



## TORAH SPARKS

### Parashat Vayera

**November 7, 2020, 20**  
**Heshvan 5781**

**Torah:** Genesis 18:1-22:4;

**Triennial:** 19:1-20:18

**Haftorah:** II Kings 4:1-4:37

#### The Divine Marriage Counselor Ilana Kurshan

When the angels visit Abraham to inform him that he will soon father a child, Sarah listens in from the sidelines. "Where is your wife Sarah?" (Gen. 18:9), the angels inquire, as if they are uncomfortable relaying news that will affect her so intimately—transforming not just her destiny but also her physical body—without at least knowing her whereabouts. The Torah relates that Sarah was listening from the entrance of the tent and Abraham was behind her, presumably unaware of her presence. When Sarah hears the news, she laughs *b'kirbah*, in that same inner space in which Rebecca would later feel the twins moving inside her ("and the boys struggled in her womb, *b'kirbah*," [Gen. 25:22]). It is an instinctive laughter, one that is followed but not preceded by language: "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my husband so

old?" (18:12). Sarah may be laughing out of joy and wonder, but God gets angry at her seeming lack of faith and confides in Abraham – an exchange which the Talmud draws on to offer a lesson in the relative merits of truth and peace.

The Talmud in tractate Yevamot (65b) discusses this scene in an extended passage about the merit of preserving peace and harmony between individuals. The Talmud cites several instances in which biblical characters deviated from the truth or told a "white lie" in order to avoid causing offense. Following Jacob's death, for instance, Joseph's brothers told Joseph that their father had commanded them to tell him to pardon them (Gen. 50:16-17). Jacob never said any such thing, but his sons falsely attributed this statement to him in order to make peace with Joseph.

The Talmudic passage culminates with the assertion that even God deviated from the truth in order to make peace between individuals, citing a verse from our parsha: "Then the Lord said to Abraham: 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?" Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?'" (18:14). This reads like a quote within a quote, but it is in fact a misquotation. Sarah actually expressed surprise at the news given her husband's advanced age, but God omits all mention of Abraham. "Great is peace," teaches the Talmud, since even God departed from the truth to preserve peace. God did not want Abraham to be angry at Sarah for laughing at his age, and so God stepped in as marriage counselor and emended Sarah's words for the sake of peace.

The midrash in Leviticus Rabbah (9:9), picking up on this teaching, contains an extended discussion of the value of peace. Rabbi Yishmael points out that peace is so important that God was even willing to allow His great name to be blotted out in water for the sake of marital harmony. This is a reference to the Sotah ritual, in which a scroll containing God's name is erased in water in a trial by ordeal conducted in the Temple to prove whether a woman suspected of adultery is guilty or not. According to the Talmud, God's signature is truth (Shabbat 55a), and so when God's name is dissolved in water, truth is erased for the sake of peace. Sometimes it is necessary to embellish or to change the details ever so slightly so as to avoid offending another person or mend a rift, and even God is not above dissolving truth for the sake of peace.

And yet perhaps the tension is not really between truth and peace, but between two different kinds of truth. There is the truth of what "really" happened – what we might call factual or objective truth. This is the truth that historians and scientists are beholden to, and it would be wrong if not criminal to willfully deviate from it. But there is also the truth of what we mean and what we feel at any given moment – what we might call emotional truth. This is the truth that poets and novelists seek to capture. Often a novelist will develop the germ of a character or scene from real-life people and events and then change the details while remaining true to the emotional reality – and, in so doing, offer deeper insight into how it feels to be a particular person, or to undergo a particular experience.

The factual or objective truth, based on what Sarah uttered, was that she was incredulous that her husband

might bring her pleasure when he was so advanced in years: "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my husband so old?" (18:12). But the emotional truth, which she could not even bring herself to say, is captured by her laughter and articulated by God: Sarah was astonished by the possibility of miraculously conceiving after so many years of hoping against hope. God, cognizant of what was happening *b'kirbah*—in her womb, and in her innermost self—reinterpreted her words so that they reflected this emotional truth and thus restored peace between Abraham and Sarah, who went on to name their long-awaited child for the laughter invoked by God to heal the rift.

## Who Cares Where I Live?! Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

### Text: Bereshit 18:17-33

(17)And the LORD had said, "Shall I hide from Avraham what I am about to do? ... (19)For I have acknowledged him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice..." ...(23)Then Avraham approached Him and said: "Will you wipe out the righteous with the wicked? (24)What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you indeed wipe it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? (25)Far be it from You to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from You! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (26)And the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous people inside the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake." (What follows are negotiations leading down to 10 righteous people for whose sake the city will be spared.)

- Avraham will not be directly affected by the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but nonetheless God informs Avraham of what is about to happen. What do you think that God expected Avraham to do with this knowledge?

- Avraham argues for 50 people inside the city. What is the significance of the location of the righteous individuals?

### Commentary: Ibn Ezra Bereshit 18:26

And the meaning of inside the city is that they are God-fearing in public.

- What do you think the ability to be publicly God-fearing says about the people of the town?

### Commentary: R. Samson Raphael Hirsch Bereshit 18:26

And the LORD said... - ...If, even in the situation like Sodom, there are fifty righteous individuals who can live publicly a life of purity and honesty, and they are able to present themselves in public as the defenders of the purity, honesty and humane behavior; then I will spare the sinners... If ...honesty and God-fearing are considered silly but not a crime, then the wicked have not reached the bottom yet. ...Only when the wicked start to consider kindness as a crime against public welfare, forbid it and punish those doing it, only then has the evil reached its peak.

- How does R.S.R. Hirsch answer the question on Ibn Ezra's text?
- How would you define God-fearing behavior?
- How would you count passive people who are not openly supportive of the righteous or the wicked in a town like Sodom (where events seem to take place that are evil)? Can one be neutral?

## **On Giving Gifts**

### **Bex Rosenblatt**

Elisha is an abnormal prophet. God has no message for him to tell the people. He does not come to criticize the nation's moral failings and he offers no critiques on religious practice. This "man of God" is rather a man of the people, working wonders for his friends and acquaintances, and helping out a king or two when they ask nicely. He is more likely found offering suggestions for soup recipes than for ways to return to God. The strangeness of his story has led commentators throughout the ages to ponder why we are told his story at all. In fact, some read Elisha as a how-not-to-be-a-prophet guide, with his failures calling into question the very institution of prophecy itself.

Nowhere are his defects more apparent than in this week's haftarah. In a grotesque recasting of the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, the haftarah tells the story of hospitality to divinely-sent guests, an announcement of a child to be born to old parents, the untimely death or near death of that child, and return of the child to his normal state. The roles do not match up exactly and this is where the trouble starts.

In our story, the part of Abraham is played by a leading lady, the great woman of Shunem. She is the one who takes the initiative to welcome the guest and it is she who will climb a mountain with a son she already counts as dead. But, importantly, she also plays the role of Sarah. She is told she will miraculously bear a child, and, like Sarah, she reacts with disbelief.

Elisha is also double-cast in our story. He plays the role of the messengers or angels, coming to tell the childless woman that she will conceive. But he also plays the role of God. It is by his word and his pronouncement that the great woman of Shunem becomes pregnant. He is the giver of life. However, the life he gave is taken away, when the son, just old enough to be in the field with his father, dies unexpectedly. At first, Elisha sends his own messenger with his staff to fix the problem, just as God sent an angel to stop Abraham from slaughtering Isaac. It is only after this fails that Elisha remembers who he is, relinquishes the role of giver of life and death, and prays to God to return the boy to life. The boy wakes up, sneezes seven times, and the great woman of Shunem takes him back.

The story happens to have a happy ending. Elisha's very name means "God will rescue" and indeed God does. But we have what to learn from his mistakes. Elisha wants to make the world a better place. He looks for and finds what appear to be problems that only he can solve. He gives freely and unthinkingly to all he meets. This giving creates a circle of dependents who need his support to survive, which he sometimes is no longer capable of giving.

When we look back at the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, we find a different model. God also is in the business of giving. But God does not give indiscriminately. Rather, we find in our parasha and repeatedly through the Tanakh the idea of giving as a covenant. The stronger party's gifts allow the weaker party to prosper and gain a measure of self-sufficiency, such that they are then able to give their own gifts back to the stronger party. When we look at the world today and want to help, may we learn to establish relationship rather than dependence.