



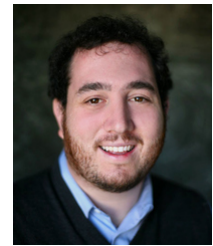
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Vayera
October 27, 2018 - 18 Heshvan 5779



By: Rabbi Adam Greenwald
Director, Miller Introduction to Judaism Program
Lecturer in Rabbinics, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University

We Plant Seeds

Torah Reading: Genesis 18:1 - 22:24

Haftarah Reading: 2 Kings 4:1 - 37

Before God leveled the twin-sin-cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, God revealed the divine judgment to Abraham. Perhaps surprisingly for God, Abraham does not respond by meekly accept the decree. Quite the opposite, he instead initiates a lengthy debate on behalf of the doomed cities. Over and over he demands that God be absolutely sure that the innocent not be wiped out together with the guilty. In one of the most eloquent protests in history, Abraham cries out: "Will not the Judge of all the Earth act with Justice?!" (Gen. 18:25).

Abraham's challenge eventually fails, and the cities are indeed destroyed. However, the Jewish tradition is unstinting in its praise of his "holy chutzpah." Our Sages see Abraham's willingness to protest as a sign of the depth of his moral sensitivity and one of the reasons that he is fit to be the patriarch of our people.

Elie Wiesel, one of modern Judaism's true prophetic figures, tells a beautiful story that suggests that Abraham was not the first person to engage in a protest outside of Sodom. In his intriguing re-telling of the tale, there was another morally courageous soul who had once tried to save the cities.

"Long before Abraham came along, there was a certain man, who used to stand outside the gates of Sodom and cry out against it. Day after day, year after year, the man would stand there, all by himself, pleading and demanding that the people change their ways.

Once, after many years, a delegation came to the man and demanded to know what he was still doing there-- hadn't he realized that his protests would not change anything? The man replied: "I came to Sodom to try to change them-- and I have long since realized that that won't happen. However, I must keep trying, because if I leave, they will have changed me."

Protest is exhausting work – not so much, because it is tiring to hold a sign or march down a street. Instead, protest is exhausting because the results are almost never immediately apparent. Change often comes at a glacial pace, and quite often society's problems get worse long before they get better. The spiritual work of protest is a matter cultivating audacious hope, of believing that there is something valuable about standing up for what's right even when it feels like nobody is listening. It's about refusing to be a bystander in the face of injustice – if we cannot solve the problem, then at very least we can start by not being part of the problem.

This month, the Catholic Church canonized as a saint one of my heroes – Father Oscar Romero. Father Romero was the Archbishop of San Salvador, and was a tireless advocate for the poor and oppressed in his country. On March 24, 1980, he was assassinated while saying the mass at the order of the Salvadorian regime. One of the most famous prayers that he wrote addresses the fundamental challenge of speaking out even when (especially when) you know that complete change will not happen in your lifetime:

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.

May we be inspired to speak our truth, to stand up for justice, even from the Master of the World. Our accomplishments may not always be immediately visible, but may we be strengthened by the faith that the seeds we plant will ultimately flourish in a new world that is waiting to be born.

Rabbi Adam Greenwald, is the Executive Director of the Louis & Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism Program at American Jewish University. Before coming to AJU, he served as Revson Rabbinic Fellow at IKAR, a Los Angeles congregation often recognized as one of the nation's most creative and fastest-growing spiritual communities. Prior to ordination, he served two years as Rabbinic Intern at Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, CA and as Director of Education of the PANIM Institute's IMPACT: DC program. Rabbi Greenwald was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2011.



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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University
15600 Mulholland Drive
Bel Air, CA 90077
310-440-1218
www.aju.edu/ziegler

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