Vayera: Challenging God

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Covenant & Conversation, "Challenging God: the birth of moral argument”

The great argument between Abraham and God in Genesis 18 is a turning point in the history of the spirit. For the first time, a human being challenges God Himself on a matter of justice. Hearing about the impending destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain, Abraham says: "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing – to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" (18:23–25)

There was nothing like this before, nor is there, to my knowledge, anything like it in any other religious literature. Yet it is no isolated phenomenon. It is the birth of one of the great Jewish traditions: the argument with Heaven, for the sake of Heaven, the covenantal dialogue between God and man in the name of justice. We hear it again in the words of Moses, when his initial intervention on behalf of the Israelites in Egypt only seems to make matters worse: Moses returned to the Lord and said, “O Lord, why have You brought trouble upon this people? Is this why You sent me?” (Exodus 5:22) We hear it again when, during the Koraḥ rebellion, God’s anger threatens to destroy the Israelites as a whole: But they fell on their faces and said, “O God, God of the spirits of all flesh, when one man sins, will You be angry with the entire congregation?” (Numbers 16:22) Jeremiah questions the justice of history: You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before You. Yet I would speak with You about Your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? (Jeremiah 12:1) So too does Habakkuk: How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but You do not listen? Or cry out to You, “Violence!” but You do not save? Why do You make me look at injustice? Why do You tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. (Habakkuk 1:2–3)

Nor does the argument end with the Hebrew Bible. It continues into the rabbinic tradition. Far from softening the contours of these sharp exchanges, the sages accentuated them, speaking of ḥutzpa kelapei shemaya, "audacity towards Heaven." Yet how can this be? How can finite, fallible human beings challenge God Himself, and this, not in opposition to faith, but as part of the life of faith itself? For it is notable that it is not heretics, skeptics or atheists who raise these questions, but heroes of the spirit. How, in our parasha, can Abraham, who describes himself as mere "dust and ashes," confront "the Judge of all the earth," challenging God's verdict on the people of Sodom?

The answer is given by the Torah itself. Immediately prior to Abraham's intervention, we read these words: Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." (18:17–19) It is clear that this speech of God is an invitation to Abraham to speak. What else can be the meaning of "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" Not only does God invite Abraham to speak; he even signals in advance the words he wants Abraham to use – "right" (tzedek/tzedaka) and "just" (mishpat). These constitute "the way of the Lord" that God wants Abraham to teach his children. Abraham responds by using precisely these words in his challenge. He uses the root tz-d-k seven times. He uses the root sh-p-t twice, at the beginning and end of the key sentence: "Shall the Judge [hashophet] of all the earth not do justly [mishpat]?" Yet the answer only serves to intensify the question. God wants Abraham to challenge His verdict. But why? Does Abraham know something that God does not? Or is his sense of justice stronger than that of God Himself?

Both suggestions are absurd. God knows more than any human being ever can or will. And God's justice is, we believe, complete: He is the Rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He. (Deuteronomy 32:4) How could it be otherwise? The fundamental principle of the Torah is that God rules by right, not might. That in itself was enough to separate Judaism from every other faith in the ancient world. God is not merely powerful but ethical, and it is precisely the pursuit of the ethical that brings God and humanity together in a covenant based on righteousness and justice.

So what did God want of Abraham? Why did He invite him to join in a conversation about the fate of the people of Sodom? It cannot be that the verdict of heaven was questionable. The Torah itself rules out this possibility twice, once before and once after Abraham's dialogue. Several chapters beforehand it tells us: Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord. (13:13) Note the threefold emphasis in this sentence: the people were (1) wicked, (2) sinning and (3) greatly.

In the chapter following Abraham's dialogue, two of the men, now identified as "angels," visit Lot in Sodom. That night, the following scene takes place: Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom – both young and old – surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can know them." (19:4–5) The sin – attempted homosexual rape – is itself a multiple offence, involving (1) forbidden sex, (2) violence and (3) a breach of the strict code of hospitality in the ancient Near East (it is significant that Lot, when he confronts the crowd, speaks only of this, the most minor of the offences: "Don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof"). Again there is a threefold emphasis in the way the text speaks about those involved. They were: (1) all the men, (2) from every part of the city, (3) both young and old. The Torah is telling us that there were not "fifty" or "ten" innocent people in the town – the numbers cited by Abraham and agreed to by God. There was not even one. So again we ask: why did God invite Abraham's challenge?

The answer, I believe, is that the Torah is intimating a profound truth, not about a human challenge to God, but the opposite: God's challenge to humanity. God wants Abraham and his descendants to be agents of justice. For justice to be done and seen to be done, both sides must be heard. There must be not only an advocate for the prosecution but also for the defence. So deep does this principle go in Jewish law, that it contains the extraordinary proviso that if, in a capital case, the judges are unanimous in finding the plaintiff guilty, the case is dismissed. Since no argument has been heard in defence or mitigation of the accused, the presumption is that justice has not been seen to be done.

That is what God wants of Abraham: to be the defence attorney for the people of Sodom; to argue their case; to be the voice of the other side. And that is precisely what Abraham does. If God invites His own verdict to be challenged in this way, how much more so does He expect the verdict of a human court to be challenged.

Justice is a process, not just a product. It is not enough for the court to be right. It must hear both sides of the argument. Ultimately, this is what the book of Job is about. Job does not insist on being found innocent. But he does insist on being heard. Justice, as the philosopher Stuart Hampshire has argued, always involves conflict.

There is always more than one point of view. That is why a court case is called a "hearing." It must adhere to the rule of audi alteram partem ("Hear the other side"). Justice involves conversation, dialogue, argument. It requires the ability to see things from more than one perspective. Justice, even divine justice, can only be seen to be done if there is a counsel for the defence. That is what God empowers Abraham and subsequent prophets to be.

If this is so, then the implication is truly extraordinary. God needs humanity to become His partner in the administration of justice. He needs to hear a dissenting voice. No judge, however omniscient and infallible, can execute justice in the absence of counterargument. That is why Judaism – the religion for which justice is central – is a religion of argument and debate, for the sake of heaven, even if it involves argument with heaven itself. And it began with Abraham, the man empowered by God to argue with God so that justice might be seen to be done.

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