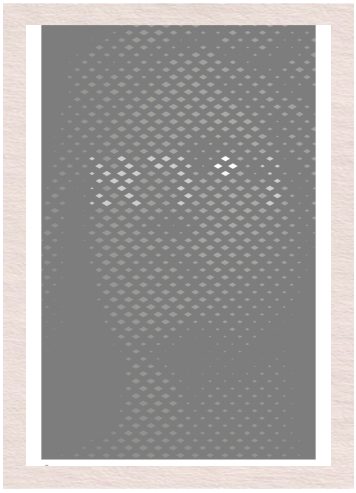
Vayera: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



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The parsha begins with Abraham, aged 99, three days after becoming the first Jew ever to be circumcised. He's talking to God, but interrupts the all-important conversation when **three guests approach his tent.** They're angels disguised as men, and they promise that, in one year's time, Abraham's wife, **Sarah, will give birth to a son. Sarah laughs.**

Abraham negotiates with God in an effort to spare Sodom and Gomorrah, but to no avail. Meanwhile, in Sodom, his nephew, Lot, struggles to keep two strangers safe from a murderous mob, and learns that the strangers are two of the three angels who had earlier visited Abraham. They inform Lot that Sodom is about to be destroyed, and command him to leave. Lot's wife, looking back, turns to a pillar of salt, and, later, Lot's daughters, **believing themselves to be the last people in the world**, get Lot drunk, lie with him, and become pregnant.

Abraham moves to Gerar and **introduces Sarah as his sister**, fearing that he may be killed by someone coveting his beautiful wife. The Philistine king Abimelech takes Sarah to his palace, but God appears to him in a dream and urges him to return her to Abraham, her husband. **Sarah finally gives birth to a son, Isaac**, and asks Abraham to **banish her maid, Hagar,** and Hagar's son, Ishmael. God appears to the mother and the son in the desert, **saving their lives.**

Finally, God tests Abraham by **commanding him to sacrifice Isaac** on Mount Moriah. We all know how that story ends.

> "He then bound Isaac, his son, tying his hands and feet behind him, and placed him on the altar, on top of the wood."

Take a deeper dive

The story we read this week, the story of the binding of Isaac, is one of the most famous—and terrifying—in all of the Torah. But as a story, it's… strange. We get almost no detail, no dialogue, no description of thought or feeling.

Which, the famous literary critic Erich Auerbach observed, as precisely the point.

Read the Greek epic poems, Auerbach argued, and you get a story that is "Clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated," and "contains nothing but itself." What did Odysseus think? What did he feel? What did he say and to whom? We don't have to wonder, because Homer tells us all that, in minute detail, in a story that unfolds like an action movie.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is different. Characters are introduced without names or descriptions (who, for example, are two anonymous young men accompanying father and son on their date with destiny?). Time is condensed. Major questions go unanswered. Why does God test Abraham so? What is Abraham thinking when he climbs up the mountain where he knows he'd soon slaughter his child? The Bible never tells us. Everything about its way of telling stories, Auerbach writes, is "fraught with background."

To read the story of the Binding of Isaac, then, isn't merely to be a passive consumer of information or feeling. It's to ask very difficult questions and grapple with very difficult ideas. And these ideas and questions all come down to one word, repeated several times throughout the parsha: ***Hinneni***, or **here I am.**

When God calls on Abraham to do the most terrible deed imaginable and sacrifice his son, Abraham gives a one-word answer: *Hinneni*, I am completely and wholly present for you. But a few verses later, suspecting that something's wrong, Abraham's son, Isaac, asks him what's wrong. Abraham replies to his boy using the very same word: *Hinneni*.

It doesn't take a Torah scholar to realize that we have a problem right then and there. Both Hinnenis can't coexist. **Abraham can't be there for God and be there for Isaac.** One contradicts the other. So he binds the boy, and lifts up the knife, and, in the nick of time, an angel speaks to him. Here's what the angel says: "Abraham, Abraham."

Why call on him twice? Because the angel is speaking to both Abrahams, to Abraham the child of God and to Abraham the father of Isaac. And when he's called, Abraham, again, says the one word that has become his catch-phrase: *Hinneni*. And in so doing, he resolves the conflict. Because there can be no conflict. What God demands of Abraham and the wellbeing of his boy are, and will forever be, one and the same. **The head and the heart never really contradict each other.** Because to be alive, to be here, to be wholly present — to answer Hinneni as Abraham once did — is to be alive and here and present for all that life has to offer, materially and spiritually, and to understand that they're never truly at war.

Why, then, did Abraham need to go through the ordeal of the Binding? In his famous essay on the subject, the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard posited the reason was to teach us that while human ethics are limited to the human mind and imagination, religion offers a higher order of justice and mercy we just can't comprehend. And he delivered this idea in a parable that resonates still: "When a rich man goes driving at night with lights on his carriage," Kierkegaard wrote, "he sees a small area better than the poor man who drives in the dark – but he does not see the stars. The lights prevent that. It is the same with all intellectual understanding. It sees well close at hand but takes away the infinite outlook."

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