



# DVAR TZEDEK

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## Parashat Vayera 5775

By Liel Leibovitz

November 8, 2014

Even in a book as rich with astonishing moments as Genesis, *Parshat Vayera* is hard to top. At its heart is a story of a man wrestling with God, with grave consequences: from their struggle, the very notion of moral behavior is born, as well as the spirit that propels each of us into action for the common good.

As the story begins, God informs Abraham that the cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah, will soon be destroyed for their sins. It's early on in our acquaintance with the patriarch, and previous Torah portions have given us no explanation for why Abraham was chosen for the singular task of siring God's chosen people. Noah, the Bible tells us, was a uniquely righteous man; about Abraham, prior to his being chosen, the book says little, and we expect little of him.

Yet in this week's *parshah*, this unremarkable man—his one grand deed was an act of blind obedience, leaving his father's home on God's unreasoned command—does a remarkable thing: He talks back to God. "Will you even destroy the righteous with the wicked?" he challenges. "Perhaps there are 50 righteous men in the midst of the city; will You even destroy and not forgive the place for the sake of the 50 righteous men who are in its midst?"<sup>1</sup> And if 50 deserve mercy, how about 40? Or 20? Every time, God assents; and every time, Abraham haggles on, hoping that enough righteous people will be found to merit saving the towns.

It makes for almost comical reading—I imagine a growingly brazen man questioning an increasingly baffled deity—but the story's message couldn't have been more serious. By taking a principled stand, Abraham enters into what the philosopher Susan Neiman has called "resolute universalism": "The Abraham who risked God's wrath to argue for the lives of unknown innocents," she writes, "is the kind of man who would face down injustice anywhere."<sup>2</sup>

In facing down God, Abraham acts on behalf of people he has never met—most of whom, he knows, are unworthy of his compassion. He has no illusion that sparing Sodom would do much to redeem the city of its wicked ways. And yet, he believes innocent lives everywhere are always worth fighting for.

We could ask for no better role model when it comes to activism. Like Abraham, most of us who attempt to make our community, our society or the world at large a kinder, more just place are regular people with very little prior experience. Often, we, like Abraham, see a situation that bothers us immensely and resolve to challenge it. When we do, we learn right away that hurdles abound, and that any human undertaking is going to present its share of frustrations, reticence, confusion, ingratitude and regret. And, often, the path to change involves grappling with mighty figures of authority. The key is to rise to the occasion despite the enormity of the challenge; to acknowledge our ordinariness and yet never shy away from extraordinary pursuits.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18:23-24.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Neiman, *Moral Clarity: A guide for grown-up idealists* (New York: Harcourt, 2008) 10.

I learned this lesson myself as a student in Tel Aviv University in the late 1990s. Concerned with the rising cost of tuition and the declining rates of college graduation—a particularly vexing confluence for a tiny nation like Israel heavily dependent on an educated population for its economic survival—I and a few hundred others took to the streets, demanding loans, subsidies and other measures designed to make postsecondary education affordable to all.

Our movement soon gained traction, and the intimate gatherings of a few dozen activists turned to throngs of angry students marching in the streets. Before too long, 60 of us set up a tent across the street from the Prime Minister's residence and went on a hunger strike, demanding an audience.

It was an audacious act. None of us had had any previous experience in policy, leadership or governance, and yet here we were, insisting to be heard by the holder of the highest office in the land. What we lacked in training, we made up for in courage and conviction. We were very much Abraham's children, acting on principle—defiant.

And, like him, we failed. The Prime Minister eventually invited us over for pizzas, ending two weeks of willful starvation. He promised to set up a committee of inquiry into our demands, but—like Abraham's protestations to save Sodom—nothing ever came of it. And yet, ours, like Abraham's, was a victorious moment; a moment of realizing our own agency and our capacity to generate change. This is true for all would-be activists: in standing up to authority, we learn how to take the first—and, often, most difficult—step towards change; namely, declaring that we are ready to take responsibility and act. Today, as in the days of our patriarch, there's no clearer path to good.



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