

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayera
November 16, 2024 *** 15 Cheshvan, 5785

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.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Kings II 4:1-37](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/579813/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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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](#)

[Walking Together: Vayera by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z'l \(5772\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/walking-together/)

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There is an image that haunts us across the millennia, fraught with emotion. It is the image of a man and his son walking side-by-side across a lonely landscape of shaded valleys and barren hills. The son has no idea where he is going and why. The man, in pointed contrast, is a maelstrom of emotion. He knows exactly where he is going and why, but he can't make sense of it at all.

The man's name is Abraham. He is devoted to his God, who gave him a son and who is now telling him to sacrifice this son. On the one hand, the man is full of fear: am I really going to lose the one thing that makes my life meaningful, the son for whom I prayed all those years? On the other hand, part of him is saying: just as this child was impossible – I was old, my wife was too old – yet here he is. So, though it seems impossible, I know that God is not going to take him from me. That is not the God I know and love. He would never have told me to call this child Isaac, meaning "he will laugh" if He meant to make him and me cry.

The father is in a state of absolute cognitive dissonance, yet – though he can make no sense of it – he trusts in God and betrays to his son no sign of emotion. *Vayelchu shenehem yachdav*. The two of them walked together.

There is just one moment of conversation between them:

Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham answered, "God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Gen. 22:7-8

What worlds of unstated thoughts and unexpressed emotions lie behind those simple words. Yet as if to emphasise the trust between father and son, and between both and God, the text repeats: *Vayelchu shenehem yachdav*. The two of them walked together.

As I read those words, I find myself travelling back in time, and in my mind's eye I see my father and me walking back from shul on Shabbat. I was four or five years old at the time, and I think I understood then, even if I couldn't put it into words, that there was something sacred in that moment. During the week I would see the worry in my father's face as he was trying to make a living in difficult times. But on Shabbat all those worries were somewhere else. *Vayelchu shenehem yachdav*. We walked together in the peace and beauty of the holy day. My father was no longer a struggling businessman. On those days he was a Jew breathing God's air, enjoying God's blessings, and he walked tall.

Before each and every Shabbat my mother made the food that gave the house its special Shabbat smell: the soup, the kugel, the lockshen. As she lit candles, she

could have been the bride, the queen, we sang about in Lecha Dodi and Eshet Chayil. I had a sense, even then, that this was a holy moment when we were in the presence of something larger than ourselves, that embraced other Jews in other lands and other times, something I later learned we call the Shechinah, the Divine Presence.

We walked together, my parents, my brothers and me. The two generations were so different. My father came from Poland. My brothers and I were “proper Englishmen.” We knew we would go places, learn things and pursue careers they could not. But we walked together, two generations, not having to say that we loved one another. We weren't a demonstrative family but we knew of the sacrifices our parents made for us and the pride we hoped to bring them. We belong to different times, different worlds, had different aspirations, but we walked together.

Then I find my imagination fast-forwarding to August this year (2011), to those unforgettable scenes in Britain – in Tottenham, Manchester, Bristol – of young people rampaging down streets, looting shops, smashing windows, setting fire to cars, robbing, stealing, assaulting people. Everyone asked why. There were no political motives. It was not a racial clash. There were no religious undertones.

Of course, the answer was as clear as day but no one wanted to say so. In the space of no more than two generations, a large part of Britain has quietly abandoned the family, and decided that marriage is just a piece of paper. Britain became the country with the highest rate of teenage mothers, the highest rate of single parent families, and the highest rate – 46% in 2009 – of births outside marriage in the world.

Marriage and cohabitation are not the same thing, though it is politically incorrect to say so. The average length of cohabitation is less than two years. The result is that many children are growing up without their biological fathers, in many cases not even knowing who their father is. They live, at best, with a succession of stepfathers. It is a little-known but frightening fact that the rate of violence between stepfathers and stepchildren is 80 times that between natural fathers and their children.

The result is that in 2007, a UNICEF report showed that Britain's children are the unhappiest in the developed world – bottom of a league of 26 countries. On 13 September 2011, another report by UNICEF, compared British parents unfavourably with their counterparts in Sweden and Spain. It showed that British parents try to buy the love of their children by giving them expensive clothes and electronic gadgets – “compulsive consumerism”. They fail to give their children what they most want, and costs nothing at all: their time.

Nowhere do we see more clearly the gap between Jewish and secular values

today than here. We live in a secular world that has accumulated more knowledge than all previous generations combined, from the vast cosmos to the structure of DNA, from superstring theory to the neural pathways of the brain, and yet it has forgotten the simple truth that a civilisation is as strong as the love and respect between parent and child – *Vayelchu shenehem yachdav*, the ability of the generations to walk together.

Jews are a formidably intellectual people. We have our Nobel prize-winning physicists, chemists, medical scientists and games theorists. Yet as long as there is a living connection between Jews and our heritage, we will never forget that there is nothing more important than home, the sacred bond of marriage, and the equally sacred bond between parent and child. *Vayelchu shenehem yachdav*.

And if we ask ourselves why is it that Jews so often succeed, and in succeeding, so often give of their money and time to others, and so often make an impact beyond their numbers: there is no magic, no mystery, no miracle. It is simply that we devote our most precious energies to bringing up our children. Never more so than on Shabbat when we cannot buy our children expensive clothes or electronic gadgets, when we can only give them what they most want and need – our time.

Jews knew, and know, and will always know what today's chattering classes are in denial about, namely that a civilisation is as strong as the bond between the generations. That is the enduring image of this week's Parsha: the first Jewish parent, Abraham, and the first Jewish child, Isaac, walking together toward an unknown future, their fears stilled by their faith. Lose the family and we will eventually lose all else. Sanctify the family and we will have something more precious than wealth or power or success: the love between the generations that is the greatest gift God gives us when we give it to one another.

[Vayera: Paragons Protesting Power by Rabbi Matt Dreffin](https://truah.org/resources/matt-dreffin-vayera-moraltorah_2024_/)

https://truah.org/resources/matt-dreffin-vayera-moraltorah_2024_/

Throughout history, the Jewish people have faced countless challenges and crises. From the pharaohs of Egypt to the czars of Russia, our communities have needed to navigate persecution, oppression, and exile. Despite repeated hardships — ones that have arguably altered our individual and collective DNA — our resilience can be seen throughout the ages. The roots of this perseverance could arguably be traced to our earliest ancestors, who stood up in their commitment to justice and human dignity.

Two striking examples of this spirit can be found in Parshat Vayera. In what could be considered one of the most daring episodes in the Torah, Abraham confronts God with an impassioned plea for justice in the face of impending destruction. The city of Sodom, notorious for its wickedness and cruelty, is on the verge of

destruction. Here we see “...Abraham remained standing before Adonai. Abraham stepped forward and said, ‘Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?’” (Genesis 18:22-23) As Robert Alter notes, the verb for Abraham “stepping forward” often signifies someone approaching a ruler or authority to plead a legal case, as though Abraham is preparing to make a bold legal argument. (The Five Books of Moses) This is not the Abraham who meekly accepts the divine will, but rather the Abraham who rises to confront what he sees as injustice, questioning God’s plan and demanding mercy.

Abraham’s audacity is remarkable because it flips the conventional human and divine relationship. In a world where the Divine is seen as omnipotent, Abraham becomes the advocate for the vulnerable, standing as a voice for the innocent who may be caught in the general tide of destruction. He does not act as a passive recipient of divine will but as a fierce and determined upholder of justice, even when that justice seems to contradict the laws of the land — or, in this case, the divine decree.

Our second example of the defiant spirit gets expressed in drastically different fashion by our matriarch, Sarah. After hearing what seems to be a ludicrous statement about her body, Sarah laughs. (Genesis 18:5) Later on, she gives birth to a son, and the laughter is transformed. “All who hear about it will laugh with me.” (Genesis 21:6) Sarah has the power to transform a painful moment, using laughter as a way of undoing the fear and anxiety she feels. She becomes the mother of laughter, her way of ribbing and kidding and giving herself power with Abraham and God. (The Five Books of Miriam) Sarah shows us that laughter and jokes have a way of inverting the internal anxieties and the fears an oppressor might seek to stoke within us.

There are many ways to laugh and show a defiant spirit. It could be in the making of memes. Or, it could be more powerful. In the 1990s, Serbian students were constantly under physical assault from law enforcement when they tried to publicly protest. They would joke amongst each other, “It only hurts if you’re scared.” (Waging Nonviolence’s article on 10 Ways to Be Prepared) They provide an example of the transformative nature of laughter, showing how they took a new attitude towards police brutality. Laughter can release us, free us up to approach the heavy work of countering the forces that want to transform our society away from human dignity.

One of our great modern sages, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, noted how we need to be on the lookout for Sodom-like conditions, where each human’s value is judged by their usefulness as an object of enjoyment and egoism elevates itself. Sodom’s society, obsessed with self-interest and devoid of compassion, built systems that enforced inequality and disregarded the most vulnerable. Laws — mishpat — got leveraged without justice — tzedakah — in a way that became

perverted and cruel. (Timeless Torah) We see echoes of Sodom's society today: a government that serves the powerful, policies that prey on the vulnerable. From policies that disproportionately affect people experiencing poverty, to systems that fail to address systemic racism or inequality, the story of Sodom reminds us of the dangers of saying nothing.

Like our ancestors, through courageous pleas, we can reject this social order and demand a vision of justice that encompasses kindness and joy. This vision of justice does not separate righteousness from compassion, but recognizes that the holy treatment of the "other" is rooted in both. Like Abraham, we are called to step forward, raise our voices in defense of those whose rights are being violated, and advocate for a more just and compassionate world. Abraham and Sarah's behavior before God is a model for us all. May we fight for justice with courage and laughter, even in the face of overwhelming odds. *(Rabbi Matt Dreffin (he/him) currently resides in Birmingham, AL, while he serves as the manager of rabbinic education at T'ruah. He earned his Masters in Jewish Education and Rabbinical Ordination at the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. He is a recipient of the Covenant Foundation's 2019 Pomegranate Prize.)*

[A Midrash on Treating Hagar & Ishmael: A Lesson in Morality by Dr Gila Vachman](https://schechter.edu/a-midrash-on-treating-hagar-ishmael-a-lesson-in-morality/)
<https://schechter.edu/a-midrash-on-treating-hagar-ishmael-a-lesson-in-morality/>

The Midrash teaches: Judge a person not by what he might do in the future but according to his current situation.

I would like to focus on the story of Hagar and Ishmael and what the Midrash learns from this story.

The verses (Genesis: 21:9) tell us:

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת בֶּן הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק

Sarah sees the son of Hagar doing some bad things (there are several explanations for this word מצחק but we will not discuss them now), and so she orders Abraham to expel them (Gen. 21:10) –

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרְשׁ הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֵת בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת עִם בְּנֵי עַם יִצְחָק

Abraham feels sorry for his son Ishmael, his first born. It doesn't seem right to him, but God tells him to obey Sarah and do whatever she says. So, he wakes up in the morning, takes some bread and water (Gen. 21:14)

וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח לֶחֶם וְחֲמַת מַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל הַגֵּר שָׂם עַל שִׁכְמָהּ וְאֵת הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשְׁלַחָהּ

Hagar wanders in the desert of Beer Sheba. When they run out of water, she throws her child under one of the bushes (Gen. 21:14-15)

וּתְלַךְ וּתְתַע בְּמִדְבַר בְּאֵר שָׁבַע. וַיְכַלּוּ הַמַּיִם מִן הַחֲמַת וַתִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים.

Midrash Tanhuma reads this verse carefully and adds some details to this story.

First, it refers to the words **תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים** (under one of the bushes). These are not difficult words, but it seems unusual for the Torah to mention details like this.

The sages give their insights – “R. Yosé ben Halafta said: It was the place at which an angel had spoken to her previously.”

The word **שִׁיחַ** means bush, but also conversation, so R. Yose connects this story to the previous one, when Hagar ran away from her mistress and God’s angel spoke to her and blessed her.

“R. Berechiah said: It indicates that she spoke harshly towards the Lord **[שהטיחה]** **דְּבָרִים קָשִׁים כִּלְפֵי [מעלה]** R. Berechiah also reads the word **שִׁיחִים** as speech, but he adds the word **תַּחַת** as **הִטִּיחָה**, she threw or slammed harsh words at God.

But what did she say?

“Is it possible, Master of the Universe, that you are like an ordinary human being, who gives a gift and then withdraws it? Did you not tell me: Your seed will multiply exceedingly? Yet now my son is about to perish from thirst.” And the midrash continues: “The Holy One, blessed be He, thereupon commanded the angel to disclose the well to her. The angel responded: Master of the Universe, why do you bring forth a well for this wicked person who will ultimately waylay travelers and wayfarers?”

This explains, according to the midrash, the prophecy that Hagar was given when she ran away from Sarah that Ishmael will make his living out of robbery and stealing **יָדוּ בְּכָל יוֹד כָּל בּוֹ**. Other midrashic traditions emphasize that his offspring will torture the Children of Israel.

Knowing this, the angel raises a moral question: is it right to help someone who will eventually become a wicked person, perhaps even a killer?

The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: What is he now? Isn’t he righteous? I judge a man only on his state at the time he stands in judgment before Me. Therefore, it is written (Gen. 21:17): “And God heard the voice of the lad there where he is.”

כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנְּעָר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם.

The matter of helping someone in need though they might eventually turn against us became very actual during the last year. Many Israelis objected the idea of humanitarian aid brought into Gaza, claiming that we are helping the enemy. But is it right to prevent water and food from children who had done no harm? Or from the elderly people? Or from any civilian who had done no harm?

This midrash teaches us an important lesson: just like God told the angel – a person should be judged not by what he might do in the future but according to his current situation. And as long as this person had done no harm, we should treat them as righteous and not prevent them from receiving the help they need.

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Yahrtzeits

Roni Bamforth remembers her mother Marjorie Gelfond on Friday Nov. 22