

Honesty is the Best Policy

In this week's parsha, *Vayeirah*, God deliberates: Should He inform Abraham about His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah or should He conceal His plans from Abraham? But in this rare moment of inner contemplation we are witness to great insight as to how we might use God's example of honesty and transparency in our own relationships.

At first, God announces: 'Can I conceal this matter that I am about to do from Abraham?!' (Gen 18:17) This is rhetorical question. God speaks to the obviousness of honesty. How could I not?! Rashi addresses this theme in parental language: Abraham's very name suggests that his role is as a father figure – Av – to the world. And shouldn't a father and mother know when something, good or ill, is being done to their child.

By right, God feels Abraham should be included in the conversation about the fate of Sodom. Abraham and humanity share their fate, in a sense; they are tied to their future as parent and child. And in this dynamic, Abraham will not necessarily stage a protest or lodge a complaint. As a matter of etiquette, Abraham has a right to know about his children's fate. God, to use the colloquial expression, owes Abraham the truth.

But God continues to mull the idea of the need for honesty. 'For I love him (Rashi) [or exalt him (Ramban)] in order to instruct his children after him to keep the way of God by doing what is right and just, in order to bring about for Abraham what God promised him.' (ibid, 19) This is a different reason for sharing one's inner thinking. Now, God believes He must share the truth with Abraham because of the instrumental value that Abraham plays in the future. God does not owe Abraham the truth. God is not in the position of a monarch who, in an act of gratuitous mercy, acknowledges his subject. Here, God is a partner with Abraham. God needs Abraham. The future of Abraham and Sarah's family will only proceed insofar as those early adopters believe the mission worthy.

And to this sentiment, God allows for protest. Had God informed Abraham that He is only sharing His plans to destroy Sodom because that is the right thing to do, Abraham would have had no grounds to object. God would have set a strict limit on their relationship. That we are privy to God's inner thoughts makes overt the quality of the God-Human relationship: Man is God's partner. In AJ Heschel's language, God needs man.

Ultimately, God gives Abraham no explanation, only the fact that He will destroy Sodom. And, as if on cue, Abraham responds with a vigorous defense of Sodom. ‘You will become ordinary (Rashi) if the Judge of all the earth does not practice justly.’ (ibid, 25) That is, Abraham believes in a God that ought to be above the execution of innocents and collective punishment and lack of process. As a spokesman for ethical monotheism, Abraham prays that he is preaching truth; that he is on the right team. The relational insight and the spirited back and forth and the meaning of God in society today would be non-existent if God doesn’t begin from the desire to speak truth.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
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