



## In Praise of Protest Or: Who's Teaching Whom?

Rabbi Shai Held

It is, by all accounts, one of the most remarkable stories in the Torah. Appalled by the corruption and lawlessness of Sodom and Gomorrah, God is moved to respond. But before taking action, God makes a choice to consult with Abraham. Alarmed at the prospect of God acting unjustly, Abraham protests, demanding to know whether God will “sweep away the innocent along with the guilty” and asking indignantly, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” “Far be it from You,” Abraham twice boldly admonishes God (Genesis 18: 23,25). There is much that is striking, even captivating about this story: a God who has so much respect for human beings (or at least for the prophets among them) that God will not act without consulting with them; a man who has so much confidence in his moral intuitions that he insists God live up to them; and a God who listens to and engages with God’s bold, presumptuous covenantal partner. And yet familiar as the story is, a close reading suggests that it is at once subtler and more radical than is conventionally assumed.



How are we to understand the respective roles of God and Abraham in the narrative? Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that “it is as though Abraham is [God’s] theological teacher... He does not flinch from urging God and even offering himself as a theological

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teacher to God so that God may think more clearly and responsibly about his own vocation... We must not miss the point. This



revolution in the heart of God is because Abraham intervened.”<sup>1</sup> Although there is something deeply moving about the image of an audacious Abraham confronting an educable God, Brueggemann’s interpretation is, in my view, unpersuasive, dependent upon a misreading of what God is really doing in the story.

Rather than emphasizing Abraham’s initiative in challenging God, the text indicates that God actively seeks out an argument from Abraham: “Now the Lord had said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?’” (18:17). Why should God share God’s plans with this mere mortal? “For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what [the Lord] has promised him” (18:19). In light of this introduction, it seems odd to imagine that Abraham here serves as God’s “theological teacher,” as if God needs to be taught the very way the text identifies as God’s own way!<sup>2</sup> So what *is* going on here?

God wants Abraham to train his descendants to do what is just and right, but Abraham cannot teach what he himself has not yet learned. Abraham needs to learn how to stand up for justice and how to plead for mercy, so God places him in a situation in which he can do just that. Subtly, the text communicates a powerful lesson, one that is learned all too slowly, if at all, by those of us blessed with children: We cannot teach our children values which we ourselves do not embody. If Abraham is to father a people who will stand up for what is good and just, he will first have to do so himself.

So Brueggemann, it seems, has it backwards: It is God who is Abraham’s teacher, educating him so that he, in turn, can instruct (and serve as a model for) his offspring.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (1982), pp. 168, 176.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nathan MacDonald, “Listening to Abraham-- Listening to YHWH: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16-33,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, pp. 25-43; relevant passage is on p. 36.



In the first part of Genesis 18, three men approach Abraham to inform him that after many long years of infertility, Sarah will soon have a son (18:1-15). Immediately thereafter, we hear of God's concern about Sodom and Gomorrah and of God's plans to consult with Abraham (18:15-19). The text then informs us that "the men went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord," (18:22), at which point Abraham steps forward and begins to intercede with God on Sodom's behalf. Remarkably, however, the text in front of us, describing how "Abraham remained standing before the Lord," may not be how the Torah originally read. As a midrash reports, "R. Simon said: 'This is a revision of the Scribes (*tikkun soferim*); it was in fact the *Shekhinah* (divine presence) which was actually waiting for Abraham'" (Genesis Rabbah 49:7). In other words, R. Simon contends, the verse originally read, "The Lord remained standing before Abraham,"<sup>3</sup> but the Scribes found the image so disturbing that they emended the text to affirm that Abraham waited for God and not the other way around.<sup>4</sup>

Brueggemann interprets the "original" text (with God waiting for Abraham) as follows:

"The picture is one which agrees with our comment about Abraham as [God's]

theological instructor. It is as though Abraham were presiding over the meeting."

Brueggemann adds that "the earlier version suggests with remarkable candor what a bold

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<sup>3</sup> The logic of the verse would thus be that two of the three men journeyed on Sodom, but the Lord (the third "man") stayed behind to talk to Abraham. This would also make sense of the literal meaning of the Hebrew: "The men went on from there to Sodom, but the Lord—He remained standing before Abraham." Cf. Martin Pröbstle, "YHWH Standing Before Abraham: Genesis 18:22 and its Theological Force," in Gerald Klingbeil, ed., *Inicios, Paradigmas y Fundamentos: Estudios teológicos y exegéticos en el Pentateuco* (2004), pp. 169-189; relevant passage is on p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Bible scholar Carmel McCarthy notes that throughout Rabbinic literature, "there is almost unanimous agreement... that Genesis 18:22 is a *tiqqun sopherim*." Carmel McCarthy, *The Tikkun Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament* (1981), p. 73, cited in Pröbstle, "YHWH Standing," p. 174. And yet there is a longstanding scholarly debate over whether these Scribal revisions should be understood as claims about the original text or as midrashic interpretations. For a comprehensive and illuminating discussion of this purported Scribal revision, and of Scribal revisions more generally, cf. Pröbstle's careful and judicious study.



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posture Abraham assumes and how presumptuous is the issue he raises.”<sup>5</sup> But again, I think, Brueggemann has it backwards. The point of what he assumes is the original version is not—and in any case, surely not only—that Abraham is audacious

in confronting God. The point, rather, is how far God will go in teaching Abraham to speak up in the face of injustice. God is willing to humble Godself by standing and waiting for Abraham in order to make sure that he intervenes on behalf of the innocent. “If Abraham remained standing before [God], as the Masoretic text reads, Abraham is the one who wanted to say something. On the other hand, if [God] remained standing before Abraham, as the original would read in case of an authentic scribal emendation, [God] appears to wait for Abraham to talk.” The startling statement about God waiting for Abraham thus tells us more about God than about Abraham—it teaches us what God wants from Abraham and how far God is willing to go in order to teach him. Genesis 18, then, is a story in which God, “‘the ultimate sage and teacher,’ waits for Abraham, the divinely chosen teacher of righteousness and justice, to engage the deity in a conversation about righteousness and justice... It is almost as if Abraham is put to the test, to see if he would fulfill his function as a... prophet.”<sup>6</sup>

R. David Hartman (1931-2013) finds in Genesis 18 a key to Jewish theology as a whole. “The God of nature,” he writes, “acts alone. The God of covenantal history, however, acts in a relational context... Abraham represents the shift from God the solitary Creator of Nature to God the self-limiting covenantal Lord of history. Abraham is not simply an instrument of the

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<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> Pröbstle, “YHWH Standing,” pp. 175-176, 187. In a similar vein, Bruce Waltke contends that in waiting for Abraham, “the Lord is challenging Abraham to play the role of a righteous judge.” I would quibble with the word “judge,” but Waltke’s point is well-taken. More broadly, Waltke writes, “this dialogue between the Lord and Abraham is for Abraham’s benefit, to challenge him to act wisely and nobly for justice” (268). Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (2001), pp. 270, 269.



omnipotent Master of Nature; he stands over and against God as an other; his importance as a historical figure is marked by divine self-limitation.”<sup>7</sup> This stunning story makes clear that from God’s perspective, this self-limitation is not a concession. On the contrary, this is how God wishes to operate: God wants—indeed, God actively solicits—the intercession of the prophets. Argue with Me, God says; stand up to Me and persuade Me.

Something similar seems to happen

between God and Moses after the incident of the Golden Calf. God instructs Moses to go down from the mountain, “for your

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people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely.” God continues, detailing the treachery the Israelites have committed against God (Exodus 32:7-8). But then something strange—and extremely subtle—happens. God goes on speaking, but the text first inserts the words, “The Lord said” (*va-yomer*). Apparently, God pauses after v. 8, seemingly waiting for a response from Moses—but Moses remains silent.<sup>8</sup> Now, however, God drops a less subtle hint of the kind of response God wants. God condemns the people for their “stiff-neckedness,” and then continues: “Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation” (32:9-10). Contemporary interpreter Pamela Reis astutely asks: “Why is God telling Moses to let him alone? Moses has been letting him alone.” Moses now picks up on what God wants and “steps nimbly into the breach between God and the sinning Hebrews.” Moses “implores” God and, “pointedly changing the antecedent of the pronoun God had used,” he begs God to relent of God’s anger against “Your people, whom You have delivered from the land of Egypt.” Moses intersperses an array of appeals—the Israelites are, despite everything, God’s people; the Egyptians might well say that God has taken the people out only to slay them; and God would do well to recall

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<sup>7</sup> David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (1985), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. how R. Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) explains the seemingly superfluous “*vayomru*” in his comments to Numbers 32:5.



God's promises to the forefathers (32:11-13).<sup>9</sup> Sure enough, God "renounced the punishment [God] had planned to bring upon [God's] people" (32:14).

What is the connection between the two parts of Genesis 18—the announcement that Abraham and Sarah will soon have a child (18:1-15) and the divine-human exchange over the fate of Sodom (18:16-33)? The first part of the chapter is concerned with the wondrous fact that Abraham and Sarah will finally have a child together; the second part insists that the blessing comes with a challenge. God is concerned that Abraham "instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right." Our covenant with God is not just about having children; it is also about the kind of children we have. Abraham is promised a son, but he must raise him with a passion for what is good and just. The continued flow of divine blessing depends on it (18:19).<sup>10</sup>

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Why is this so important? The Torah wants us to know that it is not just prophets who must step forward; what is true of Abraham and Moses ought to be true of us as well.

Even "the children of prophets," as the Talmud calls the Jewish people (BT, Pesachim 66a), must argue for justice and plead for mercy. If, following Abraham's example, Jews are asked to argue with God, how much the more so are we called to speak up in the face of human injustice. As the Talmud startlingly puts it, "Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of his own family and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the people of his community and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of his community. Whoever is able to protest against the transgressions of the

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<sup>9</sup> Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Numbers XI: Seeing Moses Plain," *Vetus Testamentum* 55:2 (2005), pp. 207-231; relevant passage is on p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, here (for the first time?) God's promises to Abraham are presented as conditional. Compare Genesis 17:2 with Genesis 18:19, and cf. Genesis 22:15-18 and 26:4-5.



entire world and does not do so is held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world” (BT, Shabbat 54b).

If Sodom is characterized by *tze'akah* (outcry), Abraham and his descendants must evince *tzedakah* (righteousness).<sup>11</sup> This subtle word play serves to teach us that the Jewish people are in the world at least in part to embody a radical alternative to the brutal cruelty of Sodom. We are charged never to go along to get along; in the face of injustice, we are challenged by God to speak up.

Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf., in a somewhat similar vein, Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 269.