

Shabbat Parashat VaYeira Arguing with God

In last week's *parasha*/weekly Torah portion, we met Avram, the progenitor of the Israelite/Jewish people, and learn of his tremendous faith in God. He willingly accepts God's command to leave his home and set out for a "Promised Land." As a mark of this new relationship with God, both Avram and Sarai receive the gifts of new names: Avraham and Sarah, the Hebrew letter "hey" serving as a literal mark of God being a new part of their identities. The faith of Avraham and Sarah are often lauded as their most important quality, a characteristic which comes to the fore again in this week's Torah portion as Avraham is commanded and agrees to offer up his only child with Sarah, Yitzhak, as a sacrifice. However, if we focus on a different section of the narrative from this week's *parasha*/Torah portion, we will find an equally and, perhaps, even more important characteristic modeled for us by Avraham: argumentativeness.

It is in this week's *parasha*/Torah portion that God decides to destroy the cities of S'dom and Amorrhah as a consequence for the lawlessness of their citizens. However, when God informs Avraham of the impending event, Avraham does not simply accept it as a fait accompli. Rather, he challenges God charging, "Will not the judge of all the earth act justly?" Avraham advocates on behalf of any righteous individuals who may reside within the cities, asking God to reverse the decree for the benefit of fifty righteous souls. Avraham then bargains God down to forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, and finally ten righteous souls. Sadly, within these two large cities, ten righteous individuals could not be found and God destroys them. However, Avraham has offered us a remarkable example of how we may interact with God in this section of the weekly *parasha*.

How many times have any of us felt the need or desire to argue with or to challenge God? Not only does God not punish Avraham for what could be construed as disobedience or comeuppance, but God accepts the challenge and is willing to relent. While the system of the universe does not function exactly as it is described in the Bible, when human beings conversed directly with God, Avraham sets the precedent for his descendents to develop into the nation of "God wrestlers," as the name Yisra'el/Israel literally means. The Jewish people does not believe that we are destined to a particular fate or that we must blindly accept the reality presented to us. We are God's partners in the world, charged with the *mitzvah*/commandment of *tikkun olam*/making the world a better place. At times, that means that we will be angry or frustrated with God, as was Avraham. However, this week's *parasha*/Torah portion teaches us that we are free to let our feelings be known, without fear of "retribution" or the feeling that we are disrespecting God. In our time, we will not get a direct "answer" from God to our communiqués, but we are, nevertheless, encouraged to release our feelings and to allow ourselves to be in relationship with our God. These kinds of visceral "prayers" to God are actually what capture some of the most essential ideas about what prayer really is.

As we enter into Shabbat this week, may we all feel the freedom to join in Avraham's tradition of being argumentative with God and to live up to the title of being *Yisra'eilim*/Israelites/God wrestlers.

Shabbat Shalom!