאך אכסה אותה מאברהם? הן אברהם אף הוא אינו אלא מלאך ה' עלי אדמות, ובדין שידע את סוד עצתי, כדי שיצליח בשליחותו:
 כי ידעתי - כי לא למענו בחרתי בו, לעשותו אולי לאמיר גדול ועשיר, אלא להיות מייסדה ומחנכה של אומה זו, אשר כה נעלים תפקידיה; ולא לטובתו, - אלא לטובת אומה זו; לתמכו לסעדו בתפקידו כמחנך - עם. ורק בעבור זה חייב אני לגלות לו את עצתי ולהעמיד אותו על סוד דרכי. הן שומה עליו, לחולל את הנס החנוכי הגדול - היחיד במינו - לנטוע בלב יחידו, בן הזקונים, את יסוד דרך העם ברוח ובמעש; וכאשר הוא, האב, כבר יהיה שוכב זה עידן ועידנים עם אבותיו, - הרי בניו וביתו אחריו, הרי הגוי כולו, עוד יעמוד איתן על יסוד מוצק זה; עודנו חי בו ומגשים הליכותיו; ונמצא כי הוא - האב - חי לעד ולעולם בכל אחד מבניו ובכלל בני ביתו; וכל נטף טל - ברכה הבא לאחרון בניו - על ראש האב יחול. כדי לתמכו בתפקיד חנוכי נפלא זה - נפתח לו עתה פתח להבנת דרך ה', כצוואה לבניו אחריו; כדרך שגם משה - הגדול שבבניו - ביקש לדעת את דרכי ה', כהכשרה להנהגת עמו (שמות לג, יג).

רמב"ן בראשית פרק יח

(יז) וה' אמר - אל צבא השמים העומדים עליו, או אל המלאכים השלוחים....
 (יח) ואברהם היו יהיה - מדרש אגדה זכר צדיק לברכה, הואיל והזכירו ברכו. ופשוטו של מקרא וכי ממנו אני מעלים, והלא חביב לפני להיות לגוי עצום. לשון רש"י. והנכון, כי השם יתברך דבר בכבוד אברהם. אמר, הנה הוא עתיד להיות לגוי גדול ועצום, ויהיה זכרו בזרעו ובכל גוי הארץ לברכה, לכן לא אכסה ממנו, כי יאמרו הדורות הבאים, איך כיסה ממנו, או איך נתאכזר הצדיק על שכניו החונים עליו ולא ריחם ולא התפלל עליהם כלל:

והגלוי אליו טוב ויפה, כי ידעתי בו שהוא מכיר ויודע שאני ה' אוהב צדקה ומשפט, כלומר, שאני עושה משפט רק בצדקה, ולכך יצוה את בניו וביתו אחריו לאחוז דרכי. והנה, אם בדרך צדקה ומשפט יפטרו, יתפלל לפני להניחם וטוב הדבר, ואם חייבין הם לגמרי גם הוא יחפץ במשפטם, ולכן ראוי שיבא בסוד ה':

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, To Heal A Fractured World

But this only deepens the mystery. Why does God invite Abraham to pray? Why does he in effect teach him how to pray? It cannot be that Abraham knows anything that God does not know. Nor can it be that God expects him to raise any moral consideration he has neglected. For God is just and righteous. If he were not, he would not have told Abraham to live by justice and righteousness. Whichever way we look at it, the episode seems unintelligible – not just within our categories but within the narrative logic of the text itself.

Yet it is clearly not intended to be unintelligible. It is written in simple, lucid prose. It does not look or read like a riddle, a metaphysical conundrum. In fact, the story conveys a proposition at once simple yet utterly unexpected. It turns all conventional understandings of religion upside down. In Judaism, faith is a revolutionary gesture – the precise opposite of what Karl Marx took religion to be.

There is divine justice, and sometimes, looking back at the past from a distance in time, we can see it. But we do not live by looking back at the past. More than other faiths, the religion of the Hebrew Bible is written in the future tense. Ancient Israel was the only civilization to set its golden age in not-yet-realized time, because a free human being lives toward the future. There is divine justice, but God wants us to strive for *human justice* – in the short term, not just the long term; in this world, not the next; from the perspective of time and space, not infinity and eternity. *God creates divine justice, but only we can create human justice*, acting on behalf of God but never aspiring to be other than human. That is why he created us. It is why God not only speaks but listens, why he wants to hear Abraham's voice, not just his own. Creation is empowerment. That is the radical proposition at the heart of the Hebrew Bible. God did not create humankind to demand of it absolute submission to his all-powerful will. In revelation, creation speaks. What it says is a call to responsibility.

sacrifice (against which the story of the binding of Isaac is directed: God wants Abraham *not* to sacrifice his child). It also set in motion the tragic conflict between sons and fathers dramatized in the myth of Oedipus, which Freud, wrongly I believe, saw as endemic to human culture.

The Hebrew Bible tells the long and often tense story of the childhood of humanity under the parenthood of God. But God does not want humankind to remain in childhood. He wants them to become adults, exercising responsibility in freedom. In Jewish law, the obligations of children to parents begin *only when they cease to be children* (at the age of 12 for girls, 13 for boys). Before then they have no obligations at all. Paradoxically, it is only when we become parents that we understand our parents – which is why the first recorded command in the Bible is that of parenthood ('Be fruitful and multiply'). A weak parent seeks to control his children. A true parent seeks to relinquish control, which is why God never intervenes to protect us from ourselves. That means that we will stumble and fall, but only by so doing does a child learn to walk. God does not ask his children not to make mistakes. To the contrary, he accepts that, in the Bible's own words, 'There is none on earth so righteous as to do only good and never to sin' (Eccl. 7:20). God asks us only to acknowledge our mistakes and learn from them. Forgiveness is written into the structure of the universe.

The connection between the two halves of the chapter lies in an utterly new understanding of what it is to be a parent. Abraham, about to become father to the first child of the covenant, is being taught by God what it means to raise a child. *To be a father – implies the Bible – is to teach a child to question, challenge, confront, dispute.* God invites Abraham to do these things because he wants him to be the parent of a nation that will do these things. He does not want the people of the covenant to be one that accepts the evils and injustices of the world as the will of God. He wants the people of the covenant to be human, neither more nor less. He wants them to hear the cry of the oppressed, the pain of the afflicted and the plaint of the lonely. He wants them *not* to accept the world that is, because it is not the world that ought to be. He is giving Abraham a tutorial in what it is to teach a child to grow by challenging the existing scheme of things. Only through such challenges does a child learn to accept responsibility; only by accepting responsibility does a child grow to become an adult; and only an adult can understand the parenthood of God.

To be a Jewish child is to learn how to question. Four times the Mosaic books refer to children asking questions (the 'four sons' of the Haggadah).⁸ The most significant family ritual, the seder service of Passover, begins with the questions asked by a child. Against cultures that see unquestioning obedience as the ideal behaviour of a child, Jewish tradition, in the Haggadah, regards the 'child who has not learned to ask' as the lowest, not the highest, stage of development (Solomon ibn Gabirol said, 'A wise

Judaism is God's perennial question-mark against the condition of the world. That things are as they are is a fact, not a value. Should it be so? Why should it be so? Only one who asks whether the world should be as it is, is capable of changing what it is. That is why Marx was wrong. Biblical faith is not a conservative force. It does not conceal the scars of the human condition under the robes of sanctity and inevitability. There may be – there is – divine justice in or beyond history, but God does not ask us to live by the standards of divine justice for if we could understand divine justice we would no longer be human. We are God's children, not God. By teaching Abraham how to be a child, challenging, questioning, defending even the wicked in the name of human solidarity, God was instructing him in what it is to be human, keeping 'the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice'.

Euthypro, Plato

"Is the pious (τὸ ὅσιον) loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?"

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, By His Light, Page 106

...Are we to understand the content, value, and significance of a mitzvah, of "the good," as simply deriving from the fact that G-d wants it? He may wish for it for purely arbitrary reasons guided by no criteria, bound by no standards, impelled by no reasons. Or do we believe that there is some antecedent reason inherent in particular phenomenon which leads or impels G-d to decide upon it? Are we to understand that, at the divine level, there is a kind of moral relativism where everything is equally good or bad and G-d has chosen between them arbitrarily? Or do we believe that His will is not purely arbitrary, but rather guided by certain criteria standards, and G-d has commanded us based on these criteria? ...

Bereishit Rabbah 39:6

R. Acha said: (Abraham argued) You have sworn that You will not bring a flood on the world, so why are you being deceptive with Your oath? A flood of water You will not bring but a flood of fire You will bring?!? If so, You have not fulfilled Your oath! R. Levi said: "Shall the judge of all the earth not perform justice?" (ibid). If you desire the existence of the world then there cannot be judgement, but if you desire judgement, then there can be no world. How can You grasp the rope from both ends?!? You want both a world and judgement. Pick one of them; but if You do not relent a little, the world cannot endure.

Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, Who is Worthy of Being Chosen?

Why didn't God answer Avraham, as he answered Iyov: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have the understanding" ([Iyov 38:4](#))? What happened to the "religious rhetoric" ("Can you find out the deep things of God"; [Iyov 11:7](#)) that was so expertly presented in various styles by all the characters in the book of *Iyov*, with the exception of Iyov himself, until he finally submitted to the (twofold) answer of God from the tempest: "I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I abhor my words, and repent, seeing I am dust and ashes" ([Iyov 42:5-6](#))? Surely Avraham was well aware that he too was nothing but "dust and ashes" ([Bereishit 18:27](#)):

According to what is written in Scripture, the answer is simple: Avraham was chosen, and therefore he is God's partner. Iyov was not chosen, and therefore he remains outside. But why? Does this all stem from God's arbitrary will, which may not be questioned or challenged?

....Iyov cried out from the enormity of his afflictions and humiliation. But as long as Iyov was a distinguished judge, whom all those around him, young and old, admired, feared, and rose up to honor ([Iyov 29](#)), it never occurred to him that there was injustice in the world.^[3] Injustice entered his consciousness only when he himself became a victim, or as Yechezkel put it: "They should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness." This does not mean that Iyov's cries lacked merit; his righteousness is not in question. But his righteousness was limited, driven by self-concern ("It may be that my sons have sinned"; [Iyov 1:5](#)). Its horizons were closed by the immanent disregard of all those outside its self-concern. Its heaven was locked from a substantive answer to prayers, cries, arguments, and protests:

Indeed, there is a strong connection between Avimelekh and Avraham, on the one hand, and Avimelekh and Iyov, on the other, and it allows us to point out the main difference between the figures of Iyov and Avimelekh and that of Avraham. Iyov and Avimelekh cried out about themselves, whereas Avraham prayed for others. Avimelekh said: "Lord, will You slay even a

righteous nation" (*Bereishit 20:4*), and Iyov cried out: "I am innocent – I regard not myself, I despise my life. It is all one; therefore, I say: He destroys the innocent and the wicked" (*Iyov 9:21-22*). Avraham, on the other hand, prays for Sodom, the subject of a decree of destruction: "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked" (*Bereishit 18:23*). Even though he knew that his nephew Lot lived in Sodom, and he had already rescued him in the war of the kings (*Bereishit 14:14-16*), Avraham did not pray only for his relatives, but for the entire city of sinners: "Will You indeed sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?" (*Bereishit 18:24*). God acceded to his request in principle: "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will forgive all the place for their sake" (*Bereishit 18:26*).

Avraham also accepted upon himself the prophecy of purpose and selection for posterity ("his children and his household after him"). Avraham is not described as one who offered sacrifices in order to atone for his sons, "It may be that my sons have sinned" (*Iyov 1:5*); he did just the opposite at the *Akeida*. Avraham called upon the name of God, in a way that certainly related not only to his seed, but also to "his trained men, born in his house" (*Bereishit 14:14*), and perhaps also to his friends and confederates (*Bereishit 14:13*), at least those whose covenants and oaths did not depend on something else.

The Koran on the Story of Sodom

Sura 11

She said, "Woe to me! Shall I give birth while I am an old woman and this, my husband, is an old man? Indeed, this is an amazing thing!"

They said, "Are you amazed at the decree of Allah ? May the mercy of Allah and His blessings be upon you, people of the house. Indeed, He is Praiseworthy and Honorable."

And when the fright had left Abraham and the good tidings had reached him, he began to argue with Us **concerning the people of Lot.**

Indeed, Abraham was forbearing, grieving and [frequently] returning [to Allah].

[The angels said], "O Abraham, give up this [plea]. Indeed, the command of your Lord has come, and indeed, there will reach them a punishment that cannot be repelled."

Sura 15

[Abraham] said, "Then what is your business [here], O messengers?"

They said, "Indeed, we have been sent to a people of criminals, except the family of Lot; indeed, we will save them all except his wife." Allah decreed that she is of those who remain behind.

Sura 29

And when Our messengers came to Abraham with the good tidings, they said, "Indeed, we will destroy the people of that Lot's city. Indeed, its people have been wrongdoers."

[Abraham] said, "Indeed, within it is Lot."

They said, "We are more knowing of who is within it. We will surely save him and his family, except his wife. She is to be of those who remain behind."

Sura 51

[Abraham] said, "Then what is your business [here], O messengers?"

They said, "Indeed, we have been sent to a people of criminals To send down upon them stones of clay, Marked in the presence of your Lord for the transgressors."

So We brought out whoever was in the cities of the believers. And We found not within them other than a [single] house of Muslims.

The Koran on the Binding of Isaac

Sura 37:101

And when he reached with him [the age of] exertion, he said, "O my son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I [must] sacrifice you, so see what you think." He said, "O my father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, of the steadfast."

"מרקא מדרש וקוראן" בת שבע גרסיאל

It appears that Muhammed changed certain features of Abraham's personality as described in the Torah in order to emphasize that Abraham was an obedient and submissive Moslem....This perspective of Abraham as being obedient and submissive is drawn from the Torah and Midrashic sources that Mohammed heard or learned from Jews of his time, but in the Koran this idea gets further highlighted and Islamified. The principle of submission (*Islam*) transforms here from being a proper trait of the believer to the being the primary trait of Mohammed's followers. At a later stage in history, this becomes the defining feature of the Islam.

[loose translation is my own]