

Shabbat Parashat VaYeira The Importance of Self-Doubt

This week, we are presented with a *parasha* (weekly Torah portion) that tantalizes the intellect. It contains several vignettes, each of which having powerful religious, ethical, and theological meaning: Avraham and Sarah being visited by three messengers bringing the news that Sarah would give birth to a son; the destruction of S'dom and Amorrhah; the birth of Yitzhak; the expulsion of Hagar and Yishma'el from Avraham and Sarah's household; *akeidat Yitzhak*/the binding of Isaac. As you can see, we have before us a Torah portion that provides many opportunities for study and inspiration.

The S'dom and Amorrhah section of the *parasha* contains the well-known argument between Avraham and God, where Avraham challenges God's ethics. When God informs him of God's plan to destroy the two cities and all their inhabitants, Avraham asks God, "Will the judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Gen. 18:25) Avraham wants to know how God could wipe out two cities without so much as checking for any righteous residents who could redeem the cities from their fate and serve as role models for the general public's reformation. God hears Avraham's plea and is bargained down to a mere ten righteous souls who, if found, would serve to reverse God's decree of destruction for the cities. In the end, the ten are not found and the cities are destroyed.

Even before this exchange between God and Avraham is a lesser-known, but equally powerful *pasuk* (biblical verse). As God is preparing to execute the decree against Sodom and Amorrhah, God asks God's self, "Should I hide what I am doing from Avraham?" (ibid v. 17) God seemingly steps back from the situation and wonders if the plan should be put into action without informing Avraham, God's closest confidant and the newly ordained progenitor of God's people. Perhaps, this decision should not be a *fait accompli*?

The result of God's moment of reflection is God following the "gut-instinct" to tell Avraham what was about to transpire, leading to the argument summarized above. In this brief and often overlooked moment, God exhibits the characteristic and sets the example of being humble, with an openness to opinions and feedback from others. *Pirkei Avot* (The Ethics of the Fathers) 4:1 teaches: "Who is wise? The one who learns from each person." One who believes that s/he is always right, never making mistakes or poor decisions makes it impossible for him or herself to live up either to this traditional view of wisdom or to the example that God provides in this week's *parasha*. Over-confidence and egoism lead a person down the dangerous path of self-adulation. Each of us, as God so beautifully exemplified, needs to step back from our decisions, reflect, and seek the consult of others. Our tradition even advises that one should not study text alone, for one can only be enriched by the interpretations, questions, and understandings of others. We live in a world of tough choices and decisions that impact not only ourselves, but also those around us. How much better a place might the world be if we all followed God's example, showed a modicum of self-doubt, and allowed the wisdom of others to contribute to our behavior and decision-making.

Shabbat Shalom!

CELEBRATING 350 YEARS OF JEWS IN AMERICA

With the World Series still high in our thoughts, we should note the contributions of America's Jews to America's National Pastime. A recent symposium at the National Baseball Hall of Fame highlighted many Jewish Major League players, most notably Hall of Famers Hank Greenberg (two-time MVP) and Sandy Koufax (three-time Cy Young Award winner). We would like to draw additional attention to Morris "Moe" Berg (1902-1972) who, although only a journeyman catcher (15 years with five teams, including as a third-stringer for the Yankees), was also a Princeton graduate, a speaker of a dozen languages, a physics prodigy, and an important spy for the OSS during World War II who provided significant valuable information to the military from behind enemy lines during his years of service.

PARENT EDUCATION

Thank-you to those parents who have already responded to Rabbi Bellas' call for interest. He is going to wait for additional phone calls and e-mails for one more week and then contact all those who were in touch with him to set-up class subjects and times. Rabbi Bellas' e-mail address is brandeisrabbi@verizon.net and his phone extension is 312.