



VAYERA

G-D IS NATURAL

It's Never Too Early to Start Talking about G-d

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Vayera

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 to not 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 Mo'ab and Ammon.

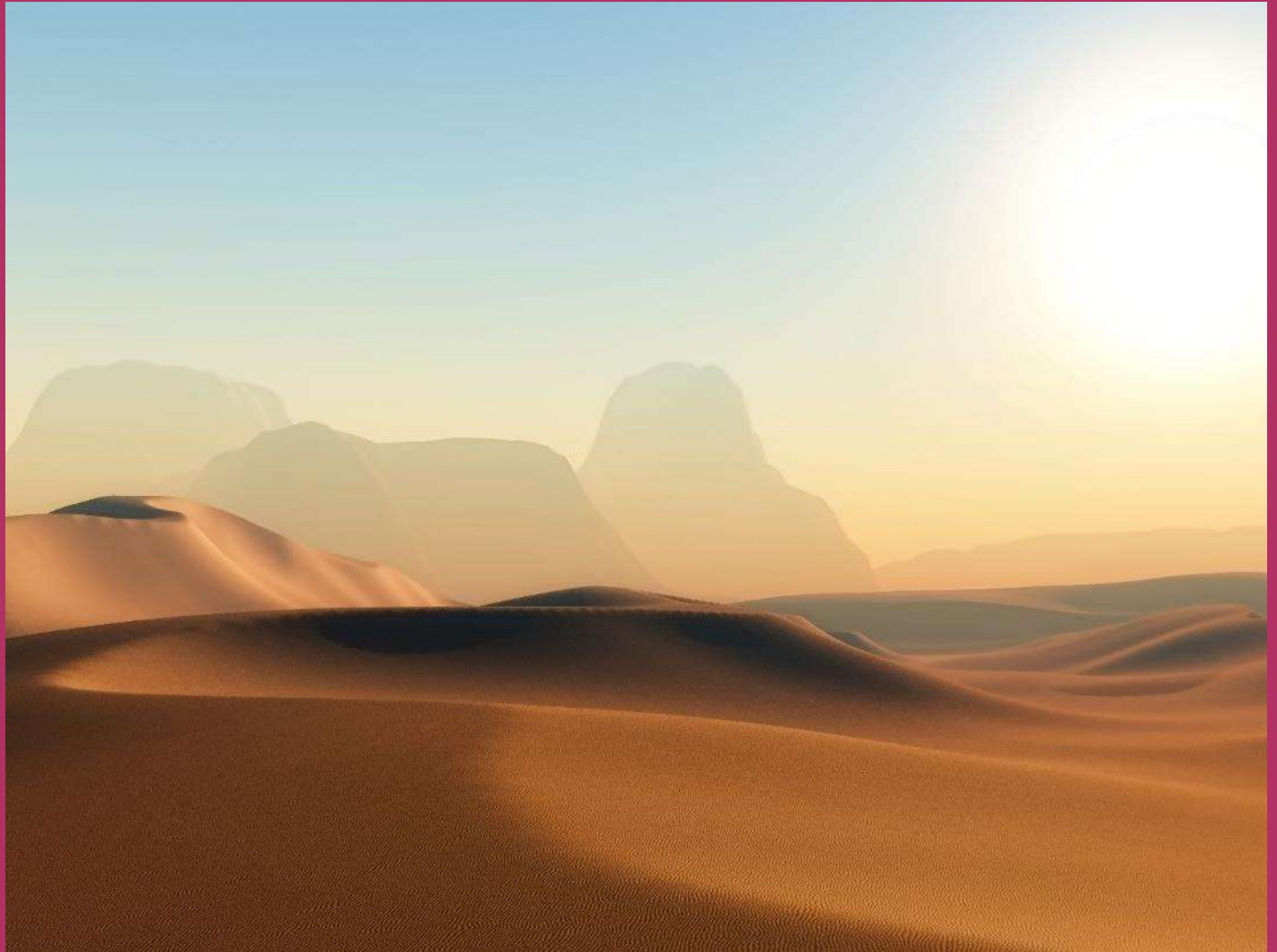
Abraham moves to Gerar, where the Philistine king Abimelech takes Sarah—who is presented as Abraham's sister—to his palace. In a dream, G-d warns Abimelech that he will die unless he returns the woman to her husband. Abraham explains that he feared he would be killed over the beautiful Sarah.

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.

“Avraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent, and G-d appeared to him.”



TEXT 1

Genesis 18:1

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלְנֵי מַמְרֵא, וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם.

And G-d appeared to Abraham in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot.

QUESTION



“Why did G-d reveal Himself to Abraham, but does not reveal Himself to us?”

ANSWER

“When a Jew who is a tzadik decides at the age of ninety-nine that he must circumcise himself, he is worthy of having G-d reveal Himself to him.”

TEXT 2

*Rabbi Yosef
Yitzchak
Schneersohn,
Cited in Hayom
Yom,
9 Cheshvan*

בְּהִיּוֹת אֲדוֹנִי אָבִי מוֹרֵי וְרַבִּי בֶּן ד' אוֹ ה' שָׁנִים, נִכְנָס אֶל זִקְנּוֹ הַצֶּמַח צְדֵק בְּשַׁבַּת קֹדֶשׁ פָּרָשַׁת וַיֵּרָא וְהִתְחִיל לִבְכוֹת, בָּאֲמָרוֹ: מִפְּנֵי מָה נִרְאָה ה' אֶל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ, וְלָנוּ אֵינּוּ נִרְאָה?

וַיַּעֲנֶהוּ הַצֶּמַח צְדֵק: אִזּוֹ אֵיךְ אֶצְדִּיק, צוֹ נִיִּין אֹן נִיִּנְצִיק יָאֵר אִיז מַחְלִיט אִז עַר דֶּאֱרַף זֵיךְ מֶל זִיִּין, אִיז עַר וְעֶרְט אִז דְּעֵר אוֹיְבֵעֲרִשְׁטֵער זָאל זֵיךְ בֶּאֱנוּיִזְעֵן צוֹ אִים.

When my revered father [the Rebbe Rashab] was four or five years old, he came to his grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek, on Shabbat Parshat Vayera and began to cry. “Why did G-d reveal Himself to Abraham, but does not reveal Himself to us?” he complained.

The Tzemach Tzedek answered, “When a Jew who is a tzadik decides at the age of ninety-nine that he must circumcise himself, he is worthy of having G-d reveal Himself to him.”

QUESTIONS

- What is the Tzemach Tzedek's answer, that such a level is unattainable?
- What was the Tzemach Tzedek trying to teach the Rebbe Rashab?
- Does this story hold relevance for us?

If our Rebbe told us
this story, it's because
it contains a universal
and eternal message.





The Tzemach Tzedek could have easily told his grandson that he can't attain the level of Avraham Avinu.

What *was* he trying to say??

TEXT 3

*Midrash, Devarim
Rabah 2:7*

אמר רבי יהושע בן קרחה: . . . דמה משה את עצמו לאברהם ולא הועיל לו כלום. כיצד? אברהם קרא לו הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר הִנְנִי, שָׁנָאֹמֶר: "ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר הִנְנִי" (בראשית כב, א), מהו הִנְנִי? הִנְנִי לכהנה הִנְנִי למלכות - וְזָכָה לְכֹהֵנָה וְזָכָה לְמַלְכוּת. זָכָה לְכֹהֵנָה מִנִּין? שָׁנָאֹמֶר: "נִשְׁבַּע ה' וְלֹא יִנָּחֵם, אֶתָּה כֹהֵן לְעוֹלָם עַל דְּבַרְתִּי מִלְכִּי צֶדֶק" (תהלים קי, ד). וְזָכָה לְמַלְכוּת, שָׁנָאֹמֶר: "אֵל עֶמֶק נְשׁוּהָ הוּא עֶמֶק הַמֶּלֶךְ" (בראשית יד, יז).

ואף משה בקש לעשות כן, שָׁנָאֹמֶר: "ויאמר משה משה, ויאמר הִנְנִי" (שמות ג, ד), הִנְנִי לכהנה הִנְנִי למלכות. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא: "אל תתהדר לפני מלך, ובמקום גדלים אל תעמד" (משלי כה, ו).

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah said: . . . Moshe likened himself to Abraham, but it was of no avail to him. How so? Abraham called to G-d, saying, "Here I am," as it is stated, "And He said, 'Abraham,' and he said, 'Here I am'" (Genesis 22:1). What does "Here I am" mean? It means, "Here I am for priesthood; here I am for kingship." And he merited both priesthood and kingship. How did he merit priesthood? As it is stated, "G-d has sworn and will not relent: 'You are a priest forever by the word of the righteous king'" (Psalms 110:4).

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TEXT 3

*Midrash, Devarim
Rabah 2:7*

And he merited kingship, as it is stated, “And the king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the defeat of Chedorla’omer along with the kings who were with him, at the Valley of Shaveh; that is, the King’s Valley” (Genesis 14:17).

Similarly, Moses sought to do the same. As it is stated, “And He said, ‘Moses, Moses!’ and Moses said, ‘Here I am’” (Exodus 3:4)—‘Here I am for priesthood; here I am for kingship.’ But the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Do not exalt yourself in the presence of a king, and do not stand in the place of the great ones” (Proverbs 25:6)

The Rebbe Rashab was
four or five years old.
Too young to study Torah
or do anything in Judaism!



TEXT 4

*Talmud,
Ketubot Soa*

אמר ליה רב לרב שמואל בר שילת: בציר מבר שית—לא תקביל. בר שית—קביל וספי ליה כתורא.

Rav said to Rav Shmuel bar Shilat, “Do not accept a child less than six years old to study. Once he is six, accept him and stuff him with Torah like an ox.”

TEXT 5

*Maimonides,
Mishneh Torah,
Laws of
Buying and Selling
29:6*

קטן עד שש שנים אין הקנייתו לאחרים כלום. ומשש שנים עד שיגדיל, אם יודע בטיב משא ומתן – מקחו מקח וממכרו ממכר ומתנתו קיימת.

The following rules apply to a minor: Until he or she is six years old, they may not transfer property to others at all. From the age of six until they attain majority, they should be tested. If the minor possesses an understanding of the nature of financial transactions, any purchases or sales they undertake, and any presents they give, are binding.

RAMBAM



We can't expect children to find resonance with Torah study and G-dliness.

TZEMACH TZEDEK



Children are comfortable with G-d. They connect with, and appreciate, the concept of G-d.

TEXT 6

*Maimonides,
Mishnah, Sanhedrin,
Introduction to
Chapter 10*

שים בדעתך כי נער קטן הביאוהו אצל המלמד ללמדו תורה, וזהו הטוב הגדול לו לענין מה שישגיג מן השלמות. אלא שהוא, למיעוט שניו וחולשת שכלו, אינו מבין מעלת אותו הטוב ולא מה שיגיעהו בשבילו מן השלמות. ולפיכך בהכרח יצטרך המלמד, שהוא יותר שלם ממנו, שיזרז אותו על הלימוד בדברים שהם אהובים אצלו לקטנות שניו, ויאמר לו: קרא ואתן לך אגוזים או תאנים, ואתן לך מעט דבש. ובזה הוא קורא ומשתדל – לא לעצם הקריאה, לפי שאינו יודע מעלתה, אלא כדי שיתנו לו אותו המאכל.

Picture this: A young child is brought before the teacher to learn Torah, which is the greatest good for them in terms of what they can achieve in perfection. However, due to his or her youth and limited intellectual capacity, they do not comprehend the true value of that good, nor do they grasp the level of perfection they can attain through it. Therefore, the Student Page 65 [118] LESSON 4. Vayera / G-d Is Natural teacher, who is more complete than the child is, must necessarily encourage them to study with things that they find enjoyable due to his or her youth. The teacher may say to the child, “Study, and I will give you nuts or figs, and I will give you a little honey.” In doing so, the child studies and strives not solely for the act of studying, as they do not understand its greatness, but rather to receive the food as a reward.

TEXT 7

*The Rebbe,
Rabbi Menachem
Mendel Schneerson,
Likutei Sichot 15, P. 133*

און דא מאנט מען ביי א קינד, אז אים זאל "אנרירען" און "דערנעמען" ועד כדי בכיה — ניט טוב גשמי וכיוצא בזה, נאר — פארוואס דער אויבערשטער באווייזט זיך ניט צו אים. דאס הייסט, אז מען דארף מחנך זיין א קינד אז ג-טלעכקייט זאל ווערן א "טייל פון זיין לעבן" ("דברים שהם אהובים אצלו"), ביז אז אים זאל שטארק פארארן וואס דער אויבערשטער באווייזט זיך ניט צו אים און אין דעם אופן ווי ער האט זיך באוויזן צו אברהם אבינו

This story teaches us that even a child can be bothered, to the point of tears—not by physical trivialities—but rather, by why G-d has not revealed Himself to them. In other words, we must educate our children that they should know that G-dliness is part of their lives (and it's something they can even enjoy), to the point that it should truly bother them why G-d does not reveal Himself to them the same way He revealed Himself to our Patriarch Abraham.



This story teaches that children can, and should, be educated to feel close with G-d—so much so, that His absence in their lives brings them to tears.

TEXT 8

*Lauren Steele,
“Simple Ways to Talk to
your Kids About G-D,”
Fatherly.com,
October 2017*

If they aren't involved in religious practices, children typically start becoming aware of G-d and religion between the ages of four and six—just by picking up on its presence in the world. By age six, if your kid hasn't asked about G-d, you can feel free to ask them yourself—just make sure that you're both prepared.

As for the idea that a child's belief in G-d is not any more profound than her belief in the tooth fairy, studies indicate that this is not the case.

TEXT 9

*Ashley Merryman,
“What Do Children
Understand
About G-D?”
Newsweekly.com,
October 2009*

What do kids understand about G-d? Jean Piaget—the Swiss early pioneer of child development—concluded that children were incapable of having a true concept of G-d; they just thought of Him as a supersized, magical version of their parents. But more recent research suggests that Piaget was underestimating kids. Children as young as four understand that a prayer is qualitatively different than a wish—that it’s a special kind of conversation between them and G-d. It’s around that same age that kids show some appreciation of divine omnipotence and omniscience. They can explain to you that a person made a car or a pizza, but it was G-d who made the mountains.

By five or six, they understand that, even though Mommies are very smart, G-d knows things that Mommies can’t know. And they have affluent enough mastery of that principle, that they can predict G-d’s superior knowledge in novel circumstances. School-age children believe that G-d is in direct control of their lives—much more so than adolescents or adults.

TEXT 10

*Rabbi Lord
Jonathan Sacks,
“The Spiritual Child,”
Rabbisacks.org*

Children are naturally spiritual. They are fascinated by the vastness of the universe and our place in it. They have the same sense of wonder that we find in some of the greatest of the psalms. They love stories, songs and rituals. They like the shape and structure they give to time, and relationships, and the moral life. To be sure, sceptics and atheists have often derided religion as a child’s view of reality, but that only serves to strengthen the corollary, that a child’s view of reality is instinctively, intuitively religious. Deprive a child of that by ridiculing faith, abandoning ritual, and focusing instead on academic achievement and other forms of success, and you starve him or her of some of the most important elements of emotional and psychological well-being. As Professor [Lisa] Miller⁴ shows, the research evidence is compelling. Children who grow up in homes where spirituality is part of the atmosphere at home are less likely to succumb to depression, substance abuse, aggression and high-risk behaviors including physical risk-taking and “a sexuality devoid of emotional intimacy.”

CONTINUED ►

TEXT 10

*Rabbi Lord
Jonathan Sacks,
“The Spiritual Child,”
Rabbisacks.org*

Spirituality plays a part in a child’s resilience, physical and mental health and healing. It is a key dimension of adolescence and its intense search for identity and purpose. The teenage years often take the form of a spiritual quest. And when there is a cross-generational bond through which children and parents come to share a sense of connection to something larger, an enormous inner strength is born. Indeed, the parent-child relationship, especially in Judaism, mirrors the relationship between G-d and us.

We have the power to reveal
the presence of G-dliness in
our lives.

We just have to cut away
layers of ego and negativity
from our heart that conceal it.



TEXT 11a

Deuteronomy 10:16

וּמִלֶּתֶם אֶת עֶרְלַת לִבְבְּכֶם, וְעֶרְפְּכֶם לֹא תִקְשׁוּ עוֹד.

Circumcise the foreskin of your heart and be stiff-necked no more.

TEXT 11b

*Maimonides,
Sefer Hamitzvot,
The Fourth Principle*

"ומלתם את ערלת לבבכם", רוצה לומר שיקבל וישמע כל מה שקדם זכרו מן המצוה. וכן
"וערפכם לא תקשו עוד", רוצה לומר אל תקשה את לבך ותקבל כל מה שצויתך ולא תעבור עליו

“Circumcise the foreskin of your heart” means that one should accept and obey all the mitzvot. “Be stiff-necked no more” means do not harden your heart; accept that which I have commanded you, and do not transgress it.

TEXT 12

*The Rebbe,
Rabbi Menachem
Mendel Schneerson,
Likutei Sichot 15, P.134*

דאס איז א הוראה ווי אזוי יעדערער קען
צוקומען צו "וירא אליו ה'", דורך דער החלטה
אז אין וועלכן מצב רוחני מען זאל נאר זיין . . .
דארף מען זיך מל זיין, דאס מיינט: מען דארף
זיך באווארענען און הארעווען אויף צו
אראפנעמען דעם צודעק, דעם העלם והסתר
העולם . . .

דאס הייסט, מען דארף מחנך זיין א קינד צו ניט
נתפעל ווערן פון העלם והסתר העולם — אויף
אים זאל ניט פועל זיין וואס "וועלט" זאגט, נאר
וואס תורה וויל. און די החלטה ביי אים זאל זיין
אזוי שטארק, ביז "גם כי יזקין לא יסור ממנה"
— דאס איז ביי אים אזוי איינגעווארצלט, אז ער
געדענקט אלעמאל, אפילו ווען ער איז שוין אין א
העכערע און אין א גאר גאר העכערער דרגא אין
עבודת ה', אז ער מוז זיך "מל" זיין.

There is a lesson here for everyone: each of us can achieve a revelation of G-dliness by resolving that no matter how high or low our spiritual level, we can still "circumcise our hearts," meaning we can cut off, through hard work, the mundane aspects of our lives that conceal G-dliness. This means that we must educate our children not to be disheartened by the mundanity of the world.

The child should know that the world is not significant—the only thing that is significant is the Torah. This conviction should be so resolute that it will last into old age. The child will always remember, no matter how high a spiritual level they achieve, that they should "circumcise their hearts."

ANSWERS

- What is the Tzemach Tzedek's answer, that such a level is unattainable?
- What was the Tzemach Tzedek trying to teach the Rebbe Rashab?
- **The Tzemach Tzedek's answer to his grandchild—and, by extension, to every one of us is that Avraham Avinu merited this G-dly revelation because of his decision to circumcise himself. Circumcision in a spiritual sense means to cut away the mundanity and distractions of this world. By so doing, we prime ourselves to our natural feeling for G-dliness.**
- Does this story hold relevance for us?
- **The message for us, in a broader sense, is that like small children, we're naturally inclined to feel G-dliness. All we have to do is get out of our own way.**

KEY POINTS

1. There's a story with the Rebbe Rashab as a young child approaching his grandfather the Tzemach Tzedek, crying and asking why G-d didn't appear to him as He did to Abraham.
2. Typically, we educate children on their level, enticing them to Torah and education with sweets and other rewards.
3. The story with the Rebbe Rashab at such a young age teaches us that children have a natural disposition toward G-d, and we need not be afraid to instill it within them.
4. Cutting away mundanity and worldly distractions triggers our natural disposition toward, and faith in, G-d.

