

**Title:** Abraham argues with God: Bereshit 18:17 – 19: 29

**Author:** Matt Plen

**Age Group:** Years 6-9

**Format:** Lesson Plan

**Categories/Topics:** Texts/Written Torah, Weekly Torah Portion/Vayera, Bible Stories/Abraham and Sarah

**Description:** Lesson 4 of Torah Bekiut, a course designed to give students a basic grounding in some of the key Torah texts and to engage students with vital moral, interpersonal and religious issues in order to transform Bible study into a relevant activity and the Torah itself into a source of meaning.

### **Introduction**

The previous lesson dealt with Noah, a character who's principal flaw is his failure to initiate moral action, instead contenting himself with following God's orders. In this lesson we meet a character depicted as the complete opposite: Abraham. Where Noah was submissive and obedient, Abraham is vocal and confrontational. Like Noah, Abraham is informed of impending disaster: the destruction of Sodom in punishment for its inhabitants sinful behaviour. Unlike Noah, Abraham decides to intercede with God on behalf of any innocent citizens of Sodom. He calls God to account, imploring Him to spare the city if only ten innocent people can be found there. God, challenged to adhere to His own ideal of justice, agrees. Ultimately, the conversation proves irrelevant as only one inhabitant of Sodom - Lot, Abraham's nephew - proves to have any (even ambiguous) moral qualities.

Abraham believes that God must be held to account in terms of His own principles of justice. But how can it be right to argue with God? Is Abraham to be judged as a righteous person, arguing with God in the moment in order to fulfil his obligations to God's eternal laws, or is he simply a short sighted, arrogant human being who thinks he knows better than the omniscient God? The goal of this lesson is to enable students to make this judgement based on an analysis of the story.

### **Learning outcomes**

*Students will*

- Empathise with Abraham as he confronts God
- Understand that the Torah emphasises its points by using contrast (in this case Abraham is contrasted with the people of Sodom)
- Assess the moral stature of the characters: Abraham, Lot and the people of Sodom
- Discuss whether Abraham was right to argue with God and demand justice for the people of Sodom

## Lesson plan

### 1. Introduction to the story

The teacher opens by giving background to the story (focusing on a summary of chapter 18 verses 1-15). If possible, the teacher should employ questions to draw out of the students any existing knowledge they have about Abraham. At any rate, the goal here is to communicate to the students the following information:

*Abraham has been commanded by God to leave his home and travel to the Land of Israel where God promises to make him into the father of a great nation. God appears to Abraham in the form of three men (or angels). Unaware that they are angels, Abraham invites them into his tent and offers them lavish hospitality. The men leave and walk towards the city of Sodom. God has heard that the people of Sodom have committed terrible sins and plans to investigate.*

### 2. Role play - God and Abraham

The teacher explains to the class that Abraham is afraid that God will destroy the city of Sodom. If a conversation were to be held between God and Abraham at this point, what do you think would be said?

In pairs, the students are asked to write short dialogues that they imagine might take place between God and Abraham. The first line of the dialogue should be said by Abraham, and the final line by God. When they have finished, several pairs are invited to perform their work.

Following the presentations, the teacher asks the class what kind of character Abraham was portrayed as.

### 3. Read the story - what actually happened?

How far did the students get this "right"? What actually happened between Abraham and God? A student is asked to volunteer to read out chapter 18 verses 22-33. The class can briefly discuss whose dialogue was closest to the events in the Torah, and what elements of the story are unexpected or surprising.

The teacher poses the question: was Abraham right to argue with God? The students are invited to offer responses. The teacher should encourage students to express both the pros and the cons of arguing with God. The responses are recorded on the board for later.

### 4. What happens next?

The students are now aware that Abraham's course of action was controversial. Is there a way of resolving the controversy, of determining whether he was right or wrong to argue with God?

We'll try to answer this question by reading the rest of the story. So far, we've been left in suspense: "When the Lord had finished speaking to Abraham, He departed; and Abraham returned to his place." (18:33).

The teacher asks the class what causes this suspense. What does the story leave us wanting to find out?

- We don't know what was wrong with the people of Sodom's behaviour!
- Did God actually find 10 righteous people there?

In order to establish whether Abraham was right to argue with God, we need to answer these questions and find out whether the Sodomites were worthy of Abraham's defence.

How can we find out the answers and relieve our suspense? By reading the rest of the story!

### 5. Hevruta study

The class splits into hevrutot and studies chapter 19 verses 1-29. The teacher hands out a task sheet containing questions which the students answer as they read:

#### Task sheet

*What did the Sodomites do wrong!?*  
*Were there 10 righteous people there!?*  
*Did God keep his promise!?*

*Read on and find out... (read Bereshit chapter 19 verses 1-29)*

1. What did Lot, Abraham's nephew, do for the men/angels?
2. What did the men of Sodom want to do to the guests?
3. How did Lot react?
4. What was his reward?
5. Why did God save Lot (see verse 29)?

### 6. Hevruta reportback

The class reconvenes and the teacher runs through the task sheet asking students to supply the answers. If the students had difficulty the teacher can prompt them by guiding them to specific verses:

- What did Lot do for the men? *He hosted for them for the night, offering them the protection of his house - Chapter 19 verses 2-3*
- What did the men of Sodom want to do to the guests? *Rape them - verse 5*
- How did Lot react? *He refused to send the guests out and offered the mob his daughters to rape instead - verses 7-8*
- What was his reward? *The angels saved him from the destruction of the city - verses 12-13 and 16*
- Why did God save Lot? *Because God remembered Abraham - verse 29*

To sum up the hevruta study, the teacher asks the class the following two open questions, and conducts a discussion in light of the following comments:

### **a. What was the sin of Sodom?**

The Sodomites are guilty of hostility towards strangers, violence and rape. It is possible to add the information that Lot was not originally from Sodom; he was a newcomer (the evidence is in chapter 19 verse 9: “The fellow came here as an alien!” say the towns people. The residents of Sodom act as mob; there is no-one to oppose them.

A further idea that can be thrown in here is how the Sodomites' behaviour contrasts with that of Abraham. The teacher can ask the class if they remember what how we met Abraham in the introduction to the lesson and in the first section of the story - he welcomed the angels with lavish hospitality before standing up to God in the name of justice. These details contrast with and highlight the Sodomites' behaviour; they try to assault guests and not one of them is prepared to argue for justice.

### **b. Was Lot righteous?**

On one hand Lot does the right thing - he offers his guests protection and tries to save them from being raped, at some considerable danger to himself. However, his method of protecting his guests comes at the expense of his own daughters; he offers them to the mob to be raped in place of the angels. Luckily for the daughters, the people of Sodom do not take Lot up on the offer.

We originally thought that Lot was the one decent person in Sodom. After learning what he was prepared to do to his daughters, how does our opinion change?

## **7. Concluding discussion**

In summing up, the teacher goes back to the questions raised during the lesson and asks the class to answer them:

- What were the Sodomites guilty of? (*see above*)
- Were there 10 righteous people in Sodom? *No - there was only one, and his moral stature was ambiguous to say the least.*

In light of what we have learned about Sodom and the people who lived there, how do the students now judge Abraham's decision to argue with God for justice? Did he do the right thing by being proactive and confrontational, or would it have been better to act like Noah - following God's orders and not asking any questions?

Depending on the time available, this question can provoke a discussion around the following dilemma: is it right to speak up to save the innocent even if we know that this means guilty people will also escape punishment?