

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayera

October 23, 2021, 17 Cheshvan 5782

Torah: Genesis 18:1-22:24; Triennial 21:1-22:24

Haftarah: II Kings 4:1-4:37 (Ashkenazim);
Sephardim II Kings 4:1-4:23

When Mercy Seasons Justice

Ilana Kurshan

Our parashah contains a tense and dramatic conversation between God and Abraham about the destruction of Sodom. Abraham tries to persuade God to spare the city, which is full of sin, but ultimately he is only partially successful in his negotiations. A close look at the dialogue between God and Abraham, as refracted through the midrashic imagination, suggests that Abraham is trying to teach God a lesson in how to strike the proper balance between justice and mercy – a lesson as important for us as it is for God.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 109b) depicts Sodom as a city debased by injustice. The inhabitants abuse widows and orphans, steal from the impoverished, and defraud the wealthy. The rabbis give several colorful examples of such devious and unscrupulous behavior. For instance, when the Sodomites would come upon a wealthy property owner, they would sit him

under an inclined, unstable wall and push it upon him, killing the hapless nobleman and then seizing his possessions. When a poor person would come to the city, each person would give him a coin marked with that individual's name; then they would refuse to sell the pauper bread so that he'd die of hunger, at which point they would come and retrieve their coins. The Sodomites' chicanery did not just pervade all aspects of society; it was also enshrined in the city's legislation. If one man cut off the ear of another's donkey, for instance, the law required the owner to give his donkey to the offender until the ear grew back. No wonder, then, that God declares, "The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin is so grave" (18:20).

And yet it seems surprising that God is bent on destroying the city, because just a few chapters earlier in the book of Genesis, in the story of Noah's flood, God avowed never to wreak destruction again on account of humanity's sinfulness: "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth" (9:21). This highly anthropomorphized postdiluvian God has "learned" to overcome a natural instinct for acting in accordance with strict justice, because human beings are inherently evil. How then can God destroy Sodom, using the same verb — *l'hashchit* — as the destruction of the earth during Noah's flood (Genesis 6:13, 9:29)?

Perhaps God recognizes that to destroy Sodom outright would be to ignore the lesson of the flood, namely that justice must be tempered by a realistic expectation of humanity's moral capabilities. And so God "checks" the divine tendency for strict justice by consulting with a human being. The midrash (Genesis Rabbah 49:2) offers a parable to a king who has three lovers whom he always consulted. Once the king wanted to do something without consulting his lovers, so he removed the

first one from the palace and locked the second one in jail; but the third lover was so beloved that the king could not bring himself to proceed without consulting with her. So too, God banished Adam and shut Noah in the ark without asking their opinion about excluding humanity from the garden or flooding the earth. But Abraham was so beloved that God could not destroy Sodom without first consulting with him. Unlike the banishment from Eden (in which Adam was given no say) or the flood (where Noah was informed, but not consulted), this time God is not prepared to destroy unilaterally without first taking counsel with a human being.

As it turns out, Abraham is as outraged by God's resolve to destroy the city as God is outraged by the city itself – Abraham says to God, "It would be a desecration for you to do such a thing, to destroy the innocent along with the guilty... Will the judge of all the earth not do justice? (18:25). In the midrash (Genesis Rabbah 49:9) Rabbi Acha reads Abraham's outcry not as a rhetorical question, but as a condemnation: "The judge of all the earth must not act justly! If You want a world, You can't have strict justice; if you want strict justice, You can't have a world. How can you hold the rope by two ends? If you cannot let go a little, the world cannot exist." Abraham demands that God give up on the ideal of strict justice so that the world can keep existing. Strict justice is incompatible with God's promise that after the flood "Cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease" (9:22). According to Rabbi Acha, Abraham reminds God explicitly of the flood and accuses God of violating that promise: "You swore and said that you would not bring a flood again—why have You violated Your vow? A flood of water you won't bring, but a flood of fire you will bring?"

Abraham proceeds to negotiate, pleading with God to save the city if there are a minimum number of righteous people.

Abraham starts with fifty, and God agrees to relax the standards of strict justice and spare the city on behalf of fifty innocent people. But Abraham worries that perhaps there aren't fifty, so he continues to tug on Rabbi Acha's proverbial rope, bargaining down to ten. The midrash explains that Abraham stops at ten because he is convinced that he has won God over. As Abraham reasons, there are surely ten innocent people in the city – Lot, his wife, his four daughters, and his four sons-in-law. Not all of those individuals prove righteous, though; the sons-in-law laugh at Lot when he tells them to leave. Even so, it is by merit of Abraham that God spares Lot and his unmarried daughters, as the Torah teaches: "Thus it was when God destroyed the cities of the plain and annihilated the cities where Lot dwelt, God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from amidst the upheaval" (19:29). The rule of strict justice was relaxed somewhat, thanks to Abraham's intervention.

If the story of Sodom is a sort of sequel to Noah's flood, then the next chapter in the evolution of God's relationship to justice, as we shall discover, is God's threat to destroy the Jewish people after the golden calf: "Now let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and I may destroy them" (32:10). But by this point Moshe manages to loosen the divine rope even further, and the people are spared in spite of their iniquity. God, through a deepening relationship with humanity over time, gradually relaxes the standards of strict justice.

We all have moments when we are so convinced that we are in the right that we are unwilling to tolerate any deviation from our sense of justice; let us remember, in those moments, that no one can be right all the time while living in the world with others. Even the Judge of all the earth ultimately learns, through interacting with humanity, to season justice with mercy.

A Laugh That Hurts in The Belly

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Bereshit 18:1-15

1Then the LORD appeared to him... **2**So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him...

9And they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" and he said, "Here, in the tent." **10**And he said, "I will surely return to you at this very season and behold, there will be a son to Sarah your wife," and Sarah was listening in the tent opening which was behind him. **11**And Avraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah no longer had the way of women. **12**And Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have become worn-out, shall I have pleasure, and my lord being old?" **13**And the LORD said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I really give birth being that I am old?' **14**Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this very season, and Sarah shall have a son." **15**And Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He said, "No, for you did laugh."

- Laughter has many meanings (and hence it's various names). What kind of laugh do you think that Sarah laughed?
- Why do you think that God turns to Avraham regarding Sarah's reaction?
- God (v.13) does not quote exactly what Sarah said. Why?
- Why does God insist that Sarah laughed? What is the significance of this laughter?

Commentary: Hizkuni Bereshit 18:12

A brief introduction: Tradition has it that the angels arrived at Pesach (Passover) time of the year, promising that in a year a child will be born. The Talmud shares that on Rosh HaShanah (beginning of Tishrei) Sarah conceived.

And Sarah laughed – When Tishrei arrived after the announcement of the angels and she saw herself that she had not conceived, she despaired of the announcement, for she knew that she had only six months left until Pesach. She did not believe like Avraham, for Avraham was told directly from the Holy One blessed be He, so he believed, but Sarah heard only from the angels, and she thought that they were people; so she would look at her belly and say: Is it possible that this belly could be filled with child? At that time in Tishre "the LORD said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh..."

- What kind of laughter is Sarah laughing according to Hizkuni's reading?
- When God told Avraham that Sarah would give birth (17:17) he laughed. How was his experience different than Sarah's, and what kind of laughter did he laugh?
- According to Hizkuni, when did Sarah laugh? How does this effect your understanding of Sarah's laughter and God's response?

Passing it on **Bex Stern Rosenblatt**

What is it that we want to pass down to the next generation? For Abraham, the answer was fairly easy. God gave him a covenant, a promise, a blessing. All of which were to come into effect fully only with his progeny. Isaac, the next generation, was to be a conduit of these great things which Abraham had received, passing them on down the generations. Of course, all sorts of other things get passed down as well - if you nearly kill your progeny on the top of a mountain, it might take a few generations to work that trauma out. But the intent, the thing that was meant to be passed down, was the covenant, the promise, the blessing.

This week's haftarah explores a very similar issue of what is to be passed down. Located in the Book of Kings, our haftarah comes from the Elisha stories. The Book of Kings tells a story of generations, of passing down the good and the bad from ruler to ruler, sometimes living up to the model set by King David and sometimes being even worse than the worst of the kings who had come already. In the middle of these tales of succession, we get a story of prophetic succession, the passing down of the role of prophet from Elijah to Elisha, as told in 2 Kings 2. It is in these fertile grounds of passing down a legacy that our haftarah is located.

We read the story of Elisha passing by the house of a big deal woman and her husband in Shunem. The woman goes out of her way to be hospitable to Elisha, much like Abraham was hospitable to his guests in this week's parashah. But she outdoes even Abraham, building Elisha a whole wing of the house to stay in when he passes through Shunem. And this seems to be enough for her. She is not driven, as Abraham was, to wonder what will become of her legacy and her wealth once she passes. She has her house, her husband, and her prophet. When Elisha offers to bring her to

national prominence, speaking to the king or general of the army on her behalf, she says, quite simply, "I dwell among my people." She seems to need nothing more, neither on a geographical scale nor when considering the legacy that she leaves. And yet, she is given a son. Elisha announces that in just another year, she will be embracing a son. The woman responds, "Don't, my lord, man of God. Don't lie to your maidservant." She has not asked for a child and she seems not to believe that one is possible, not dissimilar to Sarah's laughter on the announcement of the coming birth of Isaac. But one does indeed arrive.

Why is Elisha so concerned with repaying the woman with a child and why is the woman so unconcerned with having one? What is it that Elisha is looking to gift here? Elisha left behind his parents to follow the prophet Elijah, even calling Elijah his father. He has no children of his own, but rather is surrounded by a group of prophetic disciples, called the "children of prophets." And he seems to be trying to pass on the prophetic legacy. Even as this story unfolds in Shunem, Elisha is also teaching and testing one of these disciples, named Gehazi, giving him the chance to try out acting as a prophet. And yet, at the end of the Elisha stories, Elisha is left without progeny and without a successor. There is no line of prophets carrying on his traditions.

We have three different models in Abraham, the woman of Shunem, and Elisha. Abraham and Elisha are consumed by a need to pass down what they have been given. And yet it is Abraham and the woman of Shunem who will end up being able to do so. Reading a parashah and haftarah that focus on giving and receiving hospitality, perhaps we can learn to receive what we have been given by prior generations graciously and offer it gently to those who come after us.