

THE STORY OF AN ARGUMENT

A commentary on *Parashat Vayeira*

By Joe Grabiner

As someone who has grown up in one of our community's youth movements, RSY-Netzer, I have always been taught that our texts are filled with examples of strong leadership. In *Parashat Vayeira* we encounter such a moment of leadership, namely from our ancestor Abraham. However, it is not leadership in the conventional sense. It is not like that of Moses leading the people through the desert, or Joshua commanding his armies in triumph. Instead, it is the story of an argument.

The text tells us that there are two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, and due to the wickedness that is going on within these cities G-d has decided to destroy them and everyone in them. Abraham makes a tremendous decision, and decides to question G-d. Of course not everyone in these cities is wicked, so Abraham says to G-d, *'Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?'* (Genesis 18:25). This is a remarkable moment of accountability in our Torah. Abraham challenges G-d saying, *'how can you, the creator of all, destroy the innocent people of a city just because there are also wrongdoers amongst them?'* Abraham is a person of moral clarity in his society of passive wrongdoers. The obvious point for me here is that as Jews we are not in a relationship of submission with G-d. We are a people who, from our very earliest example question that power. Abraham does not question G-d only once but continues to do so in this passage, negotiating with G-d that 'what about if there are 50 innocent people, would you destroy the cities then? What about if there were 45 innocent people, would you destroy the cities then? What about 10?'

We can only try to imagine what would have been going through Abraham's mind at the time. Writing about something entirely different in his book 'Can Human Rights Survive', the legal scholar Conor Gearty, does a brilliant job of describing how Abraham must

have been feeling: 'how does it feel to know what truth is when you are everywhere surrounded by doubt? The feeling itself is undoubtedly marvelous to enjoy; it suffuses the body with a glow of certainty, impelling action where others can muster only cynical inactivity.'

However, Abraham is not the superhuman strong man. In his big moment of questioning G-d, he is tremendously humble, making sure to position himself at an appropriate level before the Almighty. He inhabits a mode of almost self-deprecation prefacing his argument with the words *"here I am, speaking to my G-d, I am but ashes and dust"* - ואנוכי עפר ואפר. More than being humble, this is a tactical stroke of genius. Abraham is giving us a masterclass in advocating for those in immediate danger. One commentary on this passage, the *Daat Zekenim*, suggests that the reason Abraham uses this phrase is to hint that "by rights [Abraham] should have become earth, i.e. killed, in the war against the four kings, or he should have become ashes already when he submitted to the fires in Nimrod's furnace. If he had been saved, it was only because G-d had displayed G-d's mercy for him." By reminding G-d of G-d's own previous choice to show mercy to Abraham, Abraham is encouraging G-d to show mercy to the innocent folk of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We know that ultimately Abraham fails to convince G-d, and the cities are indeed destroyed. Yet the power in the story remains for me. Abraham shows us that in a moment of colossal terror- where two entire populations are at risk, we must encounter those in power with great urgency and with even greater clarity of thought, yet even more so than that, we must approach with a clear plan of how best to affect change.

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