

# Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Vayera, Genesis, Chapters 21-22 | November 4, 2023

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## The Eyes Have It: The Vision of Abraham and the Faith of Israel

The intellectually intricate tradition known as Judaism often described itself as originating in the vision of a child, one gifted with the ability to see what adults could not. The Midrash tells us of a three-year-old Abram who, in Mesopotamia, studied the heavens with wonder, saw the setting sun, the waxing and waning moon, and the cycles of the stars, and ultimately cognized a Creator in the universe. For Maimonides, this journey to faith took some time; the curiosity displayed by the three-year-old Abram, joined with the intellectual maturity of the adult Abraham, ultimately led to the discovery of monotheism. This reminds one of a scene in the children's book *The Phantom Tollbooth*, where the protagonist, a boy named Milo, encounters another child his own age named Alec, whose head is higher than Milo's—for he walks on air:

“Well,” said the boy, “in my family, everyone is born in the air, with his head at exactly the height it’s going to be when he’s an adult, and then we all grow toward the ground. When we’re fully grown up or, as you can see, grown down, our feet finally touch. . . . You certainly must be very old to have reached ground already.”

“Oh no,” said Milo seriously. “In my family we all start on the ground and grow up, and we never know how far until we actually get there.”

“What a silly system.” The boy laughed. “Then your head keeps changing its height and you always see things in a different way! Why, when you’re fifteen things won’t look at all the way they did when you were ten, and at twenty everything will change again.”

We perceive differently at different ages; Abraham’s uniqueness lies in his ability to join perspectives together, melding maturity and childlike wonder. As we shall see, this theme is manifest throughout his story, allowing us to see, in turn, how hardheaded adulthood, joined with humble faith, is flourishing in the State of Israel right now.

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The contrast between the two ways of growing provided by *The Phantom Tollbooth* is especially interesting because our Torah reading is, rightly understood, all about sight. Its title, “*Vayera*,” literally means “And He made Himself seen,” and so many references to sight appear in the *parashah* that we will only be able to reflect on some. The stage is set by the first passage, in which the verb is repeated:

And God appeared [literally, “made Himself seen”] to Abraham on the plains of Mamre, as he sat in the door of his tent in the heat of the day. And he lifted up his eyes and **he saw**, and behold, three men stood over him, and **he saw**, and he ran toward them from the door of the tent and bowed to the earth.  
(Genesis 18:1–2)

Did Abraham see God, or three men? The standard rabbinic interpretation is that both sightings occurred; hence the phrase “he saw” appears twice. One man’s vision was able to encompass the presence of both God and of man. Abraham, the rabbis explain, was visited by God following his circumcision; but even in the midst of this divine encounter Abraham still caught sight of three travelers, to whom Abraham ran in greeting, fulfilling his sacred calling as a monotheistic minister to humanity.

One is reminded of a remarkable reflection about vision by the psychologist Alison Gopnik in her book *The Philosophical Baby*. The title provocatively inspires us to ask how children see the world. For Gopnik, adults focus single-mindedly on one aspect of reality, and in the moment see little else. But small children approach the world with constant curiosity; their vision ranges widely, and they are actually, in a certain sense, more conscious than adults. She utilizes the phrase “spotlight consciousness” to describe the adult experience of the world, citing a famous experiment:

For adults, attention can also be endogenous, directed voluntarily at particular objects, like that spotlight. In this case, attending to one thing can actually make us much less conscious of the other things around us, even salient or new or unexpected things. . . . Some psychologists call it “inattention blindness.” In one dramatic experiment, designed by Dan Simons, you look at a video of several people throwing a ball. The instruction is to count the number of times the ball goes from hand to hand. The players weave in and out so this takes some effort; it’s like trying to follow the pea in the old shell game. Then the experimenter asks if you noticed anything strange. “Nothing,” you say. Now he plays the video again, but this time he says you don’t have to follow the ball. And you see that someone in a gorilla suit walked slowly right through the middle of the scene! You were looking right at the gorilla but literally didn’t see it, because your attention was so focused on the ball.

In contrast, children take everything in; the vision alights on one aspect of existence, then another. Gopnik calls this “lantern consciousness,” and it is found in “William Blake’s world in a grain of sand, William Wordsworth’s splendour in the grass. This kind of phenomenology has historically often been associated with childhood.” To read her description is to be reminded of the midrashic description of Abraham as a child. Here, Abraham, already in his nineties, retained the capacity to see as he once did, looking at the world with wonder as he did in Mesopotamia decades before, his spiritual sight marked by a lantern consciousness.



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The men turn out to be angels, informing Abraham of the imminent birth of Isaac. Two of the celestial beings then journey to Sodom, in order to save Abraham's nephew Lot before the sinful city is destroyed. Here too sight is mentioned.

And the two angels came to Sodom at evening; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom; and Lot **saw** them, and rose up to meet them. (Genesis 19:1)

Lot has been trained by Abraham to look for guests; but Abraham he is not. This is revealed as the theme of *looking* and *seeing* continues. The residents of Sodom seek to molest the visitors, and are struck with blindness, reflecting their lack of moral vision. Lot, in protecting his guests, abominably offers his fellow denizens his daughters instead, exposing how his own moral perspective is also spiritually stunted. Later in the reading, given wine by his daughters, Lot will engage in incest, a sign of his being blind to both his daughters' identity and the sanctity of his relationship with them.

The theme of sight continues as Lot's family flees Sodom; they are warned by the angels not to look back, but Lot's wife does not listen:

But his wife **looked back** from behind him, and she became pillar of salt. (Genesis 19:26)

While some interpret this as a miraculous punishment for disobedience, the simple meaning is that this woman, looking back, became mesmerized by the grisly specter suffusing the city, and therefore she joined its fate. Rabbi J.H. Hertz notes a parallel:

She looked back and lingered behind, to be overtaken by the brimstone and fire from which the others escaped. A similar fate befell lingering refugees in Pompeii.

In other words, her "spotlight consciousness" was trained on the destruction, dooming her as her husband and daughters trained their own focus on survival, and life. Meanwhile, we are told in the very next verse that Abraham, who has been informed that he will have a child named Isaac, still allows his roving consciousness to encompass the fate of faraway Sodom, thinking, perhaps, of the wellbeing of Lot:

And Abraham got up early in the morning. . . . And he **looked out** toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and he **saw**, and behold, the smoke of the land went up as the smoke of a furnace. (Genesis 19:27-28)

The miraculous baby Isaac arrives; because Ishmael is an inappropriate influence, Abraham, to his dismay, is ordered to send Ishmael and his mother Hagar away. In the desert, Hagar is overcome by thirst, and also by despair.

And she went, and sat down far away from him, a bowshot's distance, for she said, I will not **see** the death of the child. (Genesis 21:16)



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We are scripturally signaled that sight is still of the essence. This is confirmed by an arriving angel, who announces that Ishmael will be father to a great nation. The language of the next verse is noteworthy:

And God opened her **eyes**, and she **saw** a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink. (Genesis 21:19)

God, commentators explain, needed to open her eyes to see a well that was right there, but which Hagar, in her desperation, did not notice. In *The Philosophical Baby*, Alison Gopnik notes that as children age,

attention gradually becomes more controlled by their internal agenda rather than by the intrinsic interest of external events. So it becomes more difficult to use their attention as a reliable indicator of what they see. And for adults, of course, if we decide to attend to the ball even the wildly unexpected gorilla won't distract us.

Hagar's tale asks us: what do we notice, and what is essential that we often ignore?

The theme of sight continues in the most terrifying text in the Torah. Abraham is asked to offer his child to the Almighty in the land of Moriah. He makes the journey, and the reading deliberately uses the same phrases with which it began:

On the third day Abraham **lifted up his eyes**, and he **saw** the place from a distance. (Genesis 22:4)

Abraham's roving vision seems to center on this sacred spot, Mount Moriah, which according to rabbinic tradition was later the site of the Temple, and had been holy since creation. Or as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once put it, "Abraham was instinctively attracted by *k'dushah* [sanctity] the way the bee is attracted by the nectar of the flower."

As Abraham goes up to the site with his son, a heartbreaking scene unfolds. Isaac asks:

Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering? And Abraham said: God will **see for Himself** the lamb for an offering. (Genesis 22:7-8)

An angelic intervention saves Isaac, teaching Abraham that God desired not the death of Isaac, but rather the reminder to Abraham's people forever that children, and life itself, are sacred gifts, granted by the grace of God. A replacement for Isaac is sighted:

And Abraham **lifted up his eyes**, and **looked**, and behold behind him another ram caught in the thicket. (Genesis 22:13)

Note that unlike Hagar, Abraham does not need his "eyes opened" by God; it is only after the angelic intervention that the ram appears, sighted by Abraham's roving vision. One of the most famous paintings of the story is by Caravaggio, showing Isaac in fear upon the altar with the ram right next to him:





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**In the sacred city, Jewish politics and power were profoundly important, but the Temple towered over Jerusalem to remind Israel of Abraham's spiritual vision, of the presence of providence that controls power.**

But despite the artist's brilliance, I find the painting preposterous. The drama of the story lies in the fact that originally the ram was not there; it is only after the angel intervenes that Abraham's roving eyes, his spiritual lantern consciousness, see God's gift. It is on this site that the Temple will be built; and as the reading concludes, Abraham names it for the spiritual vision, and moral insight, made manifest there:

And Abraham called the name of that place God Will Be Seen, as it is said to this day: on the mount where the Lord is seen. (Genesis 22:14)

Thus was the vision of Jerusalem born. In the sacred city, Jewish politics and power were profoundly important, but the Temple towered over Jerusalem to remind Israel of Abraham's spiritual vision, of the presence of providence that controls power. This Jewish capacity for spiritual sight stunned others. The Cambridge historian Simon Goldhill, in this vein, offers the following remarkable reflection on Pompey, the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem in 63 BCE:

Pompey walked straight in, we are told, to see what he no doubt expected to be a glorious statue to match the significance of the Temple for the Jewish people. Romans regularly took cult statues of other cultures and transported them back to Rome in triumphant appropriation. He was amazed to find



nothing there and remained baffled by the whole experience. This story is told by Tacitus, the Roman historian, but it is retold by the Jews. . . . The contrast of the emptiness of the shrine and the practical man of war's confusion is eloquent—and for once allows the non-material its moment of assertion over the powerful realities of war and conquest.

The Jewish people could endure defeat by Rome because it saw in Jerusalem what others could not; this made the city the beloved to the Jews, and ensured the Jewish return to Jerusalem today. Thus the most famous photograph in Israel shows a soldier standing at the Western Wall, the adult seemingly staring, in childlike wonder, up where Abraham once looked, seemingly seeing, in that miraculous moment, what Abraham once saw there.

Our reading asks us to see Jerusalem, the Jewish polity, and Jewish history through the lens of adult maturity, but also via Abraham's vision. Rabbi Norman Lamm once reflected on three archetypal children that appear in the Passover liturgy—the wise son, the cynical wicked son, and the *tam*, the simple son. In a cynical age, he argued, it is not only the learned child that is a source of inspiration, but also the child who reflects simple faith. We are not meant to be childish, but we are, in faith, meant at least in moments to be childlike:

. . . while it is true that wisdom is indispensable both to general life and Jewish living, it is equally true that beyond all the complexities and subtleties that tantalize man's mind and confound his understanding there stands the simple and sublime truth of the One God, Author of all. What we need is the *tam*, one who can include wisdom in his personality and transcend it, who can possess scholarship without displaying pretentiousness, who can develop his intellect and yet, in the moment he turns to his God, abandon his self-consciousness and serve his Maker with wonder.

We all grow up, but we need to acknowledge several ways of seeing. In *The Phantom Tollbooth* Milo asks Alec, the floating boy,

“Would it be possible for me to see something from up there?” . . .

“You could,” said Alec, “but only if you try very hard to look at things as an adult does.”

Milo tried as hard as he could, and, as he did, his feet floated slowly off the ground until he was standing in the air next to Alex Bings. He looked around very quickly and, an instant later, crashed back down to the earth again.

“Interesting, wasn't it?” asked Alex.

“Yes, it was,” agreed Milo, rubbing his head and dusting himself off, “but I think I'll continue to see things as a child. It's not so far to fall.”

In Israel today, citizens are facing a necessary war with the maturity and adult hardheadedness that is required, but also with a renewed spiritual vision that is quite simple but not at all simplistic. Perhaps the most moving video from the Holy Land this week featured a secular Israeli anchor who, hearing the news that the Shin Bet



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had rescued one of the hostages, turned—on live TV—to a religiously observant commentator and asked to borrow a *kippah* in order to intone a devout blessing to God. Hillel Fuld, a religious Israeli in the tech world commented, “One month ago, I could not imagine a scene like this.”

To which my friend Dan Senor replied online, “It was always beneath [the] surface. Pre-October 7, we were all just distracted by other things.”

The spotlight consciousness of Jews was focused on division and disagreement; but now, they suddenly *see*.

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## **Additional Resources**

Meir Soloveichik on the Binding of Isaac, “Bound to God,” Commentary, September 2018. [Click here to read.](#)





## JEWISH COMMENTARY

# Bound to God

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

*And he shall place his hands on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted as an atonement for him.*

—Leviticus 1:4

*Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.*

—Genesis 22:4

ONE FRIDAY MORNING in London, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks took Penelope Leach, one of Britain's most prominent child psychologists, to visit a Jewish primary school. There she witnessed children playacting the rituals of the Shabbat meal to take place that evening: Young boys blessed the wine, little girls kindled candles, songs were sung. Leach was struck by all she saw, including one very moving moment: the reenactment of a tradition in many Jewish homes, where before the Sabbath meal begins, the father extends his hands to cover the head of each of his children, and blesses them. Leach, Rabbi Sacks reports, marveled as she witnessed "the five-year-old mother and father blessing the five-year-old children with the five-year-old grandparents looking on." She left overcome by the centrality of family life to traditional Judaism.

The ritual of Jewish parents blessing their children is indeed moving, but it is easily misconstrued. Properly understood, it stresses first and foremost not the bond between parent and child, but rather

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between the child and God. The standard form of showing love to our children is through an embrace: The act is possessive in nature, drawing them close to us. To bless our children by extending our hands is the opposite; rather than draw them close, we set them apart, indicating that they belong to someone other than ourselves. In the Bible, the one ritual comparable to the Jewish act of blessing is sacrificial in context. The worshipper in the Temple placed his hands on an animal's head before the ritual occurred, thereby renouncing his own claim to the offering and dedicating it to God. In a similar sense, to place one's hands on a child is to recall the Temple and consecrate the child to divine service.

The parallel between biblical blessing and sacrifice is rarely considered. Few scriptural stories are as shocking as that known as the Sacrifice of Isaac, known to Jews as the *Akeidah* (Binding). The liturgy of Rosh Hashanah is dominated by the Bible's most haunting words: "Take thy son, thy only son." But the *Akeidah* is, in a sense, re-created every Friday evening in many Jewish homes all over the world, where parents place their hands on their children's heads, as their ancestors did over offerings in Jerusalem millennia ago.

Can this be so? Have Jews, for generations untold, placed the reenactment of one of the most



petrifying tales about parent and child at the heart of their most sacred familial experiences? They have indeed. In the 1950s, in a spirit similar to Leach's, a Roman Catholic priest was intrigued by a Jewish ritual involving parents and children: the *pidyon ha-ben*, in which the father of a firstborn son, a month following the baby's birth, presents the child to a *kohen*, a descendant of Aaron. The parent then redeems the child by giving several silver coins to the *kohen*, and the child is returned to him. The priest wrote to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik inquiring about the ritual. The Rav responded by linking Jewish parenthood to the agonizing Abrahamic tale.

At the heart of the religious worldview, he suggested, is the absolute ownership of the divine; man is merely "a guardian in whose care the works of God have been placed as a precious charge." This is especially true for that of which we are most possessive. "Children are the greatest and most precious charge God has entrusted to man's custody," Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote, but the "irrevocable though bitter truth" is that they are not ours. The *Akeidah*, he suggested, must be understood in this context. For Abraham to deserve fatherhood, he had to prove his acceptance of this theological truth and acknowledge that he was merely a custodian of the child for whom he had longed. God's intended result at the *Akeidah* was not Isaac's death but Abraham's recognition of the true nature of parenthood, and that is precisely what is recognized by Jewish parents throughout the generations in the ritual that so piqued the curiosity of the priest:

The ceremonial redemption of the first born son re-enacts the drama of Abraham offering Isaac to the Lord, of the knight of faith (using Kierkegaard's term) giving unreservedly away his son to God....The father of today, as Abraham of old, acknowledges the absolute ownership of the child by God. He renounces all his illusory rights and urgent claims to the child....When the Kohen returns the child to the father and accepts the five shekels, he presents him on behalf of God with a new child; something precious is re-entrusted to

him. The dialectical drama of Mt. Moriah consisting in losing and finding a son is re-staged in all its magnificence. After receiving the child from the Kohen, the father must always remain aware that it was only through God's infinite grace that this infant was returned to him in sacred trust.

For many modern Jews, the story of the *Akeidah* is an embarrassing anachronism, and the Torah's descriptions of animal sacrifice are seen as utterly irrelevant to our lives. The haunting possibility, however, is that these passages are painfully relevant.

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**More than any other, ours is an age that has lavished love on children; they are coddled, cherished, and protected, denied nothing. It is possible that what we need is less embracing and more blessing; less parental possession and more parental consecration. We must consider whether our children are merely extensions of ourselves, or whether they were given to us in sacred trust.**

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As Leon Kass has noted, "all fathers devote (that is 'sacrifice') their sons to some 'god' or other, to Mammon or Molech, to honor or money, pleasure or power, or, worse, to no god at all." It is true, Kass concedes, that "they do so less visibly and less concentratedly, but they do so willy-nilly, through the things they teach and respect in their own homes; they intend that the entire life of the sons be spent in service to their own ideals or idols, and in this sense they do indeed spend the life of the children." A father who attempts to instill devotion in his son to godly ways must be willing "to part with his son as his son, recognizing him—as was Isaac, and as are indeed all children—as a gift and a blessing from God."

More than any other, ours is an age that has lavished love on children; they are coddled, cherished, and protected, denied nothing. Yet as Ben Sasse has noted, this has produced a generation of Americans locked in perpetual adolescence, a result of the "creature comforts to which our children are accustomed, our reluctance to expose young people to the demand of real work, and the hostage-taking hold that computers and mobile devices have on adolescent attention." It is possible that what we need is less embracing and more blessing; less parental possession and more parental consecration. We must consider, in other words, whether our children are merely extensions of ourselves, or whether they were given to us in sacred trust. Every parent might prefer to ignore the *Akeidah* story. But especially today, and with Rosh Hashanah near, the *Akeidah* continues to call out to us. 🏹