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.

Haftarah 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 Music of Ambivalence by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l (5768)
https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/the-music-of-ambivalence/

The Torah does not have a word for ambivalence (the nearest

is Elijah's question to the Baal-worshipping Israelites: "How long will you waver between two opinions?"). It does, however, have a tune for it. This is the rare note known as the shalshelet. It appears three times in Bereishit, each time at a moment of crisis for the individual concerned.[1] In each case it signifies an existential crisis. The agent is called on to make a choice, one on which his whole future will depend, but he finds that he cannot. He is torn between two alternatives, both of which exercise a powerful sway on him. He must resolve the dilemma one way or another, but either way will involve letting go of deeply felt temptations or deeply held aspirations. It is a moment of high psychological drama.

The shalshelet is an unusual note. It goes up and down, up and down, as if unable to move forward to the next note. It was the 16th century commentator Rabbi Joseph Ibn Caspi (in his commentary to Bereishit 19:16) who best understood what it was meant to convey, namely a psychological state of uncertainty and indecision. The graphic notation of the shalshelet itself looks like a streak of lightning, a "zigzag movement" (tenuah me'uvetet), a mark that repeatedly moves backwards and forwards. It conveys frozen motion — what Hamlet called the native hue of resolution sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought — in which the agent is torn by inner conflict. The shalshelet is the music of ambivalence.

One instance occurs in Genesis 24:12. Abraham has sent his servant (not identified in the text but taken by the commentators to be Eliezer) to find a wife for his son Isaac. He goes to the city of Haran where Abraham's family remained while Abraham himself went on to the land of Canaan. Arriving at the town's well, Eliezer proposes a test: the woman who comes to draw water, offers some to the traveller, and in addition gives water to his camels, will be the

one chosen by God for his master's son. Over the "and he said" introducing his request of God that this test should succeed, the Masoretic tradition has placed a shalshelet.

The commentators identify multiple sources of ambivalence at this point. First, was the test permitted? Jewish law forbids relying on "omens" (Deut. 18:10, Hullin 95b), and Eliezer may have felt that his test was dangerously close to pagan practice.[2] Ibn Caspi himself suggests that Eliezer was unsure as to whether a single test like this was sufficient grounds on which to base so fateful a decision as the choice of a marriage partner for Isaac.

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 59:9), however, offers the most insightful explanation. Eliezer had mixed feelings not about the test but about the whole mission itself. Until that point, says the Midrash, he had been 'sitting and weighing whether his own daughter was suitable for Isaac.' He had hoped, in other words, that one way or another, Abraham's estate would pass to him.

There are two cues that led the Midrash to this hypothesis. The first is that when Abraham first spoke to God about his childlessness, he said: 'My Lord God, what will You have given me if I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' (Gen. 15:2). Eliezer, at that time, had reason to hope that he would be Abraham's heir.

The second is that when Abraham charges him with the mission to find a wife for his son, he replies, 'What if [ulai] the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land?' As Ibn Ezra notes (Commentary to Psalm 116:16), the word ulai is not always neutral. Sometimes it signifies an eventuality one does not want to happen, but at others it indicates an event one does wish for. Eliezer's "what if" may have been an

unconscious expression of the fact that, with half his mind, he wanted the mission to fail. That would once again place him or his daughter in a position to be Abraham's heir.

It was therefore with profoundly mixed feelings that he prayed for a woman to appear who would be God's choice of Isaac's wife.

More dramatic still is the case of Joseph. Child of a shepherd (Jacob), an almost youngest son, hated by his brothers and sold by them into slavery, he finds himself in Egypt as head of household to one of its prominent citizens, Potiphar. Left alone with his master's wife, he finds himself propositioned by her:

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph. "Lie with me," she said. But he refused… Bereishit 39:6-8

Over 'he refused', tradition has placed a shalshelet.

We can imagine the conflict in Joseph's mind at that moment. On the one hand, his entire moral sense said 'No'. It would be a betrayal of everything his family stood for: their ethic of sexual propriety and their strong sense of identity as children of the covenant. It would also be, as Joseph himself says, a betrayal of Potiphar himself: 'With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?'

And yet, the temptation must have been intense. He was in an urban civilisation of a kind he had not seen before. It was his first experience of "bright lights, big city." He was far from home. No one could see him. After all the hostility he had suffered in his childhood, being propositioned by Potiphar's

wife must have been flattering as well as seductive. It was a decisive moment. A slave, with no realistic hope of rescue, was he to become an Egyptian, with all the sexual laissez faire that implied? Or would he remain faithful to his past, his conscience, his identity?

The Talmud gives a graphic description of his inner torment:

> The image of his father appeared to him in the window and said, “Joseph, your brothers’ names are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the [High Priest’s] ephod, and you will be among them. Do you want your name to be erased? Do you want to be called an adulterer?”

The shalshelet is an elegant commentary to Joseph’s crise de conscience. In the end, Joseph refuses, but not without deep inner struggle.

Which brings us to the third case (chronologically the first) in Vayera. Here the conflict is explicit. Two of the angels who had visited Abraham now come to Lot in Sodom. They tell him the city and its inhabitants are about to be destroyed. He and his family must leave immediately. But Lot delays:

> The visitors said to Lot, “Who else do you have here — children-in-law, sons, or daughters, or anyone else in the city? Bring them out of here, because we are about to destroy this place. So great is the outcry against them before the Lord that He has sent us to destroy it.”
> Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, the men who were betrothed to his daughters, and told them, “Get up and leave this place: the Lord is about to destroy the city!” But his sons-in-law thought him laughable.
> As dawn was breaking, the angels hurried Lot, “Get up!” they said. “Take your wife and your two daughters here, or you will be swept away amid the city’s sin.” Still he hesitated. So the

men seized him, his wife, his two daughters by the hand, and led them safely outside the city, for the Lord had mercy upon him. Gen. 19:12-16

Over 'he hesitated' is a shalshelet.

Lot's hesitation goes to the core of his identity. We recall that earlier, when he and Abraham agreed to separate to end the quarrel between their herdsmen, 'Lot raised his eyes and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan up to Tzoar was well-watered. It was like the garden of the Lord... So Lot chose for himself the entire plain of the Jordan. He travelled eastward…' (Gen. 13:10-11). He chose to make his home in Sodom, despite the fact that - as the Torah states - at that point its inhabitants 'were evil, great sinners against the Lord' (Gen. 13:13).

When we see Lot in chapter 19, he and his family have already become profoundly assimilated. His daughters are set to marry local men. On the phrase at the beginning of the chapter, 'Lot was sitting in the city gate,' the Sages said that 'he had just been appointed as a judge' - the gate of the city being the place where, in Abrahamic times, the judges and elders sat to resolve disputes. Lot does not see himself, as did Abraham, as a 'stranger and temporary resident'. He has decided to put down roots in the Jordan valley and the cities of the plain. This is henceforth where he belongs — so much so that the visitors have to physically drag him away.

Lot's sense of belonging, however, is either naiveté or self-deception. The text makes this clear at three points. The first is the attempted sexual assault on Lot's visitors (Gen. 19:4-5). Evidently the people of Sodom do not take kindly to strangers. This is the first hint that perhaps Lot too is, in their eyes, a stranger. In fact, he is. The Torah, in its second indication, is

brutally explicit:

"Get out of our way," they replied [to Lot, when he begged them to respect his visitors. Then they said,] "This fellow came here as a migrant, and now he is setting himself up as a judge! We'll treat you worse than them." Gen. 19:9

The third comes when he tells his daughters' husbands that they must escape because the city is about to be destroyed, 'But his sons-in-law thought him laughable' (Gen 19:14). Lot's elaborate new identity is about to come crashing down about him - not only because of the impending destruction but because he has discovered in successive blows that he has not been accepted in this place. Sodom hates strangers, they still consider Lot 'a migrant', and his sons-in-law regard him as a fool.

Yet despite this, he hesitates. He has invested too much of himself in the project of making his home among the people of the plain. He is a prime example of what Leon Festinger called 'cognitive dissonance'. According to Festinger, the need to avoid dissonance is fundamental to human beings, otherwise it creates unbearable tension. It is this tension that Lot cannot resolve - and which is signalled by the shalshelet over 'he hesitated'. It was the ultimate existential question, 'Who am I?' Having tried so hard to become one-of-them, he finds it almost impossible to tear himself away. (There were, tragically, many Jews in Germany and Austria in the 1930s who refused to leave because they would not or could not believe the evidence around them, that Hitler was serious in his threats to destroy Jews).

Incidentally, Festinger's theory also explains the behaviour of Lot's wife who 'looked back', against the explicit instruction of the angels, 'and was turned into a pillar of salt.' Festinger

called this syndrome ‘post-decision dissonance’. He predicted that the more important the issue, the longer the person delays a decision and the harder it is to reverse, the more he or she will agonise over whether they have made the right choice. They have second thoughts; they need reassurance; they ‘look back’.

The shalshelet over Lot’s hesitation is no mere detail of the biblical text. It is, in a real sense, the story of the modern Jew. Entering mainstream society for the first time, and yet encountering overt or covert antisemitism, many nineteenth-century European Jews became ambivalent about their identity. They tried to hide it and to assimilate. They became secular Marranos. It did not work. The more they strove to be like everyone else, the more conspicuous they were, and the stronger antisemitism grew. They themselves lost much in the process - not only their Jewish heritage itself, but also the simple capacity to know and take pride in who they were.

The lives of Lot and Abraham exemplify for all time the contrast between ambivalence and the security that comes from knowing who one is and why. Lot, who tried to become someone else, found himself regarded by his neighbours as an alien, an arriviste, an interloper, a parvenu. To his own sons-in-law he was ‘laughable’. Abraham lived a different kind of life. He fought a war on behalf of his neighbours. He prayed for them. But he lived apart, true to his faith, his mission and his covenant with God. What did they think of him? Early in the next sedra – Chayei Sarah - the Hittites call him ‘a prince of God in our midst’ (Gen. 23:6).

That equation has not changed. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. They are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism. Never be ambivalent about who

and what you are. [1] The shalshelet note does appear a fourth time in the Torah — in Vayikra 8:23, where its significance is less apparent — but we will be focusing on the implication of the three occurrences in Sefer Bereishit. [2] Ran to Hullin 95b, however, states that Eliezer's conduct was legitimate; he sought not an omen but a sign of the woman's character.

Vayera: Can Hospitality Outlast Violence? By Rabbi Abi Weber

https://truah.org/resources/abi-weber-vayera-moraltorah_2026_/

Most people remember Vayera for its heart-pounding conclusion: An angel stops Abraham's hand as he is about to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. In the face of this violent and unsettling story, it's easy to forget how the parshah begins: with simple hospitality. Abraham, sitting at the entrance of his tent at the hottest moment of the day, sees three strangers and runs to greet them. With his wife's help, he provides these visitors with food, water, and a comfortable place to relax, and it turns out the men bear the good news of Sarah's forthcoming pregnancy. Good thing Abraham and Sarah were so kind to them!

I have written for (M)oral Torah before about my visit one year ago to the West Bank. Alongside other T'ruah rabbis and human rights supporters, I accompanied Palestinian olive farmers and shepherds as they attempted their day-to-day activities against the backdrop of intimidation and violence from extremist Jewish settlers. This fall, again, Jewish activists will join Palestinian farmers for the annual olive harvest. Harassment from settlers has become so severe that it has made international news on the regular, and even U.S. Ambassador Mike Huckabee has referred to Jewish extremism as a "horrific act of terror."

In the face of such violence, it is easy to forget the other moments of my trip, moments that won't make any headlines. And so, one year later, I'd like to return to that visit and the remarkable hospitality that, until its climactic end, defined my stay.

I landed at Ben Gurion Airport in late October 2025 and was delighted to take the train directly to Jerusalem, a train that had not existed during my last stay in the Holy Land. My friend, a Jewish Israeli whom I had met during her postdoc in Philadelphia, met me at the Central Bus Station and guided me onto the light rail to her home in Beit Hakerem.
What followed was an idyllic Shabbat: eating delicious Shabbat meals full of fresh homemade hummus and roasted eggplant; walking around the leafy neighborhood; sitting on the balcony drinking tea from verbena leaves; and playing board games with my hosts and their two young children, who had gone to preschool with my own children in Philly. My hosts were endlessly gracious, providing me with all that I needed and never asking anything in return.

As Shabbat came to a close, I said goodbye to my generous hosts and headed into Merkaz Ha'Ir (Center City Jerusalem) to meet up with the other T'ruah rabbis. Early the next morning, we took a bus to Battir, a small Palestinian village near Bethlehem. We hiked into a wadi (dry valley) and met up with a family that owned an olive grove along the terraced hillside. All day long, we harvested olives, keeping an eye out at the Jewish settlement at the top of the hill. And all day long, our host — the woman who owned the grove — cooked. With portable stoves and bags of rice pulled out of a small storage shed, she mixed a little bit of this and a little bit of that to put together a feast. As we reached noon, that hottest moment of the day, our host insisted that we sit down together around the

table (which she had pulled out from nowhere and set up on the hillside) and enjoy the delicious meal she'd cooked.

We sat together — rabbis, international activists, Palestinian farmers — and ate rice, cucumber and tomato salad, olives, and all manner of fresh foods. Our Palestinian host spoke no English but still managed to harangue us into eating more and more, gesturing at how skinny we all looked! We laughed together and told stories, even as we knew that violence could arrive at any moment.

As we headed to a Palestinian shepherding community in the Jordan Valley, where a smaller group of us would stay overnight, I thought about the story that I would tell when I returned: about the remarkable hospitality of the Middle East. About the ways in which the peoples of the Holy Land are far more alike than they are different. About how close peace felt while sitting in the shade of an olive tree, eating rice with Jews and Palestinians, Israelis and Americans.
As has been written elsewhere (and elsewhere), the story of my trip changed quite a bit on the last day. Jewish settlers attacked our group of olive harvesters, injuring a rabbi with a surveillance drone and shooting live ammo in our direction. What started as a beautiful story of hospitality and coexistence became yet another harrowing tale of settler violence and extremism.

I sometimes wish that Vayera ended after Abraham and Sarah's visit with the three mysterious guests. I wish that the moral of the story was that one should always welcome guests with open arms. Instead, it is impossible to speak about Vayera without bringing up the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the almost-sacrifice of Isaac. But these moments of violence and bloodshed need not define our parshah.

These moments of violence need not define our relationship with the Holy Land.

I yearn for a day when I can tell the story of Middle Eastern hospitality without reference to pain, struggle, occupation, and violence. When we can eat in one another's homes, sharing hummus and rice and stories and friendship. When the angels come not to announce destruction but to stay our hands and give us only good news. Let that day come speedily, bimheira v'yameinu. Ken yehi ratzon, let this be God's will.

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When Does Hagar See: Vayera by Ofra Arieli Backenroth
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/when-does-hagar-see/

When I grew up in Givataim, I loved to study a little book of the Bible with Gustave Dore's illustrations. The illustrations depicted many biblical scenes, often included sweeping landscapes and deep contrast of light and shadow, and expressed intense, theatrical, and emotional energy. Artists often turn to biblical stories to demonstrate their artistic skills and their interest in the human condition.

Looking at art books, visiting museums, and studying the arts became my passion. The first course I taught at the William Davidson School was titled Arts as Exegesis in Jewish Education, and following it was a popular course called The Arts as a Window to Israeli Society. I loved teaching these courses and learned together with the place the arts have in

making hard topics accessible. This week's Torah portion Vayera presents readers with the expulsion of Hagar. As always, the biblical text limits mentioning emotions and avoids presenting the readers with judgment. This style allows readers to constantly engage in the act of interpretation and fill in any gaps left by the Bible's editors. My colleague, Professor Barry Holtz, posits that this manner of interpretation helps readers understand the text and makes it continuously alive (Holtz, 1984). Readers are encouraged to fill the gaps in the story with meanings and emotions.[1]

The story of Hagar poses difficult questions about loyalty, trust, and, eventually, the meaning of evil. Beginning in chapter 16, the narratives opens with a promise from God to Abram: "I will establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you, for all their generations, an everlasting covenant" (Gen. 16:7).[2] However, there is tension between God's promise to Abram to be the father of a great nation and have many descendants and the fact that Sarai is barren. Hagar, an Egyptian maid, is brought to Abram by the childless Sarai, and later becomes his wife and the mother of his first-born son, Ishmael. Sarai initiates this chain of events while a mostly inactive Abram follows Sarai's wishes and God's commands.

In chapter 21, we meet Hagar again. In the intervening time, God and Abram have forged a covenant. The new names, Abraham and Sarah, reflect changes in identity and serve as a reminder of the covenant. Sarah, now a mother to her own child, convinces Abraham to send Hagar away. We are witnessing a heartless action. Abraham listens to Sarah, who wants to prevent Ishmael from inheriting: "Throw this slave girl and her son out. The son of this slave girl is not going to share in the inheritance of my son Isaac" (Gen. 21:10). Carrying only

a small portion of bread and waterskin, Hagar is banished to the desert with her son. The text relates, “She wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was all gone, she cast the child away under a bush” (Gen. 21:15). Hagar, certain that her son is dead, desperately puts him far from her and bursts into tears: “She walked away and sat down on the other side at a remove of about a bowshot, thinking: ‘Let me not see the child’s death.’ There on the other side, she sat and wept in loud voice” (Gen. 21:16). Approaching from above, an angel calls her name and repeatedly tells her to pick up the young boy, who will be the patriarch of a great nation. As she opens her eyes, she sees a well. Picking up her son, she realizes that he is alive. In her moment of despair, Hagar experienced divine intervention and receives a promise of a future for her and her son.

Camille Corot, a 19th-century French artist (1796–1875), was mainly a landscape artist. His masterpiece, Hagar in the Wilderness, can be seen at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Exploring this artwork has expanded my understanding of the story.

At first, the observer is led to believe that this is a landscape painting of mixed identity. It contains a desert-like view with greenery that does not seem to belong to the desert. After close inspection, the observer notices a woman’s figure on the bottom right corner. Hidden in the shade, the woman is crouching on the ground, holding her head in despair, and looking at the sky above her. A child who appears to be dead lies next to her. After looking at the two figures, the viewers lift their eyes to the direction of the woman’s outstretched arms. The painting offers a solution; the vast landscape informs the observer that this is the place of the numinous, awe, and mystery. As the spectator carefully moves their eyes to the

sunny side of the painting, they discover an eagle-like angel soaring at the horizon above the hot dry section of the landscape. A landscape Hagar cannot see because she is looking in the other direction. Corot paints a great drama similar to what Heschel calls “awe and wonder.”[3] He draws attention to the fact that this is a wondrous place that God visited, and by showing an inexplicable combination of nature and human, he underscores the drama of divine rescue. Reading the story in its visual interpretation, the viewer is moving from darkness to light as Hagar realizes her son is alive.

Corot depicts the moment of Hagar’s final breakdown. As the angel approaches in the distance, she beseeches God to pity her. The light cuts across the arid landscape, dividing the whole canvas in two. Desperate, Hagar is covering her eyes in the dark while the angel approaching behind her signals help, a stream of water just behind her. Her son is saved as well as the promise: “Hold him with your hand, for I am going to make him a great nation” (Genesis, 21:18).

Corot’s painting offers an optimistic message as a resolution to the story of Hagar’s expulsion. Corot, as a naturalist, believed in the power of nature to improve humanity. Even though he is depicting a difficult scene, he is still optimistic and brings the scene to a positive resolution. This is appropriate as Corot was born to an established family and was known for his charitable actions and social activity, especially to children and the sick. I wonder what we, both in our reading of this story and as viewers of Corot’s painting the readers of the Bible, feel about the conclusion of the story. Do we have the same sense of positive resolution? *(Ofra Arieli Backenroth is Associate Director of the Davidson School at JTS)* [1] Holtz, B. (1984). Back to the sources: Reading the classic Jewish texts. Summit Books. [2] I

consulted The Torah: A Women's Commentary (edited by Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Dr. Lisa D. Grant, and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, Ph.D, published by Women of Reform Judaism & URJ Press) in writing this commentary. [3] Heschel, A. J. (1955). God in search of man: A philosophy of Judaism. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy.

There May Yet Be Hope by Rabbi Alex Braver

https://bj.org/there-may-yet-be-hope/?utm_source=B%27nai+Jeshurun&utm_campaign=33880a9521-TOWARD-SHABBAT-2026-1030&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-33e4f4da6e-420337262

I've long been a fan of stories set in an alternate reality — from Michael Chabon's The Yiddish Policemen's Union and its depiction of a Yiddish-speaking Alaskan city of refuge for wandering Jews to Philip K. Dick's The Man in the High Castle and its nightmare of a Nazi-occupied North America. Oftentimes, these strange new worlds emerge from one small historical change that causes everything we know to spin out of control in bizarre and surprising ways.

This year I read Álvaro Enrigue's You Dreamed of Empires, a fantastical look at the 16th-century encounter between the conquistador Cortés and the Aztec ruler Moctezuma. In its climactic scene, both men enter a hallucinatory, dreamlike state, embarking on a vision of the centuries and centuries stretching forward from their meeting — including, in a mind-bending moment, the sight of Enrigue himself sitting and writing the very book in which they find themselves! At the decisive moment, though, one swift act alters that entire imagined history.

For too long, it has felt like our whole human story is hanging in the balance — one moment, one decision, one historical fluke away from salvation or from continuing to hurtle painfully toward an uncertain future.

This week — as we sift through the results of the Israeli election last Tuesday and await the American midterm election results next Tuesday — that feeling is as powerful as ever. Three years after October 7, will Israel embark on a new course with a new government? What role will Israel play in our domestic politics, and how deeply has antisemitism seeped into the groundwater of our political discourse? How will the midterms affect our ability to afford our basic needs, to see our values reflected in the national conversation, to navigate an increasingly complex and dangerous world?

Is there cause for hope or a harbinger of further despair? Or perhaps we're destined to continue sitting in the fear and uncertainty of a muddled present?

In our Omek class the other week focusing on Jewish ethics and criminal justice reform, a few dozen of us ended up in a long discussion on this exact idea as we pored over a classic text from Maimonides in Hilkhot Teshuvah (the Laws of Repentance):

Everyone must look at themself all year long as if they were half innocent and half guilty, and so, too, the whole world as half innocent and half guilty. If they perform a single sin, they tip the balance for themself and for the entire world to the side of guilt, and cause destruction. But do a single mitzvah, and they tip the balance for themself and the entire world to the side of innocence, bringing deliverance and salvation to themself and others.

Whether this is an encouragement to live optimistically, believing it's never too late to change the world, or a recipe for constant anxiety, self-flagellation, and existential terror is up for debate.

Maimonides isn't saying that we're actually always so

precariously perched between merit and sin. He'd be the first to concede that we can neither actually know our spiritual standing nor fully grasp how weighty any one decision might be. Instead, he's pushing us to change our paradigm — to choose to look at each moment as if our fate, and the world's, hangs in the balance of our every act.

Which moments are full of potential for change, and which will make little or no difference in the long run? One kind word to an acquaintance could change their life … or it might be forgotten the next moment. My vote could flip an election … or it could still fail to win my candidate their seat.

Perhaps the goal then is to imagine that at each moment, each of us stands at a history-making crossroads, both for the entire world and for our own more private personal universes. Live each moment k'ilu ("as if"), and commit to meeting each moment with kavannah (intention), in service of those inevitable milestones when it turns out the stakes were real and our actions truly mattered.

Our people's history for the last 2,000 years has been built on a simple and stirring prayer, voiced in Lamentations after the destruction of the Temple: "There may yet be hope." In our uncertain world, as long as we live, even our deepest grief in the face of chaos and loss might hold a pinprick of possibility — if not for sunshine and rainbows, then at least for the hope that we might gather our strength to continue the fight.

Let's look at ourselves as if we, and our world, depend on that next good deed — whether it's voting next week, organizing for change, or making another meaningful impact closer to home. Who knows? Any one of us might perform the act that tips us all into a new and better reality. *(An alumnus of the BJ Rabbinic Fellowship (2013-2016), Rabbi Alex Braver returned to BJ in*

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