



SCHECHTER

Parshat Vayera: Faith in Family

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The book of *Breishet* (Genesis) is full of many wonderful narratives. It is an inviting book to learn and to teach (especially to young children).

This week's Parsha, Vayera has a number of short stories surrounding the life of our Patriarch Abraham and his extended family. Many of the stories involve the relationship between parent and child.

Story One: The parsha begins with Abraham sitting outside his tent, in the desert heat, on the third day after his circumcision. Three visitors are traveling by and Abraham jumps to his feet to greet them. Each of these visitors, we come to learn, is an angel of God, coming with a particular message for Abraham. The second angel who delivers the message to Abraham that he and Sarah would welcome a son, one year from that day. Both Sarah and Abraham were exceedingly old (Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 89). For years, Sarah had been praying for a baby. Her prayers were finally being answered (*a direct connection is made here to this week's Haftorah, in which the prophet Elisha is welcomed into a woman's home and he tells her that in a year, her prayers would be answered by the birth of a son*).

Story Two: The next part of our parsha deals with Abraham's nephew, Lot. Lot is a resident of the city of Sodom, a city that the third angel explains to Abraham, will be destroyed by God. Prior to the destruction of Sodom, Amorrhah and the surrounding cities, two of the angels pay a visit to Lot and his family.

Unlike the other inhabitants of Sodom, Lot welcomes these men, inviting them into his home for protection. The people of the village surround Lot's house in order to do harm to the guests. Lot tries to protect the men; even offering his two unmarried daughters to the men of the city. The offer is rejected.

The angels inform Lot and his family that they must escape the city. Only Lot and his two unmarried daughters survive.

As Lot and his daughters find their way to a cave, his daughters fear that they are the only remaining people on earth. It was their duty, they thought, to repopulate the earth. They got Lot drunk, and the older one lay down with her father, becoming pregnant by him. Commentators say that Lot did not know when his daughter lay down, but he did know when she arose. The next day, the younger daughter did the same to Lot. Because Lot realized what happened to him the first night, he should not have let it happen the second night.

Story Three: Our parsha then describes the birth of Isaac and his *Brit Milah* (circumcision) at 8 days old. As Sarah has finally become a mother, she wants nothing

more than to protect her child. She wants to shelter him from all possible danger and evil influences. Sarah demands of Abraham that he send away Hagar (Sarah's handmaid) and Ishmael (Abraham's first born son, from Hagar).

Hagar also wants to protect her son. While travelling, she and Ishmael run out of water and protection in the desert. Hagar separates herself from Ishmael, fearing that she would see her child die, or that he would see her suffering. God takes pity on Hagar and creates a well, saving both her and her child.

Story Four: After experiencing the joy at the birth of one son and the pain of sending away the other son, Abraham is told by God to take Isaac to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice him.

I recently heard a story of a man who struggled with his relationship with his parents. He would often go months, even years without speaking with them. The parents supported their son through many difficult times in his life. They were always there as a shoulder to cry on and there was nothing that they would not do for him. Our relationship with our children inevitably involves some pain. We know that as much as we raise our children to become self sufficient human beings, at some point we will need to remove our protective shelter. On the other hand, I cannot imagine the pain involved in having no relationship with my child.

I like to think of myself as a pretty good parent. I have a good idea of where my strengths lie and on what areas I need to work harder. But there is nothing that I would not do for my children. When I see my children in pain, I would do anything to switch places with them. That's why I struggle, with the stories in this week's Parsha. Lot is willing to "sacrifice" his daughters to protect the visitors. Abraham sends away his first born son with nothing but water and bread. He is then willing to sacrifice the son for whom he and Sarah had been waiting for so long.

Even if Abraham knew that he was being tested by God, or not (as strong as my faith is in God) – I cannot imagine a father putting a child in such a situation. It might be part of growing up for children to push away their parents. But how can a parent do it to their child!?

Maybe there are other ways to understand these stories. Perhaps Lot's daughters found their protection in a different way. Maybe Ishmael felt that to be best protected he needed to start anew, away from Sarah. Maybe Isaac had faith in his father that he would be ok – he did not fight Abraham's taking him up to the top of Mt. Moriah.

I consider myself a God fearing person. I am what people call "a believer". I truly believe not only in the power of the stories in the *Tanakh* (Bible), looking for connections to my personal life, but I believe in the accuracy of the events recorded. I act based on my faith.

We have faith as parents, that our children will make the right decisions, that they will be responsible for their actions. The man in our story above will soon become a parent for the first time. When your children are born, you no longer live your life for you, you live it for them. I hope that this man will find a love and devotion to his child that will teach him of the love and devotion of his own parents. As children (even adult children), we need to have faith in our parents.

AS A FAMILY:

Tell your children how proud you are of the decisions that they are making. Remind them how much you love them and have faith in who they are and what they do.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Sarah laugh at the angels? How did laughter play a role in the angel's message to Sarah?
2. How does Abraham bargain with God? What was the result?
3. Which great nations were born from Lot's daughters?
4. What story in this week's parsha is similar to a story from last week's parsha?
5. How does Beer Sheva get its name?
6. How does God stop Abraham from sacrificing Isaac?