

We must all be true to our internal moral compass.

The Torah can't possibly give us a rule for every circumstance we are going to encounter.

This week's Torah reading, Vayera, has two episodes that show a stark contrast in Abraham's relationship with God, and when the second is compared with the first it somehow makes it even more difficult to grasp. In the first episode, at the beginning of the parsha, when three angels depart for Sodom, leaving Abraham alone with God, he challenges God. He argues with God. God says the outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is grave. And in what is one of the finest moments in the Torah, Abraham has the courage to stand before God, and challenge God's plan:

Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?

And as if that's not enough, Abraham bargains with God. He negotiates with God. What if there are 45? 40? 30? 20? Abraham gets God down to 10, but no lower. Apparently, you need at least a minyan's worth of innocent people to spare a city.

This magnificent episode, with Abraham acting at his prophetic greatest, challenging even God to live up to proper moral standards, is inspiring. So how can it possibly be that later in this week's parsha, when God tells Abraham "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you," Abraham's response seems to be to shrug his shoulders, say "sure thing God" and head off to sacrifice his son? Where's the righteous indignation now? Where's the challenge to God over how could God think such a thing, demand such a thing?

There's a beautiful modern midrash, written by a Quaker woman, Marion McNaughton, who apparently studied some midrash. Here's how McNaughton pictures the story:

And with a heavy heart Abraham went to his wife Sarah and said, "God has told me to take our son Isaac, whom we love, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering."

And Sarah said, "A shrewd move. This God is no fool. This is Her way of testing you. What did you say to Her?"

And Abraham replied, "I said nothing. I want God to know I will obey Him without question. I will do as He commands."

And Sarah threw up her hands in despair and said, "Abraham, you are a bone-headed fool. What kind of a God do you think you are dealing with? What kind of a god would want you to kill your own son to prove how religious you are? Don't be so stupid! She's trying to teach you something; that you must challenge even the highest authority on questions of right and wrong. Argue with Her, wrestle with Her!" But Sarah's words smacked to Abraham of blasphemy, and he went into the mountains with his son Isaac.

And Sarah said to God, "You are playing with fire. He is too stupid to understand what you are up to. He won't listen to me and he won't challenge you; if you don't stop him, he will kill our precious son. Is that what you want?"

And God said, "Sarah, they have a long journey to the mountains; I'm hoping one of them will see sense."

And Sarah said, "Like father like son. You'll have to send an angel."

And it came to pass as Sarah foretold, and the angel of the Lord spoke to Abraham the first time and told him not to kill his son. And Abraham sacrificed a ram as a burnt offering. And the angel of the Lord spoke to Abraham a second time and told him his offspring would be as numerous as stars in the heaven and would possess the gates of their enemies. And the angel of the Lord spoke to Abraham a third time and said, "Because you were ready to kill your own son in the name of your God you will be known as a great patriarch and millions will follow your example. And they will believe that He is indeed a jealous and a demanding God, and they will willingly

sacrifice their sons in His name and to His glory. And there will be bloodshed and slaughter in all the corners of the earth."

And Abraham returned to his wife Sarah and said, "God is well pleased with me for I am to be a mighty patriarch."

And Sarah said nothing. But she took the garments of Abraham and Isaac that were stained with the blood of the ram, and she carried them to the river to be washed. And the river ran red with the blood of generations to come, and Sarah wept bitterly.

And God came to Sarah at the water's edge and said, "Sarah, do not weep. You were right. It will take time. Meanwhile hold firm to what you know of me and speak it boldly. I am as you know me to be. Many generations will pass and a new understanding will come to the children of Abraham, but before then I shall be misheard and misrepresented except by a few. You must keep my truth alive."

And Sarah dried her eyes and said, "As if I didn't have enough to do."

Pirkei Avot brings a teaching that God tested Abraham with ten tests. The ten tests aren't listed there, but this episode, the Akedah, is on Maimonides' list of the ten tests.

In her midrash, Marion McNaughton says Abraham failed the test. The test wasn't about blind obedience. The test was about how firm Abraham was in his conviction to challenge authority, in his understanding of what God really wanted of us.

Why did Abraham argue about Sodom and Gomorrah, and not about Isaac? Abraham was a bystander to what was going to happen in Sodom and Gomorrah. He didn't have any skin in that game. God didn't order him to do anything. So Abraham felt free to challenge God. He wasn't trying to get out of something.

In the Akedah, God issued a direct order. God said, "take your son and offer him as a burnt offering." Abraham assumed one had to obey God that God demanded strict, blind obedience.

“I was just following orders” is never an excuse for immoral behavior. When Adolf Eichmann was put on trial in Israel for his war crimes during the Shoah, he claimed he was simply following orders. Everything he did was legal according to German law.

The Torah can't possibly give us a rule for every circumstance we are going to encounter. Through studying Torah we can learn about God. Studying Torah should help us fine tune our internal moral compass, so that we will be readily able to discern right from wrong. So that we will have the courage to speak up when we see injustice, so that we will have the courage to disobey an order that we know is immoral, no matter who the order comes from, your boss, the Prime Minister, or even God.

The regulations for the Canadian Armed Forces, Queen's Regulation and Orders (QRO) tells us that our soldiers are to rely on their internal moral compass in deciding whether an order is lawful or not. The QR&O states that if a soldier commits a crime in complying with a manifestly unlawful order he is subject to punishment. How does the soldier know an order is “manifestly unlawful?” It is

...one that would appear to a person of ordinary sense and understanding to be clearly illegal; for example, a command by an officer or non-commissioned member to shoot a member for only having used disrespectful words or a command to shoot an unarmed child.

It doesn't matter where the order comes from: regardless of whether it comes from your immediate superior, the commander of the armed forces, or the Prime Minister himself, you don't obey an “unlawful order,” and you have to rely on your sense and understanding to know what is legal and what isn't.

Jews have a long history of engaging in civil disobedience, going back to Shifra and Puah in the story of the Egypt, the midwives who refused to obey Pharaoh's orders to kill the male babies.

In the Middle Ages, the concept of *dina d'malkhuta dina*, the law of the land is the law evolved. Jews were told by their rabbis we follow the laws of the land, even if it overrules some of our customs, as long as the law is just and administered evenly. But unjust laws, or discriminatory laws, or ones contrary to the Torah laws were to be disobeyed. When schools in Germany compelled attendance on Shabbat, some parents sent their children, but forbid them to write any lessons, so as to comply with Torah law.

More recently Never Again Action, a group of Jewish activists, physically blocked entrances to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centers in protest of the treatment of immigrants. Their handbook instructs protestors not to be nice about blocking the entrances – it advises them to chant in Yiddish and sing Hebrew prayers. The manual says,

Defiant, angry, urgent, Jewish. The goal is to actually make it impossible for ICE and/or the Democratic Establishment to do business as usual. Find the chokepoint and shut it.

The rules about disobeying unlawful orders are not just for people serving in the military. We must all be true to our internal moral compass. We must all know right from wrong. May the Holy One grant us the wisdom to have a sound compass, and the courage to act on what we know is right.