USCJ Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem

# TORAH SPARKS

## *Parashat Vayera*

**November 4, 2017 | 15 Cheshvan 5778**

Annual | Genesis 18:1-22:24 (Etz Hayim p. 99-122; Hertz p. 63-76)
Triennial | Genesis 19:1-20:18 (Etz Hayim p. 104-112; Hertz p. 66-71)
Haftarah | 2 Kings 4:1-37 (Etz Hayim p. 123-126; Hertz p. 76-79)

# Dvar Torah

***Rafa Kern,*** *Conservative Yeshiva Student & Lishma Fellow*

Observant Jews seem to do a lot of running, and I'm not referring to the throngs in the Jerusalem marathon or the Brooklyn half. I mean more like the rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, the one who scurries about shouting: "I'm late! I'm late! I'm late!"

Take prayer, for instance. The Amidah, the core of the liturgy, mouthed silently while standing, often resembles a pre-pubescent exercise in speed — who is the fastest to mumble incomprehensible Hebrew? It's never me. I'm relatively new to this prayer thing and the words feel uncomfortable in my mouth, sounds losing meaning as they echo in my head. I hear the shuffling of feet, the scraping of a chair on the floor, a wordless song that's like the orchestra at the Oscars. My shoulders contract, my weight shifts forward, my neck cramps. I want to be done, to be quiet, to be elsewhere. Eventually, I finish, but I don't relax. I carry this tightness with me, holding on to the feeling that there's something else I need to do, somewhere else I need to be. I feel like I'm behind, and if I'm to have any hope of catching up, I need to run faster.

In the first chunk of this week's torah portion (Vayera), Avraham does a lot of running. When the scene opens, the patriarch sits at the opening of his tent, presumably convalescing from his recent circumcision. He looks up,

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(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

and, suddenly, he sees three men and **runs** to call them. Not one for small talk, he invites them to rest, sits them down, and then **hastens** to the tent to call to his wife, Sarah, for provisions. From there, he **runs** to the herd for a calf, and **hastens** to prepare it. In the seven verses that follow Avraham's seeing of the men, words emphasizing the speed of his actions appear *four separate times*. It is not enough that Avraham invites these strangers who are implied (but not acknowledged) to be angels into his home, and offers them bread made of choice flour, and the meat of a calf, and additional treats — it must be done immediately. This task cannot wait.

And then the task is finished. The guests have been cared for. The food has been served. Avraham stands still.

But he does not simply stand. The Hebrew reads: "וְהוּא־עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם", "and he stood over them." RaDaK, a medieval French commentator, points out that this word, "עֲל" was used "in this same sense" in the second verse of the chapter. The simple meaning of that verse seems to be that Avraham is sitting, and the three men stand above him — he looks up, and there they are, standing over him. But Rashi, an earlier French medieval biblical commentator, suggests that the word "עֲל" is used in that verse because "above him", "עֲלָיו", is the fitting way to describe the angels' position in relation to Avraham. Yet, in our verse, it is not the angels who stand above Avraham, but Avraham who stands above the angels.

There is a Hasidic tale told about angels (מַלְאָכִים): that they come into existence only to do the labor (מְלָאכָה) to which they have been assigned. When their job is done, they cease to be and melt back into the river of fire. Angels exist only to work. Humans still exist even as they stand, and in their stillness, they stand above the angels. Maybe that is why the core of the liturgy, the only thing the Rabbis called prayer, is the Amidah, from the Hebrew word to stand.

And, in this week's portion, it is in this standing that God speaks to Avraham. It is while Avraham still stands that he finds the strength to step closer, and to speak back, to plead, and fight, and bargain for the sake of Sodom and Gomorrah. The world is broken, and there is much we should rush to fix. But it is in the stillness that we come face to face with the divine, and become all we are meant to be — for our sake, and the world's.

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# Dvar Haftarah

***Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein,*** *Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

Stories often appear in the Tanakh with minimal detail and little to no context. And so it is with the story of the indebted widow who turns to Elisha to ensure that her children will not be taken away from her to pay the debt. But who is this widow? All we are told is: "And one of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha" (2 Kings 4:1) Thankfully, the rabbinic sages were wont to provide context for episode like this one, filling in details, and bringing the story to an entirely new level.

A rabbinic tradition exists which identifies this widow as the wife of King Ahab's servant, Obadiah, who saved God's prophets from the hands of Ahab's wicked wife, Jezebel, who sought their death. This project required enormous funding and that is where our story begins. According to one account, Obadiah was forced to take a usurious loan from Yoram, King Ahab's son, (usury is forbidden in the Jewish tradition), in order to care for these prophets. Upon Obadiah's death, Yoram called in the loans, ruining the widow financially, and prompting the whole episode in our Haftarah. (See Tanhuma Mishpatim 5)

Meanwhile, in the previous chapter in Kings, Mesha, the Moabite king, had decided that Ahab's death provided a great opportunity to rebel against Israel. (See 2 Kings 3). Another midrash accounts for Mesha's decision. Mesha asked his advisors for the secret to Israel's military success. They told him that it all depended on the merit of Avraham who had been willing to sacrifice his only son to God. This willingness, even though the act was not ultimately carried out, provided Israel with the merit in God's eyes necessary for its success. Upon hearing this, Mesha decided that he could better Avraham by actually sacrificing his own son to idolatry, which he does. At this point, God's fury broke forth against Israel. Whereupon, God challenged Israel: "Idol worshippers do not recognize My honor and that is why they rebel against Me; but you, [Israel] recognize My honor, but, nevertheless, rebel against Me. Said Rabbi Mani: 'If it were not for the merit of Obadiah's wife, Israel would have been destroyed, [as it says:] 'And one of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, saying,' (2 Kings 4:1)" (See Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 2:5 Mandelbaum ed. pp 21-23)

This story of Obadiah's wife's heroism is inspired by the juxtaposition of these two stories in Kings, but what is Rabbi Mani suggesting in the drasha? He seems to suggest that her heroism was in her turning to God. Mesha's deeds may have been wrongheaded but he did not ignore or neglect his deity. God, on the other hand, criticized Israel for neglecting Hlm. And as is often the case, an unsung hero or heroine saved the day through exemplary behavior. Obadiah's wife's plaintive cry to God's prophet does not seem like such a monumental act but in the face of indifference, it meant everything.

# Table Talk

***Vered Hollander-Goldfarb,*** *Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

In this Parasha we have 2 main storylines: The first relates to Yitzhak (Isaac), the son of Avraham and Sarah, from the announcement about his upcoming birth to the binding of Isaac. The second centers on the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Lot (Avraham's nephew) exits the story

1) God informs Avraham that He is planning to destroy Sodom and Gomorra because of their sinful behavior. Why do you think that God informs Avraham of His plan rather than just carry it out? (The text gives an answer, but what does it mean?) How does Avraham react to the information? (Story in 18:17-33)

2) Avraham's guests continue on their way to Sodom, where they encounter Avraham's nephew, Lot. Consider Lot's behavior towards the strangers, what did he learn from Avraham?

3) Avraham finds himself in Gerar (story in chapter 21). Again Sarah is presented as Avraham's sister, and taken to the king. What does Avimelekh king of Gerar ask Avraham when he discovers the truth (v.9)? There is no answer recorded, and Avimelekh speaks again. What do you think happened in the time between Avimelekh's 2 speeches?

4) After the birth of Yitzchak (Isaac), Avraham is approached by the local king Avimelekh to make a treaty (Story in 21:22-32). Why do you think that a local king would want to make a treaty with Avraham? Why would Avraham want to make a treaty with the king, at this point?

5) In the closing paragraph (after the binding of Isaac) Avraham is told about the children that were born to his brother Nahor by his wife Milka and his concubine Reuma (22:20-24). Why do you think that the Torah specifies who the mother of each child was? Why do you think that we get the full list, by name, of these children?

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We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org

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