

Parashat Va-yera
Genesis 18:1–22:24
November 7, 2009
20 Heshvan 5770

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה מח
והוא יושב פתח האהל כחום היום, רבי ברכיה משום ר' לוי אמר ישב כתיב, בקש לעמוד, א"ל הקב"ה שב אתה סימן לבניך, מה אתה יושב ושכינה עומדת, כך בניך יושבין ושכינה עומדת על גבן, כשישראל נכנסים לבתי כנסיות ולבתי מדרשות וקורין קריאת שמע והן יושבים לכבודי ואני על גבן שנאמר (תהלים פב) אלהים נצב בעדת אל.

As he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. Rabbi Berekhiah said in Rabbi Levi's name: It is written: he sat. He wished to rise, but God said to him: Sit—you are a symbol to your children. As you sit while the Shekhinah (God's Presence) is standing, so will your children sit and the Shekhinah stand. When Israel enters synagogues and study halls and recites the Shema', they sit in My honor, and I will stand over them.

What do we find ourselves doing when God's Presence suddenly appears to us?

Sometimes we are davening. This is what Rabbi Levi must have been thinking when he envisioned our reciting the Shema' as a means to inviting God's Presence into the room. And because that can work so well, prayer is the backbone of the Jewish spiritual experience.

But when that doesn't work? When we "wish to rise" but some voice inside bids us to "sit"?

What if we imagine that voice is God's voice? What if sometimes God wants us to rise to the occasion of sensing God's Presence in the world, but at other times God wants us to sit, to lay spiritually low?

The midrash imagines that even in those stretches of life—and we can imagine Abraham going through such a spiritual low in the aftermath of his circumcision and the household turmoil—we are doing some Jewish good. Even in the stretches of life when we do not sense God's Presence in our own lives, we can remain committed to laying the groundwork for the next generation.

Spirituality is one "way in" to Jewish living for many Jews; handing down the tradition is another. I imagine that among us—the thousands who read these emails or receive them in letter form each week—there are some of each camp. This midrash invites us to join Abraham in sitting in the tent door, ready to rise when we see God's Presence approaching on the horizon or, alternatively, serving as role models for those who will come next.

There are many ways to approach Judaism and a Jewish life—patience, quiet, contemplation, and an open heart among them—especially when we experience a sense of urgency and find ourselves waiting anxiously for God's Presence in a doorway or hallway of life. At these moments, as our children watch, we must be willing to be an example: to sit and do nothing so that we can be fully present when God's Presence acknowledges us and draws near.

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Rabbi Marc Wolf
Vice Chancellor and
Chief Development Officer
(212) 678-8933
mawolf@jtsa.edu



Parashah Commentary

This commentary was written by Dr. Carol Ingall, Dr. Bernard Heller
Professor of Jewish Education, JTS

Avraham the Avatar

Although many of us recognize the word *avatar* as a representation of the self in computer games (a "mini-me," or so my granddaughter tells me), in fact the term originates in Hindu mythology. An avatar is a personification or embodiment of a divine principle. While we traditionally refer to Avraham as *avinu*, our father, perhaps we would get a more nuanced view of this Biblical hero by imagining Avraham as an avatar. What does *avinu* mean? Surely not blood lineage; converts also refer to themselves as *b'nai avraham*. In his letter to Obadiah—the proselyte who worried about whether it was hypocritical to pray to "our God and the God of our fathers"—Rambam unequivocally substitutes moral attributes for DNA: "Thus Abraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and all proselytes who adopt Judaism" (Ed. Twersky, Isadore. *A Maimonides Reader*, 476).

Avraham Avinu is an avatar in that he embodies ethical principles and moral behavior. These *middot*, *ma'a lot*, or virtues (from the Latin, *vir*, man; *mensh* in Yiddish) allow mere mortals to emulate God. According to philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, a virtue is distinguished by three elements:

- It has a practice, i.e., rules that tell us how to live our lives according to that virtue.
- It has been accepted by a community and then shapes that community's beliefs and behaviors.
- It is connected to a hero narrative, thereby appealing to our moral imagination.

The Abraham we meet in *Va-yera* is a classic moral exemplar, an avatar. Even God is impressed with his potential to serve as a model for the Jewish people. In Genesis 18:1, God approaches Abraham while Abraham sits. Rashi explains what appears to be an inexcusable gaffe. "He [Abraham] wished to rise, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, 'Sit and I will stand. You shall form an example to your descendants (*siman l'vaneikha*) that I, in time to come, will stand in the assembly of the judges while they sit, as it is said (Psalms 82:1), 'God stands in the assembly of the judges' " (Gen. R. 48).

In this parashah, we find Abraham personifying the virtues of hospitality, compassion, humility, peacemaking, and fear of God. All of these qualities can be found in our *musar* literature and in Max Kadushin's rabbinic value concepts.

It is tempting to let the horrific story of the Akedah dominate the discussion of Abraham as moral exemplar. This narrative centers on the *middah* of fearing God, Abraham

binding himself to God's inscrutable demands and passing his ultimate test of faithfulness. During the Middle Ages when rampaging Crusaders massacred Jews (why wait to get to the Holy Land to kill the infidels when there were infidels en route?), these Jews imagined themselves latter-day Abrahams. In 1140, Solomon bar Samson recorded the horror that befell the community of Mainz: "They tied their sons as Abraham tied his son, and they received upon themselves with a willing soul the yoke of the fear of God, the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He . . . The ears of him who hears these things will tingle, for who has ever heard anything like this? Inquire now and look about. Was there ever such an abundant sacrifice as this since the days of primeval Adam? Were there ever eleven hundred sacrifices on one day, each of them like the sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Abraham?" (Ed. Marcus, Jacob R.; *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book*, 315–1791; 117–118).

This understanding of *Avraham Avinu* is highly problematic. Although those who died for *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying God's name) claimed to be following Abraham's example, their reading of the Akedah makes sense only if Abraham killed his son. Also, the readiness to sacrifice one's child does not fit MacIntyre's criteria for a virtue. Unlike other *ma'alot* or *middot* that constitute normative behavior bounded by communally determined rules ("this is the way we do things around here"), child sacrifice is not held up as a Jewish ideal. A far better example of *Avraham* as avatar, one that reflects the simple meaning of the text, is in the depiction of *hakhnassat orhim* (welcoming guests), a narrative that is twice as long as the Akedah.

The parashah includes three vignettes of greeting wayfarers: how Abraham, Lot, and the people of Sodom understand the moral obligation of hospitality and the practice of this virtue. According to tradition, Abraham's tent was open on all sides to view passersby. Upon seeing the three messengers, Abraham runs to them, bows, arranges for water and shade. He promises a morsel but prepares a lavish spread. "Such is the way of the righteous; they promise little but perform much" (BM 87a). He orders Sarah to use the choicest of ingredients: the flour that would later be used in the Mishkan, curds and milk much prized in the Ancient Near East, and tender veal (Rashi, no doubt prefiguring the French obsession with gastronomy, observes that Abraham needed to kill three calves to serve each guest the delicacy of tongue with mustard sauce [Rashi on Gen. 18:7]).

Unlike Abraham, Lot does not run to greet the angel-messengers who visit him in Chapter 19. He sits until they approach him and then stands. While he does urge them to stay in his home, rather than in the public square, he prepares a much simpler meal than the generous Abraham, i.e., unleavened bread rather than cakes of fine flour. To his credit, Lot does try to protect the visitors from the rage of the people of Sodom.

Although living in Sodom, Lot is still somewhat connected to the moral values of the Abrahamic family. His mores, his understanding of normative behavior, are at odds with those of his neighbors. The rabbis capture the moral depravity of Sodom through its contempt for *hakhnassat orhim*. They claim that the Sodomites refused to expend any of their lavish wealth on strangers and that they brutally killed a young girl for helping a poor man (Tosefta Sotah 3:11f). Genesis Rabbah tells us that Sodom provided only one bed for strangers; if an unlucky wayfarer was too short to fit, he was stretched until he could; if another was too tall, his legs were chopped off.

Reflecting on the oddity of Abraham not standing when the Lord spoke to him (Gen. 18:1), but running to greet the messengers, the Rabbis opined, "Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence" (Shab. 127a). We are called upon to test our moral centeredness in the quotidian. Judaism provides a map for living in ordinary times. How does *Avraham* the avatar show his love for God? As we should: by practicing on His creatures.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Genesis 22:2 And God said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and raise him up as an offering on one of the mountains that I will point out to you."

Joseph B'khor Shor, "raise him up as an offering," The Holy One Blessed be He masked his words, and Abraham thought that God commanded him to slaughter Isaac and burn him there. For that reason, Abraham brought along with him fire, wood, and a knife. But God did not, in actuality, command this; rather God said, "raise him up" on the altar and the intent was once he was raised up, the commandment would be fulfilled.

One of the most terrifying and troubling texts of all of Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures, appears in this week's Torah reading, Parashat Va-yera. In *Akeidat Yitzhak* (the binding of Isaac), we confront an Abraham blinded by the divine command to bring his beloved son Isaac for a sacrifice. Rather than question God's demand (as he does in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah—seemingly for total strangers), Abraham listens to the voice of God and prepares Isaac for the trial of his life. So many questions arise in the heart and mind of the thoughtful reader. How could Abraham, who had prayed long and hard for progeny, be so willing to sacrifice his son Isaac? Since God promised Abraham a future teeming with descendants, why doesn't Abraham challenge the Source of blessing by arguing that God is going back on his promise? And, of course, what is the nature of a God that would demand child sacrifice? While these queries represent some of the philosophical challenges of this narrative, the story itself also offers some portals of understanding into God's and Abraham's actions.

In explaining the second verse of Va-yera, Joseph B'khor Shor raises the possibility that Abraham incorrectly hears the command of God. God declares, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and *raise him up as an offering* on one of the mountains that I will point out to you." God does not explicitly tell Abraham to slaughter his son. Rather, the words employed are *veha'alayhu sham l'olah* (bring him up there for elevating). These words lead both Rashi and B'khor Shor to comment that God's intent was simply to ask that Abraham "bring Isaac up," and that once he would be brought up, God would then request that he be taken down.

For Joseph B'khor Shor, *Akeidat Yitzhak* represents a breakdown in communication. Abraham misinterprets the words of God and such misperception leads to almost tragic consequences. God tells Abraham simply "to bring his son up"; Abraham, however, hears "sacrifice Isaac as an offering to God." Almost daily, we encounter minor breakdowns in communication. An email text is misinterpreted. Human nature compels us to jump to judgments and conclusions that often times are absent from the source's original intent. If nothing else, this pivotal story of Israelite experience commands us to sharpen our communication skills—in both listening to the voice of God and our fellow humans. Questioning, verifying, and pushing back are positive attributes that can only bring us to live holier lives. A life led in simple and blinding obeisance contains within it seeds of destruction—and there is no guarantee that an angel of God will stay our hand the next time we confront such a situation.

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