

## You have the Right not to remain Silent!

This week's Torah portion, *Vayeira* (Genesis 18:1- 22:4), contains the famous passage in which Abraham argues with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Some focus on the fact that Abraham "negotiates" with God, pleading with God to save those cities, regardless of their wickedness, if only to save the 50 innocent citizens who lived there. As God informs Abraham that there are not 50 innocent people in Sodom and Gomorrah, he continues to plead for the sake of 40, then 30, then 20 or even 10.

Abraham's persistence is admirable but the true virtue he displayed was in his original outburst of righteous indignation.

*23 Abraham came forward and said [to God], "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? 24 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? 25 It would be a profanation to You (chalilah lekha) to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. It would be a profanation to You (chalilah lakh)! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"*

חֲלִילָה לְךָ מֵעֲשֹׂת פֶּדָבָר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע וְהֵיָה כְצִדִיק כְּרָשָׁע חֲלִילָה לְךָ  
הַשֵּׁפֵט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט :

The expression *chalilah lekha* is repeated as a point of emphasis. For Abraham, God must always be the epitome of righteousness and justice. How can we carry on if we knew that the Judge of the whole world did not act justly? This is exactly the point of this week's Torah portion: when we see injustice and unfairness we are to speak up! Speak truth to power! Some may chuckle that Abraham was the original "pushy Jew." But from our perspective that is not a pejorative. Indeed, standing up and protesting injustice is the very test and principle that Abraham championed. He passed his test. He challenged the greatest of all authorities, God, that justice and right must prevail. Abraham did not have to be told what to do. He demonstrated to God that he truly was worthy of being Abraham Avinu, the father of our nation, in the way he stood as a leader for what was right and just.

Some years ago, the late Reform Rabbi Jack Stern published a book of his sermons. I had the pleasure of being with Jack on a number of occasions when I served as Associate Rabbi in Chappaqua, New York, and he was the Senior Rabbi of Westchester Reform Temple, just down the road in Scarsdale. He titled the collection of his sermons "The Right NOT to Remain Silent." Obviously, it is a play on the Miranda rights and the arrested individual who is reminded that they have the right to remain silent. But Rabbi Stern wanted to remind us that the greatest of all authorities

has given us the right NOT to remain silent in the face of injustice and corruption. Not to stand idly while our neighbor bleeds. Not to turn our back on those in need. Not to shield our eyes from pain and want. Not to plug our ears from hearing the cries of anguish. Not to cower in the face of authority. Rather, we are instructed to stand up for what is right, to shout out in defense of justice, in defense of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

That was Abraham's way; he even challenged God. That was Moses' way; he stood up to Pharaoh. That was Akiva's way; he stood up to Rome. That was Nachmanides' way; he stood up to the Spanish inquisitors. That was Herzl's way; he stood up and dared to dream of Israel reborn in the face of European anti-Semitism and apathy in the Jewish world. That was Abraham Joshua Heschel's way; he marched in Selma to protest the injustices shackling African Americans. The list goes on and on and on. **PUSHY JEWS--** every single one of them. And thank God for them.

In our comfortable homes and safe suburban enclaves, let us never become numb to the plight of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the sick, or the vulnerable. We are Jews and our faith reminds us: We have the right, nay, we have the obligation, **NOT TO REMAIN SILENT!**

*Shabbat Shalom,*

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