

Dear Chavraya,

I feel a deeply personal connection to this week's Torah portion, *parashat Vayera*. It is the first Torah portion that I ever taught to a Bar or Bas Mitzvah student. The "student" was my youngest brother, whom I helped prepare to become Bar Mitzvah. *Parashat Vayera* is also the source of the first *midrash* that I learned as an adult. It is a packed portion, the sending out of Hagar, Isaac and Ishma'el, Abraham's argument with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah, the intended sacrifice of Isaac. This portion is so much about our world and about us. It is about the challenges of people living in relationship with people, about strife and violence, love and hatred, mistrust and fear, jealousy and envy, faith and zealotry, and seeking to transcend all of that, it is about human empathy.

Sodom and Gomorrah are two cities that are filled with violence, oppression and hatred for the stranger. They become paradigmatic of any society that is so consumed by violence that its own destruction spreads like a cancer from within, until life can no longer be sustained. Believing that deep down there was still a spark of humanity among the people of these cities, Abraham argued with God not to destroy them. From fifty down to ten, Abraham pleaded for the sake of the number of righteous people there may be among the wicked. Why did he stop at ten? The rabbis were troubled, as we are. They answered their own question, believing that there were those who did not commit violence, but of these, "not one protested." Those not guilty of crimes of violence were guilty of the crime of silence. And as today, the true innocents, the children, were consumed in the cauldron of their elders' deadly myopia.

And of the crime of silence, the first *midrash* that I learned as an adult, my rabbi sent it to me when as a college student I sat in jail for sitting-in at a draft board during the Vietnam war.

When our protests seem for naught, and the vision of a just and peaceful society and world seem so far off, we still cannot be silent. It is the teaching of a modern *midrash* by Elie Wiesel.

A person came to the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to plead with the people to turn from their violence, to stop their killing. This person walked the streets of the city day after day talking and pleading, but alas to no avail; the people continued in their violent ways. One day as the person walked through the streets of the city, a child came up and asked, 'why do you continue to talk to them, you see that they don't listen to you?' And the answer came gently to the child, 'When I came here, I talked to them in order to change them, now I continue to talk to prevent them from changing me.'

Speaking with the empathy of Abraham, so may our words and our deeds bring healing to the world.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor