

**“The Test of Justice & Righteousness”**  
**Parashat Vayera (Genesis 18:16-33)**  
**HUC-JIR New York Senior Sermon**  
**Evan Traylor**  
**November 2, 2023**

It was four years since Trayvon was killed. Two years since Mike, Tamir, and Eric. A year since Sandra. That summer, Philando and Alton. With the list of names and hashtags growing longer, the Movement for Black Lives produced a platform in August 2016, a comprehensive strategy for Black folks to thrive in this country - “A Vision for Black Lives”. But inside the platform, in a section examining foreign aid, came the accusation, similar to ones made now: that Israel was an apartheid state that was committing genocide against Palestinians. The response from Jewish leaders and organizations was not surprising: some, including our own Reform Movement, tried giving more nuance to the situation, disagreeing strongly with the language, but committing to racial justice broadly; but many, many more put forth blistering statements, promising to never work with organizations affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement; and others, well others saw this as a sign that racial justice wasn’t actually a Jewish issue at all. And then there was me, and other Black Jews, caught in the middle of this mess. Filled with sadness and anger, and lacking courage to forcefully intervene, I withdrew, ceding the fight to others.

This moment in August 2016 was a test of courage, mine and ours, and a test of our willingness to truly engage in difficult work. And I failed, we failed, to live fully into our values by allowing these harsh words to set up a false choice, to keep us from our commitments to racial justice. As religious and spiritual leaders, we are constantly tested, being pulled in many different directions in order to lead our communities. And yet, how are we to respond when we are tested by vexing issues, when the most vulnerable are suffering? Whether it’s police

brutality, or the climate crisis, or attacks on reproductive rights, or violence in Israel and Palestine, or rising economic inequality, how are we to respond? I believe, and I'd like to argue that our Torah believes, that we're called to something more, something higher in those moments.

Think of Abraham: Lech lecha, go forth, to a new land<sup>1</sup>; here are three strangers, let's see how you welcome them;<sup>2</sup> take the son that you love, Isaac, and sacrifice him.<sup>3</sup> In each of these instances, Abraham seems to pass the test set before him by God. But in the midst of these events, there is yet another test. God questions whether or not to tell Abraham about God's intention to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. Then God remembers that they have chosen Abraham and future generations to *שָׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה* וּמִשְׁפָּט, to guard the path of Adonai by doing what is just and right.<sup>4</sup> God does tell Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah, and this is the test: Will Abraham act with *צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט*, with justice and righteousness? And the answer is yes! Abraham courageously challenges God to save the whole community if there are fifty innocent people there, and then fewer than that, and fewer than that. As a result of Abraham's activism, if God can find ten innocent people in Sodom and Gomorrah, the whole community won't be destroyed.

By challenging God's actions directly, Abraham steps into the *פְּרִץ*, the breach, the space between espoused values and actions. Isaiah calls upon the *גִּבּוֹרֵי פְּרִץ*, the repairers of the breach, the ones in our world who will restore humanity.<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel, counting the ways in which the people are wronging the poor and defrauding the stranger, exclaims God's fury: "And I sought someone

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12:1

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18:2

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22:2

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 18:19

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 58:12

among them to repair the wall or וְעָמַד בַּפְּרִץ, or stand in the breach before Me on behalf of this land, that I might not destroy it; but I found none.”<sup>6</sup> Abraham though, sees the פְּרִץ, the breach, between God and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and chooses to intervene.

And how did he do this? How did Abraham intervene? וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם, Abraham drew near. Rashi notes the verb גַּשׁ, “to come near” is used in several different ways throughout Tanakh. Judah draws near to Joseph to hopefully persuade his brother.<sup>7</sup> Joav and his troops draw near into battle.<sup>8</sup> Elijah draws near to God to pray for a better future.<sup>9</sup> In our case, Abraham drew near to remind God of their goodness, their righteousness in the world: הַלְלָה לְךָ ה' הַשֵּׁפֶט כְּלִי-הָאֲרָץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה: מִשְׁפָּט, “God forbid, far be it from you God! Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?”<sup>10</sup> Speaking stern, tough words to God, Abraham draws near into the breach and begins his activism.

Like Abraham, all of us have left home to start a new adventure. Like Abraham, we engage in pastoral and communal work. Like Abraham, we have sacrificed so much to be on this path. And just like Abraham, we too are being tested. As religious and spiritual leaders, we’re being tested to see if we will וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרֹת יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט.<sup>11</sup> Will we keep the ways of God through justice and righteousness? Will we rise up against those policies, and movements, and candidates, and social media posts that aim to bring wickedness, cruelty, chaos, and injustice to our world? Our focus, our skills, our ability to meaningfully address these wrongs are all being tested. Yet there are days that I question: Am I failing the test? Is the Reform rabbinate and cantorship failing the test? Are we, the next generation of Jewish spiritual leaders failing the test?

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<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 22:29-30

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 44:18

<sup>8</sup> II Samuel 10:13

<sup>9</sup> I Kings 18:36

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 18:25

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 18:19

When we look at the emergencies surrounding us, when we understand the enormous stakes of this moment for our communities, are we doing everything we can to respond to the fierce urgency of now?! I mean, how many of us, myself included, have avoided teaching or preaching on the climate crisis, or gun violence, or attacks on reproductive rights, or Israel/Palestine, or Trumpism, or police brutality, or transphobia, or white privilege, or white supremacy, or immigration, or reparations, or gentrification, or any other important issue in our world because it would upset congregants or donors or just make work or life more difficult? We are being tested. And the question is how will we respond when the most vulnerable are under attack and our world is crumbling?

Over the last few years, I've often been asked whether or not I want to be a "social justice rabbi." Maybe some of you have gotten that question too. And, I know what they're getting at, but I still find it a strange question because all of us, every rabbi and cantor, should have social justice as a core component of our work, not something that's optional. In the words of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, "A person who learns Torah but is not transformed thereby into Torah and holiness, is merely a bookshelf containing books."<sup>12</sup> We must not merely soak up the knowledge of our tradition, but use it to propel us toward justice and righteousness. And whether or not we hold that commitment has an enormous impact on the communities we serve. In the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" he calls out to us here today: "So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo." According to Dr. King, if these religious institutions don't change, they will lose their

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<sup>12</sup> Eish Kodesh, Parashat Bereshit, October 26, 1940 by R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira. Source from "Becoming Torah, Simchat Torah 5784" by Rabbi Avi Strausberg. [https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh\\_torah\\_source\\_sheets/StrausbergSimhatTorah5784.pdf](https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/StrausbergSimhatTorah5784.pdf).

“authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club.”<sup>13</sup> As leaders we must decide: Will our communities be social clubs comfortable with the status quo, or will they be bold communities addressing our world’s most troubling issues? How we answer that question will determine whether or not we pass the test in front of us right now.

I must admit that this is a difficult sermon for me to deliver. Many of you know my passion for social justice through my racial justice work, my advocacy on Israel/Palestine, my leadership at the Soup Kitchen. And there are people in this room who have been allies or accomplices with me in that holy, important work. So while this sermon comes from my heart, it is a difficult message for me to give because of how much I value and appreciate each of you as Jewish leaders. We are doing something incredibly difficult. We work tirelessly to serve our communities. And so I pray that you don’t take this sermon as criticism or rebuke. Rather, I hope this is a reminder, that though the path we have chosen is difficult, we made this difficult choice to be leaders of this holy tradition that calls us to something more. I also hope this sermon is an invitation for you to move into the breach, to draw near to pain and suffering, and pass this test in front of us. If that work feels difficult or too risky, it’s important to remember that our test is not whether we will once and for all end the plagues of cruelty, hatred, and oppression. Our test is trying to live to the best of our abilities in justice and righteousness in every aspect of our work. It is to be holy leaders, not a bookshelf containing books. It is to lead bold communities, not organize a social club. It is to look around, wherever we are working, and know that there is someone being stepped on by our society and choosing to do something. It is taking on an issue, or several issues, and putting it at the center of our leadership. It is being strong and courageous with our beliefs and actions. It is overcoming the fears of hard conversations, becoming

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<sup>13</sup> “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
[https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

unpopular, or losing opportunities. It is to lead with nuance and care, and never lose sight of the larger picture of humanity. Ultimately, Abraham failed to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah; yet we still see the ways in which he tried to live into justice and righteousness. And we know that he ultimately succeeded because later on in our parsha, God names Abraham as a נביא, our very first prophet.<sup>14</sup> Abraham passed the test by standing in the breach and answering the prophetic call for justice and righteousness; and so can each and every one of us.

My friends and my teachers, we are being tested. The road ahead for us is filled with challenges of all kinds. And yet, I must admit, I am hopeful. I am hopeful because of the work that is already happening, the courage we are already exhibiting, the lives we are already protecting. But much more must be done for us to truly live into our purpose and responsibility as religious and spiritual leaders. Just like in August 2016, there will be moments that I hesitate or lack the courage. And in those moments, I pray I hear the call, just like you. Because together, with our combined focus and our combined courage, we can pass this test. Mi shebeirach avoteinu v'imoteinu, may the one who blessed our ancestors, and who tested Abraham to stand in the breach, bless us with the insight and the courage to rise up in justice and righteousness. May we put our love of humanity on the line to act boldly and create new ways of living with goodness, compassion, and peace. May each of us know our power, and may we use that power to create the world of our dreams. Ken yehi ratzon, so may this be. Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Genesis 20:7