

PARSHAT VAYERA

9 - 15 Cheshvan 5785
10 - 16 November 2024

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

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Psalms Daily

Hayom Yoim

The soul above awaits the time it will be privileged to descend into a body. For the soul senses how much it can accomplish here below; it can attain the level of "delighting with G-d" (through learning Torah and observing the Mitzvot). So, what is everyone waiting for?

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR SOUL RUNS DRY

Beginning with the Six Day War in 1967 (to some extent even earlier), the Rebbe initiated the "Mitzvah Campaign."

The Mitzvah Campaign involves walking over to a complete stranger, confirming their Jewish identity, and asking them questions such as, "Did you put on Tefillin today?" "Do you have a Mezuzah on your door?" "Do you light Shabbat candles?" The Rebbe eventually expanded the campaign to include 10 "starter" Mitzvot such as keeping Kosher, daily Torah study, and giving charity each day.

It was unconventional, to say the least. While standing in a supermarket, for example, you were expected to simply walk over to somebody and say, "Excuse me, are you Jewish? Let's put on tefillin!" These strange interactions ran counter to the typical American ethos of "mind your own business." Furthermore, why would we begin by asking someone to put on Tefillin? Wouldn't it be more logical to first invite them to study with us about Tefillin, to begin by introducing them to the whole idea of Torah and mitzvot? Yet the Rebbe took the opposite approach. "Start with the action," said the Rebbe. "First you put on Tefillin, and then you can go learn about Tefillin."

So, the big question is: does the action bring the emotion, or does the emotion bring the action? If the emotion brings the action, I have to wait until I'm in love, and then I'll bring flowers. If the action brings the emotion, it's the other way around. This idea is discussed in the teachings of Chassidus on the Haftarah for this week's Torah portion - an extraordinary story about the prophet Elisha.

Among the terrible activities of the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel was the brutal oppression - and in many cases the outright killing - of the Torah scholars and the prophets of their time.

One of the administrators of the court of Ahab and Jezebel was a righteous man, a prophet himself, who happened to be an Edomite convert to Judaism. His name was Obadiah.

Obadiah was a very wealthy man and he used his monetary blessings to hide many of the prophets, saving their lives.

Ultimately, the economy turned, and Obadiah, his wealth depleted, resorted to borrowing funds to continue protecting the prophets. Deep in debt, he even borrowed from the loan sharks - the sons of the wicked King Ahab. Unable to repay the loans, and with no bankruptcy laws to protect him, they persecuted him until he died from anguish.

The sons of Ahab then focused their harassment on the administrator's wife, Mrs. Obadiah. Finally, they threatened to come and take her two sons as slaves unless she repaid the money. It is a terrible, sad story.

A Small Flask of Oil

This is where the storyline of our Haftarah picks up:

"Ishah Achat" - "one woman" (the wife of Obadiah) cried out to Elisha, the great prophet of the time, and said, "Your servant, my husband, died. You knew him; he was a G-d-fearing man. Now the loan shark is coming to take my two sons. Please help! You're a miracle man! I need a miracle!"

So, Elisha tells her, "Let's see what I can do; what do you have in your house? Do you have anything of value? Gold, silver, precious stones? Stocks, bonds, securities? Anything at all?"

"I have nothing," she responds. "All I have left is a small flask of olive oil. That's it."

"This is good!" Elisha tells her. "Here's what you'll do: go to all your neighbors and borrow as many jugs and jars and Tupperware as you can. Gather all of these vessels into your house. Make sure your children are there and close the door. Then, take your flask of oil and begin to pour. Pour oil into every jar and into every container and keep pouring. As long as there are containers to fill, the oil will continue to pour."

And it worked! Suddenly, she had a massive volume of oil! When the last of the containers was filled, the oil stopped.

She ran to Elisha and asked, "What's next?"

"You've got plenty of olive oil," the prophet told her. "Sell the oil. You'll be able to pay all your debts and have enough money left to live comfortably for the rest of your life."

The Antidote to Spiritual Bankruptcy

The Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad, delivered a Chassidic discourse about this story, and many of the subsequent rebbes did as well. In a famous 1985 discourse, building upon the discourses of his predecessors and the teachings of Kabbalah, the Rebbe explained:

The "one woman" refers to the Neshama, the soul within us. The soul is described as feminine - a woman, a princess.

The soul is "of the wives of the prophets," so called because it is an extension of G-d Almighty Himself. The name Elisha means "turning to my G-d." The soul within us turns to G-d and says, "G-d Almighty, I have a problem." Houston, we have a problem!

"Avdecha Ishi Met" - "Your servant, my husband, has died." In Kabbalah, intellect (Chochmah) is referred to as father ("Av") and husband ("Ish"). The soul says to G-d, "My intellectual commitment to Judaism is dead. I am no longer intellectually motivated to pursue Judaism. Other things in life inspire me. There's a big world out there. I have no intellectual desire to pursue Torah and mitzvot."

"And the collectors have come to take my two sons." If the intellectual realm is compared to "parents," then the sons are love and fear of G-d, which are the product of intellectual contemplation of G-d's greatness.

The soul cries out, "The energies of impurity, the energies of secular life, are coming to take my 'two sons.' I'm about to lose my emotional connection to G-d, to Judaism. I love other things and I fear other things." As I like to say in my classes: Love G-d? I love seven-layer cake! That's what I love. Fear G-d? I fear earthquakes. I fear the IRS. I have many fears, and G-d is not one of them.

The Neshama is saying, "I'm going through spiritual bankruptcy. G-d, I need Your help."

And, of course, G-d is there to answer.

"What do you have left in the house," G-d says to the soul. What does the soul have left that it can call its own? "All I've got," says the Neshama, "is a small flask of pure olive oil." What is olive oil? Symbolically, it is the pristine essence of the soul.

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What is the nature of oil? If you mix olive oil with water or with any liquid, the oil rises to the top. Olive oil is pure; it's essential. Olive oil represents the spark, the essence, which can never be diluted, lost, or assimilated.

Just Do It!

"What do you have left in the house?" G-d says to the soul, "What do you have left?" And when the answer is that only that spark remains, G-d says, "This is good! You're in good shape. I want you to take lots of empty vessels, many containers. I want you to engage in activities of Torah and Mitzvot. I want you to put on Tefillin, I want you to light Shabbat candles, I want you to do and do and do.

You don't feel it? That doesn't matter. As long as you keep pouring the oil, as long as you keep doing, even if you're not feeling it, the feeling will come. Take vessels, as many as possible, and do more and more and more.

Force yourself, if need be. And the actions - the pouring of the spark of your soul into the action of Torah and Mitzvot - will revive you and will bring about a tremendous fervor, an intense emotional and intellectual connection to G-d.

And, practically speaking, this explains why the Rebbe initiated his Mitzvah campaigns: he understood that in our generation, the most essential aspect of Judaism is action.

The Rebbe emphasized that when you approach someone and ask them to put on tefillin, consider not only the immediate impact it will have on them, but also the enduring influence that one act might have on their children, their

grandchildren, and all of their future descendants for generations to come.

A single experience, such as putting on Tefillin, lighting Shabbat candles, or engaging in any of the campaign's Mitzvot, even just once, can awaken an inner awareness, one that takes hold of that essential spark and causes it to pour and pour and pour - infinitely and endlessly.

Let's resolve to boldly take action, regardless of our fleeting emotions. Trust the process; first do, and the feeling will surely follow.

By Yehoshua B. Gordon

VAYERA IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Vayera," means "And He appeared" and it is found in Genesis 18:1.

G-d reveals Himself to Abraham three days after the first Jew's circumcision at age ninety-nine; but Abraham rushes off to prepare a meal for three guests who appear in the desert heat. One of the three—who are angels disguised as men—announces that, in exactly one year, the barren Sarah will give birth to a son. Sarah laughs.

Abraham pleads with G-d to spare the wicked city of Sodom. Two of the three disguised angels arrive in the doomed city, where Abraham's nephew Lot extends his hospitality to them and protects them from the evil intentions of a Sodomite mob. The two guests reveal that they have come to overturn the place, and to save Lot and his family. Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt when she disobeys the command not to look back at the burning city as they flee.

While taking shelter in a cave, Lot's two daughters (believing that they and their father are the only ones left alive in the world) get their father drunk, lie with him and become pregnant. The two sons born from this incident father the nations of Moab and Ammon.

Abraham moves to Gerar, where the Philistine king Abimelech takes Sarah—who is presented as Abraham's sister—to his palace. In a dream, G-d warns Abimelech that he will die unless he returns the woman to her husband. Abraham explains that he feared he would be killed over the beautiful Sarah.

G-d remembers His promise to Sarah, and gives her and Abraham a son, who is named Isaac (Yitzchak, meaning "will laugh"). Isaac is circumcised at the age of eight days; Abraham is one hundred years old, and Sarah ninety, at their child's birth.

Hagar and Ishmael are banished from Abraham's home and wander in the desert; G-d hears the cry of the dying lad, and saves his life by showing his mother a well. Abimelech makes a treaty with Abraham at Beersheba, where Abraham gives him seven sheep as a sign of their truce.

G-d tests Abraham's devotion by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah (the Temple Mount) in Jerusalem. Isaac is bound and placed on the altar, and Abraham raises the knife to slaughter his son. A voice from heaven calls to stop him; a ram, caught in the undergrowth by its horns, is offered in Isaac's place.

T.N. JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 9 Cheshvan 5785 - 10 November 2024

Passing of Rosh (1327)

Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel, known as the "Rosh", was born in Germany in around 5010, or 1250. After studying under the great Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, Germany, he fled the local antisemitism with his family to Spain, where he became the rabbi of the Jewish community in Toledo. In Toledo, he established a Yeshiva (Talmudical seminary), which followed the learning style of the Ashkenazim of Germany. He also wrote a commentary on the Talmud, which is now studied far and wide. He passed away on 9 Cheshvan 5088 (1327 CE) in Toledo.

Monday, 10 Cheshvan 5785-11 November 2024

Birth of Gad

Gad, the son of Jacob and Zilpah, seventh of the Twelve Tribes, was born on the 10th of MarCheshvan around the year 2196 (1564 BCE). He lived to be 125 years old.

Tuesday, 11 Cheshvan 5785-12 November 2024

Passing of Methuselah (2105 BCE)

Methuselah, the longest-lived human being of all time, passed away at the age of 969 years on the 11th of Cheshvan of the year 1656 (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.

Passing of Rachel (1553 BCE)

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

Rachel was born in Aram (Mesopotamia) approximately 2175 (1585 BCE). Her father was Laban, the brother of Jacob's mother, Rebecca. Jacob came to Laban's home in 2184 (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 gave birth to six sons and a daughter in succession. Finally, in 2198 (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, in the Land of Israel (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.

Wednesday, 12 Cheshvan 5785-13 November 2024

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) in Tel Aviv.

Thursday, 13 Cheshvan 5785-14 November 2024

Burning of the Talmud in Venice (1553)

By order of the Pope, the Talmud was burned in Venice on the 13th and 14th of Cheshvan, 5312 (1553).

Friday, 14 Cheshvan 5785 - 15 November 2024

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, Rabbi Yomtov Lipman

Heller, rabbi of Prague, instituted penitential prayers to be said every year on the 14th of Cheshvan, which he published in Prague later that year.

Shabbat, 15 Cheshvan 5785-16 November 2024

Passing of Mattisyahu (139 BCE)

In the 2nd century before the common era, the Holy Land of Israel 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. Mattisyahu, 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 Modi'in 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, Mattisyahu died on the 15th of Cheshvan of the year 3622 (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.

Kristallnacht (1938)

On this night in 5698 (1938) and continuing into the next day - November 9 on the secular calendar - the Nazis coordinated vicious pogroms against the Jewish community of Germany. Encouraged by their leaders, rioters attacked and beat Jewish residents, burned, and destroyed 267 synagogues, vandalized 7,500 Jewish businesses, and ransacked countless Jewish cemeteries, hospitals, schools, and homes, while police and firefighters stood by. Ninety-one Jews were killed, and 20,000 others were deported to concentration camps.