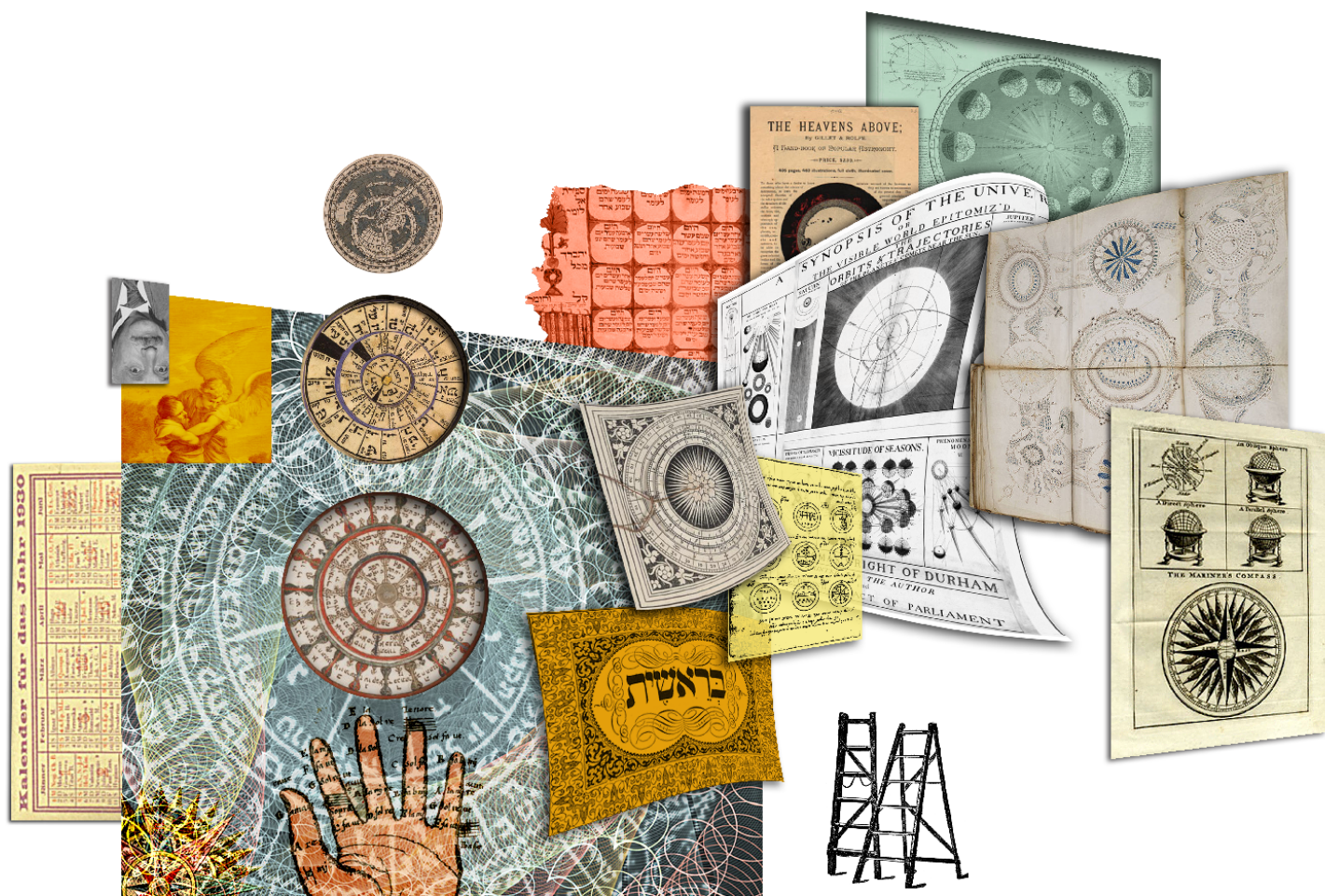


# THOSE WHO GRASP IT

*Insights on the Torah by the Members of Minyan Maat*

1979-2023



Art by Adrienne Weiss

עֵץ-חַיִּים הֵיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ וְתִמְכֶּיָּה מְאֹשֶׁר.

*It is a tree of life to those who grasp it...*

Proverbs 3:18

VOLUME I GENESIS





## INTRODUCTION

To compile the drashot of Minyan Maat would be a suitably grand gesture for a major milestone event, such as its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which we hope to celebrate in 2029. The fact is, I've harbored the intention to compile the drashot since well before the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and whenever it is possible to actually do it, that is surely the right time for it. As it has happened, this anthology came together during the 44<sup>th</sup> year of the minyan, which is perhaps *beschert*: the gematria value of 44 is represented by the word דם, *blood*, and it could well be said that the weekly sharing of our words of Torah with one another is the lifeblood of this minyan.<sup>1</sup>

I realize now that I made my first attempt to mobilize this project fully ten years ago. Perhaps it's fortunate to have waited, as we've had over 500 new drashot since then! But the long gestation also seems appropriate to the task – many drashot, for me and I assume for other darshanim, are on subjects that we've been mulling for a while. Often I'll get an idea hearing a parasha – or someone else's drash on the parasha – and prepare a drash to deliver when the parasha returns the following year. It's in the nature of darshanut that we speak of issues that have taken shape in our minds and hearts over the course of time. In reading the full Torah cycle each year we enter the texts with depth and longevity. By maintaining a community that relishes the conversation we bring this ancient tradition to life. And through that ongoing conversation we bring ourselves, and one another, more fully to life. Truly: עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה. It's a tree of life to those who grasp on to it – through our drashot, we grasp on to the Torah, and to one another.

This collection, of course, is an incomplete historical record – some of our most accomplished darshanim don't speak from notes, so their drashot are lost to time. Those that are saved in orderly computer files are easy to retrieve; those that are not...are not. And some of our darshanim are no longer with us. Nonetheless, it is thrilling to bring together some 200 drashot – and kavanot and other occasional pieces – from the Minyan's history. It is more thrilling still to consider that in 44 years, this Minyan has presumably produced well over 2,000. It's a commonplace that where you find two Jews, you'll find three opinions; here, a couple hundred Jews have produced a couple thousand opinions – literate, impassioned, profound. What a conversation we have conducted all these years. So much listening, so much learning.

All the materials are printed here exactly as they were delivered by the contributors. I therefore present to you not only all the wisdom and insight of our darshanim, but also their typos, choices of font, idiosyncratic transliterations, handwritten markups and the rest. A more elegant, and less massive, volume could be made of these materials, given sufficient time, labor and technological expertise, but I have opted not to sacrifice the good in pursuit of the better, and to bring this volume out as soon as possible, since we've all waited 44 years for it already. To quote one of my own drashot: some things are worth the wait, and some things are worth the rush.

Ron Lee Meyers  
Simchat Torah 2023 / 5784

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<sup>1</sup> And if it is so said, then it will immediately be rebutted: the lifeblood of the minyan is *chesed*, the lifeblood of the minyan is friendship, the lifeblood of the minyan is single-malt Scotch. All true. It's a rich and nourishing bloodstream.

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**NOTE:**

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Drashot for parashayot that are sometimes paired as a double parasha are listed for the pair, rather than the individual parasha.

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Within each parasha, drashot are listed chronologically, to the extent a date was discernible from the materials submitted.

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CAROL	LEVITHAN	Behar / Bechukotai		2021	653
CAROL	LEVITHAN	Vaetchanan			845
CAROL	LEVITHAN	ROSH HASHANA			997
CAROL	LEVITHAN	SHAVUOT		2007	1111
CAROL	LEVITHAN		YIZKOR		1127
RON	MEYERS	Bereishit		2015	13
RON	MEYERS	Noach		2019	69
RON	MEYERS	Vayeira		2014	125
RON	MEYERS	Vayeira		2021	131
RON	MEYERS	Toldot		2013	227
WILLIAM	MEYERS	Tetzaveh		2003	431
RON	MEYERS	Behar / Bechukotai	AUFRUF	2014	631



RON	MEYERS	Vaetchanan	SHABBAT NACHAMU	2017	837
RON	MEYERS	Eikev		2012	849
RON	MEYERS	Vaeira		2020	359
RON	MEYERS	Ki Tisa		2014	479
RON	MEYERS	Acharei Mot / Kedoshim		2018	617
RON	MEYERS	Korach		2016	767
RON	MEYERS	ROSH HASHANA		2014	965
RON	MEYERS	ROSH HASHANA		2023	993
RON	MEYERS	SHABBAT SHUVA		2022	1005
RON	MEYERS	YOM KIPUR	VIDUI	2022	1037
RON	MEYERS	SHMINI ATZERET	YIZKOR	2023	1041
RON	MEYERS	ELUL		2021	1119
RON	MEYERS		LGBT PRIDE WEEK	2020	1135
ANITA	NORICH	Bamidbar			705
JUDY	OPPENHEIM	Chayei Sarah	Yahrzeit	2017	179
JUDY	OPPENHEIM	Beshalach			391
JUDY	OPPENHEIM	Vayachel / Pekudei			529
JUDY	OPPENHEIM	Bamidbar	SHAVUOT	2015	689
BEN	ORLOVE	Noach		2019	81
BEN	ORLOVE	Noach			85
BEN	ORLOVE	Chayei Sarah		2015	167
BEN	ORLOVE	Toldot		2014	237
BEN	ORLOVE	Miketz		2016	319
BEN	ORLOVE	Tetzaveh		2020	459
BEN	ORLOVE	Ki Tisa		2021	489
BEN	ORLOVE	Behar / Bechukotai			667
BEN	ORLOVE	Shelach Lecha		2019	761
BEN	ORLOVE	Chukat / Balak		2017	789
BEN	ORLOVE	Chukat / Balak		2022	797
BEN	ORLOVE	Chukat / Balak			807
BEN	ORLOVE	Reeh		2017	861
MARCIA	PALLY	Lech Lecha		2020	93
MARCIA	PALLY	Vayeira		2021	141
MARCIA	PALLY	Ki Tisa		2023	501
MARCIA	PALLY	Tatzria / Metzora		2022	593
NATHAN	PERL-ROSENTHAL	Ki Titzei	BAR MITZVA	1995	869
DAVID	ROSENN	Tzav		2022	555
DAVID	ROSENN	Tzav	SHABBAT HAGADOL	2021	565
DAVID	ROSENN	Behar / Bechukotai		2019	639
DAVID	ROSKIES	Vayeira		1983	107
DAVID	ROSKIES	Haazinu		2023	919
MELANIE	SCHNEIDER	ROSH HASHANA		2022	991
MELANIE	SCHNEIDER		PRAYER FOR THE USA	2023	1149
CLAUDIA	SETZER	Vayeitzei			259
CLAUDIA	SETZER	Devarim			833
CLAUDIA	SETZER	Haazinu		2008	907
CLAUDIA	SETZER	Haazinu		2010	913
DAVID	SHAPIRO	Vayeishev		2022	303
JUDITH	SHULEVITZ	Behar / Bechukotai		2022	657

JUDITH	SHULEVITZ	YOM KIPUR	YIZKOR	2021	1031
YONA	SILVERMAN	Bamidbar	AUFRUF	2018	693
YONA	SILVERMAN	Bhaalotecha	HS GRADUATION	2001	743
NANCY	SINKOFF	Bereishit		1996	1
NANCY	SINKOFF	Vayishlach			279
NANCY	SINKOFF	Bo		2023	371
NANCY	SINKOFF	Acharei Mot / Kedoshim		1991	597
NANCY	SINKOFF	Acharei Mot / Kedoshim		1995	605
NANCY	SINKOFF	Bamidbar	SHAVUOT	2001	677
NANCY	SINKOFF	SHABBAT ZACHOR		2010	1045
NANCY	SINKOFF	SHABBAT HAGADOL		1999	1053

The Yiddish word, bashert, means predestined, foreordained. It is a very appropriate word for this shabbat, resonant for me and for all of today's celebrants, Ellen and Nat, Ellen and David, Shelley and Dov. I'll start with me. Incurrigibly ritualistic, I had always hoped to cap the end of my graduate training with a devar torah. Yet, sometime in the frantic week before Passover last year, amid the rolls of shelf liner and other perhaps unnecessary accoutrements of holiday preparation, I realized that, try as I may, I would not be able to defend my Ph.D. dissertation in time to receive the May degree. So I resigned myself to a June defense and to an October degree. Looking at the calendar, I planned to give the devar torah for parashat bereshit in celebration of the acquisition of the doctorate. Parashat bereshit seemed a fitting section of the Torah to celebrate a commencement.

Today's parashah is nothing less than the beginning of everything. Within it is not only the beginning of the world, but it also starts our rereading of the Torah and thus inaugurates the whole cycle of the Jewish literary year. It is a parashah of portent, anticipation, mystery, and passion. Which leads me to the subject of the readings I have selected for today. As I mentioned earlier, I had originally planned to give a devar torah in the spring in honor of a spring degree; part of my grand ritualistic design was to celebrate not only the completion of my graduate studies, but to salute publically the person who sustained me throughout the process. That is, I had also hoped to give the devar torah in honor of my husband Gary and our 11th wedding anniversary, which fell last spring. Now it is October. Oh well. So, you can imagine my delight when Ellen Schorr told me that her and Nat's



aufruf was to bP. rP. IP. hrated today. Then added to their joy were the announcements by Ellen and David and Shelley and Dov. Surely, it was bashert that I had missed the May deadline. And as many of you know, the word bashert can be used not only as an adjective, but as a noun. Someone's basherte or basherter is predestined for them; finding one's bashert means finding one's life partner, one's soulmate. In honor of that which is bashert and those who are basherte, and as a way of commentary on parashat bereshit, I offer three poems written, fittingly – given by field of inquiry – by three Jews of Eastern Europe.

The first is by the late Joseph Brodsky, who died last January at the age of 54. A Russian poet, Brodsky emigrated to the U.S. in 1972 and went on to become the national poet-laureate, writing fluently in his adopted tongue. This poem, called simply "Love Song" was written in English:

The second is by Hayim Nachman Bialik, who is considered to be the poet laureate of modern Hebrew. The poem is called Yesh Li Gan. I'll read it in the original Hebrew and then translate, roughly, a few stanzas.

### I Have a Garden

I have a garden and I have a well,  
And above my well hangs a bucket,  
Every Sabbath my darling comes,  
And drinks from my pitcher.

The whole world is sleeping – ssh!  
The apple and the pear sleep,  
My mother rests, my father has fallen asleep,  
Only I and my heart are awake.

Ssh – the ground in the garden trembles,  
Does my beloved come, or is it a bird's wing?

Darling, da ling, hurry my love,  
There is no one here except for me.

We will sit upon the trough quietly  
Head upon shoulder, hand in hand,  
I will tell you riddles: Why  
Does the pitcher seek the well?

And why, tell me,  
Does the bucket weep silently,  
Dripping, dripping, sleepily – yes,  
Incessantly, from night to night.

From where does the pain come, like  
A worm eating at my heart?  
Oh, is it really true what my mother heard,  
That your heart has turned from mine?

My beloved answers and tells me,  
My enemies have slandered me!  
This time next year,  
We shall go to the wedding canopy, silly!

Then a summer day will shine,  
Gold will stream upon our heads  
Trees laden with fruit will  
Bless us.

The canopy will stand here  
Between the well and the garden.  
You will present your small finger to me  
As a gift.

And I will be yours: "Behold, you are  
Consecrated unto me *forever*."  
My enemies will be there and will see,  
They will burst from jealousy.

Finally, a poem in Yiddish, by Avraham Sutzkever, a partisan from Vilna, a commander in the "Paper Brigade" who risked his life to save the remnants of Jewish Vilna's literary treasures, a giant of a human being, whom Dan Miron has described as a nightingale. It is called Gan Eyden Lid:

Both the poems by Bialik and Sutzkever use the word kina, in Yiddish, mekane zayn, to be jealous, reminding us that passion often, if not always, evokes a jealous response. Bialik speaks of human jealousy, that corrupt and corrosive emotion that so many of us know. Sutzkever, however, tells of God's jealousy, 01m ,Mlpr.l cyiiE> l'"N l'N 11'"l l>MlIN:i t,Nil iy, jealous that He created both in his image. God's jealousy, or zeal, is given expression in the Torah as a threat. Recall Exodus 20:5, in the ten commandments, where God commands the children of Israel not to worship any other gods, lest He punish them for four generations, because He is a jealous/zealous god, el kana. That is, God becomes jealous when Israel worships, loves, other gods. Although the word kina or kanah does not appear explicitly in our parashah, I think Sutzkever is onto something when he employs it in his poem. Rashi, always sensitive to the subtext beneath the text, notes in his comment to verse 1:26, na'aseh adam "let us make Man," that God consulted the angels in the creation of human beings, thus explaining the plural form of the verb, because He knew that the angels would l.H: jealous of the new creatures created in God's image and He wanted to appease them. So, too, on verse 2:7, vayipah be'apav nishmat hayim, "and He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," Rashi appears to explain why the text mentions both the physical and spiritual creation of man, as God shapes adam from dust and creates his soul by blowing the breath of life into him, by commenting that in order to maintain a balance between the upper world and lower world, between the heavens above and the earth below, between the firmament above and the waters below, God created Man with a body and a soul, for the body belongs to the lower world, the soul to the upper world. If not, Rashi writes, yesh kina be-ma'aseh bereshit, there would be jealousy/disharmony in the account of creation.

And, in fact, the balance of creation is disrupted by jealousy. Sutzkever clues us in. Human passion is the key. Unable to curb their curiosity, their appetites, their desire to know each other, Chava and Adam eat the forbidden fruit. In his anger, God banishes them from the garden. Although the biblical text tells us that the punishment is God's way of preventing Chava and Adam from eating from the tree of life and becoming immortal, Sutzkever offers a more poignant perspective. In his reading, God punishes Chava and Adam because He, not the angels or the mortal men of Bialik's poem, is envious of their passion. God realizes that He has created a creature with powers that He cannot experience. God is jealous that He cannot partake of the ardor he has bequeathed to humankind.

In the context of today's many joyous announcements, He should be.

shabbat shalom and mazal tov.



Gut shabbes, shabbat shalom. And so, after spending three weeks intensely involved with beginnings, we arrive once again at the Beginning. The real Beginning. Could it be that Master of the Universe is jealous of all the time we His creatures have spent on renewal, that He too wants to begin again, that He too needs Breishit as much as we do? Living with the Jewish people through five books of toil and turmoil is no easy job, even for Ribon Kol Olamim.

I experienced a deep sense of comfort listening to Livi leyn the story of creation on Simchas Torah. It feels so good to return to the familiar. Coming home to Breishit is akin to reconnecting with an adored life long friend after an extended absence. This friend makes no demands, finds no fault, and stirs no anxiety, but offers only presence and calm. When I am with my friend, I am safe. When we are together, the world makes sense. We sit together, in the midst of the Garden, and we are free to reminisce, and to dream with no fear of being betrayed by our dreams. Sadly, however, the visit is abruptly cut short, and our time together remains a deeply cherished and unforgettable memory.

God seduces us with the first chapter of Breishit and wins us over with His alluring presentation of order and harmony. How else could He get he get us to keep reading the book, for the Torah, whose paths are paths of pleasantness, all to soon introduces us to a world saturated with unpleasantness. When Rashi writes that Breishit comes to teach that we Jews rightly have a claim to the land of Israel because the Landlord of the earth deeded it to us, he is a thousand years away from the reality of Jewish sovereignty in and. Is he not truly teaching, that despite massive evidence to the contrary, it is not crazy to be hopeful as long as one can intone the words, bereishit bara Elohim?

There is an astounding Midrash in Masechet Sanhedrin:

*Rabbi Yochanan the son of Chanina said: The sixth day consisted of twelve hours. In the first hour Adam's dust was gathered. In the second, it was kneaded into a shapeless mass. In the third, his limbs were shaped. In the fourth, a soul was infused into him. In the fifth, he arose and stood on his feet. In the sixth, he gave the animals their names. In the seventh, Chava became his mate. In the eighth, they ascended to bed as two and descended as four. In the ninth, he was commanded not to eat of the tree. In the tenth,*

*he sinned. In the eleventh he was tried. And in the twelfth, he was expelled and departed.*

Only twelve hours! Adam has consciousness for just eight hours, and only spends six hours together with Chava, four of which are complicated by the drama of sin and punishment. But can you imagine how great those two initial hours must have been, two hours that practically sustain a lifetime?

Our lives move with great rapidity, and our stay in the Garden is all too brief. Our relationships with God and fellow humans are breached by lack of integrity and honesty, and by the insidious presence of deception and fear. Those ways of being do not grow well in the Garden, and we are expelled much too speedily into an anxiety filled world of thorny questions and dilemmas.

It is clear to me however that the movement from the Garden to exile is not a one time event, but rather an ongoing dynamic between **having** and **losing**. We move in and out of the Garden countless times throughout our lives as we experience those two poles of being. Residing in Eden is the experience of having, being attached to a person, an idea, a belief, and feeling secure in that connection so that that it is safe enough to believe in the future. Being East of Eden, on the outside, is the experience of living in a world in which loss deprives us of a sense of meaning because cherished assumptions ring hollow and vacuous. And so, we dream, we build our lives on core assumptions, those assumptions shatter, and we struggle to dream anew. When our assumptions match our life circumstances, we are in the Garden. When our assumptions fail to match our reality, we are forced to the outside.

Listen to the words of Breishit Rabbah on the verse, “The tree of life in the midst of the Garden:”

*It was taught: It was a tree that spread over all living things. Rabbi Judah the son of Rabbi Ilai said: The tree of life covered a five hundred years journey, and all the primeval waters branched out in streams under it. Not only its branches but even its trunk was a five hundred years journey.*

Living in the Garden is not so much about the experience of **perfection** and absence of problems as it is about experiencing a kind of **protection** that leads one to feel rooted. Each time my life circumstances and choices bring a sense of meaning and purpose, I stand protected beneath the Tree of Life.

Under the canopy of the Tree it feels safe to be expansive, to move about in any direction because the world is open. Wherever I go, the Tree is there with me, and so too is the Planter of the Tree. Dread inspiring thoughts of death and mortality reside a five hundred years journey away from the center of consciousness because I am covered by life and my assumptions take root.

We remain in that place until loss, great or small, sends us into exile, where we are forced to till an inhospitable soil. On the outside, we are forced to relearn our worlds, to reconfigure our relationships with ourselves, our surroundings, our fellow survivors, space and time, and with God. We are forced to learn how to become truly hopeful once again. The fruits of our efforts lead us back to the Garden where we rediscover that it is possible to become intimate once again without the overwhelming fear of being crushed by our own vulnerability.

It seems to me that we as a community make that journey back to the Garden on Simchas Torah in a manner unlike any other day in the year. The circle of our dancing creates the outer edge of the Garden, and in the center stands the Tree of Life. This Tree of Life is dynamic, for it rests not in one place, but moves to and fro, touching and healing those who dance around it. It is a generous Tree, allowing whoever wishes to grasp it, to cling to it. As the dancing progresses, the branches of the Tree grow fuller and lusher. Under the sheltering presence of the Tree, my life assumptions and principles become ever more clear, namely, the Torah needs to be at the center of my life. Clinging to the Torah allows me to be hopeful in a world full of mystery and pain. Under the Tree I gain the clarity that all of my neurotic behaviors and personal shticklach are for naught; they are weeds that keep me from understanding that at its core, the Torah is about love of God and fellow humans.

We are a group of people, like all other groups, full of good and bad qualities, capable of both great acts of chesed and friendship, and also destructive thoughts and deeds of jealousy, rancor and vicious negative judgment. Yet somehow, dancing with the Torah, hand-clasping hand, mouths full of song, we find ourselves once again protected by the pleasant shade of the Tree. This Garden is not a place of perfection: the judgments and differences remain, but our footsteps stamp them down to a manageable size as we are protected by our knowledge that Yisrael veOraita veKoodsha brichhoo chad hoo – the Jewish people and Torah and God are one. On



Simchas Torah we are not afraid to sing out that truth that too often remains muffled, victim of a sometimes near-lethal combination of legitimate doubt, over valued rationality, and fear of condemnation. But on Simchas Torah we sing it out, unashamed and unafraid, and in those five to six hours we spend together under the Tree we become the kahal kadosh we are capable of becoming.

And so, here we are today, Shabbes Mevarchim, on the cusp of Marchesvan. The memory of our sojourn in the Garden on Simchas Torah is fresh, yet here we sit, on the outside. The question arises for me, how do we keep alive the fervor and passion, the sense of safety that leads to creativity and exploration, the flowing of those primeval waters?

Listen to Louis Ginzburg's rendition of the Midrash on Adam's leaving the Garden:

*Seeing that he would be banished, Adam began to weep again and implored the angels to grant him at least permission to take sweet scented spices with him out of Paradise, that he might be able to bring offerings unto God, that outside too, his prayers might be accepted before the Lord. The angels implored the Lord on Adam's behalf, and He heard their prayer. Adam gathered saffron, nard, calamus, and cinnamon, and all sorts of seeds besides for his sustenance. Laden with these, Adam and Eve left Paradise, and came upon the earth.*

Adam knows that he can't remain in the Garden, but he refuses to leave without taking a piece of Paradise with him. Not an object of Paradise, but a scent of paradise, a seed of Paradise. Adam is not afraid to beg for a living memory of the Garden.

What strikes me here is that it is so clear to Adam that he can't live on the outside without that scent. That smell from the Garden obviously is not palpable, but it has the capacity to transport us back to the very beginning to the source of the living breath. As my wife Miriam perceptively pointed out to me, holy reyach is just a small "yood" away from rooach. What will it take for us as a community to truly develop a new Torah of yearning in which we refuse to move forward without at least a fragrance from the Garden? We are almost one month away from Rosh Hashanah and one week away from Simchas Torah. Are the dreams you dreamed for yourself and this community on those days still alive, or like me, have they already

dissipated, weakened to some extent? Tomorrow is the first truly open Sunday in a month, and I thank God for that, for my bike and tennis racket need to be dusted off. But I wonder, as I face this open world, is there some way for me to bring the Torah along on that long awaited bike ride?

This minyan, like many of us here today, is middle aged. We have witnessed and participated in many cycles of hope and disappointment, many painful losses, many rounds of achievement and disillusionment. To be middle aged is in part to have a very clear and detailed picture of unrealized aspirations, both personal and communal, and thus the present becomes fraught with complication and doubt. In truth it is so easy to give up. And so, to be middle aged and to yearn for a cherished past, **disconnected from the present**, is easy. To be middle aged and to yearn for something deeper and more alive in the **living present** is a much trickier proposition, for it is so easy and comfortable to remain cynical.

My hope and blessing on this Shabbes Breishit is that we as individuals and as a community can face the risk of truly yearning for a year in which the Torah is at our center, and in which even the most minute scent of Gan Eden is never too far away. Shabbat Shalom.



## **BEREISHIT – EVENING AND MORNING**

Ron Lee Meyers – Minyan Maat – October 10, 2015

I have a pretty good talent for waking up without an alarm clock. When I crack my eyes open, I can tell from the light whether it's 6.30 or quarter-to-seven. But this time of year, it's staying darker later, and it's harder to guess it right. It's the same thing with trying to get out of the office before dusk. Evening and morning are shift. They are elusive. And they have been ever since Day One of creation.

With due respect to our beloved text, which we have started rereading again this morning, Evening and Morning don't make a lot of sense. "It was evening and it was morning, a first day." Was it really?

If evening follows the day, then why did morning not precede the day? I would understand if the creation of light emerged out of the primordial darkness, forming a morning, and then receded back into night, forming an evening. But that's not what the story tells us – and even if that was the story, it would be a sequence of morning and evening, not a sequence of Evening and Morning. And if we accept that a day starts with the evening, in Jewish fashion, then wouldn't the first instance of Evening and Morning denote the start of the second day and not the end of the first? I fully appreciate that the first day of creation is unlike any other day, and that the sequence of day and night had to start someplace. But it's curious that the process is described as evening-and-morning, since that particular pattern, quite strikingly, does not add up.

It's more curious still when you consider that while light and darkness are created in the first day, and receive the names Day and Night, we really don't know where Evening and Morning come from. They are never created; they are just automatically there. There's nothing about light and darkness that requires them to fade gradually into one another. I think most of us imagine the creation of light by divine fiat to have been a sudden flip of the big switch, like a klieg light. Likewise, nightfall could have been just as sudden, the pulling of the big plug. In the fourth day, the sun and moon are created, and while this introduces a dynamic of moving spheres that create the gradations of dawn and dusk, the story is not about these in-between states, it is entirely and specifically about the separation of Day from Night. ...Just as the other days of creation emphasize the separation of heaven from earth, land from sea. Separation and distinction are a hallmark of the natural order that Gd creates, and, later they are a hallmark of the legal order – *kodesh* and *chol*, milk and meat, linen and wool.

So Evening and Morning are somehow out of place in the Creation story, even while they are ubiquitous. **The phrase Evening and Morning, I think, has nothing to do with the chronology of one day and the next. It describes a process underlying and driving creation.**

It's the unheard heartbeat that swooshes through the night while everything else is at rest. It's the nighttime dream that explores and consolidates the things that were created during the day. It's the momentum and the forward arrow of time itself. Evening-and-Morning is the inexorable process of the universe moving forward. They are never created, because they are so deeply implicit in the act of

creation. The first moment that anything differed from anything else before it, that is the moment when Time was born – and the moment when the metronome of Evening-and-Morning began to swing.

Evening-and-Morning is the force that through the green fuse drives the flower – and it keeps on driving after the flower is created. The objects of creation described in the 30 verses of our narrative are not the complete contents of the finished universe. It takes the process of Evening-and-Morning to elaborate the interactions among everything that was created in each day. Gd creates the land and the sea, the sun and the moon, but He does not specifically create the wind or the weather or the tides. These are all implicit those creations, but rather than arising during any of the six days, they emerge somehow in the ongoing process that this text calls Evening-and-Morning. Gd created the plants and the animals; Evening-and-Morning stitched together the food chains among them; Gd created the light; Evening-and-Morning give us the shadow.

We feel the ubiquity of Evening-and-Morning because it's a refrain in the text. We love refrains – we have them in literature and songs from every time and place. They help us to organize the ramble of long, repeating lists of things. They help us to appreciate the repetition and to anticipate the variations that each verse will bring. When I speak of raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, you know that I'm singing about my favorite things, and, moreover, that I might sing all day about an endless list of my favorite things, as long as the rhyming language will bear it out. And if the three verses of "My Favorite Things" – there are only three verses in the show – if three verses can lead us to anticipate an endless

expanse of Favorite Things, then what an enormous infinity is conjured by the six repetitions of Evening-and-Morning. And of course what we're talking about here is not whiskers on kittens, but, l'havdil, the genuine, manifest, actual infinity of the universe. The refrain sets a pattern that points so far into the future as to fully convey that the universe is without end.

And yet, the narrative does end. A Broadway song finishes off with a crescendo and a key change – the list of favorite things turns out not to be endless, at least not for now; it's just a sampling of what the whole list could be. The refrain of creation ends definitively, with a coda. "*Va-yehi erev, va-yehi voker, yom ha-shishi, va-yechulu ha-shamayim v'ha-aretz v'chol tz'va-am*". And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day – and it was done! Finished. It's not just an infinite universe, it's also, in a magnificent paradox, a closed set. It's an infinity, contained within the even greater infinity of Gd's plan and dominion.

The plan, of course, culminates in us – Mankind is the crowning act and destination of creation. And our unique character is signaled by the equally definitive end to the other refrain that runs through the story. Each unit of creation is registered and approved with Gd's affirmation that it is Good. The last iteration of this refrain ends not with a coda, like the Evening-and-Morning refrain, but with a transformation. When Mankind is created, the work is no longer Good, but Very Good. We are elevated above all the rest of creation in the depth and the vault of our goodness.

But actually, we're not. Because it's not Mankind that is said to be Very Good,

but the entirety of creation, once we have been placed in it. Everything else is elevated only when we arrive. But it is only as a part of everything else that we are elevated. In fact, on our own, we are never declared to be Good at all. On our own, we are nothing. It's the integration of it all that is so much more Good than the individual parts.

We don't have an inherent quality of goodness, as all the other creatures apparently have. What we have is a capacity for goodness. The azaleas and the zebras can never be less than good – that's how they were made. But we can be less, and we often are, far less – that's how we are made, and that is part of our unique position in the universe. So, if we lack inherent goodness, but possess a capacity for very-goodness, what does that mean? It means that we always, eternally, have a lot work to do. Since we are not inherently good, what we are, inherently, is a creature of work, a creature of process.

**And that (I suggest to you) is the significance of Mankind being created at the crossroads of the two refrains of our story.** The It-Was-Good refrain points to our quality of goodness, which is so different from every other creature's quality of goodness. And the Evening-and-Morning refrain points to the endless process of creation unfolding. Just as the days of creation are completed, Man, the creature of ongoing process, is unveiled.

We become partners with Gd in the continuing creation of the world. The record of humanity is, precisely, the record of our ongoing creative processes, in art and technology and social order. But perhaps even more, our engagement in creation



is in the continual work of creating ourselves. The azaleas and the zebras are set in their places, and that is Good. We have to find our place, we have to make our place, we have to determine what is good. The animals may struggle endlessly in the battle for life and death, but it's a black-and-white struggle – each day, they either win or lose. Our endless struggle is to determine how to live – that's not black and white, it's every shade of light and darkness in-between – it's Evening and Morning, Evening and Morning, for as long as we walk the earth.

So, how do we celebrate the completion of creation? With Shabbat. How do we celebrate Shabbat? With a special bread and wine. We bless Gd for creating the grapes – *borey pri ha-gafen* – but it's we who make the wine. Gd brings forth wheat from the earth, and we bring forth bread from the wheat. Our brachot conflate Gd's creation with our ongoing process of creation, thus covering the whole scope of what occurred in the first six days and what has occurred ever since: And it was evening and it was morning, and the world was done. Gd finished the process of creating, the world began the process of living.

dvar Torah for Beresheet October 2, 2021

What a remarkable parsha this is, with the most sublime opening of any and the most tragic follow-up as it goes on to explain the origins of strife, bloodshed and planetary ruination. But that exuberant opening arrives with tidings of renewal and new beginnings, echoing the hope of the turning of teshuvah of the holydays we have just come through. The year turns on its axis, the Torah on its etzim and we turn Janus-like looking both backward and forward. We are here, not in our usual space, not with our usual face, but together in physical community once again, having learned that being the host of a Zoom session and the host of a Shabbos dinner are not quite the same.

The Creation story we just read reflects nature in a way which seemed logical for much of history. Carl Linnaeus never doubted God had initiated Creation when he created his taxonomic system of all nature in 1735. His kingdoms of mineral and vegetable were created on the third day and the animal kingdom on the fifth and sixth. But there were no viruses in the purview of the Torah or of Linnaeus. Genesis 3:15 has God telling the serpent “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers....” In Exodus 17:16 we will read “The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages...” But there is no battle as eternal and unrelenting as that between human beings and microorganisms, which seek to consume us from within and without for their purposes. Viruses are genetically programmed only to co-opt cells and induce production of their own goods, their DNA and RNA. They are sort of like micro-capitalists with no conscience at all. But we are programmed to produce, alongside the fighting, murder, and evil designs, culture, art, music, poetry and community. Viruses don’t keep chronicles, but we do.

Minyan chronicle - March, 2020, a year and a half ago: we were so excited in anticipation of having three aufrufs here in that one month. Akiba Fishman, Jalna Silverstein and Anna Peterman were to be married and we were to celebrate them. Never before had three of our children scheduled aufrufs in one month and, sadly, likely never will again. As we learned of Covid, we were so naïve, or, perhaps more accurately, we just needed time to emotionally assimilate what we already knew to be true because the implications were so dire. At first, we actually thought these bakery tissues would protect us and we could pursue our plans for Akiba and Miriam. So, I ordered boxes of these. Then we decided that was inadequate and so I ordered these serving gloves in order that the kiddush go forward. Then, as if following Kubler-Ross’ stages for accepting a fatal illness, it became apparent kiddush itself, hand shaking, hugging, being together were no more. The tally of smachot, Shabbosim and holidays and the meals together which could never be made up grew. But the three young couples were married, despite the obstacles.

That Minyan M’at no longer physically existed was harsh knowledge but to be without most people previously in your world was harsher yet. In this very parshah God declares (2:18) “It is not good for man to be alone...”, the first “not good” in the Bible, as Milton observed.

I don't know that I can convey the startling epiphany of the following seemingly trivial incident as it actually occurred. Near the end of that first Covid March, I was bicycling back from Central Park and passed the metal plaque at 225 CPW, as I had hundreds of times. My eyes lit on The Alden Apartments...apartments...suddenly the word struck me. 'Aparte,' to separate, to not live all together in one large house, but in separate cells of housing, in separate lives. That was what Covid was doing to us. Our upper west side apartments had put us in solitary. Some of us were fortunate to later develop pods to be with, but some of us were really physically isolated.

We read today that Adam named all the animals but he could have had no word for the primordial, inchoate aloneness that he must have felt. The Yom Kippur liturgy tells us God knows the hidden things and therefore knew Adam needed a companion and friend. Eve so dispelled his existential despair that it appeared to Adam as if she had emerged from his very own self.

Unexpectedly, Beresheet of *Waiting for Godot* offers the same solution to lessen the severity of the decree of existential solitary:

*"Estragon: Nothing to be done. Vladimir: I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. So, there you are again. Estragon: Am I? Vladimir: I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever. Estragon: Me too. Vladimir: Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? Get up till I embrace you."*

This being Beckett, they never do embrace, but they have their pet names for each other, Gogo and Didi and they remain together. That's what there is. I credit Lisa, Bonnie, the Troika, lecturers and others for working to keep us as a community-in-being for the duration. Zoom, a descendant of Tubal-cain's technology, turned out to be a God-send for community. And, of course, the vaccine has been a game-changer, an apartment-changer. Perhaps we will now learn to take the usually mindlessly uttered "How are you?" seriously. Perhaps we will now learn to take more seriously the Shehechayanu prayer's insistence on being aware of God's preserving us and giving us this very moment together.

Covid has reminded us how vulnerable we are and how illusory is our sense of control. The Machzor (p.144) compares humans to broken shards, withering grass, shriveled flowers, passing shadows, fading clouds, fleeting breezes, scattered dust, a vanishing dream...but this dream of a life is the only one we get and we dream best together. Now that we are davening together regularly on Shabbos and the new minyan list will be out shortly, we shall see how M'at succeeds in re-constituting itself. We shall have to generate the intimacy which Hirsch Hall lacks in our remaining months here.

This bottle of vodka [show] is all that remains of our liquor supply from the old 5<sup>th</sup> floor cabinet, now gone. M'at has to ensure that from this potato-peasant seed will come improved evolutionary forms, like scotch. It is essential to the well-being of the minyan that we institute quick shots under masks as a mental health measure.

Equally intoxicating is Vassar Miller's poem on the energy of Creation and her celebration of the profusion of life:

God, best at making in the morning, tossed  
stars and planets, singing and dancing, rolled  
Saturn's rings spinning and humming, twirled the earth  
so hard it coughed and spat the moon up, brilliant  
bubble floating around it for good, stretched holy  
hands till birds in nervous sparks flew forth from  
them and beasts—lizards, big and little, apes,  
lions, elephants, dogs and cats cavorting,  
tumbling over themselves, dizzy with joy when  
God made us in the morning too, both man  
and woman, leaving Adam no time for  
sleep so nimbly was Eve bouncing out of  
his side till as night came everything and  
everybody, growing tired, declined, sat  
down in one soft descended Hallelujah.

Howard L. Berkowitz



## Genesis Drash – Enoch and the Nephilim

Here we go again. Back to the beginning; so many possible subjects. Creation through words alone; two versions of human creation; Adam and Eve and the snake and then fratricide. All good topics but I want to focus on less dramatic subjects; verses about Enoch in chapter 5 and verses about divine beings in chapter 6. At some point, these verses conjoined to form an underground stream coursing through ancient Jewish history, occasionally rising to the surface, eventually becoming a force in early Christianity. We don't know if Enoch and the Nephilim – the progeny of divine beings and human women – were widely known during the First Temple period. But they were certainly known by Jews during the Second Temple since fragments of books in which they appear are among the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in those caves around Qumran in the late 1940's. Represented among those scrolls are all the Biblical books (except Esther for some unknown reason) as well as various Second Temple Jewish texts that were adopted by the early Church but never again part of the Jewish library, such as the book of Enoch.

There are four books, probably by different authors, included in the single volume of Enoch. The only complete extant version was brought back to Europe from Ethiopia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by a Christian monk. It had been translated into Ethiopic from the original Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic – depending upon which scholar you read. Other Second Temple Jewish books that are not part of the Jewish canon were preserved in the Apocrypha, a section of the King James Bible: books such as Judith, the Maccabees and Ben Sira. Many books in the Hebrew Bible date from the Second Temple period: the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi; Job, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Ruth and Esther, among others. But the rabbis who stepped into Jewish history as communal leaders after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE were selective about which texts would live in the Jewish canon and which would die (for Jews, that is). A book like Enoch is especially interesting since it originates in five Torah verses, was read for at least a few centuries by Jews but preserved only by the early Christians. At JTS in the '90's there were two required courses on Intellectual History for rabbinical students: one focused on familiar modern texts and the ancient course taught by David Kraemer whom I've thanked many times for introducing an amazing – and often bizarre – array of Second Temple texts that were consigned to the dustbin of Jewish literary history, only to turn up in those jars. Now all these Second Temple texts are available in a JPS set of three hefty volumes.

Enoch is introduced in Genesis, 5:21, as one of the descendants of Adam. There is a clear pattern of the chapter 5 genealogy: "So and So lived so many years and begot a son. After the son's birth, he lived this many more years, begot sons and daughters. All his days came to so many total years and then he died." But when we get to verses 21-24 we read: **"When Enoch had lived 65 years, he begot Methuselah. After the birth of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years; and he begot sons and daughters. All the days of Enoch came to 365 years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him."**

From these verses, four Second Temple Jewish authors produced separate texts about Enoch, eventually brought together in a single book. They were clearly inspired by obvious questions: **Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him.**

Why is that last verse so odd? All the other descendants died and never walked with God. Was it a deliberate variation to incite some interest? Was there a tradition about one of the ancient ancestors being special? The years of his life were 365.... Is that significant? We know there were serious differences in ancient Israel about lunar and solar time until a 4<sup>th</sup> century genius established the lunisolar system for a Hebrew calendar that is worked out for all time. Why is Enoch alone mentioned as “walking with God”? And why is that phrase repeated a second time? And, finally, what does “God took him” mean? It’s no surprise that I have no firm answers to these questions but I can cite various commentaries:

\*The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah from Egypt in the 3rd century BCE, has this version: “And Enoch was pleasing to God; and he was not, for God had transferred him.”

\*Philo in 1<sup>st</sup> century Egypt weighs in with: Enoch was “transferred, that is, he changed his abode and journeyed as an emigrant from the mortal life to the immortal.”

\*Josephus, another 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian Jew, compares Enoch with Elijah: “Enoch lived 365 years and then returned to the divinity which is why nothing is recorded about his death. However, concerning Elijah and Enoch, who lived before the flood, it is written in the sacred books that they became invisible and no one knows of their death.”

**Later interpretations are negative, probably because Enoch is portrayed as a messianic figure in the text named for him that is adopted by the early Christian community:**

\*Targum Onkelos, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, one of the Aramaic translations of the Torah, puts it bluntly: “And Enoch walked in the fear of the Lord, and he was not, for the Lord had killed him.”

\*Midrash Genesis Rabbah (3<sup>rd</sup> century CE): “Rav Hama b. R. Hoshaya said: And Enoch was not, means that he was not inscribed in the roll of the righteous but in the roll of the wicked”.

\*Centuries later, Rashi expresses a negative point of view: “And **Enoch** walked: He was a righteous man, but he could easily be swayed to return to do evil.”

The commentators in early rabbinic times as well as Rashi in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, reject the idea that Enoch had been taken by God to live in heaven. Rashi may have known about the book of Enoch since the Church preserved it for some time after it disappeared from the Jewish library. Enoch is a character like Elijah who goes to heaven but, unlike Elijah, Enoch’s story continues in heaven where he undertakes a mission assigned by God and recounts all he sees on his journey. He learns all the heavenly secrets, becomes learned in science, a seer of apocalyptic visions, a scribe, and a messianic figure with direct access to God. His prominence in the early centuries of the Common Era – and especially the heresy of becoming a messianic figure – helps explain the objections of Jewish commentators to the idea that he never dies. At the same time, his story was assuming an important place in Christian texts and Christian theology.

Enoch is assigned special responsibilities for dealing with the *b’nei Elohim* - the bad angels (sometimes called “Watchers”) who descend to earth to consort with human women in

Genesis, chapter 6. This is how the two stories become conjoined and Enoch's special status is explained. While Enoch has extraordinary adventures on high, the book is not great literature. But I'll read a few selections to demonstrate how the book builds on the verses about him and the Nephilim. This first excerpt describes God's plan to punish sinners, in which Enoch will figure:

"And previous to all these things Enoch was hidden, and not one of the children of men knew where he was hidden, and where he was, and what had become of him. 2. And all his deeds were with the holy ones and with the watchers in his days. 3. And I, Enoch, was praising the great Lord and the King of the world, and, behold, the watchers called to me, Enoch, the scribe, and said to me: 4. "Enoch, thou scribe of justice, go, announce to the watchers of heaven, who have left the high heaven and the holy, eternal place, and have contaminated themselves with women, and have done as the children of men do, and have taken to themselves wives, and are contaminated in great contamination upon the earth. 5. But upon earth they shall have no peace, nor forgiveness of sin; for they will not enjoy their children. 6. They will see the murder of their beloved ones, and they will lament over the destruction of their children, and will petition to eternity, but mercy and peace will not be unto them."

These verses establish Enoch's special role described throughout the book in extensive, dreadful details that will include severe punishment of the Nephilim, the giants who result from the mating of divine beings with human women. I've spoken in the past about chapter 6 in parashat Bereshit that begins with the descent of the divine beings and continues through the description of Noah preparing the ark. The parashah, however, ends earlier than chapter 6, after mentioning God's disappointment in the world but finding favor with Noah. Parashat Noah - a continuation of chapter 6 - describes his preparation for the flood in fulfillment of God's promise to destroy all flesh. But the flood is never specifically described as punishment for the Nephilim. Given this profound violation of the divine order, you would expect severe punishment. This seems clearly to have been the intention of those who recorded the story of the Nephilim and followed it by the story of the ark without stating it explicitly as their punishment. In the book of Enoch this cause and effect is stated definitively: bad angels committed great evil in violating the boundary between humans and divine beings and their punishment will be apocalyptic.

While the rabbis surely would have liked to expunge these problematic verses about the Nephilim, the best they could do was to separate that story from the story of the flood. Bad enough for the rabbis to have this story in the Torah but, at least, there wasn't an explicit stated link. In the first year seminar at JTS, Rabbi Joseph Lukinsky, z"l, a professor in the Education Dept alerted us to be aware when the chapter divisions of the Bible – first inserted in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century Latin Vulgate – do not correspond precisely to the parashah divisions that the rabbis created around 600 CE, the time of the Babylonian Talmud. Chapter and verse divisions make it much easier to use Biblical citations compared to referencing words deep in a



lengthy parashah. When a parashah break does not correspond to a chapter break, it is worth a closer look, as Rabbi Lukinsky advised. Assigning chapter breaks is a judgment by an editor looking for literary consistency. You might expect the editor to keep the punishment for the crime in the same chapter as the crime and so chapter six continues with preparations for the flood. But by ending parashat Bereshit with a mention of Noah and saying nothing about the flood, a separation between God's decision to destroy the world from the story of the Nephilim is created. Separating cause and effect by separating the parashahs by a week – which is our practice – may not seem so important, but we don't know how the written Torah was used in the centuries after it was redacted. The first we know about a public Torah reading is the one Ezra did at the time of the return from exile. Since the parashah breaks are established about a thousand years after Ezra, it's tempting to conclude that separating the explicit punishment from the crime suggests rabbinic discomfort with the idea that the events of Genesis 6 resulted in the destruction of God's creation.

It seems safe to conclude that the rabbis wanted to disconnect the flood from the Nephilim when they became interpreters of Torah. This disassociation is reflected in the fact that I found no midrashim about the Nephilim. Rather, the rabbis explain the cause of the flood as the result of "geneva" or thievery – which seems a mild reason for such a dramatic divine response. They must have found divine beings mating with human women so downright pagan that they chose to keep those verses in Bereshit, ignore them and postpone the flood until Parashat Noah. For the rabbis, human sin is a far better reason for God to destroy the world since it has an ethical significance. What they made of these divine beings is another issue entirely! But for some ancients, the story of the Nephilim as told in the book of Enoch provided a far more powerful explanation for destroying the world. It just doesn't seem very Jewish!

**While the Genesis 6 version simply notes that the angels found human women attractive, took them for wives and bore them children, Enoch describes in vivid language the pact made by 200 angels or "Watchers", "b'nei elohim", who come down on Mt. Hermon:**

"And they took unto themselves wives, and each chose for himself one, and they began to go in to them, and mixed with them, and taught them charms and conjurations, and made them acquainted with the cutting of roots and of woods. 2. And they became pregnant and brought forth great giants whose stature was three thousand ells. Wikipedia defines an 'ell' as a unit of measurement. 3. These devoured all the acquisitions of mankind till men were unable to sustain themselves. 4. And the giants turned themselves against mankind in order to devour them. 5. And they began to sin against the birds and the beasts, and against the creeping things, and the fish, and devoured their flesh among themselves, and drank the blood thereof. 6. Then the earth complained of the unjust ones.

**Much of the book of Enoch describes his explorations in heaven, guided by the "good angels" Michael and Uriel, learning exactly how everything in nature works. He also comes closer than any Biblical prophet to seeing God:**

"And I looked and saw therein a high throne; its appearance was like the hoar-frost, and its

circuit like a shining sun and voices of the Cherubim. 19. And from under the great throne came streams of flaming fire, and it was impossible to look at it. 20. And he who is great in majesty sat thereon; his garment shone more brilliantly than the sun, and was whiter than any hail. 21. None of the angels were able to enter, nor any flesh to look upon the form of the face of the Majestic and Honored One. 22. Fire of flaming fire was round him, and a great fire stood before him, and none of those who were around him could approach him; ten thousand times ten thousand were before him; but he required not any holy counsel. 23. And the holy ones who were near him did not leave day or night, nor did they depart from him. 24. And I had had so long a veil upon my face, and I trembled; and the Lord called me with his own voice and said to me: "Come hither, Enoch, and to my holy word!" 25. And he caused me to arise and I went to the door; but I bent my face downwards. And he answered and spoke to me with this word: "Hear, and fear not. Enoch, thou just man and scribe of justice, approach hither, and hear my words. 2. And go, say to the watchers of heaven, who have sent thee, that thou shouldst petition for them: "Ye should petition for men, and not men for you. 3. Why have ye left the high, holy, and everlasting heaven, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men, and taken wives unto yourselves, and acted like the children of earth, and begotten giants as sons?"

By creating a direct link between Enoch who never dies and these "b'nei Elohim", ancient writers fashioned an apocalyptic literature that persisted for centuries until it disappeared from the Jewish canon while preserved by the Church since an active realm beyond the earthly one was consistent with Church theology. What we see dramatically when we consider the book of Enoch, are the shifting boundaries of Jewish religion over time; from the blurring of human and divine, the earthly and heavenly in the earliest origins of Judaism and persisting for centuries among some groups. Finding Enoch among the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed that the notion of mating between humans and divine creatures was not always unthinkable among Jews nor was a cosmology that included many angels – good and bad – in addition to God, and the messianic figure Enoch. Moreover, this immense violation of God's creation had the advantage of explaining the source of evil in the world. Not such a bad advantage! The Dead Sea Scrolls reflect popular religious literature of the time – the early years of the first century of the first millennium of the Common Era when the Romans destroyed the Temple and the priesthood. And it was sometime later that the ideas contained in these texts became true heresies as rabbinic Judaism took shape and the two religious traditions – Jewish and Christian – diverged further from each other. So, I come away with deep respect for the rabbis who faced enormous challenges to maintain an already ancient tradition and deep gratitude that the Torah text survived with all of the problems it presented to the rabbinic commentators. How lucky we are to have this ancient witness to our past with all of its complications!



10/11/04

When asked if I could give a dvar Torah on Noach I immediately thought of the b'nei elohim who mate with the banot adam and the Nephilim who seem to be a product of that union. You rarely hear anyone talk about this topic and there are few midrashim that deal with them. But I've always assumed that these verses come to establish how corrupt the world had become and provide the explanation for God's decision to destroy it by a flood. Then, duh, they're not in Noach. They are at the end of Bereshit. So the fact that they are Not in Noah became the topic of today's dvar Torah

Sefer Torah – not divided by parashiyyot – that is a product of the rabbinic period and we know about these divisions by about 600 CE when the Babylonian Talmud appears. Chapter divisions inserted in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century in the Latin Vulgate and adopted by Jewish tradition because they make it so much easier to talk about the text by chapter and verse (one source suggests Jews first adopted these chapter divisions during the medieval disputations to help cite prooftexts in debates with Christians about the meaning of the Bible)

It is always interesting then to look at cases where a chapter is ~~divided~~ <sup>Spans</sup> between two parshiyyot as is the case here. (Another example of this is the parashah division between Balak and Pinhas which comes in the middle of Numbers 25.)

**READ Chapter 6:1-13 through in English but indicate the parashah break.**

Read this way it seems to me that the Torah is explaining the flood as God's solution to the problem of severe boundary violations – i.e. intercourse between divine beings and humans

My question is... why do the rabbis divide the story of Noah the way they do as opposed to presenting a unified story the way it is presented in Chapter 6? Or why not start the Parashah with the first mention of Noah (ch 5: 28 or 29) and connect the material that apparently explains why God destroyed the world with the account of this destruction.

Clearly, the answer to this question is not that including these few verses would have made today's parashah too long or unwieldy. It seems likely that the rabbis were uncomfortable with these verses and preferred to leave them behind in parashat Bereshit rather than bring them along into the discussion of the flood. After all, mating between divine or semi-divine creatures (b'nei elohim) and humans (banot adam) violates a fundamental religious boundary and could certainly explain God's decision to start all over again. While the rabbis couldn't eliminate this material, by leaving it behind they shifted the focus to human misdeeds as the basis for the mabul (cf beginning of Noah-6:11 ff).

(Another question is why the Bible includes this mythical explanation for the flood; after all, the mating of divine creatures with humans and the creation of a semi-divine race sounds like other Ancient Near Eastern myths like Gilgamesh or the Enuma Elish and not like the Bible. One possible answer for this is that the Biblical redactors didn't want to explain God's decision to destroy the world as the punishment for human misdeeds. After all, while God threatens the Israelites with destruction many times over, God never actually obliterates the entire people, only significant segments of them in one manner or another. So it is certainly more consistent for the Torah to explain that a world

ordinary

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destroying deluge - as well as God's decision to make humans mortal with a life span of no more than 120 years - was the result of outrages such as the mating of divine creatures with humans and not a punishment for strictly human misbehavior.)

While there is surprisingly little midrash on the first few verses of Genesis 6, what there is clearly reflects rabbinic discomfort with the text. Rashi, for instance, defines the b'nei elohim as "sons of rulers and magistrates or angels" and as descendants of Seth who intermarried with the descendants of Cain. He understands the Nephilim as "giants" - the meaning that they have in Numbers 13:33 where the spies report that they have seen Nephilim in the land. In this context in Numbers (the only other time Nephilim are mentioned in the Bible), the plain meaning of the text seems to be that these creatures are giants but human giants, related to the Anakites, an indigenous people in the land of Canaan. But in Genesis, the Nephilim do not appear to be human, rather they are the product of divine/human mating.

And while Rashi says Nephilim means "fallen", he says that these giants fell from the attribute of mercy to the attribute of justice, not from divinity to some lesser status. Hazal divides the story between Bereshit and Noach so that the mating between b.e. and b.a is relegated to the end of Bereshit and with Noach we begin the narratives of family interaction which occupies most of the rest of Genesis. So both in their interpretation of these verses and in the way they divide the text itself, the traditional commentators refuse to follow the Biblical text into a mythical world which violates the fundamental Jewish boundary between divine and human. Of course, this leaves us somewhat in the dark when the opening of Noach refers to the great corruption on earth without explicit reference to divine beings mating with humans. Talmud Yerushalmi understands "hamas" in 6:11, translated by JPS as "lawlessness", to mean people cheating each other for such small sums that courts could not prosecute them and so this went unpunished until God sent the flood. Rashi says it means "robbery".

These first few verses in chapter 6 of Genesis - which present the mythical mating of b'e and b'a as critical to our understanding of why God would choose to destroy the world - represent just the tip of an ancient iceberg of stories of semi-divine creatures. There is a large body of ancient Jewish literature that expounds at great length about the adventures of such creatures. These ancient texts are included in a collection called the Pseudepigrapha and are attributed to the period of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, between the rebuilding of the Temple after the Babylonian exile and its destruction by the Romans in the year 70 CE. While Jewish tradition did not preserve these Jewish texts, the early Church did and they add a great deal to our knowledge of Jewish ideas during that period.

Overall these texts focus on apocalyptic concerns, the mysteries of the universe, the end of time and other matters which are mostly foreign to the Bible. The few verses we have in Genesis 6 are typical of the concerns of a book like Enoch - portions of which were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The book is named for the individual mentioned in the genealogy of Genesis in chapter 5:23 (READ) and he becomes a subject of interest in 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple literature (although not in the Bible) because his life span was

And, as we'll see, mythical explanations for the flood and other actions by God were rampant in ancient Israel.

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hey have done,

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them rises and  
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ind<sup>d</sup> concerning  
nd: how all the  
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aves appear as  
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leaves) come.<sup>i</sup>

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ear fruit.<sup>a</sup> Pay  
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and bear fruit,"  
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ntelligible  
before him.<sup>k</sup>

year to year. And all his work prospers and obeys<sup>f</sup> him,<sup>g</sup> and it does not change; but  
3 everything functions<sup>b</sup> in the way in which God has ordered<sup>d</sup> it. •And look at the seas:  
4 They do not part;<sup>h</sup> they fulfill all their duties. •But as for you, you have not been long-  
suffering and you have not done the commandments of the Lord, but you have  
transgressed and spoken slanderously<sup>i</sup> grave and harsh words with your impure mouths  
5 against his greatness. Oh, you hard-hearted, may you not find peace! •Therefore, you  
shall curse your days, and the years of your life shall perish and multiply in eternal  
6 execration; and there will not be any<sup>j</sup> mercy unto you. •In those days, you shall make  
your names<sup>m</sup> an eternal execration unto all the righteous; and the sinners shall curse  
7 you continually—you together with the sinners.<sup>n</sup> •But to the elect there shall be light,  
joy, and peace, and they shall inherit the earth. To you, wicked ones, on the contrary,  
8 there will be a curse. •And then<sup>o</sup> wisdom shall be given<sup>p</sup> to the elect. And they shall  
all live and not return again to sin,<sup>q</sup> either by being wicked or through pride; but  
9 those who have wisdom shall be humble and not return again to sin. •And they shall  
not be judged all the days of their lives;<sup>r</sup> nor die through plague<sup>s</sup> or wrath,<sup>t</sup> but<sup>u</sup> they  
10 shall complete the (designated) number of the days of their life. •And peace shall  
increase their lives<sup>v</sup> and the years of their happiness shall be multiplied forever in  
gladness and peace all the days of their life.

### The fall of angels

1 6 In those days, when the children of man had multiplied, it happened that there Gen. 6:1-4  
2 were born unto them handsome and beautiful daughters. •And the angels, the children  
of heaven, saw them and desired them; and they said to one another, "Come, let us  
choose wives for ourselves from among the daughters<sup>a</sup> of man and beget us children."  
3 And Semyaz,<sup>b</sup> being their leader,<sup>c</sup> said unto them, "I fear that perhaps you will not  
consent that this deed should be done, and I alone will become (responsible)<sup>d</sup> for this  
4 great sin." •But they all responded to him,<sup>e</sup> "Let us all swear an oath and bind  
everyone among us by a curse not to abandon this suggestion but to do the deed."<sup>f</sup>  
5 Then they all swore together and bound one another by (the curse).<sup>g</sup> •And they were  
6 altogether<sup>h</sup> two hundred; and they descended into 'Ardos,<sup>i</sup> which is the summit of  
Hermon.<sup>j</sup> And they called the mount Armon, for they swore and bound one another  
7 by a curse.<sup>k</sup> •And their names are as follows:<sup>l</sup> Semyaz,<sup>m</sup> the leader of Arakeb,  
Rame'el, Tam'el, Ram'el, Dan'el, Ezeqel, Baraqyal, As'el, Armaros, Batar'el,

f. Lit. "they obey."

g. B and C have the awkward reading *wa-mege-  
bāru qedmēhu* . . . *zavekawun wa-k<sup>a</sup>ulu megbāru  
yetqannay* [B: *yetqanay*] *lotu*.

h. Lit. "it is done."

i. I.e. organized.

j. Eth. *bāhrata*, in the accusative form. B and C  
give the common plural form 'abbert, in the nomi-  
native form.

k. So A: *wa-ifalag*, lit. "it does not part." This  
reading of A appears to be corrupt, B and C, in  
agreement with the Gk., *hē thalassa kai hoi potamoi*,  
read 'abbert *wa-'afag hebura*, "the seas and the  
rivers together."

l. I.e. in a backbiting manner.

m. B: "your peace."

n. The Eth. is corrupt. As for the variations in the  
different Gk. texts, particularly in the Akhmim ad-  
ditions, see EC, p. 9.

o. B: *wa-'emmah*.

p. Eth. *yetwahab*, B C: *yetwahabomu*.

q. Lit. "they shall not repeat sin." C: "they will  
not again sin."

r. For the variation in the Gk. fragments, cf. EC,  
pp. 10f.

s. I.e. divine punishment.

t. I.e. divine wrath.

u. Eth. 'ella, wrong for 'allā.

v. B C Gk. fragments: "and their lives shall be  
increased in peace."

6 a. Lit. "the children."

b. B C: Semyaza.

c. B: "who is their leader."

d. Cf. B: "I alone will become the payer." Text  
of A, *fadfāda*, "exceedingly," is corrupt for *fadāyi*.  
C, 'ekawwen . . . *fadāya*, is somewhat awkward.

e. B C: "they responded to him and said."

f. Eth. *zāti gebr*, "this deed." B and C, *zāti mekr  
gebra* and *zāti (mekr) gebr* respectively, are redun-  
dant.

g. Lit. "by it."

h. Lit. "And all of them were . . ."

i. B C: 'Ardis.

j. B C: "Mount Hermon." Following the Gk.  
fragment, the correct reading may be "and they  
descended in the days of Jared on the summit of  
Mount Hermon." Cf. EC, p. 13f.

k. Regarding the paronomasia between Hermon  
(of Mount Hermon) and *herem*, "curse," cf. EC,  
p. 14.

l. Lit. "And here are [this is (the list) of] their  
names, it is like this . . ." C and B read "And these  
are the names of their leaders."

m. B: Semyaza. C: Sami'azaz.

8 Anan'el, Zaqe'el, Sasomas<sup>w</sup>e'el, Kestar'el, Tur'el, Yamayol, and Arazyal.<sup>n</sup> • These are their chiefs<sup>o</sup> of tens<sup>p</sup> and of all the others with them.

7 And they<sup>a</sup> took wives unto themselves, and everyone (respectively) chose one woman for himself, and they began to go unto them.<sup>b</sup> And they taught them magical medicine, incantations, the cutting of roots, and taught them<sup>c</sup> (about) plants. • And the women became pregnant and gave birth to great giants whose heights<sup>d</sup> were three hundred cubits. • These<sup>e</sup> (giants) consumed the produce<sup>f</sup> of all the people<sup>g</sup> until the people detested feeding them.<sup>h</sup> • So<sup>i</sup> the giants turned against (the people) in order to eat them. • And they began to sin against birds, wild beasts, reptiles, and fish. And their flesh was devoured the one by the other, and they drank blood.<sup>j</sup> • And then the earth brought an accusation against the oppressors.

8 And Azaz'el taught the people (the art of) making swords and knives, and shields, and breastplates; and he showed to their chosen ones<sup>k</sup> bracelets, decorations, (shad-owing of the eye) with antimony,<sup>l</sup> ornamentation, the beautifying of the eyelids, all kinds of precious stones,<sup>m</sup> and all coloring tinctures and alchemy.<sup>n</sup> • And there were many wicked ones<sup>o</sup> and they committed adultery and erred, and all their conduct became corrupt. • Amasras<sup>p</sup> taught incantation and the cutting of roots; and Armaros the resolving of incantations; and Baraqiyal<sup>q</sup> astrology,<sup>r</sup> and Kokarar'el<sup>s</sup> (the knowledge of) the signs,<sup>t</sup> and Tam'el<sup>u</sup> taught the seeing of the stars, and Asder'el<sup>v</sup> taught the course of the moon as well as the deception<sup>w</sup> of man.<sup>x</sup> • And (the people) cried and their voice reached unto heaven.

9 Then Michael, Surafel,<sup>y</sup> and Gabriel observed carefully from the sky and they saw much blood being shed upon the earth,<sup>z</sup> and all the oppression being wrought upon the earth. • And they said to one another, "The earth, (from) her empty (foundation), has brought the cry of their voice unto the gates of heaven. • And now, [O] holy ones of heaven, the souls of people are putting their case before you pleading, 'Bring our

n. B C: "Sami'azaz [B: Semyaza], who is their leader, Arakibaram'el [B: Urakibaram'el], Kokab'el [B: Akibe'el], Tami'el [B: Tame'el], Rami'el [B: Raw'el], Dan'el, Ezeqe'el, Baraqiyal [B: Laraquyal], Asa'el, Armaros [B: Armeses], Batar'el [B: Batra'al], Anan'el, Zaqi'el [B: Zaqebe], Samsape'el, Satar'el [B: Sari'el], Tur'el, Yomya'el, Arazyal." Cf. EC, p. 14.

o. Eth. 'abayta. B C wrongly: *habayta* and *haytomu* respectively.

p. B adds "of the two hundred angels."

7 a. C: "they and all the others with them."  
b. B and C add "and became added unto them."  
For variations in the Gk. fragments in this and ch. 8, see EC, pp. 17f.

c. Eth. *maḥarewon*. B C: 'amarewon.

d. Lit. "and their heights."

e. C: "who." Cf. 4QEn<sup>a</sup>, which is closer to A.

f. Lit. "toil." "labor." So 4QEn<sup>a</sup>.

g. A should be rendered either "All of these consumed the toil of the people" or "These consumed the toil of all the people" by transposing the correctly nominative Eth. *k'ellu* in the phrase 'ellu *ba'u k'ellu šamā sabe*. Cf. 4QEn<sup>a</sup>. All of Charles's MSS give the accusative *k'ellu*. Cf. EC, p. 16, nn. 9, 10.

h. Eth. *sēsyota sab'e*. C: *sab'e sēsyota*.

i. Lit. "And."

j. Possibly "And they devoured one another's flesh, and drank the blood." B adds 'emnehā, which is a doublet of the following word.

8 a. Eth. *za'emhrēhomu*. C and B have *za'emhrēhomu*, "those after them," which Charles thinks is a corruption of the G<sup>k</sup> *ta metalla* (cf. *ta met'alta*). G<sup>k</sup> has *megala*. Cf. EC, p. 16, n. 30. C and B also add "the making of them." Eth. *za'emhrēhomu* is rendered as "their successors" or "their children" by Ethiopian commentators.

b. Lit. "antimony."

c. Lit. "and of stones all kinds of precious and chosen stones."

d. A adds *tawaleto 'alam*, "transmutation of the world." I render it as "alchemy." Cf. EC, p. 18, n. 5. Ethiopian commentators explain this phrase as "changing a man into a horse or mule or vice versa, or transferring an embryo from one womb to another."

e. B C: "and there was [great and] much wickedness."

f. B: Amazaras. C: Amizaras.

g. B: Baraq'al.

h. Lit. "the seeing of stars."

i. B C: Kokab'el.

j. I.e. miraculous signs.

k. B: Tem'el. C: Tami'el.

l. B: Asrad'el.

m. B and C read "destruction."

n. Concerning variations in the Gk. fragments see EC, p. 18f.

9 a. B: Uryan and Suryan. C: Ur'el and Rufa'el.  
b. A also adds *ba-tāheta*, "under it."

4 judgment be  
"For he is t  
seat of his g  
holy, and b  
everything<sup>i</sup> a  
open before  
6 itself from y  
oppression u  
7 in heaven (an  
power to rule  
8 of the people  
9 defiled them  
they gave birt  
10 oppression. •  
bring their sui  
but they cou  
11 wrought on e  
and you see (i  
do regarding i

10 And then  
2 to the son of L  
to him the enc  
And the Delu  
3 destroyed. • A  
4 preserved for  
Azaz'el hand<sup>b</sup>  
5 the desert whic  
6 and sharp rock  
7 in order that h  
life to the eart  
earth: that he i

c. B C: "the sou  
saying, 'Bring our  
Most High."

d. Lit. "kings."  
the Syncellus Gk.  
ages." or "of the s

e. Eth. 'esma. "I  
fragment we have s

f. Lit. "your Ge

g. Lit. "your kit

h. C: "your glor

i. B and C repea

j. A omits "ever

k. A omits "Eve

l. B and C read

m. B C: "and he

n. B: wa-'amara

o. B: Semyaza. (

p. Lit. "together

q. B omits "on i

r. This phrase is e

s. Lit. "and their

t. Lit. "and."

u. B omits "eve

ence."



the children of  
to them (while)  
between Lebanon  
accounted before  
those words of

Deut 3:9;  
Song 4:8

1Cor 6:3

ent of the eternal  
manded in this  
and the breath  
nan) may speak  
s he (the Great  
e and given me  
the children of  
our prayers will  
sed<sup>e</sup> upon you.  
ernity, but you  
before that you  
not have their  
ur petitions on  
alf (which you  
ontained in the

1Cor 6:3

and the fogs  
ushing me and  
me to fly and  
il I approached  
of fire; and it  
drew near to a  
like mosaics<sup>a</sup>  
the stars and  
f water;<sup>b</sup> and  
r fire. •And I  
nd there was

Mt 17:5;  
Pss  
18:10,11;  
104:3

Isa 30:30

ou shall have no

the text to read  
eak all the words

clouds," seems  
ne a vision thus

rate. Cf. EC, p.

to heaven."

house." B and  
instead of *wesra*,

s. A has *samay-*  
the reading "he  
in heaven was of

f life in it."

14 nothing inside it;<sup>a</sup> (so) fear covered me and trembling seized me. •And as I shook  
15 and trembled, I fell upon my face and saw a vision. •And behold there was an  
opening before me (and) a second house which is greater than the former<sup>a</sup> and  
16 everything<sup>a</sup> was built with tongues of fire. •And in every respect it excelled (the  
other)—in glory and great honor<sup>a</sup>—to the extent that it is impossible for me to recount  
17 to you<sup>a</sup> concerning its glory and greatness. •As for its floor,<sup>a</sup> it was of fire and above  
it was lightning and the path of the stars; and as for the ceiling, it was flaming fire.  
18 And I observed and saw inside it a lofty throne—its appearance was like crystal and  
19 its wheels like the shining sun; and (I heard?) the voice of the cherubim; •and from  
beneath the throne<sup>a2</sup> were issuing streams of flaming fire. It was difficult<sup>b2</sup> to look at  
20 it.<sup>c2</sup> •And the Great Glory was sitting upon it—as for his gown, which was shining  
21 more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow. •None of the angels was  
able to come in and see the face of the Excellent and the Glorious One;<sup>d2</sup> and no one  
22 of the flesh can see him— •the flaming fire was round about him, and a great fire  
stood before him. No one could come near unto him from among those that surrounded  
23 the tens of millions (that stood) before him. •He needed no council,<sup>e2</sup> but the most  
holy ones who are near to him neither go far away at night nor move away from  
24 him. •Until then I was prostrate on my face covered<sup>f2</sup> and trembling. And the Lord  
called me with his own mouth and said to me, "Come near to me, Enoch, and to  
25 my holy<sup>a2</sup> Word." •And he lifted me up and brought me near to the gate, but I  
(continued) to look down with my face.

Isa 6; Ezek  
1:9; 26;  
Dan 7.9,10;  
Ps 104:2;  
1Kgs 22:19;  
AsMos 4:2  
T Levi 5:1;  
Rev 4:2-3

Sir 42:21;  
2En 33:4

15 But he raised me up<sup>a</sup> and said to me with his voice, "Enoch."<sup>b</sup> I (then) heard,  
"Do not fear, Enoch, righteous man, scribe of righteousness; come near to me and  
2 hear my voice. •And tell<sup>c</sup> the Watchers of heaven on whose behalf you have been  
sent<sup>d</sup> to intercede: "It is meet (for you) that you intercede on behalf of man, and not  
3 man on your behalf. •For what reason have you abandoned the high, holy, and eternal  
heaven; and slept with women and defiled yourselves with the daughters of the people,  
4 taking wives, acting like the children of the earth, and begetting giant sons? •Surely  
you, you [used to be] holy, spiritual, the living ones, [possessing] eternal life; but  
(now) you have defiled yourselves with women, and with the blood of the flesh  
begotten children, you have lusted with the blood of the people, like them<sup>e</sup> producing  
5 blood and flesh, (which) die and perish. •On that account, I have given you<sup>f</sup> wives  
in order that (seeds) might be sown upon them and children born by them, so that the  
6 deeds that are done upon the earth will not be withheld from you." •Indeed you,  
formerly you were spiritual, (having) eternal life, and immortal in all the generations  
7 of the world. •That is why (formerly) I did not make wives for you, for the dwelling  
of the spiritual beings of heaven is heaven."

8 "But now the giants who are born from the (union of) the spirits and the flesh shall  
be called evil spirits upon the earth, because<sup>g</sup> their dwelling shall be upon the earth<sup>h</sup>  
9 and inside the earth. •Evil spirits<sup>i</sup> have come out of their bodies. Because from the  
day that they were created from the holy ones they became the Watchers; their first  
origin<sup>j</sup> is the spiritual foundation.<sup>k</sup> They will become evil upon the earth and shall

v. B C: "behold a second house . . . and the  
entire portal was open before me."

w. B and C omit "everything."

x. B C: "in glory, honor, and greatness."

y. Lit. "I cannot recount to you."

z. Lit. "ground."

a2. B adds "great."

b2. Lit. "they could not."

c2. B C: "looking," "seeing."

d2. The Gk. reads "on account of the honor and  
glory."

e2. Cf. EC, p. 40, n. 21.

f2. Charles suggests omitting "covered," Cf. EC,  
p. 40, n. 25.

g2. Charles prefers the Gk. *akouson*, "hear,"  
instead of the Eth. "holy." For this and succeeding  
phrase see EC, p. 40, n. 28.

15 a. B C: "and he replied."

b. B C: "and I heard his voice."

c. B C: "And go and tell."

d. B C: "who sent you."

e. Lit. "pray."

f. B C: "you have done like them."

g. Lit. "them."

h. B C: "that nothing might be wanting to them  
on earth."

i. B C: "living the eternal life."

j. B and C omit "because."

k. B and C omit "upon the earth."

l. B and C read *nafsar*, "soul," instead of *man-*  
*afest*, as in A.

m. Lit. "their first beginning."

n. C, following the Gk.: "they are born from men  
and the holy Watchers in their beginning . . ."



- 10 be called evil spirits. \*The dwelling of the spiritual beings of heaven is heaven; but the dwelling of the spirits of the earth, which are born upon the earth, is in the earth.<sup>a</sup>  
 11 The spirits of the giants oppress each other;<sup>b</sup> they<sup>a</sup> will corrupt, fall, be excited, and fall upon the earth, and cause sorrow.<sup>c</sup> They eat no food,<sup>d</sup> nor become thirsty, nor find obstacles.<sup>e</sup> \*And these spirits shall rise up<sup>f</sup> against the children of the people and against the women, because they have proceeded forth (from them).

- 1 16 "From the days of the slaughter and destruction, and the death of the giants and the spiritual beings of the spirit, and the flesh, from which they have proceeded forth, which will corrupt without incurring judgment, they will corrupt until the day of the great conclusion, until the great age is consummated, until everything is concluded (upon) the Watchers and the wicked ones.<sup>g</sup> \*And so<sup>h</sup> to the Watchers on whose behalf you have been sent to intercede—who were formerly in heaven—(say to them), \*'You were (once) in heaven, but not all the mysteries (of heaven) are open to you, and you (only) know the rejected mysteries.<sup>i</sup> Those ones<sup>j</sup> you have broadcast to the women in the hardness of your hearts and by those mysteries<sup>k</sup> the women and men multiply evil deeds upon the earth.' Tell them, 'Therefore, you will have no peace!'"

Jub  
10:5-11;  
Mt 8:29

### Enoch's Tour of the Earth and Sheol The first journey

- 1 17 And they lifted me up into<sup>a</sup> one place where there were (the ones) like the flaming fire. And when they (so) desire they appear like men. \*And they took me into a place of whirlwind<sup>b</sup> in the mountain; the top of its summit was reaching into heaven. \*And I saw chambers<sup>c</sup> of light and thunder<sup>d</sup> in the ultimate end of the depth<sup>e</sup> toward (the place where) the bow,<sup>f</sup> the arrow, and their quiver and a fiery sword and all the lightnings were. \*And they lifted me up unto the waters of life,<sup>g</sup> unto the occidental fire which receives<sup>h</sup> every setting of the sun. \*And I came to the river of fire which flows like water<sup>i</sup> and empties itself into the great sea in the direction of the west. \*And I saw all<sup>j</sup> the great rivers<sup>k</sup> and reached to the great darkness and went into the place where all flesh must walk cautiously.<sup>l</sup> \*And I saw the mountains of the dark storms of the rainy season and from where the waters of all the seas<sup>m</sup> flow. \*And I saw the mouths of all the rivers of the earth and the mouth of the sea.

Ps 104:4

- 1 18 And I saw the storerooms of all the winds and saw how with them he has embroidered all creation as well as the foundations of the earth. \*I saw the cornerstone of the earth: I saw the four winds which bear the earth as well as the firmament of heaven. \*I saw how the winds ride the heights of heaven<sup>n</sup> and stand between heaven

2Sam  
22:16; Ps  
18:15  
Job 38:6

o. Cf. vss. 7 and 8 above. The Syncellus fragment omits vs. 10.

p. So A. I have omitted *dammanāta*. "clouds," which seems to be dangling in the phrase. Eth. *dammanā* could also mean "mass," "enormity," "immensity," and one could possibly read the text as "The spirits of the giants oppress each other massively." On the other hand the *dammanāta* in this verse has been regarded by some as a corruption. The Syncellus fragment has "laying waste." Cf. EC, p. 44, n. 3.

q. Lit. "who."

r. Cf. EC, pp. 44f.

s. The Gk. fragments add "but nevertheless hunger."

t. So A. C. on the basis of Dillmann's emendation, reads "cause offense" or "become obstacle." B and other MSS have "they will not be known."

u. A: "shall not rise up."

16 a. The preceding passage is not completely intelligible and is a difficult reading. Cf. also C and EC, pp. 44f.

b. Lit. "And now."

c. Lit. "the rejected mystery."

d. Lit. "This one."

e. Lit. "this mystery."

17 a. The Gk. adds "and brought me."

b. G<sup>a</sup>: "darkness."

c. Lit. "places."

d. G<sup>a</sup> adds "and the treasures of the stars."

e. B and C add *haba*, "unto," before "depth."

a somewhat unintelligible reading.

f. B C: "fiery bow."

g. C: "living waters." B: "water of life." A and other MSS add a gloss: *za-yenāgar* or *za-'iyenāgar*.

h. Lit. "seizes."

i. C: "whose fire flows like water."

j. C omits "all."

k. G<sup>a</sup> adds "and the great river."

l. C, in agreement with the Gk. fragments, reads "where no flesh can walk."

m. B C: "the lake."

18 a. So A. B C: *yerababewā*, "stretch out," instead of *yerakabewā*, "ride."

4 and earth:  
 5 heaven and  
 6 carried by tl  
 7 and the firm  
 8 west; and it  
 9 stones—thre  
 10 east, they w  
 11 as for those  
 12 pressing int  
 13 is of sapphi  
 14 mountains—  
 15 And I saw a  
 16 pillars of fire  
 17 on top of th  
 18 foundation u  
 19 desolate and  
 20 burning mou  
 21 of heaven an  
 22 \*And the star  
 23 the commanc  
 24 arrive punctu  
 25 the completic

1 19 And Urie  
 2 of the angels  
 3 people and w  
 4 as unto gods.  
 5 are finished.  
 6 ones."<sup>c</sup> (So)  
 7 among humar

### Names of arc

1 20 And thes  
 2 angels—for (f  
 3 for (he is) of  
 4 for the world

b. B C: "turn  
 the sun and all the  
 c. B C: "I saw  
 the clouds."

d. B C: "I saw  
 the ultimate end of  
 above."

e. B C: "And I  
 f. C, in accord  
 place which burns

g. Charles sugg

13.

h. B C: "The o

i. Lit. "the sun

j. Or "stone."

k. So A and G

l. Lit. "there w

saw."

m. Lit. "there."

n. B: "waters."

o. G: "are comp

p. B reads "a d

q. B: "heavenly

r. Lit. "either in

3

dramatically shorter than anyone in his generation and, like Elijah, there is no explicit mention of his death in the text. The tradition arose that he was taken on a series of journeys by God and introduced to the secrets of the universe. There are several books bearing his name but I'm quoting from Enoch 1 which was preserved by the Ethiopian Church and has been known to scholars for only about 100 years. Enoch's journey begins with "our" verses from Genesis 6:

### **READ from ENOCH - chapters 6 & 7**

But as I said, these verses are the tip of the iceberg. Enoch's journey goes on for 100 chapters. Following the verses that the Torah and Enoch have in common, we get some really wild stuff:

**chapter 15 we get the giants**  
**chapter 65 we get the flood**

While the book of Enoch is probably not as ancient as the Torah it is at least 2200 years old and clearly both it and Genesis 6 draw upon a common source. While only a small part of the material in Enoch is found in the Torah, these few verses serve a critical purpose – that is, to justify the destruction of the world. The enterprise in Enoch is radically different and, given Enoch's preoccupation with the mythical, it is not at all surprising that this material was ignored by Jewish tradition.

*A counseling message in these times!*

So while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple story of the Nephilim includes a full *away* cosmogony of fallen angels whose sinfulness brings about the flood, the Torah references this tradition only briefly - perhaps to assure us that humans can't be so bad on their own that God would destroy the world again on our account. While Enoch is preoccupied with the adventures of these semi-divine beings, the Torah's attention is focused on humans and their adventures from parashat Noah forward. We are fortunate, I think, that the redactors of the Torah included some of the mythical traditions of ancient Israel in the Torah text but for the most part gave us the remarkable stories of human behavior that constitute the narratives of Genesis. I have no doubt that if Genesis had turned out to be like Enoch, we would have stopped reading it eons ago.

The rabbis, on the other hand, characteristically wanted to avoid the heresy of mixing the divine with the human for their own understandable reasons given the advent of Christianity, so they emphasized human misdeeds as the motivation for God's destruction of the world. In their perushim and in dividing Bereshit and Noach the way they did, the rabbis disconnected human/divine copulation from ~~its consequences~~ and instead suggested that the flood was the result of human misdeeds.

And that, I think, is why the Nephilim are not in Noach!

*the destruction of the world*

•The righteous  
y shall never see  
s will abide over  
r and ever. •The  
ing of downcast  
urs shall become  
r garments wear

shall plead that  
hment to whom  
the Lord of the  
rify the Lord of  
kings, the Lord  
rd of wisdom.  
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### Enoch's predictions concerning the Deluge and himself

65 In those days, Noah saw the earth, that she had become deformed, and that her destruction was at hand. •And (Noah) took off from there<sup>a</sup> and went unto the extreme ends of the earth. And he cried out to his grandfather, Enoch, and said to him,<sup>b</sup> three times, with a bitter voice, "Hear me! Hear me! Hear me!" •And I said unto him, "Tell me what this thing is which is being done upon the earth, for the earth is struggling<sup>c</sup> in this manner and is being shaken; perhaps I will perish with her in the impact."<sup>d</sup> •At that moment, there took place a tremendous turbulence upon the earth; and a voice from heaven was heard, and I fell upon my face. •Then Enoch, my grandfather, came and stood by me, saying to me, "Why did you cry out so sorrowfully<sup>e</sup> and with bitter tears?"

•"An order has been issued<sup>f</sup> from the court<sup>g</sup> of the Lord against those who dwell upon the earth, that their doom<sup>h</sup> has arrived because they have acquired the knowledge of all the secrets of the angels, all the oppressive deeds of the Satans, as well as all their most occult powers, all the powers of those who practice sorcery, all the powers of (those who mix) many colors,<sup>i</sup> all the powers<sup>j</sup> of those who make molten images;<sup>k</sup> how silver is produced from the dust of the earth, and how bronze<sup>l</sup> is made upon the earth—•for lead and tin are produced<sup>m</sup> from the earth like silver<sup>n</sup>—their source is a fountain inside (which) stands an angel, and he is a running angel."<sup>o</sup> •After that, my grandfather, Enoch, took hold of me by my hand and raised me up and said to me, "Go, for I have asked<sup>p</sup> the Lord of the Spirits regarding this turbulence (which is taking place) on the earth."<sup>q</sup> •He (continued to) say to me, "Because their oppression has been carried out (on the earth), their judgment will be limitless<sup>r</sup> before me. On account of the abstract things<sup>s</sup> which they have investigated and experienced, the earth shall perish (together with) those who dwell upon her. •And those (who taught them these things) will have no haven<sup>t</sup> forever, because they have revealed to them the things which are secret—to<sup>u</sup> the condemned ones; but, as for you, my son, the Lord of the Spirits knows that you are pure and kindhearted; you detest the secret things.<sup>v</sup> He has preserved your name for<sup>w</sup> the holy ones; he will protect you from those who dwell upon the earth; he has preserved your righteous seed for kingship and great glory; and from your seed will emerge a fountain of the righteous and holy ones without number forever."

### Angels in charge of the Flood

66 After this he showed me the angels of punishment<sup>a</sup> who are prepared to come and release all the powers of the waters which are underground to become judgment and

65 a. Lit. "And he lifted his feet from there."

b. Lit. "and Noah said."

c. So B and C. A: "glowing."

d. Or "pushing," "shoving." B and C, instead of *badāhef*, read *badehera*, "after . . ." which could be placed before the succeeding phrase, "this moment."

e. B and C add "unto me."

f. Lit. "from the presence."

g. Lit. "end."

h. Eth. *hebrāt*, "(those who mix) many colors" or "(those who make) dyes," makes sense in the context, whereas *hebrāt*, "provinces," "regions," "areas," "parts," found in A B C does not seem to do so.

i. A: "and all of them." B C: "and the powers."

j. Lit. "idols."

k. Lit. "mixed metals."

l. B C: "are not produced."

m. Lit. "like the first."

n. Lit. "and this angel runs."

o. Or "you have asked him."

p. Lit. "they will not be counted." Charles suggests that *'iyetholaqu*, which he equates with the

Heb. *lo-yehāšēb*, is a corruption of *lo-yehāšēk*, "will not be restrained [withheld]." See EC, p. 118, n. 24.

q. Or "gold." Perhaps this is an allusion to 8:1. A has *'awrāq*, which I have translated as "abstract things." This expression, whose singular form I assume to be *warq*, "gold" (see *wariq*, "to spit," "to be fine like a leaf," "to be slender," or "to be abstract"; cf. *raqiq*), is not attested in known Eth. literature. B and C have *'avrāh*, "months," "moons." Charles, following Halévy, suggests this expression, which corresponds to the Heb. *hādāšim*, to be a corruption for *harashim*, "sorceries."

r. Lit. "a place to go [or "turn"] to," "a refuge," "resort." Charles, following Halévy, and assuming that *megbā'e* means "return," suggested that this expression is a translation of the Heb. *teshubah*, meaning "repentance," "return." Cf. EC, p. 118, n. 29.

s. B C: "and."

t. B C: "you are free from the blame."

u. B C: "among."

66 a. So B and C. A: "the angels showed me the punishment."

- 2 destruction unto all who live and dwell upon the earth. •But the Lord of the Spirits gave an order to the angels who were on duty<sup>b</sup> that they should not raise the (water) enclosures<sup>c</sup> but guard (them)—for they were the angels who were in charge of the waters.<sup>d</sup> Then I left<sup>e</sup> from the presence of Enoch.

#### God's promise to Noah: punishment of the angels and kings

- 1 **67** In those days, the word of God came unto me, and said unto me, "Noah, your lot has come up before me—a lot without blame, a lot of true love.<sup>a</sup> •At this time the angels are working with wood (making an ark) and when it is completed,<sup>b</sup> I shall place my hands upon it<sup>c</sup> and protect it.<sup>d</sup> and the seed of life shall arise from it; and a substitute<sup>e</sup> (generation) will come so that the earth will not remain empty (without inhabitants). •I shall strengthen your seed before me forever and ever as well as the seeds of those who dwell with you: I shall not put it to trial<sup>f</sup> on the face of the earth; but it shall be blessed and multiply on the earth in the name of the Lord."<sup>g</sup>
- 4 And they shall imprison<sup>h</sup> those angels who revealed oppression in that burning valley which my grandfather Enoch had formerly shown me in the West among the mountains of gold, silver, iron, bronze, and tin. •I also saw that valley in which there took place a great turbulence and the stirring of the waters. •Now, when all this took place, there was produced from that bronze and fire a smell of sulfur (which) blended with those waters. •This valley of the perversive angels shall (continue to) burn punitively<sup>i</sup> underneath that ground; in respect to its troughs,<sup>j</sup> they shall be filled with rivers of water by which those angels who perverted those who dwell upon the earth shall be punished.<sup>k</sup>
- 8 Those waters shall become in those days a poisonous drug<sup>l</sup> of the body and a punishment<sup>m</sup> of the spirit unto the kings, rulers, and exalted ones, and those who dwell on the earth; lust shall fill their souls<sup>n</sup> so that their bodies shall be punished, for they have denied the Lord of the Spirits; they shall see their own punishment every day but cannot believe in his name. •In proportion to the great degree of the burning of their bodies will be the transmutation of their spirits forever and ever and ever,<sup>o</sup> for there is none that can speak a nonsensical word before the Lord of the Spirits.
- 10 So the judgment shall come upon them, because they believe in the debauchery of their bodies and deny the spirit of the Lord. •And these waters will undergo change in those days; for (on the one hand) when those angels are being punished by these waters, the temperatures of those fountains of water will be altered (and become hot), but (on the other hand) when the angels get out,<sup>p</sup> those waters of the fountains shall be transformed and become cold.<sup>q</sup> •Then I heard Michael responding and saying, "This verdict by which the angels are being punished is itself a testimony to the kings and the rulers who control the world."<sup>r</sup> •For these waters of judgment are poison to the bodies of the angels<sup>s</sup> as well as sensational to their flesh; (hence) they will neither see nor believe that these waters become transformed and become a fire that burns forever.

b. Lit. "who were going out."

c. A reads *'aweda*, which I have taken as *'aweda*, since the former expression is nonexistent. B and C read "do not raise the hands."

d. B C: "for these angels were in charge of the powers of the waters."

e. So B and C. A: "I came."

67 a. B C: "a lot of love and uprightness."

b. All MSS add "to these angels."

c. Lit. "her."

d. Lit. "her."

e. Lit. "it was changed [substituted]."

f. So A: *'ivyāmakker*. B C: *'iyymaker*. "he will not counsel it." Charles emended the text to read "he will not be barren," *'ivyymaken*.

g. So C, and possibly A and B. A and B could give the meaning "they shall harden [petrify]" or "they shall cast lots." It seems to me that the original

translator(s), or the copyists of A and C, were attempting a play on words: The good angels were working "wood," *'egawa* (67:2), while they will "make wood," *ya'gwoma*. "harden," "petrify," out of the evil angels.

h. B and C omit "punitively."

i. Lit. "valleys."

j. B: "shall be out." C: "shall come."

k. Lit. "condemned."

l. Eth. *fawes* has the meaning of (1) "a healing medicine," "a good medicine," and (2) "a killing drug," "a bad medicine."

m. Lit. "judgment."

n. B C: "their spirits."

o. So A. B C: "forever and ever."

p. Lit. "ascend."

q. So B and C. A: "shall be knotted."

r. So all MSS. Perhaps we should read "bodies of kings."

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**Dvar Torah – Noach – November 5, 2005**

I seem to have a problem with parashat Noah. Last year I suggested that the division between Bereshit and Noach is in the wrong place; this year I'd like to suggest that the way Noach divides from Lekh Lekha is also problematic.

My argument last year was that when the rabbis divided Noah from Bereshit they were trying to de-emphasize the connection between the mating of the divine beings and human women which produced those mysterious offspring called Nephilim (in Bereshit) and the flood which destroyed the world (in Noach). The fact that the medieval Church did not end Genesis, chapter 6 at the end of parashat Bereshit but continued it into Noach, supports the argument that the plain meaning of the text would be for the Nephilim story to be connected with the flood. I'm not suggesting that the Church's chapter divisions should necessarily be preferred over where the rabbis divided the parshiyot. However, when a chapter spans two parshiyot like Genesis chapter 6 it is worth considering why the Church made that choice. The peshat or plain meaning of the Biblical text seems to be that the flood resulted from the massive boundary violation of humans mating with divine creatures. Apparently the rabbinic world view was challenged by the extraordinary concept of human/divine mating even when it served to explain a unique event - the destruction of the world. The rabbis preferred to explain the flood as the result of normal human misdeeds – an explanation which served as an effective cautionary tale for us humans and which is abetted by leaving the Nephilim behind in Bereshit.

Because we read the Torah according to parashah divisions, this smichut parshiyot (the relationship between the parashahs) influences our understanding of the text; it functions as a subtle – or sometimes not so subtle – form of interpretation. A few years ago, a colleague gave a drash that highlighted what I'm calling the "wrong ending" of Noah. With an apology to Gali Cirlin, next week's bat mitzvah, I'll read the ending of Noach the way this colleague did, committing a small boundary violation of my own.

**Read through without a break: Genesis 11:24-12:4**

Read this way of course, we wouldn't have a parashah called "Lekh Lekha". Rather ~~this~~ third section of Bereshit might begin "Vayelech Avram" – "Abraham went forth" or Abraham's call might be incorporated into Noach and the parashah begin with "Vayerah Adonai" – "The Lord appeared to Abraham". While the chapter divisions ~~there~~ mirror the parashah break between Noach and Lekh Lekha I think a case can be made for another break, one that would not separate Abraham's journey from that of his father. Rabbinic tradition is heavily invested in that break between Noach and Lekh Lekha which severs the link between Abraham and his father Terach. Avraham avinu is universally extolled as a spiritual genius who set forth from his father's house and his native land on an unprecedented spiritual journey commanded by the God whose voice he alone heard and understood when God said "Lekh Lekha". And so we get a new parashah beginning there. And the midrashic tradition supports leaving Terach behind in parashat Noach. We are familiar with the midrash that portrays Terach as an idol maker, earning his living by cynically fashioning statues whom he knew to represent false gods. According to a midrash in Genesis Rabbah 39:7 which Rashi uses, the reason the Torah tells us in 11:32

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that Terach lived for 205 years and died in Haran – 65 years after Abraham's departure - before telling us that Abraham left home in 12:4 is that the Torah wants us to understand that Terach – having already given his soul over to idol worship - was already “spiritually dead” when his son moved on although he would not actually die for another 65 years. In another midrash Terach is said to have given his son over to Nimrod, the pagan king, so that he might be consigned to the fire for having destroyed his father's idols.

The rabbis – by ending parashat Noach just before Abraham leaves home – emphasize the discontinuity between the journey of Terach and the journey of Abraham, rather than treating Abraham's journey as a continuation of the family journey launched by Terach. After all, it was Terach who left his native land and, presumably, his father's house en route to Canaan, the precise land we later learn was God's chosen destination for Abraham and the other family members who continued the journey with him. Why not begin the third parashah in Bereshit with the fulfillment of Terach's legacy... Abraham's arrival in the land? We have no idea why Terach left Ur or why he was heading for Canaan. But maybe he had some inkling of a chosen destiny for his family that lay to the south. Nor do we know why he didn't complete the journey or why he stayed behind in Haran. But maybe he was just too old at the age of 145 to keep going! Maybe God spoke to Abraham at that point because Terach couldn't go any further. Why not, at the very least, acknowledge that Abraham's journey was the one his father had intended to make?!

It is always interesting to examine the ways in which Hazal appropriates the Biblical text and boldly – or perhaps brazenly – insist that they know what it means; that the meaning of the text “lo ba'shamayim hi” – the meaning is not in heaven. Rather the meaning is what we – or more precisely “they” – give it. Rabbinicchutzpah takes many forms. Sometimes it is as subtle as dividing the text in certain places which may not seem the most logical in order to make a certain point. Sometimes it's as dramatic as leaving out a word or phrase such as in the “shlosh esreh midot.” When we recite these 13 attributes of God we end with the phrase “notzer chesed la'alafim noseh avon va'fasha v'hatah v'nakeh” – “God extends kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin and remitting punishment”. However, in the original Biblical context – Exodus 34:7 – the phrase ends “v'hatah v'nakeh lo yinakeh”. When “lo yinakeh” follows “nakeh” it has an emphatic meaning; here it means that God definitely does not remit all punishment. God may forgive iniquity, transgression and sin but there are limits to God's forgiveness. By leaving off the “lo yinakeh” ending of the Biblical verse, the rabbis make the verse all positive. A small change in the Hebrew, a huge change in meaning! Another example of how rabbinic interpretation leads to extraordinary changes in meaning is the case of the “ben sorer u'moreh” in Deuteronomy 21: “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son... then shall his father and mother lay hold on him, and bring him unto the elders of his city... and shall say ‘he doth not harken to our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ And all the men of his city shall stone him...” In the hands of the Mishnah and then the Gemarra in tractate Sanhedren, this case is interpreted out of existence in the most ingenious way. First, the rabbis use their logical skills to limit the child to sons only and only during the several months surrounding the



age of bar mitzvah; then they define gluttony and drunkenness so that it's impossible for any one to ever eat or drink enough be considered "soror u'moreh". Finally, the rabbis conclude that this is really a "null case", it could never happen. Why then is it in the Torah? "Derosh vekabel skhar" – In order to "interpret and receive reward."

Surely everyone agrees with rabbinic interpretation in the case of "ben soror u'moreh" or at least in their conclusion! In other cases, of course, we may take issue with the ways in which Hazal interprets the text. I might, for instance, have preferred the Nephilim to have gotten the blame for the flood or may think Terach gets a bad rap not to mention numerous halakhic areas in which I disagree with rabbinic thinking. But lately I've been feeling very warmly inclined towards Hazal. More and more kindly as the firestorm over American constitutional interpretation has been raging out of control. Since I came to understand the way the Oral Law works, I've thought of rabbinic textual interpretation as a precedent for secular judicial review and often made this point in trying to help students understand Torah shba'al peh, since the capacity of Judaism to adapt to changing circumstances derives in large measure from the process of interpretation by the legal scholars of our tradition. And this process can be likened to that of judicial review in which experts in the law are called upon to resolve disputes and interpret the meaning of our secular fundamental law, the constitution. But more and more I'm driven crazy by the simplistic way in which people talk about judicial review. The terms I learned in college & "Strict construction" versus "judicial activism" made the same kind of sense as peshat and drash in rabbinic tradition. But lately, "strict construction" seems to have been dropped in favor of, or morphed into, what's called "originalism" or "textualism".

graduate school -

I've imagined one of our sages – say Rabbi Yose who helps make the case of the rebellious child a "null case" – testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee, perhaps having been nominated for a seat on the Supreme Court and having to defend the way in which he interprets the case of the "ben soror u'moreh". According to the standard of "originalism" Rabbi Yose would be hard pressed to offer an acceptable defense. The kid, it's clear, should die for his sins. That's "originalism". Rabbi Yose's judicial activism, after all, distorts the original intention of the framers - or is it here "framer" - of the law!? In last week's *New Yorker* profile of Justice Stephen Breyer author Jeffrey Toobin characterizes Justices Scalia and Thomas as holding to the "originalism" or "textualism" approach which insists that "the words of the Constitution mean only what the framers understood by them; the document's sense does not evolve over time." Breyer's position, on the other hand, says Toobin, is that "there is no way of knowing precisely what the framers meant by such phrases as 'freedom of speech' or 'due process of law', much less how they would have applied those terms today."

All disagreements with our sages aside (and I still think Terach gets a bad rap as a parent), what has kept our sacred text alive is the process of appropriation and interpretation throughout the generations. I know that this is not a perfect comparison. The Torah does not create a legal system in the same way the American Constitution does nor is rabbinic interpretation the exact equivalent of judicial review. But I think the



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Oral Law – a system which has been at work for close to 2,000 years - does help make the case against “originalism”, demonstrating that this approach to constitutional interpretation is simply a political philosophy dressed up in the wigs and waist coats of Jefferson and Madison, disguised as reverence for their wisdom. The rabbis in their wisdom knew that a sacred constitution was only viable if it was subject to review by the “gedolei hador” – the wise ones in each generation. Certainly there will always be disagreement and debate over what gets interpreted and what those interpretations should be, but if the Kadosh baruch hu couldn’t create a text whose meaning would be clear and invariable from generation to generation then our founding fathers – statesmen to be sure but neither gods nor prophets! – certainly could not have done so.

Noach 10/12/09

The story of the Flood, and the rebirth of the world afterward is called a second creation. It seems actually a third creation, or at least Creation 2.5. But, whatever the number, why do we need a new beginning?

The ostensible reason – the proximate cause – was given last week at the end of parsha Bereshit. We were told of various kinds of inappropriate cominglings – the sons of G-d with the daughters of Men, and maybe even with these creatures called Nephilim. For some commentators this is about rape, or quasi-rape, for others about mixing of classes or religions or even humans with Giants or Angels.

Whatever it is, it's an abomination, and it leads God, first, to put a limit on the human life span. And, second, to bring the flood and destroy this corrupted world where *cal yetzer*, all will or all imagination, is consumed with “nothing but evil” every day.

**“And the Lord repented that he had made man on Earth. And it grieved him in his heart. And he said I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the earth. Both men and beast and creeping things and fowl of the air, for it repenteth me (grieves me) that I have made them.” – *Ki nicham-ti ki asi-tim***

And here we have our first problem: the sins that are named have to do only with humans – and perhaps angels or giants –but the destruction will be of all biological life – save what is preserved on the ark.

So, either G-d is using vastly disproportional force to correct this human problem. Or the problem runs deeper than man.

In today's parshe, Gen.6.12 we don't hear: *V'tish-chat ha-adam*. "And man was corrupt." We hear *V'tish-chat ha-aretz*: "And the earth was corrupt." *Cal basar*, "all flesh" has corrupted its way on earth.

This leads Rashi to argue that it wasn't just humans and angels who were choosing inappropriate partners. "Even cattle, beasts and fowl," he says, "consorted with those who were not of their own species." (Either these rabbis blink at nothing. Or they need to get some fresh air.)

This grotesque, nightmare vision, suggests a level of disorder that seems almost beyond human imagination. And human sin.

And if that's right, if it really is *cal basar* and *cal yetzer*, if it's everyone or almost everyone, even the beasts, and somehow the plants, -- cross-pollinating?? -- then what we've got, it would seem, is a design problem. It's not just that *we're* bad. It's creation itself that's bad. Or at least not good enough.

Good enough for what? God's answer, one guesses, would be the same as any artist's: not good enough to satisfy Him. Not as beautiful and perfect as He imagined when he was planning it out.

Why else would He destroy all life? As most commentators say, the Flood does not distinguish between the guilty and the innocent. Which is to say the flood isn't punishment for

specific, personal sins; the flood is a way to erase *cal basar* and *cal yetzer* -- all flesh and all imagination. God repenteth of His own creation.

Then why save Noach and family, and those few samples of beasts and plants? If something is wrong with creation, why not wipe it all out and take it from the top? In the immortal words of the Nashville Teens, "Bring dynamite and a crane/Blow it up, start over again..."

1. HA-SHAMAYIM IS FINE. For one thing, ha-shamyim seems to working fine. Up in that nice, clean Newtonian world, the heavenly billiard balls are sweeping along in their appointed routes just like they're supposed to.

It's Earth that's the problem, and specifically the biological world. So why not wipe out all biology? If you've got a design problem, why load those intrinsically faulty beings, two by two, back onto the ark?

Maybe it's too hard. Maybe Ha-Shem is exhausted from all the creating that takes place in parsha Bereshit, and He just can't muster the zetz to start all over from scratch. This makes no sense; it's too anthropomorphic even for me. But it leads to something I want to raise without being able to answer.

DETOUR. In parsah Bereshit, that we read last week, there is a passage between the first creation, that ends in chapter 1, and the second that begins in chapter 2. And that passage is the description of the 7<sup>th</sup> day, when no work is done. These are, of course, except for the shema, the verses of Torah that most of us know best because we say

them every Friday night in the Kiddush.

And because we say them by rote, something of the strangeness of them gets lost. So, I'd like to read them now in the Hirsch translation. Hirsch's translations are eccentric, and this passage particularly so, but the other translations touch on the same qualities, albeit in milder ways:

**“And it was evening and morning the sixth day. Thus, the heaven and the earth and all their host were brought to their intended completion. And with the seventh day God completed His creating work that He had made and with the seventh day He ceased from all his creating work that He had made. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, for with it He had ceased from all his creating work which He, God, had created in order to continue shaping it.”**

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I've spent some time looking at this passage trying to explain its strangeness, and I can't. The most I can say is that it's tangled, confused, repetitive. That when it comes to ceasing and completing, it almost protests too much. If it weren't so absurdly anthropomorphic, we might say that it expresses God's own ambivalence about coming to the end of His creative work. He's stopping but He's going to go on shaping... It's not entirely unlike King Lear giving up the power he isn't really ready to give up. God wants to stop, but can he?

In fact, He doesn't. The minute we're through this passage of ceasing from creating, we come to a second creation, the one with the Garden of Eden. Looking closely at bereshit, I was shocked to realize that the Garden of Eden is not man's

original paradise, but, rather, our second paradise.

The first is the paradise created in Chapter 1 – in it, the whole world was paradise; we could go anywhere, eat of any animal or any plant and all of the seed-bearing trees. In second creation, we're confined to this little garden God plants in the east, where there are trees we can't eat. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which we're told about, and the Tree of Life, which we only hear about later.

Something has altered/gone wrong between that unfettered paradise of first creation, and this more restrictive set-up in Eden. We're not sure what the problem was, but we can guess that perhaps God, like any good parent, decided that his progeny needed limits. A confined area in which to play. Rules to play by.

Unfortunately, as we know, it didn't work. Man ate the apple, fell from paradise, Cain killed Abel, and then, in the fullness of time, the sons of God consorted with the daughters of men, the Nephilim consorted with all. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt.

Which bring us to 3<sup>rd</sup> Creation. Though, frankly, looking at the pattern, we shouldn't be too optimistic.

And, indeed, the Noach creation does not solve the problem either. Once the Flood subsides and the people are restored to the earth, that dangerous and corrupt place, Noach, *ish tzadik tamim*, a righteous and morally pure man, plants a vineyard, gets drunk, is seen naked and, according to *Genesis Rabba*, "loses all his former merit." All of it. He is then grouped with Cain and Uzziah as those, eager for

agricultural pursuits, who were the first to plant, the first to become drunk, the first to curse and the first to introduce slavery.

In short, a Flood that wipes out virtually the entire biological world, human, animal and plant, produces a moral interregnum that doesn't last until the end of the parshe. (And we thought Iraq was a waste.) And we all know that man's evil ways did not end there. Coming soon: Sodom and Gomorrah, the Golden Calf, and b'nai Yisrael's endless deviations from G-d's law. Truly the wickedness of man is great in the earth.

Why is that? Or, perhaps more to the point, Whose fault is it?

Hirsch uses a funny word to translate *ha-mabool*. Instead of "the Flood," he calls it something which the English version of his chumash renders as Unsoulment. He does this, in part, to mitigate God's destructiveness and cruelty. God doesn't exactly kill everyone, Hirsch says, He simply numbs them and removes them from the world a little sooner than they might otherwise have transpired/departed. It's a merciful sort of mass annihilation. But the combination of Flood and Unsoulment, the sense of a dark, swirling turmoil suggests another phrase in the Torah, and one where, perhaps, we can find the origin of the problem God has been trying to solve with all these creations.

In the second verse of the Torah we are told: *Va-haretz hay-tah toehu v'voehu*. "And the world was unformed and void" is the way most translations render it, but Hirsch, put into English, has it, "And the earth was once confused and

tangled.”

We think of corruption as a secondary condition. A thing is wholesome, fresh, pure, then it rots, decays, becomes corrupted. But what if corruption is primary? An incipient condition. What if *toehu v'voehu* is not just unbeing, a darkness that precedes creation. What if it is the chaos, the disorder, the corruption *of* creation. Inseparable from creation. Because even after God lets there be light – things have remained confused and entangled ever since.

Cosmologists tell us that if matter had been uniformly distributed at the Big Bang, there would have been no Universe. Only because of the clumpiness of matter – the inherent disorder – do we get stars, planets and life.

So that “once” in Hirsh’s – “And the earth was once confused and tangled” -- feels like a cheat, a bowdlerizing. Oh, once upon a time it was all confused and tangled, but look at it now! Sparkling perfection. Because what we are seeing in these repeated creations is, I believe, G-d’s inability to bring creation NOT back to its original pristine condition – because its original condition was *toehu v'voehu* -- but to a perfection it has never yet attained.

God is like an artist who, having a beautiful concept in mind, is endlessly frustrated by the recalcitrance of His materials, His inability to execute, and so, like any artist, He keeps smashing it to pieces and starting over.

And, from our point-of-view, if we are living in a world corrupt from the start, how do we perform Tikkun Olam? How do we heal a world that has always been sick? Can such a



world be healed?

The easy thing to say here is that the achievement of that perfection is our job, for which the Torah contains the necessary instructions, if only we could figure out how to read them. And certainly, one hears all sorts of people, including one's dear friends, announce the imminence of this perfection. But if all the creations and re-creations to date have not yet brought us to perfection, it's hard to believe that one more step or twelve steps or twelve thousand will do the trick. Maybe, as Gramsci said, what we need is "a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will."

But something does change during today's parshe. When, after the Flood, God promises not to destroy the world again "for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth," he might more accurately have said, "evil from his creation." But where, at the beginning of the parshe, man's inherent evil was the reason for destroying the world, now it becomes the reason for not destroying it.

God, it startles us to realize, has changed his mind. He seems to have realized that being "evil from our youth" is not an accusation against us but mitigating circumstances. For we have truly been created in His image, in the image of a force that could destroy the entire world because it hadn't turned out the way He wanted it. Our yetzer and basar, our will and our flesh, were already that dark even back then, if not yet that powerful. And now that they virtually are that powerful... the problem becomes truly ours, not His.

So maybe the lesson for us here is the one G-d seems to have learned by the end of Noach. He has tried over and

over to bring His work to perfection, and over and over He has failed to satisfy Himself. Finally, like so many other artists, he realizes that perfection is impossible, and he comes to peace with the flawed Universe he has made – which is to say with Himself. It's the good enough Creation. It isn't perfect, but, unlike perfection, it is. And with Creations, that's what counts.

★



Elana/Ed Wedding Dvar Torah-Noach-October 29, 2011

Golda Meir, having been born in Kiev, was selected by Ben Gurion as Israel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union. In 1949 she was mobbed when she appeared at the central synagogue of Moscow, her presence demonstrating that Israel had not forgotten the Jews of Russia. At that time she distributed some taleisim from Israel. Ed's great-grandfather received one, which has awaited Ed and this day...as have I.

As Sholom Aleichem has Tevye say: "Daughters is serious business."

I was sixteen when I went off to college and I was very immature. My first real friendship there was established with Craig Rose, initially, around a mutual fascination with motor cycles and all they represented. I can still recall the beginning of the article in Cycle World magazine which so mesmerized us that we would read it and perform it over and over: "I cannot begin to describe the level of emotion around these offices when it was learned that a Vincent Black Lightning was available for testing." The Black Lightning was a British bike, only thirty-one of which were ever built, which was essentially a truck engine lethally placed on the equivalent of a bicycle frame. Craig and I would repeat this sentence over and over as if it afforded entry into the most marvelous and magical of worlds.

"When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." (ICor.13:11) [For then I saw as if through a glass darkly; but now face to face.] So let me say now, as a man and as a father, I cannot begin to describe the level of emotion around this heart when it was learned that Elana and Ed were to be married...only one of each having ever been built.

Elana, Ed, on your e-invitations to the wedding you had an image of a two-seater bicycle with the statement "we have decided to go tandem for life." The word "conjugal" in Latin means "to be yoked together"- to go tandem. Whether it is side-by-side or fore-and-aft, you have decided to make the commitment to become sustaining companions for life, to pull together to get wherever you are going, to accomplish collaboratively whatever in this world you set out to do. This corresponds to the Rabbinic ideal of marriage as the relationship of re'im ahuvim, loving friends. This was so important it was enshrined in the sixth of the seven blessings which are said at a Jewish wedding: "O make these loving friends greatly rejoice even as You did rejoice your creation in the Garden of Eden of old. Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes the bridegroom and bride to rejoice." In the Song of Songs (5:16) we read: "This is my beloved and this is my friend." The first "not good" in the Torah is found in Genesis 2:18-where it was not good for Adam to be alone. Milton even had Adam choosing knowingly to eat of the forbidden fruit so as not to be separated from Eve. The importance of romance in marriage is attested to by the most romantic statement in the Torah (Genesis 29:20): "So Jacob served seven years for

Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.” Chayim-“life”- a word we refer to constantly in Judaism, is actually a plural-“to lives, to lives, l’chaim...”

— In your *aufruf* parsha, God chooses Noah of all people living as a partner to do the work of saving a remnant of life on earth because Noah was found to be “blameless in his age” and God tells him “...you alone have I found righteous before Me in this generation.” These two hedging comments suggest that Noah was simply the best of a mediocre bunch. Last week, in *Bereshit*, we heard, in a long list of Adam’s descendants, how the repeated pattern of the generations was disrupted with the entry for Enoch: “..Enoch walked with God 300 years...Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him.” (Gen. 5:22-24) Later God will establish favored relationships with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph with only the first being in any real sense reciprocal. God casts about in each generation seeking some sort of partner to work with. But God does not find a great and true love until Moses. The intimate relationship between God and Moses is perhaps best hinted at by this passage from Exodus (32:9-11): “The Lord further said to Moses, ‘I see that this is a stiffnecked people. Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.’ But Moses implored the Lord his God, saying, ‘Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people....’” As with any good couple, God shares thoughts with Moses in order to elicit a response and the help needed. Exodus Rabbah boldly makes this emotional reciprocity overt in stating that when God waxed hot, Moses would be cool and when Moses waxed hot, God would be cool. Their unique relationship is clearly stated by the Torah in Exodus (33:11): “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another” and Deuteronomy (34:10): “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses-whom the Lord singled out, face to face....” It is almost as if the metaphor of the marriage of God and the people Israel, which is used extensively throughout Tanach and Midrash, is said of God on the rebound from God’s grief over the loss of Moses. To human understanding, even God needs to be married.

In parsha Noah we read of a mass destruction by flood occasioned by “man’s wickedness on earth, how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time,” of animals burned as offerings not at God’s request, drunkenness, male rape, the cursing of children, the births of the progenitors of Sodom and Gomorrah, an assault on heaven with the Tower of Babel, the confounding of languages and the scattering of peoples across the earth. It is of significance, in this context of lawlessness and violence, that in parsha Noah sixty-five men are named with no women being dignified with names until Sarai and Milcah at the very end.

The *Gilgamesh Epic*, an Assyrian copy of the Babylonian epic, the oldest narrative we possess, addresses the most fundamental issues of humankind: friendship, love, death and evil. In the course of the *Epic* is a description of a world-destroying deluge with a Noah-like figure who builds an ark, thus offering a template for our parsha. The *Gilgamesh Epic* also provides a story which seeks to explain the origins of civilization. The hero, Enkidu, is a noble savage who

“...ate grass in the hills with the gazelle and lurked with wild beasts at the water-holes....” After he has sexual congress with the woman sent to him, the wild beasts bolt from him. The woman then said: “‘Why do you yearn to run wild again with the beasts in the hills? Get up from the ground, the bed of a shepherd.’ He listened to her words with care. It was good advice she gave. She divided her clothing in two and with the one half she clothed him and with the other herself; and holding his hand she led him like a child to the sheepfolds, into the shepherds’ tents. There all the shepherds crowded around to see him, they put down bread in front of him, but Enkidu could only suck the milk of wild animals. He fumbled and gaped, at a loss what to do or how he should eat the bread and drink the strong wine. Then the woman said: ‘Enkidu, eat bread, it is the staff of life; drink wine, it is the custom of the land.’ So he ate till he was full and drank strong wine, seven goblets. He became merry, his heart exulted and his face shone. He rubbed down the matted hair of his body and anointed himself with oil. Enkidu had become a man; but when he had put on man’s clothing he appeared like a bridegroom.”

All men know they are civilized by women; first by their mothers and then by their wives. They resist initially and then are grateful. The Rabbis regarded an unmarried man as a *palga gufa*- half a person. Disraeli understood this when he said: “There is nothing like female friendship-it is the only thing worth having.” (p. 243) With this understanding comes love. Philip Larkin, a poet who could never make an emotional commitment, described a visit to an ancient country church in his poem *Arundel Tomb*, in which he is surprised to see that the recumbent marble sculpture has the brave warrior knight’s left-hand gauntlet grasped in his right so that he can hold his wife’s hand through eternity. Larkin concludes: “What will survive of us is love.”

Why do women get married then? E.M. Forster, in *A Room with a View*, has an answer: “When I think what life is, and how seldom love is answered by love-marry him; it is one of the moments for which the world was made.” (p. 238) The only way to attain a semblance of perfection in this very imperfect world is to obtain “*hain*” (grace) in the eyes of another. To have a constant and true life’s companion who loves the soul and spirit, which do not wither over time, is more precious than rubies. In *Pirke Avot* (chap. 5, mishnah 15/19) we learn that “any love which depends on some transitory, physical thing-when that thing ceases to exist, the love also ceases to exist, but if it does not depend on something, it will never cease to exist.” Or, as Shakespeare put it: “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.” (s. 116) Or, as Buddy Holly put it: “A love that’s love not fade away.” Once love that’s love is granted, then, as Plaut (p. 1400) wrote in his commentary on Moses and his stiff-necked people: “That nonetheless he (like God) persists in loving [Israel] is in the end not explicable in rational terms: they belong to each other for good or for evil, and he will fight for them whether they deserve it or not.” When Moses is gone, God will persist in loving Israel. At the deepest level, love is not granted because of a laundry list of characteristics suitable for display on an on-line dating site. That is why Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* has Portia’s dead father attempt to ensure her happiness by imposing the posthumous test of the three boxes on her suitors, with the leaden,

correct one, reading “He who chooseth me [his daughter] must give and hazard all he hath.” Once achieved, love just is, it just is and it “passeth understanding.”

That being the case, my dear children, I wish I could speak the wordless dvar Torah I hold in my heart for you on this occasion. I wish I could express to you how much I love you, how much happiness and joy I wish for your future. But, as Flaubert wrote: “Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while longing to make music that will melt the stars.” (*Madame Bovary*, part II, chap. 12, p.216)

With the inundation of the earth, Noah and his wife set out in the ark not knowing what their future would hold or where their ark would come to rest or how the world would fare. Every parent wishes their outward-bound child “bon voyage” with joy, hope and trepidation. Every couple set sail with all the stores of love and support four parents can pack on board with the coordinates of a safe home harbor tattooed on the crew’s hearts. Driven by necessity and drawn by possibility, the loving friends go out upon the waters.

A marriage is a very big thing, indeed. For good reason, the marriage arrangements of Rebecca and Isaac in Hayyei Sarah take up more lines than did the Akedah. All cultures have recognized the monumentality of marriage and the joining of lives and families. The epithalamium, which means “upon the bridal chamber” in Greek, was a specific category of poem in the ancient world written on the occasion of a marriage. A.E. Housman in his poem, which I abridge and modify here, retained that word as the title for his poem. It represents every parent’s wish as precious children go out into the world.

Pour it out, the golden cup  
 Given and guarded, brimming up,  
 Safe through jostling markets borne  
 And the thicket of the thorn;  
 Folly spurned and danger past,  
 Pour it out to God at last.  
 Now, to smother noise and light,  
 Is stolen abroad by wildering night,  
 And the blotting shades confuse  
 Path and meadow full of dews;  
 And the high heavens, that all control,

Turn in silence round the pole.  
Catch the starry beams they shed  
Prospering the marriage bed,  
And breed the land that reared your prime  
Children to stay the rot of time.  
All is quiet, no alarms;  
Nothing fear of nightly harms.  
Safe you sleep on guarded ground,  
And in silent circle round  
Parents and friends keep watch and ward,  
Harnessed angels, hand on sword.

Howard L. Berkowitz

October 29, 2011





Noach 2012

Last year on parsha Noach, I was in Los Angeles at the shtibl minyan on South Robertson, and, as I sat there reading the English and listening to the Hebrew, I had the familiar, yet always startling experience of coming upon a detail I had, somehow, never noticed before.

In chapter 8, after the Flood has covered the earth, God remembers Noah; he causes a wind to blow, the waters recede and, 150 days after the rain began, the ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat. It sits there for another 2 ½ months until the mountain tops emerge, upon which we are told in verse 6: “And then at the end of 40 days,” 40 days since the mountains have appeared, “it came to pass that Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made.”

He has opened it to send forth the raven, which precedes the dove. About that raven, and its truly bizarre conversation with Noah in the aggadah, we could say a lot, but that’s in verse 7, and at the time I was entirely distracted by verse 6. The implication of 6, as I read it, is that Noah has been in the ark for just shy of eleven months, and in all that time he had never before opened the window and looked out. Is that possible?

Just to be tedious, let me argue this in detail: That it is the entire business of verse 6 to tell us that he opened the window suggests that it is a significant event. The Talmud says that the window was made of jewels and precious stones. That seems unlikely, and I’d

bet it was wood, but, in any case, we know that Noah wasn't looking out at the rain or anything else through it because transparent glass wasn't invented for at least another couple of millennia. And we know he wasn't strolling around the deck like a normal captain because a month or so later, in verse 13, we read, in what is clearly the rhetorical drum roll of a big occasion, "At last, in the 601<sup>st</sup> year," of Noah's life, "in the first month on the first day of the month...Noah removed the covering of the ark and, lo!, the waters were dried up from the face of the earth."

In short, Noah got his family and the animals onto the ark, shut the place up and, even as the gates of heaven opened and the earth was inundated, etc., he never once looked outside to see what was going on.

He wasn't afraid. He wasn't impatient. He wasn't even curious.

As Hirsch puts it, "Noah restricted himself to doing – accurately and in full – that which God had commanded him to do, leaving the rest to God."

Obviously, this is not a realistic account of a man in a flood. It is a myth in which Noah's serene indifference to the externals, his willingness to leave the rest to God, signifies his perfect faith. God instructs – "Build me an ark of gopher wood," etc. – and Noah obeys. His unhesitating compliance and his stoical silence once he's adrift on the water are two forms of the same thing.

Noah is the first in what amounts to a trilogy of parshyot of faith. Next week, we read Lech lecha and, the week after, the akedah. And the seemingly “perfect faith” we encounter in each of them seems to me a condition of our proximity in these early chapters of Genesis to *l’ma-asay bereshit*, the making of beginnings. Man is still so close to God, to his own origin *in* God, that there is, at least in moments, a perfect congruence between the divine will and the human yetzer.

By the time we get to, say, the burning bush, things have changed. In Moses’s attempts there to refuse God’s call, to beg off entirely, we encounter not just simple disobedience, like Adam and Eve’s, but something a bit different and in which I think we see a palpable enlargement of man’s inner life. Adam and Eve do the wrong thing, the opposite of what God commands; Moses wants to do *other* things. He wants to go his own way. He has an idea of himself, and a will, that is separate from God’s.

And it is worth saying that Moses’s view of himself is not so much prideful as diminished. God sees capacities in him that Moses cannot see in himself. In this he seems peculiarly modern, caught up in what we would call the “struggle” of faith; anti-heroic, withholding, crippled by a sense of unworthiness. And from this “interiority,” it is a more or less natural progression to Jesus, Augustine, Hamlet, Prufrock, Proust. A progression into an ever expanding and elaborated inner life.

In Noah and Abraham, there is no room for such thoughts. Faith is not yet a struggle or a drama. At least not that we can see. Erich Auerbach talks about all that is left out of

these simple stories and that we fill with our speculations, our midrash. What does Abraham think about on the road to Moriah? Is Noah afraid inside the ark? But in the stories themselves, it is the absence of speculation that is the point. We imagine the characters' doubt and dread (or, really, our own) but according to the text they neither doubt nor dread. They have no inner life. Or, rather, their inner life in these moments consists entirely of God.

For modern man, faith is a mental act; it takes place in the will or the imagination or the soul. Somewhere inside us. But to the ancients – if I'm reading this right – faith is a relationship with an external reality: the divine. It is a preposition, not a verb. A oneness with God in which perfect obedience is natural and, presumably, effortless. I am not myself; I am God's to do with as He will.

Thus God tells Noah to build an ark, and without hesitation or comment, he follows the instructions to the letter. The questions we might ask in his place (Was that really God talking to me? What will the neighbors think? How long do we have to stay on this stupid boat?) do not even occur to him. In fact, the ark is not really a boat at all, but a form of submission. It has no sails, no oars, no tiller or rudder. No way to move itself or steer itself. Like Queequeg's coffin, it simply keeps you afloat. It is, of course, God who moves the boat. God who steers it. God or no one. And Noah, as we say, is cool with that.

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I want to turn now to another man on another boat and another act of faith. In 1871, a mere 16 years old and never having even seen the ocean, Arthur Rimbaud composed the 100 lines of his most famous poem, “Le Bateau Ivre” – “The Drunken Boat” -- about a journey not entirely unlike Noah’s. It begins:

*As I went down impassive Rivers,  
I no longer felt the bargemen’s guiding hands.*

Like Noah, he is adrift on the water, but where Noah, in the 600<sup>th</sup> year of his life, has gone at God’s command and with God’s protection, not to mention in the company of his family and all those animals, the boy is self-selected and entirely alone. Screaming Redskins, he tells us, have taken his haulers for targets and nailed them naked to colored stakes. The sea has swept away his rudder and his anchor. He can neither steer himself, nor remain in one place. Yet he is serene in his helplessness; in fact, like a child bashed around by the surf, it delights him:

*Lighter than a cork, I danced on the waves  
That drag others to their doom.*

“Le Bateau Ivre” is a poem not of suffering, but of joy. When the poet tells us, “The Rivers let me go where I wanted,” he means, equally, he was happy to go where they took him. He submits to the Rivers, like Noah to God.

Yet unlike Noah, holed up inside his ark, windows closed, cover lashed down tight, mind emptied of everything but obedience, the poet lies on the open deck, eyes wide and hungry, as the green water, “sweeter than the flesh of hard apples is to children,” washes over him, penetrates his body and scrubs him clean of accumulated filth.

Rimbaud would describe his longer work, “A Season in Hell,” as “a plea to be released from an examination of my own depths.” By his “own depths,” he means, I believe, that human interiority we found in Moses at the burning bush and which has expanded ever since until we have now within us not just a few scraps of autonomous yetzer – personal will – but vast continents of inner being, self-consciousness, of what we call individuality. The horror of those depths – exacerbated in Rimbaud’s case by genius, homosexuality and adolescence – has become unbearable.

“Le Bateau Ivre” is not so much a plea to be released from them as program to that end – a singular example of the distinction Roland Barthes makes between writing *about* something and *writing* something. Matthew Arnold stood upon the shore, looking at the calm sea and heard the eternal note of sadness. Four years later, Rimbaud says “Bollocks!” to sadness and hurls himself into the waves. He gives himself up to danger, death if necessary and especially delirium: “a systematic derangement of the senses” that will leave no room, he hopes, for the torments of doubt, of interiority. He will drive himself out of himself by submitting to what is beyond the self: Nature, the Universe, Poetry. His names for God.

I said earlier that Noah was not his own, he was God's. Rimbaud would say, in a letter written a few months after "Le Bateau Ivre," "...I' is another." Rimbaud wants Noah's abandonment, his submission, his faith, but he has to go the long way around to get there. Because he does not hear God calling him on his journey, Rimbaud commands himself, as if he were God, the ark and Noah, all in one. And once he has given himself over to the chaos of the sea, what he calls the "triumphant hubbub," he achieves an ecstatic bliss.

*And from then I on I bathed in the Poem*

*Of the Sea, infused with stars, churned to milk*

*Swallowing the green blue where, like a pale, delighted*

*Bit of flotsam, a pensive drowned man sometimes sinks.*

Sometimes he sinks and sometimes he floats. He dies and he lives. Who by fire and who by water? And who will become immortal, if only for an hour or the length of a vision?

That word "hubbub," by the way, is a translation from the French *tohu-bohu*, derived, of course, from *toe-hoo* v' *voe-hoo*. Rimbaud does not seek the old God of Noah or His moral order; he does not want the Sea of Faith to fill up again. All that has led only to his present torment, the endless examination of his depths. He wants the new, the unknown - *l'inconnu* -- the unformed and void. The world before Creation. Only this, he thinks, would be sufficiently shocking and strange to cleanse him of his unbearable humanity.

*I have seen skies aburst with lightning, and waterspouts,*



*Tides and currents, I know the evening  
And the dawn as exalted as a flock of doves  
And at times I have seen what man thought he saw.*

In that phrase, “I have seen what man thought he saw,” Rimbaud achieves his goal. He transcends the human and leaves ordinary existence behind. Somehow this makes me think again of Noah, and I wonder: after the flood and the new covenant, when he planted his vineyard and got drunk, what visions did Noah see? Was it...

*Glaciers, silver suns, nacreous waves, skies of embers,  
Hideous strands around brown gulfs  
Where giant serpents devoured by bedbugs,  
Drop from tortured trees reeking of black perfume...???*

Well, probably not. Still, I like to think Noah enjoyed his drunken vision, and that Ham, seeing only a vulgar nakedness, missed the point. And that Shem and Yaphet walked backwards because they couldn't imagine what glories there might be in a stupor.

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But enough of that. We're here for an aufruf. So, is there anything we can make of Noah and Rimbaud, the old man and the teenager, to give to Hannah and Joey? One thing we can say is that in love, as in prophesy and poetry, the normal hierarchies of truth are

inverted: inner conviction takes precedence over consensual reality. This is a dangerous state. It can lead to catastrophes and often has. But love is dangerous; if you don't want danger, you can stand on the shore with Matthew Arnold. Of course, a marriage needs stability, too, which we'll call Faith. So may Hannah and Joey have two kinds of faith: the unswerving devotion of the amiable old man, and now and then -- and mostly in private -- the ecstatic visions of the crazy teenager.

Shabbat shalom.



## NOACH

Ron Meyers – Minyan Maat – November 2, 2019

This past spring, I took a brief trip to Copenhagen. I loved it. Everyone loves Copenhagen. I had such enthusiasm about it when I came home that I read a book about the remarkable qualities of society in Scandinavia – how it is that they enjoy a strong social system and also a strong economy, how it is that a parent can leave their child sleeping unattended in a stroller out on a city sidewalk while they go inside a bakery for five minutes to get a pastry and coffee. (I witnessed this, and I have photos.) One of the key ingredients, according to the author's many interviews is trust. Danes and Swedes and Norwegians all trust each other more than the rest of this do. But even so, the interviews also revealed some intramural frictions among the seemingly identical blond nations. One of the **Danish** interviewees said that the **Swedes** are the Very Most Trustworthy of all – because they simply “**don't have the imagination to lie or cheat**”!

This immediately made me think of today's parasha, in which Gd observes that “man's imagination is evil from his youth” (Gen 8:21).

To those of us who live with the idea that **imagination is the very pinnacle of human nature** – and I think most of us do – it's stunning to hear that our imagination is evil, and not only evil, but fundamentally so – a deep and original evil that is somehow part of our very nature.

It is true that lying and cheating require imagination – that’s what we so enjoy about a good caper movie: the clever deception and the brilliant scheme. But there are many other kinds of creativity: we also love the scientist’s clever conception and the composer’s brilliant theme. And what about the firing of bricks in kilns and the building of towers, which in this parasha are punished as primordial offenses of Man against Gd? The development of new materials and the attainment of new heights are achievements that Man has always pursued and celebrated. Human piety was for centuries expressed exactly by pursuing the heights with glorious arts and ingenious technologies in the great cathedrals. And yet even that activity grows from a tradition in which Gd is profoundly offended by man’s creativity.

The thing is, Man cannot help being creative. From the moment their minds are activated by the Tree of Knowledge, Adam & Eve creatively stitch together leaves into garments to cover themselves (Gen. 3:7), applying a **resource** in a **wholly novel way**, to **solve a problem** that had literally not been known before. And since then we have engaged in an encyclopedic array of activities, from Architecture to Zoology, in which we utilize ingenuity, apply insights, and craft inventions. It’s not only what we fundamentally do, it’s the very best of what we do.

One particular aspect of our creativity, and possibly the most pervasive, is **narrative**. Humans are narrative beings. Our lives are **suffused with stories**. We start the day by reading or listening to the day’s “top stories” in the news; we go to work and tell stories from home, and then come home and tell stories from work. We relax by streaming a frothy fiction on TV and curl up with a good book

in bed, until we sail off into the involuntary storytelling of our dreams. We codify our memories as narratives, and we project our futures as narratives. **Our minds are shattered when our life stories don't make sense**, and then we can often be **healed** through a process of rebuilding our narratives. >> And, by the way, we gather here every week to read a cycle of stories over and over and see what we can make of them.

**Cognitive theory** refers to this **inescapable process of narration** as **world-making**. And if we are engaged at all times in world making, doesn't that reflect more than anything could our creation in the image of Gd, whose original glory was to create the world?

>> What's more, in the course of our world-making, the minds that Gd gave us **make no distinction between fact and fiction**. Our narrative cognition functions in the exact same way, whether we are making sense of our manifest experiences, or just making stuff up – or anything in between. There is, apparently, not a language in the world, that makes a grammatical distinction between truth and lies, between reality and fantasy. **Narration is narration, and it's the currency of human thought**. We stitch together **coherent accounts of the way things are**, and we stitch together **visions of the way things could be**.

Theorists use the term “world-making” in a metaphorical sense, of constructing perceived worlds, worlds of coherent concepts, within our minds. But the same creative processes operate in the **literal** sense as well: **we form ideas of possible worlds**, and then we **mobilize** ourselves to **manifest** our ideas in the **real** world. Our **fluid movement between reality and fantasy** can energize a nation to collectively envision the fantastical idea of space travel, and then

mobilize hundreds of thousands of its citizens to work together to fulfill that vision. Or, of course, the fluidity between reality and fantasy can be **exploited** to **corrupt** a nation's elections.

It's not exactly news that our imagination isn't all good. But how to account for Gd's assessment that it's so exclusively bad?

A few other concepts in narrative theory may point us in the direction of an answer. The first is that it's not just any set of facts that create a narrative – **they have to have a particular form**, and we have a strong tendency to read our experiences in a way comports with this form. The essential elements of narrative have been described as: an Actor, an Action, a Goal, a Scene – and Trouble. There has to be a conflict, something to upset the initial order. It's only when we have something discordant, when we **something to make sense of**, that we start knitting the observed phenomena into a structure, a theory, a narrative. **If there's anything that did not exist in Garden of Eden, it was Trouble.**

Another conceptual ingredient in narrative – so obvious that we might scarcely recognize it – is that narrative requires events to be **sequential**. The meaning of any event arises from its place within an overall landscape of events. But after the Creation, **there were no events in Eden**. Day followed night and night followed day, and for all we know, Adam and Eve may have lived for **eons** in primordial bliss before the fall occurred. But, as the Talking Heads used to sing, "Heaven is a place where nothing, nothing ever happens". Eden is **really** the place where nothing happens. It's only with the fall that the human **story** begins. In order to form a narrative, something has to **change** from what it was.

And that's a third characteristic of narrative. It's not only a sequence of events, but a sequence in which something significant **changes**, establishes **tension** with the **norm**, and then reaches some kind of resolution. Our minds use narrative as an **operating system**, to weave a coherent understanding of reality from **familiar** patterns and the **deviations** from those patterns. In Eden there were patterns of days and perhaps seasons, but when everything is in perfect order, there's nothing to say about it, nothing to notice, nothing to narrate. If nothing has ever been different than it is, then there is no possibility of imagining any different reality.

>> Eden, therefore, is the place where narrative **could not** happen, so it's only **after** Eden that narrative and imagination could be born.

Sure enough, the very first human activities after the expulsion from Eden reflect the fairly universal **first impulses of human imagination**. Every child's creativity begins with the simple, but massively empowering, act of: **telling lies**. And it's not too much to think that the next essential act of imagination is to imagine someone you don't like, dead. So it is in our story that the first human acts outside of Eden are that Cain **kills** his brother, and then **lies** about it. The human Imagination is off and running.

From this perspective, let's circle back to Gd's statement about Man's imagination being evil from his youth. I took it at first to mean that our imagination is dyed-in-the-wool and forever stained with evil. But having considered the fall from Eden, I come around to thinking that Gd's statement itself suggests a narrative about the **sequence** of human development – that Man's imagination is evil, not so much from his youth but in his youth. **This is a**



**new development** in the post-Eden world. Not only is the fall from Eden the starting point of human imagination, it's also **the starting point of youth**.

Adam and Eve did not grow up from childhood, they were fully formed and complete. They raised no children in Eden, and whatever Gd might have meant by directing them to be fruitful and multiply, neither we nor Gd ever get to see it. It's only with Cain and Abel, after Eden, that **birth** and **youth** begin to occur. And youth is something very different from the fully-formed adulthood that existed in Eden – it's the unformed, unstable, splintered condition of **evolving incompleteness**. The question is whether we ever evolve back into completeness.

The fall from Eden is the **rending** of the bond between Gd and Man. Never again are we automatically aligned with Gd. Forever after, it takes a lifetime of effort to walk in Gd's ways, and it's not an achievement that occurs in every lifetime. As harsh as the punishment was for Adam and Eve and all of us as their descendants, I think the **anguish** was even greater for Gd. I think the flood was an act of **grief** as much as an act of anger and regret. And for this reason it's very significant that Gd's remark about Man's evil imagination comes at the end of the flood story and not the beginning.

I've been commenting all this time on just a fragment of a sentence. The full sentence is this: "Gd said in His heart, I will not again curse the ground on Man's account, **because the imagination of Man is evil from his youth**." Listen to that word "because". We all know that Gd destroyed the earth because of Man's evil. But now after the flood, Gd is deciding to preserve us because of our evil. Not despite our evil imagination, but because of it.

It appears that Gd has accepted the rift between Himself and us, and is now willing to undertake the long, long process of raising us up from our rough and unformed youth, from the evil of our imagination to its elevated possibilities. Gd really didn't know what He was getting with us. Just because you create something doesn't mean you know how it's going to function in the world (you can ask Mark Zuckerberg about that...). Gd initially thinks that simply commanding Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree will be adequate to guide their behavior. It wasn't. Even later, when Cain has not yet made the fateful decision to kill Abel, Gd tells him, supportively, that **he has a choice** in what to think and how to behave. Cain still chooses murder. And then Gd chooses destruction.

But now, with the destruction done, and with **Man's essential nature apparently unchanged**, Gd recognizes that nature, with its evil and its possibilities, and chooses to embrace it.



**Dvar Torah (2004?)  
Parashat Noach  
Bethamie Horowitz**

**The Torah tells a progression of God's attempts to create a world populated with people.**

The first attempt of course is Adam and Eve. They live in a perfect place and are given one small commandment about not eating from these trees. But they do eat from the Tree, and God discovers that they have disobeyed.

**So the first experiment is more of a failure than a success:** God has to kick them out of the Garden of Eden. Then Adam and Eve produce children, and this leads to the world's first murder. And the murder leads to other problems. The experiment is such a failure that by the time of Noach the world is so completely filled with evil that God calls an end to the experiment.

**Through Noach God *undoes* creation.** And He undoes it by almost playing the tape backwards. In creating the world God starts by separating the land from the water, and now He lets the water back in. So God *un-creates* the world.

In fact, the midrash contains a parable of a king who built a palace and he populated it with mutes, who would rise early and salute the king by waving handkerchiefs or raising their hands. The king said, this is so great, if these who are mute get up early and salute and praise me with gestures, how much better it would be if they could speak? So he replaced them with people who could speak. But these new people seized the palace, they took control and they said, 'The palace is ours, not the king's'. So the king said, 'Give me back my former tenants.'

So, too, at the beginning of creation God's praise came only from the waters. God thought, if these waters who have no speech praise me, how much more will I be praised if I create man? But each succeeding generation got worse and worse, and by the generation of the flood, God said, 'let these be removed and let the waters come in their place.'

**So in this parashah God decides to start a second experiment.** The world is so bad, but there is one good guy. "I'm going to start again with Noah."

Why did God save Noah?

Noah was *ish tamim b'dorotav*. There is a debate in the midrashic literature about how to understand this phrase-- either in relative or in absolute terms.

- 1) The world in which Noah lived was so awful, the people so terrible that Noah stood out as extraordinary, but in another time and place he would have been only average.
- 2) Or, Noah was so good by any standard that God thought him worth saving (A midrash compares it to a fine perfume in a pile of excrement-- if it smells good even in these circumstances, how much sweeter it would smell in better surroundings?!)

Commented [BL1]:

**So Noah was chosen by God to insure the future of the world.**

**The human world has a fresh start.** Then, as soon as the waters subside, Noah gets drunk and something unmentionable happens related to Noah's nakedness (It's unclear what the text means.).

Then we have the tower of Babel, and it looks like we're headed down the same path of destruction. Only this time God can't destroy the world again and start over, because He's already made a promise never to do that again. Hence the meaning of the rainbow.

**So the third experiment begins with Abraham.** This is a whole new experiment. Like before, God chooses a person -- Abraham, as He did with Adam and Eve, and with Noah.

The whole notion of God choosing intrigued the rabbis. As with Noah, the rabbis ask, Why did God choose Abraham? Did he choose him because he was an exceptional person, or did Abraham become exceptional because God chose him. Was he exceptional or ordinary?

The rabbis lean toward the first explanation, that God chose Abraham because God recognized in him some unique qualities. We see that when we compare Noah and Abraham.

The text says that Noah walks *with* God (*et ha-elohim hithalech noach*), while Abraham walks *before* God (*hithalech lifnai v'hayah tamim*).

Like a small child, God must accompany Noah's every step, while Abraham, who is more adult, walks on his own before God. In fact, one Midrash goes even farther and grants Abraham such independence from God that it imagines God lost in a dark alley, with Abraham offering a beacon of light to help God see His way out of the darkness. God would have been lost without Abraham!

Another example, this time from the text. Abraham, upon being informed that God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, argued with God about His plan, on the chance that there might be innocent people killed. But Noah, being told about flood, doesn't say a word.

**So for his third experiment God chooses Abraham, and this time around will be different from God's first two attempts at create a world filled with people.** This time God does not destroy the whole world. Instead takes a different approach. He takes a person, and out of that person He creates a people who will serve as a moral example for the whole world. It suggests that if the first two experiments had not failed, there would have been no reason for God to create a Jewish people. And that's the experiment we're still in.

Abraham's appeal is in his energy and independence. He is the idol breaker who sets out into an unknown land to seek a new future.

Abraham is heroic and feisty, and faces a world where he is forging a new reality.. The path hasn't been trodden before.

Additional comparisons between Noah and Abraham:

(God is like a king who lost a pearl and digs in the dirt -- three piles, only the last pile contains the pearl, Abraham)

A King has three friends without whose consent he does nothing. But once he decided to do something without their consent -- so the first he evicted from the palace (drove him out of Eden), and the second he locked up in prison (confined to the ark). But the third he loved so much, he could do thing without him. "I will do nothing without his consent" Hence He asked Abraham's consent about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah..



Parshah Noah

Ben Orlove

2 November 2019

1. I can tell you, as so many have, that this week's parshah is one of my favorites. What's not to like about rainbows? I have long wished that there was more room between Bereshit and Lekh l'kha. Not that I don't like the mysteries of creation, or that I tire of the long narrative of our people's lineage and wish to postpone returning to it. But I delight in the imaginative space between the fully mythic formation of the universe *tohu v'bohu*, Nephilim, and the history of our lineage—and I wish that space were larger. This parshah gives us the dramatic sweep of the flood with its enormous scale, powerful imagery and troubling close, and the quirky story of the tower of Babel, told in nine brief verses. These pieces make me want more. Lewis Carroll, also given to wild fantasies, provided the fans of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with a sequel. Couldn't the author of Noach done the same?
2. But the Torah provides us with just one parashah in this zone between the appearance of the universe and the appearance of the Jews, so we might as well just relish it for what it is. It contains one of my favorite incidents in the whole Torah, which occurs the first time that Noah sent the dove out from the ark, after the waters had abated enough for the tops of the mountains to be seen. The dove returns to the ark, having "found no rest for the sole of her foot." Noah, sensing her fatigue, reaches his hand out to her. After the cosmic scale of tempests and oceans and skies, we focus in on the intimate scene of Noah, waiting at the window of the ark, on the moment of the bird returning over the waters. We see Noah's immediate recognition of this fellow creature, his *rakhmones*. It is crafted with economy and precision: "and he reached out [his hand] and he took her and he brought her back to him into the ark." This is the first moment of tenderness in the Torah.
3. I sought an entry point to this parshah. Often I have found ways into parshahs through odd wordings or unusual elements. Talking donkeys. Rebecca's seed. Esau's yearning for red red porridge. Long strings of adjectives. These bits of strangeness or surprise give an opening in a text, offering views of what it might have meant at the time of its origins, and what it has meant to the many layers of forebears who, like us, have returned to it again and again.
4. I did come up with a promising clue in this parshah. It lists animals a number of times, and, surprisingly, the sequence varies from occasion to occasion. God tells Noah twice, in chapters 6 and 7, what orders to bring the animals in, the beasts and the cattle and the fowl and the creeping creatures. Noah brings them in in a specific order; their deaths after the flood are registered in a specific order. In Chapter 8, verse 17, God commands Noah to take them out in a specific order, and they go forth from the ark in verse 19. I could make a list, and compare it to the order in which the animals were created in Bereshit.
5. I tried this gambit, and got interested. God tells Noah to take the birds out first, but they were the last to leave, after he took the covering off the ark. Couldn't they just have flown off on their own? No need for them to wait for a place in line down the gangplank.
6. But other thoughts kept intruding, displacing the lists. The flood made me think of a climate report that I have been working on for the last three years with a number of colleagues. One of the questions we faced was sea level rise. What do new scientific observations tell us about how much the seas have already risen? Water is streaming into the oceans from glaciers in



mountains all around the world. In recent decades some of this water had been held back in reservoirs, but the global boom of reservoir construction has largely ended. And rising temperatures have affected vast ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica as well. An entire new field of ice sheet dynamics has developed, with many new articles that provide projections of the enormous quantities of water that will be added to the world's oceans from each of these sources. We looked ahead, to 2030, 2050, 2100, even to 2300. The further in the future we looked, the less precise we could be: we do not know how quickly the world will move away from fossil fuels which accelerate the warming, and the science itself, for all that it has advanced, is not entirely definitive. Still, even the best possible outcome is a very bad one. We often used the phrase "already committed": the greenhouse gasses that have already been released condemn the glaciers and ice sheets to further melting. By 2100 there will be more than another foot of sea level rise in the most optimistic scenario, and it could be several times more than that. Centuries beyond that look much worse.

7. With this report in my mind, I had a sense of shock in reading the verses in Chapter 7 that tell us, "And the Flood was forty days over the earth, and the waters multiplied and bore the ark upward...and the waters surged and multiplied mightily over the earth." The chapter confirms that waters kept growing even after the days of rain had ended, just as ice sheets will keep melting even after greenhouse gas emissions end. It took me a while to that this next-to-first parashah was evoking in me a fear that we are in the next-to-last chapter of history. It is very difficult to imagine how the world will be in the next century or the one after that.
8. I also felt a tense moment of recognition in the destruction of life that accompanied the flood. I really did not have the heart to compare the order of animals that died. "And all flesh that stirs on the earth perished, the fowl and the cattle and the beasts and all swarming things that swarm on the earth." I did not want to set up a list comparing that with the recent reports of biodiversity groups that track extinctions. I am fairly sure that amphibians—frogs and toads and salamanders—are among the groups that have already been hit hardest, even if they are mentioned last in the parashah, but I really didn't want to know.
9. I thought about fish as well. The commentators generally think that they survived the flood without any difficulties. But our climate report indicates that by the end of this century, fish stocks worldwide will decline, many of them by more than half. One important reason is that the waters are warming, particularly the shallow surface waters where most fish live. The deeper waters are warming as well, but more slowly. Fish populations are migrating away from areas in the tropics into cooler waters. They expected to increase only in a few areas around Greenland and Siberia, and in some regions close to Antarctica south of New Zealand—temporary havens that may not last far into the next century.
10. I found a nightmarish reference to this warming of ocean waters in the commentators as well. Nachmanides, discussing 7:23, "all existing things were wiped off the earth" suggests that the waters of the flood were boiling, enough to dissolve the bodies of the animals that had died as the waters rose. He then speculates that the fish survived these boiling waters by fleeing into the deep ocean.
11. Our report does not limit itself to discussing the level of oceans and temperatures of the waters. It examines other changes as well. The oceans are holding less oxygen, another problem for many fish. And it is becoming more acid. The carbon dioxide that humans are releasing mixes into the oceans, like a planetary-scale SodaStream. It is already impacting organisms that have

minerals in the shells and skeletons, from microscopic organisms that form part of food chains, to coral reefs, and to clams and oysters and snails, included in the swarming things.

12. I turned to the description of the deaths in 7:21-23: "all flesh perished that moved on the earth...and all that had the quickening breath of life in its nostrils..died, and God wiped out all existing things from the earth." This extinguishing has three phases: first, the creatures and the people stop moving (the verb *lirmosh* can mean to creep, but it also has a more general sense of movement; Alter provides "all flesh that stirs on the earth"). Then these motionless beings suffocate: they are described as having "*nishmat ruakh khayim*," an unusual duplication which occurs only one other time in Tanakh, in King David's victory song (2 Samuel 22:16), where God breathes fire down on a battlefield. And then their corpses are obliterated. The verb *lamkhot* can mean blotted, or erased; Alter's rendering is simply "wiped out." *Lamkhot* is what we are commanded to do with Amalek's memory. But it can be turned positively. The prophets hope that a person's name and good deeds can be saved from erasure, and that their sins can be erased and forgiven.
13. I was struck that animals would be erased, as well as humans. I looked back once again at the text. In my efforts to see the ordering of different kinds of animals, I had not noticed that animals and humans were always mentioned together, in God's commandments, in Noah's actions, in the moving onto the ark and in the departure from the ark. Humans and animals are closely joined in the previous parashah, brought into being at different times in the six days of creation; and we are joined with animals as well in Noah. Commentators have offered different accounts of the use of the three levels of the ark. Rashi suggested that people were on the top deck, animals in the middle, with the bottom one reserved as a kind of latrine. The 13th century writer Chizkuni, Hezekiah ben Manoah placed humans and food on the top, the animals on the two below. Whichever the configuration, it was a single structure with room for all, and for their needs. It is the care for other beings, for all of creation, that allowed life to continue.
14. I found that this passage about erasure gave me hope. It is not merely movement, or breath, that marks life; it is the capacity to be remembered, to leave a presence and a record in the world. Noah's name has certainly survived him. We know him, his name, his place in history. We can look back not only to his merciful gesture to the exhausted dove. The Talmud also records Noah's attentiveness to each creature.
15. Rav Hana bar Bizna says: Eliezer, servant of Abraham, said to Shem the Great, son of Noah: It is written: "After their kinds, they emerged from the ark," indicating that the different types of animals were not intermingled while in the ark. Where were you and what did you do to care for them while they were in the ark? Shem said to him: We experienced great suffering in the ark caring for the animals. Where there was a creature that one typically feeds during the day, we fed it during the day, and where there was a creature that one typically feeds at night, we fed it at night. With regard to that chameleon, my father did not know what it eats. One day, my father was sitting and peeling a pomegranate. A worm fell from it and the chameleon ate it. From that point forward my father would knead bran with water, and when it became overrun with worms, the chameleon would eat it.
16. Noah has ceased movement, and breathes no longer. But his name has not been erased. His righteousness led him to be chosen to build the ark in a threatening time and to care for the beings which he brought with him, humans and animals.

17. The commentators offered many views of the wickedness that condemned nearly all of Noah's generation to physical death and to erasure. They focused on sexual immorality and idolatry. We can look ourselves to the forms of action—righteous or wicked—of our own generation, a second generation with warnings of floods. And we too have a choice to take action, to assure survival of our own species and of all life.

Parashah Noach

The vision of the flood in Bereshit, once almost folkloric, now seems to us like a new apocalyptic film—or like one of the assessment reports on climate change or biodiversity produced by the UN. It offers us a chance to look deeply into our tradition's understanding of the history of the universe and the threats to the order of creation that human greed, hatred and selfishness can unleash. Bereshit 1 tells us the order of creation of living beings on air, water and earth: not counting the water-beings that survive, we have birds first, then beasts and cattle, then creepy-crawlies and then us humans. But then the humans, through actions, unleash an unnatural rise in sea levels (not so different from what we see). Just enough time for an ark. The air-and-land beings enter in a different order than they were created in, humans first. They perish in a third order (see below) and are blotted out in a fourth order. But the ark prevails, and the air-and-land beings exit, in the order in which they entered. So we humans, who were created last, most entrusted with partnering with the divine source, are the ones who threaten the air-and-land beings—but the ones who, recognizing our potential to protect and support this order, can save the beings as well. Let us rise to this challenge now in our time, as Noah, the righteous one did, in his.

יב וַיְהִי הַגֶּשֶׁם, עַל-הָאָרֶץ, אַרְבָּעִים  
יָוֶם, וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה.

12 And the rain was upon the earth  
forty days and forty nights.

**יג** בַּעֲצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּא נֹחַ, וְשֵׁם-  
וְחָם וְיָפֶת בְּנֵי-נֹחַ; וְאִשְׁתּוֹ נֹחַ,  
וְשְׁלִשָּׁת נָשִׁים-בָּנָיו אִתָּם--אֶל-הַתֶּבֶה.

**יד** הָמָּה וְכָל-הַחַיָּה לְמִינָהּ, וְכָל-  
הַבְּהֵמָה לְמִינָהּ, וְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׁ  
עַל-הָאָרֶץ, לְמִינֵהוּ; וְכָל-הָעוֹף  
לְמִינֵהוּ, כָּל צֶפֶר כָּל-כָּנָף.

**טו** וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-נֹחַ, אֶל-הַתֶּבֶה, שְׁנַיִם  
שְׁנַיִם מִכָּל-הַבָּשָׂר, אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ רוּחַ  
חַיִּים.

**טז** וְהַבָּאִים, זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה מִכָּל-בָּשָׂר  
בָּאוּ, כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֱתוֹ, אֱלֹהִים;  
וַיִּסְגֹּר יְהוָה, בַּעֲדוֹ.

**יז** וַיְהִי הַמַּבּוּל אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, עַל-  
הָאָרֶץ; וַיִּרְבּוּ הַמַּיִם, וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת-  
הַתֶּבֶה, וַתָּרָם, מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ.

**יח** וַיִּגְבְּרוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּרְבּוּ מְאֹד, עַל-  
הָאָרֶץ; וַתִּלָּךְ הַתֶּבֶה, עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.

**יט** וְהַמַּיִם, גָּבְרוּ מְאֹד מְאֹד--עַל-  
הָאָרֶץ; וַיִּכָּסּוּ, כָּל-הַהָרִים הַגְּבוּהִים,  
אֲשֶׁר-תַּחַת, כָּל-הַשָּׁמַיִם.

**כ** חָמֵשׁ עָשָׂרָה אַמָּה מִלְּמַעְלָה, גָּבְרוּ  
הַמַּיִם; וַיִּכָּסּוּ, הַהָרִים.

**13** In the selfsame day entered Noah,  
and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth,  
the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife,  
and the three wives of his sons with  
them, into the ark;

**14** they, and every beast after its  
kind, and all the cattle after their  
kind, and every creeping thing that  
creepeth upon the earth after its kind,  
and every fowl after its kind, every  
bird of every sort.

**15** And they went in unto Noah into  
the ark, two and two of all flesh  
wherein is the breath of life.

**16** And they that went in, went in  
male and female of all flesh, as God  
commanded him; and the LORD  
shut him in.

**17** And the flood was forty days  
upon the earth; and the waters  
increased, and bore up the ark, and it  
was lifted up above the earth.

**18** And the waters prevailed, and  
increased greatly upon the earth; and  
the ark went upon the face of the  
waters.

**19** And the waters prevailed  
exceedingly upon the earth; and all  
the high mountains that were under  
the whole heaven were covered.

**20** Fifteen cubits upward did the  
waters prevail; and the mountains  
were covered.

**כא** ויגוע כל-בשר הרמש על-  
הארץ, בעוף ובבהמה ובחיה, ובכל-  
השרץ על-הארץ--וכל,  
האדם.

**כב** כל אשר נשמת-רוח חיים  
באפיו, מכל אשר בחרבה--מתו.

**כג** וימח את-כל-היקום אשר על-  
פני האדמה, מאדם עד-בהמה עד-  
רמש ועד-עוף השמים, וימחו מן-  
הארץ; וישאר אך-נח ואשר אתו,  
בתבה.

**כד** ויגברו המים, על-הארץ,  
חמשים ומאת, יום.

**יח** ויצא-נח; ובניו ואשתו ונשי-  
בניו, אתו.

**יט** כל-החיה, כל-הרמש וכל-  
העוף, כל, רמש על-הארץ--  
למשפחתיהם, יצאו מן-התבה.

**כ** ויבן נח מזבית, ליהוה; ויקח  
מכל הבהמה הטהרה, ומכל העוף  
הטהור, ויעל עלת, במזבית.

**כא** וירח יהוה, את-ריח הניחח,  
ויאמר יהוה אל-לבו לא-אסף

**21** And all flesh perished that moved  
upon the earth, both fowl, and cattle,  
and beast, and every swarming thing  
that swarmeth upon the earth, and  
every man;

**22** all in whose nostrils was the  
breath of the spirit of life,  
whatsoever was in the dry land, died.

**23** And He blotted out every living  
substance which was upon the face  
of the ground, both man, and cattle,  
and creeping thing, and fowl of the  
heaven; and they were blotted out  
from the earth; and Noah only was  
left, and they that were with him in  
the ark.

**24** And the waters prevailed upon the  
earth a hundred and fifty days.

**18** And Noah went forth, and his  
sons, and his wife, and his sons'  
wives with him;

**19** every beast, every creeping  
thing, and every fowl, whatsoever  
moveth upon the earth, after their  
families; went forth out of the ark.

**20** And Noah builded an altar unto  
the LORD; and took of every  
clean beast, and of every clean  
fowl, and offered burnt-offerings  
on the altar.

**21** And the LORD smelled the  
sweet savour; and the LORD said  
in His heart: 'I will not again curse  
the ground any more for man's

לקלל עוד את-הָאָדָמָה בְּעָבוּר  
הָאָדָם, כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רָע  
מִנְעֻרָיו; וְלֹא-אֶסֶף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת  
אֶת-כָּל-חַי, כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי.

כב עד, כָּל-יָמֵי הָאָרֶץ: זֶרַע  
וְקָצִיר וְקֹר וְחֹם וְקִיץ וְחֹרֶף, וַיּוֹם  
וְלַיְלָה--לֹא יִשְׁבְּתוּ.

sake; for the imagination of man's  
heart is evil from his youth;  
neither will I again smite any more  
every thing living, as I have done.

22 While the earth remaineth,  
seedtime and harvest, and cold  
and heat, and summer and winter,  
and day and night shall not cease.'

Lech Lecha, 5762, 2001. (Minyan M'at)  
Bethamie Horowitz

All of us--certainly us in New York -- have been living with a great deal of fear lately. I don't need to explain why. But it's interesting to see it seeping into the popular culture:

For instance, the *New York Times* OP-Ed cartoon yesterday was about "Worry-Boy" -- a new toy you plug in and it rids you of all your fears (if you take it with 3 shots of bourbon)

*The New Yorker* back page cartoon of two guys reminiscing about the good old fears (more mundane) before Sept 11<sup>th</sup>: West Nile Virus, sharks at the ocean beaches, the collapse of the dot.coms.

So when I started to prepare the *dvar torah*, one thing I assumed was in looking at Abraham **we have a person who was exactly the opposite from us**: a person who had so few fears, so little worry, that with one command from God he obeyed without hesitation. This is an image of Abraham as a person with complete trust in God. A person without terror.

But in fact one of the most striking things I saw when I began reading the *parshah* was that Abraham may have been well-acquainted with fear and doubt.

Examples:

1. At the very start, God commands Avram: Leave your country, your birthplace, the land of your parents and ancestors... to the land that I will show you. -- It's scary to uproot yourself and leave your home.
2. Avram is 75 when he and Sarai and Lot and their whole household left Haran. They get to Canaan -- and there's a famine.
3. Avram goes down to Egypt -- pretends Sarai is his sister -- he's scared that Egyptians will kill him.
4. After they return to Canaan, there's strife between Avram's and Lot's men (pretty unnerving) -- so they have to split up. Avram and Lot go separate ways,



Rather than a fearless man of faith, I learned that the image of Avram in the *parshah* is a person who requires an enormous amount of help. And the help he gets from God is reassurance. A number of times in the *parshah* God is reassuring Avram – I counted five times:

1. God commands, “*Lech lecha*” (Get out of your homeland!)-- But that isn’t enough to get Avram to go, so God has to build a stronger case:  
I’ll make you name great, your name will be a blessing. I will bless those that bless you and curse those that curse you and all the families of the earth shall bless you (12:2-3)
2. Gen 12:7 When Avram first arrives in Canaan on journey from Haran God appears to Avram, whispering, “*This* is the place I give to your descendents!”
3. After Avram and Lot split, God appears to Avram to reiterate His/Her promises (Gen 12: 14-17)  
This is the place – from North to South, East to West.  
I’ll make your descendents as numerous as the dust.
4. Avram conquers the Kings, converts Melchizedek, sing praises to God. God then appears to Avram (Gen 15:1)
5. At end of *parshah* God comes to reiterate His/Her promises: changing Avram’s names to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. God calls the promise a covenant between Abraham and God, and between Abraham’s descendents into the future – circumcision.

Avram’s fear and God’s reassurance are most palpable in the amazing incident of the *brit bein ha-b’tarim* (the covenant of the parts) in the middle of the *parshah*.

After the war with the four kings, God tells Avram: “FEAR NOT ( *al tirah*) I will protect you, I’ll keep my word .” But Avram doesn’t take this on faith. He fears that God’s promises are just promises. He says, “What will you give me? I am still childless.” So God elaborates – [see all these stars – your descendants will be as numerous as them].

But Avram still needs reassurance. He says to God, “How shall I know?”

I understand this to mean that even though God just told him, Avram still worries, and he needs to get beyond his fear in another way. At that moment God seems to realize that S/He needs a different tactic. Rather than just reassuring Avram with words, God creates a ritual that in some more tangible way will help Avram get beyond his fear.

The *brit bein ha-b'tarim*: God tells Avram to take a heifer, a ram, a goat, a turtle dove and a pigeon: He divided the animals, (but not the birds). After Avram has done this sacrifice and cut up the animals into pieces, and chased away the birds of prey, **Avram falls into a deep fearful sleep (15:12)**—filled with dread and great darkness (a nightmare!)

While he is asleep God speaks to Avram:

God then tells the whole future—being a stranger in a strange land for 400 years; returning to this place, even greater substance. Avram will live to a ripe old age. The fourth generation shall come back to Canaan; Amorite iniquity  
Then there was smoke and darkness and a flaming torch appears and passes between the pieces of the animals.

**At that point, the tactile, physical action seems to help calm Avram so he can take in the words of the covenant.** And then the text continues,

(15:18) *On that day the Lord mad a covenant with Avram*  
I have given your seed this land – from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates.

So I learned that we’re a lot closer to Avram than I had thought: in our worries and fears, in our need for reassurance. But we don’t have a ritual like the *brit bein ha-b'tarim*—(Or at least we haven’t found one yet).

But there is something reassuring for us in this parshah. At one point earlier on God seeks to calm Avram's fears he says

*Don't be afraid Avram, I am your shield, and your reward will be very great.*

The line is a kind of reassurance for us, too, because *we are here*. *We* are what was promised to Avram – his numerous descendents. The very promise of this parshah, with all the tragedies of the Jewish people, Abraham's descendents are here and they are us. We recognize this every time we *daven* the *amidah* – we say, “*magen avraham*.” This refers back to God saying, “*I am your shield*.” In doing so we affirm our confidence in God's promise.

Drash: Genesis 16:11: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֵלֶאֱדָה הִנֵּה הָגָד הָרָה וְיִלְדָה בֵּן וְקָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל־עֲנָנָהּ:

By Marcia Pally, [mp28@nyu.edu](mailto:mp28@nyu.edu)

Oct. 30, 2020

Lech Lecha is a passage of the Hebrew Bible packed with drama, and the dramatic parts usually grab the scholarly attention. In this dvar Torah, we're going to look instead at a small sentence from the Hagar narrative with I hope interesting implications. We meet Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant to Sarai, after her mistress Sarai has given her to Avram so that that Avram may have a child though Sarai is barren. Hagar has become pregnant and taunted Sarai about her—Hagar's--good fortune compared with Sarai's barrenness. Sari retaliates against Hagar so harshly that Hagar flees. At this point in the narrative, Hagar is running away in the desert, and God's messenger tells her that she will have a son and she should call him Ishmael. Genesis 16:11: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֵלֶאֱדָה הִנֵּה הָגָד הָרָה וְיִלְדָה בֵּן וְקָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל־עֲנָנָהּ: And God's messenger said to her, here you are pregnant and you will give birth to a son, and you shall call his name Ishmael because God heard or your misery.

The medieval commentator Rashi (1040C.E.-1105C.E.) notes that this “call your son” is not a descriptive account of a future act: “you *will* call him Ishmael.” It is rather a command. And not only a command, but as Rashi specifies, it is a command *as if addressed to a male*:

Rashi: וקראת שמו. צווי הוא, כמו שאומר לזכר וקראת את שמו יצחק (בר' י"ז): This is the grammatical command form, as is said to a male: and you shall call his name Isaac.

Indeed, this is not only a command form but precisely the command used when God commands no less than Abraham in the very next chapter. Using the same verb as with Hagar, God commands Abraham, you will call your son Isaac.

Genesis 17: 19: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶבְרָהָם אִשְׁתְּךָ יִלְדָה לָּךְ בֵּן וְקָרָאתָ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית: עוֹלָם לִפְנֵי אַחֲרָיו: And God said, your wife Sarah will give birth to a son, and you shall call his name Isaac, and I will establish my covenant with him.

What do we learn from Hagar and Abraham receiving the same divine command?

One wants to be careful not to anachronize and read into an ancient text our twenty-first century notions of (i) women's relationship with God and (ii) the relationship of non-Jews to God. We also need be mindful of the many redactions of the Tanach and the gradual development of ideas over time. Yet however elaborate the development of this specific text, by the time we have it in this form, we see at least these things:

First, Hagar, a woman and an Egyptian, is commanded by God. Meaning, she is the sort of person who is expected to understand God and be able to have a *responsive*, responsible relationship with the divine--no less so than Abraham is. She is commanded because she is expected to understand and respond. I'd like to thank Bonnie Zaben for noting that at this point in the Bible, the Abrahamite women, Sarah, Rebecca, etc. all name their children. Sarah could have usurped this power from her maidservant. But God intervenes to assure that the non-

Abrahamite woman, the foreigner Hagar, retains this power. She is to name her son; she is to be responsive and responsible to God.

Second, Hagar is not the only woman seen as able to understand and fulfill God's vision. We see this also with Rebecca, a talented schemer and advancer of the Israelites' foundation narrative. We see it again with Miriam, Deborah, and more minor characters like Hannah, who, like Hagar, are in relations of responsiveness and responsibility with God.

Third, non-Abrahamites are also the sort of persons capable of responsive, responsible relations with God. We see this with Noah, with whom God forges a covenant for the continuation of humanity. We see this with Abraham himself, who is not Israelite but a guy whose family is in the idol-crafting business when God says to him, "Lech Lecha," leave your homeland to go to the land that I shall show you--the opening step in the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham. We see this also with the non-Abrahamite Avimelech, who covenants with Isaac (Genesis 26:28)--indeed, it's Avimelech who suggests the covenantal bond. Non-Abrahamites are expected to know the moral law. The righteous follow it (Enoch, Noah) and violators are punished (Cain, residents of Sodom, etc.). This again suggests that non-Abrahamites are the sorts of people capable of a responsive relationship with God.

So we see Abrahamite women and non-Abrahamite men in reciprocal, responsible relations with God. In the person of Hagar, we have a double hitter: we see both a woman and a non-Abrahamite together.

In the Tanach, this responsive, responsible relationship is called covenant. In *Religion in Human Evolution*, Robert Bellah describes the innovation of covenantal thinking that began to take shape over the many years of the Tanach's composition and redaction. One key feature is that covenant is not a straight import and repetition of the political suzerainty treaties of surrounding tribes--though the terms for suzerainty treaties are linguistically related to the biblical term for covenant, *brith*. *Brith* in the Bible is not a political, *quid-pro-quo* treaty between God and Israel. As the notion of *brith* developed in the new Israelite context and culture, the meaning of the *brith* changed.

Suzerainty treaties were between a king and lesser kings, vassals; the people were not involved. They did not have the standing—they were not in a position--to be responsible to God directly. They needed an intermediary: the priest or king, sometimes understood as the son of god. In some contrast, the biblical notion of responsive, responsible relationship is between God and each person, directly. No intermediary. And it is a *reciprocal* relationship though the parties, God and person, are of very different standing. God is God of the universe but God does not control or dictate terms. Human beings are not pre-programmed puppets—though that would certainly have made things easier for God. God relies on and hopes for human embrace of God's vision. But God cannot compel it. Like love, covenantal commitment must be given and sustained freely by responsive, responsible parties.

In the Hagar narrative, we see that the persons capable of such responsiveness and relationship include women and non-Abrahamites. There is no intention here to project twenty-first century notions of theological universality or women's rights onto the text. Yet there is something novel

and important here about the notion of God's relationship extending to all persons directly and reciprocally.

Robert Bellah describes the outcome of this sort of thinking. Covenant, he writes, is "a charter for a new kind of people, a people under God, not under a king... a people ruled by divine law, not the arbitrary rule of the state, and of a people composed of *responsible individuals*."<sup>1</sup>

I suggest this as something to hold as we live our lives and as we go into the vote in the coming days. Shabbat shalom.

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<sup>1</sup> Bellah, Robert (2011), *Religion in Human Evolution*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Kindle Locations 4700-4701, quote at 4864, emphasis mine.



## Parshat Lech Lecha

A beautiful feature in studying these early parshiot is to trace through the Jewish character and personality on display as the beginning of Jewish heritage. While aware of present day shortcomings, Jewish people know that attributes of the patriarchs have been reflected onto our immediate forbearers and even in the community around us today — at least I have the rose colored glasses to think so.

The amazingly impressive deeds taken by Avraham Aveenu through this shabbat's rather compact parsha Lech Lecha — even without embellishments to come from later parshiot — are primary examples of the enlightened personality blessing in our tradition.

This parsha alone recounts many great qualities in Abraham's character. Think about all these instances :

At a mature age, he unquestioningly leaves his native land for an unknown place, not by himself as a foray but fully and permanently with his entire household;

Not taking hashem for granted, he erects an alter;

A good listener, he trusts assurances from Hashem even while confronting a tumultuous tribal environment;

He generously allows nephew Lot to allocate the the land portions for Avraham and Lot to settle, even when Lot selects the Jordan plain and Avraham gets dryer hill country;

When the invading 4 kings seize Lot and Lot's retinue, Avraham leads a big expedition all the way past Damascus, rescuing Lot and Lot's entire household;

Avraham understands the King of Sodom's need for respect, allocating 10% of his wealth for this purpose — in exchange for respect in return;

He endorses Sarah's decision to discipline Hagar when Hagar shows disrespect to Sarah, understanding that no ambiguity can exist about who is the chief Matriarch;

Acknowledging that his first born Ishmael will not succeed him as the main patriarch, Avraham gains Hashem's assurances that Ishmael will have a noble future;

He carries out Hashem's circumcision decree unstintingly and immediately, including Ishmael and the entire household — without regard to parentage.

Life experience tells us that these could not have been easy things to do. Abraham's sense of self in the face of adversity must be what we all want in a Jewish role model: confidence in immediate response to hashem; perseverance in the face of the unknown; respect and understanding for people different from oneself even when they are being difficult; ability to listen and compromise when appropriate; physical courage combined with effective crisis management; generosity; listening to one's life partner; having the heart to create shalom bayit.

So is it that our immediate forbearers and we ourselves have measured up to these standards? Our Jewish souls think so. Even in the face of present day shortcomings, Abraham's personality has been passed down through the generations to a greater degree than we would openly admit. While Jewish people don't care to make k'nene'hurras, we must continue to



celebrate the gifted aspirations from these parshiot. Feed-back on this point from your actual experiences would be appreciated after services.

And all of this is a good Segway into what I wanted to say as new drash coordinator.

Parshat Lech L'Cha: Aufruf of Sandra Edelman and Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky

Shabbat shalom. I feel very privileged to be speaking this morning, because for the marital sermonizer no parsha is easier than Lech L'cha. Really, it's surefire: Avram and Sarai set off on a journey; the couple at hand set off on a journey. We sing Adon Olam and get to the kiddush.

However, since the couple at hand are Burt Visotzky and Sandy Edelman, I thought this reading might be fleshed out a bit, maybe with a little midrash. Unfortunately, a little is all the midrash I know--none, compared to Burt. Also, a d'var Torah full of midrash would respect the vocation of only half the couple. About Sandy's profession, I know even less than nothing. But I thought I might plunge in anyway; and so, in honor of Sandy's line of work, I'd like to spend the next nine and a half minutes considering the question, "What does Lech L'cha have to tell us about trademark and copyright law?"

We do find some legal verbiage in this parsha--but it comes from a different field from Sandy's, that of real property law. "Rise up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you." These words of God's are very similar to formulas for land conveyance that were common in the ancient Near East. In Egypt, for example, kings used to walk around their real estate to affirm their ownership. You can do that sort of thing in real property law. Between one's property and one's self, the law establishes a relationship that can be as direct as the touch of your foot on the ground. We might say that real property law reproduces the action of a dog marking its territory.

Now, by contrast, Sandy's field deals with material such as books and musical compositions, the kind of stuff known as intellectual property. Here, it seems to me, the law isn't about the relationship between property and self. It's about property and identity. Big difference. Instead of

marking the property with your body, you stamp it with your name. And when you do that, a funny thing happens: the property extends your name, becoming a new form of identity. War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy. As an assertion of identity, that title is much more powerful than "Leo Tolstoy" by itself. A piece of intellectual property therefore has the potential to submerge and change its owner.

The question is, do we find anything like this concept in Lech L'cha? I think it runs through the whole parsha, starting with God's promise: "I will make you into a great nation; and I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing." What does it mean, "I will make your name great?" Perhaps that the name Avram will become more than a self-representation, much as the name Leo Tolstoy, extended through War and Peace, became more than one man's identity. And how will that happen? The text might suggest an answer in the way the word "blessing" surrounds the promise about the name. "I will bless you...you shall be a blessing": the antecedent and consequence of Avram's name being great.

So we might say the parsha begins with an act of copyright. God copyrights a piece of his or her intellectual property known as Avram. How does God register the copyright? By blessing Avram. The blessing is a way of merging the author's identity with the creation. And then, when Avram's name becomes great someday, he in turn will merge his identity with "all the families of the earth." How will Avram register that copyright? In a manner very similar to God's: he will do so by being a blessing.

Before that, of course, Avram has to go to a land that God shows him, where he begins to claim the property by walking through the place. But that's not all he does. East of Bethel, he also builds an altar to God--the text uses the name itself--and he calls on God "by name." Nowhere does the text mention a sacrifice--which has to be a significant omission, considering how specific this book can be about burning fat and all the rest of it. Yet the only thing offered up on Avram's first

altar is the name itself. It's as if we were being shown that the action in this parsha is happening on two tracks at once. There's the track of real-property acquisition; but there's also the track of copyright, which takes place on a bare altar, with the affirmation of a name.

I would go further. I'd like to propose that the text plays off one form of property against the other, and even prefers one to the other. When Avram returns from his raid against the four kings, the King of Sodom makes his famous demand: "Give me the hostages, and you can take the loot for yourself." To which Avram replies, swearing by the name of God, "I won't take so much as a thread or the strap of a sandal." Why not? Because, Avram says, "I don't want people saying that a sleazeball like you made me rich." Or words to that effect. Swearing by the Name, Avram safeguards his own name, his reputation, his status as the author of intellectual property; and he does so by refusing real property.

I'm pleased to say the rabbis agree with me on this point. According to the rabbis, because Avram would not take so much as a string, God gave us something much better than a string. God gave us this--the tzitzit--a kind of trademark. And because Avram would not take the strap of a sandal, God gave us tefillin. So the real property, in itself, might have been a curse. The representation of that material, its elevation to the status of intellectual property in the form of tzitzit and tefillin--that is a blessing.

The rabbis tell us something more. Just before the King of Sodom makes his demand on Avram, the mysterious figure known as King Melchizedek shows up and offers a blessing. Why does Melchizedek bless Avram? Because he's won a battle? No. Melchizedek blesses him because God's name first became known through Avram.

This association of being blessed with publication of the Name teaches us that intellectual property, unlike real estate, has to be transmitted to be of value. And, as it's handed on, it tends to

change. Ownership of such property cannot be absolute and perpetual, because it is the nature of the property to be adapted and reworked. That's part of the reason why copyrights ultimately lapse, and the work goes into the public domain.

The piece of real estate that God deeded to Avram did not and does not change; it just sits there, century after century, ready for any dog to mark it. But the blessing is transformed as it passes through the generations. Its meaning is slowly unpacked, as the meaning of God's initial promise is unpacked throughout the parsha. Eventually, the blessing does go into public domain, as we can see by looking in the drawer at any motel. And finally, as if to show that the identity of the copyright holder is transformed by the property that is claimed, God literally makes great the names of Avram and Sarai, changing them to Avraham and Sarah.

Which brings me to Burt's favorite episode, the little adventure in Egypt. There, because a piece of information is concealed about Sarai's identity, Avram walks away with a lot of real property. In this story, Avram does not tell Pharaoh, "Keep your property. I won't take a string or the strap of a sandal." Avram is content to cart all that stuff away. He does so at the potential expense of his own good name, and of Sarai's reputation, too.

Can we find anything to excuse this behavior? I think we can, and it comes down to a single word: na, please. "Imri-na achori at": please, say you are my sister. I realize that's a thin thread on which to hang an interpretation; but tzitzit are thin threads, too. Avram does not command Sarai; he asks her. This, in a world where a woman can belong to a man in the sense of being real property. That's how it is in Avram's own family, as we see later with the story of Laban and his two daughters, sold off as a worker's wages. But with the word na, the text tells us that Sarai is not chattel to Avram. She's more like a co-author.

Together, these two people have taken out the copyright on an idea, a piece of intellectual

property we call their marriage. Marriage is the sort of property that has a life of its own, in which the identity of the copyright holders becomes submerged. In that sense, the material wealth that Pharaoh heaps upon Avram is almost comically inappropriate; it might have served as restitution for having filched a piece of real property, but it's beside the point when it comes to the marriage of true minds.

But what's not beside the point is the reaffirmation that God grants to Avram upon the return from Egypt. Before, when Avram had gone into Canaan, he'd been forced to leave again, almost immediately. But this time, God gives him something much better than the earlier, one-line promise, "I will assign this land to your offspring." This time, God gives him the full legal deed. What's happened in between? The affirmation of a partnership between Avram and Sarai; the publication, by God's own hand, of their joint copyright. It's as if the marriage, as intellectual property, had to be established first, as a precondition to the just acquisition of the real estate.

As usual, the text insists that we get our priorities straight. With today's stand-ins for Avram and Sarai, we know of course that the priorities are always correct. Burt is someone who, in addition to all his other virtues, knows how to say "please" to another person and can do it with his whole being; and Sandy is great at litigating intellectual property. I'm sure we all join in wishing them the blessings of the original copyright holder. And personally, I also wish them what God finally granted to Avram and Sarai--laughter.

Shabbat shalom.



### Lech Lecha – Olive's 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday

An old man, seventy-five years old at a time when that was ancient, sets out upon the road. A childless old man, at a time when that was a tragedy, sets out upon the road. He has lived his entire life with his father, though he is married. The only previous episode of note, if you wish to call it that, was when, at his father's behest of course, the extended family traveled from Ur to Haran, not even making it to the intended goal of Canaan. After living in Haran for some years, with his future seemingly foreclosed, one day the old man allows himself to finally hear a still, small voice within telling him to get out. More precisely, the voice said "Lech lecha," usually translated as "Go forth." However, Rashi translates these words as meaning "journey for yourself," while Rabbi Sacks translates them as "journey to yourself." This man starts as an ancient Hebrew Don Quixote, but he has set out upon a true hero's quest to see himself, and the world, anew. He continues to hear a voice only he can hear, and he sees a flaming torch only he can see. He understands what these things mean and he remakes himself and, thereby, the world.

An ongoing theme of his story is childlessness. By my count, sixteen times in this parasha the voice refers directly or indirectly to the promise of a child because there is a need for a child to preserve the legacy of all these things. The old man understands that what allowed him to leave his land and family and his father's house was that he had finally succeeded in Haran in restoring in himself a child's receptivity to the world. This is, ultimately, what Rabbi Heschel meant by "radical amazement," which he defined as the ability "...to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; [to] never treat life casually." But as we listen to Rabbi Heschel's words, we encounter a barrier created by the contemporary degradation of language and the sad fate of "phenomenal," "incredible," but most especially "awesome," as in "that watermelon bubble gum was awesome!" The New York Times recently had an article on "awe walks" which are intended to restore "the sense that you are in the presence of something larger and more consequential than yourself and this something is mysterious and ineffable." And how is this to be achieved? The Times tells us - by "...looking at everything with fresh, childlike eyes."

Of course, children don't know they have fresh, child-like eyes. Of course, children don't know that their destiny is to go forth; of course, children don't know that once they crawl, they are crawling away; of course, children are not philosophers of the phenomenology of the world, they just automatically get lost in dust motes and full moons; of course, children don't know that awe actually means a simultaneous experience of fear and marveling but they experience it.

I insist I am not engaging in the unfortunate pastime of worshiping an imaginary, idyllic, adult-centric notion of childhood. Childhood is no paradise; no functioning adult wishes to actually become a child again. Indeed, the greatest fear of any adult is the "childhood" which lies on the far side of senescence. Many years ago, Yochanan Muffs taught us there never was a "back to Eden" movement in Jewish history. God wanted us to leave the Garden, to go out and shape the world and know that only our children go back to kinder-garten.

But anyone who lives with a child knows that they have a special capacity, which helps us understand what George Eliot described in *Middlemarch*: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all



ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

There are many dramatic episodes in this parasha but, to me, Genesis 15:5 in its quiet simplicity is most remarkable: "'That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir.' God took [Abraham] outside and said, 'Look toward the heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.'" God did not command Abraham to go outside, God did not miraculously bring the heavens inside. You can't resist imagining a parental arm around Abraham's shoulder as God leads him outside and teaches him wonder; teaches him about the stars and counting and the generations to come.

Tomorrow, God willing, will be my granddaughter Olive's third birthday. I don't have her capacity for wonder but I get to borrow hers. She simply calls the magical things she does "pretend," because she doesn't have to write about childhood, she only has to allow it to unfold. On rare occasions I can lose myself as she can anytime, but I can always summon the memory of her face as she watched the marionettes in the Swedish Cottage.

However, she has some awareness of being on a quest, of changing over time, in her case into a "big girl." When one day I made some remark to Dina about how we should stop ever referring to her as Ella Olive, which is the full name on her birth certificate, Olive immediately objected with "Don't take away my words." She didn't say 'name,' she said 'words.' She has been through Babel and emerged to create her world day by day with words. If I use any word with Olive which she doesn't understand but which seems important for the meaning of our conversation, she will ask "What you mean?" When I used the word "hubbub," she asked what I meant. I told her but I didn't add that Milton in his liberated imagination had, one day, just made a word up, the way she sometimes does.

Olive also understands the fundamental materiality of love. When Olive's father Ed could still travel for work and had been away a week, Elana asked Olive if she would like to call her father on the phone. Olive replied: "Don't call dada. I want a hug." Most of us needed months of the Zoom treatment to realize how true this is.

So, may Olive "go forth" and explore her "pretend," and her "words" and her world never-endingly as Tennyson had Ulysses describe his restlessness to explore:

Yet all experience is an arch where thro'  
Gleams that [yet] untravell'd world whose margin fades  
For ever and forever when I move.

Howard L. Berkowitz

# DEVARA • TORAH

## Parshat Vayera: When angels come for supper

By DAVID G. ROSKIES

When angels come for lunch, you should roll out the red carpet and prepare the best food in the house. Then miracles will surely happen. You will discover hidden wellsprings of youthfulness though you may be pushing a hundred; though you've been menopausal for almost half a century, you'll experience renewed vigor. You may in fact feel so rejuvenated that you'll be ready to take on anything and anyone — even God himself. You may fancy yourself becoming something of an angel . . .

When angels come for supper, offering them food is not enough. You must insist that they stay the night. But this, in turn, is very risky — it may incur the wrath of the entire city. Why, they may ask, have you been chosen to be visited by wondrous guests. And before you know it, the angels will have eaten you out of house and home. You'll be lucky to get out with the shirt on your back! When angels come for supper, you sometimes discover what's really important in your life and who, of family and friends, is truly loyal.

When angels come for supper, a royal household may be stricken, for that is the

David G. Roskies teaches Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. © National Havurah Committee, 1983.

way angels have of protecting third parties whom they love. Angels make the barren fecund and the fecund barren. They protect those whom they love both directly and through the (unwilling and unknowing) agency of others. They throw their protective mantle over you not only in your house, not only on your travels, but even when you're all alone in the wilderness and no one else can see you. When you think all is lost, in the moment you are about to lose that which is most precious — your beloved son — the angel will come and guide you.

### Recognizing Angels

But how do you know an angel when you see one? Is everyone who comes for lunch or supper an angel in disguise? Angels can best be recognized by the function they fulfill, that of mediating in times of stress.

Abraham and Sarah need the angels in order to overcome their advanced age and finally beget offspring together. Abraham, rendered bold by the recent angelic visitation, tries to mediate between God and the city of Sodom. (He fails because the presence of angels actually brings out the worst in the Sodomites — madness and aggression against the strangers in their midst.) And later, when Sodom is already destroyed, the absence of any mediating presence whatsoever is precisely what drives the daughters of Lot to lie with their father.

Thus, in the first four episodes in this

*Angels can best be recognized by the function they fulfill, that of mediating in times of stress.*

parasha, we have already been taken from the interpersonal mediation of Abraham and Sarah, to the moral mediation of Abraham and Lot vis-a-vis the people of Sodom, and back to the interpersonal procreative realm of Lot and his daughters. The symmetry is important because it highlights what happens when mediation fails: then, even procreation becomes an act of total desperation; the union of man and woman becomes the sign of apocalypse.

In the geopolitical realm, the mediation of God is absolutely essential. Imagine what would have happened between Abraham and Avimelech were it not for God's intervention. In the domestic realm too, divine intervention is the only thing that can keep matters from blowing apart. Hagar cannot protect her own son from death, until an angelic voice is heard to guide her fortunes.

Now the stage is set for the most

climactic mediation in the whole Torah: the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah. But not to fear. The terror of this episode has already been greatly mitigated by the fate of Hagar and Ishmael. Here, as there, the angel will call out at the very moment when all seems lost.

### Laughter: Sign of Angels

There is another sign by which to recognize when it is that angels, and not mere mortals, have come for supper: laughter. Notice how Abraham laughs on hearing the angels' prophecy, then Sarah does the same, for which the angels reproach her; how Lot's sons-in-law laugh at his warning; how Sarah's jubilation and embarrassment are expressed through laughter, which then turns to anger when she sees (or thinks she sees) Hagar's mocking laughter. When angels visit the family circle, it is a deadly serious matter: your city and your sons-in-law can be wiped out before your very eyes, and even the son-of-your-laughter may almost be sacrificed on the altar.

When angels come for supper, anything can happen: the barren become fecund, mortals become God-like, citizens become enemies, daughters become concubines, servants become masters, sons become sacrifices, lovers become strangers and strangers become lovers. So when an angel comes for supper, the thing to do is to throw open the door for her as wide as possible and take whatever comes. □



(1)

I RECENTLY HAD AN EXPERIENCE WITH MY SON YOSSIKA THAT LED ME TO REFLECT ON THE <sup>(Binding of Isaac)</sup> AKEDAH, AND TO CONSIDER HOW SOME OF THE FATHER-SON DYNAMICS THAT ARE INVOLVED IN AVRAHAM AND YITZCHAK'S RELATIONSHIP ENTER INTO THE LIVES OF ALL PARENTS AND CHILDREN... IT WAS A WEEKDAY MORNING, AND MIRIAM HAD ALREADY LEFT THE HOUSE FOR AN EARLY APPOINTMENT. YOSSIKA AND I WERE PLAYING FOR A WHILE WHEN I TOLD HIM THAT IT WAS TIME TO GO OUTSIDE, "TO THE PLACE WHICH I WOULD SHOW HIM," TO MOVE OUR CAR SO THAT WE WOULD NOT GET A TICKET. YOSSE'S EYES LIT UP WITH EXCITEMENT, FOR HE LOVES TO BE IN THE CAR, TO SIT IN THE FRONT SEAT, TURN THE STEERING WHEEL, HONK THE HORN, AND GENERALLY, BE LIKE HIS ABBA. THIS WAS KIND OF A RITUAL ACT THAT WE HAD ENGAGED IN ON MANY EARLY MORNINGS. HOWEVER, WHAT WAS DIFFERENT <sup>THAT</sup> TODAY, AND WHAT I HAD NOT YET INFORMED YOSSIKA ABOUT, WAS THAT WHEN WE FINISHED MOVING THE CAR WE WOULD NOT BE RETURNING HOME. I WOULD DROP HIM OFF AT THE HOME OF A NEIGHBOR WHO WOULD BABYSIT HIM, AND I WOULD PROCEED ONTO WORK. AND SO WE WENT THE TWO BLOCKS TO REACH THE CAR, VERY MUCH "THE TWO OF US TOGETHER", PART OF THE WAY RUNNING AND LAUGHING, AND PART OF THE WAY WITH ME CARRYING HIM AND ENGAGING IN LIVELY AND LOVING CONVERSATION ABOUT WHAT WE WERE

Parashat  
Vayeira,  
1987-  
on  
Parenting  
the  
Akedah,  
Dedication

SEEING ON OUR WAY. WE FINALLY REACHED THE CAR. YOSSIKA  
PRETENDED TO DRIVE, I MOVED HIM BACK INTO HIS CAR SEAT, AND OFF  
WE WERE IN SEARCH OF A KOSHER PARKING SPACE. HE CONTINUED TO  
BANTER, VERY MUCH THE BACK SEAT DRIVER, CAREFREE AND WORRYLESS.  
AFTER ALL, HE WAS OUT WITH HIS ABBA, SAFE, PROTECTED, AND AT  
EASE. IT WAS ONLY I WHO WAS EXPERIENCING A SLIGHT AMOUNT OF  
UNEASE AS WE WALKED BACK TO THE BABYSITTER'S APARTMENT, STILL  
"VERY MUCH TOGETHER," AS I <sup>THOUGHT</sup> ~~THANK~~ ABOUT <sup>THE</sup> ~~MY~~ REACTION <sup>WE WOULD HAVE</sup> UPON LEARNING  
THAT HE <sup>WOULD</sup> ~~WILL~~ NOT BE RETURNING HOME WITH ME. I <sup>INFORMED</sup> ~~INFORM~~ HIM OF  
THIS SAD TRUTH AS WE ENTERED THE LOBBY OF THE BABYSITTER'S  
BUILDING. THE SMILES OF CONTENTMENT QUICKLY DISAPPEARED. TEARS  
BEGAN TO FLOW, AND YOSSIKA ENTREATED ME NOT TO TO TO WORK, AND  
PLEADED NOT TO BE LEFT WITH HIS FRIEND GARRET AND HIS MOTHER  
PATTY. I ATTEMPTED TO COMFORT HIM IN THE ELEVATOR, BUT AS WE  
REACHED THE TWELFTH FLOOR, NO SUCH LUCK. IN FACT, HE BECAME MORE  
EMPHATIC IN HIS PLEA FOR ME NOT TO LEAVE HIM.

OUR CHILDREN A NECESSARY CONCERN

(1)

WE ENTERED THE BABYSITTER'S APARTMENT, AND I AGAIN TOLD YOSHI THAT EVERYTHING WOULD BE ALLRIGHT, AND THAT HIS EEMA WOULD PICK HIM UP IN A FEW SHORT HOURS. HIS CRIES REACHED THEIR PEAK AS I HANDED HIM INTO PATTY'S ARMS. HE REACHED FOR ME, BUT TO NO AVAIL. HIS EYES SEEMED TO BE WONDERING, HOW COULD YOU BE DOING THIS TO ME, YOU, MY ABBA, MY ONLY ABBA, MY MOST BELOVED ABBA? I LEANED TO GIVE HIM A KISS, AND WALKED OUT OF THE APARTMENT, ALONE, <sup>TOUCHED BY</sup> ~~RAISED BY~~ YOSHI'S, AND MY PREDICAMENT. I STOPPED <sup>PINNED</sup> ~~AND~~ MY EAR AGAINST THE DOOR TO LISTEN, AND DISCOVERED THAT THE CRIES <sup>HAD</sup> ~~WAS~~ SUBSTANTIALLY SUBSIDED. ON MY WAY TO WORK I <sup>THOUGHT</sup> ~~RECALLED~~ ABOUT HOW QUICKLY THE DEEP FELT AND VERY REAL SENSE OF TOGETHERNESS WAS TORN ASUNDER INTO A PAINFUL SEPARATION, ABOUT HOW QUICKLY THE ADORED AND POWERFUL AND PROTECTING ABBA CHANGED INTO A SEEMINLY CRUEL AND HEARTLESS ABANDONER. AND IT OCCURED TO ME THAT PART OF BEING A PARENT OF A YOUNG CHILD IS TO BE AN EXPERT PRACTITIONER IN THE ART OF LOVING DECEPTION. WE CONTINUALLY FEED THE NECESSARY ILLUSION OF ONENESS AND UNION ONLY TO BE CONSTANTLY DENYING ITS TRUTH AND VALIDITY. WE HELP TO CREATE IN OUR CHILDREN A NECESSARY SENSE THAT NOW IS FOREVER, EVER

BOUNDLESS AND UNRESTRICTED, ONLY TO DISRUPT THIS REVERIE WITH  
LIMITS AND RESTRICTIONS. <sup>AND THUS</sup> ~~THUS~~ WE INTRODUCE THEM TO REALITY, TO  
THE FACT THAT WE <sup>HAVE</sup> ~~HAVE~~ AT LEAST TWO SIDED ~~PERSONS~~ <sup>PERSONALITIES</sup>. TO  
~~OURSELVES~~ PERSONALITIES, GOOD AND BAD.....

I IMAGINE YITZCHAK TO BE RATHER IN AWE OF HIS FATHER'S  
ACCOMPLISHMENTS, PARTICULARLY HIS CONCERN FOR OTHERS AND HIS  
WILLINGNESS <sup>AND ABILITY</sup> TO GIVE OF HIMSELF. YET I SEE HIM AS WELL AS HAVING  
A SENSE OF INCOMPLETENESS, A DEEP LONGING FOR MORE CONTACT WITH  
HIS FATHER. BOTH AVRAHAM'S AGE AND HIS MISSION HAVE KEPT HIM AT  
SOMEWHAT OF A DISTANCE FROM HIS SON. AVRAHAM WAS A MAN IN  
MOTION, "YAMAH, KEDMAH, TZFONAH AND NEGBAH," (WEST, EAST, NORTH  
AND SOUTH). EVEN BEFORE THE SACRIFICE, HE HAD SACRIFICED A  
DEEPER, CLOSER RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS SON. NOT THAT YITZCHAK  
DOUBTED THAT HIS FATHER LOVED HIM, ONLY THAT IT WAS SOMEWHAT OF  
A REMOVED LOVE. THAT DISTANCE CREATED WITHIN YITZCHAK A LONGING  
FOR SOMETHING MORE WITH HIS FATHER. AND TO ME THAT IS PART OF  
THE TREMENDOUS IRONY OF THIS STORY - YITZCHAK AT LAST WAS ABOUT  
TO SPEND THREE DAYS ALONE WITH HIS FATHER ON THE JOURNEY TO THE  
MOUNTAIN. FINALLY HE WOULD HAVE AVRAHAM TO HIMSELF. THAT



FUTURE LAUGH THAT WAS PROPHESED ON THE DAY HE WAS NAMED WOULD FINALLY ERUPT FROM WITHIN HIM. <sup>(YITZCHAK = HE WILL LAUGH)</sup> AVRAHAM TOO SAVORED THE TIME ALONE WITH HIS SON, AS HE AS WELL WAS PAINED BY THE KNOWLEDGE THAT HIS CALLING, HIS MISSION, HAD BROUGHT HIM INTO THE LAND, BUT DESPITE HIS BEST EFFORTS, TAKEN HIM AWAY FROM HIS WIFE AND SON. AVRAHAM COULD NOT ESCAPE THE IRONY THAT HE, THE FATHER OF MANY NATIONS, WAS FINALLY GOING TO BE THE KID OF FATHER HE KNEW HIS SON NEEDED AS A RESULT OF THIS SEEMINGLY LAST JOURNEY.

AND SO, "VAYALECHOO SCHNEICHEM YACHDAV," "THEY WENT VERY MUCH TOGETHER," YITZCHAK THE CONTENTED SON, COMFORTED AT LAST THAT THE DISTANCE BETWEEN HIM AND HIS FATHER WAS <sup>OVERCOME</sup> ~~BRIDGED~~, AND AVRAHAM, THE LOVING DECEIVER, TREASURING HIS FINAL MOMENTS WITH HIS SON. THUS THEY REACH THE MOUNTAIN. YITZCHAK IS BOUND, AND "AVRAHAM STRETCHED FORTH HIS HAND TO SLAY HIS SON." YITZCHAK IS DUMBFOUNDED. THE LOVING FATHER HAS BECOME A MURDERER. BUT IT DOESN'T HAPPEN. YITZCHAK SURIVIVES, CHASTENED BY THE REALIZATION THAT HIS FATHER, THE MAN WHO S GREATLY BLESSED BY <sup>AVRAHAM THE GIVER, 3000 C.Y.</sup> GOD AND ADORED BY PEOPLE, IS AT THE SAME TIME A MAN WHO IS



CAPABLE OF KILLING HIS ONLY, BELOVED SON.

IT SEEMS TO ME THEREFORE, THAT WHAT WAS REALLY SACRIFICED ON HAR (MOUNT)  
MORIAH WAS A SENSE OF INFANTILE IDEALIZATION. YITZCHAK, LIKE  
ALL OF US, NEEDED TO LEARN, I DARESAY, BE WOUNDED BY, THE  
AWARENESS THAT HIS FATHER, IN SPITE OF BEING "AV HAMON GOYIM," A  
FATHER OF MANY NATIONS, IS NONETHELESS STILL HUMAN, CAPABLE OF  
PERFORMING GOOD AS WELL AS HEINOUS DEEDS, AND CERTAINLY CAPABLE  
OF FEELING THE WIDEST RANGE OF HUMAN EMOTION. IT SEEMS TO ME  
THAT AVRAHAM IS LEARNING THIS VERY SAME LESSON - WHAT IS GOOD  
FOR THE SON IS GOOD FOR THE FATHER. WHEN GOD SAYS THAT HE IS  
GOING TO TEST AVRAHAM AT THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY, I THINK HE  
IS WONDERING ABOUT HOW AVRAHAM WILL DEAL WITH HIM IN A  
DEIDEALIZED STATE. CAN AVRAHAM REMAIN FAITHFULLY INVOLVED WITH  
A GOD WHOSE PERFECTION INCLUDES BEING INTIMATELY INVOLVED WITH, AND  
~~TO TOLERANT~~ <sup>TOLERANT</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> THE PRESENCE OF EVIL, A GOD WHO NOT ONLY  
ANSWERS A CALL TO SAVE THE RIGHTEOUS, BUT ALSO ONE WHO  
FREQUENTLY ANSWERS IN SILENCE.



CAN AVRAHAM LIVE WITH A GOD WHO NOT ONLY CREATES LIFE, BUT TAKES  
AS WELL.

~~WIMMY AND SO DO WE TOO. THE~~  
~~CHILDREN OF AVRAHAM + YITZCHAK, ARE~~  
~~LEFT WITH THAT SAME AVRAHAM AND~~  
YITZCHAK WERE CLEARLY SCARLED

TO SOME DEGREE BY THEIR EXPERIENCES.

NOTWITHSTANDING, THEY CONTINUED TO  
BE PRODUCTIVE AND CREATIVE.

AND WE TOO, THEIR CHILDREN, ARE  
LEFT WITH THAT SAME CHALLENGE  
+ TASK.



Dvar Torah on Vayerah  
Minyan Maat  
Leon Hoffman  
11/15/97

Hoffman: Parsha Vayerah, 11/15/97

Yesterday as I was thinking about this Dvar torah on Vayerah, I came across an article in the Wall Street Journal called "Idealism won't stop mass murder." Now I know that one of the rules of the Minyan is that political themes should not be part of one's remarks. I am not using this passage to promulgate any particular political point of view. Rather, I am looking at these words as metaphors applicable to what goes on within every individual's mind and what goes on between and among two or more people, mainly between parents and children. The psychological mechanism I am referring to is the mechanism of compromise formation, that is, a compromise, like the resultant of vectors, among various competing forces. For example, one can think of every piece of human behavior to be a result of compromises among various forces, such as the internal passions, the protective devices one develops, and the moral values that evolve. Similarly no ongoing human relationship is possible without a compromise among competing, conflicting and, often, diametrically opposed desires.

In the article I read yesterday, the author states that "The conviction is gaining ground that mass murder, like other deadly diseases, can be prevented by that remedy in which all bourgeois societies, ours above all, deposit their faith, Progress." To translate this sentence from my point of view, I would say, that some might believe that human aggression can be eradicated if people would only learn...In fact, if we tried hard enough, and taught people the right things in the right way, aggression would disappear. But listen to what the author of the article goes on to say. "Alas, protection against evil is surest when man is assumed to be wholly unimprovable." Is this an oxymoron? The author feels that the only way to control evil empires is by a balance of power. This was the phrase that captured my attention, a balance of power among nations is similar to the balance of power within the human mind and the balance of power among people. Now, you are right to ask, what in the world does this have to do with God, Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Yitzchak?

Let's go back to the beginning for a second. In Chapter 3 verse 22, it states, "And the eternal God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever:" Rashi adds that God fears that by living forever, Adam will lead people astray and they will say, "He, also, is a God." This is a theme from the beginning of Bereshit that is dramatized in today's sedra--the battle between God and his creations: "I am the only God," God says to his creatures, "You cannot strive to become a God like me, or even a better God." Doesn't this sound like a parent who won't let his or her child grow up, one who is frightened and angry that the child may surpass him or her?

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah David Kraemer wondered why the akeda still speaks to us. In essence, David wondered why this account of an act, an act which we would all find abhorrent, still speaks to us. Why do we, sons and daughters of the enlightenment, not simply dismiss this as a story of an ancient rite which is no longer applicable? David, if I remember correctly, contrasted our current social state, virtually with absolute freedom, with the state of Jews throughout most of history. In times of oppression, the potential sacrifice of Yitzchak

resonated with the ongoing real possibilities that our ancestors would need to sacrifice or martyr themselves and their children. David speculated, I think, that because of our own, would he say guilt, we in times of freedom, still connect to the sacrifices of past generations. Today, I would like to propose an additional reason which may help us better understand the power of the story of the akeda and the rest of this parsha. A reason which can be only observed in times of freedom from political oppression. Those times, like ours, are times when personal motivations, not just survival motivations, matter. Our present age allows us to examine how stories, like the akeda, help us understand people's private psychology in addition to matters concerning possible destruction or survival. In this frame of reference, acknowledging the universality of the individual's aggression towards people he or she loves is crucial. This was beautifully described by Susan Kraemer in an article in which she discusses the ubiquity of maternal aggression towards one's own child. We all know about Oedipus and paternal aggression, jealousies, rivalries, and the sons' aggression. But maternal aggression? Yes, there is such a thing; there is aggression in everyone, even towards one's most beloved children. Let's look at the parsha briefly and see how God is the model of the ambivalently aggressive parent, who is not sure whether to wipe his charges off the face of the earth or help them along towards the future. What does God say to Abraham when Sarah questions her ability to conceive? "Is anything too hard for the Eternal" (18:14)? How many parents have not said to their youngsters at one time or other, "Listen to me, of course I know best?" And like Sarah, who hides because she is afraid that God caught her laughing, how many children cower in fear as a result of their parents' anger or rage towards them for something they did? And what about Abraham pleading for the lives of the people of Sodom? How many children beg their angry parent that they show mercy towards the sibling who misbehaved, regardless of the hate or rivalry?

And if we go to the story of Hagar and Yitzchak--love, ambivalence, favoritism, promise for the future, and, of course, the major idea, the potential destruction of the beloved child. How many heard the story about the father who told his son to jump from a high place and not to worry and trust him because he'll catch him? The child jumps down towards his father's outstretched arm and as the son is about to reach him, the father removes his arms and the son breaks his legs. The son cries out, "But, daddy, you told me to trust you!" The father replies, "I've now taught you not to trust anyone."

Are fathers and mothers culpable because of aggressive acts towards their children? Of course! Adults are responsible for their actions, but the fantasies are ubiquitous. Fantasies are not action. Lest you think that I paint only God as the ambivalent parent and the others in the story as innocent victims, look at Chapter 12 verse 12. "And he said [God], Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him:" Rashi adds, "Then he (Abraham) said to God, 'If this be so, I have come here for nothing; let me @MDUL at least@MDNM inflict a wound on him and draw some blood from him.'" Sounds familiar, doesn't it? A little nick, like so many rites and rituals, discharges that aggression in a socially sanctioned manner.

In the introduction to today's Haftarah, Herz says that "the story of the Shunammite and her child recalls the story of Sarah. Both occurrences were 'Providential' happenings. The Haftarah teaches that there is Divine control of human conditions, and that many humanly unaccountable things happen in life." Certainly many events occur in life for which we cannot find a rational explanation. Some of us believe that such events @MDUL are@MDNM Providential happenings; others, maybe like the people referred to in the Wall Street Journal article, believe that sooner or later, as men and women perfect their reason, rational explanations will be

uncovered to explain unexplainable events. Such believers, believers in the infinite perfectibility of man and womankind, may believe, like Woodrow Wilson, that we can create peace for all time. In my opinion, such a belief necessitates a belief in the eradication of human aggression. I believe that, to achieve a more balanced vision of human existence, our own existence, it is more valuable for all of us to acknowledge that, like Abraham, consciously or unconsciously, we wish to inflict at least a @MDUL<sup>small</sup>@MDNM<sup>nick</sup> nick, draw a @MDUL<sup>little</sup>@MDNM<sup>blood</sup> blood, from the all-too-human fragile body of those whom we love. Our job as human beings is to acknowledge the presence of such wishes in order to begin to master them. God, Abraham, Sarah are not without aggression. However, acknowledging the presence of aggression does not give us permission to hate and to hurt, like the father who teaches his son not to trust. Aggression without trust equals hate.

Shabat Shalom



## Vayera – 1/16/10

After teaching some Second Temple texts such as Jubilees and Enoch for the past year I was particularly taken by Levi O'Brien's bar mitzvah dvar Torah which drew our attention to the curious case of the sea monster, the creation of which is explicitly mentioned in Genesis 1:20:

“God said, ‘Let waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly about the earth across the expanse of the sky.’ God created the great sea monsters and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind.”

While Levi went on to talk about sea monsters and other remarkable creatures, what caught my attention was the way the text gets specific about sea monsters when all of the other descriptions of creation are general.

### Genesis 1:21:

“God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep.....”

וַיֵּצֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַתַּנִּינִם וְאֶת-כָּל-הַחַיּוֹת הַרֹמְשׁוֹת אֲשֶׁר-עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעוֹף הַיָּמִי וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעוֹף הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-כָּל-הָחַיּוֹת הַיָּבֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר-עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעוֹף הַיָּמִי וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעוֹף הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-עַל-הָאָרֶץ

The word for great sea monster - “tannin” along with the word “leviatan” (no ‘h’) - appears in other ANE sources where they have the same meaning as in Genesis 21 - giant sea creatures. But in the Torah this “tanin” is the only specific creature mentioned among all the general categories such as “birds”, “living creatures” and “winged birds”. I’d never taken note of that odd specific mention but Levi’s mention of it sent me to some scholarly sources – especially Jon Levenson’s *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* where Levenson argues that this mention of the taninim serves a critical function of confirming that the Bible’s creation story – quiet, peaceful and entirely verbal - was drastically different from those other ANE creation stories which feature a battle among the gods or between the gods and monsters. In contrast to those stories, the God of Genesis created everything from the getgo, including sea monsters; there was no primordial battle in which the Israelite God engaged. And Levenson also notes that while Genesis makes this point explicitly, in other parts of the Tanach there are clear indications that among the ancient Israelites there was a divergence of ideas about the process of creation. For instance,

**Psalm 74: 12-14:** “Oh God, my king from of old, who brings deliverance throughout the land; It was You who drove back the sea with Your might, who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters; it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan, who left him as food for the denizens of the desert.”

Here again the word for “monsters” is “Taninim”. I like to think of this as <sup>a</sup>case of the Bible’s slip showing – that is, an indication the Torah is aware of varying points of view about Creation but wants to clear up any doubts on that subject and assert its perspective.

I’ve always been interested in the Nephilim of Genesis 6 – and I see a connection between them and the sea monster of Genesis 1. I also see a connection between these texts and the powers of Pharaoh’s magicians in today’s parashah. More on that later!



Taken together these texts represent outcroppings of ideas that the Torah rejects but to which it refers when necessary to affirm its theological world view. God is sovereign, the creator of all creatures, so disabuse yourself of any ideas regarding competitors like sea monsters who occupy a world prior to the one God creates. God is unique and in order to understand God's awesome power to destroy the world we need to refer however briefly to the outrage of human/divine mating that produced the Nephilim. Humans are mortal but for some reason or other – perhaps to pacify those who held to a belief in immortality – the text references Enoch in a way unique to the Genesis genealogies but does not explicitly say that he joins God on high which is explicitly noted in Elijah's case. I'm fascinated by these narrative anomalies in a text that is so tightly edited and committed to a point of view. After a few seasons teaching Second Temple texts with their incredible infatuation with celestial beings – both good and evil – I have become hyper aware that our Torah is edited to a fare thee well.

Which brings me to the magicians. I've often wondered why they are able to replicate the first three of Moses's tricks - the staff into a serpent, the water into blood and the plague of frogs yet when it comes to lice, Pharaoh's magicians fail to replicate Moses' act and exclaim:

“This is the finger of God!”

וְיִנְיָן הָיָה לְפָנָיו  
כִּי הָיָה לְפָנָיו

The magicians' ability to compete up to a point certainly makes for a better story and perhaps even to introduce some humor. After all, wasn't it absurd that they used their powers to create more blood and more frogs! Wouldn't it have been more impressive if they had used their powers to reverse those plagues! But why let them replicate any of God's powers? Is this an appeal to those who believed in magic – acknowledging that there may be some kind of human magic (or that some may believe this to be the case) - while granting far greater powers to the human acting on God's behalf? If this is the case, the text demonstrates the power and singularity of the Israelite God while acknowledging other forces can challenge but not compete with this God. And how humiliating to have these magicians acknowledge the power of the God of Israel in front of Pharaoh, their sovereign and god! In terms of the plagues narrative, the success of the magicians certainly helps to build tension, to create some uncertainty regarding Moses's power as God's surrogate. But while a literary approach to the Torah is often a powerful device for understanding the text I want to go this other route because it fits better with the case I'm trying to make with the taninim, the nephilim and Enoch. And, truth be told, I suppose it's possible that the Torah believes in some kinds of magic...

Compared with the books of Prophets and Writings, the Torah holds to a remarkably consistent theology. And compared with Second Temple writings and some wild rabbinic stories it's amazing so closely controlled a text beat out its otherworldly competitors and became our canonical text. When it comes to “wild rabbinic texts” on the subject of magical powers, here are a few aggadot from the Bavli, Sanhedrin 67a & b where we learn that:

The introduction of the Nephilim is particularly strange since they are the product of a serious boundary transgression in which “divine beings” mate with the “daughters of men”. I talked about this in a drash a few years back, suggesting that the Torah may have introduced these creatures to explain why God destroyed the world so soon after creating it. When you study some of the Second Temple texts that Jewish tradition did not preserve – books like Enoch and Jubilees – you discover strange and wonderful creatures (some of them evil doers) with remarkable powers. These texts, while not as old as the Torah, date to the second century before the Common Era, approximately the same time as the latest books in Tanach. But since traditions about the Nephilim existed when the Torah was redacted the four verses of Genesis 6 about them probably represent just the tip of the Nephilim iceberg lying beneath ~~underneath~~ *the text*.

Clearly, the ancients who brought us the Torah lived in a culture steeped in phenomena such as Nephilim and Taninim and we must assume that among Israelites these ideas held some sway. So the Torah has to take a stand about sea monsters, insisting that the God of Israel created them rather than defeating them in a primordial showdown. And when the Nephilim are introduced it is as a preface to the flood story and the apparent reason for God destroying creation and ~~starting all over~~ *starting again*. Perhaps it also serves as reassurance that God will keep the divine promise to never again destroy the world since who could imagine such a transgression would be possible in the future? But having introduced these heretical creatures the Torah dispenses with the Nephilim as soon as they’ve served their purpose of explaining God’s drastic disposition of the flawed universe. When we hear of them one other time in the Torah – in Numbers 13:33 – they are giants but apparently not supernatural creatures.

The Torah also retains a tradition that Enoch, son of Jared and father of Methuselah did not die: **Genesis 5:23-24:**

וַיְהִי כֹכַב נֹחַ בְּיָמֵי חֵנוֹךְ כִּי הָיָה חֵנוֹךְ הֹלֵךְ אִתּוֹ  
 וַיְהִי כֹכַב נֹחַ בְּיָמֵי חֵנוֹךְ כִּי הָיָה חֵנוֹךְ הֹלֵךְ אִתּוֹ  
 וַיְהִי כֹכַב נֹחַ בְּיָמֵי חֵנוֹךְ כִּי הָיָה חֵנוֹךְ הֹלֵךְ אִתּוֹ

“All the days of Enoch came to 365 years. Enoch walked with God, then he was no more, for God took him.”

This tradition gives rise to three books of Enoch in the Second Temple period that elaborately describe Enoch’s adventures in the celestial realm, books that were well represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls but preserved only by Christian communities. We would not know of this vast Enoch corpus from these few verses in Genesis 5:24 but clearly the Torah knows enough to acknowledge the special, Elijah like status that some attributed to Enoch. But the acknowledgement is just a casual mention that could also be interpreted as meaning “he died” as it most likely has been throughout the ages. Of course we can’t know if the full extent of these traditions were known to those who brought us the Torah but, again, scholars date the books of Enoch to the middle of the second century BCE which is just a few centuries *after* the Torah was likely *redacted*. Genesis 5:24 might be described as the tip of the Enoch iceberg.

\*R. Chanina and R. Oshaia spent every Friday delving into the Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Creation) and they were able to create a calf that had reached one-third of its growth and ate it.

\*R. Ashi said, I saw Karna's father (a magician) blow his nose violently and streamers of silk issued from his nostrils.

\*Rav comments to R. Hiyya: "I myself saw an Arabian traveler take a sword and cut up a camel; then he rang a bell at which the camel arose."

\*R. Eleazar says with respect to the magicians' exclamation "This is the finger of God" when they are unable to replicate the plague of lice, "This proves that a magician cannot produce a creature less than a barley corn in size." To which R. Papa responds "By God! He cannot produce even something as large as a camel; but these that are larger than a barley corn he can magically collect and produce the illusion that he has magically created them, the others he cannot."

\*And regarding the plague of frogs R. Elazar said: 'There was actually only one frog, but it produced many others, which filled the land of Egypt. This subject is debated by the Tanna'im. R. Akiva said: There was one frog that filled all of Egypt by multiplying. R. Elazar b. Azariah disagreed and told him: Akiva, what you doing, involving yourself in aggadah? Stop engaging in this field of study. Immerse yourself in the tractates of Plagues and Tents. What happened was that one frog croaked and all the others came.'  
 I'm not intending to make fun of the rabbis; I love these aggadot but if they were the essence of rabbinic Judaism I don't think the tradition would have survived, at least not in any way recognizable to us!

I am awed by the way in which the Torah establishes a world view and legal order based on God's omnipotence while acknowledging competing ideas that it rejects.

This is a delicate balance to maintain and by noting these outcroppings of heretical ideas I wanted to highlight the brilliance of the Torah text in largely repressing the supernatural elements which characterize so much of Second Temple literature and many other Jewish texts throughout the ages. I have probably outed myself as a Yekkie, content that, by and large, the supernatural and superstitious have been confined to non sacred – or less sacred – texts. What would our tradition be like, what would we be like as Jews if the stories of sea monsters, Nephilim, magicians and humans who do not die had figured more prominently in our sacred text? Some of what I'm saying might be taken as implicit criticism of other religious traditions that rest on supernatural truths.... Given my background, I figure I come by this view honestly.

One last comment.... I began with 13 year old Levi O'Brien, inspired by his insights when he became a bar mitzvah and want to end by noting an even younger boy, my nearly 2 ½ year old grandson Jonah who has consigned the Sendak book, Where the Wild Things Are to an upper shelf and no longer wants it read to him. He's had enough of scary supernatural stuff, at least for a while. Maybe it's genetic!

SHABBAT SHALOM

## VAYERA

Ron Lee Meyers – Minyan Maat – November 9, 2014

The Akeida is arguably the most enigmatic story in all of our literature, and it's only nineteen verses long. So every word of it cries out for interpretation. To me, no words cry out more than the very opening phrase: "*vayehi acher ha-dvarim ha-eleh*". Which literally means, "after these things". Some translations render the phrase to mean "after these events". And in identifying the spoken-of "events", some of the classic commentators discuss the fact that Abraham has not made sacrifices to Gd before, and others invoke a legend about Satan from outside the text. But most translations take no interest in this phrase at all, rendering it simply to mean "some time later", as a throwaway line that simply makes a transition from one chapter to the next. And many distinguished commentators, from Nachmanides to Nachama Lebowtiz make no comment at all about this phrase. There's a pretty general lack of curiosity about it.

Well, I'm curious about it.

For one thing, it not only appears at the beginning of the Akeida story, it appears at the end of it as well – it is a framing device for the entire story. At the end of the story, we are told that "after these things", Abraham learns about the begettings of his brother, and that lineage includes Rebecca, which leads us very importantly to the elaborate story of the matchmaking between Rebecca and Isaac. So, the connection that is made by the phrase "after these things" is very strong – first, Abraham saves Isaac, ensuring the survival of the covenant, and

then, *after those things*, Abraham sets out to find Isaac a wife, ensuring the future of the covenant.

The phrase “After these things” also appears earlier, in Lech Lecha, when Gd first announces His covenant to Abraham. So it seems to me that this phrase is used quite deliberately to stitch together the disparate group of Abraham stories, into a very specific saga of the covenant.

The stories leading up to the Akeida are very carefully composed. We have a rather cinematic alternation between different stories that unfold in parallel. There is a line of stories about Sedom and Amora, beginning with Lot settling there, and Abraham rescuing him from captivity, and of course Abraham’s famous debate with Gd over the fate of the cities when Gd decides to destroy them. Interlaced with these episodes is the Isaac story – first the birth of Ishmael, then the announcement that Sarah will give birth, then finally, after the destruction of Sodom and Amora, the birth of Isaac.

It is in the Akeida, *after all of these things*, that the threads of the Sodom & Amora story come together with the thread of Isaac story. Sedom & Amora and the Akeida are both stories of Gd calling upon Abraham to be witness to Gd’s destruction, or worse, to participate in it. They are both invitations by Gd for Abraham to negotiate with Him over a proposed death sentence.

As we all know, when Gd tells Abraham that He intends to destroy the cities, Abraham proposes that the cities be saved if there are 50 righteous people, then

negotiates Him down to 45, then 40, 30, 20 and finally 10. That's six exchanges in the argument, and the narrative arc of the scene is very telling. The first three stages of Abraham's argument are described in very active and heroic verbs. First it's "Abraham came forward and said" – and what he says is a full paragraph powerful rhetoric. Next it's "Abraham responded and said," again leading into an eloquent plea. The third time, "Abraham further continued to speak to Him", maintaining tremendous courage in this colloquy with Gd.

But then the verbs of the latter three stages are strikingly banal. The fourth, fifth and sixth times, the text is just "And he said", "And he said", "And he said". As the discussion focuses on the value of a smaller number of worthy people, the stakes, mathematically, are growing higher and higher. But somehow the story flattens out. Something fails in the momentum of the conversation. Rather than mounting to a climax, the tension dissipates. And rather than ever reaching a climax, the story just ends, very abruptly. The narrative simply tells us, after Gd agrees to save the cities on account of the ten people, that God and Abraham both just go away – there is no summation, no moral to the story, as there is at the end of the Akeida, no affirmation of the bond between Gd and Abraham, as we see in so many other places.

Worst of all, from a moral perspective, is that a sequence of 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, and 10 necessarily, *forcefully*, leads us to anticipate the question of: the ONE. If 50 people are worth saving, and 10 people are worth saving, then is One person worth saving? Each of us as an individual, who wishes to be saved, wants to know the answer to that question. But that question is *never even asked*. We are

intensely primed to listen for that question, and then we never reach it. We are very harshly deprived of the *obvious climax* of the story.

Worse still, from a narrative perspective, is that in a literary universe where the number Seven is the ubiquitous signal of a complete set, we are here left with a set of Six. Six exchanges is not a complete conversation; six exchanges is a maddeningly *incomplete* conversation.

**The Akeida is the completion of that conversation.**

**The entire Akeida story (I submit) is the seventh act of the Sedom & Amora story.** And just like the previous story, it is framed by a sequence of six actions. When the time comes for Abraham to do the deed, how do we arrive at the point where Isaac is bound on the altar and Abraham is holding the knife? We arrive there through a conspicuous device of *slow motion story-telling*. In verses 9 and 10, the narrative slows down to a marvelously unnecessary degree, giving us a microscopic account of the events. There are six acts. This is the exact text: "Abraham (1) built the altar, and (2) arranged the wood, and (3) bound Isaac his son, and (4) placed him on the altar atop the wood, and (5) Abraham stretched out his hand, and (6) took the knife to slaughter his son."

After the sixth verb – after all these things – is when Gd intervenes. When the angel swoops in, it is the seventh and crowning act of the story. *This* story has the *dramatic apotheosis* that was *deferred* from the Sedom & Amora story.

Meanwhile, Abraham's own seventh action is to "lift up his eyes" and see the ram. Looking upward makes a perfect bookend with the beginning of the Sedom & Amora story, where he "looks down" upon the cities. It's a beautiful connection to Isaac as well – "lifting up their eyes" is what both Isaac and Rebecca are said to do when they first encounter each other. In the Akeida story that otherwise obliterates the connection between father and son, this continuity of language suggests some *positive resolution* of the Akeida in the marriage of Isaac to Rebecca.

Looking upward is, somehow, the characteristic action of the covenant. It's what engages the connection between Gd and Man. *Looking up* is Abraham's singularly effective action in the Akieda, in a way that *speaking up*, as the advocate for Sedom & Amora, is not. There's no way of *out-speaking* Gd, I think. Anyone who can just say "Let there be light" and there actually is light, has got the edge on us in the speech department. But when we look up, we meet Gd's gaze, in something like the magical way we meet a baby's gaze, that creates an ineffable bond of connection and compassion.

When I come to the end of the Akeida story, I am greatly satisfied at the affirmation of the value of Isaac's single soul. But then I think back to Sedom and Amora, and I'm troubled by the annihilation of all the many souls there. How is it that Gd can save the one and wipe out the many? I think it's in the way that Abraham engages Him. In the debate over Sedom & Amora, Abraham is arguing in the *abstract*. There's forceful rhetoric at first, but after a few exchanges, it's all just about numbers. And even if there were 50 or 20 or 10 righteous people



down there, Abraham doesn't know who they are, and doesn't go out to look for them. The debate over Sodom and Amora is a purely intellectual exercise in moral reasoning. The binding of Isaac is the extreme opposite of that. It's the hands-on rendering of life and death.

The sequence of these two stories is a big education for Abraham, and of course for us. You cannot exert your moral force from a distance. And you cannot invoke Gd's saving power through abstract argument. You have to climb up the mountain and get in there with your own hands. You have to cry so deeply from within yourself – as Hagar does when Ishmael is in danger – that Gd hears the cry of the person you are crying for. At Sodom & Amora, Gd engages Abraham's game of words for a while and then has enough of it and goes away. But Gd *cannot walk away* from Abraham's *impassioned, visceral silence*, when he climbs the mountain, takes action with his own hands and looks upward.<sup>1</sup>

There's something especially reassuring about the fact that it's Isaac who establishes the point that the individual is worthy of life. As individuals go, he's not exactly the shining star. Now, Joseph – there's a shining star, a man of destiny – surely he should be saved. But Isaac's destiny, perhaps, is precisely to show us the value of the ordinary individual. Like a variation on a Jesus figure, he's not born to be a savior, *he's born to be saved*. And his story is here to tell us that each one of us is born to be saved, as well.

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<sup>1</sup> I think we learn from this why "charity starts at home". It is only within our own families, our own communities, our own relationships, that we can experience the moral imperative that is necessary for truly charitable acts and the emotional involvement that motivates and sustains a truly saving commitment.

## VAYERA

Ron Lee Meyers – Minyan Maat – October 23, 2021

What do you think of this? Abraham agrees to go and sacrifice Isaac – and then he makes Isaac carry the wood that will make the fire, in which he himself will be immolated. And what's even worse is that Abraham knows it, and we know it, but Isaac does not. He is innocently, unwittingly, carrying the instrument of his own annihilation. It's gruesome.

But when we read this story at Rosh Hashana a few weeks ago, I kept wondering, why do we hear about the wood at all? This story is incredibly brief – 19 verses, a few hundred words. On Rosh Hashana, it occupies the entire reading for the second day, but as we read it today in the normal cycle, it is only a single aliyah. This brevity is characteristic of the stories in Bereishit; for example, in Vayikra the section that instructs us about skin diseases and baldness is three times the length. But even by the standards of Bereishit, the Akeida is extremely terse – it's shorter than the whole narrative of Lot and his escape from Sodom, shorter than the reunion between Jacob and Esau, shorter than the episode between Judah and Tamar. So, with not a word to spare, why do we hear anything about the wood?

We hear about it three times, at the beginning, middle and end of the story. Before setting out to Mount Moria, Abraham splits the wood; when he and Isaac break off from the servants as they approach the mountain, he gives the wood to Isaac to carry, and then at the altar, Abraham arranges the wood. It's curious that they should have to carry wood for three days anyway – you'd think they might find a

tree somewhere along the route, and we're specifically told later on that the ram is caught in a thicket. So this wood thing is really unnecessary to the story – so why is it here, and what is it telling us?

To me, the wood is a window into Abraham's attitude toward his horrible task. The text doesn't tell us that Abraham *gave* the wood to Isaac to *carry*, it tells us that he *placed* the wood on Isaac. This is an *inversion of the sacrifice itself*, where Isaac will be placed on the wood. To me, this is Abraham *mocking* Gd with a *parody* of the sacrifice he's been called to perform: "You want me to put Isaac on to the wood? Instead, I'm doing the opposite – I'm putting the wood on Isaac. And I am going to give You, Gd, plenty of time to look at that as we climb the mountain, and plenty of time to call it all off."

This act of placing the wood on Isaac is clearly very deliberate. Abraham and Isaac set out from home with two servants and a donkey, and as they approach the mountain, they leave the servants and the donkey behind. Now, I have very little experience with beasts of burden, but I'm pretty sure that the function of a donkey is to help you carry heavy things up a mountain. To leave the donkey behind at just the point when its services are most needed is a conspicuous act, a performance, with Gd as the audience. More deeply, the narration does not tell us that Abraham placed the wood onto Isaac, but onto "*Isaac his son*". The phrase "Isaac his son" underscores that Abraham has not come to view Isaac as a beast of burden, has not dissociated from him as a mere object of sacrifice; he is still fully in his parental relationship. And the phrase "*Isaac his son*" denotes this act of placing the wood as part of Abraham's continuous ritual action, and part of his silent dialogue with Gd, that are sustained through the whole story. At the opening of the story, Gd

calls on Abraham to sacrifice “*your son, your favored one, whom you love, Isaac*”. When Abraham sets out from home, it is with “*Isaac his son*”. At the end of the story, the narration states that Abraham bound “*Isaac his son*”. So, I see this seemingly trivial act of transferring the wood to Isaac as one of the significant dots that the story connects.

I think that details like this enable us to unpack the meaning of a story, especially one that’s as tightly compressed as this one. A few years ago I gave a drash that focused on certain other details of the narrative. To summarize it briefly, I observed that at the climax of the Akeida story, Abraham engages in a series of six actions – he: (1) built the altar, (2) arranged the wood, (3) bound Isaac, (4) placed him on top of the wood, (5) reached out his hand, and (6) took the knife. We know that a series of six is never complete – seven is the number of completion, and in this story the crowning seventh act is the angel sweeping in to disrupt Abraham’s action. And the set of six actions in the Akeida echoes the *painfully incomplete* set of six arguments that Abraham makes to Gd in his effort to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham goes to Gd six times, asking what if there are 50 good people, what if there are 45, 40, 30, 20, or 10? But Abraham never asks the obvious ultimate question, will Gd save the cities for the sake of one good person? And in my view, the Akeida story *as a whole* is the seventh step of that conversation, in which Gd finally demonstrates the ultimate importance of the single individual.

The motif of the wood leads me to *supplement* that reading of the story. I first regarded the six actions at the climax of the story as a narrative technique that slows down the action dramatically, focusing, as we would in a movie, on every tick of the clock counting down to the fateful event. But now, focusing on the wood, I

see it not just as a narrative device, but as a description of Abraham's own deliberate behavior, through which he is talking to Gd. Abraham learned from his verbal sparring with Gd at Sodom & Gomorra that he could not reach Gd through speech alone – that language, or at least his powers of language, were not enough to move Gd, Whose powers of speech are so vast that they can literally create the world. In the Akeida episode, Abraham is *categorically silent* – but he speaks through his actions. And his actions at the beginning of the story – which include splitting the wood – form *another set of six steps*. He: (1) woke up early, (2) saddled his donkey, (3) took his two servants, (4) split the wood, (5) stood up, and (6) went to the place of which Gd has spoken to him". The set of six is a *repeating pattern*. It is Abraham's way of reminding Gd, repeatedly, that the six-step conversation at Sodom & Gomorra remains incomplete.

It's also Abraham's way of slowing the action down and giving Gd an opportunity – giving Gd *every* opportunity – to respond with a change in plan. It's often commented that Abraham demonstrated eagerness to fulfill Gd's command by getting up early in the morning. But I see Abraham at the same time breaking down the action into as many component parts as he can, to stall for time. And frankly, I don't regard the early-morning start as a quick response to Gd's command. We don't know at what time of day the command came, but if Abraham didn't act until the next morning, there was clearly some delay. The only way it could have been an immediate response would be if Gd's command came to him in the night. Otherwise, Abraham is giving the *appearance of eagerness and compliance*, while *at the same time* enacting *slowness*, and signaling *defiance*.

In his speech acts at Sodom & Gomorra, Abraham could say only *one* thing at a time; in his actions here, he finds a way to express *two contradictory attitudes at once*. It is a marvelously sophisticated faculty of communication. And it is an *expert* way to respond, in kind, to Gd's command, which forces Abraham to adhere to two contradictory moral commitments at once. Abraham has dramatically upped his game since Sodom & Gomorra, and through this type of complex, non-verbal communication he is finally able to elicit Gd's response to the ultimate question of the value of the individual. And Gd's response reflects the heightened complexity of Abraham and of this mode of communication – at the start of the story, Gd called to him as “Abraham!”; at the end, He calls “Abraham! Abraham!”. The complexity has doubled, so call is doubled.

All of this makes me want to know even more detail – at what exact moment did Gd step in, and what was Abraham thinking, expecting and doing? For this I bring in the artists.

Rembrandt's painting of 1635 shows Abraham in the act, about to slash Isaac's throat. It is shocking to see him baring Isaac's neck by covering his face and pulling his head all the way back. He is doing the deed, and he means to do it properly. It's at the very moment of action that the angel arrives – not grasping the knife from Abraham's hand, but grabbing Abraham's hand away from the knife, leaving the knife falling in



mid-air while the eye contact between the Angel and Abraham is enveloped in a chain of human figures extending from Isaac's twisted body, to Abraham's left hand, still in the act of slaughter, to Abraham's right hand in the grip of the angel's saving intervention, to the angel's upward gesture to heaven.

We should note that the text says nothing about the angel physically staying Abraham's hand – it only tells us that the angel calls out to him. But somehow this image, in all its drama and sudden reversal, probably matches the last-moment tension that many of us imagine in this story.



Rembrandt's 1665 etching tells a deeply different story. Here, Abraham holds Isaac intimately close to himself, not in a position of slaughter, and the angel holds Abraham in a calming embrace. The angel seems to be whispering rather than calling, and you can almost hear him saying both "Abraham, Abraham" and "Nachamu, Nachamu". Abraham holds Isaac's head not in a position to expose his throat, but to shield his eyes from the unbearable scene. And this is Abraham's dominant *right* hand. Holding the knife in his weaker left hand, he is decidedly *not* about to kill Isaac.

I see this etching as depicting the fifth action at the climax of the story – Abraham reaching out his hand toward the knife – or perhaps the sixth action, Abraham taking the knife. He takes it, but not in his strong hand; he takes it but does not *raise* it. This accords with my reading of the story: he is doing everything he can to *avoid* the act, waiting for Gd to step in. And perhaps it's *because* he ultimately avoids the act, after all the preparation and after going through all the performative motions of it, that Gd sees that Abraham has reached the right decision.

Finally, we have Chagall, three hundred years later. Unlike the other pictures, this one shows Abraham looking up. And not looking up to see the ram, as the text says, but looking up to lock in to the angel's gaze. This is nowhere in the text, but to me it's the correct interpretation.



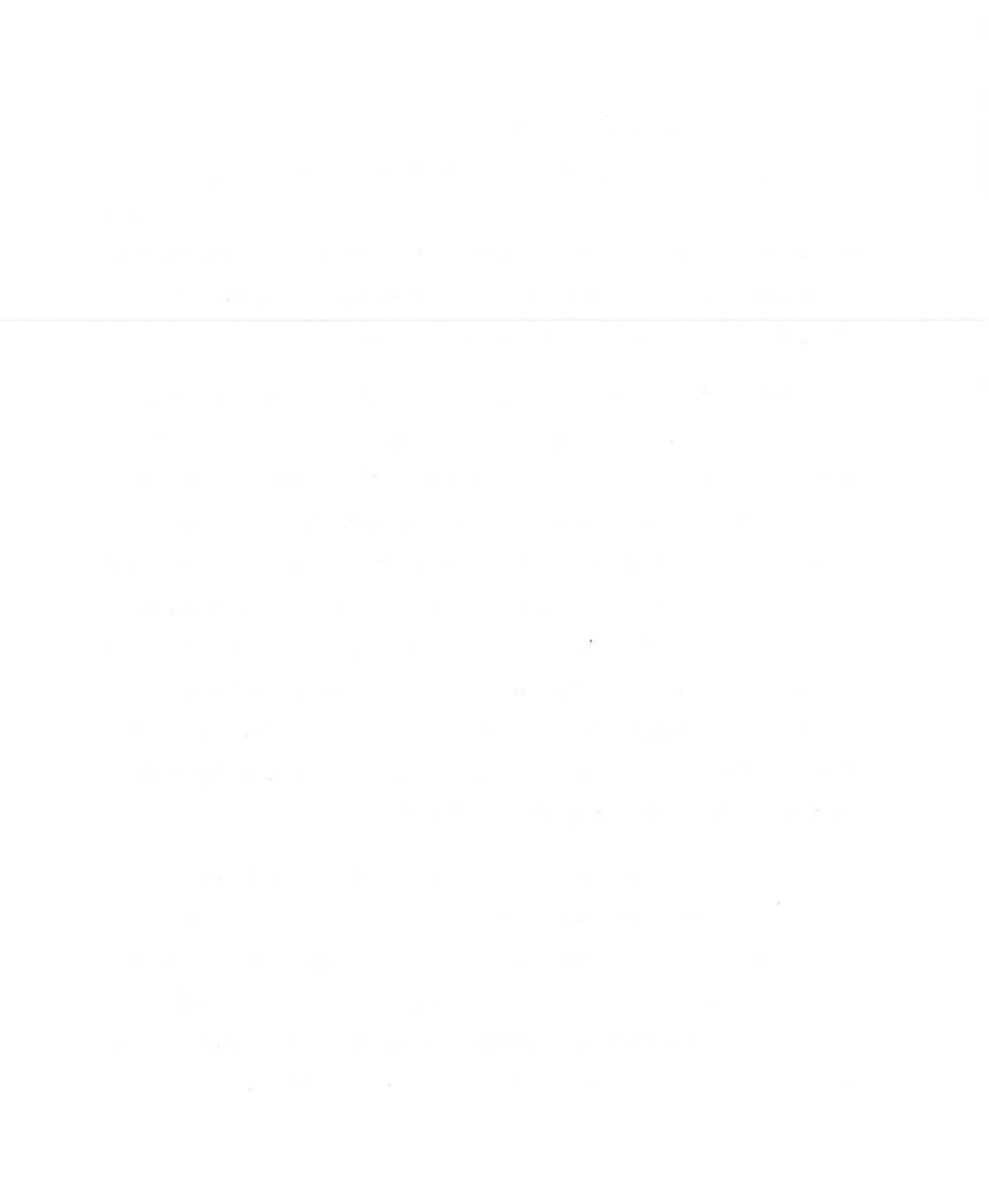


“Looking up” – or, to use the exact phrase, “lifting one’s eyes” – is a very special act in the stories of Bereishit – it is the action through which Man connects with divine providence. Abraham had previously *lifted his eyes* to see the three visiting angels. Abraham here *lifts his eyes* to see the ram that he sacrifices in place of Isaac. Isaac will later *lift his eyes* to see Rebecca, and then Rebecca will *lift her eyes* to see Isaac. Looking up has nothing to do with physical position – Rebecca looks up at Isaac while she is seated high on a camel and he is standing on the ground –

what it denotes is an *inspired connection*. What Chagall shows is Abraham lifting his eyes, *seeking out* Gd's intervention – and finding it. If I were staging the Akeida as a play or a movie or an opera – which someone really ought to do – I would have the angel walking up the mountain, together with Abraham and Isaac all along, looking toward Abraham, offering his gaze, unnoticed until Abraham looks up to meet it. And the moment of connection brings the reversal of fate.

That's a reading that puts Gd in the kindest possible light. And my reading, with a compliant-defiant Abraham, gives Abraham the most credit we can possibly give him for responding to the moral demands of both Gd and Man. But there is no escaping the fact that both Gd and Abraham fail Isaac. The Akeida is generally regarded as a dilemma between a specific command from Gd, and the categorical demands of human morality. And in my reading, Abraham manages against all odds to satisfy both of these demands. But there's a third dimension, which is the demand of the *this particular relationship* between *this* father and *this* son. The three pictures we've looked at have Abraham looking in three different directions, but the one direction where he *never* looks is to Isaac – not in these three pictures or in any other artistic rendering that I have found.

If I were a painter, I might depict a scene where Abraham has carried out his six actions in the following way, which is as faithful to the text as any other picture: He has built the altar and arranged the wood, he has bound Isaac, and set Isaac down on the wood, *and has sat down on the wood himself, together with Isaac his son, with one arm embracing him and looking deeply into his eyes*. With the other arm, he reaches out his hand and takes the knife, and holds it far away, waiting, as long as need be, for the angel to come and take it away.



## Akedah--Drash with Ron Meyers Oct. 23, 2021

By Marcia Pally

Ron and I have been talking about the *Akedah* for about five years, so in some sense, today's double drash is the best of the minyan, serious talk over the years about things Jewish that are important to us. This Rosh Hashana we came to the realization that our discussions were something like Plato's famous divided sphere. In Plato's image, we all begin as whole spheres which tragically break in half. Our task in life is to find our other half. In today's double drash on the *Akedah*, each reading is the mirror image complement of the other—each is the other's other half. Together, they form a whole.

In Ron's reading: Abraham is the moral agent, nudging God to remember not only that there is a covenant but the nature of covenant. Was is the Jewish covenant? First, covenant with God and covenants among persons are not unidirectional but reciprocal relationships—person in mutual bond with God, and person in mutual bond with other persons. Second, these two bonds—between person and God AND among persons--are inseparable. Acting righteously to others is part of each person's bond with God, and each person's bond with God sustains us in acting righteously to others.

In short, you can't have one bond without the other--as the prophets remind us. You cannot be unjust to persons and hope to retain covenant with God. No way. I'd say, no way Jose but it's actually, no way, Hosea, who writes in 6:6, "For I desire mercy not [animal] sacrifice." Amos too famously notes the importance of compassion over religious rites: "I [God] hate and despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me... But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:21-24). We might continue with Prov. 21:3: "To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice" or with Psalm 51:17 and Mic. 7:2-7. In Tractate Berachot 7a, the Talmud notes that in this covenantal reciprocity, it is not only we that pray to God but God prays as well: "May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice." And still in covenantal reciprocity: not only do we ask God for a blessing but God asks the priest Rabbi Ishmael b. Elisha for a blessing as well. Reciprocity.

So, in this *Akedah* narrative, covenant is a reciprocal relationship between God and Abraham (and between God and Isaac, and God and Sarah)—*ben adam la'makom*--AND between Abraham and Isaac (and Abraham and Sarah)—*ben adam l'chaveiro*. Two bonds—between person and God *and* between person and person). They are inseparable from each other and both of them reciprocal relationships.

If this is the nature of covenant, who in the *Akedah* narrative is nudging whom about it? On Ron's reading, Abraham is nudging God to remember this: He, Abe, cannot sacrifice Isaac because such a sacrifice would violate Abe's simultaneous covenant with Isaac and with Sarah, who would be devastated by the loss of her son. Because Abe's bonds with Isaac and Sarah are inseparable from his bond with God, sacrificing Isaac would not witness Abe's covenant with

God. It would *end* it, break it, as the two bonds—Abe with Isaac/Sarah and Abe with God—are entwined.

After all, *hineni* is Abraham's reply of commitment to God in this narrative but it is also Abraham's reply to Isaac. When Isaac calls for his father, Abe answers: *hineni*, "I am present, here for you."

So that's Ron's reading: Abe as the moral agent in reciprocal relationship with God and with Isaac/Sarah, reminding God of the entwined covenants and thus of Abe's moral commitment to both. In a mirror image reading of the same narrative, it is God who is nudging Abraham to sustain *both* covenants, with God and with Isaac/Sarah. Flip it around. On this reading, God expects Abraham not to be a puppet, programmed to obedience. Abraham is expected to be a moral agent in his reciprocal relationship with God *and* a moral agent to protect his covenantal relationship with Isaac/Sarah. For the two relationships are inseparable, entwined.

Abe has acted as a moral agent in reciprocal relationship with God before, notably in the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, also in this *parasha*. Here, Abe argues that God should keep God's covenant with humanity and not destroy the cities if there are even a few righteous people there.

Now, years later, in the *Akedah* narrative, is Abraham still holding to this entwined covenant? Is he still an active moral agent in a reciprocal bond with God *and* with persons, with Isaac and Sarah? Has he lost sight of this or hold to it?

Let's recall what the request is: sacrifice a person, Isaac, *in order* to confirm bond with God. But fulfilling this request is impossible because breaking bond with Isaac by killing him would not fulfill covenant with God. It would *end* bond with God. So, what does God do to confirm that Abe understands this—that Abe understands the nature of covenant with the Jewish God? To nudge Abraham and confirm that he is committed to this entwined, reciprocal covenant, God makes the sacrifice-request sound ridiculous.

In Gen. 22:2, God says,

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָךְ אֶת-בִּנְךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר-אַהֲבָה אֶת-יִצְחָק וְלֵךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לַעֲלֹה עַל אֶתֶד הַהִים:  
:אָמַר אֵלֶיךָ: And He said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

Would not have the word "Isaac" alone sufficed. What's unclear about: "Take Isaac to Moriah"? Abe surely would have known whom God meant. Why the extended identifiers—your son, your only son, the son you love. These elaborate emphatics make the request obviously absurd. It sounds like a politician's rhetorical flourish: "do you want your children to die in poverty? Vote for me!" No one takes the politician's question literally. In the superfluous, redundant language of the *Akedah*, God is signaling that the sacrifice-request too cannot be taken literally because it violates the covenant—and Abe should know that. God is signaling that, though child sacrifice may be a custom in surrounding cultures, in covenant with *this* God, it's ridiculous, impossible. For the two bonds, God-person, person-person, are entwined.

Just as in Ron's reading, where *Abraham* creates several opportunities for God to recognize the reciprocal nature of covenant, on this mirror-image reading, *God* does the same with Abraham. He makes the request laughable:

--take your son and kill him (ridiculous enough)....

--your *only* son (wink, wink, we both know this is an impossible request)....

--and in case you missed it: your son Isaac, the one you waited so long to have with Sarah *owing to* my, God's, promise to you. (If God is seriously asking Abe to sacrifice Isaac, God is violating his own promise. Huh? ....)

--and for those of you who were wondering: the son you love. But covenantal love is what God asks of us. (If God is seriously asking Abe to sacrifice Isaac, God is violating his own covenant. Double Huh?)

All this makes obvious the impossibility of this Jewish God asking for such a sacrifice. Abrogating covenant with Isaac by sacrificing him cannot be part of Abe's covenant with God. It would end it—by God's *own definition* of covenant as a reciprocal bond of love, entwined between God and person and amid persons.

On this reading as on Ron's, there are several moments for Abraham to respond that he gets it: his covenant with God cannot entail breaking covenant with Isaac because the relationships are entwined.

(i) The first moment is at Abe's first statement that God will provide a ram for the sacrifice and that Abraham and Isaac will return together after the sacrifice of the animal. Gen. 22:5 says:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נָעֲרָיו שְׁבוּ-לִיכֶם פֹּה עִם-הַחֲמֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנֶּעֱרָר גִּלְכָּה עַד-כָּה וְנִשְׁמַחְנוּהָ וְנָשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם:

Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and *we* will return to you."

Why do we assume that Abe is being duplicitous? Abraham's statement that both he and Isaac will return together should be taken seriously and not assumed to be strategic, lying rhetoric to dupe Isaac and the servants. Abe knows both he and Isaac are coming back together because sacrifice with Isaac is *impossible* in covenant with God. This is the reading given by Yoram Hazony in his book *The Philosophy of Israel*.

(ii) a second moment is Abraham's second assurance that God will provide a ram.

Gen. 22:8:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל-יִצְחָק יְרֵאָה-לִּי הַשֶּׁה לַעֲלֹה בְּגִי וְיִלְכִּי שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

And Abraham said [to Isaac], "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son. And the two of them walked on together."

Again, Abe's statement should be taken seriously: he knows that God will provide a ram because sacrifice of Isaac is impossible in covenant with this God.

All told, we have my reading, where God nudges Abe to the nature of covenant, and we have Ron's reading, where Abe nudges God.

Taken together--Ron's reading and my reading--the two form *the structure* of the reciprocal covenant itself. Two parties—God and Abe--in reciprocal responsibility to each other for their covenantal bond. On my reading, God is acting in covenantal moral commitment with Abraham,

Isaac, and Sarah by signaling to Abe that the sacrifice was never to be because it would violate Abe's bond with Isaac and Sarah--which would at once break covenant with God. And Abe signals back that he knows this by stating *twice* that he knows God will provide a sacrificial ram because sacrificing Isaac would also end bond with God. On Ron's reading, Abraham is acting in covenantal moral commitment with Isaac and Sarah by slow-walking the sacrifice and giving God plenty of time to show up with a ram. And in so doing, Abe is also preserving his entwined covenant with God.

The two readings *together* instantiate the reciprocal moral commitments of covenant in a way that neither reading alone does. Together, they illuminate the reciprocal, entwined nature of covenant.

Finally, if both God and Abraham understand the nature of covenant—each one of them nudging the other--why do we need this story? Everyone's already on the same page. Ron spoke of six motions at the start of the narrative and six at the end. Why do Abraham and God have to *go through the motions* of a covenant they both understand?

Perhaps God in the Godself does not need to go through the motions. But the all too human Abraham does, and God in relationship with humans also does. We humans are corporeal beings, living in space and time. We are not algorithms, collections of zeros and ones. We cannot live abstractly nor can we sustain relationship abstractly. We must live out our commitments, beliefs, morality, and emotions in time and space. You cannot only say "I love you." You must act lovingly in the days and years and places where you live.

This is why we have ritual and ritual readings: to express in the material world and in time our relationships. We express those bonds with God in religious ritual. We express them with persons in many rituals, such as engagement rings and weddings, lighting shabbat and holiday candles, blessing children on shabbat, and in small and large kindnesses.

In short, we must go through the motions. Covenant must be expressed and communicated in time and place—God with Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah, *ben adam la'makom* AND Abraham with God, Isaac, and Sarah, *ben adam l'chaveiro*.

This double reading of the *Akedah*, the motions in time and space taken by God and Abraham, can be understood as a *ritual* of the reciprocal, entwined covenant. Not only do God and Abe go through the motions of reciprocal covenant. We read this narrative of their motions ritually every year. In reading the *Akedah* annually, *we perform a ritual of the reciprocal covenant*.

Now, no one really wants the *Akedah*. No one wants the sacrifice of a child. Yet the narrative, read doubly as Ron and I have suggested, *is* the structure of covenant. Well., we still may not want it... but you can't always get what you want, but if you try some time, you can get what you need.

Shabbat shalom.

Recently one of my closest friend's father in law died-- his name was Moshe Anisfeld.

Briefly -- as background for the story I'm about to tell-- these are the basic facts of his life.

Moshe was born in Krakow in 1934.

His family were Radomsk Hasidim.

When the war broke out, he, along with his mother and two younger sisters -- he was only five years old--were caught on the Russian side of the line and were sent to a Labor Camp in Siberia. I believe it was then that Moshe became ill with Tuberculosis at the camp --and suffered breathing problems for the rest of his life. His father, caught on the German side, was unable to meet up with the rest of the family, was later shot and killed by the Nazis in the Tarnow Ghetto. They went back to Poland after the war but there were pogroms going on, so at that point, they fled to a DP camp in Germany. They were in the camp for a few years, and moved to Palestine in 1949.

He studied at a famous yeshiva, Ponivitch among other places, then went to university at Bar Ilan (was part of the first graduating class). He ultimately became a psychologist and taught at the graduate school at Yeshivah University school for 40 years.

That's the short story.

But I tell you his story, not because of his life. but because of his death.

It was one of the most amazing death-bed stories I've heard.



in the last seven or so years of his life he lived in Newton Centre with his wife Liz -- to be near family-- their son Shimi and his wife Sharon and their two children Daniel and Tali.

The day before his death was shabbat-- his family was gathered around him. As I mentioned he had had TB as a child and suffered from breathing problems his entire life. Nevertheless, after shabbat, a cup of wine in hand, he said havdalah for his family as he usually did struggling to take every breath --to form every word with what little breath he had left.. Afterwards he went to sleep and never woke up. He died the next day. When I heard this I cried to at the thought of such *shleymut*, such wholeness in a life. saying havdalah was his final act of separation not only from shabbat, but his final act of separation from this world -- such a deep and courageous marker of a full and complete life and a readiness to go forth into the unknown.

Little did his family know that when they said their final amen to Moshe's blessing they were saying it not only to the *brakha ha-mavdil bein kodesh lechol*-- They were saying amen to a life well lived. To a man who was a good and loving husband and father. At that moment Moshe himself had become the blessing. As God says to Abraham. Become a blessing. *heyeh brakha*. And moshe did. And yes, he died during the week of *parshat lekh lekha*.

But I tell this story *derekh agav*. By the way.

The real point of the story is a hawk, and how one interprets a hawk.

Here's the story as I heard it at shiva last Sunday morning.

Earlier on that very same day Moshe and his family were sitting in their backyard. A huge hawk alighted on the garage roof and stayed there a while.

Liz, Moshe's wife thought it was a sign, an omen.

Shimi, Moshe's son, thought it was just a hawk.

I start this *dvar torah* with that notion-- that a hawk is more than a hawk -- a hawk is to be interpreted -- to explain to you my approach in reading Torah.

A hawk is not just a hawk. A cigar is not just a cigar. Maybe in life-- but never in Torah.

I remember in year one of reb school I was studying Genesis 6

2 ב וַיֵּרְאוּ בְנֵי-הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת-בָּנוֹת  
הָאָדָם, כִּי טֹבֹת הֵנָּה; וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם  
נָשִׁים, מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ.  
that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were  
fair; and they took them wives,  
whoever they chose.

and Rabbi Gordon Tucker-- who was teaching this group of rabbis to be-- is a brilliant scholar and rabbi the one who married Larry and I someone who has been an important teacher for me

But I will never forget his response to these verses.

He said

"someone forgot to clean up the text."

I was shocked.

True that I had never really encountered Wissenschaft before--  
But that wasn't really it.

You might think this is a story of sheltered orthodox girl from  
Brooklyn encounters the human authorship of the Torah and her world  
shakes.

Not at all.

By that time in my life (I was 29 at the time) I had gone far astray  
from Judaism and the Jewish community and back again.

I was shocked not because of the idea of human authors and editors of  
the Bible.

Not at all.

I was shocked -- because to me the torah is irrepressibly infinitely--  
and I would even say relentlessly and sometimes even cruelly  
meaningful.

If this drash were about those verses I would begin with the assumption that these verses were there meaningfully, intentionally, pointedly.

They are not a mess someone forgot to clean up.

I mean what kind of drash could I give from

"They forgot to clean up the text"??

But this drash is not about parshat noah-- it's about parshat *veyera*.  
it's about,

- in case you were wondering-- the *akedah*.

A place I am getting to. Yes, i know, slowly, but I am getting there!

In fact -- I would go even beyond the Hawk being a sign an omen. At least if the hawk were flying out of the pages of the Torah, that very hawk would be an endlessly meaningful symbol.

But yes-- I delay. you must be wondering when will she ever get to the parsha. When will I ever get to the point.

I approach slowly.

like Kierkegaard--in this regard, I approach with fear and trembling and preamble.

With tales of death and life and, yes, also hawks.

I approach the *akedah* with fear and trembling -- because I believe in the Torah. In fact, in some sense I believe in the torah more than I

believe in God ( I can unpack that at another time) , i believe that what I read here is true-- profoundly true. not literally of course. (I know the minyan wouldn't let me in if I did) but symbolically true, mythically true, deep powerful inescapable truths about what it means to be human and to stand in the world as a Jew.

You won't get from me a critique of the text from an ethical standpoint. This may not be an ethical text, but to me that is utterly besides the point.

It may not be ethical, but it is a story of inescapably mammoth proportions and implications. this story that we, as Jews, are to say in our tefillah each and every morning, is a story, in my estimation that is encoded in the DNA of human life.

And if it is encoded in our lives. I mean if we, in some way, are living this very story out. then we better damn well wrestle with it.

I well realize that any understanding i have and offer today or any day will ultimately fail, because this text defeats us -- endlessly. in it's mystery. in it's power. in it being something from the other side-- beyond the veil. beyond the curtain.

Today and (i'm finally getting closer to my subject) I want to approach the story using two tools-- one a midrash and the other literary interpretation-- and the two tools I use I hope will come together in a

bit.

A famous midrash that rashi uses in his commentary in 22:1-- in answer to the question presented by the first verse of the Akedah-- after these things--These things? What things are you talking about.

בראשית כב) ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלהים נסה את אברהם)  
אחר מאי < [מאי אחר] א"ר יוחנן משום רבי יוסי בן זימרא אחר דבריו של <  
שטן  
אמר שטן לפני הקב"ה רבונו של עולם! זקן זה חננתו למאה שנה פרי בטן -  
מכל סעודה שעשה-- לא היה לו תור  
אחד או גוזל אחד להקריב לפניך  
----.אמר לו כלום עשה אלא בשביל בנו  
אם אני אומר לו זבח את בנך לפני מיד זובחו -  
מיד והאלהים נסה את אברהם ויאמר קח נא את בנך

Talmud - (a midrash Rashi uses in his commentary on verse 1 of chapter 22)

And it came to pass after these words, that God did tempt Abraham.<sup>14</sup>  
What is meant by 'after'? — R. Johanan said in the name of of R. Jose b. Zimra: After 'the words of Satan, as it is written, And the child grew, and was weaned: [and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned].<sup>15</sup> Thereupon Satan said to the Almighty: 'Sovereign of the Universe! you graced this old man with fruit of the

womb at age 100! yet from all that banquet which he prepared, he did not offer you one turtle-dove or pigeon for sacrifice?!

He's done all of it in honor of his son!

God replied -- 'Yet were I to say to him, "Sacrifice your son before Me", he would do so with no hesitation.' Straightway, God did tempt Abraham ... And he said, Take, I pray thee [na] thy son.

Is the Satan right-- that Abraham not making an offering to God at that moment mean that he's not dedicated to God or is God right -- that no- this has no bearing on my relationship To Abraham. He is completely dedicated to me and would offer me anything.

God, according to this midrash, made sufficiently anxious by Satan's suggestion, enacted yet another test for poor Abraham-- to show Satan an echo of the Book of Job, no Abraham is completely dedicated to me and my enterprise. Abraham withholds nothing. or, so the story goes.

This midrash captures Abraham in a moment of withholding-- and raises the question of how to interpret that withholding.

But before that disturbing question of the midrash is answered by the akedah-- I'd like to give it it's due.

If we are to read- the text in light of this midrash we might ask -- Why didn't Abraham offer God anything when he was celebrating the final arrival of his son. Is it because he was at that moment -- self involved? withholding even? Had enough of God and his monumental destiny?

I mean 100 years old. Understandable that in celebrating this long

awaited child he would forget about God for a few moments. I mean really?? After all that God had to test him yet again -- hadn't he been through enough?

Is the midrash over reading the text by way of this interpretation. or perhaps the midrash is reading some real withholding on the part of Abraham. I would like to suggest, and maybe even make the claim-- that the midrash is picking up something real here--it is picking up Abraham's existential resistance to his divine destiny-- and I will support that presumption of withholding-- by looking back and then forwards with an eye towards the larger story.

Throughout the story Abraham has a mistaken notion about God's plan, about his own destiny.

If we go back a ways---

## Chapter 15

3 And Abram said: 'Behold, to me  
ג וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם--הֵן לִי, לֹא נָתַתָּה זָרַע; וְהָיָה בֶן-בֵּיתִי, יוֹרֵשׁ אֹתִי. Thou hast given no seed, and, lo, one born in my house is to be mine heir.'

ד וְהָיָה דְבַר-יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר, לֹא And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying:



וַיֹּאמֶר אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמְּעֵיךָ, 'This man shall not be thine heir;  
 הוּא יִירָשְׁךָ but he that shall come forth out  
 of thine own bowels shall be  
 thine heir.'

And then after Yishmael is born Abraham gets it wrong yet again: -

17 Then Abraham fell upon his face,  
 יִז וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו, וַיִּצְחָק; and laughed, and said in his heart:  
 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ, הֲלֵבֶן מֵאָה-שָׁנָה 'Shall a child be born unto him that  
 יוֹלֵד, וְאִם-שָׂרָה, הִבֵּת-תִּשְׁעִים is a hundred years old? and shall  
 שָׂנָה תֵּלֵד. Sarah, that is ninety years old,  
 bear?'

18 And Abraham said unto God: 'Oh  
 יי וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם, אֵל-הָאֱלֹהִים: that Ishmael might live before  
 לוֹ וְשָׁמַעְאֵל, יִחְיֶה לְפָנֶיךָ. Thee!'

19 And God said: 'No, but Sarah  
 יט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, אֲבָל שָׂרָה thy wife shall bear you a son; and  
 אֲשֶׁתְּךָ יִלְדֶּת לָךְ בֶּן, וְקָרָאתָ אֶת- you shall call his name Isaac; and I  
 שְׁמוֹ, יִצְחָק; וַהֲקִמֹתִי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי will establish My covenant with him  
 אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם, לְזֶרְעוֹ for an everlasting covenant for his  
 אַחֲרָיו. seed after him.

Abraham has his eye on Yishmael. Even when God tells him that no--  
 Sarah will have a child Abraham doesn't get it. It's a running thread

through the narrative.

and that thread reaches its apotheosis when Sarah wants Hagar and Yishmael out of the house.

What do you mean Abraham must be saying to himself. he's my son.

HE'S THE ONE! The fulfillment of God's promise. How could this be-- this is not the way the story is supposed to work.

As it says in Genesis Chapter 21:

11 And the thing was very BAD in  
Abraham's sight on account of his  
son.  
יֵא וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד, בְּעֵינֵי  
אֲבִרָהָם, עַל, אֹדֶת בְּנוֹ.

12 And God said unto Abraham: 'Let  
it not be grievous in thy sight  
because of the lad, and because of  
thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah  
saith unto thee, hearken unto her  
voice; for in Isaac shall seed be  
called to thee.  
יֵב וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אֲבִרָהָם,  
אֶל-יֵרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל-הַנֶּעֱר וְעַל-  
אִמְתְּךָ--כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ  
שָׂרָה, שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ: כִּי בִיִּצְחָק,  
יִקְרָא לְךָ זֶרַע.

NOT JUST BAD-- BUT **VERY**BAD. ON ACCOUNT OF **HIS** SON.

And then God says don't let it be bad because of "the boy" seemingly

trying to diffuse Abraham's attachment to Yishmael as his SON.

His son. To Abraham the story, the promise, the blessing is supposed to pivot around his son. That son is Yishmael.

God says no, the story continues with Isaac, with my child.

In a real sense (and this would be another drash)  
too much to go into here in my allotted ten minutes which I'm sure I  
will go over.

Isaac is *God's* child.

It is Yishmael who is Abraham's child.

Abraham is still holding onto Yishmael.

Like Isaac

Abraham loves the wrong boy.

These men love the wrong child.

Yishmael and Esav are -- for better or worse-- not the children of  
destiny.

These men are in the **WRONG STORY!**

But Sarah and Rebekah are in the right story. Shema bekolah God says-- because her voice emerges from Abraham's and Sarah's deeper destiny.

Which explains-- at least in part the akedah.  
God is re-focusing Abraham on Abraham's true God chosen destiny.  
Abraham is saying NO.  
God is saying YES.

kach na et bincha  
My son as Rashi says-- echoing the Gemara  
which son--I have two sons?

et ychidcha --  
well, this one is only one to his mother  
and this one only one to his mother

ASHER AHAVTA THE ONE YOU LOVE -- ONE CAN JUST HEAR  
GOD'S BOOMING VOICE COME RAINING DOWN ON POOR  
ABRAHAM.

"I LOVE BOTH OF THEM" SAYS ABRAHAM HIS VOICE BEGINNING  
TO LOSE IT'S POWER

"ET YITZCHAK"

את בנך - אמר לו שני בנים יש לי, אמר לו את יחידך, אמר לו זה יחיד לאמו  
וזה יחיד לאמו, אמר לו אשר אהבת, אמר לו שניהם אני אוהב

THAT IS THE MOMENT OF VERTIGO -- A WORD Aviva zornberg  
likes to use.

A moment Abraham pivots between two destinies.

Which son?

Which destiny?

ishmael.

Not ishmael Isaac.

not your son, Mine.

not your destiny,

divine destiny.

Sarah understood. Abraham didn't.

Rebecca understood, Isaac didn't.

Abraham says no.

God says yes.

It's As if you're driving straight down the highway- to a known destination.

SUDDENLY YOU TURN THE WHEEL.

the car screeches to make an extreme left turn-- and you're speeding along to a place you do not know. The vertigo of that moment-- before you turn the car -- not knowing if you will hold to the known WELL TREADED SOMEWHAT DEADENED path or DO YOU make the extreme turn--

to the path of destiny.

not your story-- not only about you--

it's a bigger story.

When all is said and done with.

It's God's story.

Abraham finally says yes.

Abraham ceases withholding. In the Akedah. He offers everything up to God --

but God had to force his hand

The command came loud

clear

harsh

even violent.

God had to do this because Abraham was living the wrong story.  
God had to put Abraham to the test.

everything depended on it.  
We depend on it.  
We are the children of this story.

let's take a breath for a moment-- a step away from the story to life  
as we know and live it every day.  
Every day full of opportunities to say yes and no. small yes's and no's. I  
do. I won't. I will. I can. I can't.

Take for example:  
procrastination.  
I'm a terrible procrastinator.  
Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to say I don't do anything. I get a lot  
done, but never what I'm planning to get done. it's always derekh agav--  
the stuff that I'm doing in order not to do the stuff I'm planning to do.

this drash for example.  
I think (after years of living this same pattern) Start the drash early.  
That way you won't be tortured.

The command continues throughout the week.

Write the drash.

no I say with every fiber of my being

write the drash.

no.

I'd rather cook and answer emails and work and sleep and watch t.v.

and surf the internet and talk to friends and hang out with my family

and and and make coffee and have a snack and day dream

until the very last moment --

when kicking and screaming I'm dragged into a Yes.

until I feel the command so powerfully I finally say yes.

but it's a yes that comes with -- ok. o.k-- ALLRIGHT ALREADY-- but I really don't want to-- i just want you-- whoever you are-- to leave me alone!

it's not, to say the least, a full YES.

but when I finally do whatever it is I'm almost always happier for the doing.

Why then such a big NO?

well-- that's probably for my therapists office..... not for here.

but I'm working-- in my own life-- at turning No into Yes.

Ain't easy though. runs as deep as can be



runs way deeper than thought and consciousness and rationality and understanding.

runs so deep I can barely see it

---

but I feel it, I feel it all over

its coming out of the pores of my very existence.

No. No. and then the reluctant YES.

if I *have* to. ....Which I do.

Consider the words from Dag Hammerskold about saying yes and no.

From Markings:

I don't know Who -or What- put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone -or Something- and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. ...

so now back to the beginning. again.

It turns out that the story I opened with was not derekh agav-- was not on the way. It was the crux of the matter. there were no hawks flying out of the pages of this parsha After all. this drash was, after all is said and done, about Moshe Aniseld and his family.

with every last breath-- with every last tortured word-- Moshe Anisfeld was saying YES to life.

Yes. Yes to chol and yes to kodesh.

Yes to unity and yes to separation

yes to life and yes to death

And his family -- with their responses, their Amen after each one of his brakhots, were saying a big Yes to his life and love.

Wine.

Yes.

Spice

Yes.

Flame.

YES! YES!

Light  
YES!

EVEN Darkness?  
Yes.

Love  
YES.

Life  
YES.

EVEN Death?  
YES! YES!

Yes.  
yes.  
yes.

The End.

Chaye Sarah 2005

1. He is a boy of eight or nine, sweeping out the entry to the master's house. He hears his master, Abraham, within, speaking to someone he cannot see, worried that, as the only male born into the household, "this Eliezer of Damascus" might become heir to the household. It took him some moments to divine that this Eliezer was, in fact, himself.

He is startled to hear himself spoken of that way, like a stranger or an interloper, especially by the man he admires and even dares to love. For a moment he is wounded. But he understands even then that as a servant he is not entitled to resentment. He might, under certain circumstances, be entitled to the master's property, which he does not want, but not to his affection, which perhaps he does.

2. Years pass. The master now has a son, two, in fact. One day he takes the four of them on a journey. They rise up early in the morning and travel for three days. On the third day, the master takes Isaac (his son, his only son, whom he loved), and they go up the mountain with the cut wood, leaving the other two to watch the ass. Eliezer wonders what they are doing up there and is bitter at not having been taken along. Yet later, when father and son finally come down, he is not so sure. The looks on their faces stun him to silence, and he no longer minds missing the event, whatever it was. Though no one offers a word of explanation. Then or ever. They walk home in silence. Yet whatever happened up there, it seems to him, is still happening.

3. When Sarah, the master's wife dies, he calls for Eliezer. He gives him ten camels and tells him to go find a wife for Isaac. He tells him where to look, explicitly excluding the local vicinity where, as it happens, Eliezer lives with his daughter. She is almost the same age as Isaac, and the two of them played happily together throughout their mutual childhood, and even a bit beyond.

At Abraham's command, Eliezer puts his hand under the master's thigh and swears that he will do his best. He sets out with the camels and his men and a great anxiety about the enterprise. Nothing he has ever done is so important to his master as this; and nothing is more important to him than his master. And yet what if he finds no one, or picks the wrong girl? And how will he know the right one?

4. The girl comes out to the well in the evening. Yet before she comes, before he has even seen her, he has imagined her, a sleek, copper-colored beauty (not unlike Sarah, the deceased mistress) who, he thinks, will please the master and, in a different fashion, the master's son. He imagines meeting her at the well and asking her for water, for a drink of water for himself. Sometimes he imagines all "the daughters of the men of the city" coming out to the well, and there is one he approaches, and she gives him the drink and then, unbidden, offers to water his camels as well.

He imagines her in many forms, and, in truth, not all of them come out right. Sometimes she ignores him, or provides the water only grudgingly, or doesn't offer any to the camels, or serves him and the camels, but without the beauty and sweetness and untroubled generosity of the girl he wants to present to his master.

During the journey here he stopped at many wells in many towns where the girls gather to draw water, but he saw no girls worth seeing, except the ones he imagined. So to say that he imagines this girl who gives him a drink does not quite convey it. He implores God to bring her forth in the world, to provide a wife for Isaac, a wife that he, Eliezer, can present to the master. His imagining, then, is a kind of prayer, a summoning. And then, all at once, even as he is imagining her one way and then another, proud, shy, cheerful, grave, a girl appears, an actual girl, coming out to the well in the evening.

For some reason, even before he can see her, he runs to her. He does not really run, he walks, yet in his mind it is as if he were running. He is almost afraid to look for fear she will be the wrong one, and at first glance he thinks he has made a terrible mistake. Yet he asks her for a drink. She says, "Drink, my lord," and hastens and lets down her pitcher. She gives him to drink, but she does not touch his hand. When he has finished, she draws water for his camels "until they have done drinking." Water for ten camels -- think how strong she must be. She is pleasing to the eye, he realizes now, though not in the way he imagined, not smooth and coppery, but small, dark, muscular, her hair choppy like the sea. She doesn't look like a happy girl, yet he feels happy looking at her. And he looks steadfastly on her, holding his peace to whether the Lord has made his journey prosperous or not. But already he knows.

5. With that it is done. He will take the girl back to Isaac and see to the wedding. The marriage will be happy or unhappy -- that is unimportant; the line will go on, the covenant will be kept. The girl seems the sort who can appreciate these priorities. He will have less trouble with her than with his own daughter. Strong and clever; he chose well. Like him she knows that happiness has very little to do with it.

Dvar torah Parasha Chaye Sarah 7 November 2015. Ben Orlove

1. This parshah, Chaye Sarah, contains several major episodes in the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs. It includes chapter 24, the 67 verses of which contain a single sustained narrative. Speaking of God's earlier promises to him, Abraham sends a servant to find a proper Jewish wife for Isaac. The servant meets Rebecca, who succeeds both in conforming to Abraham's specific requirements and in demonstrating herself to be an animated, forthright individual. After some conversation and some gifts, Rebecca's kin accept the servant's story and agree to Isaac as her future husband. Rebecca and the servant return to Isaac. The final verse brings the story to a close: Isaac takes Rebecca as his wife, and loves her, and is consoled for his mother's death.
2. I'd like to take a look at a few verses in the last quarter of the chapter. These come after several key events: the recognition scene at the well, the servant's bestowal of the first gifts to Rebecca, the consent given by Rebecca's father and brother to the marriage, the servant's bestowal of additional gifts, and the celebratory feast. In verse 54, the servant awakens after the feast, and says that he's ready to return. But in the next verse, Rebecca's relatives ask for her to stay a bit longer, at least ten days; we can presume that they are not ready to see her leave for a distant place. The servant counters with the argument that he's carrying out a charge given to him by God, and does not want to delay. The relatives propose that they will ask Rebecca for her answer. Verse 58 contains their question, "Will you go with this man?" and her one-word answer, "eyleykh," I will go. They send her off, with her nurse, the servant and his men, in verse 59. Verse 60 consists of their blessing, "Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads. May your seed take hold of the gate of its foes." This blessing echoes God's covenant with Abraham, and intriguingly suggests that it is through Rebecca as much as through Isaac that the blessing will be passed on to following generations.
3. One word in this blessing really startled me:

זרעך

It means "your seed," referring to Rebecca's descendants. The puzzling element is that this is woman's seed, a point that is underscored in Hebrew because the second person possessive endings for adjectives are marked for gender, just as the third person possessive adjectives in

English, his and hers, are marked for gender. The word zera is used for the seeds of plants, but for humans, it refers to semen. The word zera does serve a synonym for offspring, along with

## בְּנֵי

though zera often refers to future, as-yet unborn offspring, of several generations. But it is not a simple metaphor, divorced from its bodily referent. We heard the link of zera and semen just last week in Vayera. When Lot's daughters imagine their father to be the last man alive in the world, they plan to lie with him and, in 19:32 say

## עֲרַץ מֵאֲבֵינוּ נְחִיָּהוּ

“so that we may keep alive seed from our father,” condensing in three words a complex set of ideas—that seed is the source of life, that it comes from men's bodies and that women convey it from generation to generation. And we will see again next month in Vayeshev, when Onan refuses to give his seed, not to his widowed sister-in-law, but to his dead brother. I found myself speculating whether it would have been impossible for him to give her seed, since a woman couldn't own seed—only a man could. He could relinquish ownership of his seed by legitimately placing it in the body of some other man's woman. In any case, Onan didn't spill his seed, as the King James Version has it; he destroyed it.

4. This reference to women's seed struck me as a complement to another gender-bender in the Torah, the references to men's wombs. To take one example, the blessing in Dvarim 7:13 state God “bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land” as well as your grain, wine, oil, herds and flocks.

## אֲדָמָתְךָ וּפְרִי בִטְנְךָ פְּרִי וְיִבְרָךְ

The ending indicates that these are men's wombs. In this instance, the logic of the maleness of wombs does not seem obscure, though it is different from our own cultural system. Men can have wombs as they can have land, crops and herds. The social and economic world is ordered as a set of households with male heads. This world is thoroughly male-centered. The association of human seed and agricultural seed is the converse of the association of barrenness in women and in fields, and in the numerous references to God opening and closing wombs:

like the interior of the earth, wombs are moist dark places where a seed can grow into a living organism.

5. But I didn't think that I could explain women's seed quite so readily as men's wombs, which lend themselves to a straightforward account of patriarchal cultures. Checking into sources, I found that Rashi paused to offer a brief comment on it.
6. Referring to the phrase in the blessing Rebecca receives: **may you become thousands of myriads**, Rashi says May you and your seed receive that blessing that was stated to Abraham on Mount Moriah (22:17): "and I will surely multiply your seed, etc." "May it be His will that those children shall be from you and not from another woman."
7. This account is plausible. It leaves men as the source of seed, and raises the possibility that an individual man's seed could be apportioned out to different women. This is also a possibility in our contemporary society, ideally in a system of serial monogamy, but there were more alternatives in the times that the Torah describes. With all due respect to Rashi, it did strike me as a bit of a stretch in this parshah. It was only when Isaac's own father, old and well-stricken with age, got around to it that someone finally found a woman for him. In his general passivity, Isaac seems different from the many men in the Tanakh who had several wives and concubines. I just didn't see this other woman as a possible threat at that time.
8. This uncertainty led me to look further into the question. On checking, I saw that there were two other occasions when the Torah mentions women's seed. We have already heard both of them since we began Bereshit just a few weeks ago.
9. The first occurs in Chapter 3, after Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit—in a spot, I will add, also linked to water; Bereshit 2 fills 5 verses with descriptions of the rivers of the Garden of Eden. God, not very pleased with these acts, speaks first to the snake who tempted them: In verse 14 "Enmity will I set between you and the woman, between your seed and hers. He will boot your head, and you will bite his heel." The male who will tread the snake in the last sentence refers to Eve's seed. I was struck that it was Eve's seed, not Adam's, who was cursed—a punishment for Eve's greater offense. I did not see an easy way to apply Rashi's logic here. There weren't any other women around for Adam to have children with. And if there were, and



he did, there might also be enmity between those other children and snakes. In any case verse 20 tells us that Adam called his wife Eve because she was the mother of all life

## יֵחַ כָּל סֵא הִיָּתָה הוּא כִּי

further excluding the possibility of other women who might receive Adam's seed.

10. The second occurs in chapter 16, following the first episode of conflict between Sarai—her name has not yet become Sarah—and Hagar. Sarai had borne Abraham no children, so she sends Abraham in to her handmaid, saying.

## מִמֶּנָּה אֲבִנָּה אוּלִי

Perhaps I will be built up through her, a possible pun on 'ben' son.

11. Hagar's pride after she becomes pregnant leads Sarai to treat her harshly, so Hagar flees. She is in the wilderness by a fountain of water when an angel asks her where she is coming from, and where she is going. She explains how she is fleeing her mistress. The angel tells her to go back to her mistress, and then speaks a second time, saying her, "I will surely multiply your seed and it will be beyond all counting."

## מֵרֹב יִסְפָּר וְלֹא זִרְעָךָ אֶת אֲרֶבֶה הָרֶבֶה:

The angel goes on to tell her that she is pregnant, and will have a son, whose name will be Ishmael. This scene prefigures Hagar's second expulsion, after Ishmael doesn't play nicely with Isaac. Perhaps Hagar's return is crucial to the whole arc of the Torah: in the last verse of chapter 16, Hagar bears Ishmael to Abram, and in the very next verse, God appears to Abram, promises him a covenant and a multitude of offspring, and give him a new name.

12. This case follows Rashi's suggestion to some extent, since Abraham does father children with other women. Sarah bears Isaac, and—as we have just heard at the end of today's parashah—Abraham takes another wife, Keturah, after Sarah had died. But Abram's age and Sarai's apparent barrenness are prominent in the scene of Hagar's first encounter with an angel, so here, too, there may be another reason for the seed being a woman's, other than a polygynous husband.

13. We can link Eve and Hagar with Rebecca. Each woman receives powerful words from powerful figures: God's curses to the snake, which mention Eve's seed; the angel's words to Hagar; the relatives' blessing to Rebecca. Each woman has taken a strong action; in fact, each has challenged an authority. Eve contravened God's commandment and gave in to the snake's beguilement. Hagar fled a mistress's harsh treatment which she found unbearable. Rebecca goes against the stated wishes of her mother and brother in deciding to depart right away for her future husband's home. Each woman faces a move from familiar territory: Eve from the Garden of Eden, Hagar from her mistress's house, Rebecca from her family
14. And each woman plays a critical role in the whole narrative of the Torah. Humanity, with all the suffering and drama, develops as it does because of Eve's action. Hagar's action is linked closely in time, and perhaps in narrative logic, to the covenant with Abraham. Rebecca's readiness to take action proves to be a complement to Isaac's quietness, giving shape to the movement from the first to the last of three patriarchs, and beyond to Egypt and Sinai.
15. We will hear no more mention of women's seed in the Torah after the blessing that Rebecca receives in this parashah. The only three references to it occur in the first half of Bereshit. There are other powerful women in the Tanakh, Rachel and Leah, Hannah, Deborah, Naomi and Ruth, Esther, and more. There are references to seed in stories associated with them, but it is always male seed. Perhaps it is the proximity of Eve, Hagar and Rebecca to the days of creation, as well as their bold actions and challenges to authority, that endows them with enough power and enough agency to have seed as women.
16. It has taken me some effort to make sense of a view of reproduction so different from our own. We live in a world which we understand the most intimate and deeply felt aspects of our lives through science. We deeply believe that both parents contribute equal amounts of genetic material—the same number of chromosomes to their offspring. We place great importance on genetic information, an importance that is only growing in the era of what is called "personalized medicine." And new forms of technology have found many ways to allow people who otherwise could not have children to become parents. In recent years there have been extraordinary stories of mitochondria transfers, and there's a whole Wikipedia page for a new process called "preimplantation genetic diagnosis." We are fortunate indeed to have these

technologies to assist us. And we are also fortunate to live in an era in which gender equality is strongly valued, and increasingly achieved.

17. Is there anything we might learn from these passages in the Torah, and the puzzle of women's seed, the rare exceptions that prove the rule of a deeply male-centered vision? One possibility lies in the link of reproduction to history and to creation. We imagine our DNA as something that is diluted by half in each generation, so that we are linked closely only to the people in the generations nearest us—a scientific view, to be sure, but one that also echoes our own experience of family life and our diminished sense of our individual place in enduring families and nations. But all of Abraham's seed, all of Rebecca's seed, stretching far into the future, share fully in their blessing. The urgency of the wish on both men and women in the Tanakh to have children is not just a personal feeling, but a concern to be bound up with creation and with the covenant. So it is striking that the anomalous, powerful women's seed of the first chapters of Genesis is close to the moments of the beginning of the world. I have thought as well about the connection of the three women I've mentioned with water, created on the first day, associated with life, associated so strongly with women throughout the Tanakh.
18. I am still struggling with these problematic notions of seed and womb. There are other words, appearing in other parashahs, that offer clues into the understandings of reproduction in the Tanakh. I'm very curious about *may'eh*

## הַמַּיָּה

*loins*, an apparently more gender-neutral and emotion-centered term that features importantly from Bereshit through other books that people here like a lot, Shir Hashirim, Eicha and Yonah.

19. But for the time being, we can turn to Rebecca. We can imagine that her seed, her blessed seed, lies within each of us, even if we believe that we carry very little of her DNA. Perhaps there are ways that, like her, we can give water to the thirsty, and receive gifts graciously, and, above all, readily accept invitations from strangers who bear a mission whose importance we recognize. And then, like her, we may find sudden opportunities to move beyond our familiar worlds and support a covenant. And, we may find that, even if we live a society that might seem not to recognize our contributions, blessings may come to us and to our own seed: our seed,

understood as our successors who will carry our work and our name forward, however it is that we help bring them into being.



Chayei Sarah November 26, 2016

Our parsha begins with death and ends with death. [Gen. 23:1-2] "Sarah's lifetime-the span of Sarah's life-came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba-now Hebron- in the land of Canaan..." [Gen. 25:7-8] "This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin." [Gen. 25:17] "These were the years of the life of Ishmael: one hundred and thirty-seven years; then he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his kin." But something is amiss...and missing.

Let us survey a few other notable deaths in the Torah. [Num. 20:1] "The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first full moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there." [Num. 20:27-28] "They ascended Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments and put them on his son Eleazar, and Aaron died there on the summit of the mountain." [Deut. 34:5-7] "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of the Lord...Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated." In all of these examples, there is no prodrome, no age-related disability, no illness, no sickness unto death recorded. Indeed, the description of Moses' death specifically asserts he had not suffered the ravages of aging and illness.

Let us look at some domestic scenes. [Gen. 27:1-7] "When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau...And he said, 'I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die.'" Isaac was one hundred and thirty at this time but later [Gen. 35:28] we learn "Isaac was a hundred and eighty years old when he breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age..." That is, Isaac lives another fifty years after this encounter with Esau and Jacob. Isaac's sole symptom of aging is diminished vision, which is a necessary narrative device if the deception for the blessing is to succeed. Fifty years later, no further illness or decline is recorded. Simple presbyopia, for those who managed to live long enough in the ancient world, would have been ubiquitous, except, apparently, for Moses.

[Gen 48:1] "Sometime afterward, Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." Over the next 31 psukim, there is not one word about Jacob having an illness or being diminished in any way except for Gen. 48:10 "Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see." The text clearly demonstrates that even this statement represents an exaggeration in that Jacob could differentiate Ephraim from Menashe. Jacob's death is recorded as briefly as the others [Gen. 49:33]: "When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people." When Joseph is told his father is ill, he is simply being reminded that Jacob, who has the power of prophecy, knows the day which is to be his last.

The fact is that just as Aaron remained silent about the deaths of his sons, so the Five Books of Moses are completely silent about illness. Let me be clear that the definition of 'illness' is not at all that of 'disease.' Disease refers to a pathophysiologic state of the body demonstrable by physical examination, blood test, imaging, biopsy or autopsy, while illness is a psychosocial term referring to how disease is humanly experienced. While the Torah can be quite diagnostically technical, as with tzara-at, the Torah is not concerned with quotidian aches, pains and limps. Genesis 32[:26] tells how the angel

“...wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained...” because this represents a hero’s wound from a divine encounter, but the Torah never refers to Jacob having to cope with “limping on his hip” at any time after this encounter, even though the limp was presumably permanent. Genesis 34[:25] does describe how “On the third day, when [the Shechemites] were in pain, Shimon and Levi, ...came upon the city...and slew all the males,” which represents the most minimal acknowledgement of the consequence of circumcision in adults but not for the purposes of recording human illness. This is a narrative device to account for how two brothers could have killed all the men of a town. In parsha Lech Lecha, when Abraham, Ishmael and all the men of the household are circumcised, there is no reference to discomfort at all.

When Miriam is afflicted with tzara-at in Numbers [12:10] as a punishment for her slander of Moses and his wife, her reaction is not reported nor is her experience of being excluded from the community for seven days as a consequence of being ill. With all of the misery the Plagues must have caused the Egyptians, the only hint of suffering as a consequence of disease [Ex. 9:11] regards the sixth plague, boils: “The magicians were unable to confront Moses because of the inflammation...” Exodus 21[:18-19] refers to torts involving one man striking another so that he takes to his bed and later has to walk with a staff. In Leviticus 13 with the laws of the metzora we learn of the threat of exclusion from the community as a punishment but not as an experience. We are left to imagine what it would be like to be condemned [Lev. 13:45] to have to call out “Unclean!” as one passes. Lev. 19[:14] seeks to protect the deaf from insult and the blind from stumbling but the deaf are not heard from nor are the blind seen. In Lev. [21:21] and again in Deut. [23:2] we are informed that any Kohen with a physical defect is precluded from serving but not about what he is to do with his life. Moses is the only person in the Torah who has a disability with reference to its consequences. In Ex. 4:10 “Moses said to the Lord, ‘Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent...I am slow of speech and tongue.’” This engenders both God’s anger and the ongoing humiliation of Aaron being appointed as Moses’ mouthpiece.

Numbers [5:27] suggests the consequences of the Sotah ritual in which a man accuses his wife of infidelity: “... her belly will distend and her thigh shall sag; and the woman shall become a curse among her people” but the Torah is silent regarding the woman’s actual experience of the ordeal and the threat of exclusion from the community. The Israelites are stricken by plagues at various times [eg. Num. 11:33] throughout their wanderings, including in Num. 21:6- “The Lord sent seraph serpents among the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died” but we are told nothing of their agonies. In Num. [19:11] we read “He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days” but this represents ritual impurity, not actual disease, and its time limit is known in advance, as is never the case with true illness and its attendant anxieties. In Deut. 31[:2] we may think we have found some prelude to a discussion of the limitations of old age when Moses says “...I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer come and go” but we soon [Deut. 32:49] learn Moses is able to ascend Mount Nebo unaided to encounter his death. I do not have the time here to make the argument that Matriarchal infertility constitutes a separate, special category of illness without disease.

Erich Auerbach in his book *Mimesis*, characterizes the narrative style of the Hebrew Bible as giving us “Only what we need to know about [a character] as a personage in the action, here and now...” and, he adds, “Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in

its structure of universal history” and “...certain parts are brought into high relief, others left obscure.” The Torah is our foundational document and its priorities are to represent the claims of Creation, Revelation, Law and the unique relationship of the Jewish people with God. The deaths of the towering figures of the Torah are those of heroes and not of common folk, in the lengths of their lives, the ease of their deaths and the absence of physical indignities. The description of illness is not on the Torah’s agenda, whereas in Sophocles’ play *Philoctetes* the title character’s festering wound and its impact on his life and the outcome of the Trojan War is the central theme.

The average life span in the ancient world is said to have been 30-35 years or, perhaps more accurately put, an average of 48 if one lived past the age of 10, perhaps with nomadic people and those in small villages being spared some of the afflictions of ancient urban areas. Illness was all too common in the ancient world and the Torah had no stake in its detailed description. But the Psalms speak to the travails of the eternal heart of Man and the siddur, which evolved as the Swiss Army knife of the Jewish people to serve all occasions, certainly recognizes illness and the need for healing amidst the perils of the physical world. The Tehines, the very personal prayers of European Jewish women across the centuries, are very much concerned with family illness and disability.

By way of striking contrast with the Torah’s lack of concern with the human experience of illness, we have a remarkable little aside in this week’s haftorah: “King David was now old, advanced in years; and though they covered him with bedclothes; he never felt warm.” Many older people can identify with this statement and feel a human kinship in this regard even with a king David. This addition to the text does not drive the narrative but does make David more frail and more real.

In speaking of history and the lives of those who people that history, there are, so to speak, two approaches: that of William Faulkner and that of LP Hartley; the former said “The past is not dead. It is not even past” while the latter said “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” When it comes to the history of every-day life as regards the eternalities of struggling with illness, I think people have always been more alike than otherwise. The sickness and decline of parents is troubling enough but that of contemporaries can be frightening in a deeper way; it can be “...the terror by night...[and] the arrow that flies by day,...the pestilence that strikes in the darkness, [and] the destruction that ravages at noonday.” (Ps.91) We may try to comfort ourselves with the illusion that we can buy off illness by being nice to the ill; we may secretly exult in our own health as a form of denial; we may avoid the ill for fear of contagion of ill fortune but hearing a Mi Sheberach for another will always be a memento infirmitate. The High Holydays and the Unetaneh Tokef remind us of our vulnerability to illness, but this year the very existence of those services was threatened by the permanent loss, the uncertain loss and the temporary loss of three baalei tefilah felled by illness.

I have been privileged to be part of this community for the majority of my years. Being a member of a community is an insurance policy against the isolation of illness but the premium for that insurance is very dear indeed and cannot be paid with money. On this Thanksgiving weekend, I am thankful for all of you.

Howard L. Berkowitz





**Judy Oppenheim**

**Dvar Torah 11/11/17 Chaye Sarah - Mother's Yartzheit and burials**

**Parshat Chaye Sarah** begins with *"And the life of Sarah was 127 years"*, and continues with her dying in Kiryat Arba, and being buried in Maarat Hamchpale- the cave of the double tombs.

**The commentaries say** Avraham wanted a "freehold purchase" – one that would forever remain a possession of his family.

**A place that family could go back** and visit for generations, and remember Sarah.

**This is the first reference** in the bible to burial.

**Mom**

**The first burial** I went to was 40 years ago this month when my mom, Debbie Hirmes Oppenheim, was buried at the Baker Street Cemetery in Boston on a cold, blistery November day.

**My grandparents** are buried there, as are my aunt and uncles and parents of friends.

**In my Boston modern orthodox bubble** that's what burial sites looked like.

**Cemeteries weren't something I thought about** until I went to an international ethnography conference in Savannah a few years ago and went on a tour of the Bonaventure Cemetery-

made famous from the movie *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* - with ethnographers from the US as well as Europe and Asia.

**It was an eye opener** for me in terms of the history of the cemetery and how burial traditions differ in other countries.

## **Evolution of burial practices**

**Since Sarah's death, burial practices have evolved** based on demographics, geography, cultural influences, changing beliefs and values, cost, laws, and environmental concerns.

Bereshit 3, 19 has the famous saying '**For dust you are, and to dust you shall return**'.

As we saw with Sarah, **early Jewish burial practices were in family caves**, usually created by expanding naturally-occurring tunnels.

First the body would be brought into an outer room and laid on the floor, or in special slots in the wall.

Then about a year later, the family would return, collect the bones and add them to a pile left by previous generations in an inner sanctum.

**Ground burial in private plots also happened.** The first mention of a Jewish gravestone dates back to Bereshit 35:20 where Jacob set up a matsevah or "pillar", denoting a tombstone on Rachel's grave on the road to Bethlehem.

**Cave burials persisted until the Middle Ages**, with some innovations, including ossuaries - - small boxes that held the bones of the dead after the body had decayed.

**Ossuaries** started in the Hellenistic period (the first three centuries BCE), and their acceptance was probably based on Ezekiel's prophecy of the Valley of the Dry Bones

**After the destruction of the Second Temple**, the Romans introduced the concept of ground burial in public cemeteries considering it more hygienic, and Roman-style coffins also began to gain popularity in the Jewish community.

**In Talmudic times** responsibility for burial gradually shifted from the family to the community via mutual burial societies, and by the seventh century – cave burials had stopped, and community cemeteries took their place

**Many pagan practices once attached to early Judaism** were either incorporated or became lost to Western society.

**Cave burial became associated with pagan practice**, and ground burial in public Jewish cemeteries became the standard.

**A stone was no longer seen as a weight** to entrap demons but became associated with affection and respect.

## **Burial now**

### **Now**

**Nowadays most Jews are buried in cemeteries** without a coffin, except in the West where coffins are the norm, possibly adopted from our Gentile neighbors.

**Some new trends include** green burials, use of cemeteries as parks, and - as tech for the living evolves, so does tech for the dead.

### **Digital**

**Many Jewish cemeteries that cannot be physically** preserved for a lack of funding now exist as virtual scrapbooks on the Internet.

There are also **find a grave apps**.

**Digital tech is being used** to connect graves with information about the departed person – including bios, pictures, videos, their writings, favorite music, etc.

**Some also offer the option** to leave messages and record stories for others who may visit.

## Sharing stories/Rivkah

**Sharing stories** has always been a traditional way of remembering our loved ones.

**A famous story occurs right after Sarah is buried.** Avraham sends his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak.

**Eliezer's strategy** was to ask for water and the woman who not only offered him water but also offered water for his camels would be his choice - a test of her good heart and true kindness.

**When Rivkah died,** I like to think that one of the stories people told about her is this story of the camel test.

**People are moved by and learn from stories** more than numbers and facts.

**While shiva is designed to support people** in many ways, one of the most moving parts for me – both when I've sat shiva for my parents and made shiva calls is hearing stories about the person who died.

**It brings them to life** by hearing stories about them that I didn't know or getting a new and deeper perspective on stories that I did know.

## **My mom**

**My mom was a devoted mother** of four, a creative and beloved middle school teacher, a tireless volunteer and leader for Maimonides – the Jewish Day school I went to in Boston, as well as for Hapoel Mizrachi in Israel.

**She loved music, reading, and children;**

**and put her heart into everything** she did to make things both creative and special – whether it was a birthday party or a costume for a play.

**She always encouraged us to be our best.**

## **Sharing stories**

**I'd like to share a few of the stories my family tell about my mother:**

The ice-capades were coming to town, and in order to get tickets before they sold out my mom went out in a blizzard, took the subway and then walked to the place where the tickets were sold.

**Heading back**, the weather was so bad the only vehicle around was the snow plower – who told my mother to get in gave her a ride.

Students of hers from Maimonides still tell me how lucky they were to have her as a teacher – she was an early adopter of open classroom seating, taught her 4<sup>th</sup> graders Shakespeare, did innovative science experiments, and brought tremendous creativity to everything she did.

As a parent and volunteer she pushed the school to not only think about education in the traditional narrow focus of book learning.

She started programs that were ahead of their time for day schools in the 60s - an audiovisual program, a physical education program and most controversial a sex education program.

She had to fight the board, including Rabbi Soloveitchik's daughter to make these programs happen.

**My mother was also an amazing baker** and on Pesach we would get 12 dozen, dozen eggs and spend Pesach cracking nuts, separating eggs and baking.

**My nieces and nephew** have my mom's chocolate chip coffee cake for their birthday every year, and all my cousins make my mom's famous brownies.

**Although I'm not a baker**, one of my treasured possessions is the Pesach mixing bowl we used.

## Letter

**I acquired another treasured possession** when my grandmother died 10 years after my mother, and my Aunt sent a batch of letters my mother had written my grandmother.

**Most were about daily life** but one was in response to my uncle telling my grandmother he wasn't observant anyone.

**The letter to my grandmother** showed my mother's empathy for her mother and brother, her deep sensitivity and compassion, and her acceptance of people choosing a different path.



**I'm going to read a paragraph** from it- something I think all parents can relate to when it comes to raising their children.

Here's the quote:

**"Parents can set an example** in their home – they may teach their children what their beliefs are – their code of morality and ethics.

**At one point in every person's life** there is doubt to a certain degree about all they have been taught and observed.

**He, at that crucial time,** must decide how much he will incorporate into his own way of life, and what portion he will discard. What part he can accept and what part he cannot. What change he must make in his pattern of living in order to be honest to himself in his future life.

**Try to see his side** for your and his peace of mind. You've raised one son in a million. He is an outstanding fellow and a son you can be proud of.

**You may not have an orthodox son** – but you can still say proudly this is my boy!

**As someone who stopped being orthodox,** this was a final gift from my mother – an acceptance of whom I had become.

## Donating

**In addition to telling stories**, another way we honor someone who dies is by donating money or taking action for something they cared about or that represents their personality.

**A beautiful memorial for Sarah** is Yad Sarah, the hand of Sarah - the largest volunteer organization in Israel, that has helped 50% of families in Israel.

**It was founded the year my mother died**, and while it provides an array of health and home care services, its best known for its extensive lending service for medical equipment.

**Yad Sarah was ahead of the curve** in starting the shared economy, the way my mother was in her roles at Maimonides.

**For me a fitting memorial for my mom** is the Lag B'Omer activities in her name at Maimonides, and the playground at N'er Israel, a yeshiva in Baltimore, that my aunt started in her memory.

**Every year my aunt adds** another piece of equipment.

**She has been a major philanthropist** for decades, and said this is the donation that she has received the most joy and appreciation from.

**A fitting tribute** for someone who understood the importance of taking care of the body, not just the mind of children; and who understood the importance of play.

## Closing

**In closing**, may we all live to 120 and longer,

**and may we all continue** to lead a life that creates many stories that reflect:

our values

our character

and our priorities

**the way my mother did.**

Shabbat shalom

Dvar Torah for Haye Sarah-November 3, 2018

Some of you may remember the ongoing comedy routine performed by Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner in which Brooks played a two thousand year old man and Reiner was the interviewer. Reiner asks The Two Thousand Year Old Man when he was born and he says "It was so long ago, it was the year six months, it wasn't even a year yet." Well, now it is. I am happy to report that as of two days ago my granddaughter Ella Olive was a full year old.

Genesis 23:1- "Sarah's lifetime-the span of Sarah's life-came to one hundred and twenty-seven years." Sarah is the only woman in all of Tanach who is given the honor of having her age at death specified, as is the case for many men. Olive is temporarily blissfully unaware of the currents of history and of the present moment swirling around her. But they are coming for her. What is there in Haye Sarah and the surrounding parshiot to prepare her for the world?

From these texts she would learn that traditionally women exerted influence and had an identity primarily through their husbands and sons and that women were routinely judged by appearance. Abraham was told "Lech lecha," which can be translated as journey to yourself or for yourself, but Sarah is not told to know herself. Instead, in Haye Sarah and the surrounding parshiot Olive would see Sarah desperate that the son of Hagar should not compete with her son Isaac for Abraham's inheritance, she would see Rebecca manipulating Isaac by deception so that her favored son Jacob prevails over his brother, she would see Leah and Rebecca, sisters, turning against each other in a competition of reproduction to determine dominance, she would see Tamar taking reproductive matters into her own hands to ensure the continuity of Judah's line. She would hear how Sarah is characterized as beautiful, Rebecca as beautiful but Leah as "weak-eyed." She would also read on to realize that Potiphar's wife and Pharaoh's daughter are not given the dignity of names except in Midrash. What else might Olive read one day?

The feminist literature often suggests that Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of 1792 is the founding document of modern feminism. However, nearly four hundred years earlier, in 1405, Christine de Pizan, the first professional female writer in the history of Europe, wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which represents the first work by a woman in praise and defense of women. De Pizan was able to do this because her father, over the objections of her mother, provided her with a classical education and her husband encouraged her writing. That is, she had the experience of having her intellect and opinions valued. Why did she write *The City of Ladies*? Because her husband died and she had to feed herself and her children. Why did Aphra Behn become the first professional female writer in Britain in the late 1600s and why did Clara Foltz become the first female lawyer on the entire West coast in the late 1800s? Because they were educated, their husbands died and they had to make a living.

*The Book of the City of Ladies* represents a counter-attack on the most popular and misogynistic book in French at the time, *Romance of the Rose*. It consists of dialogues between de Pizan and the female allegorical Three Virtues of Reason, Rectitude and Justice in which de Pizan presents the pieties of her day and the stereotypes of the *Romance* while the Three Virtues

respond with counter-examples of female achievement drawn from the Bible, antiquity, the classics and de Pizan's contemporary world. Each corrective statement represents a building block by which de Pizan constructs a city of refuge for women in the form of the book. She begins with a statement reminiscent of a traditional morning blessing: "Alas, God, why did You not let me be born in the world as a man...I considered myself most unfortunate because God had made me inhabit a female body in this world." Reason arrives and announces "...we have come to bring you out of the ignorance which so blinds your own intellect that you shun what you know for a certainty..." (p.5)

De Pizan does not shy from examining the worst which women have endured. She considers the foundational myth of Rome regarding Romulus leading his men to war with the Sabines to seize and rape their women so as to produce Romans.(p.147) In reviewing rape in warfare, she blandly states of the women of a besieged town "...following martial custom, they would be raped."(p. 163). And did we not read in the Haftorah for the first day of Sukkot, from Zechariah 14: "For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished..."

Outside of a martial context de Pizan writes "I am therefore troubled and grieved when men argue that many women want to be raped and that it does not bother them at all to be raped by men even when they verbally protest."(p.160) Both the words 'rape' and 'ravish' derive from the Latin for 'to seize' and so when we tell a woman she looks ravishing, we are actually saying she is worthy of being raped. Boaz understood the perilous position of women when, in Ruth 2:9, he says to Ruth, "Listen well, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field, and do not go away from here, but keep close to my maidens. Keep your eyes on the field where they are harvesting, and follow them. I have ordered the lads not to molest you." There is a reason my daughter and son-in-law have been joking about teaching their baby girl how to "karate chop boys" for the last several months. Of Olive's bubbe's namesake, we are told in Genesis 34:1 "Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force." Such has been the actual or metaphorical cost of seeking sisterhood. Hence, de Pizan needed a City of Ladies.

While rape is the most violent form of the oppression of women it is also emblematic of men imposing their values upon women. De Pizan asks the Three Virtues about the devaluing of women: "Once more I cannot remain quiet regarding a practice with widespread currency among men-and even among some women- that when women are pregnant and then give birth to daughters, their husbands are upset and grumble..." Rectitude unhesitatingly ascribes this to men's "...simplemindedness and ignorance..." (p. 110)

As to education and intellect, de Pizan wrote: "Thus, not all men (and especially the wisest) share the opinion that it is bad for women to be educated. But it is very true that many foolish men have claimed this because it displeased them that women knew more than they did."(p.154) De Pizan references Boccaccio "...who talks about the attitude of women who despise themselves and their own minds...and say they are good and useful only for embracing men and carrying...children. God has given them such beautiful minds to apply

themselves...”(p.65) Reason continues: “...just as women have more delicate bodies than men...so do they have minds that are freer and sharper whenever they apply themselves.” “[But] do you know why women know less?...it is because they are not involved in many different things but stay at home...”(p.63)

The historical truth of the confinement of the scope of women to the home and the tragedy of limiting their intellectual purview to the hearth is captured in this plaint of Donna Inez in Byron’s epic poem *Don Juan* of 1818 (Canto the first, CXCIV):

*“Man’s love is of man’s life a thing apart,  
 ‘Tis a woman’s whole existence; man may range  
 The court, camp, church, the vessel, and the mart;  
 Sword, gown, gain, glory, offer in exchange  
 Pride, fame, ambition, to fill up his heart,  
 And few there are whom these can not estrange;  
 Men have all these resources, [Women] but one,  
 To love again, and be again undone.”*

De Pizan provides endless lurid examples, most from church and medieval history and legend, of beautiful, virginal women being mutilated because of the lascivious desires of men and the measures which must always be taken to avoid a fatal attraction. She relates the story of Novella, the daughter of Giovanni Andrea, a great law professor at Bologna in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, who knew as much as her father but she had to teach with a little curtain in front of her face so her beauty did not arouse the male attendees, men not being responsible for their impulses. (p.154)

That the potential perniciousness of the quality most associated with women, beauty, by which we begin to judge babies and with which we burden women forever after, can work to a woman’s own detriment even outside of a sexual context is acknowledged by Yeats in his *Prayer For My Daughter*:

*May she be granted beauty and yet not  
 Beauty to make a stranger’s eye distraught,  
 Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,  
 Being made beautiful overmuch,  
 Consider beauty a sufficient end,  
 Lose natural kindness and maybe  
 The heart-revealing intimacy*

*That chooses right, and never find a friend.....*

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*Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned*

*By those that are not entirely beautiful;*

Since de Pizan is occupied with building her literary city, she is much taken with Dido who actually founded a city. Dido, whose original name was Elissa, had to flee her evil brother after he murdered her husband and so, as an exemplar of female assertiveness, "...she courageously reflected on what she should do and armed herself with strength and constancy to put her intended undertaking into effect." (p.92) She founds the great city of Carthage on the Mediterranean coast of Africa and becomes the queen. De Pizan writes: "Because of her prudent government, they changed her name from Elissa to Dido, which is the equivalent of saying virago in Latin, which means 'the woman who has the strength and force of a man'" (p.95) Like Jacob, whose name was changed because he had striven with God and man (Gen.32:28), so Dido's was changed for striving with men, if not with God. But that did not mean that men liked it. Virago, which was just becoming a word in common parlance in de Pizan's time, has tellingly since morphed from its original meaning of "warrior woman" to that, in our day, of a loud and overbearing woman. I should add that de Pizan wrote the only work in French praising Joan of Arc, a leader of armies, during Joan's lifetime.

In the beginning, Adam names his companion twice, first Woman and then Eve. It is time that men stopped telling woman who they are. Deborah, the only female Judge, is introduced in the Book of Judges as "eshet Lapidot." This is usually translated as "the wife of Lapidot" but could equally plausibly be translated as "a woman of fiery torches." It is simply a fact that more than the Jews, more than Africans, more than indigenous peoples, and subsuming all of those categories, women have been the most oppressed class of persons across time and geography. In our parasha, in Genesis 24:58, there is an extraordinary moment in which Laban and Bethuel accord Rebekah the dignity of asking her if she will voluntarily agree to travel with Eliezer to become the bride of Isaac and they have to await her "I will!" Olive, and all other young women, will have to decide how they will answer when called upon to become women on fire.

Howard L. Berkowitz

Gut Shabbes. This past summer Miriam and I had the wondrous experience of visiting and hiking through six national parks in the southwest: Zion, Bryce, Capital Reef, Arches, Canyonlands, and the Grand Canyon. Miriam aptly described our 14 days of viewing the rocks, canyons, sunrises, sunsets and star filled evening skies by proclaiming that “my heart is literally aching from the overwhelming beauty we are encountering every day.” It was so refreshing to temporarily get a reprieve from the canyons of Manhattan that were (and sadly still are) filled with



anger, disgust and jaw dropping disbelief at the state of our current political situation.

One day after hiking through the incredible rock formations at Arches, we went into the Visitor Center, and while browsing through a book filled with pictures of the massive

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and awe inspiring arches we had just visited in person, I discovered the following quote from Emily Dickinson:

“Life is a spell so exquisite that everything conspires to break it.”

I deeply resonated with this sentiment. This is the great challenge of the human journey: how to stay in touch with glimpses of deeper meaning that lie above and beyond the all too pervasive noise and chaos of our day to day lives. Too often we are assaulted by critical internal judgments and external forces of cynicism, manipulation and evil disregard for human suffering. We are beset by forces that conspire to dull our senses and perceptions so that we end up missing and forgetting that we indeed inhabit a sacred and exquisite place called life. And so, before I say a few words about our

parashah, I would like to invite you into the exquisite spell I inhabit today.

It is absolutely exquisite for me to see you Margalit and Caleb enveloped in a deep, rich and nurturing knowledge that you indeed have found your b'shert. The confidence you have in this choice and the palpable love and ease you share brings us great joy.

It is exquisite for me to be here with you Miriam to see this day together. You have been an amazing mother to our children, and you are the true backbone of our family. And it

is exquisite to see the love, joy and enthusiasm of that you  
Yosi, Amy, Shuki and Lucy, and our grandchildren, bring to  
Margalit and Caleb. And it certainly is exquisite to welcome  
from Atlanta, Barry and Marcie, Caleb's parents, to be part of  
this celebration honoring our children.

It is exquisite for me to be standing in the midst of a  
community (and dear friends from outside of this community)  
that we have called our own for 35 years. We have stood  
together through births, bnei mitszvah, graduations,  
weddings, illnesses, funerals, disputes, successes and failures.  
We have grown up and grown older in this community.

Anybody doubting that should take a look at this picture! I

see an ocean of black beards, wrinkle free faces, and smiling

children and teenagers who today are the parents of their

own children. I even see the face in the front row of a young

seven year old beautifully blue eyed young girl who probably

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never dreamed that someday she would be leyning the

seventh aliya of parashat Chaye Sarah while her fiancée read

the haftarah and the two of them were rained down upon

with candies of blessing and love.

To encounter the exquisite is to find nechama, deep comfort

and consolation, that transcends the weightiness of day to

day problems. You Margalit and Caleb help me to experience that nechama today.

Our parashah, Chaye Sarah, has at its center this search for nechama, for in many essential ways it details the absence of nechama in the lives of Sarah, Avraham and Yitzchak. Chaye Sarah, indeed the whole book of Genesis, is about the search for family reconciliation that leads to nechama that arises from confidence that a meaningful future is possible.

When we read about Sarah's death in the first verse, who does not hear in the background the Midrash that states that

Sarah died when she was informed about the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, that occurred at the end of last week's reading of Vayera. It is so intuitively true that a mother's heart would break upon learning that her longed-for son was almost sacrificed at the hands of her husband. Can you imagine being present for the eulogy Avraham delivers over Sarah's dead body? I hear in his words deep gratitude and respect for her willingness to travel with him in his pursuit of his divine mission, and significant regret and guilt for all of the incidents she was present for during which that mission appeared to be divine folly: from the famine they endured in

the land of Israel, to the almost consummated sexual encounters with Pharoah and Avimelech, and to the rivalries with Hagar and Yishmael, and to the Akedah itself. I hear Avraham proclaiming: “she has paid an enormous price to partner with me in pursuit of this dream the invisible God lay before us – I could not have done it without her.” He is indebted to her, and it is no surprise that he engages in such a protracted negotiation to find her a burial place of honor and dignity.

And yet, I think it is not too farfetched to imagine that there is an unspoken part of Avraham that wonders and questions:



“has it been worth it? This is what I have been pursuing for so many years? My wife is dead, I have banished one of my sons and I am nearly estranged from the other. My familial relationships are so broken. Thank you God....some promise!”

Avraham arises from burying Sarah with the pained

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awareness that he needs to repair some of the damage that has occurred in his relationship with Yitzchak. He owes this to his son, he this to Sarah, and he owes it to himself.

At this moment in time Avraham finds himself is in the midst of what Erik Erikson labeled as the adult developmental crisis of generativity versus stagnation.

Erikson is clear that while generativity is related to giving birth to progeny and descendants, it is not limited to this, and it is an issue all of us face, parents and non-parents, married and single people. It is the crisis and challenge of living a purposeful life by making worthwhile contribution to our world, however that may be defined.

The *raison d'être* of Avraham's life has been the creation of a people. Last week we read about God reflecting on his relationship with Avraham: "For I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the Way of God, doing charity and justice." The entire

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Jewish project is described here as an eternal one in which successive generations will continue to strive to enrich the world. Avraham is only the first link in what is meant to be an everlasting chain.

And so Avraham call his loyal servant Eliezer and says to him:

"Place your hand under my thigh and I will have you swear by

the Lord, God of heaven and earth, that you not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell. Rather, to my land and to my kindred shall you go and take a wife for my son Yitzchak.”

My interest here is not so much with the content of the oath, namely where Eliezer should search for a wife, but in the very need for it and the form of the oath itself.

Many of our commentators struggle to find a reason why this oath is needed, and look for reasons why Eliezer is not trustworthy.

But these explanations all seem to miss the essential closeness of Avraham to Eliezer. He has been his trusted servant and confidante for close to sixty years. According to the Sages in Masechet Derech Eretz Zutra, Eliezer is one of nine biblical characters who entered the Garden of Eden without dying. This is not a man who needs to take an oath. Avraham asks Eliezer to take an oath in this very unusual form of swearing while grasping under his thigh not because he distrusts Eliezer but because he does not have the words to communicate his deep and abiding love of his son and the terror he feels in this moment.

He needs Eliezer to touch him in this place of the source of his generativity, this place of great vulnerability and sensitivity, to communicate his deep worry that he has failed his son, and thereby failed God. He pleads with Eliezer to touch the place within him that has been wounded, and to feel that he now truly understands that his covenantal journey is bound with the real, human Yitzchak, the son he loves, and not just the amorphous unborn Jewish people.

Avraham bears his soul and Eliezer responds. He devises a plan to find a woman whose behavior embodies the characteristics of kindness and compassion. He finds a

woman, who like Avraham so many years ago, has the courage and tenacity to leave her home and country in order to begin a new life.

As we near the end of the Parasha, we read: "And Yitzchak brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rivkah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Yitzchak was comforted after his mother's death." Yitzchak is surely comforted by the loving presence of Rivka as she helps ease his deep loneliness following the death of his mother. But additionally, I believe that he is comforted by the knowledge of his father's role in arranging this marriage. In Yitzchak's

mind and heart Avraham moves from being the man who abandoned him to a father who helps him leave the fields of loneliness and enter the tent of connection.

What we are left with at the end of our Parasha is one of the central messages of the book of Genesis. Reconciliation following rupture is possible. It may not be total nor complete, and usually it is not, but it is possible. To seek reconciliation and nechama is not a fool's errand.

Margalit and Caleb, my blessing to you today is to always remember the love and joy you are feeling right now, and to



remember, that no matter where your life journeys take you,  
to always pack that tent of reconciliation in order to bring  
comfort to each other in the presence of vulnerability. I love  
you both. Shabbat shalom.

TOLEDOT-November 8, 1980

It is two days short of exactly a year ago when I delivered a dvar Torah on Vayera the day after my daughter Elana was born. Her birthday is tomorrow and so I would like to present this talk in honor of the occasion. Also, I should note that after a year the guilt over not having delivered a dvar Torah in that time was getting to be too much for me. In any case, I'm very happy that both Dina and Elana can be with us this time.

Throughout services we invoke the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs, and claim to be heirs to their merit. Though the three are usually referred to together in the ritual formula as if they were of equal stature, this is clearly not the case. In the Hertz chumash there are thirty-eight pages involving Abraham and no more than ten relating to Isaac, whereas forty-two are devoted to Jacob, apart from Joseph. In addition, G-d speaks directly to Abraham on seven occasions but to Isaac only once. I have not gotten around to obsessively counting Jacob's conversations with G-d. More importantly, of course, is the difference in the substance contained in those pages. Abraham's and Jacob's lives are rich with character and events while that of Isaac is bare by comparison.

The fact is that Isaac's main purpose is to serve as the intermediary between Abraham and Jacob-to provide continuity in the seed on which others, not he, were to stamp greatness. We know something of the beginning and the end of Isaac's life, where it touches upon those of Abraham and Jacob, but little of the middle years where he stands alone.

I would like to briefly look at these contentions from a psychological perspective in an attempt to shed some little light on why it is understandable that this inequality should exist. I will try to adhere more to the text and what seems likely than to metapsychology or my imagination in an attempt to avoid some of the lapses of the field which has come to be called "psychohistory." In any case, considering that this is a Biblical text, I don't think I will stray any farther than is the rule with many commentators. Also, one of the striking validations of the Bible is that one can speculate psychologically in a realistic fashion about its characters.

Abraham is the one of the three most often invoked singly and his singular nature is declared by G-d when we are told to look to the rock from whom we were hewn. It is with Abraham that the dialogue between G-d and the Jewish people begins. In a more secular vein, Abraham was regarded as "a mighty prince"-the undisputed chieftain of a large band of, no doubt, rather ragged nomads. Certainly here is a larger-than-life figure that would be rather imposing, if not actually intimidating, to all but the most stalwart of sons. We can be brave and wax psychoanalytic for a moment and suggest that the positive resolution of an Oedipal rivalry with such a father is not so easily accomplished. We can go a step further and assume that Abraham maintained a somewhat aloof relationship with the boy, as might be expected of such a revered leader with extensive duties. There is nothing in the text to contradict this given that we

hear nothing of Isaac from the time of the promise of his birth, which was an event between G-d and Abraham, to his weaning, which was a formal public celebration as befitted the child of a chieftain, to the Akedah which was, again, primarily an event between G-d and Abraham. In addition, there are no remarks about the fondness of Abraham for Isaac or any of his children as there are for Isaac and Jacob. If we can assume that aloofness, then the father becomes an unapproachable, almost omnipotent figure.

At the same time, of course, we can't overlook Sarah's role. Here is a woman who is barren until the age of ninety in a society where women were valued only in so far as they produced male heirs. We recall Sarah's desperation being so great that she sends Abraham into Hagar but then is intensely jealous of her. Therefore, we are certainly on safe ground if we assume that Sarah was overwhelmed with joy at the birth of Isaac (indeed, his name was derived from the Hebrew for "joy") and that she developed an exceedingly close relationship with him. Also, it should not be forgotten that Sarah was a rather strong person herself being fully capable of issuing orders to Abraham when overcome by jealousy and even capable of laughing at G-d. She may have applied this strength in the service of preventing Isaac's separation.

Granting a picture of an overwhelmingly powerful but aloof father and an exceedingly close-binding but powerful mother, it is not uncommon clinically to find in the lower right hand corner of that picture a rather passive, submissive son who has had to resolve the Oedipal conflict negatively and capitulate to his father while identifying with his mother.

The first textual evidence for this formulation and the event which exacerbates this situation is the Akedah: "And it came to pass after these things, that G-d did prove Abraham..." The text speaks of Abraham and not Isaac because Abraham was fully capable of rebelling against G-d's command, though he voluntarily chose to submit, whereas Isaac, by his nature, had no choice but to passively comply. Though Isaac is somewhere between the ages of thirty and forty at the time of the Akedah, he clearly sounds child-like in the text.

Later in the Akedah section we read: "And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said: 'Abraham, Abraham.' And he said: 'Here am I.' And he said: 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him....'" Why the repetition of "Abraham" and of the warning not to harm Isaac? It has been suggested by some that this implies that Abraham persisted in his attempt to sacrifice his son even after being excused from the task the first time. Surely Isaac could not remain unaffected at seeing the almost eagerness with which his own father was prepared to mutilate him.

Needless to say, this traumatic event, this near living out of the dreaded Oedipal revenge, would be expected to exacerbate the underlying conflict. And, indeed, perhaps this helps to elucidate why the text of the Akedah concludes with: "So Abraham returned unto his young men and they rose up and went together to Beer-Sheva...." There is no mention of Isaac returning with his father and I am suggesting this may be because of a state of dread anxiety at being with

his father. The text is silent on Isaac's reaction to the event and also to his mother's reaction to the near loss of her son. We might speculate that the Akedah might have resulted in the two of them drawing yet closer together as Abraham is drawn yet closer to his G-d.

Now it is only when "Abraham [is] old and well stricken in age" and Sarah has died that Abraham decides to allow his son to become more of a man at the age of forty by marrying. That a nomadic chieftain should decide when and who his son is to marry without consulting his son need provoke no comment as this was culturally accepted but it is certainly consistent with what has been said here. However, the degree of Isaac's passivity and acceptance on first seeing his father's servant's choice is remarkable. What speaks even more powerfully for some of the above speculations is reading: "And Isaac brought [Rebekah] into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. And Isaac was comforted for his mother." Abraham's remarriage soon after his son's marriage and his fathering of children while between the ages of one hundred thirty and one hundred and seventy five certainly served as a reminder of who was the better man.

Where do we find additional support in today's parshah for the thesis that Isaac's upbringing condemned him to a passive transitional role in Jewish history? I would say that much of the material in the first half of this section can be understood as a futile attempt on Isaac's part to equal his father as a means of resolving the Oedipal conflict and working through the trauma of the Akedah.

First, Isaac's wife was barren for twenty years and Isaac entreated the Lord to remember her just as had been the case with Abraham and Sarah. This coincidence in reality starts off the parshah by suggesting that Isaac lived his life in parallel to and as a captive of his father's. Next we hear that Rebekah gives birth to fraternal twin boys who are so different that they seem to represent caricatures of the split in Isaac between the passive and the aggressive although, as we shall see, Jacob proves to be quite different from his father. Esau is described as "a cunning hunter, a man of the field" while "Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents." Isaac favored Esau, the son who could hunt for venison as he, himself, never could.

Then we see a series of symptomatic acts-repetitions by Isaac of some of the events he knows from his father's life. He goes to the kingdom of Abimelech and claims his wife is his sister and profits by this ruse, as had Abraham. Then we hear: "And Isaac dug again the wells of water, which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father...and he called their names after the names by which his father called them." Unlike his father, however, Isaac is forced from the first two of these wells by the Philistines, thus being reminded that he is hardly Abraham's equal. Isaac then concludes a covenant with Abimelech, once again drawing on Abraham's policies and actions for his own.

It is significant that nothing other than Isaac's repetition of Abraham's history is reported to us from Isaac's middle years. We then find ourselves reading about Isaac as an old man rather

different from his father. He is described as feeble and blind and easily duped by his wife and son. It appears that Isaac's neurotic solution did not succeed and he ceases to be mentioned except in so far as he is needed to further the telling of Jacob's history.

I now want to briefly consider the question of why it was that Jacob evolved into a man more like his grandfather than his father. First, I would start with the genetic or constitutional given. If the text can be taken literally, Isaac was born of the near incestuous match of a half sister and half brother with the potential for the genetic compromise of inbreeding while Jacob was born of more distant relatives. Further, at birth Jacob demonstrated that he is not the passive character that Isaac assigns to him when he grabs Esau's heel in order to prevent him from being first born.

Secondly, Jacob had a passive and, in all likelihood, a more available father-the reverse of Isaac's situation.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Rebekah was a rather different woman from Sarah. She had been barren for a much shorter time and gave birth much earlier and had two sons. It is probable, therefore, that she was less close-binding, though as loving, as Sarah. Also the text in several places demonstrates how Rebekah's ambitions for Jacob's success were taken on by her son, and his dreams, while Sarah was not recorded as having urged Isaac to succeed or even marry.

## DVAR TORAH

PARASHAT TOLDOT-NOVEMBER 12, 2004

Gut shabbes. For the better part of the last twenty five years, I have practiced psychotherapy with individuals encountering serious illness, loss and death. I often have the sense that I am sitting, listening and talking to people who have reached the outer edge of their existence. By this I refer to people who have come into direct and agonizing contact with their own distinct human limitations. These are people who sojourn in a land in which will and desire are often terms empty of old and familiar meaning. These people wake up in the morning, look in the mirror, and see faces of powerlessness staring back at them. What they desire most in the world, be it health or an absent loved one, they can not attain. Living

with infertility, chronic or terminal illness, or losing a loved one to death, teaches like no other lesson about our lack of ultimate control over our destinies.

Most of us, thank God, spend a majority of our living hours in the much safer middle ground of existence, far away from the edge. In that safe middle ground, terms like choice, intention and autonomy still resound with meaning and spirit. We are able to comfortably live under the illusion that we are in full control of our life paths. We believe that what we desire we can achieve by virtue of our own efforts and choices. Occasionally an event takes place that leads us towards the periphery, and we are momentarily shaken as we are thrown from the driver's seat of our lives. But then we lift up

ourselves, find our balance and return to our course once again, back on the so called safe path and in control.

But what of those to whom the choice filled safe middle appears as a distant and unreal dream, those who live close to the edge, crowded and confined by illness, loss and death in the narrow straits of limited possibility.

How do they live there? What is it like to be a partner, a close friend, or even a community acquaintance of one whose most cherished hopes mightily clash against an oppositional and unbending reality? I'd like to examine two responses to this question as they appear in next week's parasha, vayeitzei, and in our parasha Toldot.



Next week, in vayeitzei, Yaakov, a man who has been crowded and squeezed since his conception, is unable to tolerate his wife Rachel's proximity to the edge. Rachel wails:

"Give me children, for otherwise I am dead". Yaakov responds coldly:

"Am I in God's place who has withheld fruit of the body from you?" Yaakov can not let in the depth of his wife's pain, the enormity of her despair, and the deadness that is embedded in her womb and soul.

Rachel is a woman whose life has been characterized by longing. The Torah tells us that the seven years Yaakov worked for Rachel were for him

"keyamin achadim," like a few days. Was it likewise for

Rachel? Is it not more likely that for her it was period of endless waiting, filled with dreams of reunion with her lover and anticipation and deep expectation about a life free from the yoke of her father? For those seven long years Rachel, no doubt, tended sheep with visions of a time when she would be free and empowered to create a new life and family, safe and unfettered, far away from her father's deceptive reach.

Rachel's longing however comes to naught: her dreams are shattered one by one. First, she witnesses her father's deceptive creation of a marital triad. Second, she suffers the humiliation of watching her husband sleep with her sister. Third, she gazes upon the revolving cycle of her sister's stomach growing large and small as Leah

gives birth to many children. And finally, she is overwhelmed by the fact of her own infertility. This is a woman whose inner world and youthful hopes have shrunk dramatically. Surely she walks near the edge. In her despair she cries to her husband: "Help me! Pray for me!"

Yes, pray for me. Rashi very interestingly reinterprets

Rachel's plea of "give me children," to mean:

"be with me in the way your father was with his wife - pray for me."

How indeed was Yitzhak with Rivka? In our parasha the Torah tells us that Yitzhak married Rivka at age 40. The

Torah then reveals the following important information in one telegraphic verse:

"Yitzhak entreated God, facing his wife, because she was barren." The Torah then tells us that God answered his prayer, and Rivka was pregnant with twins.

So much happens so quickly that if you momentarily glance away you miss this important incident between Yitzhak and Rivka. Rashi comes to our rescue and shouts: "slow down, don't for one second imagine that the intensity or duration of Yitzhak's prayer bears any resemblance whatsoever to the length of the sentence describing his act!" Rashi states:

"He prayed much and urgently...Whenever the root ATR appears it has the meaning of heaping up and increasing. Entreaties."

Rashi, following the Midrash, additionally teaches us the meaning of

"facing his wife:

"he stood in one corner and prayed, and she stood in one corner and prayed." Create for yourselves a visual of this scene. Can you see them together, each up against the wall, both literally and figuratively? Standing for hours on end against the wall, can you hear them davenning for a changed future? Can you hear them talking about their hopes for healing, their doubts about the efficacy of their prayers, and their questions about why this fate

has fallen upon them? And most of all, "I'nochach ishto," facing his wife, can you hear Yitzchak professing his unending loyalty and commitment to face this painful situation together with his wife?

And so, Rachel, remembering Yitzhak and Rivka, pleads with Yaakov: "pray for me, pray with me, let me know that you won't leave me alone. Pray and help me shore up my faltering faith so that I can believe that God is not abandoning me. Pray for my healing, however that may come."

Yaakov is unable to pray for Rachel with the quality of "haatara," deep begging, because he is threatened by the prospect of feeling Rachel's anxiety and powerlessness.

For Yaakov to pray for healing with the quality of "haftzara", impassioned entreating, he must become open to the possibility of being touched by Rachel's pain. He must listen to a chorus of voices of doubt and uncertainty such as: maybe God won't give me the answer I want; maybe God isn't listening; or even maybe God doesn't listen.

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Yaakov instead chastizes Rachel, "his anger flamed," and in so doing avoids her pain and his own as well.

Praying for health and healing is a deeply serious matter, for it causes us to face our deeply human vulnerability and our often uncomfortable dependence on the Master of the Universe. Yitzchak Avinu, who is often mistakenly

characterized and chastised for being passive and invisible, teaches us here about the need to engage in a radically active and personally risky response to the pain of our loved ones. Yitzchak teaches us about the power of being "nochach," present in body and spirit so that our loved ones facing loss and pain never have to fear abandonment and isolation. Yitzchak Avinu teaches us that true prayer takes place close to the edge where faith and doubt intersect, and that it is from that very place where we call down God's blessing of healing. May we all learn from Yitzchak's courage.





## TOLDOT

Ron Meyers

Minyan Maat, 2 November 2013

Isaac is our mystery patriarch. It's hard to put your finger on his character, or even his function in the story. He has none of the heroics, adventures or controversies of his father Abraham or his son Jacob. (Or even, for that matter, his other son Esau, or his grandson, Joseph). It seems that his main function is to just be Abraham's son and Jacob's father. And not in a nice way, either – his function as Abraham's son is to be almost killed and sacrificed, and his function as Jacob's father is to be deceived and swindled.

You could go even further and say that it's Isaac's function to be Rebecca's husband more than it's her function to be his wife – and again not in a nice way, since it is Rebecca who orchestrates Jacob's deception of Isaac. She serves as midwife to the complicated, tortuous path of the birthright and the covenant, which is manifestly Gd's plan. Rebecca's central role, compared to Isaac's weak and passive role, has led some to say that the patriarchs really are not Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but Abraham, Rebecca and Jacob. And if we are even tempted to accept that view, then we have almost no choice but to acknowledge that Isaac is less of a patriarch and more of a shlemazl.

The circumstances of his birth, to elderly parents, are utterly unique. And no other birth was ever so elaborately foretold or anticipated. Huge, extensive narratives are given to the expectations of his arrival and to his naming. And later

on, a huge, extensive narrative is given to the project of finding a wife for him, a process that is as unique in the Bible as his conception and birth. From all this narrative attention, it's unmistakable that Isaac is terribly important – but he is important as a factor in other people's lives, not in and of himself. He is *spoken about* much more than speaks himself. In contrast to the 23 verses describing his birth, or the 19 verses of the Akeida story, or the 67 verses (!) of the story of Eliezer going to find Rebecca for Isaac to marry, Isaac, during all of these stories speaks but one line: during the Akeida, he asks Abraham, "Father, where is the lamb for the offering?" And as we all know, Abraham's response to even this single line of dialogue is – a deception.

Nobody speaks honestly to Isaac. And again, the text invites us to see this as an essential aspect of his nature. Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, identifies dialogue as one of the principal literary features of the Bible. He notes that "a remarkably large part of the narrative burden is carried by dialogue," and "as a rule, when a narrative event... seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue." (p.182) Isaac's story unfolds across three parashayot, but it is only in one scene that he has any significant dialogue. This of course is the scene in which Jacob deceives him to steal the birthright. This is Isaac's single starring scene. It's as if his whole function in life is to be deceived for other people's purposes. It is hardly beyond the heroes of Genesis to deceive people – Abraham passes Sarah off as his sister, Jacob and Laban make many years' labor of deceiving each other, Joseph takes his brothers for a long and anguished ride before revealing himself to them. Isaac alone deceives no one, and Isaac alone is the constant object, and the victim, of others' deceptions.

The emphasis in the text on Isaac's weaknesses is very conspicuous (remember that he's blind, too, on top of everything else – again, an affliction not shared by any other major figure in the Bible). But I think we can find other aspects of Isaac's character if we listen closely.

A simple first observation is that it takes all types. Not everyone is cunning like Jacob; not everyone has the moral courage to talk back to Gd like Abraham; not everyone is a visionary like Joseph, or even an outdoorsman like Esau. There are many people who take a quieter role in life, supporting and facilitating the more dramatic actions of others. Perhaps this is especially true when one is the child of a famous person, or the parent of a specially gifted child. Isaac, of course, is both, and he can be forgiven for not rising to their levels of achievement. Neither Abraham nor Jacob could have attained their achievements without Isaac playing his role. (Growing up in New Jersey, I often heard that Benjamin Franklin had called NJ a “barrel tapped at both ends”, meaning that it was nothing but a conduit between NY and Philadelphia. That may be true, and it's certainly true that Isaac is a conduit between Abraham and Jacob.)

We can see more deeply into Isaac's nature if we consider the *place* that Isaac is associated with. Not New Jersey – he is associated with *Beer Lachai Roi*. Beer Lachai Roi (BLR) is the place where he is coming from when Rebecca arrives (24:63), and it's the place where he settles his family (25:11). In each instance, there's something mysterious about his gravitation to this spot – when Rebecca arrives, he is not at BLR, but coming from there. I can't readily think of another narrative

that pays attention not to the place where someone is than to the off-stage place where is not. (It is true that much of the Torah, and much of our history, is concerned with wandering and exile, but this text underscores Isaac's personal displacement<sup>1</sup>.) And when Isaac settles there, we are told that it's only, and specifically, after Abraham's death, that he makes BLR his home. It seems that this is a place to which he has a special affinity, but also a place where he cannot comfortably settle as long as his father is alive. There is something about Isaac that cannot be expressed as long as his is Abraham's son, and something about that place that enables him to express it.

BLR is the place where Hagar languished after she fled from Sarah's mistreatment. Hagar named the place in honor of Gd seeing her affliction and answering her, calling it The Well of the Living Gd Who Sees Me. Hagar is afflicted by Sarah, and later by Abraham, and is saved by the Gd who sees her – and sees within her the seed of a great nation. It seems only natural that Isaac should bask in Gd's vision as well. Isaac, who is so unseen and so unheard, who is in danger of literally disappearing from humanity, who is saved by Abraham suddenly seeing the ram in the bush, and who is afflicted later in life by his own inability to see – it is here that Isaac can take solace in being seen by Gd, if not by Man. Hagar's second banishment from Abraham's household is life-threatening – she finds herself in the desert with no water, but Gd hears her – more specifically, she cries, and Gd hears the cry of her son, Ishmael. We don't know if this occurs again at BLR, but once again, Gd tunes in to her in her affliction at Abraham's hand. Even though Hagar and her son were seen as rivals to Isaac, Isaac is also afflicted at Abraham's

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<sup>1</sup> And it contrasts with Joseph's repeated displacement from one foreign place to another, since he has a great ability to gain advantage and make himself at home in each place.

hand, and thus has so much in common with Hagar – it is no wonder that he follows in her footsteps. And we bring both Hagar’s story and Isaac’s together in our readings for Rosh Hashana with the story of Hannah. Another afflicted soul, who prays silently but is heard by Gd. These characters can rely only on Gd, and on no one else, to see them and to hear them. BLR is where Isaac finds a place where he can be found.

Isaac’s affinity for BLR underscores his identity, not as a shlemazl or an object of others’ deception, but as a victim and a survivor. Aviva Zornberg identifies his blindness later in life as a long-delayed response to his trauma in the Akeida. I don’t know about that, but I do wonder what life is like for someone who has had an extraordinarily close brush with an extraordinarily harsh death.

I think, for one thing, that when you have that kind of drama in a single moment of your life, you really don’t need any other drama in your life, ever. Maybe it is perfectly sufficient to lead a quiet life, to be acted upon, rather than acting. *Arguing with Gd, entertaining angels, working for fourteen years to get your two wives, raising thirteen children, wrestling with some other angels – that’s all very nice. You can have it. I will lead a simple, quiet, unoriginal life.* Isaac, very distinctly, does nothing novel. He reaffirms the treaties that his father negotiated; he re-digs the wells that his father dug; he even repeats his father’s strange maneuver of telling the foreigners that his wife was his sister. He treads no new ground. I think he doesn’t need to and doesn’t want to. He is happy enough just to be above ground.

I would like to suggest that Isaac does not represent a principle of weakness or objectification. He represents a principle of CONTINUATION. This is something that *Hindu* mythology personifies and deifies. At the top of the vast pantheon of Indian gods is the trinity of Brahma, the creator, Shiva the destroyer, and Vishnu, the preserver. Our tradition views all these functions in a single god, of course – it is Gd who creates, who threatens to destroy and who, when He wishes, averts the destruction and saves the day. But the creation and the destruction really tend to steal the show. The poles of narrative stretch from “Let there be light” to the Flood; from the miraculous birth of Isaac, to Korach being swallowed up by the earth. It is impossible, perhaps, not to focus our attention on the drama of beginnings and endings. But the concept of a preserver focuses our attention on the middle of the story. And sure enough, it is Vishnu whose avatars include some of the most vital, central and dramatic characters in Indian myth: Rama, Krishna, and Buddha. Isaac is not a god, of course, but he is an exemplar of CONTINUATION and PRESERVATION. He is in the *middle* of our trinity of patriarchs, and it is he who invites us to appreciate the MIDDLE of the story.

The middle is rarely as dramatic as the beginning or the end. But if birth is the beginning and death is the end, then it’s a lot of middle that we really want, isn’t it. No one knows this better than Isaac. And we can see this in two verses at the end of chapter 24, when Rebecca arrives, that reveal Isaac’s character more than all the rest of his stories. They come, *davka*, in the *middle* of his life, when he is ceasing to be Abraham’s son, and has not yet become Jacob and Esau’s father. The fleeting moment when he gets to be himself.

*So, Isaac, what do you do with your life after you're almost killed? What do any of us do on the day after something important happens – the day after we are spared from harm, come through the surgery, or the day after a big achievement (graduation, promotion, bar mitzvah)? You still have to get out of bed, and brush your teeth, and pay your bills. Life continues, in all its ordinariness. But we no longer view it as being so ordinary.*

Isaac gets up and goes back into the fields, as he must have done on a thousand other days. But in 24:63, we read that he is not just walking in the fields, but, according to different translations, supplicating, or meditating, toward the turning of sunset. From this, the midrash infers that Isaac is davvening Mincha! He is credited with initiating the Mincha prayer. And who, other than Isaac, would have the insight that we should exalt the middle of the day and give thanks for the continuation of every hour between morning and night?

And isn't continuation a central theme of our observances? Three weeks from now, we will celebrate *not* the dedication of the Temple, but the RE-dedication of the Temple. Two months ago, we marked the birthday of the world, but even more, prayed for the RE-birth and RE-newal of each soul in the world. To me, no liturgy better sounds the theme of continuation than the one we will recite just a few minutes from now: the prayer for the new month. We pray for a good life, a life of peace, a life of prosperity... Life, life, life, we hope for. Eleven times we repeat the word "life" – each building upon the other, but stopping short of a complete set of twelve – as long as we are continuing, we are never complete, and the completion of life is something we wish to defer as long as we can.



At this point, I have to let you in on the personal motivation for me in making these observations. Two weeks ago, I reached the age, to the day, at which my father died. And now I'm older than he ever was. Monday, October 21 was quite literally the first day of the rest of my life. And what did I do after passing that milestone? I got up, brushed my teeth, went to the office. And frankly, I had a pretty crappy day. I was tired, I was painfully busy. But I was alive, and, *kinehara*, I still am.

What else does Isaac do when we first see him again after he is saved from death? He *marries*. Rebecca rides up on a camel while he is supplicating in the fields. And the language is beautiful. He raises his eyes and sees her. She raises her eyes to see him. She is higher than him, up on a camel, but to look at him is to raise her eyes. For him, raising the eyes has echoes of the salvation narratives when Abraham "raises his eyes" to see the ram in the bush that saves Isaac's life, and when Hagar "opens her eyes" to see the well of water that saved her. They raise their eyes to one another, each *looking up* to the other, upward and upward and upward. No other husband and wife in Genesis are spoken of in this way. In 24:67, we are told, "he took her, and she became his wife, and he loved her and was consoled". The actions are reciprocal and conversational – he took her, she became his wife, he loved her. We hardly hear about *love* anywhere else in the Torah. *This* is the new ground the Isaac treads.

So, it is in the quiet, un-dramatic life that the *internal* states of love and consolation are found. What act more honors the principle of continuation than

marriage? A *wedding* is a beginning, but a *marriage* is a continuation. As anyone who has been in a long relationship can tell you, continuation is the great challenge, and also the great reward. I can speak from sixteen years' perspective, and just a few months ago, we celebrated with Frances and Floyd as they marked *sixty* years! Now, that's what I call continuation.

Having come to the *end* of this drash, I return you now to the *middle* of the service. Praised be the middle.



Dvar torah Parasha Toledot 22 November 2014. Ben Orlove

I apologize for the scrambling of the letters of the Hebrew words. They were in the correct order when I saved this file, I assure you. And now they are mostly reversed left to right, though the words are in the correct order.

1. The Parashah this week, Toledot, is filled with rich narrative. We read key scenes in the ongoing rivalry between two brothers and their descendants, a rivalry which began in the womb and for decades and centuries. Such fraternal conflicts are always evocative. They are now particularly timely, since recent events have shown us how difficult it is for two nations to share something that they both view as sacred, and over which they both claim ownership. This parashah contains poignant images of an aging man and his failing senses. It is the only parashah that presents the emotional force of each of the five senses. I will focus on only one of the senses, vision. Here are eight verses from Bereishit 25, in Robert Alter's translation.
2. "And the lads grew up, and Esau was a man skilled in hunting, a man of the field, and Jacob was a simple man, a dweller in tents. And Isaac loved Esau for the game that he brought him, but Rebekah loved Jacob. And Jacob prepared a stew and Esau came from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff, for I am famished." Therefore is his name called Edom.
3. And Jacob said, "Sell now your birthright to me." And Esau said, "Look, I am at the point of death, so why do I need a birthright?" And Jacob said, "Swear to me now," and he swore to him, and he sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and he drank and he rose and he went off, and Esau spurned the birthright."
4. Jacob's manipulative nature is unappealing here. But it is also puzzling indeed that Esau would be hungry enough to sell his birthright, rather than looking somewhere else for food. We can look to his description of his situation
5. אֲנֹכִי עֵיִף כִּי הִזָּה הָאָדָם מִן־הָאָדָם נָא הִלְעִיטֵנִי "Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff, for I am famished."
6. The verb הִלְעִיטֵנִי gulp down, or gobble, is a hapax legomenon, a word that appears only once in the Torah. This verb is used in Rabbinic Hebrew to refer to feeding animals, so it can be translated

by the Yiddish *fresn*. It may indicate greed, or haste, though the *אָן* is a touch of politeness that does not fit with that.

7. I wish to focus on the *אָדמָה אָדמָה*, the red, red. I'd like to argue that color words work very differently in the Hebrew Bible than they do in contemporary English. This idea leads me to some points about color words in this parashah, and to some more general points about what we can derive from the Torah.
8. So now let me contrast the Hebrew and English systems of naming color, if I might. One key feature of the English color system is that each color is a property that can be possessed by many different objects—couches or cars or flowers, teapots or towels or birds. A second key feature is that nearly every color—at least the basic colors like pink and green, not the fancy ones like salmon or emerald—is an abstract word, rather than a word that derives meaning from some object. The one exception is the color orange, associated with the fruit of the same name, and it is the only one to be introduced relatively recently. Its first appearance, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is in 1532, “an half ell of orange velvet.” The others have all been with us since Anglo-Saxon times. Taking these two qualities together—the breadth of objects to which a color name can be applied, and the abstraction of the name—it is not surprising that color terms are widely used in everyday conversation.
9. The Hebrew color system is quite different. Each color is a property that can generally be possessed by just one or a few kinds of objects. And the name of the color is close to the object which is its source; where the link of the color orange and the fruit the orange is the exception in English, it is the rule in Hebrew.
10. Take, for example, the color “blue” *תָּכֵלֶת*. It occurs 49 times in the Bible, always referring to thread or cloth. Most of the references are to fabrics that form part of the Tabernacle, though it also appears in Ezekiel, and it's mentioned in the description of the robe that Mordechai wore when he was paraded through the streets of Shushan. Its name is linked to the shell of the mollusk from which the dye is derived. Purple *אַרְגָּמָן* occurs about as often; it, too, always refers to cloth or thread. And it comes from a different shellfish.
11. The color green in the Torah is the greenness, not just of vegetation, but of certain kinds of vegetation. *קָרָן* refers to annual plants that emerge in the spring; we know it from the Four

Questions, **שָׁאֵר**. It is linked to grass and herbs, and is different from the greenness of trees, **רֵעֵן**. When the specific tree can be identified, laurel, olive, palm, cypress or cedar, it is always evergreen, rather than a deciduous tree like a fig, willow or pomegranate. It is interesting that the trees whose leaves are **רֵעֵן** differ in the shade of green; this word seems to refer to the duration of green, rather than the specific hue.

12. White is **לָבָן**, akin with **לְבָנָה** moon. It occurs 26 times. It is used mostly for skin, hair, cloth and animals. Another word for white is **שֶׁלֶג**, snow, used twice for leprous skin, though also in Isaiah for a pure state without sin. **שֵׁיבָה**, often translated into English as gray, is also a shade of white. It is used 35 times and only refers to the hair of the old. And so it is with yellow **צָהָב** and black **שָׁחֹר**.
13. Red **אָדָם** occurs 24 times, in several forms. It refers to animals, including horses and the puzzling red heifer, as well as skin and wine, and the lentils in our parashah. If we count **אֲדָמָי** ruddy, we get up to 27; this word is used to refer to Esau's appearance at his birth, and to David in his young manhood; David is mentioned as handsome, though Esau is not. This word is linked to blood **דָּם**, earth **אֲדָמָה**, to **אָדָם** Adam, person and to the nation of Edom **אֶדוֹם**.
14. In sum, color words do not occur frequently in the Tanakh. Each describes a specific set of objects, rather than being broad attributes, and its name is associated with key objects that it resembles. What, then, of Esau? When he comes in hungry from being out in the field, he does not refer to the dish that he wants to eat as stew or lentils, but simply calls it "red, red."
15. Esau's hunger may be so acute that he has lost the ability to speak in full sentences, or to recall common nouns. But perhaps he is an excessively visual person. The repetition of the word calls attention to it. Could Esau's emphasis on vision and on color be a sign of his impetuosity, or even a source of it? If he had focused on his hunger, or on the smell of the lentils, might he have reflected that his twin was offering him an exceedingly poor exchange? The redness recalls Esau's ruddiness at birth, mentioned only five verses earlier. And there are other hints of redness as well—as a hunter, he shed blood, and he was returning from a field, a place of the earth **אֲדָמָה**.

16. Our world, unlike Esau's, is filled with color. We can choose any hue we like for our shirts and sofas. There are thousands of colors for our walls and hundreds for our eyeglass frames. Indeed, we view the acquisition of the knowledge of colors as a key stage in a person's life, marking the transition from a toddler at home to a child at school. It is widely agreed that children whose parents have failed to teach them the names of colors early in life should acquire this fundamental knowledge in kindergarten, and indeed art supplies permit children to fill pieces of paper with sections of bright colors, whether with broad smears of finger paints or, in the case of crayons, demonstrating that critical skill of "coloring within the lines."
17. For all that I value the beauty of color—the extraordinary windows we have right here in this room, the details on our aron kodesh—I think that we are often sated with color. I am often struck this time of year with the focus on "peak color," the idea that the beauty of autumn is centered on a brief period. To appreciate the season, one must seek out an encounter with the greatest intensity of color, ideally on a sunny day, outside the city. To this end, one does well to attend to the maps in the *Times*, and hope not to postpone one's viewing till the dreaded period of "post-peak." How deeply estranged we are from our world that we could imagine that we might forget the arrival of autumn, after summer and before winter, that we would not appreciate the season adequately without assistance, and that we would fail to sense its presence fully without episodes dedicated to the activity called "viewing ." Fall foliage? There's an app for that.
18. As you can gather, I am broadly opposing two modes of color vision. One is our post-Enlightenment human-centered view, attentive to color as a means of classifying objects in the universe by the appearance of their surfaces. The Torah offers an alternative, in which we know things as well as see them, and understand them through their distinctive and unique natures. Rather than paying attention to the physical sensation of sight and to specific sections of the visible spectrum, we can grasp the meaning of each distinct form of matter from the Creator who made them and who placed us in relation to them. Rather than a world of endless visual variety, of novel shades of white and green and red, we can inhabit a world with the moon, with grass and trees, with earth and blood.
19. Indeed, this parashah invites us to see ourselves as Esau. Perhaps our appetite is greater than his. Have we sold our birthright, our place in the chain of human history, for a red red sportscar, for red red images on a flatscreen television, for red red sunsets on a Caribbean vacation? We no longer feel a kinship to our alienated twin, a simple person who dwells in tents. To be sure, our desire for

goods does not come solely from our immersion in a color-saturated world. Nor can we undo our engagement with a society that treats consumer choices as signs of individual identity, or forget our scientific understanding of color vision. But we do not need to wholly acquiesce, as Esau did, to our greedy eyes.

20. Strikingly, it is not only the words of the Torah that offer an alternative, the cycle of reading the Torah that instructs us, but the Torah itself as an object that we strive to view, each week when it is lifted. We direct our eyes to it. Here, perhaps more fully than elsewhere, we have preserved an earlier form of seeing, where color far less central. The visual forms of synagogues vary widely, but the Torahs do not. We know that rules govern the selection of the materials that have made it up. The ink indeed is dark, but its materials--powdered gall nuts, copper sulfate crystals, gum arabic—assurance the permanence of the letters, the sharpness of their edges, as well as their hue. And the parchment is light by contrast, though not any specific color. Each Torah has similar deep brown-black letters; the soft unnamed tone of the parchment, varying from scroll to scroll, always allows them to stand out. We see the letters, not as specific colors, but as signs of obedience to laws, to the transmission and reception of words. Seeing the lentils, Esau imagined himself close to dying from hunger. Looking at the Torah, we may be satisfied with the goodness of God.

21. Shabbat shalom.





Rebecca our foremother deceives her husband. She betrays him. She asks her younger son to lie and falsify his identity. She is instrumental in cheating her older son out of the blessing of the elder.

Rebecca is my hero.

In order to explain why this would be, I take you to our last parsha.

Let's remember who Rebecca was before she became a master of betrayal and deception.

When we meet her at the well in Chapter 24 she is a study in action and chesed, running back and forth to the well to fill her pitcher with water for Abraham's servant and his ten camels. When her family tries to delay her leaving home they decide to ask her directly what she wants. Her mother and Laban ask her directly -- וַיֹּאמְרוּ נִקְרָא לַנְּעָרָה וְנִשְׁאַלָהּ אֶת פִּיהָ "They said, let us call the young woman and ask her directly" and she says, simply: I will go. וַיִּקְרְאוּ לָרֵבְקָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶיהָ הֲתֵלְכִי עִם הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְתֹאמַר אֵלָיו: And in fact the same verbs that are used for Abraham are used for Rebecca. The doubling of the same verb to go as in -- lekh lekha

Rebecca, although beautiful, is clearly not just another pretty face. What we have before us is an assertive, energetic, physically and emotionally strong young woman who leaves home and sets out on a journey with a strange man to meet her unknown husband. A portrait in courage. Setting out on the same journey Abraham did--from Charan to Canaan -- leaving everything-- her birthplace, her mother and father's house and her land. In fact, some call her the "female Abraham" (indeed, the blessing from her family recalls the language of God's blessing for Abraham's). Like Abraham, she risks everything she has for a journey into the unfamiliar, setting out after a vague promise.

Who would expect from this portrait of courage and forthrightness the deceptive wife and mother pulling the strings behind her husband and

elder son's back, a mother who breaks the heart of her older son, leading him to cry out:

וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל אָבִיו הַבְּרָכָה אַחַת הִוא לְךָ אָבִי בְּרַכְנִי גַם אָנִי אָבִי וַיֵּשָׂא עֵשָׂו  
קוֹלוֹ וַיִּבְדֵּד:

“Esau said to his father. Is it only one blessing that you have, my father? Bless me too, my father. And he raised his voice and wept.”

There are a few passages that I think can help us understand this transformation from in Rebecca.

The first is when she first encounter with Isaac.

As she approaches her new home she sees Isaac from a distance. Upon seeing him she literally falls off her camel (*va-tipol me-al ha-gamal*), words often translated as alighting from her camel, but I translate it literally as falling. She then proceeds to veil herself. Why does this woman, a portrait in initiative and action, fall off her camel when she first sets eyes upon her betrothed? Sliding and falling are acts that are the very opposite of taking initiative; one could say they are the ultimate passivity. What about seeing Isaac would induce radical passivity in such a strong, direct and courageous woman?

Consider Aviva Zornberg's (contemporary Torah scholar) interpretation :

*What Rebekah sees in Isaac is the vital anguish at the heart of his prayers, a remoteness from the sunlit world of chesed (kindness) that she inhabits. Too abruptly, perhaps, she receives the shock of his world. Nothing mediates, nothing explains him to her. “Who is that*

*man walking in the field toward us?” (Genesis 24:66) she asks, fascinated, alienated. What dialogue is possible between two who have met in such a way? A fatal seepage of doubt and dread affects her, so that she can no longer meet him in the full energy of her difference. She veils herself, obscures her light. He takes her and she irradiates the darkness of his mother’s tent. She is, and is not, like his mother; through her, his sense of his mother’s existence is healed. But the originating moment of their union is choreographed so that full dialogue will be impossible between them. (Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis, The Beginning of Desire*, pp. 142-143)*

Upon seeing Isaac, Rebecca despairs, drops into the abyss. She knows she will not be able to be the strong person she is with Isaac. Her assertiveness, her forthrightness must be veiled. But it’s not that her strength disappears. She knows Isaac cannot take the direct strength of a woman, and so from now on she hides it. She will now accomplish what she needs to accomplish through duplicity.

The other passage that helps us understand this transformation is her existential crisis when she is pregnant with twins.

אם כן למה זה אנכי ותלך לדרש את יהוה:

“If this is, why am I?”

*And she went to inquire of YHVH. YHVH said to her: Two nations are in your body, two tribes from your belly shall be divided; tribe shall be*

*mightier than tribe, elder shall be servant to younger!* Genesis 25: 22, 23 (translation, Everett Fox).

With this oracle Rebekah is given her purpose, her mission. Her existential crisis is resolved. She knows directly from God that her younger son is the one who is the child of the promise, the one to receive the blessing of the first born. She will ensure that will happen at all costs. But she cannot make it happen through explicit and direct communication. Given all the factors: who Isaac is, given his relational blindness, that he loves Esav וַיֵּאָהֱב יִצְחָק אֶת עֵשָׂו כִּי צִיד בָּפִיו וְרֵבֶקָה אָהָבָת אֶת יַעֲקֹב, *and Isaac loved Esav, for (he brought) hunted-game for his mouth and Rebecca loved Jacob*-- and given the patriarchal power structure of the family, that it is Isaac who has the power to bestow blessing, and given that Isaac is blind to the realities of his family and the larger vision that is at play, the only thing left to her is duplicity. She will find a path, and that path will be found through subterfuge, deception and betrayal.

It reminds me of one of my favorite Quotes-- from Doris Lessing.

“Whatever you're meant to do, do it now. The conditions are always impossible.”

The conditions were entirely impossible for Rebecca but she found a way through.

It's easy to despair when we hit a wall, when it seems like impossibility is all around us. But I think what this story about Rebecca holds out of us is that

there is always a way some way to fulfill one's vision, that is, if that vision is important enough to be fulfilled, even if the way is crooked.

As I speak about Rebecca and impossibility or darkness I cannot help think about the times we are living in, a time in which it appears that those who will soon be leading our country will be blind to the humanity of so many of its citizens. That leaves the rest of us to find a path, impossible as that may seem, to rise up against that blindness with vision and vigilance and find our way to a society that is informed by fairness and compassion.



When Benjamin called a few weeks ago, it was the one parashah he needed covered so I couldn't refuse since I'd thought a good deal about it once upon a time

Also realized that there is a strong relationship between some of the things I had to say about Vayetzee 9 years ago and some of the things I said last year about Va'yishlach

Last year – Va'yishlach - prompted by Rachel's death in childbirth to talk about the striking absence of miscarriage, infant mortality, and maternal death in childbirth in the Bible; presented some statistics – both ancient and modern - that spoke to how striking this absence is

Suggested that the Torah's silence on this subject has a theological explanation – to quote myself – “Could the God whose omnipotence enables the barren woman to conceive really also be responsible for miscarriages, premature birth, infant or maternal mortality? A God who really controls all events – both wonderful and terrible – would be such a God; a God who opens up closed wombs but also one who empties the womb through miscarriage or takes the life of a mother like Rachel in childbirth. That would be the logical extension of the omnipotent God. But that would be too horrible.”

So there is the connection between this week's parshah and next week's. In the matter of the barren woman conceiving and bearing a child, we have God's omnipotence manifesting itself in precisely the way we need an omnipotent God to intervene in human life. As Psalm 139 has it: Moshiv akeret habayit, em habanim s'mechah – "God sets the childless woman among her household as a happy mother of children."

And in Va'yetzee we have the example of both Rachel and Leah being barren and then being able to conceive as a result of God's intervention:

Gen 29:31- *הנני נותנת לך נשים אלה כי עמלתי עמך*

The Lord saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

Gen 30:22 –

Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb.

God cures not only Leah's infertility and Rachel's barrenness, but also Sarah's, Rebecca's, Hannah's, Samson's mother and others. In all these cases, God enables the woman to conceive a child with her husband and thereby demonstrates divine caring, commitment and omnipotence

So, just as striking as the absence in the Bible of miscarriage, infant mortality and maternal death in childbirth, is the frequency of infertility and its cure –





And while the Bible is silent on the subject of the perils of pregnancy, delivery and infancy, presumably because it would be too theologically threatening, there is an epidemic of infertility in the Bible and God's capacity to effect a cure is really at the heart of Biblical theology

While it is unimaginable that God's omnipotence could explain the catastrophic end of pregnancies, it is entirely reasonable to believe that this very omnipotence can explain the end of barrenness, especially when it involves maintaining the covenant through the birth of a child to a patriarch and the appropriate wife

*A kind of inverse theol. relationship bet. Vayetge & Vayishlach*

When we turn from the Biblical perspective on these issues to the rabbis, we find a very different set of assumptions regarding both of these issues.

As I discussed last year with respect to Vayishlach, the rabbis do not ignore the issues of loss surrounding pregnancy. Unlike the Bible, the rabbis make a connection between such loss and God's omnipotence. Just one example – Shabbat 32b – R. Nechemiah quoted in a braita as saying: As a punishment for a person's unwarranted hatred, there will be a great deal of discord in his house, his wife will miscarry, and his sons and daughters will die young. And this is not the only example of the rabbinic sin-punishment equation regarding infant mortality, miscarriage and the like.

When we turn to the issue of infertility and God's intervention to "open the womb", we see another discrepancy between the Torah and the rabbis. The Torah isn't at all silent on the subject of God's role in conception – especially when it comes to important pregnancies such as that of the patriarchal line or a prophet such as Samuel or a hero such as Samson. However, the Torah makes no judgments about why women are barren.

Gen 21:1      *וַיִּזְכֹּר יְהוָה אֶת סָרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֵלָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּזְכֹּר יְהוָה אֶת סָרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֵלָיו*

"The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham...."

Judges 13:3      *וַיֵּרָא מַלְאָכְיוֹ אֶל הַיְּהוֹדָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו וַיֵּרָא מַלְאָכְיוֹ אֶל הַיְּהוֹדָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ*

"An angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, 'You are barren and have borne no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son.'"

1 Samuel 1:19      *וַיֵּדַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַיְּהוֹדָה וַיִּזְכֹּר יְהוָה אֶת סָרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֵלָיו*

"Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and the Lord remembered her."

In Biblical theology, closing and opening the womb describe acts of God which are beyond human control or comprehension. God controls our reproductive ability.

In *The Wake of the Goddesses*, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, argues that God's total control over conception represented a radical shift in religious ideas in the Ancient Near East. In

ancient pagan religion, it was a mother goddess who asserted control over conception just as other gods and goddesses controlled their domains. But in the religion of the Israelites, the one God – and God alone – causes conception. There is no difference between powers that were once in the domain of male gods and those once attributed to goddesses; in the Israelite view all of nature is unified under the control of one God. Fertility is neither a male nor female prerogative and the cause of infertility is assigned to neither gender.

In her doctoral dissertation, *Sing O Barren One*, Mary Callaway, a Christian Bible scholar, refers to barrenness as “unexplained suffering” since there is no cause and effect relationship established in the stories of barren women. Even the most faithful and pious, like Hannah, cannot conceive until God intervenes.

In short, the Bible does not assign responsibility for infertility. God opens the closed womb.

When we turn to rabbinic literature, however, there are a number of sources that do assign responsibility. Just as we saw with the issues of maternal death, infant mortality and the like, some rabbinic sources make theological points when discussing infertility.

A midrash in Bereshit Rabbah (71:6) maintains that Rachel’s jealousy towards her sister Leah was due to Leah’s good deeds, reasoning that if Leah had not been righteous, she would not have borne children. The implication seems clear: Rachel’s infertility was due to her lack of righteousness. Of course, in terms of the Biblical text we have no reason to believe Leah was more righteous than Rachel.

In Genesis 30:1, Rachel desperate for children, pleads with Jacob – *אֵלֹהִים אֲנִי יָדָעְתִּי כִּי אֵין בְּיָדְךָ יָלֵד לִּי* “Give me children or I will die!” Jacob responds in anger, asking her: *הֲיָכִיל אֲנִי אֵלֹהִים* “Can I take the place of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?”

In BR 71:7, the rabbis imagine the rest of this conversation, and have Jacob passing the blame for barrenness to his wife. According to the midrash, Jacob says: “From you he withheld it (i.e. a child), but not from me,” while in the Biblical text Jacob only says that God has denied Rachel fruit of the womb – *אֵין בְּיָדְךָ יָלֵד לִּי*; he does not blame Rachel for their failure to conceive.

*He simply asserts God's control in this area.*

As the rabbis imaginatively continue the conversation, Rachel reminds Jacob that Isaac had prayed for a child on Rebecca’s behalf and Jacob replies that Isaac had no children when he prayed for his wife, whereas he, Jacob, has already fathered two sons by Leah. But, asks Rachel, didn’t Abraham pray on Sarah’s behalf even though he already had a son by Hagar? Jacob’s response is a challenge: “Can you do what my grandmother did?” And of course Rachel does just what Sarah did – she sends her handmaiden, Bilhah, into Jacob to conceive a surrogate child for her.

The rabbis create this dialogue as a bridge between Rachel and Jacob’s brief exchange in verses 1 and 2 and Rachel’s decision in verse 3 to send Bilhah to her husband. But in this

is  
rabbinic literary construct blame ~~is~~ placed on Rachel for the couple's infertility. The rabbis imagine that Jacob's response to his wife's pain would be to say that the cause of their infertility certainly can't be him *and to point the finger of blame at his wife.*

Another midrash offers a reason that suggests quite powerfully that the sages did not comprehend the suffering that infertility can cause. In Bereshit Rabbah 45:4 the rabbis ask why the matriarchs are barren. R. Levi answers that God yearns for their prayers and supplications; R. Azariah suggests that they are barren so that in spite of their beauty – which they might use to attract other men – these wives have to stay faithful to their husbands to have any hope of bearing children; and, finally, R. Huna, R. Idi and R. Abin explain barrenness this way: “So that they husbands might derive pleasure from them, for when a woman is with child she is disfigured and lacks grace. Thus the whole 90 years that Sarah did not bear she was like a bride in her canopy.”

It turns out that the Bible is more in touch with the pain of infertility than the rabbis. The rabbis see barrenness not as proof of divine providence but as a divine judgment or an incentive for women to turn to prayer or as a way of preserving the dependence of wives on their husbands or even as a way of preserving their girlish figures. The Bible, however, places no blame on barren women nor does it trivialize their plight or, has v'halilah, suggest that barrenness keeps men interested.

Frymer-Kensky argues that in general, the picture of women we derive from a close reading of biblical texts is dramatically different than what our religious and cultural traditions have led us to believe the Bible says. She maintains that there is nothing particularly “feminine” about the way in which the Bible portrays women: there is no “women's toolkit” stocked with female strategems; there are no characteristics of human behavior that are particularly feminine or masculine in biblical tales. A good example of what Frymer-Kensky calls the “gender-blindness of the biblical view of human nature” is the Bible's understanding of barrenness as a problem soluble only by God. In the Bible infertility is not a punishment for wrongdoing or a way of keeping women desirable or a method by which God can count on heartfelt prayers from the womenfolk. The reasons for infertility are known only to God and the blessing of children comes only from God; these reasons cannot be discerned by human. But as Frymer-Kensky concludes, Jewish tradition altered this gender-free concept of humanity:

“These stories about women were reinterpreted, and these later reinterpretations, masquerading as the biblical message, were used to support sexist ideology and practice. The stories themselves remained to be rediscovered by an age that could understand and appreciate the biblical metaphysics of gender unity.”

*almost altogether*  
To sum up...while the Torah is inconsistent theologically – attributing conception to God's omnipotence while avoiding the difficult subjects of miscarriage and other complications of pregnancy, the rabbis are theologically consistent: to our dismay, they tend to blame humans for the catastrophic experiences surrounding conception and childbirth.

*rather than drawing the logical conclusion that God's omnipotence controls all of this*

5  
after contrasting the  
Biblical and rabbinic  
views of infertility & marriage

It was at this point in my senior sermon that I ended with a caution against ~~not~~ relying on the rabbis as our only guides in exploring the text. However, what I wanted to say then – and was advised to avoid – was that it is impossible to ignore the fact that Hazal's attitudes towards women reflect the sociological milieu from which not only the midrash emerged; it was the milieu that produced the halakhah as well. While the tradition accords a different level of authority to the halakhah, it seems forced and unnatural to draw a boundary between rabbinic exegesis of the text and rabbinic law and say that one is fraught with cultural baggage and the other is neutral and without bias. If the rabbis thought that women were infertile so they would retain their figures and please their husbands, or that their lack of piety could result in their barrenness, what does that suggest about the underpinnings of the halakhic system with regard to women?

and to reveal how those  
about  
This is certainly not an argument for dispensing with the halakhah but just to suggest some reflection upon the way in which attitudes expressed in the aggadic parts of the tradition may be built into the superstructure of Jewish law. As the Orthodox feminists are fond of saying, "Where there's a rabbinic will, there's a halakhic way," thus summing up succinctly the causal relationship between rabbinic attitudes and Jewish law both in ancient times and in our own. While within the Conservative movement there has been enormous change in the role of women since the 1950's, the piecemeal approach to investing women with the full range of religious prerogatives reflects a failure to go to the heart of the issue: which is that the rabbis of the Talmud and codes, no less than the rabbis of the midrash (and in many cases they are the same sages) were of the opinion – to use Tikva Frymer Kensky's wonderful phrase – that there is, in fact, a women's toolkit and that this toolkit doesn't include the sharpest tools in the shed!

imbedded  
attitudes  
affect the  
halakhic  
system.

For gender-blind  
neutrality  
free texts are that  
presume no such toolkit we are  
blessed indeed to have the Bible  
however theologically inconsistent.

אֶמְצֵא לָבָד יִצְחָק  
אֶמְצֵא לָבָד יִצְחָק  
PARASHAT VAYEIZEL-DECEMBER 9, 2000

S I R S  
*on Healy the Sick*

In the course of my psychotherapeutic work with bereaved individuals, I often have the sense that I am sitting, listening and talking to people who have reached the outer edge of their existence. By this I refer to people who have come into direct and agonizing contact with their own distinct human limitations. These are people who sojourn in a land in which will and desire are often terms empty of old and familiar meaning. They each wake up in the morning, look in a mirror, and see a face of powerlessness staring back at them. Losing a loved one to death teaches like no other lesson about human control over destiny and the lack thereof. Facing serious, potentially life-threatening illness surely imparts a similar lesson.

Most of us, thank God, spend a majority of our living hours in the much safer middle ground of existence, far away from the edge. In that safe middle ground, terms like choice, intention and autonomy still resound with meaning and spirit. We are able to comfortably live under the illusion that we are in full control of our life paths. Occasionally our itinerary may take us to the periphery, and we are momentarily shaken as we are thrown from the helm and sent spinning, dizzied and adrift. But then we find our balance and return to our course once again, back on safe ground and in control.

But what of those to whom the choice filled safe middle appears as a distant and unreal dream, those who live close to the edge, crowded and confined by illness, loss and death in the narrow straits of limited possibility. How do they live there? What is it like to be a partner, a close friend, or even a community acquaintance of one whose most cherished hopes mightily clash against an oppositional and unbending reality? What might be required of us as a community in such a situation?

In our parasha, Yaakov, a man who has been crowded and squeezed since his conception, is unable to tolerate Rachel's proximity to the edge. Rachel wails:

״Give me children, for otherwise I am dead״. Yaakov responds coldly: ״Am I in God's place who has withheld fruit of the body from you?״ Yaakov can not let in the depth of his wife's pain, the enormity of her despair, and the deadness that is embedded in her womb and soul.

Rachel is a woman whose life has been characterized by longing. The Torah tells us that the seven years Yaakov worked for Rachel were *ikeyamin achadim*,<sup>1</sup> like a few days. Was it likewise for Rachel? Is it not more likely that for her it was period of endless waiting, filled with dreams of reunion with her lover and anticipation and deep expectation about freedom from the yoke of her father? For those seven long years Rachel, no doubt, tended sheep with visions of a time when she would be free and empowered to create a new life and family, safe and unfettered, far away from her father's deceptive reach.

Rachel's longing comes to naught: her dreams are shattered one by one. First, she witnesses her father's deceptive creation of a marital triad. Second, she suffers the humiliation of watching her husband sleep with her sister. Third, she gazes upon the revolving cycle of her sister's stomach growing large and small as Leah gives birth to children. And finally, she is overwhelmed by the fact of her own infertility. This is a woman whose world and youthful hopes have shrunk dramatically. Surely she walks near the edge. In her despair she cries to her husband: *!Help me! Pray for me!*

Yes, pray for me. Rashi very interestingly reinterprets Rachel's plea of *!give me children!* to mean:  
*!be with me in the way your father was with his wife ñ pray for me!*

How indeed was Yitzhak with Rivka? In Parashat Toldot the Torah tells us that Yitzhak married Rivka at age 40. The Torah then reveals the following important information in one telegraphic verse:

*!Yitzhak entreated God, facing his wife, because she was barren. The Torah then tells us that God answered his prayer, and Rivka was pregnant with twins.*

So much happens so quickly that if you momentarily glance away you miss this important incident between Yitzhak and Rivka. Rashi comes to our rescue and shouts: *!slow down, don't for one second imagine that the intensity or duration of Yitzhak's prayer bears any resemblance whatsoever to the length of the sentence describing his act!* Rashi states:

*!He prayed much and urgently! Whenever the root ATR appears it has the meaning of heaping up and increasing entreaties.*

Rashi, following the Midrash, tells us the meaning of  
ifacing his wife:

He stood in one corner and prayed, and she stood in one corner and  
prayed. Can you see them together, each up against the wall, both  
literally and figuratively? What were their conversations about?  
Can you hear them talking about their hopes for healing, their doubts  
about the efficacy of their prayers, their questions about why this  
fate has fallen upon them? And most of all, *l'inochach ishto*, facing  
his wife, can you hear them professing their unending loyalty and  
commitment to face this painful situation together?

And so, Rachel, remembering Yitzhak and Rivka, pleads with Yaakov:  
I pray for me, pray with me, let me know that you won't leave me  
alone. Pray and help me shore up my faltering faith so that I can  
believe that God is not abandoning me. Pray for my healing,  
however that may come.

Yaakov is unable to pray for Rachel with the quality of *l'haatarah*,  
deep begging, because he is threatened by the prospect of feeling  
Rachel's anxiety and powerlessness. For Yaakov to pray for healing  
with the quality of *l'haftzarah*, impassioned entreating, he must  
become open to the possibility of being touched by Rachel's pain. He  
must listen to a chorus of voices of doubt and uncertainty such as:  
maybe God isn't listening; maybe God doesn't listen; maybe it is silly,  
primitive and naive to even consider that prayer may be of value.

Yaakov instead chastizes Rivka, his anger flamed.  
and in so doing avoids her pain and his own as well.

In the course of the last year our minyan has been spent  
considerable time discussing the *mishebayrach* for healing. Most,  
though not all, of our attention has gone to matters of *l'holy*  
*choreography*: how and where do we stand during the recitation of  
the prayer.

I think it is time to go deeper, to move more towards a level of  
*haatarah* and *haftzarah* in our davenning for recovery. I believe that  
in our own *mishebayrach* we too closely mimic the pace of the Torah  
in describing Yitzhak's pleas for Rivka. Praying for health is a  
serious and difficult task. I think that we need to add the  
understanding of Rashi and the Midrash in our recitation of our  
prayers. By not allowing more silent time for concentrated prayer



for healing, we are giving away too much of our potential power. By making do with the prayer of the gabbai, we inadvertently become passive. Yes, a shortened prayer gives us less time to grapple with our concerns and fears about the ill person, and with questions about the usefulness of prayer itself. Certainly that insures comfort, but I fear at too much of a price. Our mishebeyrach should be more than an oral posting of who is ill. I believe that within this community there exists a deep wellspring of concern, care and love, that goes unspoken and remains untapped.

I think it is time to give voice to that prayerful love in moments of deepened silence after the recital of the mishebeyrach prayer.

In closing, I would like to recite the mishebeyrach, and then I ask you to join me in sitting together for few minutes in silence so that as a community we may pray for all those who are ill and in need of healing, and for those who care them.

**PAGE**

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2000年12月12日

On 11-11-10

j o j u

DT for Vayetze, Nov 27, Kabbalat Shabbat, Minyan Maat

In 2019 there was a very moving interview with Anderson Cooper talking to Stephen Colbert about loss and life. One of my theologian friends said it contained better theology than half the stuff she reads. You may know that Colbert is a pretty serious Catholic, whose father and two brothers died in a plane crash when he was a kid. He said, "If you're grateful for your life, you have to be grateful for all of it." I've been trying to get my head around that. It does NOT mean that bad things are really good. No. Silver linings mean the clouds are still dark. But he says, "it is a gift to exist and the bravest thing is to accept it with love"

I think it also means that hidden within the textures of living a life which must include some suffering is infinite possibility. Emily Dickinson, with her very sheltered and creative life wrote, "I dwell in possibility." We all do.

Let's think about and the textures of his life.

He's second-born, not his father's favorite, not given to manly pursuits. He'd rather stay home and cook with his mom. He has to trick his way to the top, outsmarting his brother Esau for the birthright, and tricking his father into giving him a blessing. Susan Niditch wrote a book, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, showing how Jacob fits this motif of the trickster in world folklore. The trickster is someone with little natural power who succeeds by outwitting others, sometimes with deception and disguises. Most important, the audience sides with the trickster, we *want* Bugs Bunny to beat out Elmer Fudd, we enjoy Puck in *Midsummers Nights Dream*. because we are all underdogs at some point. Ancient Israel was a tiny nation surrounded by powerful empires.

But the trickster gets tricked. Jacob is on the receiving end of deception, given the wrong woman on his wedding night after 7 years of work, or cruelly, shown Joseph's bloody cloak and thinking his favorite son is dead. Even getting the birthright and blessing is a mixed success, as he was then on the run from Esau. in fear of his life.

But he has sublime moments, which are all moments of seeing with clarity, the opposite of deception and trickery. He sees the beautiful Rachel, and seems to fall for her immediately, kissing crying. He wakes from a dream at Bethel, realizing

God was in the place all along. He says, “Mah Norah ha Makon ha Ze!” lit. “how awesome is this place!” After wrestling all night by the river, he calls the place Peniel, because “I have seen God face to face and survived.” Finally, there is that moment when his fear of Esau’s revenge evaporates as Esau generously waves away the past, causing Jacob to say “seeing your face was like seeing the face of God.” On his death bed Jacob marvels with gratitude as he blesses Joseph’s sons, saying “I did not expect to see your face, and here God has let me see your children.”

Jacob is us. We are Jacob. His other name is Israel and as our eponymous ancestor, this is the character that ancient Israel identified with. So wonderful, he’s not a Hercules, he’s not a war hero, he’s not even Abraham. He is both admirable and flawed. He experiences joy, love, deception, and pain. He looks for God and sometimes sees him.

So here we are, having a Covid Thanksgiving, a seeming contradiction. But I invite us to accept all of it with love, and to look for moments of gratitude and seeing deep within its textures.

Colbert “We are asked to accept the world that God gives us and to accept it with love.”

Dvar Torah Vayishlach-given December 19, 1981 (12/12 and to AC 12/4)

The candy stains on my notes remind me that this dvar Torah is being given in honor of Dovid and Shana's aufruf and upcoming wedding. The astute listener will immediately note that I will be addressing myself to last week's parshah, Vayishlach, rather than this week's. That I am a week late seemed only proper considering that Dovid and Shana are having their aufruf a week early.

Rather than pursue the logic of that, I would also like to thank David Szonyi for tolerating my having put him in the awkward position of being constrained from giving last week's drash on anything but the episode of Jacob wrestling with the angel. At the risk of overextending these remarks, I would also like to acknowledge the standard set us by Arnie Eisen, our foremost darshan, who will be leaving us for Israel next week.

I think the concentration of meaning of Biblical text is well demonstrated by the fact that the questions I will be addressing regarding the episode of Jacob wrestling with the angel actually require as much time to state as do the five lines recording the episode take to read. Therefore, I will use the questions to introduce the different parts of the discussion. Also, in thinking about this parshah I was struck by the parallel between the Biblical text and events recorded in Act V, scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Therefore, we will move back and forth between the two.

What is the general nature of the wrestling episode? Jacob's encounter seems to be most usefully understood as a dream. Why do I say that apart from the fact that I am a psychiatrist? Because the episode is quite clearly bracketed by the coming of night and the arrival of dawn, it occurs while Jacob is alone and it occurs suddenly without any antecedents or preparation on the part of the text, just as a dream suddenly appears in sleep.

In *Richard III* we are overtly told that the events we are about to be witness to take place in a dream when Richard addresses God by saying:

To thee I do commend my watchful soul

Ere I let fall the windows of mine eyes

Sleeping and waking, O defend me still.

Why does the wrestling episode occur that particular night? Jacob has to confront Esau and his four hundred men on the morrow just as Richard must confront Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, the true king, and his army at Bosworth Field. Esau and Richmond represent a reproach and a challenge to the defects of character that Jacob and Richard have demonstrated up to that point in their respective narratives. Now I certainly do not mean to suggest that Jacob is as disreputable as Richard but I hope the comparison will be instructive.

With Richard the visitations of the ghosts provide a virtual catalogue of the king's machinations, deceptions and murders. Prince Edward, King Henry, Clarence, Rivers, Grey and Vaughn, Hastings and the two young princes smothered in the tower and Queen Anne all torment Richard. Buckingham concludes with:

The first was I that helped thee to the crown;

The last was I that felt thy tyranny;

O, in the battle think on Buckingham,

and die in the terror of thy guiltiness!

Dream on, dream on of bloody deeds and death.

Fainting, despair; despairing, yield thy breath!

But what has the patriarch Jacob done that he should be accursed in his sleep? Let us review the events that precede the episode of the wrestling. At Jacob's birth we are told that he had taken hold of his brother Esau's heel in order to draw him back into Rebekah's womb so as to be the first born. Jacob was given the name which Hertz translates as "one who supplants" and Everett Fox translates as "heel-sneak." We are told how Jacob as a young man takes advantage of Esau's physical exhaustion and faintness in order to steal his birthright. Sometime later we read how Jacob dupes his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing due Esau so that Esau issues forth with possibly the most sorrowful wail in the whole of the Bible. We gain some insight into Jacob's character when, after the dream of the ladder at Beth-El in which God promises to be to him as he was to Abraham, we hear Jacob bargaining with God as if He was a merchant: "If God will be with me and if God will keep me in this way and if he will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, then shall the Lord be my God." Jacob was not very compassionate with his wife Leah- in fact, it is suggested that he actually "hated" her from the first. Even with Rachel, Jacob was prone to anger and he was even unsympathetic when she complained of her barrenness: "And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said: 'Am I in God's stead, who has withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?'" Contrast this with Abrahams's tender concern for Sarah in the equivalent situation.

It must say something of Jacob's character that he was able to outcheat that master cheat, Laban, with his Biblical animal genetics techniques and by his absconding unannounced. In addition, in telling Rachel and Leah of the dream in which God commands Jacob to return to the land of his fathers, he embroiders the dream well beyond what we are told in the text and he implies that the increase in the streaked, speckled and grizzled goats was due to God's will rather than to his own machinations. Further, I believe there is confirmation of God's recognition of Jacob's flawed character when we read how before Laban confronts Jacob, God tells Laban in a

dream to speak neither good nor bad of Jacob in contrast to how God has Balaam blesses when he would curse.?

Why does Jacob specifically engage in wrestling? Who is the man with whom he wrestles? Why does the man refuse to reveal his name? From what has been said so far the answers, from a psychiatric perspective, follow. Richard and Jacob are intrapsychically grappling with their baser inclinations and past actions. The wrestling of Jacob is not the self-deceiving and unworthy “mighty wrestlings” of Rachel in her fertility battle with Leah, but rather the spiritual struggle of a man trying to contend with his conscience and his weaknesses in order to remake himself.

Nowhere in the Biblical text is the man with whom Jacob wrestles referred to by any term other than eesh. There is no basis for calling him an angel. Rather, his presence could be said to reflect the theory that characters in a dream usually represent aspects of the dreamer but are not identified as such in the dream itself. In refusing to reveal his name, the man also appears to be a very Orthodox psychoanalyst.

I submit that Jacob is struggling to decide whether he will regard Esau and his men as Richard regards Richmond and his army and so will try to deceive Esau yet again in order to destroy him utterly or whether he will regard Esau as his brother, ill-treated and sinned-against and will try to be reconciled with him. Put another way, both Jacob and Richard have to decide whether to destroy those people who represent reproaches for their sinfulness or to resolve intrapsychically those conflicts which cause them to behave sinfully. Jacob and Richard opt for different choices.

There is in Judaism a rejection of a sense of fatalism, pre-destination and lack of free will. Though the Lord says to Rebekah that there are two nations in her womb and that the elder shall serve the younger, Jacob must still earn the distinction of the prophecy and the honor of being a patriarch. There is something of this in the dream of the celestial ladder wherein it was said: “And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.” The implication is that Jacob is observing the ladder from an earth-bound perspective; he is at the bottom of the ladder. The angels ascend and descend in accordance with their merits. Therefore, Jacob must work to ascend toward God. At the time of the dream, Jacob’s state of character was touched upon when it was noted that immediately after this dream Jacob bargains with God.

Why is Jacob given a new name? Why is he told his name is now Israel yet the text continues to refer to him as Jacob? The new name of Israel is bestowed on Jacob as recognition that a process of self-examination and transformation has begun. He who is courageous enough to face the harshest of truths about himself is less likely to shrink from confronting the challenges presented by God. In fact, perhaps we are being told here that to grapple with the personal repercussions of moral conduct is the only way to advance to a spiritual awareness of

the meaning of God. Hence, after struggling with himself, Jacob is given the name of “he who strives with God.”

But character does not change abruptly with some lightning-like insight except in vain hopes and Hollywood movies. Character changes only over time and only with sustained effort. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the change in Jacob’s character is betokened by the evolution in the text’s use of his new name over time in three stages. In the first stage, the man states “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel” yet the text continues to refer to Israel as Jacob because the process of character transformation has only just begun. This is followed by Jacob humbling himself before Esau, seeking his pardon and expressing filial affection. Later we have the episode of the rape of Dinah in which not Jacob but his sons act with guile and, in fact, Jacob tells his son that they have made him appear “odious.” Still later, Jacob heeds the word of God and commands the members of his household to cast away their strange gods and purify themselves.

It is as if God recognizes the maturation of Jacob’s character in this second stage when God directly now says: “Thy name shall not be called anymore Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name.” Yet the text continues to refer to Israel as Jacob. It is not until the third stage, after Jacob suffers the death of Rachel that the text finally confers the name of Israel upon Jacob. Perhaps this is because of the opportunity for insight afforded by tragedy. The text reverts to calling Israel Jacob a few times near the end of Vayishlach in chapter 35 and once at the beginning of Vayeshev in chapter 37 but only when referring to past events or past relations.

Now, when I speak of Jacob being transformed I do not mean in the Hollywood movie sense. Rather, I mean that the crafty, calculating, tempestuous character of the earlier chapters settles into the more stable, affectionate and enduring character appropriate for a patriarch of the Jewish people and so the mainstream of the Biblical text is diverted to Joseph.

Richard is also engaged in a struggle with his nature but he fails, again in three stages. In the first, he awakens from his dream shaken and with some ambivalently held insight into his villainy:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale,

And every tale condemns me for a villain.

Perjury, perjury in the highest degree,

Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree,

All several sins, all used in each degree,

Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty! Guilty!

In the second stage, we see Richard spurning the potential for change when he tells Norfolk:

Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls;  
 Conscience is but a word that cowards use,  
 Devised at first to keep the strong in awe.  
 Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law.  
 March on, join bravely, let us to it pell-mell  
 If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell.

In the third stage Richard pays the price of his failure in being killed by Richmond on the field of battle.

Why is Jacob left with a physical impairment from the struggle? Why does the injury described specifically involve the thigh and cause a limp? It is common practice in many cultures to acknowledge the spiritual or social attainments implicit in a rite of passage by a physical or a decorative change. For example, we perform circumcision to represent entry into the covenant and we provide a tallis and tfillin at the time of entry into the adult congregation. In a similar fashion, certain South Sea island tribes perform subincision at the time of puberty and the Sioux Indians skewered the pectoral muscles during the Sun Dance. In this context of success in a physical and moral struggle, it makes sense that Jacob should be left with an outward sign of his spiritual growth. In addition, since Jacob's wrestling has been addressed here primarily in psychological terms, I was also reminded of Freud's remark: "No one who, like myself, struggles with the sinister forces of the unconscious should expect to escape unscathed."

Still, we are left with the question of the specificity of Jacob's scathing. In fact, it was decided that a specific anatomical structure, the sciatic nerve, must not be present in order for meat to be kosher because of this Biblical story. As many people here may unfortunately know, lower back pain syndrome due to spinal disc disease is very common. One of the most frequently encountered forms of this syndrome involves a disc protruding and compressing the origin of the sciatic nerve so that the pain radiates down the leg and the leg is weakened so that limping results.

Now the fact is that spinal disc disease of this type occurs solely and exclusively because human beings walk totally upright and no longer use their front limbs to help support the weight of their bodies. This disease is unknown in animals. What I am suggesting by this medical review is that a limp being selected as the specific physical symbol of Jacob's wrestling has to do with the fact that he is attempting to overcome his baser, "animal" nature and become spiritually



“upright.” Jeshurun, a term that will later be used to refer to Israel, is derived from the root “yashar,” upright or straight or just.

Once again, it is instructive to compare Jacob with Richard who was born with multiple physical defects, the most prominent of which was his hunchback. So while Jacob’s physical mark is earned late in life as the sign of spiritual struggle, Richard’s physical mark is congenital and serves as a warning of his malign nature. This connection between appearance and character is indicated by Shakespeare’s description of Richard as “that bottled spider, that foul hunch-backed toad.” Further, because of Jacob’s struggle he becomes upright, while because of Richard’s irremediable physical and moral defects he can never stand upright.

Now after all this, how does the message of this parshah relate to the fact that we are celebrating an aufruf today and that Dovid and Shana are to be married? Well, it is particularly appropriate that Dovid and Shana should be married around the time of this parshah...at least that is the sort of thing that darshanim always say. At the risk of being sexist I could say that Dovid has certainly had an encounter with his angel or, at the risk of being pushy, I could say that from what I know of Dovid and Shana’s parental aspirations they may well become the patriarch and matriarch of a great nation or at least a large family.

But what I would like to say is that Dovid and Shana, like Jacob, are on the figurative eve of a great encounter full of potential. The awesome nature of marriage is betokened by the fact that a wedding is regarded as being the equivalent of Yom Kippur in that a fast is maintained on that morning and forgiveness is granted on that day so that the marriage may start in purity and understanding. Marriage, like Jacob’s wrestling match, affords a great opportunity for growth, maturity and love which come, as in Jacob’s case, by stages and never all at once.

I know everyone assembled here joins me in wishing Dovid and Shana mazal tov and all happiness.

Howard L. Berkowitz

Vayishlach – November 23, 2002

Genesis 35:16-19:

וַיֵּצְאוּ מִבֶּתֶל וְעוֹד רַחֵל בְּיָלְדָהּ וְהָיָה עָמָל לָהּ  
וְהַיָּדוּשָׁה אָמְרָה אֵלֶיהָ וְלֹא תִירָא כִּי הֵיאָה לְךָ בָּנָה  
וְעוֹד רַחֵל בְּיָלְדָהּ וְהָיָה עָמָל לָהּ וְהַיָּדוּשָׁה אָמְרָה  
אֵלֶיהָ וְלֹא תִירָא כִּי הֵיאָה לְךָ בָּנָה

They set out from Bethel; but when they were still some distance short of Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, "Have no fear, for it is another boy for you. But as she breathed her last – for she was dying – she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.

August 25 - Article in NY Times Magazine – "Holding On to Luke" - The terrible story of a serious complication in pregnancy, requiring a caesarean, resulting in a son born at 27 weeks gestation at 1.1 lbs and his death a few weeks later. Included some statistics: 1 in 10 pregnancies end in premature births; 3 out of 4 end in miscarriage.

Triggered some thoughts that have occurred to me from time to time regarding the striking absence of miscarriage, maternal death in childbirth, premature birth and infant mortality in the Biblical text, a text which we regard as compellingly real in its stories of our ancestors.

An October 27 story from Afghanistan simply intensified this train of thought – from 1998 to 2002, about half of the women of childbearing age who died succumbed to complications associated with their pregnancies or childbirth; in Badakshan, the most remote province in northeastern Afghanistan, 54 % of women of reproductive age who died reportedly succumbed to problems associated with pregnancy

In discussing this subject with my son (a student of ancient history) – telling him that maybe, finally, I had something to say to this minyan, he helped me out with some statistics from Roman Egypt in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE when nearly 1/3 of all children died before the age of one and 2/5 by the age of 5, according to the book, Egypt in Late Antiquity.

I gleaned a similar statistic from my teacher, David Kraemer, who <sup>told me</sup> ~~quoted the statistic~~ that fewer than 1/2 of all children survived to their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday in the early Roman Empire. And, finally, from Heather Brumberg, daughter-in-law to Pamela and Stephen, I received a December 2000 article from Pediatrics which cited statistics from 1900 indicating that 3 in 100 children died between their first and twentieth birthdays; in 1915 approximately 100 white infants per 1000 live births died in the first year of life; the rate for black infants was almost twice as high.

Statistics confirm what we know from the traditional prohibition of ~~funerals and~~ mourning for a child who dies under the age of 30 days, surely an indication of the frequency of infant mortality. We are familiar with all the superstitions surrounding childbirth – the red ribbons, no baby showers, no baby furniture delivered until the baby arrives, no mentioning the baby boy's name until the bris. And new mothers continue to bench gomel even though according to Pediatrics there were only 7.1 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 1998.

We gingerly respond to the news of  
a pregnancy with <sup>האם זה בן, או תאומים</sup> not a  
1/2/6 <sup>האם זה בן, או תאומים</sup> <sup>האם זה בן, או תאומים</sup>

the  
journal

Part 1

Infertility is rife in the Bible – Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Hannah, Samson's mother – and the solution is always God's intervention. In these cases, as we saw in last week's parashah, God comes to the barren woman's rescue –

וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּפְתָּח אֶת-בֶּטְנָהּ וַיֵּלֶד בְּנָהּ וְשֵׁם הַבֵּן יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 "God saw that Leah was unloved and opened her womb."

Infertility and God's intervention so that the couple can conceive is a familiar Biblical trope, yet in the ~~entire Bible~~ there is only the one maternal death we read about in today's parashah; the death of one child – the firstborn of David and Batsheva; one pregnancy complication brought on by the combat of Jacob and Esau in Rebecca's womb; and no miscarriages save the one in Exodus 21:22 that is mentioned in the context of assessing legal penalties: if a woman miscarried as the result of two men fighting and accidentally pushing her down, they pay only a fine since the loss of the fetus is not considered the loss of a life.

Given the statistics <sup>from</sup> ~~about~~ the ancient world, the situation in contemporary third world nations, and the complications that attend pregnancy even in our technologically sophisticated society as described in that harrowing piece from August's New York Times magazine, we have every reason to suppose that the Bible knew about, but simply doesn't talk about, the infant mortality, difficult pregnancies, miscarriages, and maternal death in childbirth that were commonplace in ancient times. So, why the silence on this very important, very human subject?

When the child of the adulterous liaison between David and Batsheva dies, it is clearly God's doing, the punishment for their adulterous relationship – or ~~perhaps for~~ David's forcible taking of Batsheva – and it is a horrifying example of God's power

2 Samuel ~~14~~ 12:

וַיִּפְּדֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים מִיָּד מוֹתָו וַיִּפְּדֵהוּ מִיָּד מוֹתָו וַיִּפְּדֵהוּ מִיָּד מוֹתָו  
 וַיִּפְּדֵהוּ מִיָּד מוֹתָו וַיִּפְּדֵהוּ מִיָּד מוֹתָו וַיִּפְּדֵהוּ מִיָּד מוֹתָו

... the Lord afflicted the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and it became critically ill... On the seventh day the child died."

God can cure infertility, that is all about God's omnipotence; the woman's womb is closed until God opens it and makes it possible for the woman to conceive.

But for God to empty the womb through miscarriage or for God to be responsible for maternal death and infant mortality – if such dreaded events in human life were part of the Biblical tale, what would we have to conclude about the cause? That same God who enables Sarah to conceive at the age of ~~80~~ <sup>90</sup> would logically also be the agent of the loss of pregnancies, of babies and mothers. If God were responsible, what would this do to the covenant, to our confidence in this God??? In Exodus 23:26, God promises that none will miscarry when the people reach eretz Yisrael – this is the blessing of the promised land.

אִם-לֹא-יִמְצָא אִתְּךָ אִשָּׁה בְּרִיָּה וְאִם-לֹא-יִמְצָא אִתְּךָ אִשָּׁה בְּרִיָּה וְאִם-לֹא-יִמְצָא אִתְּךָ אִשָּׁה בְּרִיָּה

"No woman in your land shall miscarry or be barren. I will let you enjoy the full count of your days."

So

The Bible knows about miscarriage but not even the tokekhhot – the curses of Deuteronomy - threaten miscarriage or infant mortality or maternal death.

On the simplest level, we know that the patriarchal and matriarchal narratives in the Torah are enormously, perhaps obsessively - or even exclusively - concerned with the establishment and continuation of the line of Abraham, God's chosen. And God's power in opening the womb of the barren woman is the method, par excellence, of accomplishing this continuity of generations. God chooses Abraham and makes it possible for Sarah to conceive so the line continues. To be sure, these narratives abound with difficulties and complications. Nevertheless, things tend to turn out alright for the patriarchal line – Sarah gets taken into Pharaoh's house, but she and Abraham leave Egypt with lots of stuff; Isaac and Ishmael reconcile at Abraham's grave; Jacob and Esau meet later in life without incident; Joseph and his brothers reconcile in Egypt; all the barren women are able to conceive and bear children.

This narrative of reconciliation and amelioration stands in sharp contrast to the polemics of Deuteronomy and the prophetic texts in which we learn over and over and over again that if we sin, we will suffer and if we are suffering we have, by definition, sinned. The zealous God of Deuteronomy and the books of Samuel and Kings and the classical prophets is, when all is said and done, not the God of the Genesis narratives. How can the God that dictates herem – extermination – for the peoples of the land of Canaan or who uses Assyria as the rod of divine anger, destroying the Northern kingdom and scattering the ten tribes – be the same God who clothes Adam and Eve even after they disobey, who shuts the door of the ark, who negotiates with Abraham at Sodom or who enables the matriarchs to conceive and thus allows the line to be perpetuated?

Perhaps the Torah's silence on the perils of pregnancy, childbirth, infancy and childhood reflects the Torah's overriding concern with successful pregnancies, with producing the next generation in the line begun with Abraham – something which God unfailingly does. Miscarriage, maternal death and infant mortality are therefore quite purposefully ignored because they do not advance the Torah's central theme. These complications of pregnancy are simply not germane to the Torah's concerns; in fact, they run counter to these concerns.

But perhaps the Torah's silence on these subjects is <sup>due to</sup> not only ~~because~~ the Torah's <sup>'s</sup> intense ~~preoccupation with~~ interest exclusively in fertility and generativity. What we may also be seeing is what I'd like to call a felicitous and deliberate diversity of depictions of God: a God who is zealous and uncompromising in theory, but whose bark is much worse than the proverbial bite, at least on the level of the narrative about our ancestors. Perhaps we can tolerate a God who threatens such horrors but not one who actually wreaks such havoc in peoples' lives. On a communal level the theology of Deuteronomy may be bearable (although it has certainly broken down throughout Jewish history and most strikingly since the Holocaust) but on the individual level, it is simply too awful to contemplate.

Could the God whose omnipotence enables the barren woman to conceive really also be responsible for miscarriages, premature birth, infant or maternal mortality? A God who

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really controls all events – both wonderful and terrible - would be such a God; a God who opens up closed wombs but also one who empties the womb through miscarriage or takes the life of a mother like Rachel in childbirth. That would be the logical extension of the omnipotent God. But that would be too horrible. It's all right for the prophets, all right for a theology that explains events on the communal or national level, perhaps, but not all right to believe in when it comes to the destiny of one's own family.

And the rabbis actually help make this point by the reasons they give for the death of children and for miscarriages. They take the theology of Deuteronomy and apply it to the devastating losses in human life.

*Shabbat 32a* – There is a difference of opinion between R. Chiya b. Abba and R. Yose; one holds that children die as a punishment for parental neglect of mezuzah; while the other says that is for the neglect of Torah study.

The discussion goes on to present another makloket about why children die, in which R. Meir says it is due to the neglect of mezuzah and R. Yehudah prefers neglect of tzitzit as the explanation. ~~the cause~~

*Shabbat 32b* - It was taught in a baraita: R. Nechemiah said: As a punishment for a person's unwarranted hatred there will be a great deal of discord in his house, his wife will miscarry, and his sons and daughters will die young.

For some, this rabbinic theodicy that explains terrible loss as a punishment for neglect of the mitzvot may work. The application of the Deuteronomic sin-suffering equation by the rabbis to some of life's terrible losses is theologically neat but deeply problematic and terrifying. And it is not an equation that we find in the Torah text. If this explanation for human loss ~~did xxxxxxxxxx~~ the narratives of the Torah, how could we bear to read this text year after year? The Torah clearly knew about terrible loss associated with pregnancy and childbirth – Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor – but ~~the Torah~~ chose to remain mostly silent about these losses. We can read and mostly tolerate the threats of Deuteronomy (although we do so rapidly and in a soft voice) but we couldn't tolerate a litany of loss, in which many Rachels died in childbirth; many pregnancies ended in miscarriage; many, many children died before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthdays. The silence of the narrative text with respect to unmitigated catastrophes reflects a very different perspective than that of Deuteronomy and the prophets. Ironically, while it is Deuteronomy who challenges us to choose life over death; it is Genesis that makes the choice for life on our behalf.

was suggested by

דאן זאגט ער און סוף זאגט

**Vayishlach**

December 2, 2017

Shabbat shalom, or gut Shabbos, as the case may be.

All path of Torah are pleasant—but some more than others. In Vayishlach, your average darshan, me included, will usually prefer to stroll down a scenic lane with the mysterious wrestler, or Jacob during his name change, or maybe the paradoxical figure of Esau. Is he a really bad guy having a moment of weakness, or a weak guy who behaves really badly?

But this year, this is no avoiding one of the least pleasant paths in Torah. So let me begin my telling you about Bali's encounter with Harvey Weinstein.

I should say, first of all, that I asked Bali for permission to tell this story, or maybe to tell it herself. As we keep learning, over and over, the issue of who gets to speak, and who manages to be heard, is absolutely crucial. We're going to spend some time on that. But as far as Bali's story goes, she told me to go ahead.

The encounter happened at the end of a film awards dinner in January 2002. I was lingering to talk with some people. Bali, who was about 7 months pregnant, had gone by herself to the coat check. There was no line. But standing at the counter was Harvey Weinstein, holding an unlit cigarette. He cast his eyes at Bali, huge with child, and said, "Ya got a match?"

This was nowhere near as bad an experience as many other women have had with Harvey Weinstein. But, you'll admit, it had its pungency. And it bore a striking resonance with Bali's earlier encounter, in 1998, with Donald Trump. Yes, she ran into him, too—or rather, he almost ran into her. We were at the opening night party for the New York Film Festival, and Bali was, you guessed, it about 7 months pregnant. Along came

Donald Trump, through the big center room at Tavern on the Green, his head aloft, his eyes straight ahead, walking full speed exactly where it pleased him to walk—never mind that a pregnant woman was standing in his path. Bali had to jump sideways at the last second to avoid being knocked down. Which, again, wasn't the worst encounter any woman ever had with Trump. But it was something—pretty much the same thing, I believe, as the Weinstein incident.

In both cases, the man was expressing utter indifference. Trump did not even seem to see Bali—which is interesting, when you consider that he's the type who continually scans for women. But, because she was greatly pregnant, I suppose she didn't register as an immediate sexual opportunity, and so, for his purposes, did not exist at all. For Harvey Weinstein, she *did* exist—but only as an instrument of low-level, passing gratification. Weinstein certainly didn't see her as a person, or pause to think that her well-being might have been more important than his momentary desire for a smoke.

Once again, we witness the continuing relevance of Torah. It's time to talk about Dinah, our parsha's silent, hidden, almost non-existent woman.

Let's start with the fascinating motto that explains her name. There isn't any. All the sons of Jacob are given their little etymological stories. Of the daughter, the text says merely that she was named Dinah. Still, it's a suggestive choice. Dinah, presumably from *din*, judgment. Leah, who must have been the one to name her, seems to have believed that God was making a judgment through this child.

And yet the girl doesn't seem to be consequential. During Jacob's return to Canaan, when he crosses the Yabbok at night, the text says that he took his two wives, his

two maidservants, and his eleven children. “Vayikach et sh’tai nashav v’et sh’tai shifchotav v’et achad asar y’ladav.” Achad asar. Dinah literally does not count.

She becomes noticeable only when an outsider sees her—and, having seen her, abducts and rapes her. This isn’t exactly what I’d call being recognized as a person. Nor do I give young Shechem, son of Chamor, much credit for his behavior after the rape: “va-y’daber al-lev ha-na’ar,” he spoke to the young woman tenderly. A touch of realism in the narrative. The man who commits violence against a woman very often seeks to soothe her afterward, and exculpate himself, by cooing about how pretty she is.

But we can say this much for Shechem: He does speak to Dinah. Nobody else does. The men negotiate and scheme over her abused body, with no record of having asked anything about her thoughts, feelings, or intentions. And, of course, there is no record of her having voiced them. The plot is launched, the revenge is exacted in more than full measure, and the spoils are taken. Through it all, Dinah says not one word, then disappears. At the end, she doesn’t even get possession of the one thing in her life that makes her memorable. Shimon and Levi say, “Ha-ch’zonah ya’aseh et achotenu?” Should our sister be treated like a whore? The real outrage, evidently, was Shechem’s choice of a victim who was related to them. *They* were dishonored.

I see no way to evade the obvious. Dinah matters to this text exactly as she would have mattered to her society: as an object of exchange among men. Her only importance lies in her trade value, either between male-controlled households within her own clan, or between her male-controlled clan and an outside group. Her only other value is as an object of lust—which is to be normalized and institutionalized as quickly as possible through an exchange of property.



It hurts to say this—it is, in fact, a direct challenge to whatever intimations we might have of a divine purpose moving through Torah—but the text simply accepts this understanding of what women are, and what they’re good for. Of course it’s naïve to pretend that the Torah emerged from anything other than a thoroughly male-dominated society. But still, for those of us who read Torah week after week in search of inspiration, there is no pleasure in coming to this passage and having to say, “It is what it is.”

I went to the rabbis, in the hope that they would see hints of something here beyond the structures of patriarchal kindship—but they gave me nothing. Rashi, citing B’reishit Rabbah, says that Dinah was not counter among the children of Jacob who crossed the Yabbok because her father had locked her up in a chest, so Esau wouldn’t see her. This was a punishable error, Rashi says, because Esau might have wanted to marry Dinah, and she would have improved his morals. On the other hand, Rashi implies that Dinah herself did wrong when she “went out” to see the daughters of the land. Why? Because the text uses the same words in the incident of the mandrakes, when Leah “went out” to Jacob to tell him to sleep with her—and so, in the rabbis’ minds, Dinah’s behavior is sexualized and made blameworthy.

What is a young woman supposed to do, when she can’t live locked up in a chest, and she can’t be allowed to walk outside? There seems to be no place for her at all. Having no place, Dinah vanishes. Ramban writes that after the rape, she stayed with her brothers, shut up in Shimon’s quarters, living like a widow until she died.

So much for the rabbis. Can modern textual criticism help? From what I’ve seen, no. I checked the website [thetorah.com](http://thetorah.com) and found two articles about the rape of Dinah. One of them argued that the word translated as “rape” might not mean that at all, since

it's used differently in other contexts. Maybe Dinah consented to Shechem's advances, or perhaps she was humiliated but not raped. The other article proposed that the text we've received was based on an earlier version of the story, in which Dinah did not appear. I have no scholarly credentials and cannot evaluate the merits of these articles. I will say, though, that for people whose pleasure in Torah is disturbed by the story of Dinah, they very usefully wipe away both the crime and the woman.

So is that the judgment to which Leah referred in naming her daughter? Is it Dinah's purpose, her fate, to be erased? I would hope not—especially now, when women are making such an effort not to be treated as mere instruments and pushed out of the way.

I also reject the idea that Dinah simply vanishes, because great works of the imagination don't operate like that. They observe their own law of the conservation of matter and energy, their own fluid dynamics. Whatever is repressed in the Torah must somehow return. So I'm going to propose that Dinah comes back into the story in another guise.

Here's the first clue. When Dinah is shut up in Shimon's tent, never to emerge again, never to have offspring, the effective number of Jacob's children is reduced from 13 to 12. But the original number is restored in Egypt, when Jacob declares that he will accept Joseph's two sons as his own. In effect, he splits Joseph into Ephraim and Menashe, so the text returns to equilibrium with a roster of 13. Is it possible that Dinah has transmigrated into one of those two? Could either Ephraim or Menashe somehow carry on a spiritual lineage for their aunt?

The second clue: Menashe's name. Its basic meaning is "he who causes to forget." As Nahum Sarna writes in his commentary on B'reishit, "such a name would most likely be given to a child born after some misfortune." Which, to me, seems counterproductive. Every time you call the kid to dinner, you're reminding yourself of the trauma you were supposed to forget. Nevertheless. What if the misfortune were the obliteration of Joseph's sister, Dinah? And what if Menashe helps make up for the loss of Dinah by becoming, in some sense, a second Dinah?

Now, for the third clue, let's look at the final testimony of Jacob to Ephraim and Menashe—the prophecy, or judgment, that he gives them through their father Joseph. "Ben porat Yosef, ben porat aleh-ayin. Banot tza'adah aleh-shur." Choose your own translation. There are plenty of them. What's interesting here is that the grammatical feminine creeps into this prophecy about two young men. Rashi notices that the final tav in "porat" seems to denote the feminine, but he says the letter has been added merely for elegance of style. Nothing funny happening here. Rashi also notices that the subject of the line "banot tza'adah aleh-shur" is "banot," daughters. But, quoting the translation by Onkelos, he says the line means, "two tribes will come out of his sons." "Banot" has been substituted for "banim," sons, because Menashe's descendants, the daughters of Tz'lachpad, will someday inherit property.

The point is, in Jacob's prophecy, the language about Ephraim and Menashe is subtly feminized. Or, perhaps, both a male and a female side are acknowledged.

Which brings me to the fourth clue: the moment when Jacob accepts Ephraim and Menashe as his own sons, and lays his hands upon them—the wrong way. Why does he

cross his hands, despite Joseph's objection? Why does he give precedence to the younger, Ephraim, over the elder?

Going way out on a limb, I'm going to say that Jacob recognizes something of Dinah in Menashe, something feminine, and so denies him primogeniture. Overlooked and belittled once again. And this crossing of the hands—it's a very suggestive gesture. Not to play with words too much, but there is something trans about it. Of course, Joseph doesn't want to see Menashe denied. Joseph, the only patriarch who acculturated himself to an urban, multi-ethnic society, the extraordinarily handsome patriarch with a taste for really nice clothes. Our metrosexual father—he's willing for Menashe to be recognized as number one. But Jacob won't have it.

And so, to this day, on Friday evening, fathers bless their sons by asking them to be likened to Ephraim and Menashe—not Menashe and Ephraim.

But here's the judgment I want to leave you with. Menashe is put down, but not made to vanish. And once you pick up the clues of the feminine in him, and start to suspect that the neglected, silenced, and abused female lineage of Jacob might somehow live on through him, the death grip of patriarchy in the Torah loosens, just a little. The feminine itself can no longer be made invisible. And the possibility increases that women after Dinah will make themselves heard—much as they're making themselves heard, in great numbers, right now.

This, to me, is the judgment of Dinah. And I'm proud to think of it these days whenever I lay my hands on my own son's head and wish for him, as a blessing to be like Ephraim and also, for good measure, like Menashe.

Shabbat shalom.



## Parashat Ve-Yishlach

Nancy Sinkoff

ויותר יעקב לבדו ויאבק איש עמו עד עלות השחר

"And Jacob remained alone and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the dawn."

Genesis 32:25 is situated in the narrative of Jacob's return to Canaan after his long stay in Haran. In Haran Jacob had worked, married (twice), and finally departed in order to return to the land promised to his people. Both his initial departure from Canaan and his departure from Haran were fraught with tension. As the Torah tells us, Rachel urged Jacob to go to Haran in order to flee from his brother Esau's wrath after Jacob had purchased Esau's birthright and stolen his blessing. Leaving Haran, Jacob found himself in conflict with his father-in-law, Laban, who attempted to cheat Jacob out of his rightful property. Moreover, Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, has stolen her father's household gods. Jacob and his large family leave Haran in the same manner as Jacob left Canaan: in flight. This tension is heightened by the fact that Jacob had to face a tense reconciliation with his brother, Esau, upon his return to Canaan. Pasuk 32:8 tells us that Jacob is very afraid of this meeting/וירא יעקב מאד ויצר לו. Specifically, our verse appears after Jacob has already transferred himself, his family and his property over the Jabbok river. Yet, it also tells us that Jacob remained alone -- presumably on the Haran-side of the river -- and struggled with an unidentified man all night. Through midrash, the Rabbis tried to resolve some of the tensions inherent in the parashah.

Glossing the verse, the midrash Bereshit Rabbah first cites a verse from Deuteronomy, "There is no one like the God of Yeshurun." Then breaking up the Deuteronomic verse (33:26), the sages cited in the midrash form a question: "R. Barchia in the name of R. Shimon: And who is like God? Yeshurun. Israel the Patriarch. What is written about the

Holy One, Blessed is He, in it (the Torah): 'And God alone will be exalted, [Isaiah 2:17] so, too, (of) Jacob: 'and Jacob remained alone/לבוד יעקב לבדו.'" The Deuteronomic verse in its context says that the God of Yeshurun (the God of the Israelites) is unique. The midrash harmonizes the idea of God's uniqueness with Israel's uniqueness by comparing the patriarch Jacob, who is called Yeshurun in Isaiah 54:2, with God. Isaiah 2:17 was selected by the Rabbis because of the word לבד which appears in our verse. God's singular exaltedness is transferred to the patriarch Jacob who remains alone at the Jabbok."

The juxtaposition of the three verses (Genesis 32:25, Deuteronomy 33:26, and Isaiah 2:17) and the assumed encoding of one name (Yeshurun) with two other names (Jacob, Israel) express two central ideas. The first solves a problem in the Biblical text. Jacob's solitary "remaining" at the Haran-side of the river is understood as a symbol of his victory with the man. Just as God "alone will be exalted," so, too, will Jacob "remain alone," meaning survive or be victorious. Jacob, the Rabbis say unequivocally, triumphed over the man at the Jabbok.

Then, focusing more specifically on the phrase, "and a man wrestled with him/ויאבק איש" עמו the midrash addresses an obvious problem in the text: who is the man with whom Jacob wrestles alone until dawn, a struggle which earns him a new name, Israel, as well as eternally bequeathing the prohibition against leg of lamb to his heirs. The latter part of the midrash on this phrase states: "The Rabbis said: 'The man appeared to Jacob as the leader of a gang of robbers....The robber said to Jacob: "Cross my flocks and I will cross yours; the angel crossed our ancestor's (flocks and camels) in the wink of an eye, and our ancestor Jacob crossed and returned and forgot, and crossed and returned and forgot. Jacob said to him: 'Sorcerer!' R. Pinkhas said: 'Jacob took a tuft of wool and put it in the man's throat. He said to him: 'Sorcerer! Sorcerer! Witchcraft does not succeed at night!'

R. Huna said: 'Finally the robber said: 'I'll show him with whom he is dealing.' What did the robber do? He took his finger and put it in the ground and it began to sputter with fire. Jacob said to him: 'You're trying to frighten me with fire? I am, all of me, is made of it, as it is written: 'and the house of Jacob is fire.'" [Ovadia 1:18] The midrash continues: "R. Khama citing R. Khanina said: 'He [the man] was Esau's representative'".

The anonymous collective group of "Rabbis" suggest that the man is the leader of a gang of robbers. The man and Jacob break into a fight over the crossing of their flocks and the robber deliberately tries to trick Jacob. The two men have agreed to cross each other's flocks. The robber magically crosses all of Jacob's camels and sheep in the wink of an eye while Jacob must labor all night to cross those of the robber/sorcerer. The fight breaks out and Jacob gains the upper hand when he tries to strangle the robber/sorcerer by putting some lamb's wool down his throat [a motif which I can't expound upon by right now, but we should note that word צוֹאֵר recurs, both in Jacob's original deceit in stealing the blessing (Genesis 27:17), in the midrash (Genesis 32:25), and in the reconciliation between the two brothers (33:44)]. But the fight is not over. Jacob cries out to the robber/sorcerer that "witchcraft does not succeed at night" and the sorcerer retaliates with another magical ploy. R. Huna, playing on the consonantal similarity between the Hebrew word for man/אִישׁ and for fire/אֵשׁ says the man used fire to frighten Jacob. Because Rabbinic theology was based on the profound trust in the ultimate redemption of Israel, the midrash proudly presents Jacob's triumph by citing a verse in which Jacob/Israel is described as a house of fire. Compared to Jacob's fire, the man's sputtering spark was nothing.

Up until now I've explored the midrash's encoding of the biblical text with the world-view of the Rabbis: Jacob's struggle with the unidentified man could be nothing but triumphant because God's promise to Israel was eternally true. It is commonplace -- and accurate --



to describe the Rabbis as "ahistorical" in the modern sense of the word. They were not concerned with recording contemporary events and did not find religious significance in romomboring and analyzing temporal causality. Divine, meta-tomporal, oschatological history is what mattered. What makes this piece of midrash tantalizing to me is that the Rabbis' exegesis resounds with the historical situation of ancient Palestine. Redacted sometime in the fourth century, our midrash reflects the increasingly vitriolic polemic with Christianity over the true path to salvation, a polemic heightened by the Christianization of Rome in 356 C.E.

In the rabbinic mind, the biblical Esau became equivalent with the biblical Edom, which in turn was identified with Rome. By interpreting the man as Esau's messenger, the authors of the midrash projected this typology onto the text. Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok and his victory over Esau foreshadowed the Jews' ultimate victory over Roman subjugation. What ensured their victory? The eternal and unique truth of God's covenant. I have taken you, too quickly, through this compelling bit of rabbinic midrash to highlight an unusual consonance between rabbinic historiosophic thinking and their contemporary history. The rabbis, struggling with the painful contrast between their election in Heaven and their subjugation on earth, identified the biblical Esau with the Roman Empire as a way of reaffirming their faith that their current status was temporary. God could not have abandoned his people. The elder, Esau/Edom/Seir/Rome would ultimately serve the younger, Jacob/Israel/the Jews as stated in Genesis 25:22-23. The fact that Jacob had "followed" on Esau's heel during Rebecca's difficult labor meant that Israel's rule would follow Rome's. God's promise of historical election would be fulfilled. When Isaac unwittingly blessed Jacob, he promised him, "Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you" (Genesis 27:27-29). Jacob would be lord over his brother, Esau.

The Rabbis read our biblical verse not only in terms of Jacob's struggle with the man, but in terms of Israel's struggle with Christianity. Christians insisted that faith in Christ had replaced Biblical Law; the conversion of the vast Roman Empire combined with the earlier destruction of the Temple seemed to justify their claim. For the Rabbis, of course, this was patently false and they advanced the Bible as proof. "And Jacob remained alone," they asserted, just as Jacob struggled alone at the river, Judaism struggled on its own in Christian Rome. And just as Jacob's solitary struggle proved victorious, the religion of Jacob/Israel would survive and reap the rewards of God's covenant. Taken together, the duality inherent in Jacob's name and the "renaming" context of the verse, the interpretation of Jacob's victory implicitly expands to include the people Israel's destiny. The use of the sputtering fire image was certainly linked to the linguistic play on the word אֵשׁ which appears in Genesis 32:25, but may also have alluded to the destruction of the Temple through fire in 70 CE. By using the verse from Ovadia 1:18, the midrash asserts that though Roman fire destroyed the Temple, Jacob's/Israel's fire will ultimately triumph. This triumph was divinely ordained; thus the 4th century Rabbis, like Jacob in their midrash, could taunt their foes with assurance: 'with this you try to frighten me?' Rome's flames were but weak sparks compared to the historic destiny of Israel.

As we have seen, if one reads rabbinic texts carefully, one sees that in spite of the Sages' seemingly ahistorical religious encoding of the biblical text, they, too, were bound by their temporal reality. The Rabbis were inextricably grounded in historical reality, but preferred to interpret it in meta-historical terms. Though we live in times when a rampant ahistoricism affects us as a community, [Obviously, I have a vested interest in historicism!], we cannot escape the times we live in or the historical past that has preceded us. One of the many shocking reverberations of the Rabin assassination has been the way in which Zionism's past has been rewritten by some contemporary religious Zionists. It is painfully ironic that the very people who accused Rabin of giving back divinely-promised land forgot that he was the very mortal who had led the military conquest of that land.

Oh, were we able to return to the secure, eschatological faith of our Sages, who believed unequivocally that human history, in their case Roman rule, was temporary and divine history, the triumph of Jacob over Esau as Rome, inevitable. But, the study of human history, Jewish history, is sober, not like the soaring eschatologies in the Torah and non-canonical, apocryphal texts. We cannot return. Though historical understanding lacks spiritual comfort, it offers collective understanding and consciousness. I liken it to the psychoanalytic process. Remembering one's past leads to self-understanding, which is often painful, but necessary. Just as we cannot return to a pre-psychological understanding of the human condition, I would not want to revert, nor can we, to a pre-historicist (ahistorical) understanding of our past. By recording and understanding the human and Jewish past, we become grounded in the present, collectively conscious of what has come before. Our task is to hold onto the divine promise in our eternal texts without irrationally leaping headlong into them.

December 7, 1996 - 2nd day of Hannukah - Rachela's 2nd Yartzheit

During the last several weeks, as I pondered over this dvar torah, a variety of thoughts, false starts, and dead ends came to my mind. How to recognize my mother's second yartzheit in terms of the theme of the parsha and the story of Chanukah? At one point I thought of imitating my mother speaking in yiddish, trying to be funny, though humor is not one of my fortes. I thought of comparing Joseph to Judah HaMacabi and to tell you how my mother would have thought that they were both ganze mishiginas, total lunatics.

Then last week on the way to a Thanksgiving feast, the ultimate secular ritual, my thoughts came together. I walked down to the Village to my brother-in-law's, late in the day as twilight approached. As I passed Times Square, I noticed the tourists with cameras, their eyes gazing up towards the heavens, the billboards up high with gigantic pictures of beautiful men and women, lights blazing. Times Square patrols assured safety for all and I wondered how Judah HaMacabi would have felt as he wandered the streets of our Hellenized metropolis. Overt and covert sexual messages predominated--modern images of avodah zorah.

Further south on Broadway, I passed Kosher delite, Jerusalem 2 and another place whose name I no longer recollect. All providing glatt kosher cuisine for those who are forbidden to consume forbidden sacrifices. But do the visitors to these permissible locales shut their eyes to the surrounding scene or do they partake in the profane beauty just as you and I do? Shortly thereafter I passed beautifully lit Macy's, noticing the large balloon of Bullwinkle Moose down 34th street, resting after the long parade. Across the street the garish lights on Toys r' Us. My walk finished a bit beyond the grand arch forming the entrance to Washington Square Park. It was reminiscent of Titus's arch which I have never seen but often imagined.

Would my mother (and father) have supported the anti-Hellenizers of days gone by? Or, would they have become Hellenized themselves? The answer to these questions are too complex for a simple yes, no, or maybe. In 1939, as they prepared to leave Poland for Santo Domingo, their families said to them, how could you go to a treife land? Did these relatives mean that only Hellenists would leave the heilige ort, the sanctified earth, of the shtetl for the Hellenized lands in the new world? As their boat travelled around the Caribbean, my parents learned that Jews had to have a certain amount of money in order to be allowed to disembark. An amount that they certainly did not have. But as God willed it, they had befriended a Romanian Jewish family on that boat who told them that they themselves would declare themselves to be Ortodox, implying that they were Greek Orthodox. My parents did this without a noticeable trace of remorse that they may have been blaspheming God's name. Certainly Hanah of yore would have given her life, her children's lives, rather than even hint at such blasphemy.

These facts somehow seem to imply that my parents were well on their way to becoming full blown Hellenists.

Well, maybe yes, maybe not. Of my memories from the first years of my life in Santo Domingo, three stand out. One is going to a cathedral on Columbus Day to watch the priests raise the bones of Columbus. (By the way Columbus is one of those very unique individuals whose bones happen to rest in many different places simultaneously.) But to me, Columbus was

a Marrano. Regardless of outward appearance, my parents always talked about how he was a Jew at his core.

The two other memories are more direct: In Spanish countries children receive presents on the 6th of January, the Day of the Kings, when the Magi brought gifts to baby Jesus. I remember asking in a very plaintiff tone, why don't the kings come to our house, why do they only come to our next door neighbor's house? I have no recollection what I was told. The other memory is that at the Christmas pageant at the school (a church school since there were no others), they wanted me to play the role of little baby Jesus, a fitting role for a white Jewish boy in a land of dark-skinned people. My parents did not allow that. Again, whether I was disappointed, humiliated in front of my classmates, relieved, I have zero memory.

To straddle two cultures has been part of Judaism from its roots, the Egyptian and the religion of the patriarchs, the Hebraic and the Canaanite, the Hellenistic and the Judean, and the Roman Christian and the Rabbinic Judaic. In my life that paradoxical dichotomy has not represented some abstract notion or some notion that affects everyone as part of the community; instead that paradoxical state always has been part of my essence. Several years ago Miriam was troubled because we put her in constant double binds, sending her to an Orthodox school yet not practicing what she was taught there. It is really remarkable how one can repeat what one has experienced oneself. Going to a small yeshiva in the Bronx, I went to shul all the time. My father didn't. Once I was shopping with my mother before Pesach. A man stopped and spoke with us and commented on what a nice boy I was. "Too bad his father is not frum." Among the Christians I was a Jew, among the Jews I was not a real Jew. Life certainly would be easier if one would always know who to root for, whether it's for Judah HaMaccabi or for the evil Antiochus Epiphanes.

The Maccabean period lasted for a century, from the 160's BCE to the 60's CE. The Maccabees began as rebels against the Seleucids and then became as autocratic as any other potentate. The final fall of Jerusalem could be attributed to the Jewish civil strife which then allowed the Romans to defeat the non-unified Jews. The end of the Maccabean rule was caused just as much by their own stupidity as by their opponents' strength.

So what's the message from today's parsha and today's yom tov? Did my mother have it right when she stressed shalom bais, peace at home, above all? Her position of shalom bais, certainly a central essence in my mother's existence, encompasses much that allows for not only survival but for a genuine existence. This idea recognizes the importance of compromise in the face of danger, whether the danger is irreparable intrafamilial strife like between Joseph and his brothers or whether the danger is external like the mortal dangers faced by my parents. Survival of the self, of the family, of the polity requires the recognition of the ongoing tension between a tenacious grip on basic principles while at the same time having the ability to compromise despite the contrary counsel of the most fervent loyalists.

Shabat Shalom and gut yom tov

Dvar Torah  
Minyan Ma'at  
Hannukah – Parsha Vayeshev  
December 4, 1999  
Leon Hoffman

A perfect wonder

“A perfect wonder” is the appellation used of Hannah by the author of Maccabees II, as he describes the tortures applied to Hannah’s seven sons as they endured unspeakable horrors—their tongues pulled out, their heads scalped, their bodies mutilated and eventually fried on a pan. All of this because they refused to eat the forbidden swine. Hannah watched them all and even urged her seventh son, the youngest, not to recant but to join his dead brothers rather than defile the Lord’s command.

Can one imagine a mother, outside of a hypnotic trance, who would observe, allow, and even promote such torture of her children? “A perfect wonder” is not what WE would call such a mother.

The theme of maternity has been on my mind since tonight is the 5<sup>th</sup> yartzeit of MY mother’s death. Considering this occasion, I thought I would continue the theme that we have been following here in the minyan. We heard Shana Roskies talk about the universality of the pain of Hannah, before she became the mother of Samuel, and we heard Anne Mintz uncover for all of us that missing mother of Leah.

Why DO we so rarely talk about mothers? Freud, in fact, could not begin to write his main treatise on women until HIS mother died at the age of 91. Perhaps there IS a pervasive problem for us males. In fact, I came to realize that I had a great deal of trouble conceiving of this dvar torah. A month or so ago, I had asked David Curzon about giving a dvar torah today because some specific idea had come to my mind on that particular

shabat. Before too long, however, that idea disappeared from my consciousness; and looking at various texts did not produce any inspiration that I could convert into a coherent drash.

However, even within these confused musings, the story of Tamar fascinated me. After all, what psychoanalyst wouldn't be intrigued by that tale? That tale about the relationship between a young woman and a father figure. More importantly, Shana's and Anne's talks about mothers increased my focus on women in the Torah. Why ARE mothers constantly hidden in the book of Bereshit, amid all of the family struggles and generational struggles that engage our attention? Was my difficulty in coming up with some ideas of my own an example of the repeated problem men have in trying to understand women, and all of their powers and mystery? Was my block an instance of the problem of men traversing that "unknown continent," as my toiten rebbe, Freud, used to say?

In Bereshit when women are present, they often DO perform dramatically. However, they also seem to appear and disappear so quickly that we have to create our own pictures of them according to our personal private imagination. We have to create these images in order to think of them as real people. The women perform dramatic actions—they seem to be there only for the act in which they will be a participant. However, their characters, their personal strengths, their weaknesses, their relationships, in other words their subjectivity, their sense of themselves as whole complete people, is absent.

That is not to say that we know very much about most of the characters in Bereshit. Look at how so many of them are simply supporting players whose roles as bit

actors is made rather obvious by the text. Only a few privileged heroes are described in enough detail for us to understand who they are, where they came from, what their goals in life are, and what their own personal unique relationship to God is.

Look at today's parsha – “And Jacob abode in the land of his father's sojourning, in the land of Canaan. These are the progeny of Jacob. Joseph....”

That's it – out of 12, only one is important. Can there be any doubt as to the source of the grandiosity of Joseph's dreams? The Torah makes it abundantly clear—of the 12 he is the only one who really counts.

Given this one-person thread, in this parsha we read the transition from the Jacob cycle to the Joseph cycle. One hero is replaced by the another from the next generation. As we read the text, we reach the point where Joseph is sold to Potiphar. But, before we learn about Potiphar's and Joseph's relationship, and Joseph's intriguing interactions with Mrs. Potiphar, we are treated to a fascinating detour, about a woman and her father-in-law and his sons who cannot fulfill their obligations.

What can we say about this woman? We all know who will eventually emerge from this woman's heirs – no other than the King of the Kingdom –David. And who will come from the House of David at the end of days? No other than the Messiah. One side of David's lineage comes from Tamar and Judah (a thinly disguised incestuous relationship of a father and a daughter) and the other side of his lineage – via Ruth the Moabite—the product of an incestuous relationship (this time an overt one – the relationship between Lot and one of his daughters).

So what were the ancient Israelites's idea of women and mothers? On the one hand we have all of these powerful men: Jacob and Joseph and almost 2 millenia later, as



we celebrate today, Judah, the Maccabee. On the other hand, women, mothers, pop in and out of the action. But why does the lineage of the Davidic dynasty contain two incestuous relationships?

Is this a mere coincidence? Does it say something about the patriarchal view of women and mothers? Think back to a child's view of his or her mother—this person is totally in charge of the child's body, his or her life, and only gradually allows the child to assume an autonomous state. For the mother, the newborn baby is experienced as part of her own body. Thus, a loss of the child, regardless of age, can be experienced by the mother as a basic visceral loss. No wonder the story of Hannah and her seven sons really cannot resonate as a psychologically meaningful story.

As the child grows and begins to do things on his or her own, the mother may also experience those feelings of loss and separation. The child experiences the tugs and pulls—moving away and being pulled back. A constant tension between the child's own independent wishes and the wishes to stay close to mother.

So can't we imagine the awe that the ancients felt towards mothers? Certainly before the concept of paternity was understood, the concept of maternity was patently obvious. Regardless of the theory of how the baby got inside the mother's womb, the miracle of birth and motherhood was there for all to behold. What magical act could any man perform that would compare to the miracle of childbirth and nursing the babe in mother's arms?

When the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon, she said, "I have heard of thee and thy wisdom; if now I inquire of thee concerning a matter, wilt thou answer me? He

replied: The Lord giveth wisdom, out of His mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. She then said to him:

Seven there are that issue and nine that enter; two yield the draught and one drinks.

Said he to her: Seven are the days of a woman's defilement, and nine the months of pregnancy; two are the breasts that yield the draught, and one the child that drinks it.

Whereupon she said to him: Thou art wise.

Isn't it interesting that of the 22 riddles that the Queen of Sheba asked Solomon, the very first one concerned her test of his knowledge of that greatest of mysteries: woman and her bodily functions?

But where does Tamar, Judah, Ruth and David fit in?

If we look further into the Queen of Sheba's questions, we see that clear allusions to the theme of father-daughter incest is explicitly recognized in this interesting legend. Of the other questions by which she tested his wisdom, 3 of the riddles are about this theme:

In the second question, she asked him: "A woman said to her son, thy father is my father, and thy grandfather my husband; thou art my son and I am thy sister?!"

"Assuredly, " said he, "it was the daughter of Lot who spake thus to her son."

In the tenth, she asked, "Three entered a cave and five came forth therefrom?"

"Lot and his two daughters and their two children."

And in the 17<sup>th</sup> "A woman was wedded to two, and bore two sons, yet the four had one father?" "Tamar"

That three out of twenty-two conundrums should be devoted to this theme seems rather disproportionate—until one remembers that these incestuous matings were in Solomon's own family tree. Was the Queen of Sheba teasing Solomon about this irregularity in his ancestry? Or did some mystical quality attach to it?

Men AND women have in the past and continue to have in the present difficulty in fully accepting a woman's assertiveness and aggression. It is as if women are SUPPOSED to be passive. Certainly NOT active.

Tamar certainly could not be accused of being passive. "And it was told to Tamar, saying, Behold, thy husband's father goeth up to Timmath to shear his flock. And she removed the garments of her widowhood from her, and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat at the entrance of Enayim, which is on the way to Timmath; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given unto him to wife."

Rashi says that she was anxious for children from Judah since she was not going to get them from Shelah.

And if we think back to Lot and his daughters, we read how in the midst of destruction, the older one says to the younger, "Our father is old and there is not a man in the earth to come unto us after the way of all the earth: Come let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him that we may keep alive seed from our father."

Both Tamar and Lot's eldest daughter take emergency action when they feel threatened with extinction—extinction of their important male's lineage. Is it possible that it is this activity, even one which is a forbidden activity, but one with a worthy goal – to insure survival of their lineage – that led them to be worthy of becoming the progenitors of the kingly line?

Certainly all women and all mothers are active. And not just during times of crisis. As we celebrate the heroics of our Maccabbean male ancestors, we should simultaneously glorify their mothers, not only for insuring their sons' creation and survival, but for having to cope with situations where their own activity and power were restricted. Humankind's continued development requires that we all recognize that a woman's activity and power becomes threatening only because of our own fears and fantasies.

Shabat Shalom and a freilichin Hannukah



Raphaela Gold

December 5, 2015

Bat Mitzvah D'var Torah: Vayeshev

Shabbat Shalom. After many months of learning in depth about parshat Vayeshev, one topic particularly stood out to me. At the beginning of my parasha [Gen. 37:3], the Torah says:

בְּנָיו כִּי בֶן זִקְנִים הוּא לוֹ וַעֲשָׂה לוֹ כְּתוֹנֶת פָּסִים וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת יוֹסֵף מֵכָל

This means: “And Jacob loved Joseph the most of all of his sons, because he was the child of his old age, and he made him a k’tonet pasim,” often translated as a “coat of many colors,” although a “striped” or “ornamented” coat is more correct. And why did Jacob favor Joseph? The Torah says because Joseph was “ben zekunim hu lo,” a son of his old age.

Rashi quotes the opinions of the Talmud and of Onkelos (who translated the Torah into Aramaic) about what this phrase means. Onkelos says: it means he was a zaken, or a wise child, who learned Jacob's wisdom. The Talmud says: Joseph physically looked like Jacob. Both these opinions seem to mean that the child reflected the parent, and therefore Jacob favored Joseph, the son most like himself.

This really bothers me, because in my opinion, it is never okay for a parent to favor one child more than the others. It's not that I have personal experience or anything, because, as an only child, I know for certain that I am my parents'

favorite (pause for laughter). But Joseph's brothers weren't so lucky. They felt unfavored every day. Yet Jacob is always referred to as a great man -- a tzadik.

Let's try to understand Jacob's favoritism by taking a look at his own childhood. We learn earlier in the book of Genesis that Jacob's twin brother, Esau, was favored by their father, Isaac, while Jacob was favored by their mother, Rebecca. This shows us that Jacob grew up in a household where favoritism was the norm. Later we read that the same pattern is true about Jacob's relationship with his two wives. Jacob favored his wife Rachel, Joseph's mother, over his other wife, Leah.

Perhaps the roots of Jacob's favoritism come from his childhood and his early adult life, which made him think this behavior was okay. But I think his background is no excuse for favoring Joseph over the other children, which I think is morally wrong.

Sure, in life, some people are more likeable than others, and some people are the children of parents you like more than others. But I think that it is an unfortunate human flaw that we have positive or negative feelings for others based on their ancestry. We might not be able to control our feelings, but we must control how we act. It might be impossible for Jacob not to FEEL extra love for Joseph in his heart. But it is COMPLETELY wrong that he SHOW it. The relationship between parents and children is very complicated, but for a parent to show that he or she loves one of their OWN children more than another one of their OWN children is one of the most UNACCEPTABLE things for a parent to do!

There are many reasons WHY Jacob's favoritism towards Joseph is harmful. Near the end of the Torah [Deut. 21:15-17], the book of Deuteronomy states a rule that appears to criticize Jacob's parenting. The Torah teaches that if a man has two wives, one beloved and the other hated, and they both have had children, and the firstborn was the son of the *hated* one, then the man must treat the son of the hated wife as the true firstborn and give the double portion of the inheritance to him.

This text suggests how unfair Jacob had been to Reuben, his first-born son, who didn't get what he deserved, and it suggests how much pain Reuben must have felt. This rule in Deuteronomy teaches that feelings are not supposed to affect inheritance laws, but the text only talks about material things, not emotional things.

To be a sibling of the child favored by his or her parent must be one of the hardest things a person can go through, especially for a child!! Most of the time, children will have strong desires to please their parents and to make them proud. It must be awful to have a parent who favors your sibling more than you, no matter what you do to try to impress them. This can cause harm not only to one child's emotions, but it can pose a hazard to the whole world. Think about it. If there is a child who is tortured inside, they will most likely want to strike out at someone, to redirect some of their self-hatred and cast it out on others. In my opinion, this is THE MAIN REASON that it is morally wrong for parents to show favoritism amongst their children.



So why does the Torah depict one of the founders of Judaism to be so deeply flawed? Because the Torah is not afraid to show people as people. People have natural flaws, mistakes, *and* the gifts of good virtues. I really love that, although the Torah depicts Jacob as a great man, he is still deeply flawed, as are the other great patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac. I have always thought of the Torah as a book of amazing and interesting life lessons, and I think one of the greatest lessons is presented to us right here in Vayeshev. The lesson is that, while many people are really mensches, it is important to recognize that even expressing our feelings of love can lead to harmful actions, so we have to be mindful about how we express our feelings.

Now I'd like to thank everyone who is here today to help me celebrate my bat mitzvah, whether you came from near or far. I would also like to thank all of my friends and family members who could not make it here today for being so supportive. I especially want to thank Max the dog, for his barks of support all the way from Montreal. Thank you to all of my Beit Rabban teachers for making learning so exciting. A special thank you to you, Grandma, for making the long trip from Florida. Big thanks to Rabbi Kalmanofsky for helping me develop my d'var Torah and for being my lifelong rabbi who announced my name twelve years ago. Lastly, I want to thank my dad for helping me think about my d'var Torah and my mom for tutoring me in chanting the Torah and Haftarah. You are the best parents ever.

I usually read the introduction to the Haftorah, looking to see what historical connections may be found in it. The prophetic texts are wonderful from a literary perspective and often tell us a great deal about ancient Israelite history. As someone who grew up reading the prophets as foretelling the coming of Jesus, I particularly enjoy reading them in the Jewish context where they belong! It might be interesting for darshanim to consider the Haftorot as a source of drashot, particularly during the challenging months of Vayikra and Bemidbar. We might also consider drashing on the megillot in their season. We know the Torah deeply but there are many other Biblical texts that give us access – perhaps even greater access – to the lived experience of ancient Israel than the Torah which was largely in its final form during the relatively brief exile in Babylonia that began in 585 BCE.

We read the early Second Temple book of Ruth on the second day of Shavuot and I'm always reminded of Jane Austen until I remember that Ruth is, in fact, a radical text masquerading as a pastorate love story. Fortunately, there is a back-door approach to a drash on Ruth through chapter 38 of today's parashah. The chapter comes between Joseph being sold into slavery and his arrival in Egypt. It is a kind of Biblical entre-acte, marking the passage of time between Joseph leaving that pit and arriving in Egypt while building tension about his future. It also serves as a measure for measure story – Judah, having literally brought down Joseph into the pit, is now brought down by his own daughter-in-law. Tamar, widow of Judah's two oldest sons, persists in demanding her right under the Deuteronomic law of halitsah to wed his third son when he comes of age. Halitsah allows a childless widow to have children by marrying a surviving brother; children will preserve the line of the deceased brother.

Judah, having observed the law of halitsah by giving Tamar to his second son, is unwilling to marry her to his third. Tamar persists in pursuing her rights, tricks Judah into sleeping with her, becomes pregnant and gives birth to twin sons, Perez and Zerach. Those ancients who recorded these stories and chose them for inclusion in what ultimately becomes a sacred text could not have imagined they would be read for millennia wherever the people of Israel Jews lived. Happily for us, they enjoyed telling stories about the family and did not shy away from presenting the chosen family, warts and all. It's a good thing the Biblical books were canonized so early in history, since they might well have been edited later by those concerned with the public image of the ancient Israel. Later ancients who composed Biblical texts after the return from Babylonian exile, were a diverse lot, some of whom were interested in presenting a more positive image of Israel. And Ruth is an excellent example of this.

The arguments about the date and authorship of this book are interesting but what is most interesting is that it puts Ruth – a daughter of Moab, a pre-eminent enemy of Israel – into the genealogy of King David which leads, ultimately, to the Messiah. This genealogical connection between Ruth and King David is a construction of the Second Temple period that establishes the potential for non-Israelites to become members of the tribe, literally. This genealogical construction appears nowhere else in the Bible and it's worth wondering whether becoming a Jew would be possible absent the book of Ruth. The last verses of Ruth – connecting Tamar's son Perez from her seduction of Judah to Ruth's son Obed from her marriage to Boaz – are of great significance: "This is the line of Perez: Perez begot Hezron, Hezron begot Ram, Ram begot Amminadab, Amminadab begot Nahshon, Nahshon begot Salmon, Salmon begot Boaz, Boaz begot Obed, Obed begot Jesse and Jesse begot David." The author of this book clearly knew the Judah-Tamar story but may not have imagined that Ruth could be part of the same collection of texts that includes the story of Tamar.

The choice of linking Ruth, the Moabite with Tamar, the seducer of Judah, suggests a polemical intention: it suggests that the covenant is open to strangers of all kinds, giving support to the idea that it was an early Second Temple response to efforts by those returning from exile to end the marriages between Israelites who had stayed behind and their non-Israelite wives. We know from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that this became a crucial issue after the return. Until the sons of Joseph, born to an Egyptian woman, appear towards the end of Genesis, the birth of Perez and Zerach to Tamar are the last reported in the patriarchal family; the last born to Israelite women. Rather than ignoring this story of seduction, the book of Ruth blatantly references it. In Ruth, 4:11 the people at the gate in Bethlehem are celebrating Boaz's nuptials: "May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel." There's nothing surprising about mentioning two of the matriarchs. But the verse that follows is surprising: "And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah - through the offspring which the Lord will give you by this young woman." If you didn't know the story of Tamar and Judah, there would be nothing remarkable about their inclusion here. But it is remarkable that Tamar is here, not as the seductress or the woman wronged by Judah, but as a noble character who extends the line through the birth of her sons; elevated beyond the Genesis 38 context by her association with Ruth who does everything by the book.

The stories of Tamar and Ruth are an example of intertextuality – a kind of conversation between Biblical texts. Since the possibility of conversion is established in the book of Ruth, it is not surprising and most likely deliberate that there are many parallels between the two stories and that step by step, Ruth serves to "clean up" some of the problems in the Tamar story and places Tamar among the matriarchs.

- To begin with, both stories involve the death of two sons – Judah's sons Er and Onan and Mahlon and Chilion, the sons of Naomi and Elimelech.
- Ruth and Tamar are both widows; Naomi is a widow and Judah, a widower.
- There is a similar setting for each story: it is the season of the barley harvest in the book of Ruth while in Chapter 38 of Genesis, Judah is engaged in sheep shearing, a seasonal activity that he engages in with an Abdullamite friend in Timnah.
- Ruth and Naomi go from Moab into the land of Israel while Judah comes into the land from Timnah.
- Ruth is told to return to her mother's house by Naomi while Judah instructs Tamar to return to her father's house when he denies her access to his surviving son.
- The ritual of halitsah is the source of conflict in Genesis 38 when Judah – unwilling to lose a third son in marriage to Tamar – effectively denies Tamar her legal right; in Ruth, an issue arises that is identified as halitsah but, in fact, does not fit the Deuteronomic model. Here the possible "goel" or redeemer is not a brother of Ruth's late husband but a more distant relative; given how awkwardly the text deals with the danger of Ruth being taken by another man, it is probably in the text to make another connection to Tamar and to add an element of tension.
- Each woman has three partners or prospective partners associated with her: Tamar – Er, Onan, Judah; Ruth – Mahlon, Poloni Almoni (the goel/redeemer; a name that hints at the fact that this issue of halitsah may be an invention to present an obstacle to a happy ending), Boaz
- Tamar covers herself, wrapping up to appear as a cult prostitute to seduce Judah; Ruth, of course, is the model of modesty; only at the urging of her mother-in-law does she seek out Boaz on the threshing room floor where he covers her with no apparent immodest intention, or, at least, only hinted at.
- Tamar becomes pregnant while she is disguised. After the night on the threshing room floor, Ruth extends her shawl and Boaz fills it with six measures of barley. While there is no overt suggestion of sex between Boaz and Ruth, I always remember Ed Greenstein's image of Ruth

being filled with seed by Boaz as she held out her shawl. In the story, Ruth becomes pregnant results – as she should – but, later on, through marriage!

Given the many details in the story of Ruth that align with details in Genesis 38, I think it's fair to see Ruth, among other things, as a corrective midrash on Tamar. Ruth's story is one of modesty and propriety; an unlikely heroine enters the line of King David through loyalty to her mother-in-law, unselfishly gleaning from the fields, showing loving kindness towards an older man. Ruth, the righteous proselyte, plays cleanup in the chosen family. She earns her position through her gift of hesed.

I do think the book was a reaction, at least in part, to the issues that arose when those returning from exile found that men who had stayed behind had taken up with "local women" and pressured them to divorce these women. What I find most interesting are the voices of the Biblical authors and redactors in conversation across the centuries. It seems reasonable to assume that those who created the book of Ruth were influenced by some of the problems presented by Genesis 38. In creating the ideal outsider to join the chosen people, they turned back to Tamar and her son Perez, son of Judah and the last child born to a son of Jacob in the land of Israel, to begin a unique genealogy. They attached Tamar's story of desperation and transgression to Ruth's story of virtue and devotion to Boaz, an older, unmarried man and Naomi, a desperately sad widow and despairing mother of two dead sons. In short, the book of Ruth embraces the Moabite and, retroactively, the widow who defies a son of Jacob in order to bear a child.

The rabbis of the first millennium CE are troubled by the fact that the book of Ruth violated the prohibition in Deuteronomy 33:3 that "no Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord". They try to resolve this contradiction by asserting the prohibition applies only to males. But Deuteronomy is an older text than Ruth and the rabbis of the midrash are anachronizing here as they often do to solve a problem they find in a text. But thanks to Biblical scholarship we can see an evolving understanding of the text across the centuries as our ancestors responded to historical developments. The book of Ruth expands the possibilities of membership in the Jewish people through a Moabite woman whose virtues are indisputable and whose story rehabilitates Tamar who persisted.



D'VAR TORAH – PARSHAT VAYASHAV – 2022

SHABBAT SHALOM.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, MY GOOD FRIEND AND CO-RELIGIONIST HOWARD BERKWOTIZ STOOD BEFORE YOU ALL TO GIVE A DVAR TORAH TO MARK HIS 60<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY.

FOR SOME REASON, I WAS STANDING AT THE BACK OF THE ROOM. THERE WAS A PAUSE BEFORE HE BEGAN, AND I SHOUTED OUT, “HOWARD! 60 IS THE NEW 40!” HE IMMEDIATELY RESPONDED WITH THE COMEBACK, “YEAH? TELL THAT TO MY COLON.”

USING THAT AS MY LODESTAR, I THOUGHT I TOO WOULD REGALE YOU THIS SHABBAT WITH HOW THE AGING PROCESS HAS AFFECTED CERTAIN PARTS OF MY BODY AS WELL. ELLEN, HOWEVER, STRONGLY ADVISED AGAINST IT. “THERE’S NO REASON,” SHE SAID, “THAT THE KAHAL SHOULD HAVE TO HEAR ABOUT THE TSURUS I MUST DEAL WITH ON A DAILY BASIS.”

AND SO LET US INSTEAD TURN OUR GAZE TO PARSHAT VAYASHAV. THERE ARE SO MANY OF US WHO CLAIM TO HAVE A FAVORITE PARSHA. I DO NOT. BUT I DO HAVE A FAVORITE CHARACTER, AND HE IS THIS WEEK’S PROTAGONIST, YOSEPH.

YOSEPH IS AMAZING. I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN DRAWN TO HIM BECAUSE OF SOME OF THE UNFORTUNATE PARALLELS BETWEEN HIS GOALS, EXPERIENCES AND CHARACTER AND THAT OF MY OWN, ESPECIALLY AS I LOOK BACK ON SEVERAL DECADES AND, GOD WILLING, A FEW MORE DOWN THE ROAD.

NOW, DON'T GET ME WRONG. AS I LOOK OUT TODAY, I AM BLESSED THAT MY OLDER SISTER HEATHER IS WITH US, AND I DON'T WANT ANY OF YOU THINKING THAT SHE AND MY TWO BROTHERS SOLD ME INTO SLAVERY IN 1979 WHEN I WAS 17 AND LIVING IN DUNDAS, ONTARIO. I'M SURE IT CROSSED THEIR MINDS, HOWEVER, WHEN THAT YEAR I ANNOUNCED THAT THE KNACK'S "MY SHARONA" WAS BETTER THAN ANYTHING JOHN AND PAUL EVER WROTE.

BUT EVEN BACK THEN YOSEPH LEFT ME IN AWE. HE IS THE ULTIMATE DIASPORA JEW. THE MAN WHO CLIMBED AS HIGH AS A MAN COULD CLIMB. THE MAN WHO, AGAINST ALL ODDS, LEAVES HIS HUMBLE RURAL ORIGINS AND MAKES IT BIG IN THE MOST POWERFUL CITY ON THE PLANET.

I CERTAINLY HOPE I WASN'T THE EGOTISTICAL PRICK THAT HE WAS (BUT YOU CAN ASK HEATHER AT KIDDUSH). AND I REALIZE THAT HE DIDN'T *WANT* TO GO TO EGYPT AND CLIMB THAT CORPORATE LADDER, BUT HIS MOXY AND DETERMINATION ARE INCREDIBLE. WE ALL KNOW THE STORY. AND MOST OF US CAN SING IT.

YOSEPH IS INSPIRING BECAUSE THROUGH HARD WORK, INTERPRETIVE PROWESS AND CUNNING HE NOT ONLY SURVIVES, BUT HE OBTAINS POWER, RICHES, AND ADORATION. AS I WRITE THESE WORDS I THINK OF MY FATHER.

ONE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOSEPH AND ME IS THAT I WANTED TO GET OUT OF SUBURBAN CANADA AND COME TO WHERE THE ACTION IS -- THE ROME OF OUR DAY, AND -- FOR ME (FORGIVE ME JERUSALEM) THE CENTER OF THE JEWISH WORLD.

I REALIZE THAT IF I PUSH THIS ANALOGY TOO FAR, NEW YORK CITY IS MITZRAYIM. AND THAT UNFORTUNATELY WOULD MAKE US ALL EGYPTIAN JEWISH SLAVES IN NEED OF LIBERATION. WELL, WAIT A MINUTE: IS THERE SOME TRUTH TO THAT? WE HAVE MORE FREEDOM AND POWER THAN ANY GROUP OF DIASPORA JEWS IN HISTORY HAS EVER KNOWN, BUT DO WE LIVE IN A NARROW PLACE?

BUT BACK TO THE STORY AND A FEW OTHER COMPARISONS BETWEEN ME AND YOSEPH AND, I WOULD RESPECTFULLY SUBMIT, LIKELY BETWEEN *YOU* AND YOSEPH AS WELL.

AS YOSEPH WANDERS THROUGH THE DESERT ALONE, WE READ ABOUT AN UNNAMED, MYSTERIOUS MAN WHO COMES OUT OF NOWHERE AND HE ASKS YOSEPH "MA TE-VA-KESH?"



THIS IS USUALLY TRANSLATED AS “WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?” (AND NOTE, OF COURSE, THE MYSTERY AS TO WHY THE MAN ASKS YOSEPH WITHOUT BEING PROMPTED). AND IT’S NOT A WRONG TRANSLATION.

BUT IS THAT ALL IT MEANS? THE SHORESH IS BET-KUF-SHIN.

BEING A WELL-TRAINED FORMER STUDENT OF THE PARDES INSTITUTE OF JEWISH STUDIES IN JERUSALEM, AND USING THE SKILLS THEY TAUGHT ME, I REACHED FOR THAT INDESPENSABLE INTERPRETIVE GUIDE TO BIBLICAL HEBREW: THE CELLPHONE. I CALLED CAROL LEVITHAN. AFTER REACHING AN AGREEMENT ON HER FEE, SHE TOLD ME THAT BET-KUF-SHIN MEANS TO “SEEK,” AS IN TO SEEK TO FIND, OR TO SEEK TO SECURE. THERE ARE DIFFERENT WORDS FOR “TO LOOK.” THE SHORESH IS RELATED TO BE-VA-KA-SHA, WHICH MIGHT MEAN SOMETHING MORE THAN JUST PLEASE; MAYBE IT MEANS I AM SEEKING SOMETHING, AND CAN YOU HELP ME FIND IT?

AND MAYBE THIS IS JUST THE FORMER ENGLISH MAJOR IN ME, BUT IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THERE IS A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEEKING SOMETHING AND LOOKING FOR SOMETHING. I LOOK FOR A PARKING SPACE (MUCH TOO OFTEN). I LOOK FOR MY KEYS (AND CAN’T FIND THEM). I LOOK AT YOU AS I SPEAK (AND IT IS BEAUTIFUL). BUT SEEKING IS DEEPER. IT’S SPIRITUAL. IT INCLUDES LONGING. IT HINTS THAT SOMETHING TRANSFORMATIVE WILL HAPPEN ONCE

THE SEEKING IS OVER. BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, ONE WORD CAN MEAN TWO VERY DIFFERENT THINGS. IF SO, THEN IT ALL COMES DOWN TO WHO IS DOING THE SPEAKING AND HIS MOTIVATION.

BACK TO OUR STORY: BECAUSE THE UNNAMED MAN IS MYSTERIOUS, APPEARS OUT OF NOWHERE, AND APPROACHES YOSEPH FIRST, HE STRIKES ME AS GHOST-LIKE. MAYBE IN THE DESERT HEAT JOSPEH ONLY THINKS HE SEES AND HEARS THIS STRANGER. COULD YOSEPH BE TALKING TO HIMSELF? MANY YEARS AGO, THERE WAS A FAMOUS PRODUCTION OF HAMLET WHERE THE DIRECTOR HAD THE ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET ALSO PLAY HAMLET'S FATHER. THE PHRASE "I AM YOUR FATHER" TAKES ON A CHILLING NEW MEANING WHEN UTTERED BY THE SON.

IF I'M ON TO SOMETHING HERE, YOSEPH'S OTHER SELF – THE NAMELESS MYTERY MAN – IS ASKING YOSEPH, "WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING?" AND YOSEPH, USING THE SAME WORD ANSWERS WITH, "HERE'S WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR." (APOLOGIES TO BONO AND U-2.)

AND HERE'S YOSEPH'S PROBLEM, CERTAINLY IT WAS MINE, AND MAYBE IT WAS YOURS: AS A YOUNG PERSON, YOSEPH HAD NO IDEA WHAT HE WAS SEEKING OR WHAT HE SHOULD BE SEEKING. HE HAD NO DESIRE FOR ANY KIND OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE. AND WHY SHOULD HE? HE WAS HIS FATHER'S FAVORITE WITH A TECHNICOLOR DREAM COAT AND DREAMS WORTHY OF

FELLINI.

YOSEPH ONLY KNEW WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR. AND THE IRONY OF COURSE IS THAT WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR – HIS BROTHERS – IS EXACTLY WHAT DOOMED HIM TO A SMALL, NARROW HOLE IN THE GROUND, A TERRIFYING JAIL EXPERIENCE, AND NEAR-DEATH. FAST FORWARD TO THE END OF HIS STORY AND HE REALIZES WHAT HE NEEDED WASN'T WHAT HE WANTED; AND WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR WASN'T THE SAME AS WHAT HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN SEEKING.

HE REALIZED VERY LATE IN THE GAME, AT THE END OF HIS LIFE, WHAT HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN SEEKING: FAMILY. HIS FATHER. HIS HOME. ALL THOSE YEARS IN EGYPT AND NOT EVEN A TELEGRAM HOME. IT'S AN OLD STORY: THE POWER, FAME AND FORTUNE GAVE HIM WHAT HE WANTED BUT IT DIDN'T GIVE HIM WHAT HE NEEDED. WHAT HE THOUGHT HE WAS LOOKING FOR IN THE DESERT – HIS BROTHERS – SHOULD HAVE BEEN WHAT HE WAS SEEKING. LOOKING ALLOWS YOU TO SEE; SEEKING ALLOWS YOU TO TRANSFORM.

SO: WHO WAS YOUR UNNAMED MYSTERY MAN? WHO APPROCHED YOU OUT OF NOWHERE WHEN YOU WERE IN THE DESERT AND ASKED YOU THE QUESTION, "WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING?" AND DID THAT PERSON GET YOU TO REALIZE THAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHAT YOU WERE SEEKING UNTIL YOU WERE ASKED?

FOR ME, THE MAN IS A WOMAN AND SHE HAS A NAME: ELLEN BRAITMAN.

THERE'S A FAMOUS STORY IN OUR FAMILY. WHEN THE GIRLS WERE LITTLE AND I WAS IN CHARGE OF BREAKFAST AND GETTING THEM OUT THE DOOR, ONE DAY LILITH ASKED, "DADDY – HOW DO YOU KNOW MOM WAS, YOU KNOW, THE ONE?" "EASY," I SAID. "SHE TOLD ME."

BACK TO THE STORY. LIKE I SAID, I DON'T HAVE A FAVORITE PARSHA, BUT I HAVE A FAVORITE CHARACTER, AND I ALSO HAVE A FAVORITE LINE AND IT'S IN THIS WEEK'S PARSHA AND I HOPE IT WILL BRING US FULL CIRCLE. WE KNOW WHAT HAPPENS TO YOSEPH. HERE'S RUBEN'S REACTION:

וַיָּשָׁב אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הַיֵּלֶד אֲיָנִי וְאֲנִי אָנָּה אֶנִי-בָּא:

Returning to his brothers, Reuven said, "The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?"

THE POETRY OF THE HEBREW IS EXQUISITE. וְאֲנִי אָנָּה אֶנִי-בָּא

SEFARIA TRANSLATES THE LAST WORDS AS "WHAT AM I TO DO?" WELL, I WENT BACK TO THAT INDESPENSIBLE INTERPRETIVE TOOL AND THIS TIME I CALLED LAURA GOLD (YES: I CHEAT). (LAURA, BY THE WAY IS CHEAPER THAN CAROL WHICH MAKES NO SENSE BECAUSE SHE IS A THERAPIST, RABBI AND SHE HAS A PHD.)

LAURA, I ASKED. AM I CRAZY? ISN'T RUBEN SAYING "AND AS FOR ME WHERE WILL I *GO*?" OR, "AS FOR ME, WHERE WILL I *COME TO*?" ANI-VA. SHE SAID YES, YOU'RE CRAZY, BUT YOU'VE GOT EVERETT FOX ON YOUR SIDE. IT CAN CERTAINLY MEAN "AND NOW, AS FOR ME, AFTER WHAT I'VE DONE, WHERE SHALL I GO?"

LIKEWISE, "ANANU" – A WEIRD WORD. SEFARIA HAS IT AS THE BOY IS "GONE." BUT THAT DOESN'T CUT IT, RIGHT? THE ROOT APPEARS TO BE LIKE EIN – NOTHING. THE BOY IS NO MORE; HE IS NOT. THE TEXT DOESN'T SAY HE'S DEAD. AND IF HE IS NO MORE, IT'S NOT A MATTER OF WHAT AM I GOING TO DO. IT'S A MATTER OF WHERE AM I GOING TO *GO* EXISTENTIALLY. WHO WILL I BE? WE KNOW REBUEN WILL GO HOME; HE KNOWS THAT. HE'LL GO TO THE FIELDS; BUT WHERE WILL HE GO TO BECOME WHO HE NEEDS TO BECOME AFTER THIS TERRIBLE ACT?

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT HOW THESE TWO VERSES CONNECT. YOSEPH WAS AN ADOLESCENT PUNK WHO DIDN'T DESERVE HIS PUNISHMENT AND WHEN CONFRONTED WITH THE QUESTION BY A MYSTERIOUS VERSION OF HIMSELF, "WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING?," HE WAS LED TO EVENTS WHICH RESULTED IN EVERYTHING BEFORE BEING ANANU AND HE WAS NO LONGER IN CHARGE OF WHERE HE COULD GO PHYSICALLY.

REUBEN WAS GUILTY OF KIDNAPPING AND ATTEMPTED MURDER AND ONE  
WONDERS IF OTHER THAN JUST HIS FEARS ABOUT YOSEPH'S BODY,  
EVERYTHING BEFORE FOR REUBEN BECAME ANANU AND HE HAD TO FIGURE  
OUT WHERE TO GO, BUT NOT PHYSICALLY.

HERE'S THE CONNECTION: WHETHER YOU HAVE CONFRONTED A MYSTERY IN  
YOUR LIFE THAT FORCED YOU TO CONSIDER WHAT WAS WORTH SEEKING AS  
YOU WANDERED YOUR DESERT, OR WHETHER, UNFORTUNATELY, YOU  
COMMITTED A SIN WHICH DID THE SAME THING, BOTH ARE TRANSFORMATIVE.  
BOTH LEAVE MUCH OF WHAT CAME BEFORE ANANU AND BOTH FORCE YOU TO  
DECIDE, AS FOR YOU, WHERE WILL YOU GO?

WE ALL, I HOPE, AT ONE POINT MET THE VERSION OF A MYSTERIOUS UNNAMED  
MAN (MAYBE OURSELVES?) WHO REMINDS US THAT WE HAVE TO BE SEEKERS.  
AND THAT EXPERIENCE, AND THE ROADS IN THE DESERT IT TAKES US DOWN,  
LEAVES THINGS BEHIND THAT DISAPPEAR. THEY ARE "ANANNU." AND THE  
EXPERIENCE FORCES US TO ASK OURSELVES "AND, ANA, AS FOR ME, WHERE  
WILL I GO NOW"?

ON THIS SHABBAT OF MY 60TH BIRTHDAY I THANK YOU ALL FOR HELPING ME  
FIGURE OUT, ANA, WHERE WILL I GO? AND I LOOK FORWARD TO SPENDING  
YEARS WITH YOU ON THE REST OF THE JOURNEY.

SHABBAT SHALOM.

Dvar Torah, Parashat Miketz, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Good Shabbes. There is a lot of anniversary energy in shul today – the energy of returning to beginnings and acknowledging the passage of time. Steph and Mary are celebrating their 45<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, Dovid and Shayna their 33<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary, and Nathan his 53<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of his Bar Mitzvah. There are also several yahrtzeits we are acknowledging this week. Miriam's father tonight on the fifth night of Channukah, David Gedzelman's father on the fourth candle, Ira Silverstein's father on the third candle, and my father on the night of the second candle six years ago.

Miriam and I were married on this exact date in the English calendar 33 year ago at Sharey Zion synagogue in Brooklyn (that year in the Hebrew Calendar it was the 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev, the first night of Channukah). We have lit many Chanukah candles together and may we be blessed to continue to do so for many years to come.

And fifty years ago today I became a Bar Mitzvah on Parashat Miketz as I chanted the haftarah, delivered a short speech, and led the congregation in a responsive reading of Ashrei at the Valley Jewish Community Center, a conservative shul in North Hollywood, California. Although I was very anxious about my part in the service, I was proud to have arrived at that moment and join the ranks of my friends and older brother who had previously celebrated this milestone. The initial anxiety I felt upon beginning my chanting soon turned to pleasure and I rather enjoyed being up on the bima. As I chanted Ashrei I was aware of how fleeting the moment was, and with a touch of sadness said to myself: “nuts, this is almost over.” In retrospect that was probably the major lesson of my Bar Mitzvah and I am still working integrating that piece of wisdom. At that time I was mostly thrilled that my



Hebrew school days would soon be over. There was no Hebrew High School in my future and I was delighted that the three day a week indentured servitude I had been laboring under since age eight would soon be coming to an end.

My Bar Mitzvah celebration took place after shul in the backyard of the house we had recently moved into in Van Nuys, and in my mind's eye I see a picture from that day that stood on the stereo cabinet in my parent's home until the house was sold several years ago. I am surrounded by the key players in my family. I am wearing a tan suit and I have a closed mouth smile on my face. I was short and stocky and had not yet reached my growth spurt. I had a crew cut at that time (my friends would rub my head like a crystal ball wish for good luck). Gramma Bessy is there in the picture. She, the fun loving, card playing, reform shul going transplant from New York, former owner of an appetizing store in the Bronx, who taught me to bake challah. So are Grandpa Harold and Gramma Lucille, transplants from Chicago who moved to Berkeley after WWII. Grandpa Harold always encouraged me to read and loved me fiercely. Gramma Lulu, a lifelong Hadassah member and Youth Aliyah advocate, was a model of commitment and compassion and it was she who opened my world by enrolling me in an interracial summer camp when I was visiting them for several weeks at age eleven. How could I forget my great Aunt Fanny, who at that time was widowed and childless, who was an ardent Democrat and loved to debate my Uncle Jerry, who also is in the picture, about the evils of Richard Nixon. Uncle Jerry was the only Republican and super successful businessman in the family. There too is my Aunt Madeline, my mother's older sister, a hard drinking and fun loving woman who taught me to play tennis. So too is her husband, my artsy Uncle Milton, who worked in the film industry, and who I recently learned during my mother's shiva, lived in the closet for most of his life.

And most poignantly, I certainly cannot forget my mom, who was age 39 at the time, looking elegant as she always did, and my dad, who was age 41, standing next to me with his movie star good looks.

All those crucial members of my family are deceased, gone from this earth, their voices silenced.

Today as I stand here and recall them, and my Bar Mitzvah, I am living with the invisible and the inaudible. Fifty years have passed since that sunny California day and I am challenged to see and hear them, including my thirteen year old self, in my mind's eye and ear.

To be a human being of course is to live with multiple levels of the invisible and inaudible, both within ourselves and in relationship to those we encounter in our lives. None of us can every fully know another human being, even those we love the most. Each of us carries within thoughts, perceptions, and feelings that remain unexpressed and to some degree unknown to the others in our lives.

Our relationship to the invisible of course is not limited to the past and present. As I stand here today at age 63, I am full of hope and trepidation about what my invisible and longed for future holds. What will it look like, where will I be, how will my health and the health of Miriam and my children hold out, how will the end of my life transpire?

To be a religious Jew or religious person of any faith, for that matter, is to live with another dimension of the invisible, a dimension that goes beyond of any one of our own circumscribed personal pasts, presents and futures. This is the dimension of what I would call the cosmic invisible. We are bidden to answer the age old question: is there any meaning, purpose or destiny hidden in that which we cannot see and that transcends that which happens to us here in our bodily existences. I think it is fair to say that we are all here today at Minyan M'at because Avraham Avinu answered that question in the affirmative (even if some of us might not be able to do the same). Avraham taught us that the unseen matters and that in fact our lives depend upon it.

But Avraham had an advantage over all of us. He heard the distinct call, lech lecha martzecha.

We today sitting here are in many ways more direct spiritual descendants of Yosef. God never speaks to Yosef, never commands him, never comforts him, never encourages him and never illuminates the future for him. Yosef is alone with the invisible and the unspoken (as we are as well). He is forced to interpret and reconcile his lived reality on his own, a reality that includes moments of great achievement, great abandonment and significant suffering. We too are faced with a similar dilemma of finding the voice of God amidst silence and a broken world.. Yosef certainly had within him the voice of his father and grandparents, but all this was received tradition and not direct communication. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel surely must have had Yosef in my mind when he penned the words "Remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Know that every deed counts, that every word is power.."

What the Torah leaves out of course is Yosef's inner struggle with the seen and unseen, the hidden, the absurd and the revealed. Somehow Yosef clearly ends up as a member of Avraham's team, but we are given few clues about how he got to the place of repeatedly saying, "God is with me" and what it took to be able to make that affirmation.

We are compelled to project our own life struggles back onto Yosef. Yosef's primal alone moment is given one sentence last week we read that "the brothers took him and they threw him into the pit and the pit was empty and there was no water in it." Can any of you imagine being limited to just one sentence to describe moments of disappointment and trauma in your lives? We hear nothing of Yosef's years in analysis deconstructing this experience.

Rashi helps us out with his comment that although there was no water in the pit "there were snakes and scorpions in it. " Lots of crawly and icky stuff in this situation. Yosef undoubtedly experienced moments of sheer terror while in the pit that resulted solely from on the physical conditions he encountered. On top of this we have to add his deep sense of betrayal and abandonment he faced at

the hands of his brothers and perhaps even father. We won't learn until later about the brothers terrifying recollection: "we heard our brother's cries for mercy and didn't listen to them."

I was reminded of Yosef and this Rashi recently when I read a few weeks ago a review in the Times written by Mac McClelland about Hector Tobar's book "Deep Down Dark," the story of the 33 men who were buried in the pit of a Chilean mine for 69 days. McClelland speaks the language of snakes and scorpions when he describes Tobar's work: "There is weeping. There is acceptance of death...there is terror every time the rescue drill stops. He quotes one man as saying: the silence just destroyed us. Without a positive sign your faith collapses. Because faith isn't totally blind. Some men found a stronger connection to God. Others struggled with whether to pray or to succumb to the darkness and lie down and die...some men left parts of themselves in the pit that never resurfaced."

I imagine that Yosef must have cycled through all of these responses of fear, despair, worry about dying and struggles with his faith. And yet somehow he eventually escapes and finds a way to persevere. Of course he is wounded....we see all the evidence of his pain in his frequent crying, but somehow he finds the strength to go on and create. So what is it that allows him to do that? Is it the grace of God? Good genes? An inborn positive temperament? Good early mothering?

The Midrash offers some clues: In parashat Vayechi we read:

When Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Yosef still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!'" (Genesis 50:15). The midrash asks of this scene, "What did they see that made them afraid? As they were returning from burying their father they saw that Yosef turned off the road and went to look at the pit into which his brothers had cast him."

The Midrash wonders what was Yosef thinking as he peered into the pit and states:

"Yosef stood up and prayed, 'Blessed is God Who performed a miracle for me in this place!'"

Yosef here encounters the invisible and makes an interpretive choice. The pit offers many different interpretive options including a focus on vengeance. He surveys the data of his life, the triumph and the trauma, and affirms that in spite of the pain he has experienced his life has meaning by virtue of his ability to connect to moments of wonder and to appreciate that he has not been ultimately alone in his journey.

This is the Yosef I want to be close to. This is the Yosef I want to inform my life because he reminds me that I have a choice in interpreting my life experience.

I have gained and lost much in the fifty years since my Bar Mitzvah. When I look back I see a very substantial mixture of success, failure, pleasure, pain, aloneness, connection, doubt, certainty, love, and shattered and fulfilled dreams.

In all honesty, I don't know if God has been with me, but I do know that I like being around people, communities and situations on a frequent basis that help and encourage me to consider that possibility. I do know that I have been blessed with many good things in my life, particularly my family and friends, and that I far too often fail to appreciate those blessings and miracles. I am grateful to be connected to a Torah that reminds to appreciate those blessings and teach me that God is both *yotzer* and *borey choshech*. I am grateful to be in love with a Torah that endlessly enlightens me about the complexity of life and helps me to see that I can be more than I am now.

And so I say to you all: today I am a man...and may I continue to become one. Good shabbos and channukah sameach.

Dvar Torah Miketz 161231 Ben Orlove

This week's parasha, Miketz, opens with the third pair of Joseph's dreams. Last week's parasha presents the first pair, in which Joseph, as a boy, dreams that eleven sheaves of wheat bow down to his sheaf. He then dreams of the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. His brothers and father ask him, will you become the ruler to whom we will bow down?

That parasha also contains the second pair, related to Joseph, now a man in prison in Egypt, by the Pharaoh's baker and butler. Each had a dream the previous night: the former of a grapevine that grows, buds, and produces fruit, which he presses and serves to the Pharaoh; the latter of baskets, which he carries on his head, filled with bread and cakes that birds consume. Joseph explains that the butler will be restored to his position, the baker executed, and indeed these come to pass.

This week's parasha has Pharaoh's troubled dreams: seven fat cows come up from the Nile, only to be eaten by seven others, "foul to look at and meager of flesh." And then wheat makes its appearance, as it did in the other two pairs of dreams: seven ears of grain form on a single stalk, but they are eaten by seven thin ears, "blasted by the east wind." Pharaoh asks his wise men and magicians to interpret the dreams. They fail, but the butler recalled Joseph's skill, so Pharaoh sends for him. Joseph explains that seven years of good harvests will be followed by seven years of famine. He proposes that someone oversee a program of storing the abundant harvests.

Does the parasha understand dreams as we understand our own? In some ways, it does.

Dreams are universal, as shown here in the range of dreamers, boys and men, prisoners and rulers. People in the parasha, like those in our lives, like to talk about their dreams. Both they and we think of dreams as puzzles to be examined, sources of truths that can be gleaned with some effort. The parasha shows dreams as reflections of the world, containing familiar objects, but with an additional layer of meaning.

But it also presents dreams in a different way from our own. We are all heirs of psychoanalytic traditions, in which dreams refer, not to events in the future, but to elements in our own minds. Freud laid out some principles in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (a book which refers to our parasha multiple times): dreams contain symbols in which one meaning is displaced, or projected, or in which multiple meanings are condensed. The unconscious mind, drawing on past experiences, represses wishes and then displays them in dreams in coded forms. In my twenties I was a great enthusiast of recording dreams. I scribbled them down each morning, filling notebooks with images of falling rocks, deep forests and other items I certainly will not mention now.

We are heirs as well to the related, though distinct, tradition, of neuroscience. We think that dreams are produced by neurons as they fire in our sleeping brains. Researchers use machines to assess the involvement of different brain areas and ponder the association between dreams and the transfer of information from short-term to long-term memory. They distinguish the dreams in REM and non-REM sleep. (This point, like so many, is anticipated in our Tanakh by the use of three different Hebrew words for sleep, usually translated as slumber, sleep and deep sleep; these, too, merit close attention.)

In contrast to the psychoanalytic and neuroscientific approaches, the Torah shows dreams as drawing, not on the past of an individual, but on the future of a family or an entire society. Joseph's brothers understand this. "Will we bow down to you?" they ask when they hear his first dream. The butler and baker, and then the Pharaoh, wait for Joseph to tell them of their future. The other dreams in the Tanakh are also of the future: a man in the book of Judges dreamed that a loaf of barley bread fell into the camp of the enemy Midianites and knocked a tent down. This was simple enough for another commoner to understand: the loaf of bread is Gideon's sword. And sure enough, the Midianites fell.

As an anthropologist, I've spent time with other cultures, where, as everywhere, people have dreams, discuss them, and draw on them for insight. The dreamworlds of the Andes, where I've conducted my most extensive fieldwork, resemble our parasha. Bruce Mannheim, a colleague

of mine who worked near my field sites in Peru, studied systematically something that I observed only casually, the conversations of Quechua speakers about their dreams. He found an entire series of equivalences: a donkey in a dream means that good luck will come; a rope, that someone will take a journey on foot.

Mannheim reports once being woken up, in the middle of night, by the man in whose house he was sleeping. Let's go up to the high pastures, right now, the man insisted. The reason was that he had just dreamt that a woman had brought him a sack of potatoes, which she wanted to exchange for a sack of corn. This was clear as a bell to him: potatoes are money, grains of corn are sheep. Someone was coming to steal his sheep and sell them for money. They had better hurry up to rescue the animals. And so off they went, up the mountain in the dark. To their relief, they found the sheep, safe and untroubled. Perhaps the sound of their arrival had driven off a prospective thief?

My favorite example comes a community in eastern jungles of Ecuador, where people have gardens of manioc rather than fields of potatoes, and hunt animals rather than herd them. Another anthropologist, Eduardo Kohn, studied them. He reports that for them, dreams take place in a world linked to our own. A dream of a chicken indicates that a man will have success hunting for a game bird: not the identical bird, but rather one it stands for.

These Ecuadorians pay close attention to dogs' dreams. They infer that the dogs will go hunting if they bark "hua hua" while they sleep, but if they bark "cuai cuai" they will be killed by a jaguar. The signs that dogs see in their dreams aren't the same as the ones humans do, but they are a system of signs nonetheless, open to interpretation.

Kohn reports the great puzzlement on one occasion when three dogs disappeared. Their bodies were later discovered in the forest, with jaguar paw-prints near them and with the "telltale bite marks on the backs of each of their heads." The hunter's wife had been home the day before, when the dogs were sleeping by the fire. She commented that they hadn't barked. This failure of the signs provoked concern, and a long discussion.



These cases are far from our psychoanalytical and neuroscientific frameworks, where dreams are about the inner self, a processing of images from past. Rather, as Mannheim explains, dreams in the Andes are part of the outer world in which things unfold in a pattern that is neither subjective nor uncertain, but already determined, already available, if we just pay attention.

How do people in the Torah draw on such understandings? Our parasha uses a single Hebrew root, *liftōr*, to interpret. It's intriguing to see that all 9 uses of this word in the Tanakh occur only in our parasha. The word never reappears, though its Aramaic cognate, *pashar*, pops up in the Book of Daniel, where Daniel interprets some florid dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, and where he interprets the words written on the wall by a strange hand, at a feast hosted by Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar. Like Joseph, Daniel indicates that interpretations come from God, and like Joseph's, his interpretations foretell historic events.

Despite this infrequency of its use, this word *liftōr*, to interpret, seems familiar to the people in these chapters. When Joseph sees the baker and the butler, he asks them, "Why do you look so sad today?" and they reply, "We have dreamed a dream, and there is no one to interpret it." Pharaoh, too, sounds like he's accustomed to looking for interpreters. He had a bad dream and woke up. "And it happened in the morning that his heart pounded; and he sent and called in all the soothsayers of Egypt, and all its wise men; and Pharaoh recounted his dreams to them; but none could interpret them for Pharaoh." It makes dream interpretation sound like a routine problem, like when you need to get a chair reupholstered, the kind of thing you could ask about on the minyan listserv. And these passages suggest that dream interpreters vary in their level of skill, just like upholsterers.

So what is this world, where people have dreams and seek an account of them, not to resolve their neuroses, or to learn how their neurons operate, but because dreams describe the world? We can learn from other Hebrew words which also make their first appearance in the Torah in this parasha.

The word for wise man, *chacham*, occurs here for the first time, when it is used to refer to Pharaoh's wise men, who are unable to interpret his dreams. This word appears again and again in the Tanach. It found its way into Yiddish as well, "*chochem*."

Joseph introduces one more word in our parasha, one which also often reappears later. When he sees that Pharaoh has accepted his interpretation of the dreams, he presses his advantage. He tells the Pharaoh of a project: collect the harvests of the good years, store them as a reserve against the poor harvests. He plays his gambit, "let Pharaoh look out for an *ish navon v'chacham*, a discerning, wise man." *Navon*, the other new word, can mean not only discerning but also discreet or understanding. In this context, it might refer to the ability to sift through multiple interpretations and select the best one. Joseph may be comparing himself to the Pharaoh's wise men, hinting that there is a capacity beyond *chachma*, wisdom, which has just proved insufficient to interpret dreams. Whether for that, or other reasons, Pharaoh picks up the cue, and sets Joseph "over all the land of Egypt." He takes off his ring from his hand and puts it on Joseph's hand.

It's striking that our Torah brings us two important words for wisdom and insight at the same time that it discusses the interpretation of dreams. We believe ourselves to be very far from a world in which dreams can foretell when a famine will occur—or when a thief will steal sheep, or when a jaguar will kill hunting dogs. But what serves better than dreams—with their elusive, fleeting images--to demonstrate the need for finding meaning beyond appearances? What could better confirm their value than the certainty that they contain uniquely potent signs of the future?

Perhaps we can learn from the trust that earlier generations and other peoples have placed into dreams. The year that will begin tonight at midnight remains unknown to us, a year in which the mighty empires of the world may change, a year which we fear may bring a new Nebuchadnezzar to our country. It may well be in the images contained in troubled dreams across the world offer signs, not of individual psyches but of collective futures: signs that can be

read clearly, to people of wisdom and discernment, signs that can guide us through challenging times.

I'd like to close on a different, though related note, with an echo of the first pair of Joseph's dreams. The eleven stars have found their place in one of the most popular songs that come at the close of the seder, Echad Mi Yodea. Like Chad Gadya, it offers a series, but of numbers, rather than of violent acts. It's a counting song that begins with one, our God on heaven and earth, and closes with thirteen, God's attributes. The eleven stars are linked to the other numbered elements, the three fathers and the four mothers, the five books of Torah and the six of the Talmud, and much more. The stars that touched off a bitter dispute between brothers and that ultimately averted a famine are now a verse in a cheery song. The stars have offered hope to Jews in difficult times around the world. Let us take hope from them once again. Shabbat shalom.

## Parshat Miketz

It has been 85 years already since Stephen Vincent Benet first captivated readers through his tale about a New Hampshire farmer prior to the Civil War, always down on his luck, who sells his soul to the devil for seven years of guaranteed prosperity — seven years where the farmer's cows got fat and his crops were the envy of the neighborhood. What makes "The Devil and Daniel Webster" real for today is that Benet pursues themes wrapped up with Parshat Miketz — how national conscience and character cope with history.

In his story, Benet goes on to relate that when the devil comes to collect, the farmer protests his soul is too heavy a price. The devil laughs this off, bragging that the prosperity-for-soul contract is so tight even the best lawyer around — Granite State native Daniel Webster — could never get the farmer released from it. And wouldn't you know, the high flown Webster is hired immediately, insisting that the farmer have trial by jury.

Creatively shifting the issue, Webster ties the farmer's fate to nothing less than U.S. character and progress. Webster pleads that the farmer must be permitted to keep his humanity in order to continue participating in this country's saga. He makes the jury see that the American pageant is too grand for anyone to miss. Webster's defense based on the character of America is not hyper-nationalistic but disarmingly nuanced, admitting to the jury in Benet's words "... all the wrong that had ever been done. But he showed how, out of the wrong and the right, the suffering and the starvations, something new had come. And everybody had played a part in it...."

Even in front of a jury predisposed toward the devil, Webster wins, the farmer's community life endures. The devil concedes — pledging never again to stalk New Hampshire. But, the tragedy is that the devil gets last revenge by placing Webster too on trial. The devil shouts out that this great man's reputation will be tarred in the eyes of history by Webster's later compromises as a Senator dealing with the horrible issue of slavery. On this the devil is sadly right — bending to slavery burdens Webster's reputation to this day. And the legacy of slavery was something Benet felt deeply about, having a decade before the Webster story authored the Pulitzer Prize winning epic poem "John Brown's Body" — shedding light for decency during the toxic Jim Crow era.

In Miketz too, everyone is on trial. Joseph maneuvers into his position of high advantage — leveraging seven guaranteed years of fat cows and crops that become the envy of Egypt's neighborhood, by embracing assimilation. Miketz pictures Joseph vividly in his exalted foreign-figure status achieved overnight: the elaborate garments, the lush washings, the parades, the chariots, the Egyptian wife, the Egyptian names, massive power in a non-Jewish empire. These images flash uncomfortably in front of us during Hanukkah with its anti-Hellenistic cast.

In his compromised position, Joseph has plenty of reason to reject the brothers who petition in front of him and to keep his inflated distance. Yet he is able to break away from all this by finding the path to reconciliation, by overcoming the past — seeing that his place continues to be with B'Nei Yisrael, understanding his indispensable role for the people of his birth.

In Miketz, the brothers too pass the test of trial. They had sold their souls to jealousy and resentment. Yet, now their collective conscience menses out. They now prioritize the well-being of their father Jacob. They no longer fear the truth, freely disclosing the money mysteriously re-appearing in their sacks. When told that they must tear Benjamin away from their father and bring him to Egypt, they grasp that this awful decree is a product of their own misdeeds.

And so in Miketz and surrounding parshiot Jewish destiny escapes suffocation — but at sad cost. Like with Webster, the good is soon to be suppressed by slavery. Various roads have led the house of Jacob to an Egypt which will impose harshness with no escape — and tough years lie ahead before freedom.

This linkage between Steven Vincent Benet and B'Nei Yisrael — about maneuvered advantage, redemption and responding to the tides of history — teaches that national character building never ends. Jewish people know that faults can be overcome. In every generation, communities working together must measure and safeguard lives to be filled with deeds worthy of heritage and soul-saving.

And Jewish people know too that coping with history requires not only strength of character handed to the generations by Joseph and his brothers, but Hanukkah-style courage in standing up to dangerous adversaries — many still menacingly at bay. As Benet finishes by reminding us, while Webster may have rid New Hampshire of the devil — that relief does not run to places like Vermont and Massachusetts.

Shabbat Shalom, Hanukkah Sameach.

*The end of the beginning*

Parsha Vayigash

December 22, 2012

9 Teveth 5773

First, I would like to welcome Gary and Rena to the Minyan. It is my honor to give this d'var torah as a tribute to Liora and Rob for their auf-ruf and their upcoming marriage. And, also I want to remember Deborah Brodie. It has been many years since I have given a dvar torah here at the minyan, so forgive me if I am a little rusty.

Certainly when one looks at the chumash for a particular theme which might be apt for a particular occasion, one can easily conjure particular proof-texts to illustrate one's perspective or point of view. It is a little like reading Sigmund Freud; he wrote so much and often in an inconsistent fashion so that one could easily string phrases from his writings verbatim to prove one's particular psychological theory.

Since the Hebrew Bible itself is a compilation of independent tales masking as a continuous narrative, adapting the narrative for one's own purposes is relatively easy, especially if one looks at the story in broad strokes.

This week we are almost at the end of the beginning of the story of humankind. If we think about the word, Bereshit, the English/Greek translation of Genesis, is rather cumbersome and stuffy. The words, "the beginning" really communicate the nature of the this first book of five which will eventually lead to the Israelites on the verge of entrance to the Promised Land at the end of their travails for forty years in the desert.

If we think about the scope of the book of Bereshit, we see a repetitive structure. The story, of course, starts with creation, including the creation of man and woman. Things seem to be perfect for them in the Garden of Eden, obviously reflecting that time of every person's life, when things seemed so perfect, but, of course, only in retrospect.

Inevitably Adam and Eve's lives go sour and they have to toil and sweat as their descendants will always have to. God, himself, in that same anthropomorphic vein started out thinking that he was creating man in his perfect image. By the time of

Noah, the next major protagonist, God is disillusioned with all humankind except for Noah, and God wants to start all over, destroying everyone except Noah.

God has a chance at a do-over. As kids, we always had do-overs when we played games. In real life there are times when we do get a chance for do-overs. However, we have to have a certain amount of psychological readiness to be able to take advantage of those opportunities for do-overs. In fact if we think about the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, there are many do-overs: Abram gives up his previous life and becomes Abraham; Sarah laughs that she can have a child at her ripe old age, but she does; Isaac's death at the hand of his father is averted and he becomes father to those two strands of Semites whose ambivalent interaction continues to the present. Jacob can have a do-over after he is forced to marry Leah.

In all of these stories there is an ever-present fluctuation between pleasure and pain. The messages are that obstacles are inevitable but implicitly we learn that we have an opportunity to master the painful state, and restore our wish for tranquility.

Joseph's brothers sold Joseph into slavery as a result of their father Jacob's favoritism (and, in fact Jacob repeated with his own children, the favoritism shown



to him by his mother, Rebecca). Joseph as we know was able to navigate his slavery so he went from slave to master and essentially ruler of Egypt.

To me, the key message in this parsha, occurs in Chapter 45, verses 4-8, Joseph says to his brothers:

“Come forward to me, I am your brother Joseph, he who you sold into Egypt. Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God, and he has made me a father (vizier) to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.”

Whether you look at this from a theological perspective (I use the phrase from Steven Geller who used it Thursday night in his talk on Yochanan’s yahrzeit) or from the perspective of a skeptic, you have to marvel at this “rags to riches” story. From a belief perspective why did God have to punish Joseph before uplifting him and allowing him to become savior of his extended family?

The words, “extraordinary deliverance” are the translation of the Hebrew, “l’fleitah gedolah” which can mean “great survival.” From a belief perspective, the power of God is demonstrated by showing that a lowly slave can become a great ruler and a savior of his people.

From an every-day perspective the story, and those words in particular (“l’fleitah gedolah” or “great survival”), illustrates the inexplicable power of resiliency, of how people can not only survive, but succeed beyond human imagination, in the face of significant obstacles and restore or create, de novo, a sense of tranquility.

So now as we are reaching the end of the book of the beginnings, the Israelites are on the verge of a new beginning in the land of Egypt, with hope for peace, which will be followed by obstacles which they will face and overcome, and begin their trek to the Promised Land, which, despite prophetic messages, will not always be flowing with milk and honey.

Liora and Rob are at the end of their beginning. They are entering their promised land of marriage with the hope that there will be enough milk and honey to sustain them and that they will find their own visions of l’fleitah gedolah, that is, their own

brands of survival skills, so they can figure out together how to master and successfully overcome the inevitable obstacles of life.

Shabat Shalom

Leon Hoffman

## SHABBAT SHALOM

Wow, it is really special to be here, in this place that is so important to both mine and Gabriella's childhoods', to celebrate this big step in our family's life. And also to welcome and introduce Michael's family – his parents, Mark and Eli, his sister, Dani, and of course Grandma Rita. I am so happy to be sharing this with all of you.

Ya know, after much deliberation, I actually think that this week's parsha, Parshat Vayigash, is an appropriate parsha to both kick off 2017 and to celebrate Gabi and Mike's Ufruf.

At first I was skeptical. Poor parenting, sibling jealousy, deception, hatred, forgiveness, and A LOT of crying. Actually, it seems like the perfect story-line for a straight-to-TV movie. And to be honest, the first time I read through the parsha, in preparation for today, I thought, "eh, I better take a look at the Haftorah."

I couldn't help but feel that the transformation of Joseph's brothers – suddenly so remorseful after years of severe jealousy, was just a little bit unrealistic. And what about Joseph himself? He's somehow able to reframe his brothers' jealousy into a story about God's ultimate plan? His brothers didn't willingly sell him. Noooo! Rather it was God! God had a master plan to send Joseph to Egypt so that ultimately he would be able to save his brothers and father's lives.

I come from a family that specializes in reframing, and even for me, this seems far-fetched.

But as is often true in the Torah, the most interesting moments lie in the gaps. What we are not told. What we have to fill in. What we are left to imagine, figure out, and wrestle with.

So I did the exercise. I tried to imagine and understand what happened behind the scenes, in the characters' emotional realms, that led Joseph, Yehuda, and their brothers to be able to achieve such extreme transformations.

I work in environmental policy, where we talk a lot about what it takes to get people to change their minds and behaviors. So, naturally, I tried to apply those theories to this story.

Dr. Martin Patchen, a former Psychology professor at the University of Michigan, GO BLUE!, says that the first, perhaps most obvious thing that helps people change is if it is convenient and easy to do so. Well, given that Yehuda and his brothers and father likely would have starved without help from Joseph, it seems reasonable that compared to the alternative, apologizing to Joseph was, in fact, the easier and more convenient option.

A second common tactic used to motivate change, according to Dr. Patchen, is reward and punishment. This makes some amount of sense. Joseph could have pretended not

Yehuda coming to Joseph during this parsha was, I believe, a qualifying life event. And Joseph could have reacted in a different way. He could have shut down. He could have pushed his brothers away. Been angry and vengeful. And honestly, I wouldn't have judged him if he had.

But he didn't. Instead, he reveals himself to them. And he says "Geshu Nah Ailai" - come close to me. Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, one of my Mom's favorite commentators, writes about this moment. She says:

*"When we reveal our true selves, removing the masks with which we disguise our deepest identity and our souls' own light, both we and those to whom we reveal ourselves may weep. Emotions may run high. Revealing who we really are, in all of our vulnerabilities and differences, requires great bravery. But it is only through that revelation, and through the healing tears which ensue, that we can begin to truly respond to one another -- to speak to, and from, the heart of who we really are."*

It's a new year. And Gabi and Mike – soon it will be your wedding. I believe that both of these are qualifying life events. A chance to imagine that compassion, forgiveness, and love are limitless.

I obviously have never been married, but I grew up in this community, so I have seen and felt a lot of love. And as a result, I also know that there will be times when you disappoint each other or hurt each other. And I hope that in those moments, the moments that feel hardest, you chose to reveal yourselves to each other more deeply and with more compassion than you knew you could.

And the truth is, there are real rewards to responding to qualifying life events with courage and compassion. The story of Joseph and Yehuda shows us just how meaningful those rewards can be.

It is their reconciliation and reunion that allow both Yehuda and Joseph to realize their full potential. For Yehuda this means becoming the real leader of his brothers, and ultimately the surviving tribe of the Jewish people. For Joseph, the reward is to be able save his family's life. To be reunited with his father. To develop sibling relationships. And ultimately, we actually bless our children that they should be like Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menashe.

It is the way we respond to qualifying life events, the bravery, the emotional courage that we display, that defines whether we can realize our promise to become the best people we can.

So here we stand. As a community, at the beginning of a new year, and for you, Gabi and Mike, at the beginning of the next stage of your lives. A moment of unbridled opportunity. May we all take advantage of this moment, face each qualifying life event with the goal of achieving our fullest potential.

SHABBAT SHALOM!

December 29, 2001  
Dvar Torah on vayechi

It is a notable coincidence that the book of bereshit ends on the last weekend of this extraordinary secular year. Just as historians say that the 19<sup>th</sup> century ended in August 1914 and that the sixties began in November 1963 to end with Watergate in 1974, so do we now say that the twentieth century ended on 9-11. Will that be the judgement of history?

As Jacob's life is ending we read about the end of another era and think about the beginning of an age which is heralded with Joseph's words on his deathbed: "God will surely visit you, and ye shall bring up my bones from hence." The image, perhaps just to our ears because we know of the immediate future, is one of hope only for the very distant future. The near future is surely bleak.

Yet, as throughout all of bereshit, the social and political realm is easily subsumed to the personal realm. For those who read bereshit as full of descriptions of one dysfunctional family following another, Jacob's so-called blessings to his sons fit the mold.

He follows the family tradition of spurning the first born—this time to the chagrin of Joseph. He spurns Manasseh in favor of the younger Ephraim. He in essence curses his first born Reuben because of Reuben's sexual transgression; and, he scatters Shimon and Levi because of their aggressive acts. To all the rest but Judah he gives seemingly ambivalent blessings. Judah is praised, including the statement that "the rod shall not depart from Judah." The prominence of Jacob's blessing of Judah has been read by scholars to verify that this retrospective insertion was made so as to justify Judah's position in Israel centuries later.

But, on a simple thematic level, what do we think about a father's egregious favoritism of some and anger at other of his children? If we look forward to Moses's last blessing at the end of devarim we encounter a very different set of blessings.

"Let Reuben live and not die; and let his men not be few." To Levi, Moses says, "They shall teach Jacob thy judgements, and Israel thy law." And all of the other sons are unambivalently blessed. Can we conjecture and say that on the eve of enslavement, Jacob's appraisals of what his children will

receive from God is a realistic vision of the immediate future? While, on the eve of entering the promised land, Moses's unambivalent blessings are more appropriate?

And where are we now? Where will our children and our children's children be, physically and emotionally, a decade, a score, a century hence?

In "My son was drafted" (part of "Open closed open"), Yehudah Amichai writes:

--My children grew and flourished around tears and laughter  
Like fruit, like houses, but the tears and the laughter  
Stayed inside the kernel, just as they were. Our Father, Our King!  
That's all for today on fathers and kings.  
Go, my children whom I begot; Get yourselves into the next century,  
Where the tears and the laughter will continue, just as they were.  
I remember giving them a stern warning:  
"Never, never stick your hand out the window of a moving bus."  
Once we were on a bus and my little girl piped up, "Daddy that man  
Stuck his hand into the outside!"

That's the way to live; to stick your hand into the world's  
Infinite outside; turn the outside inside out,  
The world into a room and God into a little soul  
Inside the infinite body.—

As the New Year begins may we all have the courage of our convictions to stick out our hands and to teach our children to stick out their hands, to stick them out and provide our fellow human beings with the help that they need.

Shabat shalom and Happy New Year

Leon Hoffman

**dvar torah-- Dec 18, 2021 on parashat *Yayechi*  
*Bethamie Horowitz at Minyan M'at***

I volunteered to speak because it's my birthday today .. and My bat mitzvah parsha was *Vayeshev*, the opening of the sweeping story of Joseph and his brothers that we've been reading over the past 4 weeks. And today, in *Yayechi*, the entire story wraps up.

I'd like to say a bit about how I viewed Joseph back then, as I recall, and what I think now.

When I was a girl I was delighted by Joseph. His colorful striped coat captured my imagination. I also liked that he had dreams. He seemed very imaginative to me and the fact that he was dreaming and projecting himself into the future was very appealing, even though I could see that his dreams caused a bit of an upset in the family.

[I'm the middle of three sisters, so there was a fair amount of rough and tumble, although I never got thrown into pit.]

It's no surprise that his brothers didn't appreciate the grand dreams- after all, we know that he and the brothers didn't get along terribly well..

But it's more telling that the dreams didn't sit well, either, with his own adoring father Jacob. These dreams are received by Joseph's family as out of whack, and entirely grandiose.

It's a bit like *Yosele mit de halomes* , as Barry's mom used to say in his own youth, when someone was droning on and on about something, or being completely unrealistic.

I have another story, too, this one from a dear friend who grew up in working class, tight-knit extended family. She and her cousins have done quite well in their own lives and at a reunion with her cousins they recollected a story. My friend recalled that as a girl she had wanted to sing like Aretha Franklin, but her aunts and uncles had a harsh response - " You want to sing like Aretha Franklin?! You should be happy you've got two arms and two legs!"

My friend and her cousins laugh about this story- at the attitude of their parents to them. But this story stunned me. It's such a slap in the face of a young person's aspirations. It brings you down to earth that in effect trims your wings and prevents you from flying. Maybe appropriately, but rather harshly.

Needless to say, she didn't keep on singing..



In contrast, in the face of the incredulity of his brothers and especially that of his beloved father, Joseph didn't himself seem to waver. He kept his direction -- he could see the future -- to where the dreams were pointing.

The dreamy Yosef turns into a man of substance, and tremendous influence-- because of *three things related to dreams* :

- First, he has dreams that show him a different future than what existed.
- Second, Joseph was able to interpret dreams. He could make sense of them when others could not. Eventually this ability interpret dreams is what saves him -- not only did it become his get-out-of-jail-card, it leads to his position in pharaoh's court.
- Finally, Joseph is able to *think forward* see possibilities and consequences and the needs that must be addressed. And he has a dream, and he is able to figure out what to do about it. This farsightedness also becomes the saving grace for the entire kingdom of Egypt and for Joseph's kinfolk without food in the north. It serves Joseph in the unfolding story with his brothers -- after all he manages to get them to return to Egypt, along with Jacob..  
[and of course that was God's plan all along].

So Joseph was adept at imagining the future.. a reality perhaps different from the current arrangements, and he could plan a way to get there. He turns out to be the ultimate strategic planner.

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In this parsha we see the death of Joseph—and if we look at his life over time-- you see that the young Joseph has many of the ingredients of the mature Joseph. His compass is steady in the face of changing circumstances.

Jacob's blessing zeros in on this quality:

Although [Archers bitterly assailed him; They shot at him and harried him.]

וְהָיָה בְּיָמָיו זֶרְעִי יִגְדֹּל מִיַּד אֲבִיר יַעֲקֹב מִשָּׁם רֵעָה אֶבֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל

Yet his bow stayed taut, And his arms were made firm

By the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob—There, the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel—

Joseph as steady and focused, like an archer who never wavers, who never loses focus.

We know the brothers hated Joseph or found him incredibly annoying with his grandiose ideas; and then they became entirely dependent on him because of where those dreams actually led. However the rabbis called him *Joseph ha-tzaddik* --the righteous one. They admired him ..but with ambivalence.

That ambivalence plays out in how we remember Joseph.  
And even his name isn't part of the tribal division that flow from Jacob's sons -- instead, his portion is split between Ephraim and Menashe

So there's a message here, too. These are two brothers who aren't like the other brothers in the book of *Bereishit*. They don't fight, they're not rivals. They break the pattern of strife that threads through every story in this entire book. They create a new pattern of getting along and sharing the tasks of leadership—essential for nation-building – that we'll see in another and different set of siblings, in Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

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Joseph is a person of great resilience. He has dreams and this ability helps move him forward to great accomplishment.

When he names his two sons he recognizes that he has suffered greatly—Naming his son Menashe is about the travails he'd like to forget– but in naming him that he in fact remembers them.

Most important for him and for us is that he continues to look forward. And we see that in in the name Ephraim—

God has made me fruitful in the land of my afflictions

וְאֵת שֵׁם הַשָּׁנִי קָרָא מֵנַשֶּׁה כִּי־הִפְרֵנִי אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנִי:

At a time when there's a lot of despair and worry with the surge of COVID, [not to speak about the other afflictions and uncertainties in our world today], we should remember that aspect of Joseph as we bid farewell to him in this *parasha*: The aspect of Joseph that looks forward and holds onto his dreams and overcomes despair.



## Parshat Vayechi: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend

Shabbat shalom, gut shabbos—and as my neighbors uptown would say, a blessed Dr. King weekend.

After everything they've been through, after everything they might have learned from their father on his deathbed, the brothers decide to deal with Joseph by sending a messenger to him, with a lie. "Your father," they say—not "our father," yours—"commanded us to tell you, forgive the evil that we did to you." Joseph hears, and he weeps. Then the brothers come in person and grovel. And Joseph says, "Don't be afraid. You meant evil against me, but God intended it for good, to keep many people alive, as they are today."

To me, this isn't just the conclusion of Sefer B'reishit. It's the summation. The members of the wayward but God-favored family at last achieve reconciliation, although they haven't deserved it. The truly chosen one, having acquired some humility to go with his immense gifts, declares himself a mere mortal and refuses to subjugate his brothers. There are tears—all the more touching, for being mentioned so tersely—and there is an affirmation of God's goodness.

It's a profoundly satisfying culmination of Sefer B'reishit; and now that I have praised it, I will follow the custom of the minyan and mess it up. The title of this drash is *The Agony of Jacob, The Tears of Joseph: or, My Inability to Understand the Most Uplifting Finale in Literature*. To be specific: I don't know why Joseph is weeping, and I cannot accept the crowning affirmation of God's plan.

The very notion of a divine plan troubles me. At the start of the Joseph cycle, when the boy dreams of sovereignty, I can imagine that everyone has free will and is

choosing his or her own path. Some people, like Joseph, are just more talented than others at intuiting where those paths will lead. But by the time we get to Pharaoh's dreams, it's apparent that God decides the course of events, at least some of the time.

In this parshah, Jacob's prophecies about the tribes are clearly determined by something more than the personal traits of the brothers. And at the finale, Joseph all but claims that his brothers have been puppets of the divine will, acting out a play they didn't understand. "You meant evil against me, but God intended it for good."

Now, unless I'm giving a drash, I don't worry about the philosophical assumptions underlying this statement—because, over the centuries, the Jews have developed a very practical way to deal with biblical traces of a belief in predestination. We just ignore them, the same way we ignore the traces of polytheism at the start of B'reishit.

But let's admit it: our lingering notion that certain things are beshert is more than a bit of folkloric humor. Sefer B'reishit as a whole is shot through with a belief that God is the author of this story and its primary actor. Think of all the pairs of rival brothers we've seen. How many times must the situation repeat before we acknowledge it as divinely ordained? When Joseph delivers his culminating statement, his theodicy, he might as well be remarking on a pattern worked into a carpet that covers the entire world.

In which case, why does he weep?

The question is not obvious. Rashi doesn't ask it. Neither does Ramban. And I admit, I hadn't thought to ask, either, until now. The brothers' behavior is so appalling, and Joseph's response is so inspirational, that I simply took the statement that he wept as a cue for my own emotional reaction.

I might not be able to comprehend a belief in a divine plan. But weeping is something I think I understand. It carries me into the ethical dimensions of the story, and past the disagreeable philosophical ones. But there's a problem. If Joseph has seen the divine pattern, he shouldn't need to cry about anything. It's all good. But if, all the same, the current of emotion runs so deeply that it overcomes Joseph, I can't say which emotion in particular is tugging at him.

Are these tears of disappointment, shed because of his brothers' lack of faith in him? Tears of pity, for the brothers' blindness to the divine purpose? Tears of understanding for their fear? Or tears of shame at recalling his own youthful pride? Are these tears of sorrow at the mention of his father's recent death, tears of remembered suffering, or tears of relief that all these trials are now over? Maybe they're even Joseph's tears of happiness at his triumph.

If you want to say "all of the above," you can, because the terseness of the passage allows you to impute one, or several, or all of these emotions to Joseph. But let's be clear. We are reading our own feelings into the text. And our feelings are not necessarily the same as Joseph's would have been.

Emotions are not uniform among all people, in all periods and across all cultures. You can learn that by reading Aristotle, or by trying to tell a joke to a Swiss German. So the meaning of the tears of a man in the eastern Mediterranean in about 1,600 BCE is really no more accessible to us than the meaning of the tongue-twister I leyned earlier today: "Gad gedud yigudenu." Joseph's tears are comparable to a lost or obsolete term, the significance of which we can reconstruct only speculatively.

So, let's speculate. The tears well up after a phony story about the death of "your father" Jacob. Let's delve into the emotional core of that death.

We can start with the blessing of Ephraim and Menashe. Jacob begins by saying, "El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz and blessed me." This seems appropriate. Jacob is going to hand down that blessing. But there's also an undertone of something darker. God appeared at Luz, the second time, in a moment between two deaths: of Rachel's nurse Deborah, and then of Rachel herself. So a memory of Rachel's death, suggested though unstated, hovers over this scene from the start.

That memory becomes explicit a few lines later. Jacob has already made Joseph promise to bury him in the cave of Machpelah. The business is settled; he doesn't need to bring it up again, let alone discuss any more personal history. But Jacob suddenly interrupts himself to say, "When I came from Paddan, Rachel died in the land of Canaan along the way, when there was still some way to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road." Then he seems to remember what he's doing, looks at Ephraim and Menashe and asks, "Who are these?" as if the talk about Rachel had been the digression of a man whose powers are faltering. But the suspicion has been planted; Jacob is obsessing about Rachel's death. Do you think Joseph notices? He's quick to pick up on things.

This suspicion becomes stronger when Jacob blesses, or prophesies over, all the tribes. Once again he extracts the oath to return his body to Machpelah. And this time he says, "There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebecca his wife; and there I buried Leah." Interesting omissions. Jacob doesn't call Leah "my wife." She's just Leah. The woman he would have called "my wife" was Rachel. And he doesn't mention her at all, because she's not buried in the cave. Jacob left

the corpse of his beloved Rachel by the side of a road. He didn't even go the little way farther to Ephrath.

The ancient and medieval rabbis felt so shocked by this behavior that they tried to explain it away. They invented prophecies, by which Jacob foretold that the spirit of Rachel would comfort the exiled Israelites along that road. Or they thought up logistical difficulties in proceeding quickly to Ephrath with a large household—as if Jacob had no one to help him. We're more inclined to say that Jacob had done wrong, and he knew it. When he'd needed to perform the final act of love for the woman who was central to his life, the woman who should have been everything, it had been too much for him. And now, on his deathbed, he can't stop talking about his failure, one way or another.

I think that's true to the process of human emotion. When we attend a close family member through his or her death, we do not always feel we did everything we could have done. The memory of how we failed the person we loved can linger for years—because it's final.

Consider a different case. Let's say that you've been overwhelmed at work, and you're suffering from a monster of a head cold, and your boss has made you run up for the day to someplace thrilling, like Troy, New York. Under those circumstances, maybe you forget that today is your wedding anniversary. I'm not saying this has ever happened to anybody. But imagine how hurt your spouse would feel. And yet the situation is not final. You can apologize, a lot, and make amends, at staggering expense, and the relationship can be repaired, kind of. But when you fail someone you love in the time of death, there are no longer any amends.



This is what I learn from the deathbed scene of the patriarch whose only utterance, upon being introduced to the most powerful man in the world, is to say, “Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life”; the one who cries out helplessly, in the midst of his prophecies, “I wait for your salvation, Adonai.” Jacob has not always been like this. He tells us that he has actually seen God, and has captured property by force of arms. He is a great figure, to his sons and to us. And he’s sick at heart because of the way he failed Rachel.

So, when the brothers send a lie to Joseph at the end of the parshah, talking about “your father”—not theirs, just his—maybe Joseph gives some thought to his mother—his, not theirs. Maybe he thinks of how she died in pain and was buried by the roadside. I don’t think Rachel felt there was anything good or fair about it. Ben-oni, she called her baby, son of my sorrow. It was Jacob who came up with a theodicy then, trying to discover the good in the situation and changing the name to Benjamin.

I am going to imagine that Joseph weeps precisely because he does *not* think everything works out according to God’s will, because he knows in his heart that God does *not* always bring good out of evil. When his brothers show up, telling him a lie, Joseph responds with a lie of his own: It was all for the best. But, really, nothing is for the best for those who suffer and die along the way. There’s no making it up to them.

Yet we often speak as if there is. When we read Joseph’s words, we believe, at least for a moment, that God has a good plan. We’re uplifted, as we need to be. From Jacob’s agony, and Joseph’s tears, I conclude that we should never gloss over the suffering of others, or excuse ourselves for having failed to alleviate it. And I also

conclude that when it comes to our own sufferings and worries and fears, we ought to be like Joseph and tell ourselves a lie: It will all work out. It's for the best.

Because we have to keep going down our own road—and as we learn from next week's parshah, it might be a long one.

Keep walking, everybody. And shabbat shalom.

