

Rosh Hashana: Address to Bais Abraham Congregation

Maharat Rori Picker Neiss

Class of 2014

It isn't easy to wake up in the morning.

Some of you may have had trouble waking up this morning. I know I did. It is hard to wake up after being up late last night, hopefully enjoying the company of close friends and family at a beautiful yom tov meal. And it is especially hard to wake up when you know that you have something difficult to do that day. And I cannot think of anything more difficult than standing in shul, before God, on the Day of Judgement. It is long, it is difficult, and it is daunting.

The Torah tells us three times that Avraham arose in the morning, each for a task more difficult than the last. The first time is in connection with the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah. The second is in the story we read yesterday, when Avraham sends away Hagar and Yishmael. And the third is in the story we just read this morning, the story of Akeidat Yitzchak, the Sacrifice of Isaac.

Let's start at the beginning.

God tells Avraham that God is going to destroy the city of Sodom. And what does Avraham do? Avraham argues! He argues with God! He says to God:

Is it possible that the Judge of the entire earth shall not to justice? (Bereishit 18:26) השופט כל-הארץ לא יעשה משפט? (בראשית יח:כו)

What if there are fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom?"

And God says to Avraham, "If there are fifty righteous people, I will not destroy the city of Sodom."

And Avraham says to God, "What if there are forty-five righteous people in the city of Sodom?!"

And God answers, "If there are forty-five righteous people, I will not destroy the city of Sodom."

"What if there are forty righteous people?... thirty righteous people?... twenty righteous people?... TEN righteous people?!"

And each time, God answers and says, "I will not destroy the city of Sodom." And then Avraham says... nothing. He says nothing. He STOPS! What if there were nine righteous people in the city of Sodom? Maybe Avraham could have gone and helped them make the minyan! What if there was one righteous person in the city of Sodom? And we know there was at least one righteous person in the city because Avraham's own nephew, Lot, was there and was saved.

No, Avraham stops. He says, "השופט כל-הארץ לא יעשה משפט"? Is it possible that the Judge of the entire earth shall not to justice? Of course not! God is just. And justice does not mean sparing a city for the merit of one righteous individual.

The next morning, Avraham wakes up (19:27) וישקם אברהם בבוקר. He goes to the place where he had spoken with God, where he had argued with God. And he sees, off in the distance, the smoke rising. He sees the signs of the destruction of the cities. And he is silent. השופט כל-הארץ לא יעשה משפט – is it possible that the Judge of the entire earth shall not do justice? This, is justice.

And so when Sara tells Avraham to send away Hagar and Yishmael, and Avraham is distraught, but God tells Avraham to listen to Sara: וישקם אברהם בבוקר – Avraham wakes up in the morning. He prepares bread and water— though we know not nearly enough for two people to survive in the desert— and he

sends Hagar and Yishmael on their way. Wordlessly. שופט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט – could it be possible that the Judge of the entire earth shall not do justice?

And so when God tells Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak, to physically be the person to slaughter his own child—his only remaining child!—Avraham is silent. וישקם אברם בבוקר – Avraham wakes in the morning, he saddles his donkey, he splits the wood, and he prepares to sacrifice his son.

These three stories are actually three versions of the exact same story. In each situation, Avraham is asked to give up, to sacrifice, to leave or lead to certain death his own progeny. First his nephew Lot, his assumed heir. Then Yishmael, his firstborn son. Finally Yitzchak, the son of his wife. Though in each story an angel intervenes to save Lot, Yishmael, and Yitzchak, Avraham doesn't know that. Yet, Avraham remains silent. He says nothing.

Nothing?! Avraham should say “**שופט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט**” – is it possible that the Judge of the entire earth shall not do justice?! God, where is your justice? What did Lot do to deserve to die? What did Yishmael do to deserve to die? What did Yitzchak do to deserve to die?”!

Yet, Avraham says nothing. **שופט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט** – could it be possible that the Judge of the entire earth shall not do justice? Of course God is fair and God is just. And so Avraham says nothing.

He takes Yitzchak up the mountain. He builds the altar. He ties Yitzchak to the altar. He lifts the knife to slaughter his child. And just as he is about to swing the knife down, an angel appears and yells “STOP!” And then the angel says something very curious: “**עתה ידעת** – Now I know, that you are a man who fears God.” (Bereishit 22:12)

עתה ידעת – Now I know?! God told Avraham to leave his home, to abandon the house of his father and the city he knew, to go to a place that God had yet to show him, and Avraham went. God told Avraham to circumcise himself, and Avraham did so. God told Avraham to send away his firstborn son, and Avraham did it. God told Avraham to sacrifice his son, and Avraham is ready to do it! now I know?! Is it doesn't seem that it is Avraham who lacks faith in God, but God who lacks faith in Avraham!

עתה ידעת – Now I know

כי יראה אלוקים אתה – that you are a man who fears God.

Avraham fears God.

השופט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט – is it possible that the Judge of the entire earth shall not do justice?

God is just.

Justice is harsh. Justice demands punishment. Justice doesn't save a city because of the merits of one person.

Justice is scary.

Avraham **fears** the God of justice.

He is willing to give everything, to **sacrifice** everything, even himself, for the God of justice that he fears.

What Avraham doesn't realize, though, is that there is one thing better than to sacrifice oneself to God: to **live** for God.

In last week's parsha, God said:

I have placed life and death before you...
And you shall choose life (Devarim 30:19)

חחיים והמוות נתתי לך לפני
ובחרת בחיים (דברים ל:יט)

Avraham knows the God of justice. God is challenging Avraham to find the God of compassion.

We, too, seek the God of justice in our own lives, even when we pray for compassion for ourselves. We seek justice for others. We hope that the person who cut us off on the road gets a ticket. We are pleased when the person who was rude to us trips and falls. We demand answers from God when the coworker who is unethical gets the promotion over us. *השופט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט*. We take comfort in knowing that those who wrong us will get their due.

Yet, our world cannot survive on justice alone. We cannot ask for compassion for ourselves as we insist upon justice for others.

We are about to blow the shofar – the rams horn. We are taught that the shofar must be made from the horn of a ram and not of a cow because a cow is a reminder of sin of the Golden Calf— while the ram is a reminder of Akeidat Yitzchak, of the sacrifice of Isaac. It is interesting that the bracha we make before blowing the shofar is *לשׁמֹעַ קָול שׁוֹפָר* to hear the sound of the shofar. The mitzvah is not to blow the shofar, it is to hear the shofar. The rabbis even debate what to do if one blows the shofar in a place where there is an echo, lest he hear the echo of the shofar rather than the sound of the shofar. Why is that? If the shofar is our call to God to remind God of the sacrifice of Isaac, then why is it important that we hear the shofar; it is important that God hear the shofar!

When we blow the shofar, the sound of the shofar is indeed us saying to God, “God, please remember that Avraham was willing to sacrifice his own son for You, and as we stand here in judgement before You, please judge us with the merit of that act.” But when we hear the sound of the shofar, that is God saying to us, “Yes, Avraham was willing to sacrifice his son for Me. And I do remember that. But you must remember that I did not want Yitzchak to die. Remember that I sent a ram instead.”

As we stand together, here, now, before God, we pray not for justice, but for compassion.

Let us pray together for a world in which those who have caused us harm can still find love, happiness, and success.

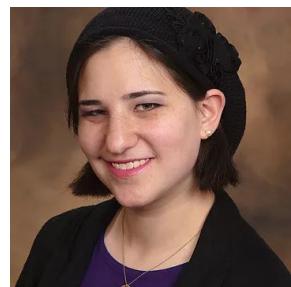
Let us pray for a world in which a city can be saved by the merits of one person.

Let us pray for a world in which angels, in all their forms, intercede.

בחירה בחיים

And let us choose life.

Shana tova.



Maharat Rori Picker Neiss serves as the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St Louis. Prior to that she was the Director of Programming, Education and Community Engagement at Bais Abraham Congregation, a Modern Orthodox Jewish synagogue in University City, MO. She previously served as Acting Executive Director for Religions for Peace-USA, Program Coordinator for the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, Assistant Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, and Secretariat for the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, the formal Jewish representative in international, interreligious dialogue. Rori is the co-chair of the North American Interfaith Youth Network of Religions for Peace, a CLAL Rabbis Without Borders fellow, and co-editor of "InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook." She is married to Russel Neiss, a Software Engineer for Sefaria, and they have three children.