

Ten Righteous People

Vayeira 5782/2021

Imagine arguing with God! Sure, we might do it all the time when we are upset, angry, or down – calling out and asking God why a specific thing happened, screaming “How could you?”. But those moments are really just elements of personal supplication, you are not in direct conversation with the Almighty, so imagine Abraham’s emotional state when he confronted God in direct conversation over the impending destruction of Sodom.

Abraham calls out to God and reminds Him that he is just, and that it would be contradictory for a just and righteous God to destroy the innocent along with the wicked. Back and forth they argue, with Abraham pleading the case of the citizens of Sodom¹. In this moment we learn of the *chutzpah* of the *yid*, the natural inclination of the Jew’s otherness, to stand up for what is right. Obviously, this hasn’t been the case for all Jews, or in all moments, but that trait of protesting, of protecting the innocent, of having compassion, they are found throughout Jewish law, Jewish history, and indeed human history.

The Talmud tells us that if one does not protest against the sins of their household, they are guilty in the sins as well², and worse the *Orchot Tzadikim* tells us that not protesting is a form of flattery aimed at those who have sinned³. One isn’t just complicit; one ends up promoting and encouraging the continued immoral behaviour just from being silent.

In the commentary *HaEmek Davar* on the Book of Bereshit, great emphasis is put on the forefathers and mothers – not for being righteous, but rather for being upright⁴. They stood tall, proud, and ready to do what was right. Whether it is the protection of the citizens of Sodom, or Jacob’s standing up for Rachel at the well, or Rachel’s own self determination with her sister Leah and her quest for children. Being upright means being willing to challenge even those who you love most.

In the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote to President John F. Kennedy and implored him to use his power to ask members of clergy to make personal sacrifices, to use their positions, their churches and synagogues, not just to be a moral voice, but to be moral actors⁵. It is a powerful moment of righteous protesting, of being an upright and *chutzpah* filled Jew, as the sacrifice that Heschel was discussing was the donating of all clergymen’s salaries for a month to the Civil Rights Movement.

In modern society, most of us like to avoid conflict, especially to those who we love. The few that do engage often do so from behind keyboards – advocating for their opinions without much fact, rationality or even tact. One of the biggest arguments at the moment is around vaccinations and the rights of freedom and liberty from health orders that mandate stay at home or restrictions of movement and interaction.

While I am not one for advocating for specific political opinions from my pulpit, there are a few positions that I am willing to take, a few moments where I am willing to be upright, and engage in righteous protests even with those whom I love most deeply. Vaccination is one of those moments – as a believer of science, and someone who has fidelity to Jewish law, I trust in both the medical world who have endorsed the vaccines available and heed the advice of my Rabbis and mentors who have stated that there is a halachic imperative to be vaccinated. While it is difficult to confront

A New Page of Talmud – Companion Article

friends and family, to try and change their mind, this is one of those times where we need to be strong, resolute, and upright.

As Dr Martin Luther King Jr. said “You are not only responsible for what you say, but also for what you do not say”⁶

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud – Vayeira 5782**