

Vayera: Amidah B'et Tzara
Sarah Pincus, Class of 2026

Over the past three weeks, people have not only gathered to show solidarity, people have gathered to pray together. Those who often find themselves in different communities have gathered together for weekday prayer services, and individuals who previously didn't have a practice of reciting *Tehillim*, now find themselves in large Whatsapp groups whose sole purpose is to divide saying *Tehillim* to finish the book as many times as possible throughout the day. Many have remarked that this response "feels so Jewish," and perhaps that is because *it is so Jewish*. Because the experience of praying to God as a way of connecting with those around us amidst destruction dates back to Avraham Avinu.

In this week's *parsha*, God says that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are so great that God will destroy the city if they are as bad as the rumors say. The agents go to Sodom to check out the situation, but Avraham "*odenu omed lifnei Adonai*—remained **standing** before God" (Bereshit 18:22). Avraham then negotiates with God until God concedes that He will not destroy the city if there are ten innocent people. Avraham wanted to see the good in the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, but his hope of finding ten innocent people proves to be lofty. The messengers tell Lot and his family to leave so that they won't get killed, but the rest of the city is going to be destroyed. They warn Lot's family "*V'al taamod*—Do not **stand** (or stop) anywhere in the Plain or the hills, or else you too will be killed" (Bereshit 19:17). Don't remain in the ruins. Don't focus on the loss. Most of Lot's family survives, but his wife turns back and famously becomes a pillar of salt.

Immediately after she dies, the Torah recounts that the "Next morning, Abraham went to the place where he had **stood** (*asher amad*) before God" (Bereshit 19:27). Avraham returns to the place where he bargained with God. From that vantage point, Avraham looked towards Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding areas and he saw the smoke rising from the land. He bore witness to destruction.

The gemara in Tractate Brachot 26b explains that Avraham's *amida*, his standing, is the precedent for *tefillat shacharit*, the morning prayers, and uses the above verse as the source. What insights can we learn from the context of Avraham's *amidah* that can inform how we approach *shacharit*?

Amidst the ruins, Avraham hurried to turn to God. He went back to the place where he

had previously connected with God, a place where he bargained with God, a place where his prayers were not heard. He stood before God, but the Torah doesn't record what he said. It says that he looked around and saw the upheaval. The verse notes that "God remembered Avraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval" (19:29). But we don't have an account of Avraham thanking or praising God, which one might expect to find in this context, if this is the source for the *amidah*. After all, those are core components of prayer.

Maybe this is the prooftext to indicate that standing before God (*amidah*) is a rather complex enterprise. Sometimes it might be about gratitude or petitioning. And maybe sometimes it is just to bear witness. Avraham teaches us that, even when we struggle to find our stance, God still wants us to turn to Him each morning.

Nighttime is marked by fear and uncertainty. It is dark physically, and often metaphorically. But then the sun starts to rise, and things get a little bit brighter. And as the night wanes, a person is commanded to "strengthen him/herself like a lion to **stand** (or rise up) in the morning for the service of his Creator, so that it is he/she who awakens the dawn" (Shulchan Aruch OC 1:1). This is exactly what Avraham did. He rose early in the morning to serve God. But what exactly does this entail?

Commenting on this *halakha* in Likutei Halakhot, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov explains that when a person begins examining themselves, presumably in the early hours of the morning, they will find that they are far from perfect. But Rebbe Nachman says, "Do not despair. There has to be something good." Though it may feel dark, just hang on and wait to see the light. "A person should search and seek until he/she finds in himself/herself some good. For how is it possible that he/she never did anything good in his/her life?," he writes (Orach Chaim, Laws of Morning Conduct 1:1).

By identifying her good points, she can then bring herself joy, says Rebbe Nachman. That joy will enable her to pray with enthusiasm and excitement. But that's not all. She must look for the good points in others, even those people who society deems to be worthless.

Rebbe Nachman continues: By finding the good points in others, even sinners, a person has the ability to uplift the other and allow that person to feel closer to God. That merit-seeking person in turn merits to **stand** before a congregation and lead. "*Hu yachol lehiot chazzan ve'lehitpallel lifnei ha'amud*" (*ibid.*)



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Perhaps we can understand Rebbe Nachman to be saying that even amidst the gloom and doom, or maybe *specifically* amidst the gloom and doom, we should channel the ethos of Avraham Avinu's *amidah*. Particularly when things feel grim, and God feels absent, we need to cultivate opportunities to shine light on the Godliness that remains in the world. And how can this be accomplished? By *standing* before God and identifying the goodness and the Godliness in ourselves and in others.

Larry Petrus, a 76-year-old volunteer at the West Side Catholic Center in Cleveland, OH, embodies Rebbe Nachman's teaching. Regina Brett, a journalist that I have followed for years, shares an account of Larry. As a volunteer, he was aware that many of the people who come through the doors of the Center have been disregarded by society. "They carry the labels the world gives them—bum, loser, ex-con, alcoholic, prostitute—until they meet Larry Petrus and discover those labels are all wrong," she writes. This outlook shapes the way he interacts with the people. Brett continues: "He finds the hidden worth in every soul who walks in the door because he's trained himself to see it. When you look for the good in everyone, you not only find the good, you magnify it...What would it mean to have your soul really magnify God? If you saw the good in everyone, the God in everyone, like Larry does? It would mean that every minute of every day you walked around with a special magnifying glass. On everything you trained it on, you saw God."¹ You *stood* before God.

May it be so.

Shabbat shalom.

After spending a year studying at Midreshet Lindenbaum, Sarah Pincus attended Binghamton University where she earned a BA in Politics, Philosophy & Law, and a Masters in Public Administration. She has taught and has held administrative positions in a variety of educational settings including Camp Stone, Friendship Circle, Brandeis' Genesis Pre-college Program, the Drisha Institute, and the Maimonides School.

¹ Regina Brett, *Be the Miracle*, Grand Central Publishing, 2012, p. 22-25.