

## Today's Torah Portion: *Vayera*

### Issues:

1. As *Vayera* begins, Abraham receives a divine visitation in the form of three men. According to tradition, they were the angels, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. Each of them had been given a task. Raphael was to heal the wound (circumcision) of Abraham, Michael was to bring Sarah the news of her impending motherhood, and Gabriel was to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Rashi points out that Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent so that he might see passersby and invite them into his home. The Encyclopedia Judaica states that *Hachnasat Orchim* (welcoming guests) was not simply a sign of good manners, "but a moral institution which grew out of the harsh desert and nomadic existence."

Abraham is our model for hospitality. We can learn from his example just how important and how involved the process is:

- a. Abraham looks for his guests – pitches his tent at a crossroad and doesn't just wait for guests to come to him. He goes to greet them.
  - b. He brings guests into his home and, without hesitating, goes to get them food and drink.
  - c. He includes his entire household in the performance of this *Mitzvah*.
  - d. He encourages the weary guests to recline and rest their feet (Verse 4).
  - e. He does more than he promises to do (Verse 5). (Says, "I'll fetch a morsel of bread.") The Rabbis call this "the mark of a good man."
  - f. When they are ready to leave, he doesn't just see them to the door, but instead, he walks with them for a while, extending the boundaries of his hospitality far beyond his physical home.
2. God informs Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah are to be destroyed. How did Abraham's response to the proposed destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah differ from Noah's response to the proposed destruction of the world by flood? Was Abraham foolish to challenge God's plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah? How does Abraham's bargaining with God exemplify the relationship between the Jewish People and God?
  3. Sarah laughed when she heard she was to become a mother. "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my husband so old" (18:12)? In reporting this to Abraham, God says: "Why did Sarah scoff and ask, 'How can I have children?'" God changed Sarah's words so that Abraham would not be angry with her. As the commentary *Tzenah Ur'enah* states, it is from this episode that Sages learned that for the sake of *sh'lom bayit* (family harmony), a harmless lie is allowed.

When do you think it is justifiable to lie?

What does the term *sh'lom bayit* imply? How is *sh'lom bayit* a responsibility of each family member?

4. Rabbi Hama, the son of Hanina, said: It was the third day after his (Abraham's) circumcision, and the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared (*Vayera*) and inquired after the state of his health (*Baba Metzia* 86 b). From the interpretation comes the tradition of *Bikur Cholim* (visiting the sick). According to the Rabbis, a visit to the sick removed 1/60<sup>th</sup> of the illness. However, simply visiting the sick did not fulfill the *mitzvah*. Rather, the sick person had to be aided and his/her material needs satisfied by the visit.
5. In Chapter 21, at Sarah's behest, Abraham banishes Hagar and Ishmael, his second wife and first son. *Midrash* tells that of all the trials Abraham had to undergo, none was so hard to bear as this.

If you were Abraham, what would you have done? Are his actions justified?

6. In Chapter 22, the Akedah story begins with the phrase, "Take your son, please." It may sound like a Henny Youngman joke, but it highlights an aspect of this command that is often neglected. God says, "*Kach Na*." If it were just a simple command, God would have said, "*Kach*," (Take him) but the word "*Na*" is added. Since "*Na*" can mean "Please," the command is transformed into somewhat of a request. This prompts some questions:
  - a. Was this really a request and not a command? Did Abraham actually have the option of refusing to offer Isaac as a sacrifice?
  - b. If that was the case, was God hoping that Abraham would refuse? Is this why the request was made so slowly, so carefully – in order to give Abraham time to think about it and then refuse?
  - c. Since Abraham did not refuse, did God allow him to go through with the entire ordeal as both a punishment (for his lack of ethical concern for his son) and as a lesson to show Abraham that child sacrifices are an abomination?
  - d. Assuming that this is a command and not a request, what does this teach us about how orders should be given and how a "boss" should treat his subordinates?
7. As our portion ends, the dramatic flair of Genesis surpasses even the best of soap operas. As soon as the *Akedah* episode concludes, our attention is immediately drawn to Rebecca, a descendant of Nahor, Abraham's brother. What part will she have to play in our story? How will Isaac recover from his trauma? Where can Abraham go from here? And what about Sarah?

TUNE IN NEXT WEEK ...

#### **HAFTARAH 2 KINGS 4:1-37**

This miracle story parallels the *Akedah*, in two key ways. A barren woman gives birth after a divine promise, and her son is saved from death (by the prophet, Elisha). Another story similar to this one – that of Lazerus – appears in the New Testament.



## Lessons of the Binding of Isaac

- 1) To teach that God does not want child sacrifice and explain why Israel does not engage in that practice.
- 2) To indicate that God is seen through life's darkest moments, apparently instigating them, but in reality providing us with the keys to salvation (the ram). Was that original voice, then one that commanded Abraham, really God? Or just the last voice (the angel) In Genesis, there often is confusion between angels/God/ and (see Jacob and the beginning of this portion too)
- 3) Torah: shows epitome of commitment *to* and love *of* God. Part of our essence – (each of us is challenged in different ways through life. Individually and the Jewish people as a whole. Abraham's merit saves us.
- 4) Isaac actually doesn't return:
  - Midrash: He dies and is brought back. This was comforting to Jews being slaughtered in middle ages. Jews saw themselves as being bound on the altar.
  - Christian version: He is forerunner of Jesus. The father saves the son.
- 5) Have to be willing to risk all in order for life to have meaning. We do not choose our fate: God does.
- 6) Absurdity of life (1 chapter before this one, Abraham's immortality is "assured")
- 7) Sarah's role – why does she let them go? Both she and Abraham are automata.
- 8) Abraham *did* lose faith after this (God went too far). He never "hears" God again (this "Lech Lecha" annuls the first/Sarah dies/Abe doesn't trust God (Isaac) to find the right wife – sends Eliezer instead (whose name means "helper of my God")
- 9) Arguing for oneself is self-serving. But is submissive faith what God wants? Abe *failed* the test.
- 10) Response to the Flood – from here on, God will save (but what of the Shoah?)
- 11) God is never too late (angel comes just in nick of time). In the case of the Shoah it is HUMANITY that arrived too late.
- 12) Norman Cohen: Isaac is *our* child – we do not see that we sacrifice children on alters of our careers, interests or principles. Isaac even carries the wood for his own sacrifice!!!

- 13) Isaac is really the victim nor martyr but protagonist, challenging his father as his father challenges God. (Oedipal interpretation) – result of infant primacy psychic conflict with father.
- 14) Received promises do not entail being protected in moments when those promises seem to be called into question.
- 15) What of the Ne'arim (the youths)? Why did they not protect Isaac??? (Jews in US during the Shoah)
- 16) The story explains the origins of Jerusalem and Mount Moriah as a holy spot. What makes it holy?
- 17) We shouldn't worship our children – this is a lesson to Abraham that despite the fact that a son was what we cherished and wanted more than anything else, even that should not become an absolute.
- 18) Koran: God puts us in this world in order to test us.
- 19) God needs to learn something here – just how much is the human capacity to fear God / or to obey blindly.
- 20) People who claim to hear God's voice directly are susceptible to succumbing to madness – it is dangerous.
- 21) Repetition of the verb “sees.” Place is called “God will see.” Faith is not blindness, faith is *sight*. God grants vision. (and Isaac, the son, ends up blind, and handicapped for life)
- 22) “This is the terror in God's mysteriousness and inscrutability.” Phyllis Trible  
Job/Jonah: life isn't fair.
- 23) The ram, the vehicle for redemption (shofar) is there from the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation. The DNA of redemption is programmed in from the start.

# The Akeda in the Arts



*"Must I sacrifice family for career?"*

***New Yorker, Oct 2013***

## *"Heritage" (Yerushah):*

The old man raised his head. / Seeing that it was no dream / and the angel stood there /  
—the knife slipped from his hand.

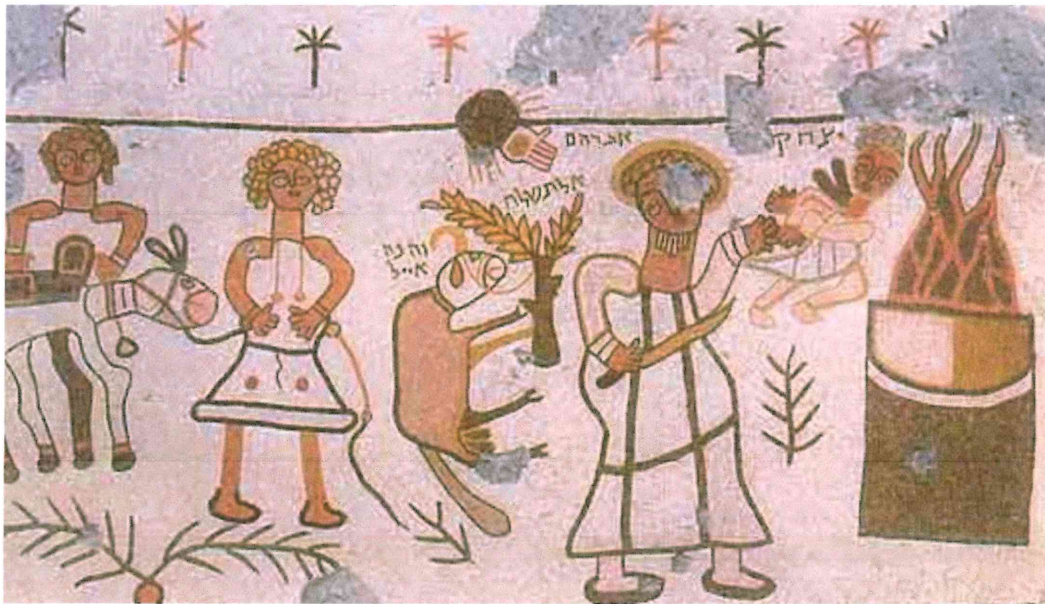
The boy, released from his bonds, / saw his father's back.

Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed. / He lived many days more, / saw (life's) goodness,  
until his eyesight dimmed.

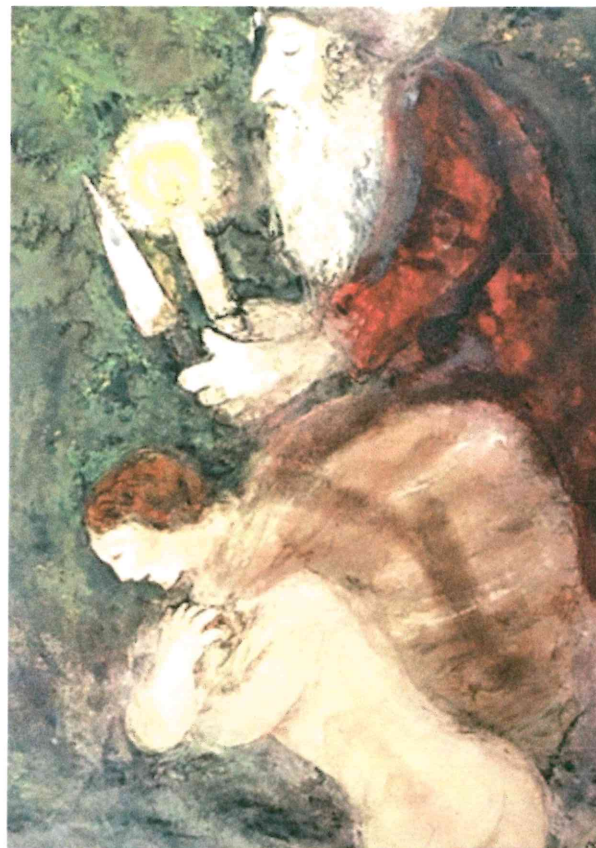
But he bequeathed that hour to his descendants. / They are born / with a knife in their hearts.

Hayim Gouri (Awarded winning Israeli poet)





*From the ancient synagogue at Bet Alpha*



*Marc Chagall, Abraham and Isaac on the Way to the Place of the Sacrifice, Musee National, Nice, 1931*



*George Segal, 1978 "Sacrifice of Isaac"*

## **The Parable Of The Old Man And The Young (1916)**

**by Wilfred Owen**

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,  
And took the fire with him, and a knife.  
And as they sojourned both of them together,  
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,  
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,  
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?  
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,  
And builded parapets and trenches there,  
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.  
When lo! an Angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him, thy son.  
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,  
A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

## Vayera Quiz 5780

This is an “open book” test!! Page numbers are for Humash Etz Hayim. The commentary in the middle of the page is the “Pshat” (historical or linguistic “plain” meaning of the text) and at the bottom the commentary is “Drash,” (expanded, midrashic commentary). This exercise will help you to understand the difference between the two.

- 1) P.112 - Why, according to the commentary, were these two chapters chosen as the Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah? (Real people)? What do you think?
- 2) In note 3 on p.113, it states no name change for Isaac, unlike his parents and son Jacob. Why is he the only patriarch not to have his name changed?
- 3) P.114: What justifies the banishment of Ishmael? (see Midrash for verse 9). Note the commentary on the word Mitzachek... Is this grounds for “dismissal?”
- 4) On p.115 what are lessons we can draw from verse 18 (see both commentaries – in middle and bottom of page) and how do they apply to our times?
- 5) P.117 - What is unusual about verse 33? See both the Pshat and Drash notes.
- 6) P. 118. When is the first time that the word “love” is used in the Bible? (p.70) What does that tell us about how Judaism defines love? Look at Pshat note.
- 7) Does the text say that Mount Moriah is Jerusalem? (p.118 pshat note).
- 8) What is the double meaning of the word “makom” here and how does it change the meaning of the story (p. 119, note 4 in Drash) (Bonus – where else does that happen?)
- 9) Describe the relationship between Abraham and Isaac at the moment of recognition (verses 6-8, see in Pshat and Drash)
- 10) Where is Isaac at the end of this story? See verse 19.