**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYERA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The *haftara* for Shabbat Parashat Vayera is taken from Sefer Melakhim II (4), and tells the story of the *isha ha-Shunamite* – the woman who conceived after many years of infertility, following a blessing given by the prophet Elisha. The story begins by telling that Elisha would periodically lodge in the woman’s home, and she and her husband eventually decided to build separate quarters in their home for the prophet. The Shunamite woman told her husband that such a gesture was appropriate because “Behold, I know that the man of God who always comes to us is holy” (4:9).

The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (10b) raises the question of how the Shunamite woman knew that Elisha was “holy.” Two answers are cited, explaining that she never saw a fly near the table when he ate, or that when she changed his bedding, she never saw evidence of a bodily emission.

Both answers appear difficult to understand, but regardless, Rav Yisrael Salanter is cited as noting the significance of the Gemara’s question. The Gemara worked off the assumption that a person’s “holiness” is not something readily visible. A “holy” person does not necessarily look distinguished or act in an outwardly distinguished manner in his ordinary affairs. As much as we could assume that the Shunamite woman admired and respected Elisha, the Gemara nevertheless found it puzzling that she definitively described him as “holy.” The Gemara therefore explained that the woman reached this conclusion on the basis of the way Elisha ate and his bedding, which demonstrated a unique level of self-discipline and purity of the mind.

In our pursuit of *kedusha*, we should focus not on how we appear to others, but on what we truly are and what we ought to be. Whether or not people perceive us as “holy” is not the yardstick by which to evaluate our level of sanctity, and thus our efforts should be directed towards changing ourselves, not changing our image.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Vayera of Avraham’s plea on behalf of the wicked city of Sedom which God had decided to annihilate. He asks, “Will [Your] wrath destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous people within the city; will [Your] anger destroy and not pardon the city for the sake of the fifty righteous people within it?” (18:23-24).

Avraham here appears to advance two different claims. First, he claims that it would be unjust for God to destroy the entire city, including the small population of righteous people living within it. Then, he argues that the entire city should be spared on account of this small population. These are two separate arguments, and the fact that Avraham combined them in his plea may likely reveal the way he perceived people and the situations he encountered. If, indeed, there were fifty righteous residents in Sedom, then not only should they be spared, but the entire city should be spared, as well, because it did, after all, produce a righteous group of people. Even if the vast majority of the city was evil and corrupt, the small virtuous population should not be discounted or overlooked. The fact that a small pocket of piety could emerge in Sedom testified to a ray of light and kernel of hope, and indicated that the society was not altogether evil. Avraham was not prepared to despair from Sedom as long as the city proved capable of producing a group of pious individuals.

In the end, of course, it was discovered that Sedom did not even have ten righteous people among its population, and thus its fate was sealed. Nevertheless, Avraham’s plea teaches us an important lesson about positivism and recognizing the potential for goodness in the people and things around us. Certainly, there are a small handful of outright evil people and groups of people without any redeeming qualities. But these are the exception. The rule is that nearly all people have at least some degree of goodness within them which testifies to their potential. If Avraham refused to discount a generally corrupt city with a few dozen righteous people, then we should certainly be able to identify the goodness within others even if they display negative qualities. We are to learn from our patriarch to try, as much as possible, to see the potential for goodness within all people, which is the first and most critical step towards allowing them to realize that potential.

(Based on [an article by Rav Amnon Bazak](https://he-il.facebook.com/amnon.d.bazak/posts/525801467556380))

Monday

Parashat Vayera begins by describing Avraham sitting by the entranceway to his tent during the heat of the day. Rashi, citing the Midrash, famously explains that Avraham was looking for wayfarers in need of hospitality, which he was very eager to provide. As Avraham had just undergone the procedure of circumcision and was thus physically frail, the Midrash tells, God brought exceptionally hot conditions so that people would not travel, in order to spare Avraham the trouble of having to tend to guests, and to allow him to recover from his circumcision. However, Avraham was eager to welcome guests despite his pain and frailty, and so he waited outside looking out for wayfarers. God sent the three angels to visit Avraham in order to fulfill his wish.

The Midrash’s comments are commonly understood as an expression of Avraham’s overpowering desire to perform acts of kindness, and how he persisted in his pursuit of opportunities for kindness even under adverse conditions. It is possible, however, that the Midrash’s depiction should be understood in terms of the specific context of Avraham’s circumcision. Avraham’s *berit mila* resulted in a degree of separation sorts between him and his contemporaries. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 47) indeed comments that Avraham complained to God about this effect, how people would be far less likely to come to him and learn from him after hearing that he performed such an act. Performing *berit mila* not only threatened to frighten potential followers, who might worry that they would be expected to follow suit, but also served as a symbol of distinctiveness, as it created a permanent mark on Avraham’s body which would be made upon the bodies of his descendants. And thus whereas until now people were drawn and attracted to Avraham’s teachings and influence, now – Avraham feared – he would find himself isolated and separated from other people.

This perspective on Avraham’s condition may perhaps shed light on the Midrash’s depiction of his anxious effort to find guests. In the aftermath of his circumcision, Avraham felt lonely and isolated. He was eager to find people who would enter his tent and his sphere of influence even in his new stage of distinctiveness. And he thus waited outside, anxiously awaiting the opportunity to invite guests.

In this vein, we might also explain the significance of God’s appearance to Avraham in the opening verse of this *parasha*: “The Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamrei…” Some commentators understood this verse as an introduction to the story of the three angels; meaning, God appeared to Avraham in the form of three angels whom Avraham thought were wayfarers. Others, however, including Rashi, explained that God appeared to Avraham before the three angels arrived. The significance of this revelation should perhaps be understood in light of Avraham’s condition of anxiety and loneliness. At this moment, when Avraham worried about the repercussions of his *berit mila*, facing the prospect of isolation and solitude, God appeared to him. It was as if God was saying to Avraham – and to us, his descendants – “When you feel alone, I am with you; when you find yourself abandoned and forlorn, you have Me to rely upon.” God eventually sent the three angels to reassure Avraham, but first, He appeared to him to convey the message that he is never alone. Even though his unique status, signified by the *mila*, would result in a degree of isolation, he must not fear, because God would always accompany him, stand by his side, and offer him the assistance and protection he needs.

(Based on [an article by Rabbi Shmuel Silber](http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/819834/Rabbi_Shmuel_Silber/Vayera:_Companionship_&_Consolation))

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells of the three angels who visited Avraham in Chevron, and then traveled eastward to Sedom, where they rescued Lot and his family before destroying the city and the surrounding towns. The angels’ departure from Avraham’s company is described with the words, “*Va-yifnu mi-sham ha-anashim va-yeilkhu Sedoma*” – “The men turned away from there and went to Sedom” (18:22).

Rav Yitzchak Menachem Abrahamson, in his [*Be’er Mayim*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=38014&st=&pgnum=23&hilite=), finds it significant that the angels are said to have “turned away” from Avraham and his home before proceeding to Sedom. In order to properly fulfill their mission, Rav Abrahamson explains, the angels needed to first divert their attention completely from Avraham and forget everything they experienced in his home. The reason emerges from Rashi’s comment (19:1) that these angels were “*malakhei rachamim*” – angels of compassion – who did not actually want to overturn Sedom. To the contrary, their plan was to stall, give Avraham a chance to pray on the city’s behalf, and save the city and its inhabitants. In the end, of course, God determined that the people of Sedom were unworthy of being saved even after Avraham’s plea, and the angels were indeed compelled to annihilate Sedom, but their plan as they made their way to Sedom was to save it, not destroy it. And this, Rav Abrahamson explains, is why they needed to “turn away” from Avraham. In order for them to plead for the city and try to save it, they needed to forget the exceptional standards set by Avraham. If they approached the city with the image of Avraham’s generous hospitality still fresh in their minds, it would be very difficult for them to feel concern and petition God to spare Sedom. It was necessary for them to “turn away” from Avraham, to divert their attention completely from Avraham’s extraordinary selflessness and generosity, and view Sedom through an objective, impartial lens.

This insight reminds us of the need to evaluate people on their own merits and in consideration of their individual circumstances, without comparing them to anybody else. Just as the angels were to try to look favorably upon the wicked city of Sedom, we need to try, to whatever extent is possible, to view others favorably despite their faults and shortcomings. And this effort requires – among other things – that we avoid harboring unreasonable expectations. The people of Sedom did not have to meet Avraham’s standards in order to be deemed worthy of divine compassion. Unfortunately, they failed to meet even the most minimum standards and were thus condemned. But the angels’ attempt to “turn away” from Avraham and find some good in Sedom serves as an instructive model for us of how we are to set reasonable expectations for the people around us so we can view them positively.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayera of Hagar’s banishment from the home of Avraham and Sara, after which she wandered in the desert until she found herself without any water. As her son, Yishmael, was dying from dehydration, Hagar placed him under a bush and distanced herself so as not to see him die. As she sat there weeping, an angel appeared and reassured her that God had heard her son’s cries, and showed her a well. She quickly filled her canister with water and revived her son.

When the angel appeared to Hagar, he began speaking to her by asking, “*Ma lakh Hagar*,” which likely means, “What is wrong, Hagar?” (21:17). This question, at first glance, seems very peculiar. Was it not obvious why Hagar was weeping? She and her son had just been banished from their home and now the son was about to die. Why would the angel ask, “*Ma lakh Hagar*”?

Rav Avraham Nesher, in his [*Pirchei Shoshana*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41907&st=&pgnum=21), suggests an answer based on *Chazal*’s understanding of the phrase in the previous verse, “*va-teilekh va-teita*” (“she went out and wandered”). The Midrash explains this to mean that Hagar returned to the idols which she had worshipped prior to becoming Sara’s maidservant. The Midrash’s remark need not be understood to mean that Hagar actually renewed her worship of pagan gods, which would be difficult to imagine considering that she now received a prophetic vision and that *Chazal* elsewhere speak of Avraham remarrying her later. Rather, the Midrash speaks of Hagar’s sense of disillusionment and despair. She had embraced Avraham’s beliefs and values while living in his home, but the dire crisis that she faced caused her to have doubts and begin to consider rejecting the faith of Avraham and returning to the pagan faith of her childhood. Her faith was challenged by crisis, and it began to crack. We might add that the Midrash makes its comment in explaining the phrase, “*va-teilekh va-teita*,” which speaks of Hagar “wandering” through the wilderness. *Chazal* perhaps draw upon the image of Hagar’s aimless wandering, noting that she “wandered” in the theological sense, and considered the option of returning to pagan beliefs.

On this basis, Rav Nesher writes, we can understand the angel’s question. The angel was not asking why Hagar was weeping, but rather why she was losing faith. We should never lose hope or despair, even in times of hardship and crisis. Rather than weep, we should have confidence that God is available, understands our plight, and is capable of helping under any circumstances. The angel’s message to Hagar is that God does not give up on us when we “wander” and stray, and we, too, must not give up on God when we face dire crisis and turmoil. Even under such circumstances, we must remain steadfast in our faith in and loyalty to God, trusting that He is always with us and is always available to help.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vayera the disturbing story of Lot’s daughters, who, after having been rescued from the destruction of Sedom together with their father, mistakenly assumed that “there is no man in the land to cohabit with us” (19:31). Figuring they and their father were the only people remaining on Earth, they gave their father wine until he became drunk, and the older daughter then slept with him. The next night, they again gave Lot wine and he slept with the younger daughter. Both daughters conceived and had sons.

In relating this episode, the Torah emphasizes that in both instances, Lot “did not know when she slept [with him] or when she arose” (“*ve-lo yada be-shikhvah u-ve’kumah*” –19:33,35). Meaning, Lot had no recollection whatsoever of his intimate encounters with his daughters, of anything that occurred from the time each daughter came to lie with him until she arose.

The Gemara in Masekhet Nazir (23a) observes that according to tradition, a dot appears in the Torah scroll above the word “*u-ve’kumah*” (“when she arose”) in the first instance of this phrase, in the context of Lot’s encounter with his older daughter. The significance of this dot, the Gemara asserts, is to counter the plain meaning of the word. While the Torah appears to inform us that Lot knew nothing of this encounter after regaining sobriety, in truth, he was aware when his older daughter arose from his bed. As such, the Gemara comments, Lot was less than innocent the second night, when he again allowed himself to become inebriated. Having been aware of what happened the previous night, Lot should have been responsible enough to avoid intoxication the second night in order not to repeat the mistake. The Gemara there applies to Lot the final verse in Sefer Hoshea, “for the ways of the Lord are straight…but the sinners stumble on them.”

It appears that the Gemara understands the word “*yikashelu*” (“stumble”) as a reference to unintentional transgressions, sins committed without willful intent, but for which one is nevertheless held accountable. Lot did not actually intend to commit an incestuous act, but he is nevertheless considered guilty due to his irresponsibility in allowing the second such act to occur. Although he could be excused for the initial act due to his state of inebriation, he cannot be excused for the next night’s encounter, which he did not take the appropriate measures to avoid after being made aware of what happened the first night. We are accountable not only for wrongful behavior, but also for failing to avoid conditions that may likely lead us to such behavior. Religious observance requires common sense and responsibility, which includes learning from our mistakes so we can ensure not to repeat them. And we are thus held accountable even in situations of “*yikashelu*,” when we err by mistake as a result of conditions which we irresponsibly failed to avoid.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Vayera tells the story of Hagar and Yishmael, who were driven from Avraham’s home and wandered in the desert until they ran out of water. Hagar placed her ailing son under a bush and moved away to avoid watching him die, until “God opened her eyes and showed her a well of water” (21:19), from which she promptly drew water to save Yishmael from death.

Before God made Hagar see the well, an angel appeared to her, assured her that her son would live, and instructed, “Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand…” We might ask why it was necessary for Hagar to pick up Yishmael before she was shown the well. Once God determined that Yishmael should live, why did He not immediately reveal the water to Hagar? Why did He first dispatch an angel to tell Hagar to lift Yishmael?

Rav Avraham Nesher, in his [*Pirchei Shoshana*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41907&st=&pgnum=21), cites a novel interpretation of this account which answers this question. (Rav Nesher cites this explanation from the Ramban, but it does not actually appear in the Ramban’s commentary. Apparently, he intended to make reference to a different source.) According to this explanation, when Hagar placed Yishmael on the ground as he became dehydrated, she unknowingly placed him over the cover of a well, thus concealing it from her view. The angel appeared to Hagar and instructed her to lift her son, whereupon the well was revealed. Thus, it was as a result of lifting Yishmael off the ground that “her eyes were opened” and saw the well.

Symbolically, this is a very powerful reading of the events. When Hagar put Yishmael down on the ground, this was an act of despair. As the Torah relates, she decided to move far away from her son so she would not see him die. Rather than continuing to do all she could to help, such as search for water sources or at least comfort her ailing son, she simply gave up and left. As it happened, this act of despair had the effect of blinding her to the solution. When she put Yishmael down on the ground, giving up all hope of helping him, she obstructed the solution from her view. In order to save Yishmael, she first needed to pick him off the ground and hold him – to act as most parents would in that situation, remaining with the child and trying to help until the final breath of life. Once she renewed her hope, the solution came into view.

Hope requires courage, but it is often indispensable to solving the problem. Despair blinds us, making us unable to see the possibilities that exist. Rather than give up during times of hardship, we need to continue searching for the “well” without despairing. Otherwise, we might unknowingly block access to precisely the kind of help we need.