A Genealogy of Justice

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ALL MORALLY serious people care generally about justice. And when its apparent absence touches them directly, all people, serious or not, find themselves eager for justice. Even self-proclaimed moral relativists become outraged by the Rodney King verdict or the subsequent rioting, the bombing of the World Trade Center or of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. But not everyone cares for justice in the same way, or understands it in the same sense. Though most people probably regard both the unfair man and the lawbreaker as unjust, some concentrate on justice as fairness or equality, others on justice as law-abidingness. Some focus on the just distribution of communal goods (voting rights, educational opportunities) and communal burdens (taxes, military obligations). Others focus on just dealings in private exchanges (getting a fair wage, honoring an agreement) or on just punishments for misdeeds, civil and criminal.

These differences should not surprise us, for justice is no simple matter. What it is, where it comes from, why be just—these are questions agitated and left unsettled by the great philosophers, from Socrates onward. But the operative notions of justice in the West, informing the attitudes of contemporary liberals and conservatives alike, come mainly from biblical religion.

A concern for justice or righteousness is indeed central to the biblical way, not only in its fully developed form but even in its very beginnings. In the Torah, righteousness is a constant preoccupation, both of the commandments and of the stories. When Micah succinctly formulates what the Lord requires of man—namely, "only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God"—doing justice (literally, "executing justice") stands first.

The biblical rules of justice and procedures for executing it are first enunciated as the Mosaic law, presented in the book of Exodus and rehearsed in Deuteronomy. Later, the prophets exhort and harangue the wayward people and their leaders, raising the demands for righteousness in elevated and inspiring terms. But the problems of justice, addressed by the Mosaic law, existed well before the law was given. Some of these problems are made highly visible in the stories of Genesis. Indeed, one might say that Genesis offers some elementary lessons about justice, and in the process prepares us to appreciate the necessity and the wisdom of the law that comes later. But though justice is a lofty notion, the *ABC*'s of justice shown us in Genesis are rather mixed and hardly cheering.

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A. Personal Justice

THE QUESTION of justice first enters the world with the anger of Cain, the first human being born of woman. This association alone indicates the unwholesome context of its birth. Cain is the first to get angry; he is outraged because his sacrifice is not accepted, and especially as God prefers the sacrifice of his younger brother, Abel:

> And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering; but unto Cain and to his offering He had not respect. And Cain was very wroth and his face fell.

Both Cain's anger and his shame have their roots in pride, wounded pride. The first-born and elder brother, the proud farmer who produces crops by his own labor, first also (or so he thinks) in relation to God as the "inventor" of sacrifices, Cain desires to be first and best, and to be so recognized. His younger brother, a lazy shepherd, a mere follower in gift-giving, has surpassed him in God's respect. Cain feels the sting of shame, as the world does not affirm his lofty self-image. But, still proud, he takes the disappointment as a slight or an insult; he fills his heart with rage, for he believes that he has been not only harmed but injured. Cain's anger, though it is not pretty, carries the world's first outraged sense of justice: "I did not get what I deserved; I was wronged."

Suffering a loss or a harm arouses only sadness or pain; but experiencing slight, insult, and injury—from the Latin, *iniuria*, meaning injustice—gives rise to anger, to a demand not only for getting back what we have lost but especially for getting even with the one who has slighted us, who has knowingly treated us less well than we "deserve." This deep connection between anger and justice has been noted since antiquity. Aristotle calls anger "an impulse . . . to revenge . . . caused by an obvious *unjustified* slight," and slight, "an active display of opinion about something one takes to be worthless." Such contempt for our person, experienced as a slight, is often more unbearable than the harm itself. Every human being, once he comes to self-consciousness, acquires notions of self-esteem and self-worth; absent some corrective, this sense of self-worth becomes the standard by which each of us naturally measures what he thinks he deserves from another.

In this regard at least, Cain must be seen as humanly prototypical, not as an aberrant deviant. However much we see that self-love and vanity may have falsely inflated his sense of self-worth, and however much we deplore the fratricide born of his self-righteous anger, we must concede that Cain is the first to experience injustice. He is thus the first to "discover" justice—or at least to act on the basis of some notion of justice, however incomplete or warped. Cain's conduct brings us our first lesson: justice is, to begin with, not an altruistic matter of doing right by others, but a selfish matter of not letting others do wrong to oneself. It begins in the passion to get what one deserves *for oneself*, and to get even when one feels oneself cheated or slighted. Cain "takes revenge" for God's slight of his sacrifice by killing his innocent rival, Abel, whom—so it seems to Cain—God has unjustly preferred.

NEEDLESS TO say, Cain's deed is not only horrible but also, itself, horribly unjust. His brother's blood cries out the injustice from the ground. Abel has done nothing to deserve his fate. But in these pre-legal days, before the law against murder and its measured punishment have been established, wild and disproportionate revenge like that taken by Cain is the order of the day. Even God Himself announces a sevenfold vengeance for anyone slaying Cain; and a few generations afterward, Lamech will boast of his superiority even to God in vengeance: "'For I have slain a man for wounding me, and a young man for bruising me; if Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold.'" Injury sparks anger, anger breeds vengeance, vengeance, escalating, commits new injustice, injustice breeds new anger, and anger and spiraling violence eventually consume everyone in sight. Personal justice, personally defined and personally prosecuted, is a dangerous business, incompatible with civilized life.

The proud line of Cain and its wild primordial justice thus beg to be replaced. And a promising new line is in fact established, after the death of Abel and the banishment of Cain. It begins with Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, at a time when "men began to call on the name of the Lord." But the promise of a better human way is unfulfilled. Following the unexpected death of Adam and then Seth in the ninth generation, an epoch of wild justice breeding injustice reemerges. Soon, the whole earth degenerates into violence, as men of renown—i.e., heroes—roam the earth, gaining fame by punishing those who fail to treat them as they think their high and mighty self-esteem deserves.

God destroys this corrupt world in the flood, and begins again with Noah, a man "*righteous* and simple in his generations." But this time God does not leave men solely to their own devices and their own internal "knowledge" of good and bad. Instead, He institutes measures designed to prevent the bloodshed that has required such drastic cleansing. In these measures, to speak in nonbiblical language, "right takes the place of violence as nature is subjected to law" (Rousseau). I refer to the Noahide law and covenant, which contain the first explicit rules of retributive justice, and which call on human beings to "execute justice" in punishing murder.

B. Legal Justice

THE BIBLE'S second lesson in justice comes right on the heels of Noah's unasked-for and bloody animal sacrifice, offered immediately upon leaving the ark after the Flood. As if making a concession to such human bloodlust, and hoping thereby to contain it short of homicide, God's new law begins by permitting men to eat the flesh of animals, forbidding only the eating of blood "which is the life thereof." But if animal blood may not be eaten, *human* blood must not be shed:

> "And surely the blood of your lives will I require [i.e., I will require retribution for it]; at the hand of every beast will I require it; and at the hand of man, even at the hand of every man's brother, will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man."

The institution of the Noahide code represents an advance in righteousness over the spiraling anarchic cycles of revenge in the antediluvian "state of nature." Yet we are struck first by the rather ugly character of primary legal justice. The injunction is not stated as a moral rule, or even as a negative commandment—"Thou shalt not murder"—but rather as a demand for a fitting, bloodshedding punishment once the implicit rule is violated. God, it seems, expects human bloodshed to continue, but it must no longer be tolerated, it must no longer go unpunished. Indeed, human bloodshed even by an animal must be avenged, and, *a fortiori*, blood shed by a man's own brother—a clear reference to Cain and Abel.

Moreover, the required capital punishment is to be administered not directly by God but by human beings, now become responsible agents of the divinely-ordained, just, yet bloody retribution. From this passage, the rabbis would later deduce the establishment of human courts of justice, to "execute justice," including, quite literally, to execute those who commit murder. Human beings, in order to be human beings, must freely accept the harsh responsibility for defending the inviolability of human life.

Seen in context, the Noahide injunction regarding retribution is a device for restraining much greater harshness. In contrast to the prelegal kind of revenge, men will now take *no more* than a life for a life, and they will take the life only of the murderer, not also that of his wife and children. The tendency of righteous indignation toward excessive vengeance is here brought under strict rule and restraint. In addition, though it speaks mainly about punishment, the Noahide law at the same time implicitly conveys a lofty moral message: radical human equality regarding the value of human life. All human beings are created equally in God's image. Against our ever-present natural temptation to care only for ourselves and for our own and to depreciate and ignore the value of the stranger, and against our prideful propensity to make our own vanity the sole standard of justice, the Noahide law teaches that, at least with respect to life itself, every human being has a claim and a standing equal to our own.

But this lofty moral principle is by itself too weak to withstand our violent passions—our angers, hatreds, envies, lusts, spites, and greed. It needs to be defended by armed yet just retribution. The community must insist that whoever denies the inviolate godlikeness of human life, by shedding human blood, denies and thus forfeits his own share in it. The murderer's life for the life he murdered becomes the first principle of strict and equal justice: he gets exactly what he deserves. The guaranteed strict reciprocity of life for life provides the force needed to defend the underlying lofty principle of human equality.

This law and the responsibility for enforcing it are great gifts to the human community, for at least two reasons. First, only when men accept responsibility for executing strict retributive justice can their own lives as human beings be secure; second, only then can they be said to affirm in deed that they appreciate what it means to be equally in God's image, demonstrating their godlikeness by exercising moral responsibility in the name of the equal sanctity and dignity of human life.

Doing justice will eventually become much more complicated. But the later additions of legal justice will build upon—and will not overturn—these elementary beginnings. Indeed, the principles and practices of Noahide justice are not peculiar to the children of Israel but remain valid for all humankind.

C. Political Justice

WHEN THE peculiarly Jewish way is begun with Abraham, justice is one of its central concerns. With God as tutor, Abraham right from the start receives an education in righteousness—regarding relations both within his own household and with neighboring peoples.

First, in Egypt, Abram, a stranger in a strange land, is exposed to Pharaoh's unjust and predatory behavior toward beautiful women, and compelled to choose between self-preservation and his own marriage. Yet although he is pressed by necessity, Abram will come to discover that his own conduct is hardly righteous, for he encourages his wife to accept an adulterous liaison from which only God's intervention saves her.

Next, returning to Canaan a wealthy man, Abram heads off a potentially fratricide-like quarrel with his nephew Lot: "'Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen; for we be brethren. . . .'"

Magnanimously, he gives Lot first choice of the available land; Lot, understandably but unwisely, chooses the fertile plain of the Jordan, which seems to him "like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt," and he moves into its cities, winding up in Sodom. This fateful separation, and the polar opposition between the wandering herdsman and the city dweller, will be the basis for Abraham's later crucial lesson in political justice.

Anticipating that lesson, the narrator gives us an early warning: "Now the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against the Lord exceedingly." As we learn more clearly later, Sodom is notorious for injustice, for unqualified love of one's own and unqualified hatred and mistreatment of strangers. Sodomite injustice is epitomized in the acts of sodomy (practiced by the citizens) and incest (practiced by Lot's daughters on their father), each of which is an excessive embodiment of the principles of love-of-like and aversion-to-unlike. These principles are not peculiar to Sodom but to some extent are celebrated in every city, for every city defines itself by magnifying the importance of the distinction between who is in and who is out. To this we shall return.

Next, Abram enters into the war of the kings, but only to rescue his kinsman, Lot; unlike Cain, Abram shows himself to be his brother's keeper. Although splendidly victorious, he prudently and justly refuses a share of the spoils, for which high-mindedness God promptly rewards him by augmenting His original promise. But in the sequel, in the covenant between the sacrificial pieces, God gives Abram a foretaste of a new and partly painful lesson about justice, one that Abram is not eager to learn. In the midst of a deep sleep, amid dread and darkness, he is told of an impending 400 years of slavery which his descendants will suffer as strangers in a strange land. No reason is given why Abram's people deserve to be enslaved. But there is also good news: this injustice will not go unpunished.

> "And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward they shall come out with great substance. . . . And in the fourth generation they shall come back hither; for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full."

Abram thus learns that God will execute judgment on the tormentors of his people, and that his people will be compensated. God, in other words, is a judge who cares for justice, so much so that even the gift of the Promised Land cannot proceed except as an act of justice: the Amorites, who now inhabit Canaan, are not yet sufficiently wicked to warrant expelling them from the land. This is Abram's first clue about God's interest in political justice. If we imagine that he begins now to brood about these matters, we will not be surprised that he is ready to talk about justice when God provokes him into conversation about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

But Abram is not quite ready for that new and most important lesson. First, he celebrates the arrival of Ishmael, borne him by Hagar, and suffers the strain this places on his marriage to Sarah; in this quasi-adulterous union with an Egyptian partner, Abram is "paid back," measure for measure, for his earlier willingness to have Sarah enter into an adulterous liaison with Pharaoh. Next, with Ishmael on the cusp of manhood, comes the new covenant with God, to be marked by circumcision. Newly charged ("Walk before Me and be thou wholehearted") and newly named, Abraham promptly follows God's command and circumcises himself, Ish-

mael, and all the men in his household; down to the present day his descendants remember by this same practice God's covenant with Abraham and His chosen people.

But this clear separation from the rest of mankind does not lead Abraham to xenophobia or injustice. On the contrary, in the immediate sequel he receives the three strangers with extraordinary hospitality and magnanimity. Becoming a member of the chosen tribe, as Abraham shows so graciously, can become the ground of treating *all* human beings with respect. When, a chapter later, we compare Lot's attempt to host these same strangers, now come to Sodom, we see immediately Abraham's superiority. Lot begs his fellow Sodomites not to wrong his guests, and offers them instead his daughters; but the Sodomites turn on him because he presumes to judge them. The Sodomites thus defend not only sodomy and xenophobia, but also, implicitly, moral relativism—all perverse expressions of the love of same. Yet for all his personal rectitude in dealing with *individuals*, Abraham remains largely innocent of what justice finally requires.

THE CONVERSATION with God regarding the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is the cure for his innocence. It is one of the dramatic high points of the narrated life of Abraham, indeed, of the entire book of Genesis. In this unique exchange, Abraham dares to challenge not only God's proposed conduct but His very justice. And for a brief moment, the two interlocutors address each other in a manner betokening equality.

Commentators on the Bible frequently see fit to praise Abraham's concern for justice and compassion, all the more remarkable as it is exercised on behalf of unrelated strangers. They see it as a human triumph, a sublime display of Abraham's extraordinary nobility of character. Writes Nahum Sarna:

> The . . . dialogue with God involves a concern for the welfare of others, total strangers. Abraham displays an awareness of suffering and an ability to respond beyond his immediate personal interests. He shows himself to be a moral man, a compassionate person. His behavior at this moment makes him the paradigm of "the just and the right," qualities that are to characterize his descendants.*

I do not wish entirely to quarrel with this reading, though it seems to me to benefit from hindsight, not to say from certain modern prejudices. But there are certain aspects of the discussion which it tends to overlook, and which constitute a particularly difficult and painful lesson about the difference between personal and political justice.

The encounter is arranged by God, and precisely for political purposes:

> And the Lord said: "Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing; seeing that Abraham shall surely become *a great and mighty nation*, and *all* the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, *to do righteousness and justice*; to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him." [Emphasis added]

Abraham, the founder of a great nation, must do righteousness and justice, and command his children after him to do likewise, for only in this way can he bring the Lord's righteous ways to the entire world. Although he has shown himself to be personally just, Abraham, because he is to be a *political* founder, needs also some instruction in political justice, that is, in justice regarding whole communities. God not only wants Abraham to know about the judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah; He also wants him to understand its rightness. More importantly, God also intends that Abraham share responsibility for the punishment as a result of his participation in the judgment. Through this conversation, Abraham is to become God's partner, as it were, in executing political justice.

The Lord makes known, presumably within Abraham's hearing, the problem that commands His attention:

> "Verily, the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and, verily, their sin is exceeding grievous. I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know."

If the cry of injustice rising from these two

*_The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis_ (Jewish Publication Society, 1989). Another commentator is even more effusive in his praise: "[O]ne of the sublimest passages in the Bible or out of the Bible. Abraham's plea for Sodom is a signal illustration of his nobility of character. . . . Abraham proves true to his new name and embraces in his sympathy all the children of men. Even the wicked inhabitants of Sodom were his brothers, and his heart overflows with sorrow over their doom." _The Pentateuch and Haftorahs_, edited by J. H. Hertz (Soncino Press, 1967).

cities has brought God to investigate, what He intends to do about it is not stated. It is Abraham who, drawing near, initiates the conversation:

> "Wilt thou indeed consume the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are 50 righteous within the city; wilt thou indeed consume and not forgive the place for the 50 righteous that are therein? That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from Thee; shall not the Judge of the whole earth do justly?"

We are immediately struck by the boldness and intensity of Abraham's speech. Unlike most of his subsequent offerings in this conversation, he makes here no preface and offers no apologies for his challenge, and the repetition of certain phrases ("that be far from Thee") indicates his passion. But closer examination provides some clues about what it is that moves him so. It is not, I submit, concern for strangers.

NOTE FIRST that it is Abraham, not God, who introduces the subject of destruction. God is still investigating, but Abraham, far from shrinking from punishing the wicked, is the one who suggests it. Not compassion or mercy but justice is on his mind (as it is on God's). But Abraham's leap to questioning the idea of wholesale destruction may be motivated by something nearer and dearer. Here is the crucial clue: God has announced his interest in the wickedness of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, but Abraham in his questioning speaks only of one, although he does not name it. God, reading Abraham's mind, will in His next response also speak only of Sodom, and by name.

The commentators who hear in Abraham's pleas only a concern for total strangers have forgotten the importance to Abraham of his nephew Lot, whose home is still in Sodom. Abraham, who risked his very life—and with it the divine promise—to rescue Lot in the war of the kings, will certainly not have become indifferent to the fate of his kinsman just because he now has a son and an heir in Ishmael. It is Lot's presence among the wicked in Sodom that captures Abraham's attention and engages his passions. But because it would be both ignoble and unjust to engage in special pleading, Abraham cannot make his argument in personal terms; he must make it in terms applicable both to his own and to the strangers alike. Lot becomes the hook God uses to catch and lift up Abraham's concern for justice.

Even leaving aside the question of Lot, Abraham's point of departure is clearly a concern for personal justice: is each individual getting what he deserves? More precisely, Abraham focuses entirely on the danger of injustice for the *righteous*; he is not at all arguing that the wicked should be spared out of mercy or compassion, only that the righteous not suffer with the guilty. This concern for personal justice, and especially for the fate of the righteous, is also not disinterested; Abraham surely wants to know whether his own righteousness will be rewarded as promised. If God is careless, Abraham too could fare much less well than he deserves. In this respect, Abraham's concern is not all that different from Cain's—or ours.

Yet lurking in these personal concerns are also larger and even more important questions. For Abraham desperately needs to know whether divine justice bears a sufficiently close resemblance to our human intuition about justice, namely, that the good shall prosper and the wicked (only) shall suffer. Is God's justice, seen from this human viewpoint, arbitrary or capricious? If so, will it be possible to follow Him wholeheartedly as God has commanded? For this reason especially, Abraham insists on learning whether the righteous must suffer with the wicked.

The conversation about the fate of the righteous is important not only for man. It is crucial also for God and for the lesson He wants to teach through Abraham, a lesson about which Abraham already has his suspicions. For Abraham is dimly aware that there may be a tension between what is just for individuals and what is just for a city. He senses that if the city gets judged as a whole, some righteous will—unjustly—suffer with and for the guilty. Abraham, to begin with, rebels at this prospect. Accordingly, he eschews the political perspective, and focuses entirely on the fate of the righteous individuals, demanding to know if the Judge of the whole earth is going to act justly, that is, render to each person exactly and only what is owed.

In contrast to Abraham, God is much more interested not in individuals but in the city and its wickedness. Still, He welcomes Abraham's insubordination in order to educate him. In accepting his plea about the 50 righteous, He promises to spare the city if they be found, but subtly tries to get Abraham to think also about the problem of the whole. Whereas Abraham had asked Him "to

forgive the place for the 50 righteous therein," God stresses the totality: "'. . . I will forgive *all the place* for their sake'" (emphasis added).

Abraham, when he speaks next, repeats God's "all," but he clearly has not grasped the point. Looking away from the city, he wants God to look *only* at the vulnerable righteous: "'. . . Perhaps there shall lack five of the 50 righteous; wilt thou destroy all the city for the *lack* of *five*?'" (emphasis added).

In His response, God, although again allowing himself to be moved by Abraham's plea, nonetheless rejects its focus and the terms Abraham has used. Correcting Abraham's calculations, He promises not to destroy the city if He finds there the positive *presence* of 45 righteous men.

ABRAHAM GETS the point. From now on, he bargains solely in terms of the size of the saving remnant. Encouraged by God's answers, he continues to work down the number, making the case for 40, 30, 20, and, finally, 10. But then voluntarily—"I will speak yet but this once"—he stops. This is strange. On the principle that has driven him from the start, and that has apparently been supported at every turn by God's response, why does he not push all the way to one?

Abraham may have been afraid that God would judge him presumptuous, or embarrassed to reveal a personal interest in his one kinsman, Lot. But fear and embarrassment aside, he may have broken off the bargaining also because he has learned something. Abraham has come to see that if one cares about justice for a whole city, one must be willing to overlook, at least to some extent, both the natural preference for one's own kin and the demand for absolutely strict justice for each individual. By stopping at ten, Abraham (at least tacitly) accepts the possible destruction of Lot, the man he once called "brother." And he (at least tacitly) accepts that politics—the life of cities—*necessarily* involves the suffering of at least some innocent and righteous people. Political justice is a sobering business, because political justice is not altogether just.

There is, of course, also some consolation: God is indeed moved by every appeal Abraham actually makes, and God's justice seems not too different from Abraham's. He is willing to make accommodations, *if* there is a truly saving remnant, and *if* there exists thereby a possibility to effect reform and lift up the city as a whole. (If not, the innocent and righteous necessarily go down with the guilty—as they do in every wicked city, down to the present day.) By showing Abraham their common ground on the principles of justice, God enables Abraham to gain His perspective on its practice in the political realm.

Most importantly, Abraham learns from this experience that one virtuous man does not make, and cannot save, a nation by his own merit alone. For Abraham, the lesson could not be more pointed. His excessive preoccupation with God's personal promise, with his own merit and its reward—that is, with personal justice—is in fact at odds with the purpose of God's promise: that he become a great *nation*, steeped in righteousness, a blessing to all the others. The implication could not be plainer: because a community once founded will stand or fall together, and because one man's virtue is not sufficient, there is urgent need for education and transmission, beginning with a well-ordered house and with political measures to secure justice in the community.

This lesson is administered to Abraham at the most timely moment, just after he has learned that Sarah will bear him the long-awaited son-of-the-covenant. Before Isaac arrives, Abraham is compelled to think less like a natural father and more like a righteous founder, one who executes justice and who walks before God. Thanks to this lesson, he will be able to fulfill his mission, to "command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice."

The lesson does not end with the conversation. The point is driven home the next morning as Abraham awakens to see the destruction of the cities and all the land of the Plain. The text says not a word about Abraham's reaction, but we can try to imagine what goes through his mind. For sure, God's evident and mighty power over human life inspires in him awe and dread. But what about the righteous for whom he has bargained? There may be as many as nine perishing with the guilty—not to speak of innocent newborn babies—as the cities go down together. And what of Lot? As Abraham watches, he no doubt concludes that Lot has died in the conflagration. With heavy heart, he feels his own responsibility for Lot's death—not only because he has agreed to let any fewer than ten righteous die with the guilty, but perhaps also because he earlier failed to educate Lot in justice and allowed him to go off to settle in Sodom.

Abraham's reflection on the destruction completes and fixes the political lessons of the conversation of the day before. As if to signal the

heaviness of his heart, the text speaks of smoke ascending like smoke in a furnace, using the words connected with the making of burnt offerings. True, in the immediate sequel, we are told "that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow"; God shows his mercy, saving Lot for Abraham's sake. But—and this is crucial—He does not tell Abraham that He has done so. There will be time enough later to teach Abraham and his descendants about God's mercy. For the time being, the painful lessons of the founder's justice must be allowed to sink in without a word of consolation. One wonders, indeed, whether something of what he learned as he witnessed the smoke rising from Sodom and Gomorrah may have prepared Abraham for his greatest trial, enabling him to respond without so much as a peep of protest about the suffering of the innocent when God asks him to become not just an accomplice in the death of Lot but a killer of his own beloved son.

Beginning Lessons

THESE STORIES from Genesis, powerful though they are, only initiate our needed instruction about justice. But they provide salutary lessons—about why justice is a problem and about how to approach it—which we in our sophistication are in danger of ignoring.

It is salutary to be reminded that justice does not, to begin with, concern the common good or the good of another but the good of oneself and one's own. The demand for justice is primordially a demand that *I* get what I *deserve*. It is thus naive to believe that government programs aiming at "social justice," like the progressive income tax, or forced busing, or quotas in hiring, will not arouse a quite proper indignation among those at whose expense the common good is being advanced. And there is also a danger of another kind, involving the beneficiaries of such programs. As each person's standard of what he deserves is rooted in personal pride or self-esteem, equal treatment will never be enough for someone who believes himself deserving of more. Worse, the attainment of more will often only enlarge the sense of further entitlement. It is thus naive to believe that promoting self-esteem, say, among the disadvantaged, will necessarily resolve the demand for justice; on the contrary, heightened self-esteem and pride carry a heightened risk of taking offense, of feeling slighted, of claiming injury. It is also naive to believe that the application of some external principle of fairness—like equality of opportunity or even equality of outcomes—will satisfy the insatiable and elastic demands that proud people have for what is coming to them.

It is also salutary to be reminded that caring for justice means caring for law, law-abidingness, and law-enforcement. More, it requires being willing to defend the primary laws of justice—first of all, regarding murder—with strong, clear, proportionate punitive and retributive measures. A community that overdoes retribution—that exacts more than a life for a life—is in danger of slipping back into precivilized spiraling vendettas. But a community that has no stomach for executing justice—surely and swiftly—undermines its very existence. By letting people get away with murder, it not only encourages more killing; worse, it alienates the loyalties and affections of its law-abiding citizens who have surrendered their private right to avenge injustice only because they trust the community to do justice for them. Worst of all, it contradicts the fundamental principles on which any decent human community must rest: the equal worth of each human life before the law, and our equal moral responsibility to respect and defend the life of our fellows, not only in nice speeches but in firm deeds. Celebrities and low-lifes, ne'er-do-wells, doctors, professors, and politicians must all be held accountable to the same, clearly established, legal standards that are the bedrock of all civilized life.

Finally, it is salutary to be reminded that all cities and political communities are, necessarily, imperfectly just; to opt for city life means to accept the principle that some righteous will always suffer with and because of the wicked. But this also means that the righteous can ill afford to be indifferent to what the unrighteous are doing, even if they do it only among and to themselves. The righteous, and those who love righteousness, must band together—at the very least as a saving remnant—to see to it that wickedness does not get the upper hand. Though justice is to begin with personal, and though political justice is often personally unjust, it is our personal and communal business to care for the righteousness of the city as a whole.

How to do it—that is a complicated matter, varying case by case. But that one must try to do it is the most important lesson that we can learn from Father Abraham, who received just this lesson from the very highest authority.