

Mercy with a Sword at the Neck

Parashat Vayeira

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Syracuse, New York is neither the first nor the only Syracuse in the world. With all due respect to the Orange from ‘Cuse, the original Syracuse is about 5,000 miles to the east, on the coast of the island of Sicily. ‘Seracusa’ is a 2,700 year old city, rich with Greco-Roman architecture, amphitheaters, fortresses, castles, temples, there’s even a Jewish ghetto where Jews lived for 800 years prior to the Inquisition. According to the Roman historian Cicero, in the early 1st Century Syracuse was a strong city-state ruled by an iron-fisted king named Dionysius. Though the king was very wealthy and powerful, he also had many enemies. Cicero wrote that the king’s bedchamber was surrounded by a moat, and that he only trusted his own daughters to shave his face with a razor. Dionysius had a devoted courtier named Damocles whose job it may have been to be a professional flatterer. Every day he came before the king to praise him for his vast power and wealth. One day, when Dionysius was really feeling the burdens and complexities of the crown, he offered Damocles the opportunity to switch places with him for a day. Damocles readily agreed and soon found himself seated on a golden throne, being attended to by countless servants who fed him the richest, most succulent meats and brought him anything his heart desired. As he sat back to revel in his good fortune, he noticed a razor-sharp sword suspended over his head by a single hair from a horse’s mane. He was unable to enjoy another moment of luxury or comfort, constantly worried that the thread would break. He begged Dionysius to be released from having traded places with him, and this became a parable—the Sword of Damocles—for time immemorial, that wielding power is actually fraught with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty on a daily basis.

There is a version of the Sword of Damocles story in the Talmud, in tractate Berachot, albeit with an important twist. In this version the king is Hezekiah, the biblical ruler of the 8th Century Kingdom of Judah, who relates that he learned this wisdom from his grandfather...King David himself.

Aflu cherev chada munachat al tzavaro shel adam, al yimna atzmo min ha'rachamim.

Even if a sharp sword rests upon a person’s neck, he should not prevent himself from praying for mercy.

In other words, even when the circumstances are dire, even when things seem hopeless...one should never give up on *rachamim*, on mercy, sympathy, compassion, grace.

One of the episodes in this parasha that makes Abraham so renown is his bold, courageous argument with God about protecting innocent life in Sedom. Can you destroy Sedom, Abraham challenges God, if there are 50, 45, 40, 20, 10 innocent lives? *Ha'af tispeh tzaddik im rasha?* Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? Those words reverberate with relevance

today! What does it mean for an army, any army much less a Jewish army to go to battle when innocent lives may be lost? Even in a *milchemet chova*, a war that is obligatory, a war that leaves us no other choice but to fight, and I believe we are in just such a war, how do we maintain that *rachamim*, that sensitivity for the lives of innocents? We know how the Sedom story goes...Even 10 innocent people cannot be found in all of the city. We have to assume that God has the best possible intelligence on the residents of that town, and with the exception of Lot and his family, the city is entirely obliterated.

On the morning of Sedom's destruction, the Torah reports a very strange detail. It says, *Vayashkeim Avraham ba'boker*; Abraham woke up very early, *el hamakom asher amad sham et p'nai Adonai*, and he rushes back to the very same spot where he had argued with God the previous day. The destruction had not yet commenced, the sword, if you will, was lying across the neck. What was Abraham doing there? Why did he return to that spot? Why did he rush there at the crack of dawn? Ovadia Seforno a 16th Century Italian commentator, not from Syracuse but Bologna, said that Abraham was there *le'vakeish rachamim*, he went back to the place where he pleaded with God one more time to beg for mercy for the people of Sedom. The Polish commentator known as the "Netziv," Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, said that Abraham went there *le'hitpalel aleihem*, to pray on their behalf. With the knife against the throat, Abraham prays and pleads for a city that is seeping and soaking with evil.

I am so moved by that image of Abraham overlooking Sedom, on the one hand knowing that it is irredeemable, and on the other that he can't just divorce his conscience from what is happening below. *Afilu charev munachat al tzavaro, al yimnah atzmo min ha'rachamim*, even with the sword at the neck, don't give up on mercy. That is precisely the uneasy place that many of us find ourselves in right now. Of course we grieve civilian losses in Gaza. Any time an innocent life is lost it should pain us, it must pain us. As Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, "A person cannot be religious and indifferent to other human beings' plight and suffering." And at the same time it is maddening when accusations of the disregard for civilian life is leveled against Israel while Hamas and Hezbollah fire rockets indiscriminately into Israel on a daily basis, hide among civilians, and tunnel beneath their homes which they prevent them from leaving even when they have been warned to evacuate. How dare they presume to speak for innocent victims? If anything, by enmeshing themselves with non-combatants they are making the lives of innocents so much more precarious.

One of my biggest fears is that Israel will continue to lose support as civilian death tolls rise. I know that even for ardent supporters of Israel this is one of the most difficult realities to respond to; to explain; to defend. I have been a part of so many conversations, one-on-one, with groups of kids and adults; tomorrow I am meeting with a group of Har Shalom college students, and I know that this issue is the thorniest of them all. I believe the way to keep these people who are struggling with how to make sense of civilian losses in the conversation is to model the Abrahamic approach. To acknowledge the crisis. To be honest about the moral complexity of the situation. To express genuine sadness at the loss of innocent life regardless of what side of the

border it occurs. Even with the knife dangling above our heads or pressed against our throats to never lose our instinct of *rachamim*, of mercy. When our souls become numb to death or to some deaths but not others, then we too become victims of this conflict.

I pray every day that this war is prosecuted swiftly. I am not one of those who demand an immediate ceasefire, because leaving Hamas in power in any way shape or form will guarantee that there will be many more terrible days like October 7th in the future. As Maya Angelou once said, “When people show you who they are, believe them.” Hamas has shown us who they are, and we best believe them. For the sake of our brave *chayalim*, the soldiers engaged in this battle, for the sake of the precious hostages, for the sake of any truly innocent human being who has become ensnared in a conflict not of their desire or of their making, we pray that not just peace, but a lasting, reliable, just peace is established in the wake of this conflict. *Bimheira ve'aymeinu*, may it happen quickly and in our day. And let us say: Amen.