



Compromise and Acceptance

R. Elie Kaunfer — kaunfer@hadar.org

Parashat VaYera 5783

Parashat VaYera includes a scene that is the model of our entire mode of prayer. It also serves as the source of the image of God as a Being who loves justice and judgment (צדקה ומשפט). This is a phrase that we recite at the end of the 11th blessing in the Amidah, blessing God as “מֶלֶךְ אוֹהֵב צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט” – the King Who loves justice and judgment.” What does this phrase mean, and how might it relate to our own prayer lives?

When God plans to destroy the city of Sodom, God first tells Avraham what is going to happen. God explains this decision to share the plan with Avraham because Avraham needs to “instruct his children and household to keep God’s ways, doing *tzedakah u-mishpat*” (Genesis 18:19). This then leads to Avraham’s argument with God, in which Avraham challenges God to live up to the title of “judge (שופט) of all the land,” who actually exercises fair judgment (משפט). In other words, part of what it means for God to love justice and judgment is for God to engage us in the pursuit of justice and judgment—even (or especially) if it means that we challenge God.¹

¹ On this point generally as a characteristic of faith, see Eliezer Berkovits, *Essential Essays on Judaism* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2002), p. 316.



Indeed, the entire scene of arguing against the destruction of Sodom—and the witnessing of its destruction the following day—serves as a model of the Amidah generally. An old source in the Talmud makes this claim:

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 26b

Abraham established the morning prayer (i.e. the Amidah), as it says: “Abraham awoke early in the morning [and went] to the place where he had stood” (Genesis 19:27).

תלמוד בבלי ברכות כו:

אברהם תקן תפלת שחרית - שנאמר
 "וישכם אברהם בבקר אל המקום
 אשר עמד שם" (בראשית יט:כז).

Avraham stood in the morning, implying (through a text in Psalm 106:30) that what he did while standing was to pray the morning Amidah. This means the model of the Amidah is the argument Avraham has with God about saving the city of Sodom. But it is actually a double reference, since this proof-text is, in fact, quoted from the scene following the destruction of Sodom, the **morning after** Avraham’s argument with God. In Genesis 19:27, the verse cited by the Talmud as the source of the Amidah, Avraham returns to the place at which he had stood for his earlier argument with God (18:22). The first standing is when Avraham argues; the second standing is when Avraham sees the destruction. The prayer moment, identified by the Talmud as the second standing, takes place when Avraham recognizes that, despite his argument, Sodom has been destroyed (presumably because there were not even ten righteous people there). Sometimes prayer is about acceptance, not about achieving a result.

What does it mean for us to say this phrase, *tzedakah u-mishpat*, in the middle of our Amidah? God wants us—Abraham’s descendants—to do *tzedakah u-mishpat*.² The main way of demonstrating that is by arguing for people who are, by all accounts, awful, in order not to hurt innocent people. Perhaps prayer is not only about ourselves or our close community, but

² Avraham’s descendants are referenced specifically in God’s rationale (Genesis 18:19).



about those who are as far away from us as we could imagine, who nevertheless demand our attention.

There is also another, perhaps even more surprising understanding of the phrase *tzedakah u-mishpat*, one in which God favors a stance of compromise as opposed to strict justice. This interpretation relies on a reading of these two terms not as synonyms, but rather as distinct, with *tzedakah* lighter than *mishpat*. Our phrase is connected to this concept in the following *midrash*:

Midrash Ha-Gadol Bereishit, p. 306³

“To do justice and judgment.” What is judgment that has together with it “justice”? Let’s say this is compromise.

From here we learn that compromise is better than judgment, as it says “justice and (meaning: together with) judgment.”

מדרש הגדול בראשית עמוד שו:

“לעשות צדקה ומשפט” – איזה

משפט שיש עמו צדקה הוי אומר זה

ביצוע. מכאן אמרו הפשרה עלת

מדינא שנאמר “צדקה ומשפט”.

In this source, *tzedakah* and *mishpat* are quite distinct: *Tzedakah* is synonymous with compromise, and *mishpat* represents strict justice.

The value of compromise is not an uncontroversial position. In fact, this view stands in stark contrast to that of R. Eliezer son of R. Yosi Ha-Gelili, who says that anyone who compromises is a sinner. After all, compromise stands in direct contradiction to clear truth. Indeed, Tosefta Sanhedrin 1:3 presents two different models of relating to justice: Moshe and Aharon. Moshe is the one who favors strict justice, saying, “Let judgment pierce the mountain!” He is contrasted to Aharon, who would try to make peace between people through compromise. It is possible, then, to see our blessing as supporting the Aharon approach to life: try to make

³ See also Tosefta Sanhedrin 1:3 (ed. Zuckerman, p. 415), Bavli Sanhedrin 6b; Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 1:1; 18b.



compromises, in which both *tzedakah* and *mishpat* are held as one. The blessing then becomes a plea for God to also hold to this standard, and to temper strict justice with some form of *tzedakah*.

Our blessing, then, becomes an opportunity for the worshiper—who perhaps identifies with the accused—to ask God to bring a world based on compromise, rather than strict justice, a world in which Aharon’s approach to life takes precedence over Moshe’s. It also provides a model of how we might move through the world: looking for opportunities to compromise, without always hewing to a strict standard of judgment. Strict justice has a value, of course—this approach is represented by Moshe! And yet, in our prayer, God loves compromise more than justice. Perhaps we might as well.

Taken together, both of these understandings of the phrase *tzedakah u-mishpat* open a new interpretive field for the 11th blessing of the Amidah. We might see ourselves in the role of Avraham, facing reality in our prayers, even if that reality disappoints. And we might see ourselves in the role of Aharon, looking for moments of compromise in the complexities of our world.

