

A JEW ASKS QUESTIONS

Parashat Vayera 5779

By Howard Zilber

Dedicated to my first Torah teacher, Chaim Picker.

I

One has to admire the audacity. When God informs Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah will be destroyed, Abraham dares to question God. “Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” Abraham believes that it would be unseemly for God, the judge of the world, to act unjustly. He argues to save innocent life and to preserve the honor of God.

What if fifty righteous people should be found among the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah? God agrees to forgo punishment if fifty righteous people should be found in those cities. What if forty-five righteous people should be found? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? Cautiously, always respectfully, Abraham expresses concern that a certain number of righteous people will be unfairly punished. And each time God accedes to Abraham’s concern. God will spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of fifty righteous people and even for the sake of ten. But at ten Abraham stops.

I do not want to criticize him for this. He is confronting mighty God. To even initiate the discussion is to be bold. Abraham was certainly brave. Still, we can imagine him braver. Imagine if Abraham had gone on? What if with equal respect and deference, Abraham had asked about nine righteous people, or five, or two? What if there were just one righteous person living in Sodom or Gomorrah? It seems that for the sake of one innocent person, Abraham could still ask: Will the One who is just, destroy the good along with the wicked? ¹

But Abraham didn’t ask. For all the beauty and power of this story we are still left with the possibility that one, or even nine good people were killed, who might have been spared had the right question been asked. We will never know because Abraham didn’t persist in his questioning.

But let us assume that the wretchedness of Sodom and Gomorrah was such that even if Abraham had argued to save them for the sake of one innocent person, that person would not have been found. I maintain that with sufficient courage, with extraordinary courage, Abraham still might have continued his dramatic confrontation with God. We read in Ezekiel, “Is it my desire that a wicked person

¹ In the tradition it is often argued that ten good people are the minimum foundation for a community. This may be true, but doesn’t alter the fact that taking innocent life is wrong.

shall die?... It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live.” (Ezekiel, 18:23) It seems that God does not want the death of the sinner but that the sinner repent.

Now Ezekiel comes later than Abraham. And perhaps this would not be so much asking, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” as, “Shall the merciful one not be merciful?” Still, it seems that Abraham’s love of God and humanity was such, that out of deep religious and ethical conviction, he might have asked God about the possibility that there was at least one person living in those places capable of sincere repentance. Should those cities be spared for the sake of that person? I think perhaps they should be. I would love to know how God would have replied had Abraham asked.

But let us go back to where Abraham stopped. God agreed not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, if ten righteous people could be found within them. It seems that this could be treated as a principle: a proposed destructive action should not be carried out if that action will kill ten who are innocent, or at the very least, that if asked, God will desist from a destructive action if doing so will spare ten innocent lives.

But when God commands destructive actions later in the Torah others generally do not assume this principle. They do not confront God with the courage and compassion that Abraham displayed. More than once Moses argued with God to save Israelite life, when God was weary of the Israelites and wished to destroy them. Indeed, he argues with God successfully: the Israelites are spared. But he does not confront God when it is the lives of strangers that are threatened.

God says the first-born among the Egyptians will be killed. This is, of course, the tenth plague. Moses does not remind God that the judge of the entire world needs to act justly. He merely conveys the threat to Pharaoh. And keep in mind the scale of the action. All of the Egyptian first born will be killed, from the oldest to the youngest, from the highest to the lowest.

Were there ten righteous people among them? Pharaoh’s daughter shows mercy when she adopts Moses. There were midwives who did not kill Israelite babies, demonstrating fear of God. There were Egyptians who lent the Israelites valuables. And others who even joined the exodus. Even more disturbing, consider the infants and children among the first-born. Imagine how many there had to be in all of Egypt. Surely ten were innocent. If Moses had acted like Abraham had acted, many lives might have been saved, and liberation might have been achieved by more peaceful means.

And similar things can be said about wars commanded against the Canaanites. We can safely assume that many innocent children and others must have died. If Moses, if Joshua, if Samuel if so many others had followed the way of Abraham, God might have relented and, as ironic as it sounds, the conquest of the land might have been accomplished through peaceful means.

Of course it is possible that God knew that innocent lives would not be destroyed in Egypt or in Canaan. It is also possible that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was unique; that God would have saved those places for the sake of ten righteous people, but that no general principle was implied. But perhaps in all these cases God was waiting for someone to act in the manner of Abraham. Perhaps God merely needed a nudge. For the sake of innocent life, for the sake of preserving God's honor we must consider the possibility.

II

In the same way we can imagine those who came after Abraham questioning God, arguing with God, insisting that God be just, we can also imagine this of those who came before Abraham. Noah is the obvious example. He is told that all flesh is about to be destroyed. Does he wonder if this is an action worthy of God? No. When told that almost all of humanity, and even almost of all animal life will be destroyed, Noah shows no concern for the possibility that innocents will die, or that God's goodness will be compromised by letting innocents die. He merely builds the ark he has been commanded to construct. We are left wondering what God would have done had Noah acted like Abraham.

But now I wish to go deeper by asking who might have first questioned or argued with God, in the spirit of Abraham? I say it was Adam and Eve. Of course, they were so lacking in concepts and experience that we need to argue for them.

"Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." That was God's command. But it seems to be it can be asked: is this a just command?

Those of us who are parents know what it is like to impose rules and restrictions. I recall when my daughter was very young I explained she needed to keep her fingers out of electrical outlets. I was concerned with the possibility that she would receive an electrical shock that could prove fatal.

Was God's command of this nature? Was the tree perhaps poisonous? This does not seem to be the case. Its name suggests that God is not concerned that Adam and Eve will be poisoned, but that they will obtain knowledge of good and bad. Furthermore, when they eat of the tree they do not die. It does not seem that the tree was poisonous.

It is, of course, possible that God's command was justified straightforwardly, that it would have been better for humans to be ignorant of good and bad. *Would* it have been better if humans lacked knowledge of what is good and bad? Obviously, this question is very large, and it is even hard to determine what would count for evidence either way. Still on the surface, it seems preferable that we should have knowledge of good and bad. How can we achieve good, if we do not know what it is? How can we avoid what is bad, if we cannot identify what is bad?

There is another kind of command that parents impose on their children: do it because I say so. Sometimes this is just shorthand for when it is inconvenient, or too difficult, to explain why the rule is required. Suppose the child asks why she shouldn't stick her finger in the outlet. The parent knows that an explanation of electrons and their properties would be lost on the child. Still, it is vital the rule be followed. "Do it because I say so", said in a stern voice, could merely be a way to achieve an important, love motivated, effect quickly.

But if a parent is honest she should be able to admit that sometimes, "do it because I say so", is merely an imposition of will. Perhaps this is easier to admit to in the case of subordinates. We have power over people and sometimes we make them do things merely because we can make them do things. This would be "power tends to corrupt" at it's most basic axiomatic level. Perhaps that axiom applies to God.

We are told that we are created in God's image. Now forgive a brief, mildly technical foray. Some relationships are symmetrical, for instance equality. If A equals B then B equals A. Some relationships are not symmetrical, if A is greater than B then B is not greater than A. Now consider the relationship, A created B in the image of A. It would seem that relationship is not symmetrical.

If Takashima creates (invents) a robot in the image of Takashima, it does not follow that the robot created Takashima in the robot's image. But it does imply that the robot resembles Takashima, that the robot has certain features in common with Takashima. And that relationship is symmetrical.

God created us in God's image. So in some crucial ways we are like God. And since resemblance is symmetrical, in certain crucial ways God is like us. We can learn about ourselves by contemplating God. But we should also be able to learn about God by contemplating ourselves. We sometimes abuse our power by imposing our will merely to impose our will. Perhaps, God sometimes similarly abuses God's power.

I am not talking about the God of the Greek philosophers taken up by so many theologians, the God who is forever, statically perfect. I am talking about the dynamic personal God of the Torah who changes and can even be argued with successfully, as when Moses convinced God not to destroy the rebellious Israelites. I am talking about the God of Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham.

I am not asserting that the first command was unjustified. I am suggesting the possibility. I am raising the question. Abraham dared to question God. He set an excellent example. I wish Moses had asked if the tenth plague was consistent with God's justice. I wish Joshua had asked if the genocidal conquest of the land was consistent with God's goodness. I wish that Adam and Eve could have asked if that first command was justified. They didn't ask so we'll never know how God would have answered, but we can at least raise those questions ourselves.

As my first Torah teacher taught, and as Abraham admirably demonstrated: a Jew asks questions.