

A Muse: Vayera

“Abraham came forward and said, ‘will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? 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? 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. Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?’” (Genesis 18:23-25)

Parshat Vayera has two interesting episodes, each presenting a different ethical position and each presenting the reader with a different portrait of God. The first deals with the threat of Sodom being eradicated, resulting in Abraham initiating a conversation with God, negotiating the safety of its inhabitants. In this scene Abraham is depicted as one who stands before God - he doesn't prostrate himself. He doesn't appear to be self effacing, obsequious, or servile, but confident and self assured in his position. The impression one gets is that Abraham's ethical position, in principle, is acceptable to God, but the critical mass necessary to warrant his claim isn't there. What becomes an acceptable number to save a city? When Abraham argues “will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty” he really is making a statement against collective punishment and rejecting the rationale for collateral damage.

In this scenario God is depicted as One who is sympathetic with the issue at hand, a God that values morals and ethics. God is seen as transcendental, external, One who stands outside of time and history and is omnipotent. Since He stands outside of time and history He doesn't have man's sense of ethics and morals, since these are human qualities. Abraham is asking God to accept human norms, trying to remove the omnipotence and placing God into history.

The following episode, the Akeda is very different. Unlike Sodom, Abraham is servile and self effacing, reticent and willing to obey without an argument. All Abraham can say is “Hineini”, and passively accepts the command to slaughter his son, Isaac. Here, God is presented in the total opposite image of the God in the story of Sodom. There, He is

involved. In the Akeda He is removed, estranged and not approachable. In Sodom, Abraham brings God down to accept the ethics of the mortals. In the Akeda, Abram doesn't even try to involve man in history, but resigned to perform what is commanded of him.

Thus, there are two models of the God head presented in Vayera. The model presented in Sodom where God is willing to be involved in human history, adapting to man's morals and ethical concerns, willing to meet man on man's terms and dialogue with him. The God of the Akeda is transcendental, omnipotent demanding more than He is ready to give.