

Questioning God - Jewish Texts

Genesis 18:20-33

כ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה זַעֲקַת סְדֹם וְעֹמֶרָה כִּי-רַבָּה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כָבֵדָה מְאֹד:
כא אֲרֹדְהָ-נָּא וְאַרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקוֹתֶיהָ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ כָלָה וְאִם-לֹא אֲדַעָה:
כב וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֹמָה וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדְנֵנוּ עֹלְמֵד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:
כג וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֵף תִּסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע: כד אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ חַמְשִׁים
צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הָאֵף תִּסְפֶּה וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא לְמָקוֹם לְמַעַן חַמְשִׁים הַצְּדִיקִים
אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּהּ: כה חָלְלָה לְךָ מַעֲשֵׂת | בְּדַבַּר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע וְהָיָה
כְּצְדִיק כְּרָשָׁע חָלְלָה לְךָ הַשֵּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט: כו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה
אִם-אֶמְצָא בְּסֹדֵם חַמְשִׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וְנִשְׂאתִי לְכָל-הַמָּקוֹם
בְּעִבּוּרָם: כז וַיַּעַן אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִה-נָּא הוֹאֲלֹתִי לְדַבַּר אֶל-אֲדֹנָי וְאַנְכִי עֹפֵר
וְאֶפֶר: כח אוֹלֵי יַחֲסֵרוֹן חַמְשִׁים הַצְּדִיקִים חַמְשָׁה הַתְּשֻׁחִית בְּחַמְשָׁה
אֶת-כָּל-הָעִיר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁחִית אִם-אֶמְצָא שָׁם אַרְבָּעִים וַחֲמִשָּׁה: כט וַיִּסָּף
עוֹד לְדַבַּר אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שָׁם אַרְבָּעִים וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אַעֲשֶׂה בְּעִבּוֹר
הָאַרְבָּעִים: ל וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-נָּא יַחַר לְאֲדֹנָי וְאֲדַבֶּרָה אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שָׁם שְׁלֹשִׁים
וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אַעֲשֶׂה אִם-אֶמְצָא שָׁם שְׁלֹשִׁים: לא וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִה-נָּא הוֹאֲלֹתִי לְדַבַּר
אֶל-אֲדֹנָי אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שָׁם עֶשְׂרִים וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁחִית בְּעִבּוֹר הָעֶשְׂרִים:
לב וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-נָּא יַחַר לְאֲדֹנָי וְאֲדַבֶּרָה אֲדָ-הַפַּעַם אוֹלֵי יִמְצְאוּן שָׁם עֶשְׂרָה
וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁחִית בְּעִבּוֹר הָעֶשְׂרָה: לג וַיִּלְךְ יְהוָה כְּאִשֶׁר כָּלָה לְדַבַּר
אֶל-אַבְרָהָם וְאַבְרָהָם שָׁב לְמִקְמוֹ:

20. And the Eternal One said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave;

21. I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.

22. And the men turned their faces from there, and went toward Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the Eternal One.

23. And Abraham drew near, and said, Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?

24. Perhaps there are only fifty righteous inside the city; will You destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous who are in it?

25. Far be it from You to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should fare as the wicked, far be it from You. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?

26. And the Eternal One said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous inside the city, then I will spare the whole place for their sakes.

27. And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to the Eternal One, I who am but dust and ashes;

28. Perhaps there shall lack five of the fifty righteous; will You destroy the whole city for lack of five? And God said, If I find there forty five, I will not destroy it.

29. And he spoke to God yet again, and said, Perhaps there shall be forty found there. And God said, I will not do it for forty's sake.

30. And he said to God, Oh let not the Eternal One be angry, and I will speak; Perhaps there shall thirty be found there. And God said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there.

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31. And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to the Eternal One; Perhaps there shall be twenty found there. And God said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake.
32. And he said, Oh let not the Eternal One be angry, and I will speak yet but this once; Possibly ten shall be found there. And God said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake.
33. And the Eternal One departed, having left off talking with Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XLIX:9

9. BE THAT FAR FROM THEE-*HALILAH LAK* (XVIII, 25). R. Judan interpreted: It is a profanation (*halalah*) for Thee, it is alien to Thy nature. R. Aha said: *HALILAH* is written twice, implying, Such action would profane (*hilal*) the Divine Name.' R. Abba said: Not 'to do this' is written here, but TO DO AFTER THIS MANNER: neither this or anything like it nor anything even of a lesser nature.

R. Levi said: Two men said the same thing, viz. Abraham and Job. Abraham: BE THAT FAR FROM THEE, TO DO AFTER THIS MANNER, TO SLAY THE RIGHTEOUS WITH THE WICKED. Job: *It is all one-therefore I say: He destroyeth the innocent and the wicked* (Job IX, 22). Yet Abraham was rewarded for it, while Job was punished for it! The reason is because Abraham said it in confirmation, while Job said it in cavil: '*It is all one!*'

Exodus 5:19-6:1

יֵט וַיִּרְאוּ שְׂטָרֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְּךָ בָּרַע לֵאמֹר לֹא־תִגְרְעוּ מִלְּבַנֵיכֶם דְּבַר־יוֹם
בְּיוֹמוֹ: כִּי וַיִּפְגְּעוּ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן נֹצְבִים לְקִרְאתְּךָ בְּצִאתְּךָ מֵאֶת פְּרַעֲהִ:
כִּי וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם יְיָ יְהוָה עָלֵיכֶם וַיִּשְׁפֹּט אֲשֶׁר הִבְאַשְׁתֶּם אֶת־רִיחֹנוּ בְּעֵינֵי
פְּרַעֲהִ וּבְעֵינֵי עַבְדֵּי לְתַת־חֶרֶב בְּיָדְךָ לְהַרְגֵנוּ: [מפטיר] כִּי וַיָּשָׁב מֹשֶׁה
אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי לָמָּה הִרְעִיתָ לְעַם לְמַעַן הַזֶּה לָמָּה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּנִי: כִּי וַיִּמְאַז
בְּאֵתִי אֶל־פְּרַעֲהִ לְדַבֵּר בְּשִׁמּוֹךְ הַרַע לְעַם הַזֶּה וְהִצֵּל לֹא־הִצֵּלְתָּ אֶת־עַמּוֹךְ:

פרק ו

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲתָה תִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה לְפְרַעֲהִ כִּי בְיַד חֲזָקָה
יִשְׁלַחֶם וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה יִגְרָשֶׁם מֵאֶרֶץ:

19. And the officers of the people of Israel saw that they were in evil plight, after it was said, You shall not diminish nothing from your bricks of your daily task.
20. And they met Moses and Aaron, who stood in the way, as they came forth from Pharaoh;
21. And they said to them, The Eternal look upon you, and judge; because you have made us loathsome in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us.
22. And Moses returned to the Eternal, and said, Eternal One, why have you done evil to this people? Why have you sent me?
23. For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people; neither have you saved your people at all.

Chapter 6

1. And the Eternal said to Moses, Now shall you see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand shall he let them go, and with a strong hand shall he drive them out of his land.

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From Mishnah Ta'anit 3:8

מַעֲשֵׂה שְׂאֵמְרוּ לוֹ לְחוֹנֵי הַמַּעֲגָל, הַתְּפִלָּל שְׂיִרְדּוּ גְשָׁמִים. אָמַר לָהֶם, צְאוּ וְהַכְנִיסוּ תַנּוּרֵי פְסָחִים, בְּשֶׁבִיל שְׂלֵא יִמוּקוּ. הַתְּפִלָּל וְלֹא יִרְדּוּ גְשָׁמִים. מָה עָשָׂה, עָג עוֹגָה וְעָמַד בְּתוֹכָהּ, וְאָמַר (לְפָנָיו), רַבּוֹנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, בְּנִיךָ שָׁמוּ פְּנִיָּהֶם עָלַי, שְׂאֵנִי כְּבֵן בֵּית לְפָנֶיךָ. נִשְׁבַּע אֲנִי בְּשֵׁםךָ הַגָּדוֹל שְׂאֵנִי זֶז מִכָּאן, עַד שֶׁתִּרְחַם עָלַי בְּנִיךָ. הַתְּחִילוּ גְשָׁמִים מִנְטָפִין. אָמַר, לֹא כֵךְ שְׂאֵלְתִי, אֶלָּא גְשָׁמֵי בּוֹרוֹת שִׁיחִין וּמַעְרוֹת. הַתְּחִילוּ לִירֵד בְּזַעֲף. אָמַר, לֹא כֵךְ שְׂאֵלְתִי, אֶלָּא גְשָׁמֵי רְצוֹן, בְּרָכָה וְנִדְבָה. יִרְדּוּ כְּתִקְנָן... שְׁלַח לוֹ שְׁמֵעוֹן בֶּן שֹׁטָח, אֶלְמָלֵא חוֹנֵי אֶתָּה, גּוֹזְרֵנִי עֲלֶיךָ נְדוּי. אֲבָל מָה אַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ, שְׂאֵתָּה מִתְחַטֵּא לְפָנָי הַמְּקוֹם וְעוֹשֶׂה לָּךְ רְצוֹנָךְ כְּבֵן שֶׁהוּא מִתְחַטֵּא עַל אָבִיו וְעוֹשֶׂה לוֹ רְצוֹנוֹ. וְעֲלֶיךָ הַכְּתוּב אוֹמֵר, (מִשְׁלֵי כג) יִשְׁמַח אָבִיךָ וְאִמָּךָ וְתִגַּל יוֹלְדֹתֶיךָ:

There is a story about Honi the Circle Maker, that [the people] said "Pray that rain should fall." He said to them: "Go and bring in the ovens [in which you have roasted] the Pascal offerings so that they do not dissolve." He prayed - but no rain fell. What did he do? He drew a circle and stood within it and said: "Master of the Universe! Your children have turned to me for I am like a member of Your household (literally: a child of Your house). I sear by Your great name that I shall not move from here until You show mercy to Your children. Rain began falling drop by drop. He said, "Not for such rain have I prayed, but for rain that will fill the cisterns, pits and caverns." It began to rain with violence. He said, "Not for such rain have I prayed, but for rain of goodwill, blessing, and graciousness. Then it rained in moderation.... Shimon ben Shetach (the head of the scholars of his day, 80 BCE) sent to him [saying] Were you not Honi, I would have pronounced a ban against you. But what shall I do to you? You implore God and God performs your will, like a son who implores his father and he performs his will. Of you, Scripture says: *Let your father and your mother be glad, and let the one who bore you rejoice.*" (Proverbs 23:25).

RABBI LEVI YITZHAK OF BERDITCHEV

(1) One year, when the first day of Rosh Hashanah occurred on Shabbat, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev ascended the podium in the center of his synagogue and addressed the heavens:

"Master of the Universe! Today, all Your creatures pass before You like a flock of sheep, and You pass judgment upon them. Two great books lie open before You, the book of life and the book of death. The righteous are inscribed in the book of life, and the transgressors are written in the book of death, God forbid.

"But today is Shabbat. Did You not command in Your holy Torah that is forbidden to write on Shabbat? True, it is permitted to violate Shabbat in order to preserve a life, so You are permitted to inscribe the righteous in the book of life. But no such clause permits inscribing those who have transgressed Your will in the book of death. I therefore inform You, dear Father in Heaven, that according to the law of the Torah, You must inscribe all Your children for a year of life, health and prosperity!

(2) The story is told of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev that once on Kol Nidre, the holiest night of the year when all sins are confessed, the tailor, one of the most devout members of

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the community, was absent. Concerned, the rabbi left the synagogue and went to the tailor's home. To his surprise he found the tailor looking at a piece of paper before him on the table. "What's the matter?" asked Levi Yitzhak. "Oh, everything's fine," replied the tailor. "As I was getting ready to attend the service I made a list with two columns. At the top of one I wrote my name and at the top of the other I wrote, 'God of all the Universe.'

Then, one by one, I began to list my sins. 'Cheated Goldman out of a pair of trousers.' And in God's column I noted God's omission: 'Little girl died of diphtheria.' Then the next sin, 'Lost my temper with my children,' and in God's column, 'I heard there was a famine in another country.'" And so it went. The tailor showed the rabbi the completed list. "And for every sin I had committed during the past year, God had done one too. So I said to God, 'Look, we each have the same number of sins. If you let me off, I'll let You off!' "

But the story doesn't end there. When the rabbi looked at the paper his face grew red and he scolded his friend: "You fool! You had Him and you let Him go!"

Here is a kind of relationship with God unique to Jewish tradition. Jews don't just get angry with God. They call God to account. In Abraham's words, as he argues the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? . . . Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:23-35) The man, in effect, is saying, "Just who the hell do You think You are?" But there's another curve ball. If you believe, as I do, that "it's all God," then how do we argue with what we're made of? That destabilizes us, makes us very uncomfortable. It means we have to talk to ourselves. We no longer have the luxury of putting all the nasty decisions and deeds on some distant, omniscient, omnipotent God, and freeing ourselves to bask in moral security. God says, in effect, "And whom do you think you're talking to? Hold up a mirror. When you're done with that conversation, come back to Me. . . ."

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Genesis 32: 28-29

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִה שְׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: כֵּט וַיֹּאמֶר לָא יַעֲקֹב יִאמָר עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי
אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּכָּל:

And he said to him, What is your name? And he said, Jacob.

29. And he said, Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.