

Kol Rina  
An Independent Minyan  
Parashat Vayera  
November 16, 2019 \*\*\* 18 Cheshvan, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Today's Portions

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Vayera in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3171/jewish/Vayera-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3171/jewish/Vayera-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

G-d reveals Himself to Abraham three days after the first Jew's circumcision at age ninety-nine; but Abraham rushes off to prepare a meal for three guests who appear in the desert heat. One of the three—who are angels disguised as men—announces that, in exactly one year, the barren Sarah will give birth to a son. Sarah laughs.

Abraham pleads with G-d to spare the wicked city of Sodom. Two of the three disguised angels arrive in the doomed city, where Abraham's nephew Lot extends his hospitality to them and protects them from the evil intentions of a Sodomite mob. The two guests reveal that they have come to overturn the place, and to save Lot and his family. Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt when she disobeys the command not to look back at the burning city as they flee.

While taking shelter in a cave, Lot's two daughters (believing that they and their father are the only ones left alive in the world) get their father drunk, lie with him and become pregnant. The two sons born from this incident father the nations of Moab and Ammon.

Abraham moves to Gerar, where the Philistine king Abimelech takes Sarah—who is presented as Abraham's sister—to his palace. In a dream, G-d warns Abimelech that he will die unless he returns the woman to her husband. Abraham explains that he feared he would be killed over the beautiful Sarah.

G-d remembers His promise to Sarah, and gives her and Abraham a son, who is named Isaac (Yitzchak, meaning "will laugh"). Isaac is circumcised at the age of eight days; Abraham is one hundred years old, and Sarah ninety, at their child's birth.

Hagar and Ishmael are banished from Abraham's home and wander in the desert; G-d hears the cry of the dying lad, and saves his life by showing his mother a well. Abimelech makes a treaty with Abraham at Beersheba, where Abraham gives him seven sheep as a sign of their truce.

G-d tests Abraham's devotion by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah (the Temple Mount) in Jerusalem. Isaac is bound and placed on the altar, and Abraham raises the knife to slaughter his son. A voice from heaven calls to stop him; a ram, caught in the undergrowth by its horns, is offered in Isaac's place. Abraham receives the news of the birth of a daughter, Rebecca, to his nephew Bethuel.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/579813/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/579813/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

In this week's Torah reading, G-d promises a child to Abraham and Sarah, despite childless Sarah's advanced age. This week's haftarah describes a similar incident that occurred many years later — the prophet Elisha assuring an elderly childless woman that she will bear a child. The haftarah discusses two miracles performed by the prophet Elisha. The first miracle involved a widow who was heavily in debt, and her creditors were threatening to take her two sons as

slaves to satisfy the debt. When the prophet asked her what she had in her home, the widow responded that she had nothing but a vial of oil. Elisha told her to gather as many empty containers as possible — borrowing from neighbors and friends as well. She should then pour oil from her vial into the empty containers. She did as commanded, and miraculously the oil continued to flow until the last empty jug was filled. The woman sold the oil for a handsome profit, and had enough money to repay her debts and live comfortably.

The second miracle: Elisha would often pass by the city of Shunam, where he would dine and rest at the home of a certain hospitable couple. This couple even made a special addition to their home, a guest room designated for Elisha's use. When the prophet learned that the couple was childless, he blessed the woman that she should give birth to a child in exactly one year's time. And indeed, one year later a son was born to the aged couple.

A few years later the son complained of a headache and died shortly thereafter. The Shunamit woman laid the lifeless body on the bed in Elisha's designated room, and quickly summoned the prophet. Elisha hurried to the woman's home and miraculously brought the boy back to life.

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

#### Negative Capability (Vayera 5780)

<http://rabbisacks.org/vayera-5780/>

I have written about the binding of Isaac many times in these studies, each time proposing an interpretation somewhat different from the ones given by the classic commentators. I do so for a simple reason.

The Torah, and Tanach generally, regard child sacrifice as one of the worst of evils. Child sacrifice was widely practised in the ancient world. In 2 Kings 3:26-27, we read of how the Moabite king Mesha, in the course of war against Israel, Judah and Edom, sacrificed his eldest son to the god Chemosh. Had the point of the trial been Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, then in terms of the value system of Tanach itself he would have proven himself no better than a pagan king.

Besides this, the name Abram means "mighty father." The change of name to Abraham was meant to signify "father of many nations." God said that He chose Abram "so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to go in the way of the Lord," meaning that Abraham was chosen to be a role model of fatherhood. A model father does not sacrifice his child.

The classic interpretation given by most of the commentators is beautiful and moving. Abraham showed that he loved God more than he loved his own son. But for the reasons above, I prefer to continue to search for different interpretations. Unquestionably, there was a trial. It involved Isaac. It tested Abraham's faith to the limit. But it was about something else.

One of the most perplexing features of the Abraham story is the disconnect between God's promises and the reality. Seven times, God promised Abraham the land. Yet when Sarah died, he owned not even a burial plot and had to buy one at an exorbitant price. At the very opening of the story (see parshat Lech Lecha), God called on him to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house, and promised him, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." Without demur or hesitation, Abraham left, began the journey, and arrived in the land of Canaan. He came to Shechem and built an altar there. He moved on to Bet-El and built an altar there as well. Then almost immediately we read that "There was a famine in the land."

Abraham and his household were forced to go to Egypt. There, he found that his life was at risk. He asked Sarah to pretend to be his sister rather than his wife, thus putting her in a false position, (conduct which Ramban intensely criticised). Where, at that moment, was the Divine blessing? How was it that, leaving his land and following God's call, Abraham found himself in a morally dangerous situation where he was forced to choose between asking his wife to live a lie, and exposing himself to the probability, perhaps certainty, of his own death?

A pattern is beginning to emerge. Abraham was learning that there is a long and winding road between promise and fulfilment. Not because God does not keep His word, but because Abraham and his descendants were charged with bringing something new into the world. A sacred society. A nation formed by covenant. An abandonment of idolatry. An austere code of conduct. A more intimate relationship with God than any people has ever known. It would become a nation of pioneers. And God was teaching Abraham from the very beginning that this demands extraordinary strengths of character, because nothing great and transformative happens overnight in the human world. You have to keep going, even if you are tired and lost, exhausted and despondent. God will bring about everything He promised. But not immediately. And not directly. God seeks change in the real world of everyday lives. And He seeks those who have the tenacity of faith to keep going despite all the setbacks. That is what the life of Abraham was about.

Nowhere was this clearer than in relation to God's promise of children. Four times, God spoke about this to Abraham:

[1] "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you." (Gen. 12:2)

[2] "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted." (Gen. 13:16)

[3] "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then He said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Gen. 15:5)

[4] "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you." (Gen. 17:5-6)

Four ascending promises: a great nation, as many as the dust of the earth, as the stars of the sky; not one nation but many nations. Abraham heard these promises and had faith in them: "Abram believed the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Then God gave Abraham some painful news. His son by Hagar, Ishmael, would not be his spiritual heir. God would bless him and make him a great nation, "But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." (Gen. 17:21).

It is against this background of four promises of countless children, and a further promise that Abraham's covenant would be continued by Isaac, that we must set the chilling words that open the trial: "Take your son, your only son, the son that you love – Isaac – and offer him up."

The trial was not to see whether Abraham had the courage to sacrifice his son. As we saw above, even pagans like Mesha king of Moab had that courage. It was widespread in the ancient world, and completely abhorrent to Judaism.

The trial was not to see whether Abraham had the strength to give up something he loved. He had shown this time and time again. At the very beginning of his story he gave up his land, his birthplace and his father's house, everything that was familiar to him, everything that spoke of home. In the previous chapter, he gave up his firstborn son Ishmael whom, it is clear, he also loved. Was there even the slightest doubt that he would give up Isaac, who was so clearly God's miraculous gift, arriving when Sarah was already postmenopausal?

The trial was to see whether Abraham could live with what seemed to be a clear contradiction between God's word now, and God's word on five previous occasions, promising him children and a covenant that would be continued by Isaac.

The Rabbis knew that there were instances where two verses contradicted one another until a third verse came to resolve the contradiction. That was Abraham's situation. He was faced with a contradiction, and there was as yet no further verse to resolve it. That was the test. Could Abraham live with uncertainty?

He did just that. He prepared himself for the sacrifice. But he told no one else. When he and Isaac set off on the third day on their own, he told the two servants who had

accompanied them, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” When Isaac asked, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham replied, “God Himself will provide the lamb.” These statements are usually taken as diplomatic evasions. I believe, however, that Abraham meant exactly what he said. He was living the contradiction. He knew God had told him to sacrifice his son, but he also knew that God had told him that He would establish an everlasting covenant with his son.

The trial of the binding of Isaac was not about sacrifice but about uncertainty. Until it was over, Abraham did not know what to believe, or how it would end. He believed that the God who promised him a son would not allow him to sacrifice that son. But he did not know how the contradiction between God’s promise and His command would resolve itself.

The poet John Keats, in a letter to his brothers George and Thomas in 1817, sought to define what made Shakespeare so great compared to other writers. He possessed, he said, “Negative Capability – that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Shakespeare, in other words, was open to life in all its multiplicity and complexity, its conflicts and contradictions, while other, lesser writers sought to reduce it to a single philosophical frame. What Shakespeare was to literature, Abraham was to faith.

I believe that Abraham taught us that faith is not certainty; it is the courage to live with uncertainty. He had negative capability. He knew the promises would come true; he could live with the uncertainty of not knowing how or when.

### [The Gravity of Laughter: Vayera by Ariella Rosen](http://www.jtsa.edu/the-gravity-of-laughter)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/the-gravity-of-laughter>

Parashat Vayera opens with a flurry of action. Yet several of the narrative’s most significant moments are driven not by action, but by reaction.

After Abraham runs to welcome the three wandering strangers he sees from the entrance to his tent, inviting them to bathe, rest, and feast, the action slows, opening space for a story to play out in the realm of emotions. The strangers share the news that in one year’s time, Sarah will give birth to a son, ending the couple’s decades-long wait to fulfill their destiny as the parents of a nation:

And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?” (Gen. 18:12)

God omnisciently asks why Sarah laughed, suggesting that her reaction was misguided, for nothing was too wondrous for God’s abilities. (No matter that Abraham also laughed upon hearing the same news in the previous chapter, with no rebuke.) Sarah, then lies about her reaction:

Sarah lied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. But God replied, “You did laugh.” (18:15)

Scholar Aviva Zornberg characterizes Sarah’s laughter as an embodiment of the tension of “joy at enlarged possibilities, on the one hand, and the laughter that (bitterly? cruelly?) denies any possibility but the quotidian reality. To laugh is to confront the pressures of necessity on one’s individual destiny and one’s infinite desires.” (The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis, 99)

Sarah laughs, not because she finds the promise of having a child at the age of 90 funny, but because she finds it inconceivable. She is processing the tension between the possibility of having her dreams come true, and the impossibility that her body would allow it to happen. She is unable to suppress her reaction, because this is news she long ago gave up on hearing.

Laughter is a most curious reaction. It is (almost) uniquely human, yet deeply physiological, a response that is at the same time difficult to control and something we seek to curate through humor. Numerous researchers have found that human beings

laugh much more often when we are with other people than when we are alone. In fact, we even find ourselves laughing at things that are not remotely funny if others are with us. Laughter, then, must serve as more than a response to the unexpected and the humorous.

Zornberg, quoting the French writer Michel Tournier, relates that when individuals laugh together, “they are using a pseudo-language, laughter, based on a common ground . . . which, unintelligible in itself, has as its function to narrow the distance between their respective positions which divides them from that common base.” (100) Laughter is its own language, and it helps us connect on a primal, yet distinctly human level. When we laugh or seek to provoke that reaction in others, it is one way of asking, “are you thinking what I’m thinking? Can I see myself in you?”

In the midst of a conversation about whether or not one should approach Torah study from a place of joy, the Talmud relates the practice of the sage Rabbah, who before beginning to teach matters of Jewish law, “would say something humorous so that the Sages might be cheered” before beginning the daunting and awe-some task before him. (BT Shabbat 30b) Incredibly, Rabbah determines that the best way to prepare his students for complex Torah study is to tell a joke.

By inviting them to laugh together, their nerves are put at ease, and their hearts and minds are opened to possibility. They embark on their journey having felt the power of sharing a moment of joy. As such, laughter becomes part of the sacred act, a prerequisite for engaging collectively with that which is deep and profound.

To the extent that laughter is a social glue, Sarah has committed a faux pas. She giggled at an inappropriate time, when her joke (or rather, her gut reaction) was not shared. In that moment, it was easier for her to deny laughing when questioned than to try to explain the reason she responded as she did.

Yet, she seems unwilling to be shamed by her reaction in the long-term, and even seems to assert that laughter is the exact right response to the incredible circumstances of Isaac’s birth, as her own prerequisite for engaging with the profound nature of life. After Isaac was born,

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” (21:6)

All who hear of my circumstances will laugh with me.

Numerous commentaries and midrashim tell of Isaac’s birth sparking a wave of babies born to previously barren women, illnesses healed, and goodness restored, so that others could share in the joy and laughter of this moment. Yet there seems to be another message here as well, if we understand Sarah’s two encounters with laughter to be part of the same story: laughter is a communal connective tissue. It is an act of faith, rather than doubt, an act of defiance and triumph rather than acquiescence. While Sarah might not have been able to control her reaction before, now her laughter is deliberate, and forever bound up in the name of her child.

Isaac’s name is a symbol of Sarah’s hope that she might indeed still become the matriarch of a nation. It is perhaps a most intentional reaction to name her first (and ultimately only) offspring after a force that is uncontrollable. Laughter, in its role as a bodily response to the unexpected, allows us to forge ties, to build a sense of connection, and uncover the joy that makes way for the profound. That is no joke. (Ariella Rosen is the Director of Admissions at the JTS Rabbinical School and H.L. Miller Cantorial School)

[Vayera by Rabbi Berel Wein](https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2238.html)

<https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2238.html>

The Mishnah in Avot specifically, and Jewish tradition generally, instructs us that our father Abraham was constantly challenged with great tests in life and was able to survive and surmount all of them. There is an underlying difficulty to this narrative regarding the testing of Abraham. God after all is omniscient and knows well in advance what the

reaction of Abraham will be to all the challenges that are placed before him. This being the case, then one can easily ask why bother presenting those challenges in the first place. This fits in to the general question that Maimonides deals with when he attempts to reconcile God's omniscience with the presence of human free will and free choice. His answer is that both exist and coexist and that is part of the secret of the fact that human beings and human logic can never truly understand the Infinite and the Eternal. So that is undoubtedly true in the case of Abraham and his challenges.

Even though ultimately we will be unable to arrive at a definitive answer to this question – almost all questions that begin with the word 'why' are never completely satisfactorily answered – nevertheless I believe that we can attempt to arrive at some sort of understanding as to the purpose of the tests that Abraham endured and overcame. The Torah would not have devoted so much space and such detailed descriptions to these events in the life of Abraham if there wouldn't be eternal moral teachings present in the narrative that are relevant and true to all humans in all generations.

I think the obvious answer that jumps forth from the pages is that the tests are not meant to prove anything to Heaven as much as they are meant to prove the potential of greatness of Abraham to Abraham himself. It is our nature not to realize how great our potential is, how strong we really are, morally and emotionally, and to our surprise what we are capable of accomplishing.

It is one thing to profess that one has faith and is willing to make sacrifices on behalf of the preservation of that faith, whether personal or national. However, it is another thing completely to make those sacrifices, and to experience the emotional difficulties and even tragedies that life often visits upon us. A person never really knows what one's true makeup is unless tested over a lifetime, with the Talmud's graphic phrase that we are ultimately tested regarding our final resting place.

Abraham becomes great and stands erect after having successfully dealt with the challenges to his faith and to his vision that life and the environment in which he lived set before him. That is perhaps what the Torah indicates to us when it says that Abraham's faith was of such power in nature that the Lord deemed it to be the paragon of righteousness. Righteousness is achieved only when challenges are overcome.

### [Maintaining an Open Tent by Rabbi Michael Gilboa](http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=096da240-938a-4ae0-9375-323a4bee9be2)

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=096da240-938a-4ae0-9375-323a4bee9be2>  
Genesis is a book of experiments. Humans trying out how to be human. God trying out how to be our God. And often the experiments don't go particularly well. Three times--in the Garden of Eden, during the generation of the Flood, and at the Tower of Babel--the entire human race turned away from God, and each time God responded by bringing us back on course.

In the final episode of collective human rebellion, at the Tower of Babel, God simultaneously dealt with the immediate problem and changed our fundamental circumstances. By creating languages, cultures, and nations God made it impossible for the entire human race to turn away from God. From then until now there has always been more than one way to be a human. Instead of charting one course, the human race would simultaneously try many approaches, hopefully to learn from each other's mistakes and to steer toward the best of our humanity. One of the inevitable byproducts of this multifaceted approach, however, is chauvinism and superiority. Probably from the first day, a small group with a shared language gathered beneath the ruins of the Tower, some people have limited their circle of concern to those most like them, using our differences to disqualify others of their basic humanity.

This week's Torah portion, Parashat Vayera, is a study of the contrasts that quickly emerged from this new multicultural reality. According to our tradition, Avraham was 48 at the Tower of Babel's doom, and he was 99 when the events of the parashah took place. In little more than 50 years we see the emergence of two diametrically opposed ways of

being human.

Sodom and Gomorrah, though extreme, ought to sound familiar to us. After all, we should love our families. We ought to care most about our neighbors. We should be more concerned with our own city than with people halfway around the world. And yet, this exclusion that is so natural to us, that comes from a place of love for those around us, is condemned by God. In the most striking terms God told Avraham and us that although there will be more than one right answer to the question of being human, that doesn't mean there won't be any wrong answers. There is a limit to our experimentation, and Sodom and Gomorrah surpassed that limit when identity and allegiance transformed into callous and cruel exclusion. In the name of those they loved, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah denied the humanity of the outsider, and a mere half-century of this inhumanity was enough for God to shut down the experiment in its entirety.

Avraham and his emerging tribe, on the other hand, were marked by radical inclusion. Everyone was welcome in Avraham and Sarah's tent. Everyone was invited to the table. There was no such thing as a foreigner. Avraham was so dedicated to the power of welcoming that he sat at the entrance of his tent waiting to greet passersby even as he was recovering from his circumcision. Avraham was fierce in his own convictions, to the point of washing idolaters' feet before they might bring the dust they had worshipped into his home. At the same time, he welcomed them wholeheartedly, and through his radical welcoming Avraham furthered his mission of telling the world about God, inviting strangers to learn about their creator over a meal, and transforming outsiders into insiders through the common experience of God's love.

Avraham's was, and still is, an audacious experiment that could only come from faith in a single God who transcends all tribes and nationalities. It is not easy to keep the tent open, especially as so many of us live in majority cultures trying their own Sodom-like experiments, but our faith in radical welcoming is ultimately a faith in the God of Genesis: a God who cares about all people, loves all nations, and believes in our shared sacred human destiny. (*Rabbi Michael Gilboa, is a Conservative Yeshiva Alum & Founder of the Chicagoland Center for Conversion to Judaism*)

### [D'var Haftarah: Heroic Sincerity by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein](http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=096da240-938a-4ae0-9375-323a4bee9be2)

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=096da240-938a-4ae0-9375-323a4bee9be2>

Both Elijah and Elisha were renowned for the miracles that they performed. They miraculously fed the hungry, acted as harbingers of children to barren women, and brought back to life those thought to be dead. In one instance, found in our haftarah, Elisha rewards an act of kindness by an important woman from the town of Shunem who was barren by promising that she would bear a son. The son grew up and once, while visiting his father in the field, fell sick and later, died. The woman traveled to Elisha to tell him her troubles and he sent his servant Gehazi to revive the child, with a precise set of orders: "Gird your loins and take my staff in your hand and go. Should you meet a man, do not greet him, and should a man greet you, do not answer him. And you shall put my staff on the lad's face." (4:29) Gehazi did as he was bidden but the youth was not revived until Elisha came and miraculously revived him himself.

Why was Gehazi's act ineffective? The biblical storyline does not answer that question. This question, however, was the driving force behind the following midrashic rewrite of this episode, found in Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer (chapter 33), an 8th or 9th century collection. The author introduces into the story these details of how Gehazi acted after Elisha commanded him: "And to Gehazi this [mission] was silly in his eyes. And everyone that he met along the way, he would say to them, 'Do you believe that this staff can revive someone?' And this is why the mission was unsuccessful until Elisha came by foot and set himself face to face and eye to eye with the dead youth and prayed..." The upshot is that Elisha revived the child.

According to this midrash, Gehazi was commanded to single-mindedly carry out his

mission without interruption, all of which he totally disregarded. This was not his only transgression. He also lacked sincerity and the commitment to carrying out his assignment. Imagine any of us taking upon ourselves a responsibility which we treated as a joke. Would anyone take us seriously - a doctor who scoffs at the treatment he or she is offering? A rabbi for whom the performance of mitzvot is performed without heart? Gehazi, in this midrashic telling, is a foil to Elisha's total commitment and integrity. Gehazi is meant to show us how things should not be done in order to make Elisha's correct performance look heroic. Of course, all of us have a bit of "Gehazi" in us, which makes it all the more imperative to strive to be like Elisha! (*Rabbi Silverstein is on the faculty of the Conservative Yeshiva*)

### Lessons From Sodom and Gomorrah by Helen Plotkin

<https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/291886/lessons-from-sodom-and-gomorrah>

In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah—recounted in the Torah in Parshat Vayera, which will be read this Shabbat—the Bible addresses the question of ethics head-on. These towns represent a human society so thoroughly corrupt that it is beyond the possibility of repair. There are other stories in which God finds human behavior to be abhorrent, but there is usually some redemption (as in the story of Nineveh in the book of Jonah), or a remnant remains that holds the potential to rebuild (like the living things in Noah's ark). Only here does an entire place get annihilated with fire and brimstone.

What makes this place irredeemable? Some people assume that the biblical narrative is clear: It was "sodomy"—a particular male sex act—that infuriated God. But the oldest interpretations of the story see it very differently.

The prophet Ezekiel brings it up in one of his warnings to the kingdom of Judah in the sixth century BCE:

Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. (Ezekiel 16:49)

Centuries later, the ancient rabbis fleshed out Ezekiel's charge in a midrash—a snippet of biblical interpretation. Here is a passage from Genesis Rabbah, a collection of commentaries compiled in the third century CE:

There was an incident concerning two young girls who went down to fill pitchers with water from the spring.

One of them said to her friend, "Why is your face so sickly?"

The other said to her, "Our food is all gone and we are about to die."

What did the first one do? She filled her pitcher with flour and switched the two, each girl taking what was in the hand of the other.

When [the people of Sodom] became aware of this, they took her and burned her.

The Holy Blessed One said, "Even if I wanted to keep silent, the judgment in the case of the young girl does not permit me to keep silent."

This midrash paints a terrible picture: A young woman burned to death as punishment for an act of compassion. And her burning was not the work of hooligans. God uses legal terminology—"judgment" and "case"—implying that the people of Sodom took the compassionate girl to court for sneaking food to a starving neighbor. She was tried and convicted under the law of the land. In Sodom, feeding a hungry person was a criminal act that carried the death penalty. The act that forced God's interference was a legal one. Like most midrash, this interpretation roots itself in an oddly worded phrase in the Bible. In Genesis 18 we hear God describing the decision-making process:

The Lord said, "Because great is the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah and because weighty indeed is their sin, I shall go down and see whether they have done entirely in accordance with its outcry that has come to me. If not, I shall know. (Genesis 18:20-21)

The ancient rabbis found it odd that the text speaks of “the outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah”—two cities—and then of “its outcry” in the singular. Shouldn’t it say “their outcry?” For the rabbis, this mismatched “it” is an opportunity, a hint about a direction to investigate. There was something that cried a cry that wafted up to God, something singular, not plural, and in response to that cry God began the process that led to annihilation. An explanation of what “it” refers to will be an explanation of whose pain awakened God’s action.

Every noun in Hebrew is either masculine or feminine. The form of “it” used in “its outcry” could refer to any feminine noun, or it could refer to a female person. If it were a person, we would translate it “her outcry,” but in Hebrew there is no way to distinguish “it” and “her.” The search is narrowed: The outcry comes from something feminine and singular, a person or a thing.

A sensible reader whose goal is to understand the plain meaning of the text might dismiss this entire search as nitpicking. It happens that the Hebrew word for “city” is feminine, so perhaps “it” is the place itself. Perhaps a minor editing problem led to using “its outcry” instead of “their outcry” in speaking of two cities.

The ancient rabbis were not sensible readers in this way. The idea of dismissing a peculiarity as an editing problem would horrify them. It would amount to throwing out a precious clue that might reveal something of great significance. When they perceived a slight lump in the fabric of the text, they were compelled to investigate further. They imagined peeling back the fabric to reveal another world of meaning, an alternate reality that lies beneath the text, where deeper levels of meaning might be discovered.

The midrash ends like this:

The Holy Blessed One said, “Even if I wanted to keep silent, the judgment in the case of the young girl does not permit me to keep silent.”

Thus, it does not say “If in accordance with their outcry,” but rather “If in accordance with her outcry”—the young girl’s.

The midrash solves the grammar problem: Whose outcry did God hear? The outcry of one vulnerable young girl, abused by her own city. At the same time, the midrash delivers a strong message: God stands up for the generous and the vulnerable against the stingy and the powerful. It was the cry of a young girl that caught God’s attention and compelled God to act, a cry not loud, but thin and true. The image of this righteous girl crying out to God caught the imagination of the Jewish tradition and for many she has become a symbol of the sin of Sodom.

But there is another version of this midrash that takes the issue a step further. The alternate version ends like this:

The Holy Blessed One said, “Even if I wanted to keep silent, the judgment in the case of the young girl does not permit me to keep silent.”

Thus, it does not say “If in accordance with their outcry,” but rather “If in accordance with its outcry.” What is “it”? “It” is the judgment in the case of the young girl.

According to this version, it is not the cry of the girl herself that turns God’s head. Now it is the judgment in her case that cries out.

An innocent girl, an extraordinarily brave and generous girl, was abused in Sodom. But according to this version of the midrash, there was another level of abuse that was impossible for God to ignore, and that was the abuse of judgment itself. By the law of Sodom, the case of *The People v. Girl* was judged fairly. She was sentenced to death by burning, and the sentence was carried out. It was not even that the judges were corrupt. The problem was that law itself was perverted. Judgment cries out in rage: If legal action results in cruel injustice then what is the value of judgment?

For most people, the abuse of an abstract concept is not as emotionally compelling as the abuse of a little girl. But the idea that her treatment reflected the ethical stance of her society is truly horrifying. It suggests that in a society whose communal values are

corrupt, it eventually becomes impossible for individuals to live ethical lives. Ethics and morality are not only attributes of individual people. Ethics exist or do not exist in a community. Whether individual people are good or bad, it is the collective values of the community that make ethical life possible.

Later in the biblical story, when God's messengers appear in Sodom, the residents—"from youngsters to old folks, the entire population, to the last one"—gather round and demand to know the visitors (Genesis 19:5). The word "know" is frequently used in the Bible to speak of sexual intimacy. When Adam "knows" Eve, she conceives and bears a son. So yes, we can assume the people want to use the visitors for sex, and this is the source of the "sodomy" charge. But there are several other words for sex in the Bible, including the very explicit "come into" and the rather crude "lay." Both seem much more likely choices than "know in the biblical sense" for this scene that is surely about rape or something like it. Why does this text use the language of knowing, language that suggests mutuality and relationship?

Putting the word "know" in the mouths of the Sodomites is sarcastic, or at least ironic. It says, yes, this story is about relationship, but relationship corrupted. These people—every single one of them—encounter other people as an opportunity for their own advantage. This is the very model of the corruption of what it means to be in intimate relationship: Let me get to know you so I can sell you something. Let me get close to you so I can take advantage of you. Let me get you to trust me so I can use you for sex. And why does the text emphasize that all the people participated? (Really? The little kids were rapists?) Because it was the society, not just each individual, that was corrupt. The ancient rabbis imagined that the selfishness was so deep that it was codified in law. The intimacy—or the parody of intimacy—that the Sodomites demand is designed to make strangers who set foot in their city part of the economy of using and being used—part of the economy of anti-ethics.

The rabbis left us two versions of the midrash about the outcry of Sodom. In one, God heard the small voice of one girl who knew her neighbor's suffering and acted upon that knowledge. In the other, God heard the anguished scream of law itself, contorted to forbid that girl's humane response. When we are surrounded by suffering and injustice, should we direct our energy to helping individuals, or should we focus on political action aimed at building social frameworks that embody our values? Read together, the two versions of this midrash tell us that our communal survival depends not on one or the other, but on both. (*Rabbi Helen Plotkin teaches at Swarthmore College and at Mekom Torah, a Philadelphia-area Jewish community learning project.*)

### YAHRTZEITS

Roni Bamforth remembers her mother Marjorie Gelfond on Tues. Nov.19 (Cheshvan 21).  
Ilisia Kissner remembers her stepfather Frank E. Strassfeld (Ephraim ben Avraham Ha Levi) on Thur. Nov. 21(Cheshvan 23).