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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.

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# TORAH SPARKS

## Parashat Vayera

**November 16, 2019 | 18 Heshvan 5780**

Annual | Genesis 18:1-22:24 (Etz Hayim p. 99-122; Hertz p. 63-76)

Triennial Genesis 18:1-18:33 (Etz Hayim p. 104-112; Hertz p. 66-71)

Haftarah | 2 Kings 4:1-37 (Etz Hayim p. 123-126; Hertz p. 76-79)

## D'var Torah: Maintaining an Open Tent

**Rabbi Michael Gilboa**, *Conservative Yeshiva Alum & Founder of the Chicagoland Center for Conversion to Judaism*

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

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## D'var Haftarah: Heroic Sincerity

**Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

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 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> 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!

## Parashah Study: Vayera

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Our parashah opens with the arrival of three guests at Avraham’s tent. What do they need? What do we offer? Who is involved?

### **TEXT - Bereshit 18:2-8**

*He was sitting at the entrance of his tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him... **he ran...** to greet them... He said: My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant... let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves, then go on... They replied: do as you have said. Avraham **hastened** into the tent to Sarah and said ‘**hasten...** knead and make round-breads’. And Avraham **ran** to the herd and took a calf...and gave it to the lad who **hastened** to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf...and set these before them, and he waited on them as they ate.*

- Avraham seems to be in a rush to take care of the guests that arrived at midday. What might be the reason for this rush? (You might consider both Avraham’s needs and those of the travelers that stopped by at that hour.)
- Look at what Avraham offers his guests, and what he serves them. How would you explain the discrepancy?
- \*Avraham involves his family in the preparations, first and foremost his wife, (Midrash also identifies the lad as Ishmael), despite having a vast number of servants. What is gained by Avraham’s management style?

### **COMMENTARY - Radak (R. David Kimhi, Provence 1160-1235) on Bereshit 18:5**

***Fetch a morsel of bread** – from here [we learn that] the righteous say little and do much, and so it is proper to do, and therefore this story was written, so that one may learn from it good manners...*

- What is Radak referring to by suggesting that Avraham said little and did much?
- When do you think that this rule of behavior is appropriate, and in what settings might it not be advisable?
- \*Radak suggests that the story is written as a teaching tool. Hospitality and good manners are not established as commandments later, yet we exalt them. When is a story a better tool than a mitzvah?