

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayera
November 12, 2022 *** 18 Cheshvan, 5783

Vayera in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3171/jewish/Vayera-in-a-Nutshell.htm

G-d reveals Himself to Abraham three days after the first Jew's circumcision at age ninety-nine; but Abraham rushes off to prepare a meal for three guests who appear in the desert heat. One of the three—who are angels disguised as men—announces that, in exactly one year, the barren Sarah will give birth to a son. Sarah laughs.

Abraham pleads with G-d to spare the wicked city of Sodom. Two of the three disguised angels arrive in the doomed city, where Abraham's nephew Lot extends his hospitality to them and protects them from the evil intentions of a Sodomite mob. The two guests reveal that they have come to overturn the place, and to save Lot and his family. Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt when she disobeys the command not to look back at the burning city as they flee.

While taking shelter in a cave, Lot's two daughters (believing that they and their father are the only ones left alive in the world) get their father drunk, lie with him and become pregnant. The two sons born from this incident father the nations of Moab and Ammon.

Abraham moves to Gerar, where the Philistine king Abimelech takes Sarah—who is presented as Abraham's sister—to his palace. In a dream, G-d warns Abimelech that he will die unless he returns the woman to her husband. Abraham explains that he feared he would be killed over the beautiful Sarah.

G-d remembers His promise to Sarah, and gives her and Abraham a son, who is named Isaac (Yitzchak, meaning "will laugh"). Isaac is circumcised at the age of eight days; Abraham is one hundred years old, and Sarah ninety, at their child's birth.

Hagar and Ishmael are banished from Abraham's home and wander in the desert; G-d hears the cry of the dying lad, and saves his life by showing his mother a well. Abimelech makes a treaty with Abraham at Beersheba, where Abraham gives him seven sheep as a sign of their truce.

G-d tests Abraham's devotion by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah (the Temple Mount) in Jerusalem. Isaac is bound and placed on the altar, and Abraham raises the knife to slaughter his son. A voice from heaven calls to stop him; a ram, caught in the undergrowth by its horns, is offered in Isaac's place.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Kings II 4:1-37

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/579813/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

In this week's Torah reading, G-d promises a child to Abraham and Sarah, despite childless Sarah's advanced age. This week's *haftarah* describes a similar incident that occurred many years later — the prophet Elisha assuring an elderly childless woman that she will bear a child.

The *haftarah* discusses two miracles performed by the prophet Elisha. The first miracle involved a widow who was heavily in debt, and her creditors were threatening to take her two sons as slaves to satisfy the debt. When the prophet asked her what she had in her home, the widow responded that she had nothing but a vial of oil. Elisha told her to gather as many empty containers as possible — borrowing from neighbors and friends as well. She should then pour oil from her vial into the empty containers. She did as commanded, and miraculously the oil continued to flow until the last empty jug was filled. The woman sold the oil for a handsome profit, and had enough money to repay her debts and live comfortably. The second miracle: Elisha would often pass by the city of Shunam, where he would dine and rest at the home of a certain hospitable couple. This couple even made a special addition to their home, a guest room designated for Elisha's use. When the prophet learned that the couple was childless, he blessed the woman that she should give birth to a child in exactly one year's time. And indeed, one year later a son was born to the aged couple.

A few years later the son complained of a headache and died shortly thereafter. The Shunamit woman laid the lifeless body on the bed in Elisha's designated room, and quickly summoned the prophet. Elisha hurried to the woman's home and miraculously brought the boy back to life.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

To Bless the Space Between Us by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/to-bless-the-space-between-us/>

There is a mystery at the heart of the biblical story of Abraham, and it has immense implications for our understanding of Judaism.

Who was Abraham and why was he chosen? The answer is far from obvious. Nowhere is he described, as was Noah, as “a righteous man, perfect in his generations” ([Gen. 6:9](#)). We have no portrait of him, like the young Moses, physically intervening in conflicts as a protest against injustice. He was not a soldier like David, or a visionary like Isaiah. In only one place, near the beginning of our parsha, does the Torah say why God singled him out:

Then the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham is about to become a great and mighty nation, and through him all the nations on earth will be blessed. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and

his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He spoke of for him.”

Gen. 18:17-19

Abraham was chosen in order to be a father. Indeed Abraham's original name, Avram, means “mighty father”, and his enlarged name, Avraham, means “father of many nations”.

No sooner do we notice this than we recall that the first person in history to be given a proper name was Chava, Eve, because, said Adam, “she is the mother of all life.” (Gen. 3:20) Note that motherhood is drawn attention to in the Torah long before fatherhood (twenty generations to be precise, ten from Adam to Noah, and ten from Noah to Abraham). The reason is that motherhood is a biological phenomenon. It is common to almost all forms of advanced life. Fatherhood is a cultural phenomenon. There is little in biology that supports pair-bonding, monogamy, and faithfulness in marriage, and less still that connects males with their offspring. That is why fatherhood always needs reinforcement from the moral code operative in a society. Absent that, and families fragment very fast indeed, with the burden being overwhelmingly borne by the abandoned mother.

This emphasis on parenthood – motherhood in the case of Eve, fatherhood in that of Abraham – is absolutely central to Jewish spirituality, because what Abrahamic monotheism brought into the world was not just a mathematical reduction of the number of gods from many to one. The God of Israel is not primarily the God of the scientists who set the universe into motion with the Big Bang. It is not the God of the philosophers, whose necessary being undergirds our contingency. Nor is it even the God of the mystics, the Ein Sof, the Infinity that frames our finitude. The God of Israel is the God who loves us and cares for us as a parent loves for, and cares for, a child.

Sometimes God is described as our father:

“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?”

Malachi 2:10

Sometimes, especially in the late chapters of the book of Isaiah, God is described as a mother: “Like one whom his mother comforts, so shall I comfort you.” (Is. 66:13) “Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you.” (Is. 49:15) The primary attribute of God, especially whenever the four-letter name Hashem is used, is compassion, the Hebrew word for which, rachamim, comes from the word rechem, meaning “a womb”.

Thus our relationship with God is deeply connected to our relationship with our parents, and our understanding of God is deepened if we have had the blessing of children (I love the remark of a young American Jewish mother: “Now that I've become a parent I find that I can relate to God much better: now I know what it's like creating something you can't control”).

All of which makes the story of Abraham very hard to understand for two reasons. The first is that Abraham was the son told by God to leave his father:

“Go – from your land, your birthplace, and your father’s house...”

Gen. 12:1

The second is that Abraham was the father told by God to sacrifice his son:

Then God said: “Take your son, your only son, the one whom you love – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah. There, offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, the one that I will show you.”

Gen. 22:2

How can this make sense? It is hard enough to understand God commanding these things of anyone. How much more so given that God chose Abraham specifically to become a role model of the parent-child, father-son relationship. The Torah is teaching us something fundamental and counterintuitive. There has to be separation before there can be connection. We have to have the space to be ourselves if we are to be good children to our parents, and we have to allow our children the space to be themselves if we are to be good parents.

I argued last week that Abraham was in fact continuing a journey his father Terach had already begun. However, it takes a certain maturity on our part before we realise this, since our first reading of the narrative seems to suggest that Abraham was about to set out on a journey that was completely new. Abraham, in the famous midrashic tradition, was the iconoclast who took a hammer to his father’s idols. Only later in life do we fully appreciate that, despite our adolescent rebellions, there is more of our parents in us than we thought when we were young. But before we can appreciate this, there has to be an act of separation. Likewise in the case of the Binding of Isaac. I have long argued that the point of the story is not that Abraham loved God enough to sacrifice his son, but rather that God was teaching Abraham that we do not own our children, however much we love them. The first human child was called Cain because his mother Eve said, “With the Lord’s help, I have acquired [kaniti] a man” (Gen. 4:1). When parents think they own their child, the result is often tragic.

First separate, then join. First individuate, then relate. That is one of the fundamentals of Jewish spirituality. We are not God. God is not us. It is the clarity of the boundaries between heaven and earth that allows us to have a healthy relationship with God. It is true that Jewish mysticism speaks about bittul ha-yesh, the complete nullification of the self in the all-embracing infinite light of God, but that is not the normative mainstream of Jewish spirituality. What is so striking about the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible is that when they speak to God, they remain themselves. God does not overwhelm us. That is the principle the Kabbalists called tzimtzum, God’s self-limitation. God makes space for us to be ourselves.

Abraham had to separate himself from his father before he, and we, could understand how much he owed his father. He had to separate from his son so that Isaac could be Isaac and not simply a clone of Abraham. Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Rebbe of Kotzk, put this inimitably. He said:

“If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!”

God loves us as a parent loves a child – but a parent who truly loves their child makes space for the child to develop their own identity. It is the space we create for one another that allows love to be like sunlight to a flower, not like a tree to the plants that grow beneath. The role of love, human and Divine, is, in the lovely phrase of Irish poet John O’Donohue, “to bless the space between us”.

[Women of Faith by Amy Kalmanofsky](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/women-of-faith2/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/women-of-faith2/>

Abraham passed God’s litmus test of faith. God commands Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac to the land of Moriah and kill him. Faithful Abraham does not hesitate. [Genesis 22](#) may be the most loved and hated story in the Torah by every reader, no matter what their faith. Certainly, generations of Jews have struggled to make sense of this story, and of the father and God it portrays. Rashi, the 11th-century French commentator, cannot bear to think that God intended Abraham to kill Isaac. He writes: “God did not say ‘kill him [שחטנו],’ because the Holy One Blessed Be He did not want him to kill him. Rather, God commanded Abraham to “bring him up [להעלותו]” with the intention to give Isaac the status of being an offering” (on [Gen. 22:2](#)).

Although I appreciate Rashi’s motivation and the elegance of his reading, it seems clear to me that God commands Abraham to kill his son. And equally clear to me that God wants Abraham willing to do so. Abraham proves himself to be God-fearing [ירא אלהים, v.12], or what 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard calls a “knight of faith.” Contemporary Jews may not be comfortable with this level of faith, but we rely upon it every year when we pray on Rosh Hashanah: “Hold before You the image of our ancestor Abraham binding his son Isaac on the altar, when he overcame his compassion in order to obey Your command wholeheartedly.”

Abraham passes God’s test, but to do so, he must forego fundamental aspects of his life and character as a patriarch. In significant ways, he must fail as a man in order to become a man of faith. Remarkably, the women in Parashat Vayera take up the slack, and behave more like patriarchs than Abraham does. Lot’s daughters, Sarah, Hagar, and the Shunammite—the subject of the haftarah—assume patriarchal duties. The deeds of these matriarchs—and noticeably, they all

behave as mothers in their stories—offers insight into the complex roles women play in Torah.

Although men in the Torah may fairly be labeled patriarchal, there are only three official patriarchs in Jewish tradition: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What identifies these patriarchs is that each receives the twofold divine blessing of progeny and property.^[i] Their essential task as patriarchs is to establish and secure their inheritance by having children and by acquiring and protecting their property. In other words, they should behave as fathers who protect the life and property of their sons.

When Abraham raises the knife to kill Isaac, he does not behave like a father. In that moment, for that moment, he relinquishes his role as patriarch and becomes a knight of faith. As any Game of Thrones watcher knows, knights must sacrifice the needs and demands of the flesh in order to serve their higher cause. More than anything else, children epitomize those needs and demands.

Abraham's story could be over, and with it Israel's story. Faith alone cannot create a nation and define its people. There need to be individuals who advocate for the lives and property of their children. In this week's parashah and haftarah, these individuals are women. They are mothers who do what is necessary, if at times repugnant from our contemporary perspective, in order to secure the lives of their children.

Having survived the destruction of Sodom, convinced that there are no men left in the world, Lot's daughters sleep with their father to sustain life and preserve his seed [19:32, [ונוחיה מאבינו זרע](#)]. Sarah commands Abraham to exile Hagar and Ishmael in order to protect Isaac's inheritance [21:10, [כי לא יירש בן האמה הזאת](#)]. Unlike Abraham, who sends one son into the wilderness and lifts a knife to kill the other, Hagar cannot watch her son Ishmael die [21:16, [אל אראה במות הילד](#)], and works to sustain his life. Unwilling to accept the death of her son, the Shunammite also behaves like an anti-Abraham. Like Abraham, she saddles a donkey and takes a servant [[2 Kings 4:24](#); [Gen 22:3](#)] to pursue the prophet Elisha. Yet unlike Abraham, the Shunammite works for her son's life, not his death, and demands that the prophet revive him. As a woman of faith, she believes her son can be revived.

Given the life-sustaining and -affirming role these women play, it is easy to say that they are the heroes of their stories, and, arguably, of Israel's. Yet it remains a question whether the Torah views them as heroes. It is possible that the Torah does not. Certainly, Lot's daughters and Hagar, as mothers to Israel's enemies, are not part of Israel's story. Although God sides with Sarah, the Torah seems to have more sympathy (perhaps surprisingly, given her progeny) for Hagar, who receives divine revelation and assurance. The Shunammite may work on her son's behalf, but it is the prophet Elisha who miraculously revives him. At the story's conclusion, the Shunammite lies in humble gratitude at the prophet's feet.

The Torah may not view these women as the heroes, but it certainly sees them as essential characters, and perhaps even uses them to offer a critique of Abraham, the man of faith. Sarah and Hagar do not receive God's direct blessing, but they work for its fulfillment. Without them, Abraham would have no inheritance and Israel no story. The Shunammite may offer the strongest critique of Abraham, which could be the Rabbis' intention when assigning her story to this parashah. The Shunammite, like Lot's daughters, does not submit to death, but works to sustain life. Her story, like the stories of all these women, displays ferocious maternal power and perseverance.

As women of faith, the women of Parashat Vayera remind us of a faith that does not demand human sacrifice or death but recognizes the needs and demands of the flesh, and serves life above all. [i] Gen 12:2–3, 7; 13:14–17; 15:5–7, 18–21; 17:1–8, 22:15–18, 26:1–5, 23–25, 28:13–15, 35:9–11

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[The Wisdom of Welcome: Vayera by Rabbi Steve Greenberg](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-vayera-steve-greenberg-moraltorah/)

<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-vayera-steve-greenberg-moraltorah/>

Three tired and hungry travelers are accosted by an old man. He is running, actually limping toward them. He beseeches them to come back with him and to take some nourishment, some food and drink, to rest their feet for a bit in his home. He prepares for them not a snack, but a feast.

This story of welcome in Parshat Vayera is in our people's DNA. Abraham sits at the door of his tent. God appears to Abraham, but then does not say much about that appearance. Abraham makes out the shapes of three travelers in the distance. He runs to greet them and invite them in for food and drink. Of course we know the story: they turn out to be three angels sent to him and to Sarah to announce the birth of Isaac and to respond to the cry of Sodom.

It is important to recognize what the text is doing with this juxtaposition. Abraham and Sarah's tent is set in contrast to the city of Sodom. The two environments are polar opposites. Our parents' tent, open on four sides, is a welcoming oasis — the city of Sodom is a locked fortress. In Sodom, the sages tell us, there are rules designed to keep out undesirables. Itinerant travelers, vagrants, homeless folks are zoned out. Sodom was something like the first gated community. Only Lot, a nephew of Abraham, is willing to break the law and welcome in guests.

Abraham and Sarah's tent is a different world. In Sodom, other people's needs are experienced as an immediate loss. The outsider will make you vulnerable, the hungry will deprive you of what is rightfully yours. In one way or another, you will lose. In Abraham and Sarah's tent, while there is no opulence, there is plenty. Other people's needs are the contexts by which we share God's gifts and bring down blessing upon all. Culturally speaking, welcoming in the stranger is a defining

quality of Abraham and Sarah, our first father and mother. It is who we are. However, as defining of covenantal identity as welcome is, it is among the most difficult demands made of us as Jews and as people.

First, it challenges us to shift priorities.

Let's go back to the primal scene of Abraham and the angels. "The ETERNAL appeared to him in the plains of Mamre" (Genesis 18:1). The easiest way to read this line is as an introduction, a chapter title, or headline of sorts. Then when the angels appear in the next verse, we understand that they clarify how God appeared to Abraham — that is, in the form of three angels. While some medievals, like the Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, grandson of Rashi) read the text in this straightforward way, this is not the choice of the rabbis of the Talmud.

They instead suggest that this verse tells us that, immediately after Abraham circumcised himself and his household, God independently appeared to him in a marvelous revelation of Presence. While in the midst of an other-worldly, divine-sick visit, Abraham notices, far beyond his tent, three moving figures, strangers on the road. He wants the ecstasy of the divine visitation to continue but feels pulled toward the traveling wayfarers. Maybe they are tired, thirsty, hungry? It is in this tension between spiritual fulfillment and a stranger's physical needs that Abraham is tested. The Talmud suggests that this moment of conflict can teach us something important about the power of welcoming guests:

Rav Judah said in Rav's name: Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shechinah, for it is written, And he said, My lord, if now I have found favor in thy sight, please do not leave.... Rabbi Eleazar said: Come and observe how the conduct of the Holy Blessed One is not like that of mortals. The conduct of mortals is such that an inferior person cannot say to a greater man, "Wait for me until I return."

(Talmud Shabbat 127a)

Abraham's plea, "please don't leave," is not spoken to the three men, but to God. He sees the travelers and requests divine patience while he takes care of the human beings. The conflict and its resolution in the minds of the sages becomes a paradigm: greater is welcoming in guests than receiving the Divine Presence. The rabbis are not presuming regular Shechinah visitations, but they are telling us that people often put their own spiritual needs ahead of taking care of other people's physical needs. It is clear at least for this text, that this is the wrong order of priorities.

Second, welcoming guests challenges our notion of how far that welcome should extend. In Maimonides' description of the many duties of loving kindness (gemilut chesed), he first lists all the ways people help each other, and he includes the welcoming of guests. However, in the very next passage, he cites our text, not only in regard to the welcome itself but in regard to completing the welcome by

accompanying the traveler a bit on their way. Here are his words:

Rambam Yad, Laws of Mourning, Chapter 14, Law 14:1

It is a positive commandment of the sages to visit the sick, comfort the mourners, carry out the dead, accompany guests on their way, organize the burial of the dead, carry the bier on one's shoulder, to walk before the casket, to eulogize, dig the plot and bury the dead and likewise, to gladden the bride and groom, and to help them put together their new home. All these are gemilut hasadim accomplished by one's body and there is no limit to this. Even though all over these specifics are defined by the sages, they are all under the rubric of "love your neighbor as yourself."

Taking in guests is one of the rabbinic enactments, like dowering a bride and burying the dead. They are not independent mitzvot in the Torah, but each of them is a fulfillment of the biblical command to "love your neighbor as yourself." Whatever we would wish done for us, we must do for others. Maimonides, however, adds that taking in guests, and especially accompanying them for a bit of their journey, is the greatest mitzvah of all.

Law 14:2

The reward of accompanying (the guest on their journey) is greater than the rest. It is the law that Abraham, our father, established and it is the way of kindness that he practiced—to feed travelers and give them drink and accompany them on their journey. Greater is receiving guests than receiving the Presence of the Shechinah, as it says, "And he looked up, and behold, there were three men." And accompanying them is greater than receiving them. Our sages said: All who do not accompany (the stranger who is your guest) it is as if you spilled blood.

Why should this application of "love your neighbor" be greater than the rest? Could it be that hachnassat orhim, the welcoming of guests, is the greatest fulfillment of gemilut hasadim because it is identified with Abraham and so a sign of covenantal identity?

At the very end of this law 14:2, Maimonides adds that accompanying the wayfarer for a portion of their journey is even greater. Why? Might this suggest that there is a need for direction or protection that visitors could require? This must be a circumstance of some threat or danger for Maimonides to say that failure to accompany a guest is akin to spilling blood!

Welcome, it appears, does not end at the door. It is a commitment to walk with vulnerable guests as they emerge from the protection of our homes and enter the public square. Accompaniment announces: "This person I have sheltered continues to be under my protection even now." Allies accept a measure of personal risk when they walk in public with a feared or hated outsider. This sort of courage protects the stranger and, in time, it can transform communities.

In schools today all over America, young people are forming gay-straight alliances.

It is a way for friends to rally behind the LGBTQ kids in school and serve as a shield of sorts. Since every student organization has a teacher who serves as an advisor, students are aware of at least one adult in the administration in whom they can confide. The members of a GSA include allies which can help young people find a supportive social environment even before they are ready to come out of the closet. It is both a protected sanctuary and a courage-building context for creating allied support in the halls, the lunchroom, and the playground.

At the end of this week's portion, Abraham plants a flowering tamarisk, an eshel tree, to signal to distant travelers where refuge can be found. The mitzvah of hachnassat orhim and its fearless fulfillment is a mark of our covenantal identity and the fullest expression of the commandment to love. It reminds us that our attention to other people's physical needs rates higher than our own spiritual achievements. And like so many moral achievements, it begins at home, b'shivticha beveitecha, as we share meals with new friends and it expands boldly, b'lechtech baderech, as we walk by the way together, into the public square. *(Rabbi Greenberg offers this coda for anyone interested in a short Talmudic tale, "On the Satan's Lesson of Welcome," that extends the lesson. Rabbi Steven Greenberg is the author of Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition (University of Wisconsin Press), for which he won the Koret Jewish Book Award for Philosophy and Thought in 2005. Rabbi Greenberg is presently the Founding Director of Eshel, an Orthodox LGBTQ+ community support, education and advocacy organization.)*

Yahrtzeits

Ilisia Kissner remembers her stepfather Frank E. Strassfeld on Thurs. Nov.17th , Cheshvan 23).