



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parashat Vayera 5773

The Power of Advocacy

November 3, 2012

This Shabbat, Jewish communities across America are commemorating Global Hunger Shabbat, a Shabbat dedicated to exploring how we can use our political power to influence our country's policies and ensure access to food for all of humanity. Global Hunger Shabbat is part of AJWS's [Reverse Hunger](#) campaign, which is tackling the root causes of global hunger through political advocacy in the United States.

This *Dvar Tzedek* Text Study is adapted from materials produced for Global Hunger Shabbat. To download these materials and participate in Global Hunger Shabbat, please visit www.ajws.org/reversehunger/ghs.html.

You can use this *Dvar Tzedek* Text Study in any of the following ways:

- **Learn with others.** Discuss this text study together with friends, family or colleagues. Consider using it as a conversation-starter at your Shabbat table.
- **Enrich your own learning.** Read this text study as you would a regular *Dvar Tzedek* and reflect on the questions it raises.
- **Teach.** Use this text study, and the ideas and reactions it sparks in you, as the basis for your own *dvar Torah*.

Please take two minutes to [provide us with feedback](#) on this piece.

Introduction

In a famous passage from *Parashat Vayera*, God informs Abraham of plans to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham responds by taking advantage of his unique relationship with God to advocate on behalf of the innocent people who may live in the cities:

Genesis 18:23-26

23. Abraham approached and said: 'Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? 24. What if there should be 50 innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent 50 who are in it? 25. 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?' 26. And the Lord answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

בראשית יח:כג-כו

כג) וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם, וַיֹּאמֶר: הֲאֵף תִּסְּפֶה, צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע. כד) אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ חַמְשִׁים צְדִיקִים, בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר; הֲאֵף תִּסְּפֶה וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא לַמָּקוֹם, לְמַעַן חַמְשִׁים הַצְּדִיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּהּ. כה) חֲלֵלָה לְךָ מַעֲשֵׂת כְּדָבַר הַזֶּה, לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע, וְהִנֵּה כְצִדִיק, כְּרָשָׁע; חֲלֵלָה לְךָ--הַשְּׁפִיט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ, לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט. כו) וַיֹּאמֶר ה', אִם-אֶמְצָא בְּסוֹדֵם חַמְשִׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר--וְנִשְׂאתִי לְכָל-הַמָּקוֹם, בְּעִבּוּרָם.



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

- What do you imagine motivates Abraham to speak on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah?
- When have you advocated on behalf of others or a cause? What motivated you to do so?
- What might Abraham have been feeling as he 'approached' God? Have you ever taken a stand in the face of authority? How did it feel?

The medieval commentator Rashi offers examples of other biblical uses of the word 'approach' to help us understand the nature of Abraham's interaction with God:

<p>Rashi to Genesis 18:23</p> <p>And Abraham approached: [In other places in the Torah] we find the word 'approach' used to describe war;¹ and the word 'approach' used to describe placating;² and the word 'approach' used to describe prayer.³</p> <p>In all these senses of the word, Abraham approached: to speak harshly, to placate and to pray.</p>	<p>רש"י בראשית יח:כג</p> <p>ויגש אברהם : מצינו הגשה למלחמה (ש"ב י יג) ויגש יואב וגו', הגשה לפיוס (להלן מד יח) ויגש אליו יהודה, והגשה לתפלה (מלכים א' יח לו) ויגש אליהו הנביא, ולכל אלה נכנס אברהם, לדבר קשות, ולפיוס ולתפלה.</p>
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- According to Rashi, what techniques does Abraham use to try to convince God to spare the cities? What do you think are the benefits and risks of each way of approaching?
- What techniques have you used to try to convince powerful people or institutions to listen to you in the past? In your experience, which techniques have been most effective?

Just as Abraham used a variety of techniques—speaking harshly, placating, and praying—to advocate to God to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, we, as Americans, have a number of methods at our disposal to advocate to our government on behalf of the vulnerable. The Congressional Management Foundation recently published findings about the effectiveness of various methods of making your voice heard to members of Congress:

Congressional Management Foundation, Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill, Key Findings⁴

Citizens Have More Power Than They Realize. Most of the [Congressional] staff surveyed said constituent visits to the Washington office (97% of staff) and to the district/state office (94% of staff) have 'some' or 'a lot' of influence on an undecided Member, more than any other influence group or strategy. When asked about strategies directed to their offices back home, staffers said questions at town hall meetings (87% of staff) and letters to the editor (80% of staff) have 'some' or 'a lot' of influence. . . staffers also said postal mail (90% of staff) and email (88% of staff) would influence an undecided Member of Congress.

¹ II Samuel 10:13: "And Joab and the troops with him **approached** into battle against the Arameans, who fled before him."

² Genesis 44:18: "And Judah **approached** him and said 'Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh.'"

³ I Kings 18:36: "When it was time to present the meal offering, the prophet Elijah **approached** and said "Oh Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and that I have done all these things at Your bidding."

⁴ Congressional Management Foundation. "Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capital Hill," 2011. Available at <http://www.congressfoundation.org/projects/communicating-with-congress/perceptions-of-citizen-advocacy-on-capitol-hill>.



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

- Why do you think the Congressional Management Foundation entitled these findings 'Citizens Have More Power Than They Realize'? Do you agree?
- How does knowing that political advocacy can be so influential change your sense of your responsibility to engage in it?
- What steps do you need to take to be prepared to make your voice heard as an advocate for global justice and, particularly, for ending global hunger?

Conclusion

Abraham's act of advocacy models the importance of using our power and influence as American citizens to speak on behalf of the vulnerable. His example has long inspired the Jewish community's involvement in social justice—from the Civil Rights Movement to the fight for Soviet Jewry to our current work to end hunger around the world. Like Abraham, we must take advantage of our ability to effect change and pursue justice by making our voices heard.

In the words of Rabbi Abraham the son of the Rambam: "Proper generosity involves not only money and goods, but also power... Generosity with power entails using the power bestowed on us by God to help those in need."⁵ Let us commit today to emulating Abraham, shouldering the responsibility of being generous with our power and fulfilling our birthright of raising our voices on behalf of those in need around the world.

For more information about how you can get involved in efforts to fight global hunger, visit the AJWS *Reverse Hunger* website at http://ajws.org/reversehunger/take_action.html.

⁵ *The Guide to Serving God*, Chapter 5.

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