

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayera
November 8, 2025 *** 17 Cheshvan, 5786

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

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

[Even Higher than Angels: Vayera by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/even-higher-than-angels/)
<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/even-higher-than-angels/> (5770)

It is one of the most famous scenes in the Bible. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day when three strangers pass by. He urges them to rest and take some food. The text calls them ‘anashim’ – ‘men’. They are in fact angels, coming to tell Sarah that she will have a child (Genesis 18).

The chapter seems simple. It is, however, complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.

Verses 2-16: Abraham and the men/angels.

Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

How are these sections related to one another? Are they one scene, two, or three? The most obvious answer is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event. First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, “to visit the sick” after Abraham’s circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news about Sarah’s child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice.

Maimonides suggests (in Guide for the Perplexed II:42) that there are two scenes (the visit of the angels, and the dialogue with God). The first verse does not describe an event at all. It is, rather, a chapter heading.

The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. God appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks God to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed – in verse 17 – does he turn back to God, and the conversation begins.

How we interpret the chapter will affect the way we translate the word Adonai in the third verse. It could either mean (1)

God or (2) 'my lords' or 'sirs'. In the first case, Abraham would be addressing Heaven. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.

Several English translations take the second option. Here is one example:

The Lord appeared to Abraham . . . He looked up, and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them. Bowing low, he said, "Sirs, if I have deserved your favour, do not go past your servant without a visit."

The same ambiguity appears in the next chapter, when two of Abraham's visitors (in this chapter they are described as angels) visit Lot in Sodom:

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening while Lot was sitting by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low he said, "I pray you, sirs, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night there and bathe your feet." Gen. 19:2

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halachic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case is unusual, because if we translate Adonai as 'God', it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If we translate it as 'my lords' or 'sirs', then it has no special sanctity.

The simplest reading of both texts – the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot – would be to read the word in both cases as 'sirs'. Jewish law, however, ruled otherwise. In the second case – the scene with Lot – it is read as 'sirs', but in

the first it is read as 'God'. This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that Abraham interrupted God as He was about to speak, and asked Him to wait while he attended to his guests. This is how tradition ruled that the passage should be read:

The Lord appeared to him . . . Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. The moment he saw them, he ran from the opening of his tent to greet them, and bowed down low to the ground. [Turning to God] he said: "My Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, please do not pass by your servant [i.e. Please wait for me until I have given hospitality to these men]." [He then turned to the men and said:] "Let a little water be brought so that you may wash your feet and rest under the tree..." Genesis 18:1-5

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence." Faced with a choice between listening to God, and offering hospitality to [what seemed to be] human beings, Abraham chose the latter. God acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

How can this be so? Is it not disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of God?

What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity. The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that God is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set

His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike.

The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity. As the Psalm puts it:

Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell... Their makers become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them. Psalm 115

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person: compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. Precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say 'You', we honour human dignity as sacrosanct. 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. It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

One of the most beautiful comments on this episode was given by Rabbi Shalom of Belz who noted that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham [nitzavim alav]. In verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them [omed alehem]. He said: at first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels. We honour God by honouring His image, humankind.

[Recasting Lot's Wife by Rabbi Ayelet Cohen](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/recasting-lots-wife/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/recasting-lots-wife/>

In difficult times it's natural to want to look back. Our memories can have a way of blurring the edges, so we remember things the way we have categorized them in our minds, without the details that don't fit our story. If we're remembering warmly, we may blur out the parts of the story that don't hold up; if it's a bitter memory we may leave out the parts that included kindness or helpfulness.

We can get bogged down in "if only" and "I told you so," tripping ourselves in regret and blame. Too much looking back, we can't move forward. Too little, we fail to learn from history and experience. Blame is rarely productive or compassionate. It can be an understandable defensive strategy to help us make sense of difficult or painful reality. If someone else is at fault, it puts distance between those terrible events and our own responsibility, as well as the possibility that we could suffer a similar fate. Sometimes there is clear culpability, and it is important to be honest. Often the real story is unknown.

Classical midrash and commentaries look for culpability to understand the puzzling verse describing the fate of Lot's unnamed wife.

וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַתְּהִי נְצִיב מֶלַח:

Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt. (Gen 19:26)

If the warning not to look back (19:17) was intended to spare Lot and his fleeing household the consequences of witnessing the destruction wrought on Sodom and Gomorra (see Ramban on 19:17) or betray any regret about leaving their material

belongings or their neighbors, Lot's wife's backward look was some kind of violation. Bereishit Rabba 51 imagines that this unusual punishment was poetic retribution for an imagined sin in Sodom, where she tried to avoid welcoming the angels into their home by asking the neighbors for salt to borrow, thereby informing them of the angels' arrival.

Many contemporary writers are puzzled by this theatrical punishment for such a natural impulse. How do we not look back? There is a fascinating body of poetry primarily by women poets whose imaginations were captured by the enigma of Lot's wife.

The American Israeli poet Shirley Kaufman (1923-2016) who was certainly aware of the rabbinic commentaries, offered a counter narrative in her poem, His Wife:

But it was right that she
looked back. Not to be
curious, some lumpy
reaching of the mind
that turns all shapes to pillars.
But to be only who she was
apart from them, the place
exploding, and herself
defined. Seeing them melt
to slag heaps and the flames
slide into their mouths.
Testing her owl lips then,
the coolness, till
she could taste the salt.

In Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash) Ruti Timor approaches the story with similar empathy, basing her reading on a midrash from Pirkei Derabbi Eliezer 25 which

imagines Lot's wife (to whom midrash assigns a name, Idit or Irit) overcome with compassion for her married daughters who she fears are remaining in Sodom:

He said to her: Quiet, woman! Do as I say! She was silent. And the angels took them out of the city, and Lot did not say to his wife a word of what they said. He walked sure-footed, and she lagged behind him. Her heart was heavy upon her, she looked back and saw her city, her family, and her property going up in flames. And his wife looked behind, and became a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26). Tear after tear dripped from her eyes, and the tears grew fuller and fuller, stronger and stronger, until they became a pillar of salt. She stumbled and fell, and stirred no more. And Lot did not look back. Our Sages of Blessed Memory said, with salt she sinned and with salt was she punished. And I say, she sinned not, but was punished all the same.

It takes tremendous spiritual work to greet others with compassion or empathy rather than blame. It is harder to see the world in its moral complexity, and to act accordingly.

Dr. Gila Vachman, from Machon Schechter, brought to mind another midrash from Bereishit Rabba on a passage later in the parsha when Hagar fears that Ishmael is dying of thirst in the desert.

Rabbi Shimon said, 'The ministering angels leapt to condemn [Ishmael]. They said, Creator of the universe, a person who is destined to kill your children by thirst, will You produce a spring for him?' The Holy One said to them: 'What is he right now, righteous or wicked?'

They said to him: 'He is righteous.' God said to them: 'I judge a person only at his present time. "
(Genesis Rabba 53:25).

Here, the midrash reframes judgment as compassion, echoing the lesson implicit in Lot's wife's story: to see others as they are now, not as we imagine their past or future to be. May we rise beyond our instincts to blame and condemn, to try to greet one another, even those we do not understand, with compassion. May we learn from the past and from the complexity of the human experience, to move forward with empathy towards justice. *(Rabbi Ayelet Cohen is Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership at JTS)*

[Vayera: Two Models of Governance by Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky \(2019\)](https://truah.org/resources/vayera-two-models-of-governance/)

<https://truah.org/resources/vayera-two-models-of-governance/>

Just what are the sins of Sodom?

It is written in Psalm 18:36, "You have given me the shield of Your protection." According to the Midrash, "this verse refers to God's protection of our ancestor Abraham." The verse continues, "...Your humility has made me great." This also refers to Abraham. In what way did God display humility to Abraham? Genesis Rabbah 48:1, on the beginning of this week's portion VaYera, interprets this verse to teach us that God stood while Abraham, who was healing from his circumcision, sat!

This surprising assertion takes some unpacking. Genesis 18:22, reporting the departure of two of the angels visiting Abraham and Sarah to head to Sodom, pretty clearly says, "Abraham remained standing before the Lord." But the

Midrash on that verse (Genesis Rabbah 49:7) points out that this is a “scribal correction” (tikkun soferim), suggesting that the original verse had God standing while Abraham was seated. To make it more theologically palatable, the ancient scribes “adjusted” the text, reversing subject and object, so that Abraham stood before God. But our rabbis knew that originally, God stood while Abraham sat. Why? God showed Abraham the virtue of humility.

And not merely by standing before Abraham, who was recovering from circumcision at age 99. God also showed humility by consulting with Abraham in advance of God’s nuking of Sodom and Gomorrah: “**Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?**” (Genesis 18:17). And if it were not enough that God stood, and God transparently submitted God’s plans to Abraham for his opinion — God also allowed Abraham to argue about those plans. And, perhaps, God even changed the plans in deference to Abraham’s insistent question: “**Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?**” (Genesis 22:25).

Why does God take such pains to display humility, consult with openness and transparency, and even adjust the plan in deference to Abraham’s bargaining? God explains, “**Since Abraham is about to become a great and populous nation . . . I have singled him out that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right**” (Genesis 18: 18-19). God offers Abraham a model of good governance. The King of the king of kings, the Blessed Holy One, Who needs no alliances, Who can create worlds by speaking but a word, Who can destroy cities by mere whim — God teaches Abraham the necessity of consultation, transparency, justice, and humility.

This is in stark contrast to the model of governance, or perhaps better: anarchy, offered in the very next chapter of Genesis. There, the townsmen of Sodom, from young to old, surround Lot's house, demanding that he turn over his guests. When Lot refuses them, claiming the inviolability of his hospitality, they shout, "Lock him up! Lock him up! Make Sodom great again!" Actually, those verses are not found in Genesis but in a rather recent midrash on the parashah. But the attack on strangers, the xenophobia of Sodom, the nationalism of the Sodomites, the mob rule and amoral behavior, these were the cause of the total destruction of the city, according to the Bible. When Abraham made his way to Sodom, "He saw the smoke rising like the smoke of a kiln. Thus it was, when God destroyed and annihilated the cities..." (Genesis 19:29).

This thuggish mob governance stands in sharp contrast to what God models for Abraham in this week's Torah reading. When the Sodomites protested that their way was perfect, the best, they said, We only want what is ours by right. We do not want those strangers to have what is ours. What's mine is mine. What's theirs is theirs. What could be fairer?

Pirke Avot (5:10) seems to reply directly to this claim, "The one who says, 'what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours?' There are those who say that this is the measure of Sodom." In other words, what seems on its face to be simple fairness is in fact a form of willful blindness and distortion of the moral order. God's example of humility, in contrast, can lead us to heed the better angels of our nature. *(Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, PhD, serves as Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he is the Louis Stein Director of the Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies.)*

Vayera: Avraham's Plea – Showing Mercy

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/table-for-five/2025/11/02/vayera-avrahams-plea/>

Why Did Abraham Challenge God?

Table for Five

And Abraham approached and said, “Will You even destroy the righteous with the wicked? -Gen. 18:23

Michael Milgraum - Psychologist and Author

This question of punishing the righteous along with the wicked does sound like a challenge to Hashem, even a protest. Avraham raises a question that, despite the thousands of years that separate us and him, has not diminished in its raw emotional intensity. In fact, I would argue that his question has intensified, in the shadow of the brutal and traumatic history since his time, particularly the unparalleled carnage seen in modern times.

What is interesting about this quote is that it's a question not a statement. And I believe in its form as question there is embedded an element of hope. It is the same hope that anyone standing before a judge, parent, king, or King of Kings might long for—that the authority figure render a just judgement that does not make the righteous suffer for the misdeeds of the wicked. So often we look around the world and the opposite seems to be true. But being Jewish gives us a responsibility—to strive to generate the longing and faith that we do not see the whole picture, and that justice will be served in the fullness of time, taking into account not only this world but the World to Come. Nonetheless, beyond this, we also must learn from Avraham's example of protest. The world we see is often not the world that should be. And we should act locally and pray globally to make it the more righteous and just

world that we yearn for.

Rabbi Aryeh Markman - Executive Director: Aish LA/Jewish American Summit

Can you imagine Abraham having this conversation with God about Gaza? Would you entertain the subject or allow the Gazans to be obliterated down to the last child? The question is not, "Is this right or wrong?" Torah doesn't deal in right and wrong. The Torah deals in the binary code of "Is this true or false?". Right and wrong can be a slippery, subjective slope. True and false is black and white with no grey, running on God's software. Unlike Noah, who was told the Flood would wipe out mankind and obediently built an ark without complaint, Abraham stands up for a corner of humanity involving the Sodom region in Canaan. Factoid: This scene is soon after Abraham undergoes the bris mila/circumcision commandment. He is transformed from a more reflexive, contemplating personage into an assertive force, prepared to stand in contradiction to God. There is a difference between Jews and non-Jews. We have the bris, the covenant with God, which demands and empowers us to constantly improve ourselves and the world. The Talmud states everything we do either elevates or reduces us and our surroundings. Thus, our actions are either true or false.

The world, by contrast, witnesses mass killings among rival groups and is silent, while we insert ourselves in harm's way to, literally, protect our enemies. Just ask the I.D.F!

The Torah is teaching us that Abraham is the progenitor, who taught us, in a place of 100% evil we still must ask, "Are any righteous home?"

[Rabbi Natan Halevy - Kahal Joseph, www.Kahaljoseph.org](http://www.Kahaljoseph.org)

Abraham embodied the divine attribute of loving-kindness, as noted in Sefer HaBahir, where his merit shielded others—even the undeserving—from punishment and destruction.

When learning that Hashem planned to destroy Sodom, Abraham's reaction was not quiet acceptance or prayer, but passionate and courageous argument. This appears uncharacteristic of one whose essence was mercy. The resolution lies in understanding that Abraham's kindness was not emotional indulgence but disciplined service of Hashem's ultimate will. His compassion flowed through reason, allowing him to act firmly when necessary to uphold divine justice.

When Abraham "approached" Hashem, it was not physical but spiritual. He invoked three divine names—E-lokim, E-l, and the Tetragrammaton—each representing a different mode of address: confrontation, appeasement, and heartfelt prayer. He challenged the decree by asking whether Hashem would destroy both righteous and wicked together, questioning whether anger could truly overpower mercy. Abraham's plea affirmed that mercy must prevail; the merit of the few can sustain the many.

Believing that righteous individuals must exist within Sodom, Abraham argued that sparing them could inspire repentance among others. If Hashem punished the righteous alongside the wicked, moral order itself would be undermined; if only the righteous survived, they would still suffer the anguish of loss. Hashem acknowledged Abraham's profound reasoning, agreeing that if fifty righteous could be found—ten for each of the five cities—their merit would suffice to save all. Even when reduced to ten, the minimum for a minyan, Abraham demonstrated that a small community of righteousness can uplift and transform an entire society.

Rabbi Cheryl Peretz - Vice Dean, AJU Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

God decided that the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah warranted their destruction. When God revealed the plan, Abraham did not remain silent. He stood before God and pleaded on behalf of the innocent who might live among the guilty.

With willful determination and passion, Abraham implored God not to destroy the cities if fifty, or forty, or even ten innocent people could be found. A few verses beyond this moment, Abraham's bold prayer — "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Genesis 18:25) — reflects both deep faith and moral courage.

Abraham was not from Sodom and probably did not know anyone there beyond his nephew Lot, who is not mentioned here. Yet he understood that the inhabitants were fashioned in God's image and were therefore as worthy as he himself.

Though Sodom and Gomorrah were ultimately destroyed, Abraham's plea left behind a timeless spiritual lesson — a legacy for which we can strive to live.

We lose our sense of humanity when we can no longer recognize the humanity within others. When we fail to see each person as deserving of compassion, dignity, and love, we deny the very essence that connects us all.

We are not measured by how we treat those who are like us, but by how we respond to those who are different. Whenever our words or actions strip others of their worth, we diminish ourselves. To be truly human is to honor the sacred spark of humanity in every person.

Rabbi Rebecca Schatz - Associate Rabbi of Temple Beth Am

Abraham is a character born out of trauma. Noah before him, does not say anything when God informs him the world will be destroyed. Maybe he couldn't, maybe he didn't want to, or maybe his relationship with God wasn't strong enough to know it was a possibility to ask or fight. However, Abraham has that proximity to God to challenge a choice if he believes it is wrong or immoral.

At the beginning of this parsha, Abraham sees three people, still recovering from the physical covenant with God of brit milah, and yet takes care of them. Thus, we learn to visit the sick and to welcome in the stranger. However, we also learn that Abraham is a person who cares for humanity, potentially because Noah did not.

God wonders whether to share the plan of S'dom and Amarah with Abraham. Eventually Abraham is told and responds with the question in our verse. Abraham believed in God who had compassion and could answer a question before acting.

Midrash Tanchuma teaches that "proof of this is that even when [hu]mankind sins against God and provokes anger, (God) relents and seeks an advocate to plead on their behalf."

As humans, we always have options and choices to make. Are we only making decisions based on history, or fear? Are we making our decisions or responding to those poorly made before us? We need to ask more questions and have more conversations before we accept that the innocent will be punished with the guilty.

Yahrtzeits

Ilisia Kissner remembers her stepfather Frank E. Strassfield on Friday November 14