

“HOLY CHUTZPAH”
Parashat Vayera
October 27, 2018
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

A Hebrew word that is hard for some people to pronounce -- and even harder to define precisely -- is **CHUTZPAH**.

CHUTZPAH is a certain kind of **audacity**. It's brazen nerve. Effrontery. **Shameless** audacity.

Here's the British definition: "Behavior that is extremely confident and often rude, with no respect for the opinions or abilities of anyone else" (From the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary). (I think they capture everything but the humor.)

Here's a sentence that I think *does* capture the humor: "It took a lot of chutzpah for her to walk in on Owen's bachelor party." (I don't know who "she" is, but I have a feeling there's some history between her and Owen.)

Generally, chutzpah isn't considered a virtue.

But sometimes it is.

One classic example is in today's Torah portion.

Abraham is told that God is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ordinarily, when God gives you a piece of information like that, you expect to suspend your own judgment.

Maybe, if *we* had been there, we'd have done that. After all, those cities were full of evil people. We know this from the Bible and from the various legends that are told about those cities. They were full of rotten people. It's easy to appreciate why



God would want to destroy them. It's easy to say, "More power to you, God!" or "The sooner, the better!"

Abraham doesn't do that. Instead, he challenges God. This is very strange. Challenging the being that is more powerful than any other, that has more knowledge and understanding and wisdom than any other is, well, not only risky, but it seems *dumb*. It seems unlikely to succeed. Why then does Abraham do it?

Perhaps the answer comes from a story told by Elie Wiesel that was recently recounted to me by a colleague, Rabbi Adam Greenwald.¹

Elie Wiesel tells us that, long before Abraham came along, there was a certain man who used to stand outside the gates of Sodom and cry out against it. Day after day, year after year, the man would stand there, all by himself, pleading and demanding that the people change their ways. Once, after many years, some people came up to the man and demanded to know what he was still doing there. Hadn't he realized that his protests would not change anything? The man replied: "I came to Sodom to try to change them. And, believe me, I have long since realized that that probably won't happen. However, I must keep trying because if I leave, **they will have changed me.**"

That man was determined. He was convinced that he needed to be where he was.

Abraham was like that man. He had his conviction, his courage and his persistence. But he had more than that, for he stood up to God. He spoke up and argued and tried to persuade God to change his mind. In doing so, he demonstrated what the rabbis called, "*hutzpah k'lapei shamayim*," or "hutzpah directed at heaven." I call this "**Holy Chutzpah.**"

We might have a less elevated way of describing what he did. We might call it: "protesting." Protesting for a cause.

¹ "We Plant Seeds," by Adam Greenwald, www.amerticanrabbi.com.

Protesting, not for one's self but for a *cause*, is hard work. One reason is that the results are almost never immediately apparent. You need an inner strength to protest. You need what's called "**audacious hope.**" You need to believe that there is something valuable about standing up for what's right **even when it feels as though no one is listening.** It's about refusing to be a bystander in the face of injustice. It's about declaring that even if you can't achieve a solution, you are sure not going to be content remaining part of the problem.

This month, the Catholic Church recognized a person who also had **Holy Chutzpah.**² It canonized as a saint Father Oscar Romero. Father Romero was the Archbishop of San Salvador, and was a tireless advocate for the poor and oppressed in his country. He stood up to an autocratic, murderous regime, convinced that he could do nothing else.

On March 24, 1980, he was assassinated -- apparently at the order of the Salvadorian regime -- while saying the mass. It's a reminder of the risks you take when you stand up and protest.

I remember that assassination very clearly. I didn't know much about the politics of Central America, but one thing I did know: Father Romero had courage. Father Romero stood up for freedom. Father Romero gave his life in furtherance of that cause. Father Romero had **Holy Chutzpah.**

In addition to being a protester, Father Romero also wrote prayers. One of the most famous prayers that he wrote addresses the fundamental challenge of speaking out even when -- especially when -- you know that complete change will not happen in your lifetime: It's called, **We Plant Seeds.**

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

² Ibid.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

*We are prophets of a **future not our own**. (Emphasis added.)*

In the Mishnah, Rabbi Tarfon said something similar: “*Lo alecha ham'lachah ligmor, vlo atah ben horin l'hibatel mimenu*”: We won't be held liable for not completing the task, but we're not free to turn away from it.

Let's remember that man who stood outside the gates of Sodom year after year. Let's emulate his determination. And let's also emulate Abraham, who was willing to challenge even God to live up to the very values that God had taught him.

We live in the freest country that has ever existed in the history of humankind. Let's make use of that freedom to stand up for the values we believe in. We may not always agree with one another, but let's live up to the principle taught us by Voltaire, who said, “I disapprove of what you say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it.”

May we be inspired to stand up for the values that we believe in. Let's stand up for **truth**, and for **justice**, and for **mercy**. Let's try to match Abraham's courage in confronting the Master of the Universe. Though we may be thwarted, though we may experience setbacks, let's not desist from the task before us. May we, like the great Oscar Romero, be strengthened by his faith -- and ours -- that the seeds we plant will ultimately flourish -- in a new world waiting to be born.

Shabbat Shalom!