

Every time we read *Parashat Vayera*, I am struck anew by how very full it is of the human condition: hospitality, faith, doubt, laughter, negotiation, destruction, birth, exile, betrayal. All of that *before the akeidah*, the binding of Isaac.

Zev Wacks will be discussing the *akeidah* tomorrow, so I'm focusing elsewhere. Between the internal family drama of Sarah's barrenness, the promise that she will bear a son at age 90, and the subsequent birth of Isaac and banishment of Ishmael, the story takes a political turn.

In the middle of Chapter 18, Hashem reveals before Avraham the concern about Sodom and Gomorrah, vowing to go down and and "take note" if the outrages are as bad as what Hashem has heard. I discussed two years ago what was so bad about Sodom – you can actually find that dvar on our website, if you're interested – but in summary, rabbinic tradition largely describes Sodom's sins as a deep xenophobia and callous disregard for the well-being of anyone who is not already well-off.

Avraham, rightly suspecting Hashem's vow, "I will take note," means, "I will utterly annihilate the whole region," carefully speaks up. In the famous passage from verses 23-33, Avraham starts by acknowledging the presumptuousness of protesting before Hashem, "I who am but dust and ashes," then points out that the innocent should not die for the sins of the guilty: "הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה" – Shall not the judge of the whole earth do justly? he asks.

Hashem responds by promising that Sodom will be spared if there are 50 righteous people within the city.

Avraham has the chutzpah to press further, haggling down to forty five, the forty, then thirty, twenty, then ten. By the time Hashem departs, Avraham has received the assurance that if there is a *minyán* – just 10! – righteous people in the whole of the city, Sodom will be spared.

Imagine the giddy elation Avraham must feel after that encounter. He has argued with God, and God has conceded – multiple times! He has argued not just for strict justice, the sparing of the innocent, but for expansive mercy; that the merit of the righteous save the guilty. Now, with the bar lowered to just 10 righteous people, Avraham must be thinking; surely Sodom will be spared. Surely there must be 10 righteous people within the whole city!

But as the story continues, we find out: there are not 10 righteous people. There is only Lot, Avraham's nephew, and his immediate family, standing feebly before a hostile crowd, then fleeing with their lives, as fire rains down from heaven.

Before we learn Lot's fate, the narrative briefly returns to Avraham. Genesis Chapter 19, verses 27 and 28:

“Abraham hurried early in the morning back to the place where he had stood before Hashem, and, looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln.”

Imagine Avraham returning to that place, which commentators all agree to mean the place where he had been standing when he negotiated with Hashem yesterday. Imagine him cresting the hill, expecting to see the cities spread out before him, still intact, thanks to his negotiations.

And instead he sees a smoky desolation. Avraham finds that he misjudged his countrymen. Standing there, he bears witness to the truth: things were worse than he knew. There were not even ten righteous people, and his negotiations were not enough to save them.

What does it feel like to be Avraham in that moment?

I imagine Avraham asking in that moment in that moment: *Eicha?* How can this be? How could I have failed to know what was happening in the valley below me?

And also: What if? What if I had negotiated it down to five, or one? What if I had left my comfortable perch here at Mamre and gone down into the city of Sodom once in a while and engaged with the people?

Sforno, a 16th century commentator, has a commentary that I love. He says that the word in verse 28 that is translated as “looking down,” וישיק , is “a hostile kind of looking, at the magnitude of their evil.” And then, Sforno says, “he saw the smoke,” means the realization hits him that he was too late to pray for these people. The grief hit him.

I love Sforno’s commentary for what it reflects about the moment we are currently inhabiting. So many of us are struggling right now, as we face that things were different than we’d hoped.

Many of us had hoped for, maybe expected, a different outcome than the uncertainty we are currently still living with. No matter how the outcome of this presidential election is called, the fact remains: We have learned that we do not understand our fellow Americans.

And like Avraham, we might feel inclined to look down, to gaze contemptuously at those who, by our own reckoning, are making poor choices that may ultimately destroy them.

If contempt is the first reaction, as Sforno posits that it might be for Avraham, that reaction might be masking a deeper grief, as it was for Avraham, and a question – “How could I have failed to understand? How could it have been different? Could I have done anything to make it different?”

How could I so misjudge my countrymen, and how did we come to this divide?

Before we try to answer these questions, let’s bear witness to anguish from which they emerge, as Torah does.

The text could easily have told the full story of Lot's escape from Sodom without this two-verse interruption. But it did not. It focused on Avraham's bearing witness to the truth of his miscalculation, to the destruction he had hoped and failed to avert – and so we bear witness, too.

According to many midrashim, most famously articulated in the Masechet Brachot in the Talmud, this moment, of Avraham standing and bearing witness to the destruction, proves that Avraham instituted the daily morning prayer practice. As page 26b states, **“Abraham instituted the morning prayer, as it is written “Abraham hurried early in the morning back to the place where he had stood – תָּמַע- before Hashem” ([Genesis 19:27](#)), and the verb “standing” “amidah” refers only to prayer.**

There is Avraham, awash in shock, grief, questioning, contempt. And our sages say, *this* is when he prayed. He took time to feel all of those feelings and express them. He cried out. He faced them. That image remains, suspended, as the narrative returns to Lot. Maybe Avraham needed to pray for a long time.

When the narrative next returns to Avraham, he moves from his high place at Mamre to Gerar. I imagine that Avraham realizes that he cannot be a blessing to humanity sitting high in his tent in the desert. It is not enough to intercede with God; he must also engage with his fellow humans, as complicated as those interactions can be.

We, too, will figure out how to get beyond the shock and mutual contempt and recrimination, how to reach out and rebuild a vision with those with whom we profoundly disagree.

But first, like Avraham, we bear witness to our own confusion and grief. We get to feel the pain of this chasm between our hopes, our subconscious expectations and the current reality. Let those feelings be raw and let us face them and move through them. We do not face them alone. We are here together, and Avraham is with us, too.