

Parshat Vayera shows two women, Sarah and Lot's Wife, struggling to make sense of things beyond imagination. Sarah learns she will become a mother at age 90. Lot's Wife must turn her back on the destruction of nearly everyone and everything she knows.

The parsha begins with Abraham and Sarah being visited by three angels disguised as travelers. The angels inform Abraham that Sarah will soon become pregnant with his child. Sarah had suffered through decades of disappointment in her journey toward motherhood.

Perhaps traumatized by these experiences, Sarah retreats into that which is familiar: she cynically laughs at what these angels say. But if she doesn't make space for the joy of motherhood she has sought for so long, how can she ever experience it? Sarah must wrestle with accepting the good coming her way.

The parshah then flips Sarah's challenge on its head. Whereas Sarah wondered "can life really be this good?" Lot's Wife had to ask "can life really be this awful?"

The same angels who visited Abraham and Sarah visit their nephew Lot's household. The angels warn Lot and his family to flee and not to look back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Lot's wife ignores this command, looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt.

Nearly everything and everyone Lot's wife knew was being destroyed behind her, including possibly two of her married daughters whose households were not spared as her own was. How could Lot's Wife resist looking back, if for no other reason than to try to make some sense of her sudden and terrible loss?

It is easy to empathize with Lot's Wife here because sometimes we can't understand the how or the why of something right in the moment. Sometimes we have to just accept that someone or something is dangerous and we need to get away. We have to protect ourselves.

Faced with opposite extremes, Sarah and Lot's Wife demonstrate two common emotional responses to trauma. Sarah avoids difficult emotions by minimizing them through laughter. Lot's Wife is stunned. She is so stuck in the trauma of the moment she forgets to protect herself.

Yet there is a third possible response which is strangely absent from this parshah: crying out to G-d.

To cry in moments of overwhelming struggle is to live out the words of the Psalmist, G-d is the healer of the brokenhearted who binds up their wounds.

It is to strive to believe as our ancestors have for millennia that when we feel weakest, G-d who is stronger than we can ever comprehend, will share in our burden.

We can call out to G-d in our tears as my great grandfather Peter Swartz did after becoming an Amish minister. This was not a path in life he chose but one that literally fell on him. When an Amish community needs a new minister, several candidates are gathered and each draw lots. Those on whom the lot falls are believed to have been selected by G-d to lead the flock.

My grandmother used to tell the story of her father, Peter, weeping on the buggy ride home after the lot fell on him. Weeping not just at the overwhelming feeling of having been chosen to lead but at the awesome responsibility it represented.

Roughly a century later, I too would weep for similar reasons on the balcony of my Jerusalem apartment after I received the phone call admitting me to JTS.

I wept, overwhelmed by joy and awe. When I moved to Israel to study to prepare to apply to JTS, I knew little to no Hebrew and knew almost no one in the country. I bussed tables, hauled trash and milked cows. When my feet and back would hurt after a long shift, I'd say to myself with each step "rabbi" to remind myself of what I was doing this for. So I cried on that balcony, I cried because of what I had been through to get to this moment. I wept in awe at the incredible tasks that lay ahead.

I knew that like Sarah and Lot's Wife, I was faced with something much bigger than I could understand.

But neither Peter Swartz nor I tried to avoid our feelings when faced with a sudden change in the trajectory of our lives. Separated by many years and miles, united by our faith in G-d's mercy. We acknowledged what we faced was more than we could comprehend and in our tears asked G-d to carry us.

To do so is not easy, I still struggle frequently to acknowledge my lack of control over things. Like Lot's Wife, I sometimes struggle to make sense of the bad in this world and like Sarah, I sometimes struggle to trust the good in it. Learning how to balance these two things is all part of the spiritual journey I have begun, the journey which has brought me to this institution and in a few months will take me out of it. The journey which has brought all of you gathered here today and watching online into my life.

I thank all of you for being here. I thank my mentors, friends and teachers in Michigan, New York and Israel. In particular I thank Rabbi Diamond, who guided me as I prepared this dvar torah.

I want to thank my parents, Karl and Linda Bender, who are here today. Thank you as well to my father for leading Mincha. I want to thank my brother, Jacob, his wife Melissa, and their son Danny who are back in Michigan.

I want to thank my grandmother, Annette Steinborn, who believed in me and my dream to become a rabbi from the very beginning and helped make my journey possible. All of you help make me the man I am today and the rabbi I hope to become.

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 25:11

...The pity of 'Edith the wife of Lot was stirred for her daughters, who were married in Sodom, and she looked back behind her to see if they were coming after her or not. And she saw behind the Shekhinah, and she became a pillar of salt, as it is said, "And his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt" (Gen. 19:26).

Rav Hirsch on Torah, Genesis 19:26

By standing still, she was overtaken by death, which followed closely behind her

Psalms 147:3

(3) He heals their broken hearts, and binds up their wounds.

Ramban on Genesis 18:15

(1) "AND SARAH DENIED, SAYING"- I wonder about the righteous prophetess (Sarah). How did she deny that which G-d had said to the prophet (Abraham) and also, why did she not believe in the words of G-d's angels? The answer appears to me to be that these angels who appeared as men came to Abraham, and he, in his wisdom, recognized them. They announced to him, "I will certainly return unto thee and Sarah shall have a son." *And Sarah heard it*, but she did not know that they were angels of the Supreme One, as was the case with the wife of Manoah (Judges 13:6). It is even possible that she did not see them at all. Therefore she laughed within herself in derision, just [as the word "laugh" is used in the verse]: "He that sitteth in heaven laugheth, the Eternal hath them in derision" (Psalms 2:4). For joyous

פרקי דרבי אליעזר כ"ה:י"א

...עירית אשתו של לוט נכמרו רחמה על בנותיה הנשואות והביטה לאחריה לראות אם הולכות אחריה אם לא (וראת אחרי) [וראתה אחריה] השכינה ונעשית נציב מלח, שנאמר ותבט אשתו מאחוריו ותהי נציב מלח:

רש"ר הירש על התורה, בראשית י"ט:כ"ו

Indem sie stille stand, ward sie von dem (1) ihr auf die Ferse folgenden Tode erreicht

תהילים קמ"ז:ג'

(ג) הֲרַפָּא לְשִׁבּוּרֵי לֵב וּמְחַבֵּשׁ לְעַצְבוֹתָם:

רמב"ן על בראשית י"ח:ט"ו

(א) ותכחש שרה לאמר אני תמה בנביאה הצדקת איך תכחש באשר אמר השם לנביא וגם למה לא האמינה לדברי מלאכי אלהים והנראה בעיני כי המלאכים האלה הנראים כאנשים באו אל אברהם והוא בחכמתו הכיר בהם ובשר אותו שוב אשוב אליך ולשרה בן ושרה שומעת ולא ידעה כי מלאכי עליון הם כענין באשת מנוח (שופטים יג ו) ואולי לא ראתה אותם כלל. ותצחק בקרבה ללעג כמו יושב בשמים ישחק ה' ילעג למו (תהלים ב ד) כי השחוק לשמחה הוא בפה אז ימלא שחוק פינו (שם קכו ב) אבל השחוק בלב לא יאמר בשמחה:

laughter is [expressed in Hebrew as originating] in the mouth — “Then was our mouth filled with laughter¹⁰⁸Ibid., (Psalms 126:2) — but laughter originating in the heart is not spoken of as joyous.

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