

OU Women Parshat Vayera

Welcome to the Torat Imecha Parsha Series presented by the OU Women's Initiative. My name is Chana Meira Katz, and today we will be studying Parshat Vayera.

This week's *parsha* (Torah portion) is composed of 147 verses (*pesukim*) and spans four chapters (*perakim*): Chapters 18 through 22 of the Book of Bereishit. *Parshat Vayera* contains several foundational and emotionally profound narratives, including the *Akeidah* (Binding of Yitzchak), which are central to our observance and are re-read annually on Rosh Hashanah.

The 1st Aliyah:

The *Parsha* (*Vayera*) begins three days after Avraham's *Brit Milah* (circumcision), while he is still recovering. God immediately offers comfort:

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח-הָאֵהֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם:

"Hashem appeared to him in Elonei Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to the tent in the heat of the day" (*Genesis 18:1*).

While God is visiting, Avraham notices three travelers passing by, and he immediately rushes to invite them into his home, commencing a powerful display of unbelievable *Hachnasat Orchim* (hospitality).

Avraham does not realize that these three travelers are angels in disguise. The verses then abruptly shift, leading to a profound textual puzzle: the Torah describes God's appearance, but it doesn't mention what God said to him. Instead, the narrative goes straight into the story of the three visitors, with Avraham saying to one of them:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדוֹשָׁם אִם-נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶל-נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ:

"My lords, please, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass by your servant" (*Genesis 18:3*).

This sudden interruption leads to much debate among commentators as to who Avraham was addressing when he said, "**My lords**, please, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass by your servant" (*Genesis 18:3*).

Rashi offers two explanations for the word *Adonai* (My Lord): first, that Avraham addressed the **Chief** of the three travelers, calling them all "**lords**" (the term being *profane*, or merely a term of address meaning "Sirs"), knowing that if the leader stayed, the others would remain. The second, more spiritual explanation, is that the word is "**holy**" (referring to God), meaning Avraham asked God to wait for him while he ran and invited the travelers (*Rashi* on *Genesis 18:3*). "Avraham requested that God, the Divine Presence, wait for him while he tended to his guests."

This second interpretation is the basis for a famous teaching in the *Gemara* in *Masechet Shabbat*, which states:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: גדולה הכנסת אורחין מהקבלת פני שכינה, דכתיב: "ויאמר ה' אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל נא תעבר וגו'"

"Hospitality toward guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence (*Shechinah*): (*Shabbat 127a:13*).

After this powerful display of prioritizing service, the angels inform Avraham that Sarah will give birth to a child in exactly a year. Sarah overhears this conversation, and she laughs to herself because she is past childbearing age and cannot imagine giving birth. God is upset with Sarah because her laughter demonstrates a lack of *Emunah* (faith). It is worth noting the Rambam (Maimonides) offers a controversial, rationalistic explanation that the entire scene with the angels was all a vision and did not happen physically—an approach that most later commentators do not agree with.

The 2nd Aliyah:

In the next Aliya, the angels leave, and Avraham escorts them on their journey. From here, we learn the halacha that part of the mitzvah of Hachnasat orchim is escorting your guests when they leave. Of the three melachim, two continue to Sedom. Their mission is to destroy the five cities in the Sedom region and rescue Lot. As soon as they leave, Hashem decides to inform Avraham of his intention to destroy Sedom.

Unlike Noach, who, when informed of the destruction of the world, remained silent, Avraham vigorously argues with Hashem, bargaining for the lives of the wicked people of Sedom.

Avraham asks: האֵף תִּסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע “Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” (18:23)

Avraham initiated his plea to God, asking if He would spare the region if there were 50 righteous people—implicitly allowing 10 *Tzaddikim* (righteous individuals) per city. God confirmed that He would spare the entire region for the sake of fifty, thereby implying that fewer than fifty righteous people actually existed there.

Avraham continued his bold negotiation, successively lowering the number: 45, 40, and so on, but he decisively stopped bargaining at 10.

The reason for halting at this number is explained by **Rashi**:

Avraham did not ask for less than ten because he recalled the Flood generation. Hashem destroyed the world even though there were eight righteous people at that time: Noah, his three sons, and their wives. Avraham concluded that if less than ten could not save the entire world then, surely they could not save Sedom.

This shows Avraham's reasoning was rooted in a precedent established by God's judgment during the time of the Flood.

The narrative abruptly shifts from the unresolved negotiation between Avraham and God—the conversation has no clear resolution—directly to the city of Sedom.

The 3rd Aliyah:

The angels (*malachim*) arrive in Sedom, and Lot is sitting by the gate, waiting for guests.

Lot immediately begs the visitors to come into his house. However, his hospitality is notable for one strange request: He requests that they do not wash off the sand off their feet. This contrasts sharply with Avraham, who had asked his guests to wash the dust off their feet because, in ancient times, the local people worshipped dust as an idol. Lot bakes them *matzot* and personally serves them.

The people of the city soon discovered that Lot had guests. The entire city, from the greatest to the smallest, surrounded his house and unanimously demanded that Lot hand over the guests so that they could assault them. In a shocking display of misplaced morals, Lot offers the angry mob his two unmarried daughters in place of the guests, but the crowd is not placated. When the mob tries to break down the door, the angels defend Lot by striking all those surrounding the house with blindness.

The angels (Malachim) inform Lot of their mission to destroy Sedom and instruct him to evacuate his family.

Lot first attempts to convince his family to flee with him. He tries to warn his sons-in-law and married daughters, but they utterly laugh at him, dismissing his fear. For them, Sedom is pulsing with life; what was this crazy old man talking about?!

Lot only manages to take his wife and his two unmarried daughters, and the text indicates that the angels had to drag him out. The word used to describe Lot's hesitation is *vayitmahmah* (וַיִּתְמַהֲמַח—"and he delayed"). The symbol placed over this word, known as a sharsheret (a type of cantillation or textual marker, often interpreted as a "chain"), is sung in a prolonged manner when read from the Torah. This highlights that Lot was really dithering because he just couldn't decide what to take with him, which made his leaving prolonged, and, in the end, he had to leave empty-handed.

This forced abandonment of his possessions is understood as a Divine consequence, or middah k'neged middah (measure for measure): Lot had originally come to the region of Sedom for financial gain, choosing to put his money in front of his morals. Now, at the time of salvation, he is forced to flee empty-handed.

The 4th Aliyah:

God acts on the judgment of Sedom: He destroys the city, raining down fire and sulfur and completely overturning it. The consequences are absolute: the once lush, fertile area becomes absolutely barren. Tragically, Lot's wife looks back at the destruction and is instantly turned into a pillar of salt.

As Lot and his daughters flee, the narrative momentarily shifts to Avraham, highlighting his deep concern:

The Torah says

: וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־עָמַד שָׁם אֶת־פָּנָיו ה' :

"Avraham rose early in the morning to go to the place where he had stood in the presence of Hashem" (Genesis 19:27).

Avraham is considered the **first one to engage in the prayer of *Shacharit*** (the first daily morning prayer), going to the spot of his negotiation to pray for Lot's welfare, hoping for his survival.

Meanwhile, Lot and his two unmarried daughters take shelter in a cave. The girls assume that it's the end of the world and that no one is left to continue humanity. In a desperate effort to repopulate the world, Lot's daughters make their father drunk and then they seduce him. This echoes the events involving Noah and Ham (where a son took advantage of a drunken father), but here, the tradition views the daughters' intention as acting "Le Shem Shamaim" (for the sake of Heaven)—meaning, for a higher purpose.

The daughters each conceive from this union. The older daughter brazenly named her child Moav, meaning "from my father." The younger daughter was more modest than her sister. She did not want to reference the incestuous birth directly, so she called her son Ben Ami, meaning "son of my people." He eventually became the ancestor of the nation of Ammon.

Due to the fallout from Lot's actions and the destruction of Sedom, Avraham has to relocate and moves to Gerar. Here, a dangerous pattern repeats: Avraham once again finds himself in potential danger because of Sarah's beauty, and he asks her to pose as his sister. This deception leads Avimelech, the King of Gerar, to take her into his house. Avimelech is immediately struck with a disease, and God comes to him in a dream demanding that he return Sarah to Avraham.

The resolution of this crisis is notably different from the earlier encounter with Pharaoh in *Lech Lecha*. While Pharaoh gave gifts, took Sarah, and then forcefully threw the couple out of the land, Avimelech gave wealth to Avraham and a personal monetary gift to Sarah after being commanded by God. This gift served as dual proof: first, that he had not touched Sarah, and second, that he recognized the validity of their relationship and forbade anyone from touching them. Thus, Sarah, this time, receives money in a dignified way in contrast to what happened in the previous parsha.

The climax of the story ties Avraham's actions to God's ultimate promise. Avraham prayed (*davened*) for Avimelech that he should be healed from the disease with which God had punished him. Immediately afterwards, the Torah says that Sarah was "remembered." The Sages (*Chazal*) teach a powerful lesson here: "Somebody who prays (*davens*) for his friend and he is suffering from the same thing, he will be answered first." Because Avraham prayed on behalf of Avimelech, the very next verse confirms that Sarah is remembered and, at the age of 90, she has a child named Yitzchak (Yitzchak). Yitzchak is born and receives a *Brit* (covenant of circumcision) at eight days old, fulfilling the promise of a miraculous heir.

The 5th Aliyah:

The passage begins joyfully: Avraham throws a great feast when Yitzchak is weaned. As Yitzchak begins to grow, however, a profound problem arises between the two half-brothers.

Sarah notices Yishamel doing something problematic:

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בֶּן־הָעֶרְוָה הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק

"Sarah notices that Yishamel, the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, was metzachek."

The exact meaning of the Hebrew word *metzachek* is uncertain, but it is considered a corruption of the word *tzachak* (to laugh or rejoice), indicating a negative act. The Sages (*Chazal*) interpret the word severely, suggesting that Yishamel was involved in one of three serious transgressions: idolatry, immorality, or bloodshed.

Sarah immediately recognizes the spiritual danger. She does not want this negative influence on her son Yitzchak. Her concern, however, also had a vital legal dimension: who would inherit Avraham's spiritual and material legacy?

According to the Code of Hammurabi, a major legal code of the time, the inheritance was determined by the father's actions during his lifetime: If the master does not distinguish between the child of the slave woman and the child of the main wife, then after the master dies, they split the inheritance equally.

Sarah's true goal was that her son, Yitzchak, should be the one who carries on the destiny of the Jewish people.

She therefore demands that Avraham send Yishamel away, even though Avraham is initially reluctant to banish his son.

Though Avraham was reluctant to send his son away, God confirms that Sarah's demand must be obeyed, elevating her spiritual insight:

God says: כָּל־אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִיצְחָק יִקְרָא לָהּ זָרַע:

"All that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, because it is through Yitzchak that your offspring will be renowned" (Genesis 21:12).

The Torah subtly highlights the conflict and the different ways Yishamel (who is 17 years old at the time) is viewed by those around him:

- Sarah calls him the "son of the handmaid."
- Avraham calls him בְּנוֹ ("his son").
- Hagar refers to Yishamel as הַיֵּלֶד ("the child").

It is interesting to note that the name *Yishamel* is not explicitly mentioned in the narrative until later, emphasizing these differing, emotional labels. Despite the emotional difficulty for Avraham, who had invested himself in Yishamel, thinking that he would be the heir of the covenant from God, Avraham wakes up early in the morning to do the will of God.

Hagar and Yishamel go into the desert, where they get lost, become dehydrated, and Yishamel becomes dangerously ill. Unable to witness his impending death, Hagar puts him under a tree and walks away. The Torah poignantly paints a picture of her grief:

וַתֵּשֶׁב מְנוּגָד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְרֹךְ: (Genesis 21:16)

Although Hagar is crying, the very next verse reveals whose prayer God hears: וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנָּעִר (Genesis 21:17). It is Yishamel's cries that God listens to. An angel (*Malach*) calls to Hagar and shows her where there is water, saving their lives. Yishamel recovers and grows up, becoming a skilled archer.

This moment of salvation contains a crucial spiritual lesson for our own day. When this section is read on Rosh Hashanah, we focus on the famous words of God's response (Genesis 21:17):

כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנָּעִר בְּאֶזְרָה הוּא־שָׁם

"...for God has heard the voice of the young boy, as he is there."

The phrase "*as he is there*" is interpreted to mean that God judged Yishamel as he was in that moment of crisis—a desperate, dying boy—and not for the wicked deeds predicted for his future. We learn from here that we are judged on Rosh Hashanah as we are at that moment, based on our current state of sincerity and need.

The 6th Aliyah:

The passage returns to Avimelech, who seeks to cement a lasting relationship with Avraham. Avimelech proposes a solemn treaty with Avraham, pledging that neither he nor his descendants will harm the other for three generations.

Avraham uses this opportunity to address a recurring problem:

Avraham complains to Avimelech that his subjects repeatedly steal the wells that Avraham digs.

They formalize their peace treaty, and Avraham sets aside seven ewes as a visible sign of their pact, which gives the place its name.

With the conflict resolved, Avraham performs a significant, defining spiritual act:

Avraham digs a well (or redigs the stolen ones), plants an orchard, and sets up a dedicated place to teach about God. He names the location Be'er Sheva (meaning "Well of the Oath" or "Well of Seven"). The Torah records his purpose in establishing this place:

וַיִּקְרָא-שֵׁם בְּנֵי שָׁם ה' אֵל עֹלָם:

"And he proclaimed there the name of Hashem, the Everlasting God" (Genesis 21:33).

By dedicating this visible spot to public service and the proclamation of God's existence to all passersby, this location is often cited as a model for actively bringing people closer to God.

The 7th Aliyah:

The Torah culminates with the final, most severe trial of Avraham's life: God commands Avraham to take Yitzchak and offer him up as a sacrifice (*korban*) on a mountain. This is the intensely dramatic scene that we read every year on Rosh Hashanah.

It is poignant that both the first of Avraham's tests (leaving his homeland) and the last (*Akeidah*) are introduced with the identical command: הֵלֵךְ-לְךָ ("Go for yourself").

In the first test, Avraham was commanded to sacrifice his **past** (his home, family, and birthplace).

In this test, he is asked to sacrifice his **future** (the promised son, Yitzchak, through whom the entire covenant was supposed to continue).

While one can find the motivation to sacrifice one's past for one's future, to sacrifice one's future is unbelievably difficult.

Nevertheless, acting with his characteristic zeal, Avraham's style remains unchanged: וַיִּשְׁלֶם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר ("Avraham rose early in the morning"). Avraham personally loads his donkey, takes the wood, and also brings Yishamel and Eliezer to accompany him and Yitzchak.

At the base of the mountain, Avraham leaves Yishamel and Eliezer behind and continues with Yitzchak alone. The Torah beautifully stresses their bond with the repeated phrase: וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יחדו ("and the two of them walked together"). Though Avraham is going to perform the most painful of all the tests, the text says three times (the last being וַיֵּלְכוּ יחדו "and they walked together") that they were united. Avraham still stands next to Yitzchak and encourages him, he does not emotionally distance himself, even though that would have been easier. Yitzchak, who is 37 at this point, trusts his father and trusts Hashem, and goes along willingly.

Just as Avraham is about to perform the actual sacrifice of Yitzchak, an angel calls out and says, "Do not touch this boy."

Avraham lifts his eyes and notices a ram caught in the thicket, and he offers that ram instead.

The horns from that ram become the *Shofar* (ram's horn) that we blow every Rosh Hashanah, where we ask God to forgive us in the merit of the *Akeidah* (the binding).

The *Parsha* then concludes with an announcement of good news: Avraham finds out that Rebekah (Rivka) had been born. This is a "stay tuned" piece of important information, setting the stage for the search for Yitzchak's wife in next week's *Parsha*, *Chayei Sarah*.