

This Week's Shabbat Message from Rabbi Rheins,

Questioning Authority

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayeira*, we find one of the most dramatic and courageous verbal exchanges. Abraham challenges God. Now, to be exact, the Torah records that God was concerned that, perhaps, Abraham would not rise to the occasion. It is written that God had hoped that Abraham would be one who would champion justice and fairness for all people---but what if it turned out that Abraham only cared for those of his own family, his own tribe, his own party?

Now you might wonder, "Why didn't God know exactly what Abraham would do? Doesn't God know everything?"

It's an important Jewish concept from the Torah that each person, each one of us, has absolute free will. God doesn't ordain how we will react or what we will choose. God gives each of us the ability to choose -- and sometimes, the choices we make can fool and upset even skilled and expert pollsters.

The question was, how would Abraham react once he learned that Sodom and Gomorrah were about to be wiped out? How did Abraham react? As you may know, Abraham did not like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Those people infamously mistreated all strangers. They oppressed and abused the weak and the vulnerable. They even tried to hurt his own nephew, Lot, and his family. So, you would think that Abraham would have little or no sympathy towards them. But listen to what happened:

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 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?"

חָלָלָה לְךָ מַעֲשֵׂת כַּדְּבָר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צַדִּיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כְּצַדִּיק כְּרָשָׁע חָלָלָה לְךָ הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

Far from being unsympathetic to the plight of his opponents, Abraham fiercely argued with God that justice and fairness should be applied to all people --even those with whom we disagree.

So, what do you think, was God pleased with Abraham's reaction? Yes, I think that God was very pleased. This is how the story continues:

26 So Adonai answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." 27 Abraham spoke up, saying, "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes: 28 What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five?" And God answered, "I will not destroy if I find forty-five there." 29 But he spoke to God again, and said, "What if forty should be found there?" And God answered, "I will not do it, for the sake of the forty." 30 And he said, "Let not my Lord be

angry if I go on: What if thirty should be found there?" And God answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

³¹ And he said, "I venture again to speak to my Lord: What if twenty should be found there?" And God answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the twenty."

³² And he said, "Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if ten should be found there?" And God answered, "I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten." ³³ When Adonai had finished speaking to Abraham, God departed; and Abraham returned to his place.

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. Note that once it was clear that there were not even 10 innocent people in all of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham finished his plea and went back home. Again, we ask: "Why didn't Abraham continue arguing with God for the sake of a single person?"

It is a question for which we have no absolute answer. Still, it is interesting to consider that the classic commentaries point out that ten is the minimum number for a *minyán*, a quorum that constitutes a community. The point is, without a quorum of dedicated individuals, we do not constitute a community and are thereby made vulnerable. The message is that we need each other. Indeed, even 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.

This *Erev Shabbat*, Temple Sinai has two services at 6pm. Rabbi Susan and I will lead a traditional Shabbat service with a Torah reading in the Abrahams Family Chapel while, concurrently, Cantor Nesis and Dan Yolles will lead a "Camp Fire" Shabbat service for young families in the Social Hall.

On Shabbat morning, the service begins at 9am.

We'll conclude Shabbat with a *Havdalah* service and Sinai Circle program at 6pm.

Shabbat Shalom!

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