

Abraham's Plea for Justice: A Commentary on Genesis Chapter 18**C. D. Axelrod**

Abstract. *The following is a commentary on Genesis Chapter 18, a philosophical discussion written in the form of a midrash, an interpretive expansion of the scriptural narrative. It opens onto the question of justice, targeting the lived experience of justice in relation to its concept, when taken up into worship. The problematic of a theology of justice then is our topic, specifically, the antinomy between a god that is identical with, and a god that supersedes justice. Two biblical narratives that involve challenges to the experience of justice, are often brought to mind in discussions of a theology of justice: one, the story of Job, culminating in God's rebuke of him, "Would you condemn me in order to justify yourself?" (Job 40:8), and the other, Abraham's conversation with God over the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and culminating in Abraham's rebuke of God, "Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?" (Gen. 18:25). This latter conversation frames the subject of this midrash.*

With the circumcision of Abraham and Ishmael the tradition ends a "parshah", a week's portion of Torah reading; a new one begins with the words, "And the god appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre." (Gen. 18:1) This is the story of the visit of three angels to the house of Abraham. I'll refer to it as the sixth revelation.

The story we begin here fits a mould we may assign to Abraham: we can locate it easily along a line from provocation to provocation. This will be Abraham's fourth response within the uncertainties – even the turmoil – of the god's provocations (Gen. 15:2, 15:8 and 17:17). Yet a discontinuity. Till now, the worship, as covenant worship, has addressed only itself: Abraham's responses have all been reflexive inquiries into the order, the intelligibility, the existence of the covenant. Now the god will provoke him to respond with an eye to matters outside their own arrangement, and the difference modifies the lexicon, permits other passions, draws and is drawn by other limits. We will witness a discourse somewhat separated from the weighty conceptuality, the persisting paradoxes and deferred questions that have gathered already around the covenant. The air clears, and Abraham will be engaged in a conversation about justice, but a separate one, different from the talk about the covenant.

...And the god appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; and he was sitting in the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. And he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing a distance before him. And when he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them, and bowed low to the ground. And he said, "My lord, please, if I have found favour in your eyes, do not pass me by... your servant. Let a little water be brought, and bathe your feet, and recline under the tree. And I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; afterwards you will proceed on your journey, for on account of this you have passed this way by the home of your servant." And they replied, "Do as you have spoken." Then all in a hurry Abraham went back to the tent, and told Sarah to bake them each a fine cake; he ran to the herd, picked out a choice calf, and gave it to his servant to prepare. And when all was ready, he took curd, and milk, and the veal that was prepared, put it before them, and stood over them in the shade of the tree while they ate. (Gen. 18:1-8)

Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he replied, she is here in the tent." Then one of them said—formally to Abraham but loudly enough so that Sarah could hear, for it was really to Sarah that he was wanting to speak, the news he was carrying was not news for Abraham—"I shall return to you when life is due, and your wife Sarah will have a son." Sarah was listening from the entrance of the tent which was behind him. (Gen. 18:9-10)

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had long ago stopped having the periods of women. When she heard these words, well... she laughed—inwardly, silently—saying to herself, "Now that I am withered shall I find pleasure, and with my husband so old?" The words went through her mind, but with a confidence, born of respect, that they would not find their way outside the privacy of her thoughts. She knew not who these men were, and what powers of perception and prophesy they bore. Then the man said to Abraham—again, so that Sarah could hear—"Why did Sarah laugh, saying: "Shall I truly give birth, though I am so old?" Is there anything too wondrous for the Lord?" I will return in the time that life is due, and Sarah will have a son." (Gen. 18:11-14)

The words jolted her. Throughout their visit she had remained inside the tent, had not met the men face to face; and we are even told that the man who prophesied was turned the other way. Yet could he read her thoughts. No ordinary men were these, their words likewise no ordinary words—and a fear began to grip her. Years and years it was that she had raised her hopes in

prayer to carry a child. But her years for bearing had passed, so too her prayers. And she certainly no longer held onto the dinner-time prophecies of passing strangers; her hopes had been too hard on her. Suddenly this, messengers of the god, one can never know when comes the moment—terrifying to think that you may have dismissed your moment with a laugh! Will it all now be taken back from this unworthy woman, she thought to herself, and in fear she recoiled; it was like an instinct that spoke: “No, I didn’t laugh, I didn’t,” she said; and the messenger replied calmly, “But you did laugh.” (Gen. 18:15)

...And then the men rose from there, and looked out toward Sodom, Abraham walking along with them to see them off. And the god said (to himself it seems, and to us), “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will become a nation, great and mighty; all other nations will be blessed through him. I know him, I know his nature, and must tell him this, so that he will command his children and his house after him to keep my ways, doing righteousness and justice, so that I will deliver to Abraham all that I have spoken to him about.” (Gen. 18:16-19) And what words cometh here from the god? A foretelling of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—to provoke Abraham’s sense of justice. And the god said, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sins so grievous, I will go down and see whether they have acted according to the outcry that has come to me. If so, I will destroy. If not, I will know what to do.” (Gen. 18:20-21)

What images of Sodom have we already conjured? Whatever they are, they have all been organized by the reputation for wickedness with which the city was first introduced. Within the frame of Torah study there is no Sodom that precedes its reputation. First the reputation, then comes the story of its destruction; the people of Sodom were sinners (Gen. 13:13), and the god rained fire and brimstone down upon them (Gen. 19:24)—a perfect oscillation, a tidy stroke of cosmic justice! And why foretold to Abraham? Let us begin by repeating what we have already introduced: “in order that he will command his children and his house after him to keep the ways of the god, doing righteousness and justice.” (Gen. 18:19) What? Is Sodom to supply the perfect pedagogical script? One could hardly ask for a more satisfying example with which to announce the formula for justice, and command one’s children to align themselves with it: measure for measure, and hardly a gap between them, the space between wickedness and its just recompense closed—so palatable the symmetry, but the pedagogy skirts a thousand questions. A significant discourse begins in the “spaces between”, and Abraham is directed into it.

I return now to the provocation, and repeat it: And the god said, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sins so grievous. I will go down and see whether they have acted according to the outcry that has come to me. If so, I will destroy. If not, I will take note.” (Gen. 18:20-21)—these words revealed to Abraham as he accompanied his three guests to the road to see them off. The visitors turned from there, and went on to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing in the presence of the god, the spirit of a discourse igniting within him. He spoke now to the god, and said, “Will you also stamp out the righteous along with the wicked? What if there should be fifty righteous people within the city? Would you really destroy the place, and not endure it for the sake of the fifty righteous ones within it? Chalilah le’chah (this term represents purely reproach—the etymology? “sacrilege”—and carries within it the tone and logic of astonishment, much the same as the English “God forbid!”, although in this case such a rendering would be awkward since the words are spoken to the god. We will adopt the usage “Heaven forbid!” which erases only the surface of the paradox while it tries to preserve the contextual tone of the rebuke along with part of its lexical meaning): “Heaven forbid that you should do such a thing,” Abraham said, “to kill the righteous together with the wicked, so that it will be the same in this world for the righteous as it is for the wicked. Heaven forbid!”—(he repeats his astonishment)—“will the judge of all the earth not act justly?” (Gen. 18:22-25)

It is the boldest he has ever been in his conversations with the god; and this last question (“Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?”) spoken on behalf of the hypothetical righteous fifty, but heavy with the weight of the generalization it utters, opens us into a theology of justice at precisely the intersection that permits the widest view of the territory it mediates. A vast territory, a prominent organizer of our daily discourse this concept of justice is, a system of thinking interwoven into, and having the capacity to vie for attention in every corner of human life, such that through its interplay, through the specific ways it opens, organizes, channels our thinking, we stir up certain emotions or find ourselves free of them, generate the needs to speak or the capacities for silence, consider matters open or closed. We would not be able to register the emotions of shame, gratitude, bitterness, forgiveness—to mention only a few taken from a longer but incomplete list—except by employing the conceptuality of justice. Or even anger: all anger is self-righteous anger, issuing from a consideration of justice.

Let us ask: precisely what conceptual design does justice manifest? What object does it put into focus that Abraham brings forward here, in what looks

like a confrontation with the god? What cluster of meaning operates as his resource? I will try to outline it briefly.

While the voices of justice are manifold, the discussions often complex, often convoluted, yet they begin by taking into account a simple abstract scheme. Imagine a scale, in relation to which the task is given to weigh whatever happens to a human against what he himself initiates, executes, participates or is implicated in, in short, everything of which we will conclude, “It is his doing.” What “happens to him” we translate into a measure of pleasure and suffering (a positive or negative satisfaction), while what we consider “his doing” we translate into a measure of virtue. The theory then (still at this point in the abstract) is to place the two measures opposite each other on the scale resolving both indices into one (we do this by reducing the concept of “virtue” in order to contain it fully within the idea of “merit”), and rendering thereof a judgement as to whether or not the scales are balanced; we call the balance “justice”. The scale can be thought grandly to measure a life, a life of a group, or as is more common, minutely, to measure a single moment of a single relationship. Yet in whatever manifestation, the abstraction remains the same: justice implies a balance.

This is not to suggest that the discourses that result are equally simple. Complexities multiply quickly as we move from abstraction to the development and execution of concrete measures, each starting point, and each index in this economy can be the source of discord; yet discussions of justice, even in the midst of discord, are built upon agreement concerning the abstract idea of what justice is.

Still one more ingredient completes the abstraction. This vision of a balance, and out of it our entire involvement with the idea of justice as balance, is predicated upon the following given: that justice is due. This aspect orders our occupation with it, governs the flow of discourse from beginning to end, setting up from the start the conditions of resolution. Unlike the ideal of beauty, for instance, which bears internally no responsibility for its being due anyone, the concept of justice is built fully upon that idea. Or to say this with a different emphasis, its essential ongoing questions are “What do we owe?” (in other words, “What are our dues?”), and “What is due us?”

Now follow the concept as Abraham carries it into the confines of a worship where, from a consciousness focused upon the god, justice has the unique capacity and inclination, compelled by the force of its own involvement to register the highest standard only. If I earlier called this Abraham’s boldness

this was not altogether accurate. It is also the boldness of the concept itself speaking into the discursive space of worship where absolutes only will satisfy it, not approximations of justice, but justice in the purity of its own simplicity. Accordingly, nothing will fully dissolve its questions unless the righteous—every one of them—receives what is due. (I exclude for the moment the matter of payment to the wicked; it involves a further complexity which is not the center of Abraham’s interest at this moment. The issue we face here together with Abraham concerns the righteous and what is due them.) So I reiterate: nothing will fully resolve Abraham’s question, “Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?”; it will not leave off tracing a confrontation with the god, occupying a persistent position poised accusingly at the god — whether or not Abraham himself persists in the asking — until the righteous are paid in full.

Then the god responded, “If I find within the city of Sodom fifty righteous people I will forgive the whole place on their account” (Gen. 18:26) — a concise and direct reply to Abraham’s concrete request. But Abraham had not restricted himself to the content of this request that a righteous contingent of fifty be enough to pardon the city. His questions had registered a more profound interest in the problem of justice; and as a guardian of its pure abstraction (guardian of the principle) Abraham had entered the space of the god’s presence in a confrontational posture voicing the problem in its generality; “Will you wipe out the righteous together with the wicked,” he had asked? And “will the judge of all the earth not act justly?” These latter questions retain their restlessness even after the god’s reply, and the concerns they operate under are precisely what then moves Abraham to reopen the dialogue. So he began a second time: “Here I venture to speak to my Lord,” he said, “I who am but dust and ashes. What if the righteous fifty should lack five? Would you destroy the whole city for want of the five?” (Gen. 18:27-28)

Building his argument carefully around the recognition that forty-five is much like fifty, Abraham pronounces the continuity of this request with the last. It’s a sound logic, for the principle of justice could be only mildly less offended by forty-five innocent victims. But then might we not have expected that the same spirit of justice, the same pure involvement, that boldly pushed forward Abraham’s first petition would likewise have animated the second? Listen again to the way he introduced the second request: “Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.” From whence the change in tone? It is as if Abraham suddenly knows from some other spectrum that he cannot lay claim to the concerns he is expressing, as if the certainty that earlier issued boldly from the concept of justice must now check its boldness at

the door of worship and proceed (if it is to proceed at all) apologetically, under a ban. Where does the idea come from? Nothing internal to the concept of justice accounts for it. So long as Abraham's involvement issued purely and exclusively from the internal network of the concept itself, Abraham's words would ring boldly. We must look outside the concept for the source of the shift, this encroachment of another order of commitments surfacing here as a reason for justice not to speak.

Have I a name for it? No, but that is not so crucial at the moment. Let us simply call it a rule of worship in order to name the context from which it issues; now let us fit it in. With the second request Abraham consciously enters a system of competing prescriptions: on the one hand, a necessity for justice to be given a determined voice especially in conversation with the god where it can seek its highest standard, and on the other, a certainty that such a voice, somehow would be in radical violation of the rules of worship—two ideal forces, working in opposition to each other where actually no compromise can be struck without leaving a residue from each. Let us follow the course of Abraham's dilemma; it will show finally in the sixth request. So we continue with the god's response: "I will not destroy," he said, "if I should find there forty-five." (Gen. 18:28) (The god's replies will all be short and direct.) Then Abraham continued addressing the god; and he said, "What if forty should be found there?" (Gen. 18:29) Of the two incompatible imperatives, one of them, the problem of justice, is now taking the upper hand in the strain of their opposition; yet the other, the transgressed rule of worship, the prescription for a silence even in the face of injustice, is not thereby neutralized, but rather collects a new violation with each request, so that the path Abraham is pursuing will need be experienced as a growing tension. And the god replied, "I will not do it for the sake of the forty." (Gen. 18:29) Then Abraham began again, uncomfortably aware that he is testing the god's patience, or more accurately, certain of his violation of the territory of worship. "Please," he said, "Do not be angry, my Lord, and I will speak: what if thirty should be found there?" And the god said, "I will not do it if I find there thirty." Then Abraham said, "Here I venture to speak to my Lord: what if twenty should be found there?" And he said, "I will not destroy for the sake of the twenty." (Gen. 18:29-31)

We arrive at the sixth request. The discourse brought about by the god's provocation has spelled out a moment of heroism — indeed, Abraham is a champion of justice — and as with all heroism, it is born in a struggle, and measured by the strength of the adversary it confronts. But this very thought

creates confusion, for in this case the struggle is with the rule of worship Abraham violates. It would demand silence, and threaten him with the thought of an angry god: “Who do you think you are, lecturing to the judge about justice; human, don’t you know your proper place?”

To think of this as heroism provoked into being by the god, and to give the thought any positive substance, which we must if we are to think heroism at all, means accordingly that we must assign the violations to a certain neutrality and consequently enter into the record an air of worship independent of the rule: call it ‘struggling with the god.’ Yet this critical space of discourse thus opened will not even for a moment be left uncontradicted. The rule of worship does not stand aside in assigning a positive value to the heroism that violates it. For one thing, it must be strong if it is to be measured against, and hence, a measure of Abraham’s heroism, but for another, well... two apologies have been exacted already, and one more is to come, all suggest a ban still very much in force.

So now the sixth, the last request, in one sense a mere extension of the series from fifty to twenty, in its gaze the simple absolute of justice. But now the growing strain of the ‘other imperative’ has become un-ignorable. This is made clear to us by the fact that Abraham accompanies his last plea with a promise: “Please my Lord, do not be angry, and I will speak just one last time.” Just one last time: threatened by the perception of his own arrogance and the pressure that the thought exerts on him even with all the pre-violation apologies on record—just one last time, and he will go back to his place. Let us prepare the last request with a few questions of anticipation.

Under what obligation will he this time place himself knowing that he has ceded to the understanding he has one request only? Can he be really both a champion of justice, and proper servant to a contradicting rule of worship? Or let us ask it this way: Will his involvement with the question of justice get taken to its limit, to its highest standard?—since after all, this is the last request, he will not get another. Will justice put forward the last possible question and so reach for a fully restful repose? But then the rule of worship that has somehow been pressuring him all along to stop will have actually registered no consequence at all. Nothing but the apologies will have answered to the requirements of the rule; and they would begin merely to look like lip service to a rule not really in effect. So what will it be? Will the rule make a difference—must the rule make a difference? or will he complete to the end his scandalous-heroic involvement with justice? “Please my Lord, do not be angry,

and I will speak just one last time. What if ten should be found there?” (Gen. 18:32)

We are left here a subtle residue, more accurately, justice is left a residue. We have merely to articulate it, and will... in due course.

Although I had not distinguished it earlier, this conversation between Abraham and the god had been set into two separate systems of calculation: one we will call the ‘inner principle’, the other, the ‘outer shape’. Thus far we have dealt almost exclusively with the inner principle, the concept of justice, led by the idea that justice’s own involvement, i.e., an involvement issuing from the concept itself, had animated and guided Abraham’s side of the discourse to this point, and in line with which we want to know: will justice proceed to its limit, or will worship cut it short of an absolute extension of its principle?

The outer shape of the conversation delineates another calculus. It shows itself in the shadow of Abraham’s involvement with the inner principle of justice. But then in the same shift from bold to apologetic speech that we noted earlier we can also see emerge out of the shadow this discursive shape along with its own line of questions to be put before the god. To display it, let us separate out one segment of Abraham’s first concentrated outburst. In the midst of the two questions we have focused upon most (i.e., “Will you stamp out the righteous along with the wicked?”, and “Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?”, questions which helped us outline the principle of justice in its absolute conceptual simplicity), in the midst of these two, in fact squarely between them, Abraham asks the following: “Would you destroy the place and not endure it for the sake of the fifty righteous ones within it? (Gen. 18:24) This is the first expression of what I have called the ‘outer shape’. It involves a specialized economy with regard to the righteous, relying upon the thought that righteous living — at the moment I accept this notion in its full vagueness — that righteous living weighs more heavily in the world than the particular rewards due to the righteous individually, that the righteous partake of an additional value for their social environment which we will imagine constitutes a distinct factor of history. What factor? That nations come to prominence or destruction, act out their part on the world stage, their continuing existence depending strongly on a meagre core of righteous folk living among them, and in line with which we would want to know: how many righteous people are needed to effect the salvation of an otherwise decadent environment?

What counts in the new calculation has to do with Abraham’s perception of the phenomenon that would ensue. He sees Sodom’s destruction coming in

the form of a natural — that is to say, ecological — disaster, imagines that in the discharge of this destructive force (the particulars of which are not yet in focus), nature being what it is, somewhat indiscriminate, the vengeance of the god would spill over on the righteous. Holding strictly to this perception, and suffering it, Abraham considers only two alternatives: either the god will save the city for the sake of the few, or destroy it along with the few. We mustn't downplay this rigid perception, for it is precisely what provokes him into the conversation in the first place, and what shapes it through to the end. Nor do any of the god's responses undermine, or contradict, or do anything but confirm it. Even though, given our theologies, we might discern a whole series of other alternatives open to the god here, all of which, we could argue, Abraham should be fully cognizant, yet for Abraham, it is either the one or the other, which is to say, the list is complete for articulating this moment of worship.

Can we see a little more clearly the shift to a second economy? It involves a sobering predicament. We referred above to a specialized philosophy of history; consider its question again: how many righteous people are needed to effect the salvation of an otherwise decadent environment? But now contained within the thinking of this question is the accompanying thought that should some lower limit not be achieved, then the righteous few might suffer the fate of the unforgiven. What is the lower limit, Abraham begins to consider? Is it fifty? Heaven forbid, says he! Forty-five? How could that possibly be, being only five short of fifty? Well then, forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? — the latter four offered as distinct possibilities, like so many signposts of a troubling economy. But not entirely a different economy: justice is still the issue, and Abraham will be able to pursue its inner principle on behalf of the righteous. But note now the solid difference between the two economies (inner principle and outer shape), the single factor that finally renders the two incompatible: while the inner principle conforms only to its simple absolute limit that every righteous person — I repeat, every righteous person — should get his due, the outer shape regards its limit as radically unknown to it. But let us make this exact. For the inner principle of justice, the limit had been predefined, issuing from the concept itself, and radically unmodifiable. The outer shape, on the other hand, involves seeking a limit — slowly, along a provoked course of worship, and conforming on its way to the pattern of a negotiation.

We said he suffers the provocation; we might add that justice provoked and taken up into worship has been substantially this suffered conversation, a clash of economies. Just as he cannot but revolt at the thought that the god

could differ from justice (as in the rhetorical outburst, ‘Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?’) so too he cannot include continuously into his perceptions their perfect identification. Allowing in this case that the god’s wrath might spill over on the righteous, he is caught. The god he acknowledges as the object of his worship must be (he would reject to think otherwise), but at the same time somehow cannot be simply traced along the lines of justice’s formula, for how could Abraham be seeking a limit unless he is able to plant lucidly before his mind, as a fully conceivable possibility, the thought that the god he worships presides over a dangerous world and cannot therefore be held synonymous with justice?

Were it not dangerous for the righteous, were the god inconceivable except through the grid of justice, then Abraham would not suffer the provocation. No danger would ever appear except immediately as illusion; the just order would of course present itself acutely to the light, his confidence in it unshaken. Likewise, if Abraham did not consider justice a supreme ideal in the extended conversation that transpires between him and the god, then he could not have generated the authority to mount such a bold challenge. He is required therefore to perceive both a god that defends and a god that supersedes justice. The space of this worship is and is not synonymous with the space of justice. Is and is not. How sudden must his awakening have been into this territory of opposition when he first heard himself speak! Consider again his first bold response. It was justice talking, its involvement undiluted. Keeping strictly to its perceptions Abraham’s petition culminated in that awkward utterance that earlier presented us a problem transporting out of the Hebrew, “Chalilah le’chah,” he said. After some consideration we left it as “Heaven forbid!” Actually the rendering “God forbid!” would have better restored the full impossibility of the rebuke. The word “chalilah” means literally “desecration”, “profanation”, “sacrilege”, in sum, that which offends the god. You offend the god, he said to the god—or did he? — as if accusing him, and as if in the god’s own name. Absurd, of course, yet he could not have chosen a more accurate phrase to represent the tight bind of justice provoked and taken up into worship. No subsequent change of words, no apologies spoken in advance of further requests, all sounded out in more proper worship tones, could erase the representational accuracy of this impossible consideration. “Chalilah le’chah.”

And nothing puts the provocation into better focus. Abraham’s “chalilah le’chah’, followed by “Will the judge of all the earth not act justly?” was uttered, and then it hung there suspended, bearing heavily upon worship’s space,

forcing upon Abraham the necessity for a step-by-step renunciation of his course. Justice would proceed as forbidden speech.

For Abraham to correspond adequately with this provoked space — this irreducible clash of ideal limits — and without devising some manoeuvre to refashion a single concept as limit, hence a single limit, Abraham engages instead in an oscillating structure of moves, advancing justice under the weight of one absolute perception of the god, and then apologizing under the weight of another — over and over. We must respect the originality of this jagged course, or threaten to under-describe the context of his worship, and the conceptions of the god he sustains antinomically within it.

Were we now to cut into this space of provocation with news that comes later, and establish for the record how smoothly for justice the story will end, that the righteous of Sodom, of which there may have been three, were all saved (Gen. 19:15-29), this might well work to nullify the danger and recreate in our minds a smoother surface for worship, without the strain of contradictory impulses. But must we remind ourselves again that Abraham delineates a worship that moves about within danger, he more than anyone; and that the text of his worship involves precisely a trail through provocation? Let us not be too hasty then to nullify the provoked space.

Equally relevant for preserving the precise oppositional lines of this provocation that we resist the thinking implied in a number of comments on this section to wit: that Abraham's final request ("What if ten should be found there?") does actually and artfully bring his involvement with justice to its full completion. (We left this question a moment ago; we return to it now.) The reasoning around which the comments converge is as follows: since less than ten righteous people many years earlier did not save the generation of the flood, Abraham would on the strength of this precedent know two things: first, that less than ten would likewise not save Sodom, so that he need not pursue the matter further, but second, and more important, as if it were the secret, that if there were righteous people in Sodom but less than ten, the god would rescue them — surely —as he did the family of Noah from the flood.

To follow this direction would undoubtedly fulfill its intention to bring the provocation to a full resolution within the revelation, that is, within the conversation, so that Abraham could depart from it focusing upon a god fully reconciled with justice. Yet if this track escapes one difficulty it immediately accumulates others. For example, if precedent has informed him generally that the god could and would rescue the righteous from a punishment conceived for

the wicked, then the god's first statement about his intention to destroy Sodom would not have provoked such a bold confrontation, in fact, would not have opened the space of provocation at all. Knowing from precedent, he would know from the start of this option, and pursue it only to validate it. But then the questions would have been different, and much differently intonated. Or, if precedent has told him that the god would rescue only less than ten, what cunning theological work would be required here to focus upon a reconciled judge that would rescue less than ten but not more? But more significantly, if Abraham has all along been leading the god to ten as justice completing its course, then what effect has the rule of worship actually had in this encounter? None. The discussion from Abraham's side would not correspond to any real fear of the god's anger, any real sense of a forbidden speech. Consequently, the apologies, along with the rule of worship that forced their utterance, would be rendered inessential — an elaborate decoration, but a mere decoration, for an illustration of justice.

Hence the necessity to preserve intact the lines of the provocation, or let the conversation slide out of focus: of Abraham's perception of danger, of justice reaching heroically for its absolute, over against the perception of a god who might take offense at a worshipper so clearly not in his conventionally proper place.

The provocation ends, and is preserved, signalled by its residue. Abraham would not go beyond ten or threaten to belittle that aspect of worship that would tell him to desist. ...”Please my Lord, do not be angry and I will speak but one last time” what if ten should be found there?”, and the god said, “I will not destroy on account of the ten.” And when he had finished speaking with Abraham, the god departed. And then Abraham went back to his place. (Gen. 18:32-33)