“Listen people to a story, that was written long ago
‘bout a kingdom on a mountain and the valley folks below.
On the mountain was a treasure hidden deep beneath a stone
and the valley people swore they’d have it for their very own.

Go ahead and hate your neighbor, go ahead and cheat a friend.
Do it in the name of heaven, you can justify it in the end.
There won’t be any trumpets blowing, come the judgment day.
On the bloody morning after, one tin soldier rode away.

So the people of the valley sent a message up the hill.
Asking for the buried treasure, tons of gold for which they’d kill.
Came the answer from the kingdom, with our brothers we will share
all the riches of the mountain, all the treasure buried there.

Now the valley cried with anger, mount your horses, draw your swords.
And they killed the mountain people. So they won their just rewards.
Now they stood before the treasure on the mountain dark and red,
turned the stone and looked beneath it. ‘Peace on earth was all it said.’”

“One Tin Soldier,” Brian Potter, Denis Earle Lambert
1960’s counterculture era anti-war song

At 9:50 A.M. on Saturday, October 27, 2018, Eastern Time, Robert Gary Bowers entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and murdered 11 congregants. The victims had just begun Shabbos morning services at the synagogue when the shooter entered the building and opened fire with a Colt AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and 3 Glock semi-automatic pistols, all four of which he fired, the shooting occurring over a 20-minute period with the shooter shouting, “All Jews must die!” Approximately 75 people were in the building at the time—all attending either one of two Shabbat services—at the New Light conservative congregation or the Tree of Life conservative congregation—or attending a Torah Study session in the Dor Hadash Reconstructionist congregation. The carnage resulted in the murder of 11 people and 7 injured, the injured including 4 police officers. The gunman was captured, repeating his comments made during the attack: “All Jews must die!” He was taken to Allegheny General Hospital where his injuries were treated by 3 Jewish medical staff.

He had earlier posted anti-Semitic comments against the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in which Dor Hadash and Tree of Life were supporting participants, saying, “HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.” His action resulted in the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the United States (Sources: Washington Post; Pittsburgh Post-Gazette; Associated Press; Haaretz).

In Denver, Colorado on October 27, 2018 at approximately 10:25 a.m., Mountain Standard Time, we were finishing Morning Minyan services at Temple Sinai. The Torah service had just finished as well as the reading of the Haftarah and we were in the midst of naming individuals for yahrzeits when one of our members raised her hand, holding her phone in the other hand, saying, “Wait, everyone. My husband just texted me that there has been a shooting in a synagogue in Pittsburgh.” Rabbi Rick Rheins, senior rabbi at Temple Sinai, stopped mid-sentence, hesitated, then said, “Which synagogue in Pittsburgh?” The answer came, “They are saying Tree of Life Synagogue.” Rabbi Rheins, who had previously served a rabbinate near Pittsburgh, seemed for a brief moment to be caught up in shock and sadness, then said, “I know that synagogue. Susan and I used to attend many events there. Let’s hope it is not serious.”

We finished our service and, quieter than usual, many of us frantically checking phones or texting, departed the service, sober, frightened. Glancing through a window in the foyer, I saw a police squad car pull into Temple Sinai’s parking lot. Reality—2018 version—had arrived.

The parsha for the week including Saturday, October 27, 2018 was “Vayeira.” By way of explanation, the weekly Torah portion, called “parsha” or “sedra” is a section of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) used in Jewish liturgy during a single week. The Saturday morning and holiday morning readings (in Hebrew) are followed by a reading, the Haftarah, (meaning “parting,” “taking leave,” “to conclude,”) traditionally from a Book of Prophets, Nevi’im, which is thematically linked to the Torah reading.
There are 54 weekly parashiyot (plural) in Judaism, the full cycle being read over the course of one Jewish year. Each Torah portion consists of two to six chapters to be read during the week and each Torah portion has a name, that name taken from the first distinctive word in the Hebrew text of the portion in question, often from the first verse. For example, the first Torah portion of the Jewish year is “Bereshit,” from Genesis, meaning “in the beginning.” The Torah reading follows an annual cycle beginning and ending on the Jewish holiday, Simchat Torah, with the divisions corresponding to the Jewish lunisolar calendar which contains up to 55 weeks, the exact number varying between regular years and leap years. The annual completion of the Torah readings on Simchat Torah (meaning: “ rejoicing with/of Torah”) is marked by Jewish communities around the world.

Thus the parsha for the week including Shabbat of October 27, 2018, was “Vayeira,” the fourth parsha in the Jewish year, and meaning, “And He appeared.” (Genesis 18:1-22:4). At Temple Sinai on the Shabbos morning of October 27th, we were privileged to have several women from the congregation leading the Torah service—giving the D’var Torah (commentary on the Torah portion) and reading the parsha in Hebrew. Gale Chapman, a regular attendee of Temple Sinai’s morning minyan, has frequently organized teams of women throughout the year to read Torah and had continued that tradition that morning with Judy Schwartz delivering the D’var Torah and Amy Grossman, Ellie Deneroff and Gale as Torah readers and Bobby Kramer, reading the Haftarah. Ted Brooks, the only male in the group—calling himself the “honored male participant”—led the first half of the service. Judy delivered a meaningful D’var Torah, starting with a summary of the very long parsha, “Vayeira,” (Genesis 18:1-22:24) saying, “it’s not fair, really, for Vayeira to be a parsha for only one week. As I read it, I found a minimum of 12 topics to discuss... It is a series of challenges and proofs between man and G-d. Fortunately, Gale and Ellie and Amy are reading the ten verses—a very meaty ten verses—that relate directly to our lives today.

“When we hear the words Sodom and Gomorrah, we immediately think of lust and rape... because lust and rape are the most extreme treatment of an inhospitable people toward strangers. It is a metaphor for the most cruel treatment of strangers by a people so arrogant that they see strangers—immigrants—as fair game, subject to any imaginable violation, abuse or whim. Later in the Bible, Ezekiel says, ‘...only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance. She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility, yet she did not support the poor and the needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before me. (Ezekiel 16: 49-50).’

Judy concluded her comments with the words, “Today we see some frighteningly parallel behavior. Building walls, sending troops to the border, separating families to prevent the entry of refugees to a country rich in resources, when there are many hospitable ways to offer a safe home to these people...We would do well to reflect on these lessons and practice the values they teach.” (from D’var Torah notes, October 27, 2018, Judy Schwartz).

Judy’s comments about the many lessons in this long Torah portion referenced the several situations in which Abraham found himself and handled himself as God’s servant: the concept of Jewish hospitality (Abraham preparing a banquet for strangers), of the hope of an heir (Sarah conceiving Isaac at the age of 90); the birth of Isaac (fulfilling the covenant), Abraham’s plea to God for justice for Sodom and Gomorrah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the rescue of Lot and his family, and the “Akedah,” the binding of Isaac—to name only a few. Judy’s reference to the “very meaty ten verses” in this Torah portion which was read by Gale, Amy and Ellie was to the section of “Vayeira” which describes Abraham’s challenge of God—his challenge of God not to wipe out the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Often described as “Abraham’s Argument with God,” the section of “Vayeira,” (Genesis 18: 22-32), is also alternatively titled, “Abraham’s Plea with God” for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah were exceptionally evil cities. Within the text itself, we learn they were extremely inhospitable to strangers and practiced homosexual rape. In the end, it was their social evil which led to their destruction. “The Bible takes the story...and turns it into a moral tale that carries its warning to all ages: Affluence without social concern is self-destructive; it hardens the conscience against repentance; it engenders cruelty and excess. The treatment accorded newcomers and strangers was then and may always be considered a touchstone of a community’s moral condition.” (Plaut, Commentary on the Torah). To say the least, Abraham knew them to be very corrupt and without redeeming character. Both the Torah and later midrashim (Plaut) emphasize their singular cruel treatment of strangers—specifically, immigrants. In addition to their oppression of the poor and needy, they tried to hurt Lot, Abraham’s nephew who lived there with his family. God had noted the sins of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah—which had provoked His wrath—and had decided to destroy them. Before doing this, God invited Abraham into a dialogue for He asked Himself, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?...for I have singled him out that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right…” (Genesis 18: 17, 19; Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Biblical Literacy). What follows is the dramatic confrontation between Abraham and God. Abraham’s challenge of God for the sake of justice was the first Jewish debate.

One of the most fascinating features of the Hebrew Bible is that people argue with God when they feel He is acting unjustly. As Elie Wiesel said it, “A Jew can be Jewish with God or against God, but not without God.” And, in another statement, “Only the Jew opts for Abraham-who-questions and God-who-is-questioned...only the Jew knows that he may oppose God as long as he does so in defense of His creation.” (Great Jewish Debates, Rabbi Barry Schwartz). Fittingly, then, Abraham, the first Jew, is the first to argue with God. We might expect a pious religious person to merely accept God’s edicts or remain silent. We might even expect that Abraham would limit his plea to “family,” wishing to rescue his nephew Lot and Lot’s family. But none of that is what Abraham does. Abraham’s reaction is immediate
and confrontational: “Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent people 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? Shall not the judge of all the earth act with justice?” (Genesis 18: 23–25); (Telushkin, Biblical Literacy)

From Abraham’s questions, one can observe that he fully understands that justice is an essential part of God’s character. And God, Himself, concedes the validity of Abraham’s challenge and says, “If I find within Sodom, fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” (18: 26). Abraham, then the persistent negotiator, asks God, “What if there be fifty less five (meaning forty-five)?” and God concedes the argument which further emboldens Abraham to request that Sodom be spared for the sake of forty, then thirty, then twenty, and finally to even ten innocent people. Abraham argues vociferously, relentlessly, but shows awareness of ground rules: he addresses God with fitting humility and expresses trust in God’s sense of justice, leaving it to God to discern the number of righteous in Sodom.

Additionally and importantly, “Abraham is not negotiating to save the innocent—but rather, the guilty. If his purpose was to save the innocent, he would have challenged differently, saying, ‘You must lead the innocent out before you destroy the guilty.’ No, the argument is that God should spare the guilty for the sake of the innocent. The explanation: Abraham was aware [as God thought he was] that God has chosen him to teach certain truths to the world. Implicit in this is the realization that while many people often do not act justly, through Abraham and his descendants, they might be influenced to change their behavior. As long as a requisite number of good people reside in a place, there is hope that they can influence and transform the evil ones.” Therefore, it makes sense for God to spare the guilty people of Sodom for the sake of fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, even ten good people since these people might change the behavior of others (Ibid).

But God and Abraham both depart their discussion at ten. “Then done speaking to Abraham, the Eternal departed; and Abraham returned to his place” (18:33). God is not inclined to spare Sodom nor is Abraham willing to continue the argument for less than 10 good people. Reason: it takes a certain ‘critical mass’ of good people to exert influence and if this ‘critical mass’ is less than ten, it becomes impossible to influence. Therefore, later Jewish law rules that if a person finds himself/herself living in a place with almost no good people, he/she is to leave immediately (Ibid). “There comes a time when even the merciful and just God is ‘done speaking’ with us and when the punishment for unchecked evil will take its inevitable course and engulf all of society” (Plaut). Additionally, the number 10 became the minimal number required for communal worship.

In this plea of Abraham with God, he is not doubting the existence of God’s justice but is questioning its extent and limitations. He is aware he must submit to the final judgment—in this case the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—but he/we can question with impunity—the important point being that Abraham asks and God does not reject his question. And, in Abraham’s situation, his plea is not limited to only tribal considerations—he is not merely concerned with Lot or his family, but with people outside his tribe. This was his universal concept of justice. (Ibid).

10:40 A.M., Saturday, October 27, 2018, Denver, Colorado. Shabbat Morning Minyan had finished its service and we slowly drifted through the synagogue, some leaving for home, others of us off to join Torah Study with Rabbi Raymond Zwerin—most everyone concentrating on their phones, trying to retrieve any information on the shooting in Pittsburgh, but still without complete information or awareness of the enormity of the event. That horror would sink in later. The deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the history of the United States became all too real. The Denver community responded with heartfelt messages of shared grief—most of them from friends and colleagues not Jewish.

But as the days went by, I began to think back on our service that Saturday morning and wondered why the parsha for that day had gone un-noticed. No article, no pundit’s comment, no op-ed contributor marking the ironic connections/parallels of the parsha to the day’s events—at least none found by this writer. No one had made note of what those Tree of Life Synagogue congregants would have heard that day; the message(s) from a singularly meaningful sedra that was the same read and heard in synagogues around the world—just as in ours. The message about Abraham’s hospitality to strangers, the message about the conception and birth of Isaac—and, most significantly, the message of Abraham’s plea with God to preserve the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah—for the sake of a few good people. Abraham pleaded that the guilty of two very immoral cities be saved along with the innocent. He pleaded for justice—hoping that if there were just enough good people, their goodness would be enough to salvage two very evil cities. There weren’t enough 3,700 years ago. Were there enough on October 27, 2018 to dampen the rage of a murderous shooter convinced Jews who supported aid for immigrants must die? Or did the divisiveness, prejudice against “the other,” unchecked anger, burgeoning anti-Semitism and disappearing civility in our society give him all the permission he needed? Was the cacophony of all that rancor blasting too loud to hear the voice of justice? Or was it a refusal to hear? The lesson from Torah that day has been carried forth into society since Abraham—and set the bar—for ethics, for the law, for medicine, for the basis of good and decent behavior—yes, for justice—and is in the form of Abraham’s plea. Rabbi Rick Rheins’ words in his own D’var Torah that day of October 27, 2018: “Far from being unsympathetic to his opponents, Abraham fiercely argued with God that justice and fairness should be applied to all people—even those with whom we disagree...Abraham set the tone for all who question authority. He set the standard for defending the most
vulnerable in society. Then again, at some point Abraham ceased arguing—once it was clear there were not even 10 innocent people in all of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why didn't Abraham argue for the sake of a single person? It is a question for which we have no absolute answer—the classic commentaries point out that ten is the minimum number for a minyan, a quorum that constitutes a community...without a number of dedicated individuals, we do not constitute a community and are thereby made vulnerable. The message is that we need each other. Indeed, the wicked need us. The wicked depend on the innocent to establish a society that will offer them the possibility of defense: a fair trial, a chance for mercy. Alone and selfish and without community we are not only vulnerable, we also deny others the hope for redemption.”

It would have been good for America to have heard that parsha from that Shabbos of October 27th. In this time, in this country, it would have been very good for America to hear the Torah speak about questioning authority with impunity; to hear the Torah’s words about society’s need for good people to influence unconscionable behavior of others—and to hear the Torah speak of the concept of justice...of Abraham’s concern that reached beyond boundaries of tribe and family.

The actions of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were an abomination to Abraham. They were an abomination to God. Deplorable immorality was running unchecked. But Abraham pleaded, not wanting to give up; grasping onto his sense of justice. Hoping for a few good people.

The actions of the shooter of Squirrel Hill were abominable. Make no mistake, he will receive judgment for his heinous acts. But his wounds were treated by 3 Jewish medical staff. He will have a fair trial. He will have a defense attorney. Maybe his defense attorney’s name will be Abraham. A few good people. And justice.

“Listen, people to a story that was written in October
‘bout a synagogue on Squirrel Hill and the valley folks below.
On Squirrel Hill was a treasure hidden in the Torah
and the valley people swore they’d destroy its words forever.

“Go ahead and fuel a prejudice; go ahead and hate another.
Do it in the name of politics, you can justify it in the end.
There won’t be any trumpets blowing come the judgment day.
On the bloody morning after, no one rode away.

So the people of the valley sent a message up Squirrel Hill
damning the hidden treasure, ‘those liberal values,’ for which they’d kill.
Came the answer from the synagogue, ‘With all people we will share
the riches of our values; all the treasures living there.’

Now the valley cried in anger, ‘Load your rifles; draw your guns!’
And they killed the synagogue people. So they won their just rewards.
Now they stood before the treasure on Squirrel Hill dark and red,
opened the Torah and looked within it.
Justice, justice shall you pursue,”* was what it said.”
“One Tin Soldier,” paraphrased, J. Guthery
*Deuteronomy 16:20

“It is not enough to be concerned for the life to come. Our immediate concern must be
with justice and compassion in life here and now, with human dignity, welfare, and security.”
Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)

Extending Passover’s message of freedom to all,
Jean Guthery

In memory of the 11 souls who lost their lives at the Tree of Life Synagogue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, October 27, 2018.

In memory of the 50 souls who lost their lives at the Al Noor and Linwood Islamic Centre Mosques, Christchurch, New Zealand, March 15, 2019.

Zikhronam Livrakhah, may their memories be for a blessing