

Torah Weekly

ת"ב

October 17-23, 2021
11-17 Cheshvan, 5782

Torah reading:
Vayeira: Genesis 18:1 - 22:24
Haftarah: Kings II 4:1-37

PARSHAT VAYEIRA

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

The Acid Test

Last week we read how Abraham received his marching orders from G-d. “Lecha lecha—Go from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house, to the land I will show you.” G-d told him to leave all his familiar comfort zones and travel to an unknown destination. Eventually, it would become known as the Land of Israel, and Abraham as the one to whom it was originally promised. At the time, however, Abraham probably had no idea as to where he was going. But orders are orders, and so he went faithfully.

In the end, Abraham’s great trek would be the fulfillment of his calling as the father of monotheism. He would take on the whole pagan world of the time, and succeed beyond his own wildest dreams. By the way, I think we take our biblical giants too much for granted. We fail to appreciate the enormity of Abraham’s contribution to civilization. What he did was nothing less than to singlehandedly change the mindset of the world! Believing in one, invisible Creator was culture shock to the idol-worshippers of the day. This achievement made Abraham not only the founding father of the Jewish people, but also the father of all the monotheistic faiths of the world. No wonder a recent study of history’s “100 Most Influential People” ranked Abraham way on top, far above other faith founders and even way ahead of Madonna, Britney, and the Bills—both Clinton and Gates.

According to our sages, this journey to the unknown was the first of ten tests of faith the Almighty would impose upon Abraham. Yet the final test, which we read about on Rosh Hashanah and again in this week’s Parshah, is considered the supreme test. The akeidah, the binding of Isaac, the near-sacrifice of the son he waited a century to have, generates far more coverage in Torah, in our prayers and in the writings of commentary.

Why should this be the case? The first test of lech lecha had a universal impact, while the binding of Isaac was just between a father, his son and G-d. Somewhere on a secluded

mountaintop, far removed from public scrutiny, a personal drama was played out. The journey of Abraham, on the other hand, had an almost global audience. Surely, this universal test should be considered much more important than the personal test of father and son.

The answer is that before we can undertake a universal mission to humankind, we must first understand our personal relationship to G-d. Or, to put it simply, before you can change the world, you have to know who you are. If you don’t know yourself, if you don’t recognize your own personal spiritual mission, how can you hope to influence the broader society?

The sages taught, “Perfect yourself before you seek to perfect others.” Obviously, this is not to say that we should not try and teach others until we are perfect ourselves. (Who is perfect?) What it does suggest is that if we hope to have an impact on others, our call must resonate as authentic and genuine. How can we make an impression on others, if we are not credible individuals ourselves? A good salesperson believes in his product (even if he had to talk himself into believing it . . .).

The legendary Hillel tells us in Ethics of the Fathers, “Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place (makom),” and an interesting alternative interpretation understands him to mean that in order to judge any person accurately, one should first establish what kind of reputation that individual enjoys in his own makom, in his own city and home. Is there not some truth in Jackie Mason’s jesting about the Jewish husband who is a big mover and shaker all over town, but who, as soon as he walks through the door of his own house, becomes a henpecked shlemiel?

Years ago I came across a one-liner that had a profound impact on me personally: “Every rabbi has only one sermon—the way he lives his life.” It’s all too true. We can preach from today until next Yom Kippur, but if we don’t “walk the talk” and live the game we purport to play, we will leave our audiences unmoved. The most eloquent orators will fail to make an impression if their listeners know that their message is hollow and isn’t backed up by genuine personal commitment.

So, while the story of Abraham’s journey and universal mission appears in the Torah and comes chronologically before the final test, in essence, the akeidah reigns supreme. Not only because it was the most difficult, but because our personal commitment and integrity always form the moral basis for our mission to the world. At the end of the day, only these validate the person and his or her message. And that is the acid test for all of us.

By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

A Pillar of Salt

So I’m told we should “live with the times” and find how our lives are connected to the Torah portion (parshah) of the week. That only when we see ourselves in the Torah can we say we’ve truly learned.

I read the parshah, and I learn of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I learn of how Lot is saved and how his wife is turned into a pillar of salt. And I search to see my life in these words. I’d rather not see it, of course, as the connection is too intense, too real, too true. I’d rather pretend that this is merely a story, a lesson

about universal evil needing to be removed. How do I relate to a pillar of salt? And yet I do—all too much.

So this is the story. An evil community is destined to be destroyed. It is to be totally annihilated and Abraham is foretold of the destruction. He argues with G-d, begging him not to destroy the land and those who inhabit it. He begs that the people be spared in the merit of 50 righteous people. Yet he cannot find 50. He tries to find 45. Forty. Thirty. Twenty. Ten. Still, he cannot. The city is utterly evil, and it is to be destroyed. Only Lot and his family will be saved. There is one condition. Don't look back. But the temptation is too great. And Lot's wife looks. And she is turned into a pillar of salt.

So I, too, am often that pillar of salt. Stuck and hardened between where I never should have been and where I need to go. If only I could have the strength to let go. I try to reason, to rationalize why certain things are good for me. And even if they aren't good for me, they are good for someone, right? At least one person, right? Wrong. There is no good there. There is nothing to be redeemed. It must be destroyed. The relationship cannot exist. The only thing that can be saved is me. And only if I leave and don't look back. Never look back.

Yet I can't help it. I take the first step away. I leave where I never should have been towards where I must go. If only I can make it there and leave this behind. Truly leave behind me what aims to bring me down and destroy me with it. If I can keep going it will be gone forever. If I can let go, it will lose its power to hurt me. And yet, time and time again, I look back. And I am once again as frozen as that pillar of salt.

By Sara Esther Crispe

Sunday, October 17, 2021 --- 11 Cheshvan, 5782

Passing of Methuselah (2105 BCE)

Methuselah, the longest-lived human being of all time, died at the age of 969 years on the 11th of Cheshvan of the year 1656 from creation (2105 BCE) -- exactly seven days before the beginning of the Great Flood. Methuselah was Adam's great-great-great-great-great-grandson and Noah's grandfather.

Rachel (1553 BCE)

The matriarch Rachel died in childbirth on the 11th of Cheshvan of the year 2208 from creation (1553 BCE) while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin.

Rachel was born in Aram (Mesopotamia) approximately 1585 BCE. Her father was Laban, the brother of Jacob's mother, Rebecca. Jacob came to Laban's home in 1576 BCE, fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau. He fell in love with Rachel and worked for seven years tending Laban's sheep in return for her hand in marriage. But Laban deceived his nephew, and on the morning after the wedding Jacob discovered that he had married Rachel's elder sister, Leah. Laban agreed to give him Rachel as a wife as well in return for another seven years' labor.

Rachel was childless for many years, while her elder sister and rival gave birth to six sons and a daughter in succession. Finally, in 1562 BCE, she gave birth to Joseph. Nine years later, while Jacob and his family were on the road to Jacob's ancestral home in Hebron (after a 22-year absence), she gave birth to a second son, but died in childbirth. Jacob buried her by the roadside, in Bethlehem; there, "Rachel weeps over her children, for they are gone [in exile]" (Jeremiah 31:14). Her tomb has served as a place of prayer for Jews for more than 35 centuries.

R. Nachum of Chernobyl (1797)

Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl was a disciple of the second leader of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch, and the founder of the Chernobyl dynasty of Chassidic Rebbes.

Monday, October 18, 2021 --- 12 Cheshvan, 5782

Yitzhak Rabin (1995)

Yitzhak Rabin, Commander-in-Chief of the IDF during the Six Day War and later Prime Minister of Israel, was assassinated on this date in 5756 (1995).

Passing of R. Zev Wolf Kitzes (1787)

R. Zev Wolf was one of the prominent disciples of the Baal Shem Tov. A great scholar in his own right, he accompanied his master on many of his travels and witnessed his miraculous accomplishments firsthand.

Tuesday, October 19, 2021 --- 13 Cheshvan, 5782

Burning of the Talmud in Venice (1553)

By order of the Pope, the Talmud was burned in Venice on the 13th and 14th of MarCheshvan, 1553 (*Minchah Belulah*, Deuteronomy 33:2). The reason given was that the Talmud contained statements heretical to the Christian faith. Venice boasted many famous Hebrew printing houses, including that of Daniel Bomberg, an Italian gentile who published the Talmud there during the years 1519–1523.

Wednesday, October 20, 2021 --- 14 Cheshvan, 5782

Jews of Prague Saved (1620)

In May 1618, the Bohemian Revolt broke out in Prague, triggering the Thirty Years' War. In November 1620, King Ferdinand II suppressed the rebels in Prague in the Battle of White Mountain. Notwithstanding the widespread looting, the king gave orders that no Jew be harmed. To commemorate the miraculous turn of events, R. Yomtov Lipman Heller, rabbi of Prague, instituted penitential prayers to be said every year on the 14th of MarCheshvan, which he published in Prague later that year. (The above account was recorded by R. Yomtov in his introduction to the publication.)

Thursday, October 21, 2021 --- 15 Cheshvan, 5782

Passing of Mattityahu (139 BCE)

In the 2nd century before the common era, the Holy Land was ruled by the Seleucids (Syrian-Greeks) who, with the collaboration of the Jewish Hellenists, introduced pagan idols into the Holy Temple and set about to forcefully Hellenize the people of Israel. Mattityahu, the son of the High Priest Yochanan, was already an old man when he picked up a sword and raised the flag of revolt in the village of Modiin in the Judean hills. Many rallied under his cry, "Who that is for G-d, come with me!" and resisted and battled the Greeks from their mountain hideouts.

After heading the revolt for one year, Mattityahu died on the 15th of Cheshvan of the year 3622 from creation (139 BCE). His five sons -- the "Macabees" Judah, Yochanan, Shimon, Elazar and Yonatan -- carried on the battle to their eventual victory, celebrated each year since by Jews the world over with the festival of Chanukah.

Friday, October 22, 2021 --- 16 Cheshvan, 5782

R. Sholom Dovber of Lubavitch Leaves the Town of Lubavitch (1915)

With the approach of the German army during World War I, R. Sholom DovBer and his family left Lubavitch, located in modern-day Russia near the border of Belarus, for the city of Rostov. Lubavitch was the seat of the Chabad movement for 102 years, starting when R. DovBer, second Chabad Rebbe, settled there in 1813.