

Parshat Vayera
Checking in On G-d
Briah Cahana - Class of 2023

When we think of Avraham Avinu as being the paragon of faith, what comes to mind is his steadfast compliance to G-d's commands without the need for rationales or even coherence. It is an image of a faith that is untethered, with the eyes and heart alive with passion guiding each of his next steps determined by G-d's pronouncement. It is a faith not easily disappointed or fixated on problems. Perhaps, we can even imagine the unsettling murmurs of his neighbors as he took on a new way of life, so shockingly different to theirs, bolstering his faith even more. Perhaps we can relate to this faith, perhaps we cannot.

This ardent faith was incubated in last week's Parsha, Lech Lecha, with the command to Avraham to leave his birthplace into the unknown and culminates in this week's Parsha, Vayera, with *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, when G-d asks Avraham to sacrifice his beloved child, Isaac, and he seems willing. However we understand the subtext and nuances of that complex story, the suprarational giving over to G-d's wishes has symbolized a type of pure faith in religious thought and life, so much so that it is customary to recite the *Akeidah* in the preparatory morning prayers of Shacharit as a mode of orienting ourselves toward G-d. But this is not the only model of faith we can glean from Avraham in Parshat Vayera!

Earlier, when Avraham was accompanying his visitors out, he learned about G-d's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and promptly set into a mode of protest. In a few simple lines that unravel the image of Avraham's unquestioning obedience, we learn of another important aspect of Avraham's faith: his ability to question. He approaches G-d, asking Him with incredulity, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?... Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" "וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאַף תִּסְּפֶה צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע... הֲשֹׁפֵט?" "כִּלְהֲאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט?" (Gen 18:23-25). This is an extremely bold assertion to make to G-d about G-d's own nature vis-a-vis humans, but it so contradicts Avraham's intuitive understanding of how G-d should be that he must question it. At this moment, he cannot be complacent.

As Rashi points out, the same word *vayigash* is used here as in the story of Judah when Judah entreats Joseph to not keep Benjamin hostage. Both Judah and Avraham elicit much needed courage to challenge what has been decreed by a higher authority, but they simultaneously approach 'the Royal Other' in a loving and tender manner characterized by the word *vayigash*. It might make sense for Judah to try to change the mind of a person of flesh and blood by approaching lovingly, but where does Avraham have the gumption or insight to contend with G-d, whose ףא, nose, was enflamed in anger ready to destroy these cities? Was he taking a risk of impiety? When we look closer in the Parsha, it seems that it was actually G-d's idea for Avraham to come forward in this way, to call Him in, in protest.

First, earlier in the Parsha, when Sarah laughs at the impossibility of being able to give birth at an older age, G-d asks Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh... Is there anything too

wondrous for Hashem?” (Gen 18:13). In the moment of internal challenge, then, Avraham recalls G-d’s self-definition that there is no limit to His capacity, big or small. So, cleverly he could be using this point to ask, ‘Perhaps G-d, you can overturn or soften your own decree? Remember, you can do anything!’ An even more straightforward proof that G-d wanted Avraham to interject is that G-d explicitly consults Avraham in His plan with the explanation that “...For I know him [Avraham], that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of Hashem by doing what is just and right...” (Gen 18:19). G-d knows that Avraham seeks justice and that matches the language he uses to frame the challenge G-d, “...Judge...not deal justly?!”

The next logical question, however, is if G-d knew what was in Avraham’s heart, which invited him to protest, then is it not even more cruel that Sodom and Gomorrah are still destroyed in the end save Lot, his wife and daughters? There are at least two lessons worthy of being gleaned here: 1) Protest for justice is a form of devotion that calls G-d near rather than pushes G-d away. As inheritors of this story, we learn that G-d has a responsibility to judge in favor of protecting and preserving life even with imperfect humanity in the mix, and we have a responsibility to hold G-d to that promise. That is our prerogative as faithful believers. And 2) The answer to our requests and prayers is not always ‘yes’, but that doesn’t diminish the requirement to pray and to imagine and build toward a different reality.

In a world where we “call each other out” in the name of justice, sometimes we inflict additional unnecessary harm and make the world of pursuing justice antithetical to a world of pursuing loving-kindness, *chesed*. Avraham models for us both a type of faith based on extreme piety and one that challenges, but with affection. Instead of calling G-d out, Avraham calls G-d in. May we learn not to be afraid to challenge, but always remember to do it from a place of love-- to call G-d in as we call each other in-- and know that this is a deliberate, legitimate form of expressing our faith in G-d and each other.



Raised in the social, linguistic and culturally diverse Jewish communities of Gothenburg, Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, Bria Cahana is honoured to begin a new chapter in New York at Yeshivat Maharat. Over the years, she has immersed herself in many formal, traditional and experiential Jewish learning environments such as Hadar, Kivunim, Pardes, and Urban Adamah all of which inform her understanding of the expansiveness of Jewish life and tradition and depth of its values. Bria is a passionate student of Torah and has experience teaching Tanakh informally at summer camp and coaching elementary and high school students for the Chidon Hatanach competition. She received her BA at McGill University in Philosophy, Jewish Studies and Arabic, which she put to use by participating in interfaith dialogue groups and co-creating a space for religious women to gather to discuss their faiths and build personal connections through art, poetry, music and volunteering. Later, she completed her MA at McGill University in the History of Bible

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