

Vayera: Abraham Relocates to the Negev
Rabbi Eliot Malomet November 8, 2025 17 Marcheshvan 5786

After the catastrophic destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham relocates to the Negev. (Gen. 20:1)

וַיֵּסַע מִשְׁם אַבְרָהָם אֶרֶצָה הַנֶּגֶב וַיָּשֶׁב בֵּין קֶדֶשׁ וּבֵין שׁוּר וַיָּגֵר בְּגֵרָר.
Abraham traveled from there* to the Negev; he settled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar.

*Up until this point in the story, Abraham was living in Elonei Mamrei, which we learned is in the vicinity of Hebron. (Gen. 13:18)

Why did he move? Abravanel¹ cites several reasons:

1. Proximity to the Disaster Zone.

...he left because the place where he was living was close to Sodom and from Elonei Mamrei (which was in the higher terrain) he could see the entire plains below.

Comment: As the Torah depicts it, the destruction of Sodom



was a cataclysmic event. Fascinatingly, recent archeological discoveries in the vicinity lead to the speculation that there had been a devastating meteor impact in the area.² Nobody survived it, and it disrupted the ecosystem there to this day. While people remained in the highlands and eventually returned to live there, it was never the same. We might want to compare this to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The

devastation was immediate and vast.

First, an extraordinary, roaring explosion. Then they saw an extremely bright flash...the ground surface was colored brilliant crimson...the flash of light spread all over the sky...Those who were close to the hypocenter felt the heat instantly. Then a violent wind...Within a moment, almost everything on the ground was crushed. The earth was naked! All the wooden buildings within a mile of the blast were destroyed. Concrete buildings were crushed...From human beings to animals to insects, all living creatures

outside buildings were instantly killed; those inside were buried. In one roar, this enormous change... took place within a second.³

Regarding Abraham, Abravanel says:

(Abraham) looked down upon the face of Sodom and Amora and upon the whole face of the region of the plain and saw: here, the dense-smoke of the land went up like the dense-smoke of a furnace! (Gen. 19:27-28). Because of that Abraham did not want to remain dwelling in his place because he saw the entire plain was like a pillar of salt and he was very worried about it.

He moved because he didn't want to live near Ground Zero.

2. Despair Over Lot and the Impact of the Devastation.

Abraham was also deeply saddened about Lot who had lost all his property and livelihood. In addition, Sodom and Gomorrah were situated on what had been lush and verdant lands. They used to provide food to the entire area surrounding it and when it was destroyed, Abraham and all the other inhabitants in the area lacked food, so therefore they migrated from there.

Comment: Prior to the devastation, the valley near the Dead Sea was a major agricultural area providing food for the entire region. Lot starts out, like Abraham, as a pastoral nomad, raising livestock. While Abraham stayed a shepherd, Lot was drawn to the city and evidently, as he amassed greater wealth he moved to Sodom where he became a *macher*. The local townsfolk regarded him as an interloper situating himself at the gate of the city,⁴ engaging in commerce and intervening in local political and judicial matters.⁵ All of this was destroyed. Lot became destitute fathering sons with his daughters. With the economy in ruins, and most importantly no food, Abraham would have to find another place to live.

3. Change of Name, Change of Place.

Maybe Abraham had a third reason for leaving and that was because of the name that God instructed him - that he would no longer be called Abram but Abraham. Everybody in the area (of Elonei Mamrei) knew him as Abram and he would not have been able to change the way everybody called him, because they were so used to calling him Abram. Thus, when he recovered from his circumcision, he was ready to leave there - and a righteous person will stick to his way (Job 17:9) - ready to travel a great distance to a place where nobody knew him, so that there the (new) name (Abraham) would become famous.

¹ Don Isaac Abravanel, Medieval Commentator, 1437-1508.

² Elizabeth Fernandez, **"A Massive Meteor May Have Destroyed the Biblical City of Sodom,"** *Forbes*, September 23, 2021. This is a fascinating article. Take a look.

³<https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/hiroshima-nagasaki/give-me-water/chapter5.html>

⁴ Gen. 19:1. Gates of cities were places where the business of the city was carried out. Courts and administrative offices were situated there.

⁵ When the men of the town come to his house to riot, they express their hostility to Lot, an outsider, and say: **This one came to sojourn and would judge, play-the-judge?! Now we will do more wickedly to you than [to] them!** (Gen. 19:9)

Comment: If he remained in the area he would have had to deal with people who knew him as Abram and not by his new name, Abraham. It was important for him to be known by his new name, because God gave that name to him, and that was how he was to be called from now on. He needed to relocate to a new place for that to work. The new name meant a new story and a new purpose in his life.⁶ All of that was brewing as part of the decision.

4. Rabbis (a): After the Destruction Who Would Come?

And the Rabbis said that Abraham ran away from there because when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah all the caravans ceased coming through the area and he could no longer engage in hospitality.

Comment: The defining feature of Abraham's character in rabbinic lore is his hospitality. Abraham goes out of his way to receive guests, as is demonstrated by the story of the visitors at the beginning of the parasha. The rabbis understood that he situated his tent at the junction of major trade routes precisely so that he would be able to engage in this mitzvah.⁷ Without guests, there was no reason to stay.

5. Rabbis (b): To Get Away from Lot.

And there those rabbis who said that he did this to distance himself from Lot whose reputation was sullied because he slept with his daughters.

Comment: Having done so much for Lot, and Lot becoming so depraved, Abraham would want nothing to do with him. **Other Speculations:** **Malbim:** Abraham went to the Negev to *promote faith* in God. **Radak:** Abraham went to the Negev to *claim sovereignty* over that territory. **SR Hirsch**⁸: Abraham will be raising a son there and he wanted to expose his son to the more congenial culture in the Negev where people such as Avimelekh had some affinity to a moral disposition, as opposed to the despicable Canaanites in the north. *In the land of the Philistines, moral degeneration does not appear to have reached the Canaanite heights*, he writes. What we see from all of these speculations is that *the decision to relocate was made up of many reasons. For all we know, the decision to relocate could have been brewing inside him for some time and once the area was destroyed, it was time.*

REM: What is interesting is that this move coincides with a pivotal moment in his life. He has been told that in a year from now, he will have a son, so a new chapter is beginning for him, hence a new place to live makes sense. Here, a

close reading of the text is in order to reveal the story flowing under the surface. Recall that when Abraham arrives in Canaan, he goes to the vicinity of Shechem (the north), and then to the vicinity of Beit El and Ai (the center), building altars in both places and then, he goes to the Negev (the south):

ויסע אברהם הלוך ונסוע הנגבה. (יב:ט)
Then Abram journeyed on, continually journeying to the Negev. (12:9)

But he never gets to settle fully there because of the

famine, which forces him to flee to Egypt!

When he comes back from Egypt we are told:

ויילך למסעיו מנגב ועד בית אל עד המקום אשר היה שם אהלה בתחלה... (יג:ג)
He went on his journeyings from the Negev as far as Bet-El, as far as the place where his tent had been at the first, (13:3).

When he came back from Egypt he wanted to settle in the Negev, to pick up where he left off before he had to go down to Egypt! That was his original plan! But the fact that the text specifically tells us here that he continued journeying from the Negev, means that settling in the Negev at this point in his life was not going to happen. Instead, he was going to go back to the Beit El area (the center of the country, see map). Why? Because of Sarah. But now that the Sodom was destroyed, and he didn't want to live close to Ground Zero, he wanted to move. Most importantly though, *he was going to start a new phase of his life. Therefore, Abraham decided that this was the time to move and live out his original plan. It was now or never.* At first Sarah goes with him. She has no choice because God has told her that she is going to have a child with Abraham. But we sense that she is not enthusiastic about it. There is great tension in the family altogether, and once Isaac is born the whole family unravels. Sarah banishes Hagar and Ishmael and is left alone with Abraham and Isaac. But that will not last. At some point she goes back to the center of the country to live in Hebron because that is where she dies, and when she dies, Abraham is not with her. He is in Beersheva in the south. *When the Torah tells us here that Abraham relocated to the Negev, it is because he wanted to live there from the very beginning of his time in the land.* Unfortunately, Sarah did not. And that's the real story. But that's for next week. שבת שלום!

We continue to pray for the repatriation of the bodies of the 6 hostages remaining in Gaza. May their grieving families attain a measure of peace. AMEN

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Mitchel and Wendy Rosen to commemorate the 1st Yahrzeit of Mitchel's father, Gerald Rosen, z'l.

⁶ וְלֹא יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת שְׁמֶךָ אֲבְרָם וְהָיָה שְׁמֶךָ אֲבְרָהָם כִּי אֲבַ הָמוֹן. (בר' יז:ה) *No longer shall your name be called Abram, rather shall your name be Abraham, for I will make you Av Hamon Goyyim/Father of a Throng of Nations!* (Gen. 17:5)

⁷ *Rabbi Abahu said: The main tent of our patriarch Abraham was open on both sides, like a large plaza. He said: 'If I see them, that they turn off from their way to*

approach this way, I will know that they are coming to me.' When he saw that they had turned off the road, he immediately "ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and prostrated himself to the ground." (Gen. Rabbah 48:9).

⁸ Meyer Leibush Malbim (Ukraine, 1809-1879), Rabbi David Kimchi-Radak (Provence, 1160-1235), Samson Raphael Hirsch (Frankfurt, 1808-1888).