

Vayera
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SHABBAT SHALOM!

The parashah I am about to chant in Hebrew is called Vayera. Parashah means Torah portion and it takes a lot of studying, practicing, and repetition to learn. Each word has one or more markings called trope that tells how to chant it. Once you learn the trope you must then be able to chant it just as it is written in the Torah, without the markings. I will now give you a narrative, a *d'var Torah*, of my Torah portion.

In Beer Sheba, Abraham, an old man is recuperating from his circumcision. He is sitting outside his tent resting in the heat of the day as three strangers approach him. Not knowing who they are, he goes to them and invites them to rest and have food and water. These men are not strangers, but angels sent by G-d. They came to inform Abraham of two things. First, his wife Sarah who is very old will bear him a child within the year. Second, that they would be traveling to Sodom and Gemorah as G-d would destroy the cities because of all the evil there. Abraham tries to convince G-d to spare all the residents if there are some who are not evil. G-d agrees to save them all if at least 10 righteous people can be found. When they arrive, Lot, Abraham's nephew, protects the messengers from being attacked by the evil citizens of Sodom.

Unfortunately, 10 good people could not be found. They inform Lot and his family that Sodom will be destroyed and to be safe they must leave and not look back at the city. Lot's wife does not obey G-d's commands, looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Just as the angels said, Sarah gives birth to Isaac when Abraham is 100 years old. Abraham already has an older son named Ishmael with his concubine, Hagar. Sarah is very protective of her son, Isaac, and tells Abraham to send Ishmael away when he teases Isaac. G-d tells Abraham to listen to Sarah and He will watch over Ishmael and keep him well. Abraham obeys G-d's wishes and continues to live his life as a faithful and obedient follower of G-d's commandments. G-d once again comes to Abraham with specific instructions to give his son, Isaac, up as a human sacrifice on Mount Moriah. Abraham does not tell Sarah where he is taking Isaac and he does not tell Isaac why they are going to Mount Moriah. Isaac helps to carry the wood up the mountain not knowing his father is planning to slaughter him. Abraham binds Isaac to the altar and just as he raises his knife to slaughter him, an angel of G-d commands him to stop and take the ram in the bush as an offering instead. G-d, now convinced of Abraham's obedience, faith, and devotion instructs him not to take Isaac's life.

When Abraham is in pain from his circumcision he puts the needs of strangers before his own and makes sure they are comfortable and taken care of. He is loving towards the strangers, but he is quick to offer his son, his own flesh and blood as a sacrifice to G-d. How could he care about the welfare of strangers and not about his own son? Should he have argued with G-d like he did when G-d said he would kill all the people of Sodom and Gemorah? When is it OK to question authority? Should he have said NO to G-d or did he know that if he proved his devotion and obedience to G-d that G-d would let no harm come to Isaac? Isaac trusted his father to take care of him and protect him. Should Abraham have cared more about his relationship with his son than his relationship with G-d? I cannot answer a lot of these questions, but I do believe in questioning authority.

This parashah has a lot of meaning for me, it is very powerful. It is about the importance of believing in G-d, about obedience, devotion, trust, miracles, and family relationships. It is about "*Bikkur Cholim*", the mitzvah of visiting the sick, which is what I did for my mitzvah project. G-d provides an example of this when Abraham was recovering from his circumcision. G-d sent 3 angels to distract him from his pain. In the spirit of *bikkur cholim*, I have been playing my trumpet with the Heavy Shtetl Klezmer Band once a month on Sunday mornings at The Hebrew Home and Hospital. I am the youngest member of the group and everyone treats me like family. I love seeing the smiles on the resident's faces. When we perform they are so happy. Some of them dance, some sit in their chairs and move to the music or clap and sing along. They come alive. We can't take their illnesses away, but while we are there they forget about their discomforts. My maternal great grandparents were residents of The Hebrew Home; they would have loved to hear us play. You can help me with my project by taking whatever talents you have and go to The Hebrew Home and Hospital to visit the residents, they love this. You will make them feel better and bring happiness to them and to yourself.

It is my responsibility as a Jew to remember my roots and to continue the traditions passed on to me to the next generation. I stand before you today a very lucky Jewish man. I am a third generation Holocaust survivor because my zayde is a Holocaust survivor. I come from a family whose Jewish heritage runs very deep. I am named Yonaton Lazaar. Yonaton is for my maternal great grandmother, Johanna Bramson. She was a special woman. I am told family was very important to her. She came to this country with my great grandfather, Joseph and my grandmother, Margaret to escape the Nazis. She worked very hard and she never let any of life's hardships she faced keep her down. Johanna loved the arts, especially opera. She was a wonderful cook and seamstress. I am named Lazaar, for my paternal great grandfather, Louis Cohen. He was a special man. He came to this country from Poland and fought during WW1 in France. He loved to read books and was a carpenter by trade. He was a quiet, but strong man who with his wife, Jennie, raised 4 sons during the depression. Family was very important to him as well.

Just as Abraham had to prove himself to G-d, I feel like I am always being tested and have to work hard to prove myself to others. I am blessed, as G-d has sent many angels my way to help me through this process. At times, things are difficult for me, but I have a lot of people in my life who are my advocates: My parents are always there for me, to guide me, and to push me to try harder, especially with things I really don't want to do. I know they love me very much and only want the best for me just like Sarah and Abraham wanted for their son, Isaac. My big brother, Jason, is my hero. I always look up to him. I have always wanted to be just like him and it has made things difficult for me at times because we are different. I am learning that I have my own great qualities and unique abilities. Since the day he came home from college last June, he started helping me with my Bar Mitzvah studies. My nana and zayde are always there for me. My nana always takes me where I need to go when my mom is working. I love going to their house, they have good food and cable. I love listening to my zayde's stories about his childhood. Even though they are very sad and painful for him to talk about, he tells me. I especially love to hear about his mother, Chaya Gittle. Chaya Gittle had a very good heart, she invited people to come home for Shabbat and they would eat and sleep in her home even though there was not enough room and they had to sleep on the floor. She performed "gemilut hasadim", acts of loving kindness, just like Abraham did with the 3 strangers, putting others before herself. My grandpa and Sherri are always there for me. I love going to their house for holiday dinners and down to the beach. It is always so much fun. My grandfather sets a wonderful example for me. He still practices his instruments everyday. Last Purim I was honored to perform next to him on the stage of The Agudas Achim Synagogue and play with the Klezmer Band.

My mother says that when we go through a hard time, a difficulty, or a problem it is for a reason. We learn something from it and then something better comes our way after. She believes that things are b'shert, meant to happen. I know she is right because it happened to me when Mr. Pinchover invited me to play my trumpet in The Heavy Shtetl Klezmer Band. This is how I came to my mitzvah project. Mr. Pinchover, it was b'shert that you came into my life, you have not only been my mentor, my Bar Mitzvah teacher, but a friend. You made it possible for me to enrich the lives of other people, thereby making me feel good about myself. You noticed that I am musical. Thank you for helping me to prepare for this day. Rabbi Small thank you for being there for me and my family and for guiding me with my d'var Torah and to appreciate my parashah and its many messages. I want to thank Cantor Cohn for teaching me how to lead the services and how to put on my teffilin and tallis. Thank you to Mrs. Fox, being in Beit Safer Tichon is much more fun than Hebrew school because I get to be a student aid. Thank you to all of my religious school teachers for guiding me through Hebrew school. A special thank you to Ms. Wolpoe, Mrs. Mackey, and Mrs. Sucoll, she has been like a bubbe to me. Thank you ALL for making this day very special for me.