university educated and share our lives with our gentile neighbors? To answer this I turned to the centuries and texts which birthed Judaism as we know it.

When there was a Temple, we brought animal sacrifices to God at the altar. The biblical book of Leviticus is all about that system of offerings. But after the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, Judaism became portable. No longer tied to Jerusalem, we became the religion of the book. We chose to become Hellenists.

When our Rabbis count the books of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) they number them at 24—not coincidentally, the same number of books in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. When the Rabbis reformatted the Passover celebration away from the sacrifice of a lamb into a home-based service, the order (*seder*) they chose was the same as that of a Greco-Roman literary cocktail party— a symposium!

That lovely compilation of rabbinic wisdom Pirkei Avot is chock-full of Stoic philosophy. The ways the Rabbis changed biblical laws into living halakhah were modeled on Roman law. Thousands of Greek loanwords are carefully transliterated into Hebrew letters in the Talmud and Midrash. Think: *Sanhedrin*, *karpas* (the vegetables of the Passover Seder), *afikomen* (our Passover "dessert" comes from Greek symposium custom); the *bimah* where we go up for Torah honors. And did I mention *synagogue*? All Greek!

Art, architecture, even the stories the Rabbis told about Hillel—all came from the broader Greco-Roman world. Were the Rabbis who gave us Judaism as we know it comfortable living in the broader world? As much as we are. And like us, they adapted it and adapted to it.

TORAH FROM JTS

JTS

Vayera 5778 **וירא תשע"ח**

Women of Faith

Dr. Amy Kalmanofsky, Associate Vice Chancellor and Associate Professor of Bible, JTS

Abraham passed God's litmus test of faith. God commands Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac to the land of Moriah and kill him. Faithful Abraham does not hesitate. Genesis 22 may be the most loved and hated story in the Torah by every reader, no matter what their faith. Certainly, generations of Jews have struggled to make sense of this story, and of the father and God it portrays. Rashi, the 11th-century French commentator, cannot bear to think that God intended Abraham to kill Isaac. He writes: "God did not say 'kill him [שחטהו],' because the Holy One Blessed Be He did not want him to kill him. Rather, God commanded Abraham to "bring him up [להעלותו]" with the intention to give Isaac the status of being an offering" (on Gen. 22:2).

Although I appreciate Rashi's motivation and the elegance of his reading, it seems clear to me that God commands Abraham to kill his son. And equally clear to me that God wants Abraham willing to do so. Abraham proves himself to be God-fearing [**ירא א-להים**, v.12], or what 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard calls a "knight of faith." Contemporary Jews may not be comfortable with this level of faith, but we rely upon it every year when we pray on Rosh Hashanah: "Hold before You the image of our ancestor Abraham binding his son Isaac on the altar, when he overcame his compassion in order to obey Your command wholeheartedly."

Abraham passes God's test, but to do so, he must forego fundamental aspects of his life and character as a patriarch. In significant ways, he must fail as a *man* in order to become a *man of faith*. Remarkably, the women in Parashat Vayera take up the slack, and behave more like patriarchs than Abraham does. Lot's daughters, Sarah, Hagar, and the Shunammite—the subject of the haftarah—assume patriarchal duties. The deeds of these matriarchs—and noticeably, they

all behave as mothers in their stories—offers insight into the complex roles women play in Torah.

Although men in the Torah may fairly be labeled patriarchal, there are only three official patriarchs in Jewish tradition: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What identifies these patriarchs is that each receives the twofold divine blessing of progeny and property.[1] Their essential task as patriarchs is to establish and secure their inheritance by having children and by acquiring and protecting their property. In other words, they should behave as fathers who protect the life and property of their sons.

When Abraham raises the knife to kill Isaac, he does not behave like a father. In that moment, for that moment, he relinquishes his role as patriarch and becomes a knight of faith. As any *Game of Thrones* watcher knows, knights must sacrifice the needs and demands of the flesh in order to serve their higher cause. More than anything else, children epitomize those needs and demands.

Abraham's story could be over, and with it Israel's story. Faith alone cannot create a nation and define its people. There need to be individuals who advocate for the lives and property of their children. In this week's parashah and haftarah, these individuals are women. They are mothers who do what is necessary, if at times repugnant from our contemporary perspective, in order to secure the lives of their children.

Having survived the destruction of Sodom, convinced that there are no men left in the world, Lot's daughters sleep with their father to sustain life and preserve his seed [ונחיה מאבינו זרע, 19:32]. Sarah commands Abraham to exile Hagar and Ishmael in or order to protect Isaac's inheritance [כי לא יירש בן האמה הזאת, 21:10]. Unlike Abraham, who sends one son into the wilderness and lifts a knife to kill the other, Hagar cannot watch her son Ishmael die [אל אראה במות הילד, 21:16], and works to sustain his life. Unwilling to accept the death of her son, the Shunammite also behaves like an anti-Abraham. Like Abraham, she saddles a donkey and takes a servant [2 Kings 4:24; Gen 22:3] to pursue the prophet Elisha. Yet unlike Abraham, the Shunammite works for her son's life, not his death, and demands that the prophet revive him. As a woman of faith, she believes her son can be revived.

Given the life-sustaining and -affirming role these women play, it is easy to say that they are the heroes of their stories, and, arguably, of Israel's. Yet it

remains a question whether the Torah views them as heroes. It is possible that the Torah does not. Certainly, Lot's daughters and Hagar, as mothers to Israel's enemies, are not part of Israel's story. Although God sides with Sarah, the Torah seems to have more sympathy (perhaps surprisingly, given her progeny) for Hagar, who receives divine revelation and assurance. The Shunammite may work on her son's behalf, but it is the prophet Elisha who miraculously revives him. At the story's conclusion, the Shunammite lies in humble gratitude at the prophet's feet.

The Torah may not view these women as the heroes, but it certainly sees them as essential characters, and perhaps even uses them to offer a critique of Abraham, the man of faith. Sarah and Hagar do not receive God's direct blessing, but they work for its fulfillment. Without them, Abraham would have no inheritance and Israel no story. The Shunammite may offer the strongest critique of Abraham, which could be the Rabbis' intention when assigning her story to this parashah. The Shunammite, like Lot's daughters, does not submit to death, but works to sustain life. Her story, like the stories of all these women, displays ferocious maternal power and perseverance.

As women of faith, the women of Parashat Vayera remind us of a faith that does not demand human sacrifice or death but recognizes the needs and demands of the flesh, and serves life above all.

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Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

The Rabbis, the Romans, and Us

Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies, JTS

Aphrodite and the Rabbis: How the Jews Adapted Roman Culture to Create Judaism as We Know It by Burton L. Visotzky, St. Martin's Press (2016)

In my most recent book I take up a quintessentially American Jewish subject: can we adopt the broader culture in which we live and still be Jewish? Is it possible to have a strong Jewish identity while living as Americans who are