

Toldot By Jeff Zhuk on 11/06/2021

This parsha is about Isaac and Rebekah family. Isaac married Rebekah when he was 40. For 20 years they did not have children. Then Isaac pleaded to G-d and Rebekah gave birth to two sons, Esau and Jacob. Isaac loved Esau as the first-born son and a skillful hunter. Rebekah favored Jacob, who was a quiet fellow and mostly stayed at home. Once Esau came home hungry after hunting. He was so hungry that he sold his birthright to Jacob for Jacob's stew. Isaac family settled originally in Gerar. With G-d's help his harvest grew bigger every year and he became a very wealthy man. At that point Philistines could not take it anymore and asked him to leave. Isaac moved to Beersheba that became their home. When Esau was 40 years old, he married two Hittite women. Rebekah was not happy with that marriage. When Isaac became old, he asked for Esau to give him his blessing. Isaac did not see well and Rebekah took this into account. She dressed Jacob into Esau clothes and Isaac gave his blessings to Jacob thinking that this was Esau. Then Esau came back and Isaac understood the mistake. Esau pressed Isaac to bless him. Esau wanted to kill Jacob and Rebekah sent Jacob to her brother Laban. Rebekah shared with Isaac her feelings about Esau marriage and asked Isaac again to bless Jacob. Esau understand now displeasure parents had with his marriage of Hittite women. So, he married one more woman, this time, Ishmael's daughter, Mahalath. This was the last line in the parsha. After finishing a parsha we usually ask: What can we learn from this parsha about life and Judaism? I will try my ideas and then will ask about yours. I can think of 3 important lessons that influence Jewish life. First: Through the intuition and closer connection to G-d, women know best what should be done and even how this should be done. Especially when this is about the family. One example is right here in the parsha. Another example is when G-d directly tells Abraham "Do exactly as Sarah told you". This also brings enormous responsibility to a Jewish woman. Another lesson: In Judaism a favored man is not with a strength and outdoor mastery but a "dweller of tents", an intellectual person. And the third lesson is about ideal and real life. Torah shows life in its complexity, teaches that some situations require different from ideal behavior. One sample in this parsha when Isaac is not straight open to Philistines neighbors, calling Rebekah his sister. He is afraid of being killed and he might have good reasons for such fear. What do you learn from this parsha? Comments: Neiel Baronberg: It is strange that we do not see a lot of discussions between people in this parsha and overall, in Torah. The stories are mostly told through actions. For example, there was no discussion between Isaac and Rebekah about the birthright. Chuck Jacobs: Maybe this is another sample to underline woman's superior intuition and understanding of what is right and wrong in family affairs. Kohelet <- Vayera D'Var 2 By Io Loechell on 10/23/2021 Good Morning! This is the 5th anniversary of my Bat Mitzvah, which seems unbelievable. Five years ago Samantha Rose was a newborn, and now between my husband Niels and me we have 5 grandchildren ranging in age from 2 months to 7 years. So I felt it would be special and appropriate to talk about Vayera again. Vayera seems magical in a number of ways, but also prophetic; it exactly corresponds to the Hebrew year and date of my birth, but also to the birth of the biblical Rebecca! The Torah portion I chanted 5 years ago lists children born to Abraham's relatives, including "Bethuel who begot Rivka" (or Rebecca). My clever parents chose a prophetic birthday for me. Regarding Vayera: The story begins with Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent, hoping to welcome any guests. It was hot out and he had just been circumcised (at the age of 90), so you gotta give the guy a lot of credit! When three visitors come he prepares a feast, not knowing they are actually angels in disguise. The visitors tell him that his 89-year-old wife Sarah will have a child in one year, and good sport Sarah laughs— instead of screaming! Abraham brings the angels to Sodom since they have been ordered to destroy it. Kind-hearted Abraham then tries to bargain with God to save any righteous people, starting with 50, and finally relenting to save even 10.

But apparently Sodom is so depraved that there aren't even 10. The angels then tell Abraham's nephew Lot that he and his family can escape as long as they do not look back. Lot's wife disobeys and is turned into a pillar of salt. Thinking that the world has been destroyed, Lot and his daughters hide in a cave. The daughters believe they must repopulate the world, so they get Lot drunk and seduce him. Abraham moves to a Philistine city, Gerar and, at age 90, Sarah gives birth to Isaac. I hope she had an epidural! Some time after Isaac is born, Sarah exiles Ishmael, Abraham's other son, and his mother Hagar into the wilderness. Later God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on a mountain and Abraham obeys, going as far as building an altar and holding up a knife. But at the last minute, an angel orders him to stop, and a ram is sacrificed instead. At the end of the Parasha, Abraham finds out his sister-in-law has given birth to children, one of them being Bethuel, father of Rebecca. Trying to come up with a single discussion topic from Vayera is daunting, since it is so multi-faceted. I have more questions than answers. For example, Abraham didn't give up on the Sodomites even though they were wicked. He actually talked back to God and bargained with him to stop the destruction if there were even 10 righteous men. So if Abraham didn't give up on the Sodomites, why did God? And if we're all part of God, why would God want to destroy any us? It seems like Abraham is mentoring God rather than vice versa. Here's another question. When Lot's wife looked back on the destruction of Sodom, she became a pillar of salt, so what does that mean? There are many interpretations, for example, that being a former Sodomite herself, she lacked the strength to leave that lifestyle behind. But if this is a parable about the dangers of looking back, I disagree. It's been said that who you are now is each age you have ever been, so now you are merely the latest version of yourself. And after all, what are we doing every Shabbos when we read the parasha? Looking back on our history to find relevant meaning. It's also been said that only when we see ourselves in the Torah can we say we've truly learned. So while it's healthy to be a forward-thinking person—and staying in the past can be destructive-- looking back in general gives us the opportunity to move ahead and not repeat our mistakes. When we're older, looking back allows us to recontextualize our lives and put them into perspective. Now on to some commentary on the parasha; in my Bat Mitzvah D'var Torah 5 years ago, I talked about the brilliance of Abraham's light, and how he bequeathed to every Jew the ability to radiate it, but that it is sometimes difficult to see this light because we live in an often-dark world. I believe that to connect to this light, we have to see the soul-like essence in each other. Here is my conclusion from five years ago: "I think every act we do has an effect, and the universe somehow hears us. Our acts are like little flames, connecting us to God and lighting up the darkness, helping us visualize that world we aspire to create. I believe that when there's enough light, the world will be healed and transformed." Now for today, with so much dissent in the world, I'd like to expound on this topic by discussing how we go about seeing different points of view from our own. Rabbi Michael Gold tells the story of two monks who were arguing about a flag blowing in the breeze. "One monk said, "It is the flag that causes the waving." The other monk said, "No, it is the wind that causes the waving." "If there was wind with no flag there would be nothing to move," insisted the first monk. "But if there was flag with no wind, the cloth would remain still," retorted the second. Back and forth they went, arguing and challenging one another, until they finally brought the matter before the great Zen master Hui Neng. "My dear friends," began the sage. "Ultimately, you are both wrong. It is neither the flag that causes the waving nor is it the wind that causes the waving. In the end, it is your very own mind that causes the waving." And with that, the matter was settled. Liel Leibovitz expanded on this in a column he wrote about Vayera, concluding that it's our own minds that shape how we experience the world rather than the events themselves. For example, we tend to choose media that's in line with our own perspectives instead of trying to understand the views of others. Leibovitz

wrote that failing to notice things right in front of us, or to see things that don't exist, is a central theme of Vayera. Here is one example: In the story of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's first son and his mother who were exiled, they run out of food and water; Hagar despairs and is sure that Ishmael will die. But then she hears an angel's voice telling her that Ishmael will live and found a great nation. Suddenly she sees a well and gives Ishmael a drink. You could ask, Did God miraculously create the well? Or was it there all the time but Hagar was too devastated and frightened to see it? We too can fail to see the possibilities that are offered to us because of our own anger and hopelessness, and likewise we can also fail to see the truth in a situation. Anais Nin wrote, "We do not see the world as it is. We see the world as we are." I was talking to my Niels about this Parasha because, having been an attorney, he was trained to look at things objectively and to see both sides of the same coin. (In fact, he still has this lawyerly thinking which drives me crazy when I only want him to see my side!) I asked him how he's able to see different perspectives and he said he would start by going backwards. First, what is the viewpoint of the witness? You have to figure out how they became who they are. What is their religious background, education, socioeconomic status? Do they come from a nuclear or extended family? What is the relationship between their beliefs and their background? For example, suppose someone from a poor family happens to attend an affluent high school with a perceived liberal student body. He may be resentful and end up with conservative values as a result. Of course that's just one outcome, and he could alternatively become more empathetic, but the point is that people are shaped by their early lives, and if we can learn to walk a mile in their shoes, we can build a connection to them. Colin Powell advised that to keep a coalition together, you have to stop and think about the history, culture, language and above all, the demands that your counterparts are facing. Consider the unlikely friendships between Orrin Hatch and Ted Kennedy, John Kenneth Galbraith and William F. Buckley, and even Michelle Obama and George Bush, which started with him offering her a piece of gum when they were sitting together. All of them must have sought and found common ground. Of course it's not always convenient to consider someone else's point of view. If someone cuts in front of me while I'm politely waiting in line at the grocery store, I probably won't take the time to think about their socioeconomic background. I'm much more likely to call them something evil under my breath. But we can practice; the more we try to see another's perspective, the easier it becomes to connect, until eventually it can become our natural response. Five years ago, in concluding my talk about seeing the soul essence of people, I wrote: "So together, let us light the darkness and create that world of which we can only dream." However we do it, that is still the dream.