

Vayera 5768—Praying with Our Silence

I find praying to be not so easy. Extraordinarily difficult, actually. Even on a day one might consider ideal, when I'm well rested, unburdened by time constraints, emotionally available and interested in looking toward God, it's a challenge. The words in the *siddur* tumble out of my mouth too quickly for me to consider what they mean. Or I get distracted by the many things going on around me. Perhaps I'm still waking up and am a little too foggy to put my feelings into my own "right" words. This difficulty becomes pronounced on days that are far from ideal, when I am sitting in a place of loss, when I feel overwhelmed by sadness. On such, thankfully rare, occasions, I picture God turning God's back on the world, or on me, and I want to turn my back in return. I can't imagine what a sincere prayer in such a situation would sound like. And I know that I am not the only one who finds this difficult.

A few summers ago, I worked as a hospital chaplain. Early on in my internship, I met Marie. Marie, like me, had trouble with prayer. As a devout Catholic, she was raised praying, and she came to believe that prayer, or any pious expression, was only valid when it was thanking, extolling, or lauding God. But, as a deeply religious person who came face to face with

real life, she needed to reach out to God when she was suffering—when her husband left her with 6 daughters, when her heart began to fail, when her health was so precarious that she had to face the possibility of entering a nursing home. Her religious training, however, left her without a way to express her doubts to God. She told me that she could not find the words to pray. She told me that she wished she could be like Tevye.

I was struck by her comparison. “Tevye,” I responded, “like Fiddler on the Roof?”

“Yes, that Tevye.”

Tevye, she explained to me, spoke with God regularly. He told it like it was, and even yelled at God in anger. Marie wished that she could be more like Tevye, that she could talk to God like that and still feel religious. Not being able to pray had alienated Marie from her religious community and from the spiritual stirrings that were at her core. If she could only be like Tevye, she could find her way back in—to her community and to herself.

I was troubled by Marie's sense that her pain had no place in prayer. But it is true that brutally honest, even angry, expressions like Tevye's receive little attention as expressions of prayer. We tend not to include expressions of pain, or harsh accusations in our liturgy. It's often quite difficult to reach out toward God in prayer when we feel that God has hurt us. In fact, what makes Tevye so remarkable is that, in times of pain, he turns to God at all. Tevye, like most of us, receives no response from God when he prays, regardless of his prayer's content. He cries out in pain, gets nothing, and still cries out. How many of us, knowing that we will hear no words of comfort from above, would be able to muster the strength and the courage to put our pain and anger into words anyway, and address them to a silent God? It's certainly not easy for me. I'd like us, though, to consider the example of Abraham.

We read this week in Parashat Vayera of Sodom and Gomorrah, the quintessential story of sin and divine punishment. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities are spectacular sinners, and God decides to wipe them out. Later in our Parasha, God does exactly that, destroying the cities and their residents. But before God goes through with

the plans, God consults Abraham: "וה' אמר המכסה אני מאברהם אשר אני עושה?"

[*Vadonai amar ha-m'khaseh ani mei-Avraham asher ani oseh?*]

God says, 'Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am about to do?'

God consults Abraham. God feels a closeness, a sense of responsibility to Abraham, so much so that God lets him in on the plan to annihilate these cities.

It is startling to hear God expressing a sense of obligation toward a person, even if that person *is* Abraham. Does God need *human* permission to punish a city for its sins? Isn't *God's* sense of justice and righteousness the ultimate yardstick? The Tanakh is full of descriptions of God's capacity for doing what's right and just. These descriptions are foundational parts of our collective belief system—they are even embedded in our liturgy. Every morning we recite Psalm 145, better known to us as the Ashrei, in which we read that: “צדיק ה' בכל דרכיו” [Tzaddik Adonai b'khol d'rakhav], God is just in all of God's paths; moreover, “והסיד בכל מעשיו” [v'hasid b'khol ma'asav], All of God's deeds are marked by lovingkindness.” The Psalm affirms that God is not only identified with righteousness and justice, but that God is also

overflowing with love and faithfulness. A God so endowed seems to have little need for checking in with mortals in making decisions, even serious ones like whether or not to decimate an entire population. God should be able to weigh the different factors fairly, and also to allow love to tip the scales. And still, God needs to talk it over with Abraham. Our Parasha teaches us why. We read that Abraham is himself a paragon of צדקה ומשפט [*tzedakah u'mishpat*], of righteousness and justice—these are values he holds so dear that he teaches them to his family. Knowing this, God feels the need to defend the decision to destroy the cities to Abraham. And so Abraham is let in on the plans.

Abraham, however, sees things quite differently from God. In response to the suggestion that Sodom and Gomorrah should be destroyed for their sins, Abraham cries out: Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? חלילה לך [*halilah l'kha*]—Far be it from you to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that the innocent and guilty fare alike! Far be it from you! *Halilah l'kha!* And then, this most stunning challenge: השופט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט [*ha-shofet kol ha-aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat?!*]—Shall the judge of all the earth not act justly!?

You, God, says Abraham, uphold the entire world with justice. How can you behave so unjustly?!

As if Abraham's words to God weren't *chutzpadik* enough, *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, the rabbinic collection of allegorical interpretations of the book of Genesis, makes his challenge even more pointed. Rabbi Aha, in the *midrash*, questions why Abraham, when standing up to God here, says חלילה לך [*halilah l'kha*], far be it from you, twice. His answer—were God to go through with the plan to destroy the cities, it would be a חילול ה' [*hillul hashem*], a desecration of God's own name—sacrilege. The authors of this *midrash* use this word play—the connection between חלילה [*halilah*]—far be it from you—and חילול [*hillul*]—desecration of God's name—to make a powerful point, which they retroject into Abraham's mouth. God's plans, coming from a place of strict justice, of reward and punishment, are so deeply out of balance with God's own nature that they would constitute a grave sin not only against the people of Sodom, but against God! Far be it from you, says Abraham, to be guilty of *hillul hashem*!

Remarkably, our tradition sees Abraham's brazen audacity as prayer. Looking back at our story for a moment, before Abraham begins to protest,

he approaches God; ויגש אברהם [vayigash Avraham]. This phrase sparks a question—what exactly does it mean to approach God? Rashi’s comment to this phrase offers an answer. He explains that “there is approaching for war—as Abraham approached to speak harshly against God; there is approaching in order to appease—as Abraham sought to stay God’s hand against Sodom; and approaching for prayer—Abraham’s words, while both belligerent and conciliatory, were also prayer.” Abraham’s prayer included not simply words of praise. It comprised both pleas for mercy and penetrating accusations.

Like Tevye, Abraham cried out to God when he was angry and hurting. He cried out to God when he was furious. In this instance, it seems that Abraham was moved by the passions he shared with God—his commitments to righteousness and justice—to tell it like it was, to call God on it when he was certain that God was wrong. And incredibly, our tradition sees Abraham’s boldness as an act of true prayer. Abraham’s close relationship with God did allow him to approach so forthrightly in prayer. But it did not guarantee that his prayer would be answered. In fact, we see that it was not. Eventually, after a long bargaining session in which

Abraham seems to convince God to act mercifully, the conversation ends, and God demolishes the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Nonetheless, Abraham presents us with a model for prayer. Like Rashi, the sages of the Talmud agree that Abraham teaches us how to pray. In a feat of anachronism and creativity possible only in the rabbinic mind, the sages of the Talmud imagine Abraham to be the originator of *Shaharit*, our morning service. Rabbi Yose, when he expresses this idea, quotes as proof a verse from our Parasha—וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר עָמַד שָׁם—[*vayashkem Avraham ba-boker el ha-makom asher amad sham*]—Early the next morning, [the morning after the destruction of Sodom], Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before God. (Genesis 19:27-8) Where he had stood—and as the Talmud explains—standing means praying. After the conversation between Abraham and God ended, after God rained down fire and sulfur on the cities, Abraham woke up early, and went back to where he had encountered God.

What interests me most about Rabbi Yose's statement is his unexpected choice of proof-text. Rabbi Yose chooses to see the origin of our daily *Shaharit* prayer not in the lengthy and passionate passage in which

Abraham pleads for the fate of Sodom, but in a scene where Abraham is silent. It is Abraham's silence that is the deeper reason for associating our morning prayers with this verse.

I find it truly inspiring that Abraham's prayer life does not die when he experiences rejection and the destruction of Sodom. What's more, his new, different prayers are seen as exemplary. After the destruction of Sodom, Abraham hurries back to the place where he challenged God to overlook the sins of these cities and beholds the effects of God's terrible power. And he has no words. His prayer is his silence.

Like Tevye, Abraham came back to God. But unlike Tevye, Abraham could no longer cry out. I like to imagine what was contained in Abraham's silence, what he was really saying that morning when he stood again before God, this time as a witness to devastating destruction. I believe that his silence, his prayer, was defiant. By standing before God and withholding his words, Abraham spoke volumes. I imagine Abraham's silence to be silent screaming. He was crying out in pain as a witness to the absolute annihilation that lay in the plain below. And he was yelling in anger, telling God that even after the fact, he still objected. All of this, silently. After

witnessing the destruction of Sodom, he could no longer appeal to God's innate sense of צדקה ומשפט [*tzedakah u'mishpat*], of righteousness and justice in petition. And as someone with his own innate sense of צדקה ומשפט [*tzedakah u'mishpat*], he could not praise God's ultimate knowledge of right and wrong. Remaining true to his own sense of the right and the just, Abraham held God accountable for God's actions by praying with the absence of words. This is the prayer that taught us how to rise early every morning and pray.

And we are Abraham's descendents. As his descendents, it is us whom Abraham taught to follow God's way of the right and the just. As his descendents, we are the heirs to this tradition of rising early in the morning to pray. Abraham's silence is our model. This event, Abraham standing before God, furious, devastated, and silent, brought us the institution of prayer.

But this view of silence as prayerful is not one that we generally adopt. More often, we see silence as turning away, as refusing to engage. Imagine being back in school, or for those of us currently in school, imagine being in your least favorite class. You haven't done your homework, and

the teacher asks a question which no one can answer. What happens? We look at our notebooks, at our feet, at a specific spot on the far wall that has suddenly become deeply fascinating—anywhere but up at the teacher (or rabbi, for that matter!). And no one says a word. Perhaps there's some stifled coughing, but otherwise there's silence. And boy, is it uncomfortable. We tend to read that silence as utter emptiness. There's an expectation for us to raise our hands and our voices and share our thoughts, but no one has anything to say. The silence is a hole that we cannot fill, and so we are uncomfortable.

However, what's really going on in that situation is not emptiness at all. It is not the silence that makes us uncomfortable; it's what the silence is saying. In that situation, our silence expresses our embarrassment at not being prepared for class, our anger at our peers for not rescuing us from this agony by speaking up themselves, and also perhaps even an emerging sense of inadequacy. It is these emotions, not the silence that holds them, with which we're really uncomfortable. We don't like to admit to others that we feel this way.

This same dynamic also holds for our experience of prayer. We don't like to turn to God in fury, or disappointment, or pain. These powerful emotions are often hard for us to face within our selves, and certainly difficult to translate into words, especially words we see as prayerful, so we turn away. This is what happened to Marie. Marie was pushed into silence by her pain. She felt that the words she was able to muster weren't prayer, so she stopped praying. For her, silence meant abdicating her relationship with God.

Not so Abraham. When Abraham had no words to offer to God, he offered his silence. In the absence of words, his emotions were brought into sharp focus. Abraham stood before God, distraught and furious, and those feelings rose to God. His silent expression of these emotions did not push him away from God. On the contrary, it cemented the relationship. Abraham's silence became our first *Shaharit*. May we learn from his example, and allow ourselves to be with God in silence, and may our silences, like Abraham's, resonate as expressions of prayer.