

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS.

GENESIS CHAPTER 18

VERSE TAKEN FROM "THE TANAKH. THE JEWISH BIBLE" TRADITIONAL JEWISH TEXT.

18:1...The Lord appeared to him

This is not an easy verse to understand. In other contexts, when the Hebrew Bible uses the words, "the Lord appeared to," God then says something to the person. But nothing was said here by God. The likeliest explanation is God was speaking through the three strangers.

18:1 (Cont.) ...by the terebinths of Mamre;

Terebinths are trees native to the Mediterranean region.

ABRAHAM'S CHARACTER

18:1 (Cont.) ... he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.

This chapter shows Abraham at his greatest. First, we witness his kindness to strangers and his humility, and then we see this very same man of humility argue with God Himself on behalf of justice.

Although the Torah tells us nothing about Abraham when God first calls out to him, gradually we learn about the extraordinary qualities of the father of God's Chosen People.

18:2...Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground,

To those living in the Western world, Abraham's reaction seems exaggerated. But in many non-Western cultures, bowing to people as a sign of greeting is commonplace.

18:3...he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant."

18:4...Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree.

18:5...And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves;

Abraham did everything in his power to make the visitors comfortable—including bathing their feet, providing shade and rest, and offering to feed them.

A good host delivers more than he promises: "I will bring a morsel of bread" is what Abraham initially said but, he provided his guests with cream and milk, followed by a sumptuous feast of a tender calf and cakes. The Talmud derived a lesson from Abraham's behavior: "The righteous say little and do much."

18:5 (Cont.) ...then go on—seeing you have come your servant's way." They replied, "Do as you have said."

18:6...Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quick, three seahs of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!" (Note: The seah is part of a system of measures that includes the ephah and the omer specifically, one seah is equivalent to one-third of an ephah or about 7.7 quarts)

18:7...Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it.

Abraham did not ask Sarah to do all the work. While she was making flour cakes, he fetched bread, chose a calf, arranged with the servant to prepare it, and then served it.

THE PATRIARCHS AND LATER JEWISH LAW

18:8...He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate.

The description of the meal is notable for its contents. Abraham served the visitors milk and meat, a violation of the later Jewish laws of “kashrut,” which prohibits consuming meat and milk together or at the same meal. (Exodus 23:19)

There are many ways to explain this event but, the truth is, it is not necessary to justify Abraham’s actions as he lived many hundreds of years before Jewish law was legislated.

THE DIVINE MESSENGERS HINT WHO THEY ARE.

18:9...They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he replied, “There, in the tent.”

Given that Abraham does not ask these strangers the obvious question, “How do you know my wife’s name?,” we may infer that Abraham had begun to suspect that these visitors were not ordinary men but messengers from God. (angels)

The angels do not talk to Sarah directly because in ancient Middle Eastern society, men did not normally converse with other men’s wives. But they asked her where-about because they wanted to ensure she would overhear their announcement to Abraham.

18:10...Then one said, “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him.

In the preceding chapter, God informed Abraham that Sarah would soon be giving birth, (17:16) and for reasons that are not clear, Abraham did not share this divine prophecy with her. Abraham’s silence is particularly

striking given how significant this issue was to Sarah, and how much joy such knowledge would have brought her. As regards to Abraham's silence, there are two possibilities.

Perhaps he felt God's words were directed to him and not to be shared with others unless God commanded him to.

Or, perhaps having himself been skeptical when God made this promise to him, (Genesis 17:17) Abraham felt uncertain about this prophecy and did not want to raise Sarah's hopes.

18:11...Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years;

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, so he must have been at least that old at this point; Sarah was ten years younger.

18:11 (Cont.) ...Sarah had stopped having the periods of women.

The Torah explicitly states that Sarah could no longer have children by ordinary means in order to emphasize, yet again, that the birth of the Jewish people was through divine intervention.

18:12...And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?"

WHY GOD CHANGES SARAH'S WORDS.

18:13...Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?"

This may be a continuation of verse 1— "The Lord appeared to him..."— or it may be God speaking through one of the strangers.

Sarah was highly skeptical. A child seemed out of the question because of her advanced age and because her husband was "so old." Interestingly, when God reported Sarah's words to Abraham, He omitted her reference to Abraham as an old man. Ancient Rabbis considered this as an example of permissible deviation from the truth. This was in order to keep peace in the home. (shalom bayit)

The great seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, “if all men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world.”

18:14...Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”

18:15...Sarah lied,

Once again, the Torah does not shrink from portraying its heroic figures as flawed. In the Hebrew Bible, only God is perfect.

18:15: (Cont.) ...saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. But He replied, “You did laugh.”

“He” here refers to God, who is the only one who could know that Sarah laughed to herself. God neither punishes her for laughing nor for lying. He merely set her straight, telling her she did, in fact, laugh. In addition to the wrongness of lying, this verse indicates Sarah had an inadequate understanding of God—not realizing while there are many things you can get away with in this world, lying to God is not one of them.

18:16...The men set out from there and looked down toward Sodom, Abraham walking with them to see them off.

18:17...Now the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,

This may at least partially answer the question raised earlier as to why God would inform Abraham his descendants would be enslaved for four hundred years: (Genesis 15:13) God did not hide from Abraham what He was going to do. And if this is a valid answer, it would strongly imply that God, for reasons knowable only to Him, planned the Israelites enslavement in Egypt.

THE PURPOSE OF JEWISH CHOSENNESS.

18:18...since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him?

18:19...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,

God Himself explains here what exactly “the way of the Lord” is: doing what is right and just. For the first time, the Torah explicitly states God’s purpose for Abraham and his descendants: to do what is just and right and, implicitly, to teach it to the world.

The Torah revealed ethical monotheism (belief in the existence of one God, or in the oneness of God.) and this is the verse that summarizes what it means. In brief, ethical monotheism means God is moral, God demands moral behavior from all human beings, and God will judge them according to His universal moral law.

18:19 (Cont.) ...in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him.”

18:20...Then the Lord said, “The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave!

THE GREAT TORAH INNOVATION: A MORAL GOD.

18:21...I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me: if not, I will take note.”

God took a final look at Sodom before casting judgement just in case the people mended their ways.

One lesson taught here is the need to establish facts before passing judgement: even God does so. One should not condemn, let alone punish, on the basis of hearsay. However, this is the exception, not the rule. Most of us rarely hear the whole story before reaching conclusions.

A second lesson is that God judges all people—and does so according to one set of moral rules. This was an utterly new idea in human history. Unlike pagan gods, who acted according to irrational and amoral whims, God is morally predictable.

A third lesson is that, because God is a moral being, He cares most about how we treat other people, not about how we “treat” Him. This was another enormous difference between the Torah’s God and the other gods of the world.

18:22...The men went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord.

WHY DIDN'T GOD CALL ON THE PEOPLE OF SODOM TO REPENT?

18:23...Abraham came forward and said, “Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?”

Abraham does not make a case that the guilty people of Sodom and Gomorrah be allowed to repent. Why not? Perhaps because repentance is possible only in a society where the evil know what they are doing is evil. But in Sodom, the people, as we will see in Genesis 19:4 – 11—where it says “all” the townspeople participated in attempted rapes—had no cognizance of good and evil. Therefore, they could not consider themselves sinners and therefore would not even understand a call to repentance.

They were like modern-day Islamist terrorists—people who believe that they are doing good when they murder innocent people. Such people would not understand a call to repentance. Concerning such people, the prophet Isaiah warned: “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who present darkness as light, and light as darkness.” (Isaiah 5:20)

GOD IS MORALLY CHALLENGED—A FIRST IN HUMAN HISTORY.

18:24...What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?

Abraham argues for sparing the entire city of Sodom if fifty innocent people live there.

18:25...Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You!

Abraham not only argues with God, but he also declares God wrong—“Far be it from You”—if God should kill the innocent along with the guilty. The Hebrew words “chalila l’cha” may be translated, “Don’t you dare do such a thing...”

This may sound astonishing. But it is the essence of the Torah and of later Judaism that humans may have so real a relationship with God that we can actually speak this way to Him.

18:25 (Cont.) ...Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

Abraham was arguing a legal principle known thousands of years later as the “Blackstone Formulation.” This principle was first used by English jurist William Blackstone and is still adhered to in Western legal thought, it postulated “It is better that ten guilty persons escape than one innocent suffer.”

What is as incredible as Abraham’s arguing with God is his assumption that God is just. It is incredible because we know of no other people at that time or before who made such an assumption about their god(s).

This assumption changed history. Never had a human being challenged a god or gods on moral grounds. This is one of many reasons the Torah is as different from pre-Torah thought as life is from non-life. And it is therefore one of the many reasons the Torah—like the emergence of life from non-life—can best be explained by attributing it to God.

18:26...And the Lord answered, “If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”

Equally amazing, God was in no way upset with Abraham for arguing with Him, or even for the manner in which Abraham spoke to Him. (Verse 25)

God responded to Abraham’s moral argument by agreeing with him. He would spare the entire city if fifty good people lived in it.

18:27...Abraham spoke up, saying, “Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes:

Having just won an enormous concession, yet planning to ask for more, Abraham abandoned the aggressive, confrontational stance he took in verse 25. (“Don’t you dare...”) He prefaced his next request with a statement of humility.

18:28...What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five?

As a bargaining technique, Abraham did not say “forty-five.” He wanted to emphasize the number “five” hoping a compassionate God would not destroy an entire city because just five fewer good people resided there.

18:28 (Cont.) ... And He answered, “I will not destroy if I find forty-five there.”

18:29...But he spoke to Him again, and said, “What if forty should be found there?” And He answered, “I will not do it, for the sake of forty.”

Abraham kept lowering the number of innocent people. And God kept agreeing.

18:30...And he said, “Let not my Lord be angry if I go on: What if thirty should be found there? And He answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.”

18:31...And he said, “I venture again to speak to my Lord: What if twenty should be found there?” And He answered, “I will not destroy, for the sake of the twenty.”

IT TAKES MORE THAN ONE TO DO GREAT GOOD; BUT A SINGLE PERSON CAN DO IMMENCE EVIL.

18:32...And he said, “Let not my Lord be angry if I speak out this last time: What if ten should be found there?” And He answered, “I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten.”

Abraham, in arguing for the entire city to be saved because of the merit of a few, stopped at ten because there has to be some minimum number of good people—arguably, a quorum of ten—in order to change a bad place. Every individual must do as much good as he or she can to improve society. But in reality, one person alone cannot change an evil society.

The way the world works, one individual can do far more evil than good.

However, a small group, as Abraham’s appeal suggests, can have a moral impact. In fact, most of the good that has ever been achieved has been initiated by small groups.

18:33...When the Lord had finished speaking to Abraham, He departed; and Abraham returned to his place.

Abraham’s argument with God for justice is another example of his greatness. We had no way of knowing why God chose Abraham when God first did. But we do now. In addition to a preoccupation with justice, Abraham demonstrated a concern for humanity in general. The people of Sodom are not his family, his people, his ethnicity, or his religion, yet their fate weighed on him.

SUMMARY

Genesis chapter 18 explores the visit of divine messengers to Abraham, highlighting his hospitality, character, and his unique interaction with God concerning justice and the fate of Sodom.

- **God's appearance through strangers:** God appeared to Abraham by the terebinths of Mamre, likely speaking through three visitors without directly addressing Abraham.
- **Abraham's exemplary hospitality:** Abraham warmly welcomed the three men, offering water, rest, and a lavish meal, embodying kindness and humility.
- **Pre-law actions of Abraham:** Abraham served milk and meat together, which later Jewish law would prohibit, illustrating his actions predate formal kashrut laws.
- **Recognition of divine messengers:** Abraham inferred the visitors were divine messengers as they knew Sarah's whereabouts without being told, and they announced Sarah would bear a son despite her old age.
- **Sarah's skepticism and God's response:** Sarah laughed at the prophecy due to her and Abraham's advanced age, and God addressed her disbelief while omitting Abraham's age to maintain peace.
- **Abraham's dialogue with God on justice:** Abraham boldly argued with God to spare Sodom if innocent people were found, emphasizing God's justice and the principle that innocent should not suffer with the guilty.
- **God's willingness to negotiate:** God agreed to Abraham's requests, promising to spare Sodom if as few as ten righteous individuals were present.
- **Moral purpose of Abraham's descendants:** God chose Abraham to lead a great nation that would exemplify justice and righteousness, teaching these values to the world as part of ethical monotheism.

- **God's moral nature and judgment:** God judges' people by universal moral laws, caring most about human treatment of each other, a novel concept contrasting with pagan deities.
- **Limits of individual impact on society:** Abraham ceased his plea at ten righteous people, recognizing that while a small group can influence society, a single person cannot overcome widespread evil.