

Silence and Abuse

The **question** that upsets the reader of this *parasha* is Abraham's inconsistency: Why at the start of the portion does Abraham argue and protest against God's decision to destroy Sodom – an immoral society and complete strangers to Abraham, yet at the very end of the portion, Abraham does not say a word of protest against God when he is commanded to bind and sacrifice Isaac, his lone, beloved, covenantal child?

Around this time of year, the Jewish community devotes a Shabbat to the message of Domestic Violence Awareness. Even though October is DV Awareness Month, this issue is important enough for us to think about even if it comes a few weeks late...

I would like to look at the question of Abraham's inconsistency through the lens of DV.

Let's hold the religious meaning of the Akeida for this conversation– and focus on the natural question: Why doesn't Abraham oppose God? Why does a moral, loving man willingly take his son to be murdered?

I look at the parallel story; the first words God speaks to Abraham; “Lech Lecha, leave your home and family and everything you know, to an unknown land.” In the same way, Abraham is told to Lech Lecah, to an unknown land and to go and slaughter his son.

In both stories, Abraham is willing to endanger lives, to enter doubt; to encounter the most uncomfortable feelings. And in both cases, Abraham is completely silent.

God comes to Abraham as a Commander; without warning; with only a few instructions – with a mission that is impossibly difficult and cannot end well. – Go from your home! Go take your son to the slaughter. Abraham is silenced by God’s authority...

But in the middle of these accounts, we find the story of Sodom. And Abraham acts out of character. What changes for Abraham that he is able to confront God?

The Torah does something incredibly rare in the Sodom story: it exposes God's inner conversation. Should I conceal this from Abraham or tell him the truth - that I am about to annihilate an entire society?

And God consents to tell Abraham the truth since "Abraham will teach his children to follow in the ways of God, the ways of *Tzedaka* and *Mishpat* – in justice and righteousness."

God is not acting like the commander here; if God were a commander, Abraham would never know about Sodom; he would not need to know. B/c even if God wipes away an entire society, I am still commanded to obey.

The God of Sodom is not a commander; he is a judge.

Rashi comments that God's judgment in the Sodom case was a model for Judges to uphold to 1st go and observe if Sodom was indeed guilty of their crime.

אַרְדָּה בָּא. לְמַד לְדִינִים שְׁלֵא יִפְסְקוּ דִינֵי נַפְשׁוֹת אֱלֹהֵי בְרֵאִיָּה.

A commander's words we accept, a judge's words we appeal. Abraham challenges God in court and it allows him to offer the most irreverent rebuttal: "Can the judge of the earth not do justice?!"

Essentially, the way God relates to Abraham influences the way Abraham relates to God. When God acknowledges that the future mission of the covenant of the family of Abraham is at stake if He does not talk with Abraham about the destruction of Sodom, God concedes that the covenant is two-way. God needs man and man needs God. Then, if each party is vital the health of the covenant, then the relationship will be nurtured with respect and dignity. And the more honesty attests to a confidence in the covenant; 'I don't believe the whole system will collapse if I express my concerns.'

However, when God *commands* Abraham – the message to Abraham is that the covenantal relationship is not built upon consent, but coercion. Abraham does not need to know where he must travel or why he must slaughter his son – Abraham's feelings are immaterial. And instead of a covenant that encourages commitment through dignity and respect, feelings of fear and inferiority are what keep the initiated in place.

How do we know that Abraham was the cowering commanded one? B/c he was silent; God tests, God asks the impossible, and Abraham submits.

Jewish tradition took issue with the very notion of power overwhelming us into acceptance.

When the Jews were at the mountainside of Sinai, about to receive the Torah, the Talmud says God lifted the Mt over their heads and said: If you accept the Torah, very well; but if you do not, this will be your grave. How do we feel about a covenant, a relationship with God, where our choice is: accept it or die?!

That is not a covenant of confidence. That's why the next statement in the gemara is: This is terrible critique on the Torah! A covenantal community, a community of Torah, cannot be sustained by fear and thru force?! So we are reminded that, in fact, the Jewish people re-accepted the Torah on Purim, when the commanding God was absent – they came to the covenant out of love and mutual respect.

This phenomenon of Abraham's silence illuminates a very pernicious cycle in the family where domestic violence is found.

Why is Abraham silent? Remember, he has followed God to the ends of the earth; he's given up everything for the dreams of children and nation. Abraham's life and identity depend on the success of his relationship with God. Since, God demands obedience - that must be the only way to ensure the covenant will hold. So even if God asks the unthinkable – my job is to proceed.

For Abraham, and for anyone in an erratic, fear-inducing relationship, the natural reaction is to close up. If I talk, if I, God forbid, challenge, I can destroy everything. So I don't say word. The silence is used as a way to protect the relationship; we shield ourselves from an attack; we shield the abuser from our true feelings, which he could never accept.

Look at the terrible news from Penn State – it's a perfect example of mistaken protective silence. Everyone involved wanted to guard the other from the truth. It was a rare sports program built by heroic leaders with the values of integrity and hard work. Yet, beneath the sheen, the structure was rusting from institutionalized fear and intimidation. You could not speak the full truth; if you did, the institution would crumble. So it was safer to be silent.

But that's what makes the Abusive relationship so dangerous. The victim tries to protect himself or the institution – the university or the family – by being silent when in fact the shield

of silence is actually a weapon to inflict self-harm or harm onto others.

We wish we could stop the abuser and reform the destructive conduct so that DV never happen, but more likely is to prepare ourselves – as a community, we must drop the myth that we do not have abuse; of course we do; we have a problem in our community too; if we or someone we know is an abusive relationship, we must encourage them to find help. It's *pikuach nefesh* – 3 women die every day from DV – our community has very professional and well-trained facilities to deal with DV in the Jewish community, Project Sarah and the Rachel Coalition.

And we need to model in our own homes what Shalom Bayit means – do we act judiciously and allow from conversation and validate one another or do we issue proclamations with fierce words and clenched fist. Are we encouraging our kids to be aware of unhealthy patterns as soon as they start dating? **Let's remember that our Judaism and our families are stronger when all of us are stronger.**