

# kol chovevei TORAH

PARSHA PONDERINGS

from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah  
Rabbinical School

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Kol Chovevei Torah is a publication of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. YCT's mission is to professionally train open Orthodox rabbis who will lead the Jewish community and shape its spiritual and intellectual character in consonance with modern and open Orthodox values and commitments.

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## Upcoming Events:

Pre-Hanukkah  
Lecture  
Dec. 11, 2007  
7:30pm, NYC  
Rabbi Nathaniel  
Helfgot on  
"Exploring the  
Halalakhic, Historical  
and Spiritual Connections  
Between Hanukkah  
and Sukkot"

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## Will the Judge of the Entire Land Not Act Justly?

By Rabbi Dov Linzer

Perhaps one of the most vivid scenes in Breishit is that of Avraham standing before God defending the innocents of S'dom and Amora. "Will the Judge of the entire land not act justly?!" Avraham declares, challenging God and calling upon God to act in accordance with the standards of justice. This act of Avraham has been seen by many as evidence that the Torah does not want us to sacrifice our autonomy in the service of God, that ideal *avodat Hashem* is not unquestioning subservience. Rather, it has been argued, we are to challenge God with our own sense of what is right and wrong, and that being true to ourselves and struggling with God and God's actions is what true *avodat Hashem* is about.

This religious-theological position is worth discussing in its own right, but it is questionable whether that is the message that the Torah means to communicate in this narrative. Firstly, we can just as easily turn to the final story of this week's *sidra*, the story of the *akeida*, and argue the opposite, that one must totally submit to God's commands, no matter how much it conflicts with one's ethical standards, no matter if God asks one to take the life of one's own son. Does not the angel declare, after Avraham has passed the test of the *akeida*, "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.?" It is thus quite reasonable to argue that it is only now, now that Avraham has

totally submitted himself to God, that Avraham has reached the height of what it means to fear God. Submission, not arguing and grappling, is the religious ideal. We could reconcile the messages of these two stories in the following way – in the story of the *akeida*, Avraham is being called upon to act. When God makes demands upon us, we must bracket our struggles, obey God, and act. Whatever our struggle, we never have a warrant to disobey God's commands. In the story of S'dom, however, no act is being demanded of Avraham. Religious struggle, on its own, if it does not compromise our commitments, is acceptable and perhaps praiseworthy.

There is another significant difference between these stories. In the case of S'dom, Avraham has no vested interest in the outcome. In such a case, it is appropriate to raise the question of divine justice. Avraham is not shirking his responsibilities, and he can be sure that his motives are pure. However, in the case of the *akeida*, when the life of his son is at stake, how can he know that his struggle is a legitimate one? When one is *nogeya bi'davar*, has a vested interest, then it is quite possible that one's religious struggle is at least partly fueled – consciously or subconsciously – by these interests. If this is the case, then perhaps the struggle is not so religious after all. As a great rabbi once responded to a *maskil* who had declared that he could not live an observant life because he had too many questions of faith, "I can answer questions which are questions; I can not answer questions which are answers." Beyond these caveats, however, I believe that the claim that the story of S'dom recognizes the legitimacy of challenging God with our own, independent human ethics, is an incorrect one. For such a claim ignores the framing verses that precedes the story and the language of the challenge itself. The story is introduced with the following verse, "And

God said, "Will I withhold from Avraham what I am about to do? ... Because I have known him that he will command his children and his household after him to keep the way of God, to do what is right and what is just..." (Gen 18:17-19). While Rashi and Ramban debate the exact meaning of this introduction, its purpose seems clear. The Torah is telling us that Avraham understands that the way of God is to do justice; it is for this reason that God has chosen him. As such, how can God hide from Avraham what God is about to do, an act that would, on the face of it, seem to violate God's own principles of justice? Avraham must be given a chance to challenge God on this point, so that he may demonstrate his commitment to live according to the principle of justice, and so that it will be clear to him and to everyone that the judgment of S'dom is in keeping with this principle. And thus, when Avraham challenges God, he calls upon God not to act in accordance with a human ethic, but rather to act according to God's own principles – "Will the Judge of the land not act justly?!". God – Avraham is saying – You have taught me the principle of justice; You are the Judge of all the land, how can You not act in accordance with Your own standard of justice?

Thus, whatever the merits of struggle with God's principles when they conflict with one's own sense of ethics, the story of Avraham and S'dom only recognizes the value in a religious struggle of God or the Torah being true to its *own* values. In this case, the conflict between God's actions and God's principles seemed clear, as the concept of justice had been explicitly identified as the "way of God." How, in other cases which are not so explicit, one is to distinguish between those values that are true Torah values, and those values that are independent values, is a matter of great importance, and one that is not easily answered. How can we ever know that our understanding of Torah values is the correct one and not a subconscious reading of our own values into the Torah? This is a question that any thinking person must necessarily struggle with, and we are thus perhaps destined to continue to struggle over the very nature of the struggle itself.

*Rabbi Dov Linzer is Rosh HaYeshiva and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School.*

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah  
Rabbinical School's

## Tribute Dinner: DC- Baltimore Area

**Date/Time:**

**Thursday, November 8, 2007**

27 Cheshvan 5768

7:00 PM

**Honoring:**

Rabbi Aaron Frank and Ms. Laura Shaw  
Frank

Mr. Steven and Mrs. Sharon Lieberman  
Dr. Melvin Linzer

**Location:**

Beth Sholom Congregation

11825 Seven Locks Rd

Potomac, MD 20854

Ad blanks, reservations

Contact Stacey Apter

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