

## Between the Lines

### Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Andy Shugerman

Genesis Rabbah 48:11

ואקחה פת לחם וסעדו לבכם אחר תעבורו א"ר יצחק בתורה ובנביאים ובכתובים מצינו  
דהדא פיתא מזוניתא דליבא בתורה מנין ואקחה פת לחם וסעדו לבכם בנביאים (שופטים  
ט) סעד לברך פת לחם בכתובים (תהלים קד) ולחם לבב אנוש יסעד

*And let me fetch you a piece of bread that you may refresh yourselves* (lit. "satisfy your hearts"); *then go on . . .* (Gen. 18:5) Rabbi Isaac said: In the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings we find that bread strengthens the heart. From where in the Torah: . . . *let me fetch you a morsel of bread that you may satisfy your hearts.* In the Prophets: . . . *Eat some bread to give your heart strength, [then you can leave.]* (Judg. 19:5) In the Writings: [*You make the grass grow for cattle*] . . . *and bread that sustains man's heart.* (Ps. 104:15)

On its face, this midrash may seem to state the obvious: that eating bread gives one energy. After all, a look at our food packaging today reveals the ingredients and nutrients contained in any given product. This text, however, teaches that not all nourishment comes in physical form. The deceptively simple statement that "bread strengthens the heart" and the prooftexts that follow it actually provide a subtle commentary to the notion that "man does not live on bread alone" (Deut. 8:3); indeed, we derive sustenance at least as much from our gratitude for the company we keep and for the blessing of hospitality.

To support his insight about a staple food, Rabbi Isaac cites three verses that each use three key terms: the nouns *lechem* (bread) and *lev* (heart) and the verb root *sa'ad* (satisfy/sustain). In fact, the similar contexts of the first two cases highlight the message of the third. Both the verse from this week's Torah portion and Judges 19:5 represent invitations from a host (first Abraham, then a nameless Bethlehemite) to wayfarers to eat before or after undertaking a journey. Both cases demonstrate *hachnassat orchim*, the mitzvah of welcoming guests into one's home. By breaking bread together, the hosts and visitors forge a bond with one another. While this act exemplifies biblical graciousness, it also reflects an awareness of the spiritual ecology as depicted above in the verse from Psalm 104. God is ultimately the source of all sustenance, whether for grazing animals or in partnership with humans at every stage of growing, harvesting, and producing food.

It is interesting to note that *birkat hamazon* (the blessing after a meal) only mentions *lechem* once, even though eating bread is what distinguishes a meal from a snack. In the closing lines of the Ashkenazic version of this prayer, many declare that "I have been young and am now old, but I have never seen a righteous man abandoned, or his children seeking bread" (Ps. 37:25). I justify reciting this shocking verse as a vow that, having been fed ourselves, it is our obligation to feed as many others as possible. Perhaps that is why we conclude by praying, "God give strength to His people . . ." (Ps. 29:11).

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-dera  
Genesis 18:1–22:24  
November 12, 2011  
15 Heshvan 5772

## Parashah Commentary

**This week's commentary was written by Rabbi David Hoffman, assistant professor, Department of Talmud and Rabbinics, and scholar-in-residence, Development Department, JTS.**

### Going Toward the Present

Martin Buber, the great 20th-century Jewish theologian, observed a powerful literary connection between the beginning of Abraham's life and the end. God first speaks to Abraham suddenly, seemingly without introduction, and commands: "Go forth (*lekh lekha*) from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). With these few words, God introduces God's Self to Abraham and it is with these words that their relationship is founded. The phrase "Go forth" appears on only one other occasion in the entire Torah. Toward the end of Abraham's life, as God begins the last conversation God will ever have with Abraham, God again commands: "Go forth." This time God demands that Abraham "go" and take "[his] son, [his] favored one, Isaac, whom [he loves]" and give him as a burned offering (Gen. 22:2).

The words "Go forth" (*lekh lekha*) serve as literary bookends to Abraham's life. As Buber dramatically describes our story, in the first instance at the beginning of Abraham's life, Abraham is asked to separate himself from the world of his Fathers—his past, his family, and everything he knows. In the second instance, Abraham is asked to kill his son and thus separate himself from the world of his Sons—his future and the promise and the expectations of a time where his offspring would be "as numerous as the stars" (Gen. 15:5), where his progeny would be made into "a great nation" (Gen. 12:2).

In his spiritual life, Abraham has been asked to give up so much. He is asked to leave all that he knows and then surrender the very hopes and expectations that may have allowed him to have had the courage in the first place to take those first steps away from the world of his Fathers. God has demanded that

Abraham walk away from both his past and the hope of a particular future that has propelled his entire life.

We can offer a reading of the repetition of this literary phrase that emphasizes the importance of sacrifice in the religious life. Transcending one's own needs and concerns is a worthy goal of the spiritual life and the practice of being nudged beyond (sacrificing!) our parochial self-interests seems to me to be a healthy provocation.

And yet the type of sacrifice God demands of Abraham seems to exceed what might be considered creative or productive agitation. This sort of sacrifice does not feel like something that should serve as a foundational part of our relationship with God.

Perhaps the emphasis should not be placed on what God is asking Abraham to walk away *from* but on what God may be asking Abraham to walk *toward*. That is to say, God is asking Abraham not to live in his past or in the hopes for a particular future. By asking Abraham to give up both, God invites Abraham to focus on the present moment of their relationship. And there is much uncertainty in this moment. In the one instance, at the beginning of Abraham's trials, God tells Abraham to "Go forth," but God does not tell him where he is going. With the second command of "Go forth," God tells Abraham to go forth to a mountain that God will identify later in the journey. In both instances, God asks Abraham to inhabit the uncertainty of the present.

This paradigm of a relationship with God serves as an important counterbalance to an alternative way the Torah conceives of our relationship with God. The Torah repeatedly reminds us of God's role in our past, of the God who took us out of Egypt, who gave us the Torah, and led us into the Land of Israel. The Torah asks us to recount our people's story, tell our children, and remember that we too were once slaves. And, of course, the Torah holds out God's promise for a particular future. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you (Gen. 12:2). The promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob about a future in the Land serves as the cornerstone for our contemporary understandings of the redemption that we believe will take place for the Jewish people and for all of humanity. So much of our Jewish lives takes place in inhabiting a particular past and promise for a particular future.

However, here—with the drama of Abraham's relationship with God—we are encouraged to separate ourselves from the potentially disruptive "noise" of our individual and even our people's history. We are asked to set aside the hopes we harbor for a particular future. As with Abraham, God is reminding us to be actively present for God and our lives now. Our personal histories are important, as are our desires for a promised future, and yet, the divine call of "Go forth" (*lekh lekha*) reminds us that no stories of the past nor hopes for a certain future are more important than the steps we take into the present moment. Like Abraham, we are challenged to free ourselves from the constraints of our history and the expectations of a certain future. God, through Abraham, asks each of us to "Go forth" into our present.

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## A Taste of Torah

### A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Sight and vision play an important role in the two opening narratives of Parashat Va-yera. At the beginning of this week's Torah reading, the newly circumcised Abraham, resting in his abode of Elonei Mamre, "looks up" and sees "three men rooted before him" (Gen. 18:1–2). Their appearance triggers a flurry of activity as Abraham and Sarah scurry to perform the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* (hosting guests in one's home). The mysterious guests are pampered and go on to deliver the news that Sarah will conceive. Then, juxtaposed with this story of generosity and kindness, we encounter the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah. Interestingly, it opens with the same men setting out on their journey and, in sharp contrast to Abraham's upwardly gazing posture, they "look down toward Sodom" (Gen. 18:16). What are to make of the juxtaposition of these two stories?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains, "From the hospitable meal at Abraham, they stood up and looked towards Sodom . . . Sodom offered the most complete contrast to the simple pure atmosphere from which these men were just emerging. They had just seen the foundation of a nation laid on two factors: a) on sanctifying the body with all its urges and lures in pure moral submission to God in *brit milah* (the covenant of circumcision) and b) on practicing universal brotherly love, as in the kindness which they themselves enjoyed in Abraham's home. The hospitable meal at which they had just announced the first foundation stone of the future people of God offered such a contrast to Sodom, formed such a loftiness to the Sodomite debasement to which they now had to wend their way, that they 'looked down to the plains of Sodom with criticizing gauging consideration.' For that is the meaning of *va'yashkifu*, that 'they looked down'" (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 318).

The stark contrast between the example of our ancestor Abraham and the behavior of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah gives us pause to reflect on what it means to build an ethical and moral civilization. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch emphasizes this notion in commenting on the expression used for the men looking out toward Sodom, *va'yashkifu*. They look down, literally and figuratively, upon the evil that is unfolding in these twin cities. Abraham, on the other hand, looks up. The divine quality of the three men that have just appeared in his home shines through. And Abraham rises to the occasion. Hirsch sharpens our exegetical focus as we read through this text. For it is not simply the contrast that is of import, but also recognizing these moments as "the foundation of a nation." Abraham's descendants must sanctify their bodies and practice kindness to build a sacred future. Indeed, every moment in life presents us with the choice between Elonei Mamre and Sodom, between embracing the presence of God and our fellow humans and banishing the divine from our midst. May we always be blessed with the gumption and sight of Abraham—choosing the path of Elonei Mamre.

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