

# OHRNET

SHABBAT PARSHAT VAYERA · 18 ELUL 5773 - NOV. 3, 2012 · VOL. 20 NO. 4

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

### TURNING OVER

*“And He (G-d) overturned these cities and all the plain and all the dwellers of the cities and the vegetation of the earth.” (19:25)*

When we look at the situation today it's easy to despair. The strident metallic clang of materialism and selfishness seem to swamp out the message of the Torah and its People. The sensuous siren call of the media surrounds us all with a world whose reality is merely virtual.

Society at large seems deaf to morality, to modesty, to the values that are rooted in the Torah. The motto of the time is “Let it all hang out”. In a world where there is nothing to be ashamed of, nothing brings shame, and thus anything is possible. And what is possible - happens.

Those who stand for the eternal values of our people are despised as fundamentalists and violent barbarians. Everything has been turned upside down.

There is a strange thread of history that runs from this week's Torah portion down through the ages and climaxes in the end of history: Lot was rescued from the *overturning* of Sodom. Why specifically was it necessary to overturn Sodom? Why couldn't Sodom have just been destroyed with fire and brimstone? Wouldn't that have been cataclysmic enough? What are we supposed to learn from the fact that Sodom was *overturned*? *From the fact that it was “reversed”?*

After the destruction of Sodom, Lot's daughters thought that they were the only human survivors of what must have looked like a global nuclear holocaust. They surmised that the only way to perpetuate the human species was to cohabit with their father. The Torah, however, ascribes no blame to their actions, as their motivation was pure.

From this incestuous union came a people called Moav — literally ‘from father’. From Moav comes the prototypical convert, Ruth. From Ruth comes King David, and from King David comes the Mashiach. *So it turns out that the foundation of Mashiach is ultimately in Sodom.*

There are two ways that society's spiritual landscape can be changed. One way is by improving the situation bit by bit until the world is perfected. The other is that things get so

bad that *they cannot get any worse*. At that point everything reverses in an instant from the nadir to the zenith. This second way is the way Mashiach will come.

The prophets speak in many places about the coming of Mashiach in terms of childbirth.

Someone ignorant of the process of childbirth who sees for the first time a woman in labor would be convinced that she is about to die. And the closer the actual moment of the birth, the stronger that impression would become.

And then, within a couple of minutes, seeming tragedy has turned into the greatest joy. A new life has entered the world.

Immediately prior to the coming of Mashiach there will be a tremendous confusion in the world. Everything will seem to have gone haywire. The natural order will be turned on its head: Age will bow to youth. Ugliness will be trumpeted as beauty, and what is beautiful will be disparaged as unattractive. Barbarism will be lauded as culture. And culture will be dismissed as worthless. The hunger of consumerism and the lust for material wealth will grow more and more, and it will find less and less to satisfy its voracity.

Eventually “materialism” will grow so rapacious that it will become its own angel of death. It will literally consume itself and regurgitate itself back out.

But from this decay the line of David will sprout, like vegetation that springs forth from no more than dirt and earth. *For vegetation cannot flourish unless the seed rots*. The second event is predicated on the first. It can be no other way.

It's interesting to note that Mashiach is referred to as the “*tzemach tzedek*”, literally the “righteous sprouting”. This is because his coming is identical to the growth of vegetation. First total decay and only then new life.

This is the way Mashiach will come. The worse things become, the more painful the birthpangs, the nearer is his coming. Until, like a mother who had delivered, all the tears and pain will be forgotten in the great joy of a new life.

## PARSHA OVERVIEW

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by G-d. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. G-d reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. G-d agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will not destroy it. Avraham "bargains" G-d down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot's daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon. Avraham moves to Gerar where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After G-d appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases

Avraham. As promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar's son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but G-d tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel and G-d promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation. Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that G-d is with him. In a tenth and final test, G-d instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, G-d sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham's unquestioning obedience, G-d promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The parsha ends with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

## LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

### THE DEAD SEA BEGINNINGS

How did the Dead Sea come into being? In this week's Torah reading we learn that Lot raised his eyes and saw the entire plain of the Jordan that it was well watered everywhere - before G-d destroyed Sodom and Amorah. (*Bereishet 13:10*).

In his commentary on Chumash, Rabbi Meir Leibish Malbim explains that the area occupied by the above-



mentioned sinful cities was the fertile delta of the Jordan River. When these cities were overturned by Heaven a huge crater was created. The water of the Jordan River rushed into this crater and formed a sea. The minerals released from the bowels of the earth by this great explosion joined with those waters to form the Dead Sea.

לע"ו  
מרת יוטא רחל בת ר' יוסף חיים ע"ה  
ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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## PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Why did G-d appear to Avraham after the *brit mila*?
2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
3. What were the missions of the three angels?
4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
7. When G-d related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
8. What "cry" from Sodom came before G-d?
9. How many angels went to Sodom?
10. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
11. Lot served the angels *matza*. Why?
12. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
13. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
14. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
15. In what merit did G-d save Lot?
16. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
17. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
18. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
19. Why did G-d listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
20. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the *akeidah* (binding)?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so G-d came to "visit" him.
2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of *mitzvot*.
6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
8. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
9. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
10. 19:1 - He was a judge.
11. 19:3 - It was Passover.
12. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
13. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
14. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
15. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
16. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
17. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
18. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
19. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
20. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.

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## SHABBAT 30 - 36

*“Do not do to others what is hateful to you.”*

This advice from the Sage Hillel was given to a non-Jew who expressed an interest in converting to Judaism but only on condition that he be taught the entire Torah while standing on one leg.

“This is the entire Torah,” he told him. “All the rest is elaboration. Now go and learn!”

This advice of Hillel was, of course, a repetition of the Torah command to love your neighbor as yourself but was said in Aramaic, the language spoken in Eretz Yisrael at that time.

• *Shabbat 31a*

*“One should never stand in a place where there is a danger to life.”*

To this counsel for personal safety, Rabbi Yannai added that it is wrong for one to take risks with the expectation that a miracle will save him. First of all, that miracle may never occur. Secondly, even if one merits a miracle it will cause a reduction in his record of merits.

• *Shabbat 32a*

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## THE JEWISH MIDNIGHT

**From: Vladimir**

*Dear Rabbi,  
I have heard various teachings about the Jewish midnight which are intriguing. Could you please elaborate? Thanks in advance.*

Dear Vladimir,

I'd be happy to shed some light on the Jewish midnight.

First, unlike the well-known song in *Fiddler on the Roof* which goes, "Sunrise, Sunset...", the Jewish day starts at night and continues through the day – sunset, sunrise. And since sunset and sunrise are constantly changing, so is the length of the night. This affects the reckoning of midnight, since in Judaism, midnight is not artificially and arbitrarily fixed at 12 AM but rather is literally at the mid-point of the night, and hence it is called "chatzot" in Hebrew from "chetzi" which means half. Therefore, in the winter, when the nights are long, midnight is generally before 12 AM; in the summer, when the nights are short, it is generally after. In any case, it changes from day to day throughout the seasons of the year.

Also, since according to Jewish thought there are spiritual forces behind everything in the physical world, there are specific qualities associated with the different parts of the night. There are generally three parts of the night, whose quality progresses from the physical to the spiritual. The first part of the night is affected by the noise of the activities of the day whose echo reverberates into the evening – referred to as the "mule braying". This is a turbulent time when the world transitions from material to physical. The next part is affected by the transcendence of the mundane into the spiritual, but at the initial lower level, negative spiritual forces are at "play" and have sway – referred to as "dogs howling". The last part of the night is characterized as a peaceful and tranquil time where the world is recharged and rejuvenated for a new day – referred to as a "suckling baby".

This understanding has several ramifications regarding our daily rhythms. If we focus on your specific interest, namely midnight, this is a time of the night which is poised between the physical and spiritual, where harmful forces and impurity reign. People who are awake at this time and interested in spiritually detrimental activities will unfortunately find many opportunities. People who are asleep at this time will also be affected, and it is at this time that the impurity of death associated with sleep settles in. Dreams that people have at this time of night are also generally unpleasant and disturbing.

It is for these reasons that according to Jewish teachings, a person should ideally sleep during the first part of the night, but be awake by (the Jewish) midnight in order to engage in Torah study, prayer, meditation and reflection. In this way one avoids the harmful effects of sleep at this time and mitigates the harmful effects of impure forces and the activities of the people under their sway, on the world. In fact, the Talmud describes that King David had a type of magical, mystical harp whose chords, when caressed by the nightly, northerly breeze, would sound a melody to awaken David before midnight. He would then spend the rest of the night learning Torah, praying and composing the Psalms until dawn.

The Talmud also discusses that at night generally, and particularly at midnight which is the apex of night, G-d Himself mourns the destruction of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem. This corresponds to the depth and darkness of exile in which we yearn for the dawn of Redemption. It is considered a very praiseworthy and beneficial thing for one to be up at this time to express mourning over the Destruction as well, thereby empathizing as it were with G-d's sorrow over our exile. The special prayer service that was composed for this time, to be recited by individuals or the community, is called "Tikkun Chatzot" – the Rectification of Midnight – whereby through repentance, yearning for G-d and our return to Israel, we will merit the rebuilding of the Temple and the final Redemption.

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## DISTRIBUTING CHARITY FUNDS

**Question:** Together with some other people in my community I have established a charity fund to assist needy families in our midst. There is a list of one hundred such families, so we have a choice of distributing one thousand dollars to each of these one hundred families, or two thousand dollars to the fifty most needy. What is the right thing to do?

**Answer:** In his commentary on the statement in *Pirkei Avot* (3:14) that everything depends on the quantity of deeds, Rambam writes that the more times a person gives charity the more he develops his characteristic of generosity, and that it is therefore preferable to give a thousand gold coins

to a thousand needy people than to give the entire sum to one alone.

Whether this rule of thumb applies as well to a situation in which one family is in greater need than another is a question which was put before the leading halachic authority Rabbi Yosef Sholom Eliyashiv by Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein of the Ramat Elchanan community of Bnei Brak. The response was that since all hundred are needy and are entitled to receive charity funds, there is no justification for distinguishing between more and less needy, because there is an obligation on the part of the donors to the communal fund to provide for all hundred.

## THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

### TAP ON THE SHOULDER

**A**nother baby was on the way to the Bnei Brak family already blessed with more children than their modest apartment could accommodate. When the expectant mother pointed out that there was absolutely no space for another bed, her Kollel (Torah study group) husband declared that he would ask his father for help in acquiring a larger home.

“What can you father possibly do more for us than he has already done?” challenged his wife. “You know he has no money left for such a purpose.”

“I didn’t mean my human father,” explained the righteous husband, “but rather my Father in Heaven.”

He traveled to Jerusalem and poured out his heart in prayer at the Kotel (some call it “The Weeping Wall”). Someone standing nearby saw the tears pouring from his eyes, tapped him on the shoulder and asked him what the cause of his prayerful outburst was. At first our hero simply responded that this was a private matter between him and

his Heavenly Father and continued his tearful prayers. The curious bystander once again asked why he was praying with such fervor. Upon hearing the plight of the worshiper he immediately took him to a real estate office and wrote a check for a larger apartment.

When this overjoyed *talmid chacham* scholar told his fellow scholars in the Kollel how his prayers were so miraculously answered, they decided to go as a group to the Kotel and pray for their own needs of larger living spaces. But when the anxiously awaited tap on the shoulder came to each of them, it was merely a beggar asking for a donation!

Brokenhearted they returned to their Kollel and asked their leader why they were not favored with the miracle of their colleague.

“You went to the Kotel looking for that mysterious human benefactor,” he explained, “while your colleague went there looking for his Father!”

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