

A Brief Note on Faith and Confidence

Parsha Vayeira [1] presents a study in contrast; not of people or things, but of one man's reactions to emotional trauma. The parsha opens with a two edged message brought to Abraham by three mysterious visitors, apparently messengers of God, on their way to witness the destruction of Sodom. Whilst enjoying Abraham's hospitality, the men disclosed that Sarah, though *well on in years* would, within the year give birth to a son. As Abraham guided the men toward Sodom, God confided His plan to destroy it and four neighbouring cities. Abraham did not react well to the news that God intended the destruction and death of so many. In one of the most remarkable of the dialogues of the Torah, Abraham challenged God's measure of mercy and obtained God's agreement to vacate His decree, if only ten just men were found amongst the inhabitants of the condemned cities. He failed, but the fault lay with the wickedness rampant amongst the Sodomites, and they suffered death and destruction by the hand of God. The *parsha* concludes with the narrative of the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac on an altar of sacrifice.

Abraham did not flinch when told that he was expected to offer the life of his child to God; rather, he proceeded to fulfill the request, with the manner of a man completely at peace. The Torah described Abraham's very matter of fact actions: "*And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.*"

Sodom was the largest of the cities that were destined for destruction. There is a consensus that it was located in the area towards the southern portion of the Dead Sea. It was involved in the War of Kings described in *Parsha Lech Lecha*. The Torah does not allude to the size of the population at peril from God's fiat; however some have surmised that the entire population affected was small because they had previously proved no match for Abraham's army of less than four hundred men in the War of Kings. The impugned conduct on which the residents of the area were indicted was remarkably vague; they could have been guilty of various moral and ethical violations, or as others have suggested, practiced immoral sexual practices.

The dialogue that ensued between Abraham and God about the plight of the Sodomites is the first example of man disagreeing with a divine dictate and genuinely conversing with Him. Later in the Torah, there are two instances of Moses confronting God and challenging His decision. Moses was successful and God vacated the decrees he had pronounced against the Children of Israel, following the sins of the Golden Calf and the Incident with Spies. Interestingly, there are similarities in the relationships that each of Moses and Abraham fostered with God; both were intimate yet reverent; respectful but not obsequious.

The passion demonstrated by Abraham as he argued for the Sodomites' reprieve from the death sentence is highly commendable. His strenuous pleas for their lives grounds many of the complimentary epitaphs used to describe the first patriarch. But this urgency also reflected a certain truth accepted by Abraham; that God would have no hesitation about destroying what offended Him. It would seem probable that Abraham was aware of the Flood which had almost destroyed mankind, so he well understood that God's threat

needed to be taken very seriously. However, Abraham also knew that God had never demanded a human sacrifice; in fact, the very idea, sometimes called *molech* worship, was an anathema to the Israelites. Abraham's faith that God could and would destroy all of mankind also informed him that God would never ask a parent to sacrifice their child. The same feeling of certainty that made him fear for his neighbour let him rest easy knowing that no harm would come to Isaac - Abraham's confidence in God was complete.

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1. Literally, [and he] *appeared*.