

SELECTED SHORTS FOR VAYERA

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It is always tempting to say about each parasha, “This is one of the most important parshiyot in the Torah,” because they are all important. But there are things that stand out from this parasha that have imprinted themselves on all of Judaism, first and foremost, the Akedah, arguably the most enigmatic and challenging story in the Bible. The birth of Isaac, the banishment of Hagar, the report of the proliferation of Abraham’s brother’s family to set up the marriage of Isaac, which will occur next week, and offer a sharp contrast to Abraham’s own familial situation which is far less prolific. We have dealt with those stories at length at Rosh Hashanah. Here the stories at the beginning of the parasha grab our attention. The visit from the angels, Abraham’s epic hospitality, the sustained argument between Abraham and God, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. And so much more. Shabbat Shalom!

בראשית י"ח:ב'

(ב) וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיִּרָא וַיָּרֶץ לְקִרְאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֲרָצָה:

Genesis 18:2

(2) *Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground...*

“Hospitality,” writes the philosopher Richard Kearney, “is a central and inaugural event in the world’s great wisdom traditions. It marks the moment when the self opens to the stranger and welcomes what is foreign and unfamiliar into its home.” Abraham becomes the paradigm of *hakhnassat orhim* from this moment (welcoming guests). If, as we read in Genesis 1, that we are all created in the image of God, then receiving guests is not only an expression of decency and a validation of human solidarity (especially in the foreboding climate of the Near East) but it is also a way of honoring God. To honor a guest is to honor a reflection of God. It is not an accident that the occasion of dishonoring guests later on in the parasha vindicates the judgement against Sodom, and that a terrible episode of in-hospitality in the book of Judges (chapter 19) occasions one of the great civil skirmishes in biblical Israel. *he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them..*

Let’s remember that Abraham is 99 years old; he is recovering from his circumcision. He runs because of enthusiasm, zeal, fortitude,

total self-negation and refusal to give in to physical infirmity. He is “other-directed” and “open”.

בראשית י"ח:ט"ז

(טז) וַיִּקְמוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיִּשְׁקְפוּ עַל-פְּנֵי סְדֹם וְאֵבֶרָהֶם הַלְוָה עִמָּם לְשִׁלְחָם:

Genesis 18:16

(16) *The men set out from there and looked down toward Sodom, Abraham walking with them to see them off.*

The tradition sees the welcoming of guests as a multi-staged experience. There is the greeting, the bringing in, the accommodating including bathing, the provision of food and drink, and then the conclusion. Escorting the guest from the home was seen as important as bringing the guest into the home in the first place. “Escorting them,” writes Maimonides, “is even greater than receiving them. The sages have declared: Anyone who does not escort his guests is almost guilty of bloodshed” (Sotah 46b).” Entry and exit are the boundary experiences. It is at the boundary that we take shelter from the unknown and embark to the unknown. The custom of escorting is probably more deeply rooted in human nature than we know; it discloses the attempt to leap into solidarity with the wayfaring individual as he/she embarks from known reality to an uncharted sector of time and space. Watch a parent say good bye to a child at an airport and you will understand what this anxiety is all about.

(יז) וְהָאֵמֶר הַמְכַסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה: (יח) וְאַבְרָהָם הָיָה יְהִיגָה לְגֹי גְדוֹל וְעַצְיוֹם וְנִבְרָכוּ בּוֹ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ: (יט) כִּי יִדְעֹתָיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְנֶה אֶת־בְּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשִׁמְרוּ הַדָּר הַלֵּזְעוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבְיֵא ה' עַל־אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר עִלָּיו:

Genesis 18:17-19

(17) Now the LORD had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, (18) since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him? (19) For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is just and right, in order that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him."

This is the prelude to the great argument between Abraham and God. One can hardly ignore the irony here given God's penchant for "hiding" certain details from Abraham: God called Abraham to leave his birthplace, but didn't exactly tell him where he was going. God guided him to Canaan but didn't exactly tell him what to do because of the famine there or why Abraham would be subjected to so many difficulties. Most importantly, God consistently promises Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation, but always seems to hide how exactly that will be accomplished. But here, it is as if we are being invited into the conversation as well. God wants to share with Abraham the thinking regarding the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, in order to elicit his response. The moral argumentation is what God seems to want here from Abraham; here and elsewhere, it just looks like God enjoys a good argument! Arguing with God is a model of religious response. Abraham and Moses argue; we can detect arguments elsewhere among the prophets and the psalms. The great joy of being a Jew is to know that in addition to following God's commandments we are also engaged in a constant conversation to determine what is the just and right way to live. Indeed, the structure of Jewish civilization, the centrality of family, the primacy of community, the orientation around sacred time and the creation of study as the medium for cultivating relationships places the quest for what is just and right, the question: how are we to live? - as its core objective.

(ל) וַיַּעַל לוֹט מִצּוֹעַר וַיָּשֶׁב בְּהָר וּשְׁתֵּי בָתָיו עִמּוֹ כִּי יָרָא לְשָׂכַת בְּצוֹעַר וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּמַעְרָה הִוא וּשְׁתֵּי בָתָיו:

Genesis 19:30

(30) Lot went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zoar; and he and his two daughters lived in a cave.

Let's give a final word about Lot. Lot is the son of Abraham's deceased brother, Haran. With the other brother still in Aram and creating his 'nation,' and Abraham now on his way to creating his 'nation,' Lot is, we suppose, on the way to creating his 'nation' taking up the mantle of his deceased father. Destitute at the beginning of the story, he chases after Abraham as he departs for Canaan. Eager for self-advancement, he parts with Abraham and settles in more lush territory for the sake of his flocks. Lured by the concentration of wealth and power to be found in the city - not to mention the dining and entertainment! - we next see him as a somewhat respected citizen of Sodom, a man with a wife and two daughters. The Torah is hinting a critique of Lot and the fact that he and his family are rescued from the destruction doesn't really say much for him in his favor. In the moment of destruction, they are warned not to turn back, but Lot's wife turns around and becomes a pillar of salt. A stark metaphor for what happens to you when you focus on the past at the expense of going forward: you become stone, or worse, bitter. And Lot, the man who has his eyes on territory and eventually abandons the nomadic freedom of the pastoral life for ambition and the accumulation wealth, property and power; the man who abandons the God-centric lifestyle for a metropolitan lifestyle; the man who opted for the depraved citizenry of Sodom over the "just and right way to live," ends up hiding from both the pastoral landscape and the city, and is holed up in a cave with his two daughters. They imagine themselves as survivors of a completely destroyed world, and perhaps guided by the folkloric model Noah's family after the flood, they want to propagate the human species. The birth of Ammon and Moab from the union of Lot and his daughters is Torah's negative coda to his narrative. Their cruelty to Israel in the desert is their legacy.