

PARASHAH VA-YEAR, CHAPTERS 18-19 (DIVINE VISITORS)

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This Parashah begins with God appearing to Abraham and the three angels, dressed as men, arriving and appearing before Abraham at the entrance at Mamre. Abraham hurries to greet them and provide them with food, drink and special care. The three angels announce to Abraham and Sarah that in one year's time they will have a son. Sarah finds this to be incredible because Abraham and Sarah are old, advanced in years, and Sarah no longer has her periods. The angels reassure her that nothing is impossible for God. In the footnote for Chapter 18-1 in Etz Hayyim, "Abraham teaches us that caring for others is a great mitzvah. Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the divine presence. Rabbi Aaron of Karlin taught that when we turn our thoughts from God to the needs of people, we do God's will."

While three angels arrive in Mamre, only two angels set out for, and arrive, in Sodom. Etz Hayyim footnote: According to the Talmud, an angel exists to perform a specific task, after which the angel disappears. In this instance, there was one angel to announce the good news, one angel to save Lot, and one angel to destroy Sodom. Abraham asks God, "What if fifty innocent people are in Sodom, will you destroy the innocent with the guilty? God replies that God would spare the lives of the guilty for the sake of the innocent. In effect, Abraham is bargaining and negotiating with God. Abraham continues to bargain with God, ratcheting down the numbers of the innocent ones to be saved, with God continuing to agree from 50 to 45, from 45 to 40, from 40 to 30, from 30 to 20, and from 20 to 10. God answered at each interval that God would not destroy Sodom for the sake of the innocent. The number ten represents a minyan, or a kahillah, community. When God had stopped speaking, God left.

In Chapter 19, Lot greets the two angels dressed as men, and offers hospitality. Caring for others, especially wayfarers, is a great mitzvah. Lot succeeds in persuading the angels to spend the night in Lot's home and they are provided with the meal that Lot arranged for them. The men in Sodom surrounded Lot's house and demanded that Lot bring out the two men so that the Sodom men can be intimate with them (i.e., commit rape). When Lot offered to provide his two daughters that Lot indicated were virgins in their place, the Sodom men refused. (Etz Hayyim footnote: A patriarch possessed absolute power over his clan. Daughters were held in low esteem. Also, the two daughters were betrothed but not married.)

When the men in Sodom threatened to destroy Lot's house, the angels struck the men at the entrance of Lot's house with a blinding light. Lot urged his future sons-in-law to leave. They thought Lot was kidding and remained in Lot's house. The angels took Lot, his wife, and his two daughters away from the city and urged them to go to the hills to seek higher ground for their safety. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot's wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Lot and his daughters fled to the hills. The daughters believed that their chances of finding other men were eliminated due to the destruction. The older suggested that they get their father drunk and sleep with him in order to have a child. During two successive nights, the daughters got their father drunk and slept with him. Both daughters had a son. The older daughter's son became the father of the Moabites. The younger daughter's son become the father of the Ammonites.

HOW TO RELATE THESE TEACHINGS FROM PARASHAH VA-YEAR 18-19 TO OUR EVERYDAY LIFE:

Abraham's bargaining and negotiating with God to save the lives of the innocent in Sodom foreshadows the Jews becoming partners with God.

Abraham's teaching that caring for one another is a great mitzvah is what we do in our B'nai Emunah community.

In Chapter 18, verse 8, the description of the angels eating milk and meat together in a meal was not forbidden until the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

Lot protects and grants asylum to the two angels dressed as men. The provision of asylum is sacrosanct. Regrettably today, asylum is under attack.

Rabbi Lisa Bernstein, Conservative Yeshiva Advanced Lishnah Fellow, 2019-2020, made the following comment: "The first time the word *vayigash* appears in the Torah is in the 18th Chapter of Beresheit (Genesis - which is the chapter we just read tonight). When Abraham overheard God threatening to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah Abraham approaches (i.e., *vayigash*) God . . . and demands justice. . . an intense intimacy takes place between them. Abraham is not just talking to God, he is holding God accountable. (The word) *vayigash* connotes a powerful physical and emotional (proximity between Abraham and God)."

This commentary appears in the publication called Torah Sparks published each week by the Conservative Movement. This commentary for Parashat Vayigash relates to Joseph meeting with his brothers when he recognizes them and they don't recognize him, and he is threatening

to enslave their brother Benjamin. In that Torah portion, the brother named Judah approaches (vayigash) Joseph and pleads for Joseph to have mercy on Benjamin and all the brothers and their aging father (Jacob) who is back in Canaan. Judah approaching (vayigash) Joseph brings such closeness between them that Joseph is no longer able to keep up the lie and tells his brothers who he is and invites them to go back to Canaan and bring their families and their father to come and live in Egypt.

I have a confession to make. I must have experienced “vayigash” – a strong intimacy – a powerful physical and emotional proximity – when I first met my wife Helene in San Francisco years ago.