

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayera
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Vayera in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, "Vayera," means "And He appeared" and it is found in Genesis 18:1.

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

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

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/579813/jewish/Haftorah-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 *haftorah* describes a similar incident that occurred many years later — the prophet Elisha assuring an elderly childless woman that she will bear a child.

The *haftorah* 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

[The Binding of Isaac: A New Interpretation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/binding-of-isaac-new/)

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It is the hardest passage of all, one that seems to defy understanding. Abraham and Sarah have waited years for a child. God has promised them repeatedly that they would have many descendants, as many as the stars of the sky, the dust of the earth, the grains of sand on the seashore. They wait. No child comes. Sarah, in deep despair, suggests that Abraham should have a child by her handmaid Hagar. He does. Ishmael is born. Yet God tells Abraham: This is not the one. By now Sarah is old, post-menopausal, unable by natural means to have a child.

Angels come and again promise a child. Sarah laughs. But a year later Isaac is born. Sarah's joy is almost heart-breaking:

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; all those who hear will laugh with me." Then she said, "Who would have told Abraham, 'Sarah will nurse children'? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." [Gen. 21:6-7](#)

Then come the fateful words:

“Take your son, your only one, 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

The rest of the story is familiar. Abraham takes Isaac. Together they journey for three days to the mountain. Abraham builds an altar, gathers wood, binds his son and lifts the knife. At that moment:

The angel of the Lord called out to him from the heavens, “Abraham! Abraham!”

He said, “Here I am.”

“Do not lift your hand against the boy; do nothing to him, for now I know that you fear God: for you have not withheld from Me your son, your only one.”

Gen. 22:11-12

The trial is over. It is the climax of Abraham’s life, the supreme test of faith, a key moment in Jewish memory and self-definition.

But it is deeply troubling. Why did God so nearly take away what He had given? Why did He put these two aged parents – Abraham and Sarah – through so appalling a test? Why did Abraham, who had earlier challenged God on the fate of Sodom, saying, “Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?” not protest this cruel act against an innocent child?

The standard interpretation, given by all the commentators – classical and modern – is that Abraham demonstrates his total love of God by being willing to sacrifice the most precious thing in his life, the son for whom he has been waiting for so many years.

The Christian theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote a powerful book about it, *Fear and Trembling*, in which he coined such ideas as the “teleological suspension of the ethical”^[1] – the love of God that may lead us to do things that would otherwise be considered morally wrong – and “faith in the absurd” – Abraham trusted God to make the impossible possible. He believed he would lose Isaac but still keep him. For Kierkegaard, faith transcends reason.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik saw the Binding as demonstrating that we must not expect always to be victorious. Sometimes we must experience defeat. “God tells man to withdraw from whatever man desires the most.”^[2]

All these interpretations are surely correct. They are part of our tradition. I want, however, to offer a quite different reading, for one reason. Throughout Tanach, the gravest sin is child sacrifice. The Torah and the prophets consistently regard it with horror. It is what pagans do. This is Jeremiah on the subject:

“They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal – something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.”

Jer. 19:5

And this is Micah: “Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my

body for the sin of my soul?”

Micah 6:7

It is what Mesha, King of Moab, does to get the gods to grant him victory over the Israelites: When the King of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the King of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land.” 2 Kings 3:26-27

How can the Torah regard as Abraham’s supreme achievement that he was willing to do what the worst of idolaters do? The fact that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son would seem to make him – in terms of Tanach considered as a whole – no better than Baal or Molech worshippers or the pagan king of Moab. This cannot be the only possible interpretation.

There is an alternative way of looking at the trial. To do so we must consider an overriding theme of the Torah as a whole. Let us assemble the evidence.

First principle: God owns the land of Israel. That is why He can command the return of property to its original owners in the Jubilee year:

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine. You are merely migrants and tenants to Me.”

Lev. 25:23

Second principle: God owns the Children of Israel, since He redeemed them from slavery. That is what the Israelites mean when they sang, at the Red Sea:

“Until Your people crossed, Lord, until the people You acquired [*am zu kanita*] crossed over.”

Ex. 15:16

Therefore they cannot be turned into permanent slaves: “For the Israelites are My servants, whom I brought out from Egypt: they cannot be sold as slaves.”

Lev. 25:42

Third principle: God is the ultimate owner of all that exists. That is why we must make a blessing over anything we enjoy: Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without first reciting a blessing is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven, since it says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” R. Levi contrasted two texts. It is written, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” and it is also written, “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the children of men!” There is no contradiction: in the one case it is before a blessing has been said, in the other, after a blessing has been said. Brachot 35a

All things belong to God, and we must acknowledge this before we make use of anything. That is what a blessing is: acknowledging that all we enjoy is from God. This is the jurisprudential basis of the whole of Jewish law. God rules by right, not by might. God created the universe; therefore God is the ultimate owner of the universe. The legal term for this is “eminent domain.” Therefore, God has the right to prescribe the conditions under which we may benefit from the universe. It is to establish this legal fact – not to tell us about the physics and cosmology of the Big

Bang – that the Torah begins with the story of Creation.

This carries a special depth and resonance for the Jewish people since in their case God is not just – as He is for all humankind – Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He is also, for Jews, the God of history, who redeemed them from slavery and gave them a land that originally belonged to someone else, the “seven nations.” God is Sovereign of the universe, but in a special sense He is Israel’s only ultimate King, and the sole source of their laws. That is the significance of the book of Exodus. The key narratives of the Torah are there to teach us that God is the ultimate Owner of all.

In the ancient world, up to and including the Roman Empire, children were considered the legal property of their parents. They had no rights. They were not legal personalities in themselves. Under the Roman principle of *patria potestas* a father could do whatever he wished with his child, including putting him to death. Infanticide was well known in antiquity (and in fact it has even been defended in our time by the Harvard philosopher Peter Singer, in the case of severely handicapped children). That, for example is how the story of Oedipus begins, with his father Laius leaving him to die.

It is this principle that underlies the entire practice of child sacrifice, which was widespread throughout the pagan world. The Torah is horrified by child sacrifice, which it sees as the worst of all sins. It therefore seeks to establish, in the case of children, what it establishes in the case of the universe as a whole, the land of Israel, and the people of Israel. We do not own our children. God does. We are merely their guardians on God’s behalf.

Only the most dramatic event could establish an idea so revolutionary and unprecedented – even unintelligible – in the ancient world. That is what the story of the Binding of Isaac is about. Isaac belongs to neither Abraham nor Sarah. Isaac belongs to God. All children belong to God. Parents do not own their children. The relationship of parent to child is one of guardianship only. God does not want Abraham to sacrifice his child. God wants him to renounce ownership in his child. That is what the angel means when it calls to Abraham, telling him to stop, “You have not withheld from Me your son, your only one.”

The Binding of Isaac is a polemic against, and a rejection of, the principle of *patria potestas*, the idea universal to all pagan cultures that children are the property of their parents.

Seen in this light, the Binding of Isaac is now consistent with the other foundational narratives of the Torah, namely the creation of the universe and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The rest of the narrative also makes sense. God had to show Abraham and Sarah that their child was not naturally theirs, because his birth was not natural at all. It took place after Sarah could no longer conceive.

The story of the first Jewish child establishes a principle that applies to all Jewish

children. God creates legal space between parent and child, because only when that space exists do children have the room to grow as independent individuals. The Torah ultimately seeks to abolish all relationships of dominance and submission. That is why it dislikes slavery and makes it, within Israel, a temporary condition rather than a permanent fate. That is why it seeks to protect children from parents who are overbearing or worse.

Abraham, we argued in last week's study, was chosen to be the role model – for all time – of what it is to be a parent. We now see that the Binding of Isaac is the consummation of that story. A parent is one who knows that they do not own their child. [1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, and the Sickness Unto Death*, 1843, translated by Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954, see pp. 55, 62-63.

[2] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17:2, Spring, 1978, pp. 25–37.

Accepting Guests: Abraham Sets an Example for the Jewish People by Dr. Noa Yuval-Hacham

<https://schechter.edu/accepting-guests-abraham-sets-an-example-for-the-jewish-people/>

Parashat *Vayera* opens with God's revelation to Abraham: "The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot."

Rashi, following the Talmud in Tractate *Sotah*, explains that God came to visit Abraham, who was recovering from having been circumcised.

In the next verse we are told that Abraham sees three men, who are later revealed to be angels, and hosts them in his tent, feeding them and providing them with drink.

In fact, there are two events here: God's revelation to Abraham and the angels' visit. Are these two separate events, or are they tied to one another?

The Talmud in Tractate *Shabbat* says:

Yehuda said in the name of Rav: Hospitality toward guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence, as it says: "And he said: Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please pass not from Your servant."

In other words, these are two different events. Abraham received two visits: one from the *Shekhinah* and one from the angels, and when he needed to give one precedence over the other, he chose the angels! Abraham turns to God and asks him to wait until he finishes hosting the three men. How can one explain this choice?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains it thus – and I quote: "What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity... Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one."

Man was created in the image of God. When he fulfills the commandment of hospitality toward guests he is paying respect to a creature of God, who were created in His image, and is therefore also worshipping God. This is why Abraham dares to ask God to wait until he has finished hosting the men who visit him.

In closing, we will look at two works of art that present this idea from a different perspective:

When Abraham first sees the angels, it says: “he saw three men standing on/above him.” They stand over him, they are taller than him.

The Jewish painter Abel Penn describes the scene in light of this: Abraham is at the center of the painting, bowing. Across from him we see the shadows of the angels who stand in front of Abraham. The left-most one holds a long staff in his hand.

Following the initial meeting with the guests, Abraham rises and begins hosting them, and then it says “and he stood on them under the tree as they ate”.

Now, the situation is reversed. The angels sit and Abraham stands. The artist Meir Ben Ori describes this scene in a painting that emphasizes Abraham’s figure, in the center of the painting, as opposed to the angels, who sit under the tree and whose figures blend into the depiction of the tree. When Abraham fulfills the commandment to host guests, he becomes taller even than the angels.

We are undergoing difficult days and weeks. We are in the midst of a difficult war, after having witnessed the complete and utter evilness of our enemies revealed to us. We believe, against the unprecedented moral low point we witnessed in the events of Simchat Torah, that each person was created in the image of God, to the extent that hospitality toward guests is greater even than receiving the Divine Presence. In these difficult days, we believe firmly that light will conquer darkness; good over evil. *(Noa Yuval-Hacham is the Dean of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies and a lecturer and academic advisor in the Land of Israel Studies and Judaism and the Arts tracks. She earned her PhD in 2011 from Hebrew University. Dr. Yuval-Hacham’s research deals with ancient art in the Land of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora, with a special emphasis on Jewish art and its relationship with neighboring cultures in late antiquity. She lives in Efrat with her husband and five children.)*

[Vayera: The Sin of S'dom and Its Impact on Creation by Rabbi Yuval Cherlow](https://www.growtorah.org/breisheit/2022/11/09-vayeira-the-sin-of-sdom-and-its-impact-on-creation)

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Two cosmic catastrophes unfold in the book of Bereishit. The first is the flood, in which Hashem brings waters down from the Heavens to destroy almost all life. The second is the utter devastation of S'dom and Amora, in which an area previously known as a fertile and lush “garden of Hashem”[1] becomes a desolate land “that cannot be sown, nor sprout, and no grass shall rise up upon it...which Hashem overturned in His anger, and His wrath.”[2]

One of the connections we see between these two events is the word the Torah employs in both cases, “lehashcheet” – to destroy. When Hashem relates to Noach

that He will bring the flood He says, “The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with robbery through them; and, behold, I am about to destroy them (“mashcheetam”) from the earth.”[3]

In the case of S’dom we see the same word applied: “When Hashem destroyed (“beshacheet”) the cities of the plain...”[4] The Torah did not elaborate on the sin of S’dom, but the underpinnings are expressed later in the prophecy of Yechezkel: “Behold this was the sin of S’dom...She and her daughters had pride, excess bread, and peaceful serenity, but she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy.”[5] The prophet’s description combined with what the Torah reveals to us gives us the following picture: the people of S'dom insisted on preserving their high quality of living to such an extent that they established a principle not to let the poor and homeless reside in their city.

Consequently, when a destitute person would come seeking help, they would revoke his right to any welfare – public or private. By doing this they figured they would preserve an elite upper-class community who would monopolize the profits that the bountiful land offers without having to distribute any revenues to a “lower class” of people.

An opinion in the Mishna Avot 5:10 further strengthens this picture of moral backwardness when it defines the Sodomite as one who says, “What’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is yours.”[6] The Mishna decries a man who wishes to remove himself from the social responsibility of welfare by closing himself and his wealth from others, even if he makes the claim that he is not taking away from anyone else.

Until now, we have dealt with sins between people and society (robbery and excluding the poor), yet our Torah portion also makes references to sins between man and his environment. The Torah again uses the verb “hashchata” in relation to the wanton destruction of fruit trees: “When you besiege a city to seize it, do not destroy (“tashchit”) its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down; is the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you?”[7]

A final example: the same Hebrew verb “hishchit” is used in regard to the widely accepted halacha delineated in the Sefer HaChinuch, not to destroy any part of our world. Under the above-stated commandment not to destroy fruit trees in a siege, comes a further negative commandment where we are forbidden to waste. For example, we must not tear or burn clothing or break or discard dishes for no reason. About all of these issues, and any other issues of wanton destruction, the Sages of blessed memory said in the Talmud, “And he has transgressed the sin of being a wasteful man.”[8]

What could be the connection between the corruption of the people of S'dom and environmental sins? There are two answers. The first and most simple reason is that humanity itself is part and parcel of its environment and is not separate from it.

Having been created in the image of Hashem we may think that we are detached from creation.

Further, our Torah-given obligation to preserve the world that Hashem gave us may suggest to us that we are above it. Nonetheless, we are bound to and part of creation. The Torah stresses this by including the creation of human beings in the six days of creation and creating us with the means to sustain ourselves like all other creatures, regardless of our unique stature of being created in the image of Hashem. Consequently, when one sins against a fellow creature — human or animal — they are sinning against their environment.

The most central point in the connection between moral behavior and environmental behavior comes from the understanding that both behaviors go hand in hand. One without the other corrupts the Divine vision for human action. That is, a society may be passionate about preserving its natural environment while maintaining a complete disregard for the welfare of its citizens. S'dom is a perfect example of this; they cared so much for their “garden of Hashem” that they refused to aid anyone in need.

The behavior of the people of S'dom, in effect, was extremely unsustainable – causing Hashem to turn one of the most fertile and lush ecosystems on earth into what today is infamous for its barrenness and desolation. From the mistakes of the people of S'dom we can learn the essential character traits that allow one to live in balance with the Creator and creation.

The moral human being is devoted to the holiness and purity of life, refrains from harming others, and sacrifices their personal wants for an ethical and upright path. When we are capable of fulfilling this ideal, we will naturally be successful in attaining the great spiritual task of infusing our religious lifestyle with one that is also environmentally sustainable.

May we all be blessed to undertake the task. (*Yuval Cherlow (born 1957) is a Modern Orthodox rabbi and posek. He is Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Hesder Amit Orot Shaul in Tel Aviv*)

[1] Bereisheit 13:10 [2] Devarim 29:22 [3] Bereisheit 6:13 [4] Bereisheit 19:29

[5] Yechezkel 16:49 [6] Mishna Avot 5:10 [7] Devarim 20:19 [8] [Sefer Hachinuch](#)

[Hagar's Tears and Ours: Choosing Connection over Despair by Ayelet Cohen](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/hagars-tears-and-ours/)

Genesis offers us narratives of our biblical ancestors struggling with many of the deepest challenges that we may face in our lives, whether in our familial or interpersonal relationships or as we face the uncertainty, fear, and loss of living in a broken world. Throughout the Genesis cycle we encounter families who accept the fallacy that there is not enough blessing to go around, and thus make terrible mistakes. Parents choose favorite children, siblings are pitted against each other as rivals. This year we return to these stories shattered by the horrific violence of the October 7th massacres, as we see a new and terrifying chapter unfold in the primal conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. We know that there is enough

suffering and trauma and outrage to go around. We wonder if there is enough compassion or enough hope to carry us through this time.

In Parashat Vayera we encounter Sarah and Hagar, two mothers who are more accustomed to scarcity than abundance and become trapped in their own fears for their beloved sons. After years of longing, Sarah receives the blessing of a son, of Isaac. She experiences a moment of pure joy.

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:6)

But when we are accustomed to feeling empty, lonely, less than, it can be hard to stay in that place of joy. And so when Sarah becomes concerned about the behavior of Ishmael, the son of Hagar, towards her own son, Isaac, she reacts with seemingly unrelenting fury.

She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." (Gen. 21:10)

Her words are dehumanizing. Painful. I would rather imagine that Sarah and Hagar had built a relationship through their years of being in the same family, parenting side by side. But so often our fear of inadequacy turns us inward. If we doubt whether we are worthy of love, we may close ourselves off from others. Our fear that we and those we love will not have enough can make us regard others as competitors for the same scarce resources. We forget that generosity and connection are available to us. Instead of turning towards connection and generosity, which can lead to abundance, we turn away from them.

Abraham, while distressed about doing so, sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with only some bread and a skin of water. Rejected by Sarah, betrayed by Abraham, when the water is gone Hagar quickly descends into despair.

When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she wept. (Gen. 21:16)

Hagar cannot bear to see her son suffer, and so she moves away from him. The rabbis do not want to believe that Hagar is abandoning her child in this moment. Radak, Rabbi David Kimchi, explains the unusual measure of a bowshot to explain that while Hagar went some distance away, she remained close enough that she could still see Ishmael. She is so consumed by her fear and grief that she moves away from him. Yet, she is motivated by love and so she stays close enough to still see him. We don't know if Ishmael can see his mother. We don't know if he knows she is still there. In her own grief and isolation, Hagar moves away from her one connection, and inadvertently deprives him of her presence. So now they are both alone, thirsty, and afraid.

Hagar weeps. Ishmael must have wept too, and perhaps while she could still see him, she was too far to hear his cries, because the text continues:

God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is." (Gen. 21:17)

Midrash Rabbah teaches that from this we learn: *The prayer of a suffering person on their own behalf is more beautiful, more desired, than the prayers of others.*

Rashi explains that if a person is in a position to pray on her own behalf those prayers will reach the One of Blessing first. Yet the midrash is saying even more than this. According to this reading, God responds to Ishmael's cry for help first, and only then to Hagar's tears of despair. God wants us to hope. We must reach towards the Divine to express our desire to survive and our hope that a different future is possible. Seeking that connection can open us to receive blessing. Hagar must confront her despair and break through her isolation to reconnect with her child in order to reclaim her will to survive. Abraham Joshua Heschel understood deeply the delicate line between fear and despair. In a 1963 speech titled "Religion and Race," he acknowledged that despair is seductive, because the evils of the world are tremendous. In the face of the greatest acts of human depravity, of brutal racism and injustice we may feel "that the most practical thing we can do is 'to weep' and to despair." But, he argues, succumbing to despair is an abdication of our most fundamental human responsibilities, and a betrayal of God. "The greatest heresy is despair, despair of humanity's power for goodness, humanity's power for love."

Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and let the boy drink. (Gen. 21: 18-19)

First Hagar must rise out of her isolation and despair and go back to Ishmael to hold him. Then God opens her eyes, and she is able to see the well of water. Perhaps it had been there the whole time, but she was so focused on looking away from Ishmael that she couldn't see it. When she remembers the power of love and connection, the possibility of good, her eyes are unclouded and she can find the water.

May each of us seek out connection to defeat the isolation and despair that clouds our vision, so that we may remember our potential to choose hope, and with that, our potential to help build a different future. *(Based on a d'var Torah delivered at Cong. B'nai Jeshurun in New York City on Rosh Hashanah 5784/2023.) Ayelet Cohen is the Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of The Division of Religious Leadership at JTS)*

[Vayera: War Ethics from Kabbalah by Rabbi Lev Meiorowitz Nelson](https://truah.org/resources/lev-meiorowitz-nelson-vayera-moraltorah_2023/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=062a54ef-2a41-492b-b6e0-30b0fd19ee32)

https://truah.org/resources/lev-meiorowitz-nelson-vayera-moraltorah_2023/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=062a54ef-2a41-492b-b6e0-30b0fd19ee32

The stories of this week's parshah feel too painful, too close to the headlines, for me to enter into them in the midst of the war in Israel and Gaza. Last week, Lot was a hostage (rescued successfully). This week, Abraham tries to avert collective

punishment in Sodom and Gomorrah and fails, leading to a divine aerial bombardment that obliterates the towns. An innocent mother and child are cast out into the desert to die of thirst.

What feels so hard in this moment is that I don't know what the right course of action is. I can identify many wrong ones, but my list of better alternatives sputters to a halt after such platitudes as "exercise more creative problem-solving" and "expand your moral imagination." A staff member at Gisha, the Israeli-Palestinian human rights organization that works on Gaza, texted a colleague, "There is no military strategy... I truly think that Israel is blinded by vengeance and at best, is guided by hubris in thinking it can win this war..."

And so, I suggest we turn to Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), as a way to express that confusion and all its intended feelings, as well as a potential source of wisdom to guide us forward.

For those less familiar with Kabbalah, a quick primer: Kabbalah understands God's unity as comprised of ten "emanations," called sefirot in Hebrew. The most common arrangement of them is in three sets of three, with the tenth — Shechinah or Malchut — being the most accessible to us mere mortals. The three least accessible sefirot are mostly involved in creation, while the seven "lower" ones interact with the world as it exists.

With me so far?

One of the ways the kabbalists interpreted the Torah is as one long name of God, with the stories in it representing movements or personality conflicts within God; each sefirah is identified with one or more biblical characters. Perhaps most familiar will be the "uppermost" of the seven: Chesed (Loving-Kindness) is Abraham and Gevurah (Strict Justice/Power/Limitation) is Isaac. Accordingly, one way to understand the Binding of Isaac in this week's parshah is that God's attribute of never-ending Love tries to bind and disarm God's fierce attribute of Justice. Left unchecked, that Justice would rampage throughout creation, destroying everything in its path that could not stand up to exacting divine standards of morality. Out of the tension between these two comes Tiferet, which I like to translate "Beautiful Balance" — Jacob, who integrates the tendencies of his father and grandfather.

One of the problems I see in the world's response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack is a preponderance of either Chesed or Gevurah thinking. The right wants a heavy-handed Gevurah response to Hamas; the far left that cheered Hamas seems to want the same, punishing Israel for the occupation without regard for the innocents killed or taken hostage. Calls for an unconditional ceasefire feel like too much Chesed, not differentiating between the actors in any way. All of these have their place, in measure, but are harmful when unchecked.

Alas, I don't see voices successfully manifesting Jacob's role of balancing and integrating these impulses.

Fortunately, Kabbalah has a related lesson for us. While it is tempting to think that we can operate on the level of Chesed and Gevurah, those are actually way, way above our pay grade. We can aspire to imitate those divine forces, but our human frailties limit us. The realm in which we can more appropriately hope to operate is the “lowest” of the trios, called Netzach, Hod, and Yesod.

Netzach, “Victory” or “Endurance,” is the sefirah of action. It is represented by Moses, the one who split the Red Sea, broke the first set of stone tablets, and smote the rock to bring forth water. Hod, its counterpart, is the sefirah of acceptance, of patience, of inaction. It is represented by Aaron, who ministered pastorally to the Israelites in the desert and performed their sacrifices, accepting each person as they were.

This feels more like the right question to be asking, setting aside the hubris of believing we have the answers when we clearly don't. Let us put aside our fantasies of being God's avenging fist or God's open, all-accepting arm. A response to the Hamas attacks is called for, of that I am certain, but my certainty ends there. We should ask ourselves: Is this the right action to take? What will be the consequences of acting? Of not acting? What happens if we wait? Sometimes inaction or delay is the least harmful choice. Moses striking the rock (the second time) had serious repercussions. Too many lives are at stake to fall into the trap of “We have to do something; this is something; therefore we must do it.”

Yesod (“Foundation,” represented by Joseph) mediates between Netzach and Hod. We should aim to be firmly grounded in order to take right action; acting impulsively usually leads to regrets later on. And there is poetic logic in our encountering the “higher” sefirot in the weekly Torah readings early in this war. Our first emotional reactions were in the realm of Chesed and Gevurah. As weeks pass, I hope cooler heads can prevail and shift gears to the more appropriate level, later in the story — and that it does not take the weeks that we as readers will require until we encounter Joseph in early December.

I want to close with a modern take on the kabbalistic idea that the Torah's stories are happening not in the “real world” but in some other frame of reality. The book “[Hagar Poems](#),” by Syrian-American Muslim poet Mohja Kahf, offers many insightful “midrashim” on this series of parshiyot, but this one spoke most to me in this particular moment.

[“Hagar Dreamwork: The Therapist's Notes”](#)

You've got this Hagar thing all wrong
It's mythic. You're stuck
at left-wing literal levels
of rage-for-justice rhetoric
and knee-jerk feminist bludgeoning
Go get your Jung and Ibn al-Arabi
What is the Hagar function in the psyche?

Here we have the angel and the baby;
here, two wives, two brothers,
a doppelganger story.
It's all interior, desert and city,
mountain and well.

Take it away from history;
wake up and jot down the latest jigsaw clue.

All the characters in the Hagar dream are you

With gratitude to Rabbi Katie Greenberg for introducing me to "[Hagar Poems](#)" and to Rabbi Seth Wax for consulting on the finer points of Netzach and Hod. All errors are my own.

(Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson is Director of Leadership and Learning, and Director of Emor: The Institute for Bold Jewish Thought, at T'ruah. He also serves part-time as rabbi of the Flatbush Jewish Center in Brooklyn, NY.)

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### Yahrtzeits

Roni Banforth remembers her mother Marjorie Gelfond on Sun. Nov. 5

Ilisia Kissner remembers her stepfather Frank E. Strassfeld on Tue. Nov. 7