

# PARASHAT VAYERA

## *Genesis 18:1–22:24*

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*Parashat Vayera* begins with the visit of three men to Abraham. He welcomes them with generous hospitality, and they promise that Sarah will soon bear a son. When the men depart for the city of Sodom, God appears to Abraham and tells him that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are about to be destroyed because of the sinful behavior of their residents. Abraham protests, asking God not to destroy innocent people along with the guilty ones. God promises that, if there are as few as even ten innocent people in the cities, they will not be destroyed. Afterwards, two men-angels arrive in Sodom and are offered hospitality by Lot. He protects them from the Sodomites, who threaten to harm them. The men-angels warn Lot to leave Sodom. He escapes the next morning as fire rains down upon the cities, but his wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Abraham travels to the Negev, where Abimelech, king of Gerar, sees Sarah and wants her for a wife. Fearing the king, Abraham claims that Sarah is his “sister.” The king takes her as a wife, but God appears to him and reveals Sarah’s real identity. Abimelech returns her to Abraham along with a great bounty. As the visitors to Abraham had predicted, Sarah bears a son whom they name Isaac. After a few years, Sarah persuades Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, claiming that only Isaac should inherit Abraham’s wealth and position. Abraham agrees when God tells him that “I will make a nation of him [Ishmael].” Several years later, God tests Abraham’s faith by ordering him to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. Isaac is saved at the last moment when God praises Abraham’s loyalty and tells him to sacrifice a ram in Isaac’s place.

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## OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

**A**braham sees three men approaching his tent. He rises, runs out to greet them, and invites them to have some water and food with him. Sara prepares a meal for them. The men promise Abraham that Sarah will soon become pregnant with a son. Sarah hears what they say and laughs. She is convinced that she is too old to have children.

· 2 ·

The visitors depart and travel toward the city of Sodom, located in the Jordan Valley. God appears to Abraham and tells him that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah will be destroyed because of the wicked behavior of their citizens. Abraham protests, arguing that, if God is just, innocent people cannot be destroyed along with evil ones. He asks: "What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?" God agrees to save the city if there are fifty innocent people. Abraham then begins to bargain. He asks God: "What if there are forty-five people?" Then, pursuing his argument, he asks about forty, then thirty, twenty, and, finally, if God will destroy the city if only ten innocent people are found. God tells him: "I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten."

· 3 ·

One evening two men-angels arrive in Sodom. Lot, who is sitting at the gate of the city, welcomes them and invites them to stay the night at his house. The wicked people of Sodom gather outside Lot's door, demanding that he turn over the visitors so that they might sexually abuse them. Fearing for the lives of his guests, Lot offers the Sodomites his daughters. The crowd becomes angry with Lot, threatening to break down the door. At that point the two visitors pull Lot into the house, and the people standing outside are struck with a blinding light.

The visitors tell Lot to gather his family and flee before Sodom is destroyed. Lot's sons-in-law

refuse to believe the prediction or to follow him, and the rest of Lot's family delays. Finally, in the morning, the visitors take them by the hands and escort them outside the city. They tell them: "Flee for your life! Do not look behind you . . . lest you be swept away." As the cities are destroyed, Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt.

· 4 ·

Later, while Abraham and Sarah are traveling in the Negev, Abimelech, king of Gerar, sees her and wishes to have her for a wife. As he had done when Pharaoh desired Sarah (see *Parashat Lech-Lecha*), Abraham tells the king, "She is my sister." God appears to the king on the night he takes Sarah into his house and reveals that she is Abraham's wife. Fearing for his life, Abimelech returns Sarah to Abraham along with a huge treasure as payment for any wrong he might have done.

Soon Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac. After a few years, she demands that Abraham send away Hagar and her son, Ishmael, claiming that only Isaac is entitled to inherit Abraham's wealth and leadership. Abraham, greatly upset by Sarah's demand, agrees to do as she wishes after God



assures him that Ishmael will also become a great nation.

·5·

Some time later, God tests Abraham's loyalty by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac at the top of Mount Moriah. Abraham takes his son and travels to the place. There he builds an altar and, just as

he is about to kill his son, an angel stops him, saying: "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God." Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught by its horns in a bush. He takes the animal and offers it as a sacrifice in the place of Isaac. The angel tells him that he and all of his people after him will be blessed.

## THEMES

*Parashat Vayera* contains three important themes:

1. The importance of hospitality.
2. The consequences of social injustice.
3. The meaning of "loyalty" to God.

## PEREK ALEF: *The Hospitality of Abraham and Lot*

Twice in this Torah portion guests are welcomed in a home: once by Abraham at the beginning of the portion and the second time by Lot just before the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. In each situation, the "hospitality" offered is very different. And from each we learn something about the unique Jewish standards for welcoming people into our homes.

### *The importance of hospitality*

"Hospitality," the Talmud says, is a "great mitzvah. It is considered more important to show hospitality than to attend classes or to greet God in prayer." (Shabbat 127a)

"Why was the prophet Micah included among those who will live for eternity?" the rabbis asked.

"Because he shared his bread with those who passed by his home." (Sanhedrin 103a)

The example of Abraham's special model of hospitality is clearly described by the Torah. Every gesture was important and recorded. We are told: "Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground,

he said, 'My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on. . . .?'"

Abraham's hospitality is not passive. He is *looking* for guests. He is alert to those who might be passing by and in need of help. Nor does he wait until the strangers have approached his tent. Instead, *as soon* as he sees them, *he runs* toward them. He does not ask them all kinds of questions about their parents or people or where they are going, but, instead, he *greet*s them and shows them respect by *bowing* before them. Abraham then pleads with them: "Do not go on past your servant." He *comforts* them by bringing them water and then rushes to feed them.

Several commentators who have studied Abraham's welcoming of his guests point out that he was still recuperating from the pain of his circumcision. Even so, he was alert to the exhaustion and hunger of others and ran out to greet them and refresh them with food and drink. (*Akedat Yitzhak*)

Ramban (Nachmanides)



Furthermore, according to Nachmanides, Abraham thought only of the needs of his guests.

It was the middle of the day; they had been traveling and would want to rest and then continue their journey; their feet were sore; they were tired from the hot sun. So he gave them water with which to cool their feet and arranged for them to sit in the shade of a tree.

***The angels can wait!***

*A young person once visited the famed teacher known as the Chofetz Chaim. The guest had arrived at the synagogue just as the Sabbath began, having been on the road for many hours. He was hungry and weak as they walked from the synagogue to the rabbi's home. To the surprise of the guest, the Chofetz Chaim skipped the singing of "Shalom Alechem" (a song that greets the Sabbath angels) and, after quickly reciting the Kiddush and the Motzi, began to eat. "Why did you skip the singing of 'Shalom Alechem,'" the young man asked his host.*

*The Chofetz Chaim replied: "You were hungry. A hungry person should be fed as soon as possible. The angels can wait to be greeted."*

The Torah informs us that Abraham was not alone in offering hospitality to his guests. Sarah helped him. Many Torah interpreters explain that, as husband and wife, they shared the responsibility of preparing food for their guests. And they wasted no time. They *hurried* to care for the strangers. They also made an effort to serve their guests with bread made from *choice* flour and meat taken from a *choice* calf. Nor did they turn over the feeding of their guests to servants. Abraham and Sarah waited on the strangers, serving each an equal portion. They cared for each person according to that person's need. (See *Mesillat Yesharim* 7, *Numbers Rabbah* 10:5, and *Megillah* 12a.)

Furthermore, Abraham insisted on serving his guests at the entrance of his home.

Why?

Perhaps he wanted other strangers to know that they were welcome; perhaps he wanted to remind others that each human being is created in the "image of God" and that showing hospitality to strangers is a way of welcoming God into our lives.

And, when it came time for his guests to leave, the commentator Nachmanides comments that Abraham did not just bid them farewell at his gate, but he went with them until he saw that they were safely on their way.

***Who is the stranger?***

*One day a group of strangers came to an inn. The innkeeper and his wife were known for their kindness and hospitality. They saw that the strangers were tired, and the innkeeper ran out to heat some water in the bathhouse. Among the strangers was a poor old man with ugly sores all over his back. The other guests refused to bathe with him or to help him wash himself. When the innkeeper's wife saw that the old man needed help, she took the brush and gently washed his back. "Thank you for your kindness," he said to her. "May all the children you bear be like me."*

*Some say that the poor old man was none other than Elijah the Prophet, who will someday bring an era of human understanding, kindness, and peace.*

Abraham's treatment of the strangers who visited him is viewed by Jewish tradition as an outstanding model of hospitality. By contrast, Lot's reception of his guests raises troubling questions. According to the rabbis who explained our Torah portion, Lot brought visitors to his home only at night, never during the day. He also never led them directly to his house but chose a long way to get there and entered always through the back door. When they arrived, he would tell them, "Do not wash your feet. Should authorities from the city come checking on us, it must appear as though you just arrived and that I am not providing anything special for you." (*Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* and *Midrash ha-Gadol*; also Rashi and *Meam Loez*)

Why did Lot act in such an inhospitable manner?

Some explain that the officials of Sodom had decreed that it was against the law to show any kindness or hospitality to visitors. The punishment for anyone welcoming guests or caring for

their needs was imprisonment and death. Strangers were to be taken advantage of, their possessions were to be stolen, and they were to be chased out of the town as quickly as possible. (Nachmanides and *Genesis Rabbah*)

Others point out that, unlike Sarah, Lot's wife opposed offering hospitality to strangers. She refused to cook for them or to help Lot make them comfortable. On many occasions she actually complained to her neighbors about "my husband's visitors" and even reported to the authorities when Lot was entertaining guests. (*Midrash Agadah* 19:4; *Genesis Rabbah* 50:8, 9)

While many commentators are critical of Lot, a few argue that his hospitality was heroic. They point out that, unlike Abraham, Lot lived in a city where one could be put to death for offering food, shelter, and friendship to guests. One interpreter suggests that Lot's daughter, Pelotit, had been put to death by the authorities of Sodom for giving bread to a stranger.

Others emphasize that, when the crowd gathered at his door, demanding that he turn over the strangers to them, he refused. Risking his life, he went outside, closed the door behind him, and tried to calm the mob. He bravely stood his ground and tried to convince them to leave. But they demanded that he open the door and send his visitors out to them. It was only then that Lot offered to give the mob his daughters as protection for the strangers. (*Sefer ha-Yashar* 10)

Should he have made such an offer? Was it a heroic gesture or a cruel decision? Given the circumstances, can we even compare Abraham's hospitality with Lot's?

#### *Limits even to hospitality*

*Lot told the crowd: "See, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men since they have come under the shelter of my roof." We have been taught that a person should sacrifice his own life for the sake of his wife and children. Lot was ready to hand over his daughters for abuse. Therefore, he brought shame to his life. (Midrash ha-Gadol 19:8)*

In some societies, the head of a household might be justified in turning over his wife or daughters to an angry mob in order to save innocent visitors. Jewish tradition, however, demands that a person give his own life rather than sacrifice the lives of his loved ones.

#### *Zugot*



#### *Let your house be open*

*Rabbi Yosi ben Yochanan taught: "Let your house be open wide, and let the needy be treated as members of your home." (Avot 1:5)*

#### *Judging others*

*Rabbi Hillel cautioned: "Do not judge another person until you have put yourself in that person's place." (Avot 2:5)*

Between Abraham and Lot we have two examples of hospitality. Yet the conditions faced by each of them were quite different. How then are we to judge between them?

### *PEREK BET: Should Good People Suffer for the Evil That Bad People Do?*

The Torah informs us that, when God told Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah were to be destroyed because of the terrible sins of their citizens, Abraham boldly asked: "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? . . . Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"

Abraham was concerned with justice. He did not believe that good people or innocent people should suffer for the evil actions of others. So he argued on behalf of the innocent people in Sodom. When God told him that the city would be saved for the sake of fifty people, Abraham

went on to argue the case for forty-five, then for forty, then for thirty, then for twenty, and, finally, for ten.

Yet Sodom was destroyed. Why? The Torah text tells us only that “the outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah was great, and their sin was serious.” That is all. We are given no details.

Later, the rabbis ask themselves the question: “What was so evil about the people of these cities that God decided to destroy them? They came up with several important reasons.

The first was the selfishness of the people of Sodom. Their land was rich with gold, silver, and precious stones. Their farmers produced an abundance of food. Every citizen had a comfortable home, a closet filled with clothing, and gardens of beautiful flowers and fruit trees.

#### *Nothing for the stranger*

*Rabbi Nathaniel commented that the people of Sodom refused to give food to the stranger or traveler, and they even constructed fences above their gardens so that no bird flying by could eat from their trees. (Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 25)*

#### *Keep it all for ourselves*

*Because of their wealth, the people of Sodom became haughty. They said to one another: “Since gold and silver flow from our land, why should we allow strangers to visit in our borders, eat our food, use our resources, and share what is ours? They will only take what we have, and there will be less for us. Let’s keep them from entering, and let’s drive out those who get in as soon as possible—especially the poor or the sick ones.” (Tosefta to Sotah 3; Sanhedrin 109a)*

Rather than being willing to share their wealth and good fortune with others, the people of Sodom wanted to keep it all for themselves. They expelled immigrants, strangers, or travelers. They chased away the poor and the sick and allowed no one in who would be a “burden” to their city. They felt no responsibility for others.

According to the rabbis, they went a step further in their selfishness. They developed clever ways of stealing from visitors without breaking

the law. For example, when a stranger entered the gates of Sodom with grain, they would each steal only a few grains from his bags until the grain was gone. In that way no Sodomite could be taken to court for stealing. And, if the visitor took a Sodomite to court for taking his grain, the Sodomite would tell the judge, “I took nothing, just a few grains.” (*Sanhedrin* 109a)

But that is not all. According to the rabbis, the Sodomites also created laws forbidding any citizen of Sodom from feeding the hungry, from offering help to the poor, or from healing the sick.

#### *The proclamation of Sodom*

*Rabbi Yehudah said: The leaders of Sodom made a proclamation in which they declared: “Anyone who gives even a loaf of bread to the poor or the needy shall be put to death by fire.” (Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 25)*

In Sodom, “kindness to strangers” was against the law! If a citizen of Sodom happened to feel compassion for a needy person and offered him support, that citizen could be convicted of breaking the law and be put to death. According to the rabbis, that is what happened to Lot’s daughter, Pelotit.

#### *Lot’s daughter is punished*

*Pelotit, the daughter of Lot, saw a poor person seeking bread on the streets. Her heart was filled with compassion. So what did she do? Each day she drew water for him and gave him bread and other food to eat. When the leaders of Sodom discovered that she was helping a poor man live, they put her to death. (Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 25)*

The great evil of Sodom was that cruelty became public policy. The leaders made oppression and abuse of the needy the law of their city. Even the courts, the place where most societies look for justice, promoted injustice. Judges sided with the rich and treated the needy without pity or fairness.

***Their evil courts and judges***

*Rabbi Joshua ben Korchah commented that the leaders of Sodom appointed judges who were dishonest. They lied, they cheated, they oppressed strangers. They allowed wayfarers to enter Sodom, then convicted them of breaking the law. Afterwards, they robbed them of their possessions and expelled them from the city. (Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 25)*

*Ibn Ezra*



According to the Spanish Jewish interpreter Abraham ibn Ezra (1092–1167), not one citizen of Sodom protested the cruel treatment of strangers. Instead, they remained silent. They chose the safety of “not getting involved.” They refused to serve in public office or try to change the evil laws that had been passed. Because these good people chose indifference rather than opposition to evil, they were destroyed with the rest of the city.

So why were the people of Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed? The commentators offer the following reasons:

1. They refused to share their wealth and abundant riches with others.
2. They made fun of those in need and deliberately made their lives more miserable.
3. They refused to care for the sick, aid the poor, help the needy, or offer hospitality to the immigrant or stranger in their midst.
4. Their leaders were so greedy and selfish that they made cruelty a public policy.
5. They went so far as to punish their own citizens who reached out to feed the hungry or provide shelter to the homeless.
6. Their judges practiced dishonesty and robbery, and their courts offered no fair treatment for victims of oppression or injustice.

For all these reasons, the rabbis inform us, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.

*But what about our original question? Even if*

there was one innocent, good person left in Sodom or Gomorrah, should that person have been destroyed with all the evil ones? Must good people suffer because of the bad things others do?

Unfortunately, they do.

Jewish tradition teaches us that we are free to choose between good and evil, between hurting others or helping them. That gift of freedom means that God does not interfere and cannot prevent us from doing things that not only harm us but others as well. God wants us to do the right thing, to be just, kind, loving, and generous, but God cannot force us to make the right choice. We must make our own choices, and we must live with the consequences—even the consequences of the choices that other people make.

God is like a parent who says to his children, “Go out into the world and make your own decisions, but remember that what you do will not only affect you but others as well.” When the decisions are good and others benefit, the parent is happy and so is God. When the decisions are bad ones that bring pain and sorrow to innocent people, the parents weep and, perhaps, so does God. But God is not responsible for those bad decisions; human beings are. God cannot be blamed for our failings; we are responsible for them.

God did not plan the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The people brought their end upon themselves and others.

***Abusing human freedom***

*. . . much evil is not God's fault but ours. The right to choose is a great good, but we often use it to be creatively malicious. We drive too fast and maim careful drivers and innocent pedestrians. We destroy reputations, squander resources, abuse power, and make the world the worse for our freedom. Some people even choose to be Nazis and engender a Holocaust. They were not compelled by God to do so. They did it freely. They faced their moral responsibility and rejected it, abusing human freedom worse than anything else we know in human history. (Eugene B. Borowitz, Liberal Judaism, UAHC, New York, 1984, p. 198)*

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because, as we have seen, their people were guilty of “abusing human freedom.” They brought on their own destruction—and the death of many innocent people—because they deliberately chose cruelty over charity, selfishness over caring, and greed over sharing.

### PEREK GIMEL: *What Is Loyalty to God?*

The story of Abraham being called by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, is a frightening one. It was also considered one of the most important events in the Torah. The rabbis, who divided and assigned portions of Torah to be read in the synagogue on Shabbat and on the holidays, titled it the *Akedah*, meaning “the binding for sacrifice,” and chose it for reading on Rosh Hashanah. They believed that it was a “test” of Abraham’s loyalty to God.

In the story, Abraham is told to bring Isaac to the land of Moriah and to offer him as a sacrifice on one of the high places there. Abraham follows God’s orders but, just as he is about to kill his son, an angel of God stops him, telling him to sacrifice a ram instead. “For now I know,” says the angel, “that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.”

What is this strange story about?

Some say that, to test the strength of Abraham’s loyalty, God ordered him to kill Isaac, his son. And, without hesitation, without asking any questions, without even consulting Sarah, Abraham followed God’s orders. In doing so, he not only proved himself loyal to God, but he also showed the world what true faith is all about.

Rambam (Maimonides)



In his book *Guide for the Perplexed*, Moses Maimonides explained Abraham’s test in the following way:

The purpose of all tests mentioned in the Torah is to teach human beings how they are to act. . . . Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son. . . . And, because he feared God and loved

to do what God commanded, he thought little of his beloved child, and set aside all his hopes concerning him, and agreed to kill him. . . . Therefore, the angel said to him: “For now I know that you fear God,” which means that from Abraham’s action . . . we can learn how far we must go in the fear of God.

Many interpreters would criticize Maimonides’ description of Abraham’s test as an example of “blind faith.” Abraham did as he was told; he did not protest. He did not say to God, “How can You do this to Sarah and me?” Nor did he take the side of his son and argue, “But he is a child. How can a just God who was willing to save Sodom if there were ten righteous people in the city now ask for the sacrifice of a child?” Instead, Abraham seems to follow “blindly” the command to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah.

Is that what Jewish tradition teaches us? Are we to follow the commandments of our faith without questioning them? Are we disloyal if we express doubts about what Jewish tradition says God “commands” us to do?

There is another interpretation of the *Akedah* that is also about “loyalty to God,” but it is one that makes room for serious questions.

*When God commanded Abraham, “Take your son . . .” Abraham did not set out immediately. He asked, “Which son?” God answered, “Your favored one . . .” Then Abraham said, “But I have two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. And one is favored by his mother, and the other is favored by his mother.” So God answered: “Take the one whom you love . . .” And Abraham replied, “I love them both, so how can I choose?” Finally, God told him, “Take Isaac!” (Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 31)*

According to some interpreters, Abraham had several questions and doubts about what God had commanded him to do. He did not march off immediately toward Mount Moriah. His was not a “blind faith”—but a questioning one. Because he wanted to be sure that he understood what he



was being asked to do, he asked questions and evaluated the answers. He put to work his reasoning powers and examined what it was that God was asking him to do.

After hearing God's command, he waited until the next morning before setting out to fulfill it. He was not reckless or impetuous, but, instead, he gave himself time to think about it and to analyze the consequences of what he was being asked to do. Because it was one of the most important decisions of his life, he considered it carefully.

Furthermore, as Abraham was about to act on his decision and plunge his knife into Isaac, he was capable of reconsideration. His questions continued to the very end. He was constantly reexamining his understanding of what it was that God wanted of him. And, when the angel told him, "Do not raise your hand against the boy," Abraham was able to change what he had thought to do.

*Abravanel*



***Abraham's example of faith***

*This story of Abraham's faith is an example, a banner for all the peoples of the world to follow.  
(Don Isaac Abravanel)*

Loyalty to God does not mean "blind faith." Sometimes it means asking difficult questions about what it is that we should or should not be doing. Sometimes it means being willing to take risks for what we believe is just and right. Sometimes it means delaying action until the facts are analyzed carefully. Sometimes it means being willing to reconsider opinions and to make changes

when presented with new evidence or a better perspective.

The *Akedah* is a story about Abraham's struggle to understand what it means to be loyal to God. He is an example of a person who tested his faith with questions and weighed his decisions carefully. He was not afraid to face doubts or to get all the facts. If necessary, he was ready to make sacrifices for what he believed, but he was also ready to rethink his convictions and commitments.

Perhaps for all those reasons this story of Abraham is considered one of the great examples of religious faith and loyalty to God.

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Are we, as Jews, obligated to offer hospitality to strangers? Were non-Jews justified in not opening their homes to Jews during the Holocaust? Are there situations, when loved ones might be endangered, that require us to refuse giving others hospitality?
2. Read the story of Sheba, son of Bichri, in II Samuel 20:1-26. How does it compare to our story of Lot?
3. In what ways is the story of Sodom similar to the stories of Cain and Abel, Noah, and the building of the Tower of Babel?
4. Since other people and religions in Abraham's time believed in child sacrifice, perhaps the real message of the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is to demonstrate that God does not require human sacrifice. If that is so, then what are the ways in which modern society "sacrifices" children? How can we protect our children from being victimized by the evil elements of the culture that surrounds us?