

פרשת
וירא
Parashat Vayera

Bereshit / Genesis 12:1-17:27, Isaiah 40:27-41:16
John 1:1-18

Places of Wickedness and being Lukewarm

In this week's Torah portion the Lord God Almighty Himself met with Abraham over dinner as a friend to discuss what was taking place in the nearby region of Sodom and Gemara. These places of wickedness had gone up before God to the extent that He sent His messengers to investigate the matter. Following the meal, the messengers traveled to Sodom and we read the following, *טָרָם יִשְׁכְּבוּ וְאֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר אֲנָשֵׁי סֹדֹם, 19:4 They had not yet lain down, when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people to the last man—gathered about the house. וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל-לוֹט וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אֵיךָ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה וַיֹּצִיאֵם אֵלֵינוּ וַיְנַדְּעָה אִתָּם: 19:5 And they shouted to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them."* Note how the men of the city did not just assume these visitors would have sexual relations with them; their level of depravity in their request was one of criminal activity. This is the conclusion of the commentary *Chizkuni on Bereshit / Genesis 19:5 Part 1* which states, *וונדעה אותם, so that we may engage in homosexual relations with them;* the word *ידע* is familiar to us from *Genesis 4:1* where it

described Adam in engaging in carnal relations with Chavah. Besides, it is clear from Lot's offer of his two virgin daughters as an alternative to satisfy the carnal desires of the men of Sodom (19:8), that these men were planning a criminal activity." The people of Sodom are the example of a people living by their emotions and the desires of the flesh (יֵצֵר הָרַע, Yetser Hara). This is the mentality of our culture today to teach our children to be fluid, gender neutral, or whatever suits one's carnal feelings at any given time. This is a culture of immorality and sin which was so great the Lord God in heaven destroyed these peoples. This is the very same culture we find ourselves living in today.

Do you have an unsettling feeling on the nature of American Culture and the underlying principles our country wants to teach our children today? This unsettling feeling on the inside is not limited to the recent actions of the United States (i.e. gay marriage) but is a world wide phenomenon. The reason being, everything of any importance in our lives as believers basically boils down to our relationship with our Creator (*the Lord God of Israel*) and our relationships with others. Our modern culture wants to push its morals and unrighteousness not only on our children but also on each one of us! In addition, the message of the modern church is to settle for something lukewarm in regards to our faith as it is related to this world system of truths, morals, and ungodliness. What has happened is that we have relegated our walk with God to little more than a hobby, when the Scriptures clearly show us that the Lord is passionately in love with His people. If this is what the Scriptures teach us, *"why are we not as passionate about our relationship with the Lord?"* And, *"What does a passionate relationship with God look like in life?"* According to the Scriptures, the Lord has revealed Himself as Father, Husband, King, and Master, and has called us to become His children, bride, ambassador, and servant. These words draw in a covenant context of righteousness (צְדָקָה), holiness (קִדְּוָה), and purity (תְּמִימָה, תְּהִלָּה), which is coupled with truth and faithfulness (אֱמֶת) in our lives as His children. Does the modern church meet this level of commitment in a way that honors the Lord according to His word and proclaims His glory and truth to the world today? These are very important questions. This was the approach that is described of Abraham, who left his father and his land to seek the Lord God and His righteousness in the Land of Promise. Abraham understood who he

was, what the Lord expected from him, and how these things are to be applied in practice in his life. In the opening verses of this week's Torah portion (Parashat Vayera), we are provided with a picture of a man who lives a repentant life, and who actively sought for others to walk in God's Ways according to God's Word. The rabbis believe Parashat Vayera was a turning point for Abraham, for having just been circumcised, he heard from the Lord God in heaven by a visitation of angels. On meeting the angels, Abraham demonstrated a sense of urgency of faith. Do you demonstrate today that same sense of urgency as he did?

The verses we are looking at for this week are from *Bereshit / Genesis 18:1-15*.

Bereshit / Genesis 18:1-15

18:1 Now the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. 18:2 When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, 18:3 and said, 'My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. 18:4 'Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; 18:5 and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.' And they said, 'So do, as you have said.' 18:6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes.' 18:7 Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave it to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. 18:8 He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate. 18:9 Then they said to him, 'Where is Sarah your wife?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' 18:10 He said, 'I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which

was behind him. 18:11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. 18:12 Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?' 18:13 And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' 18:14 'Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.' 18:15 Sarah denied it however, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. And He said, 'No, but you did laugh.' (NASB)

א וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאַלְבָּנֵי מְמָרָא וְהוּא יָשָׁב פְּתַח-הָאֵהָל כְּחַם הַיּוֹם: ב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְצִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיִּרְץ לִקְרָאתָם מִפְּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה: ג וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם-נָא מְצֹאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל-נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ: ד יִקַּח-נָא מְעֹט-מַיִם וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁעֲנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ: ה וְאַקְחָה פֶתֶל-לֶחֶם וְסִעְדּוּ לְבָבְכֶם אַחַר תַּעֲבֹרוּ כִּי-עַל-כֵּן עֲבַרְתֶּם עַל-עַבְדְּכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֵּן תַעֲשֶׂה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ: ו וַיִּמְהַר אַבְרָהָם הָאֵהָלָה אֶל-שָׂרָה וַיֹּאמֶר מִהְרֵי שְׁלַשׁ סָאִים קָמַח סֹלֶת לֹוֹשֵׁי וְעֹשֵׂי עֲגוֹת: ז וְאֵל-הַבָּקָר רֵץ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח בֶּן-בָּקָר רֶדֶד וְטוֹב וַיִּתֵּן אֶל-הַנְּעָר וַיִּמְהַר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתוֹ: ח וַיִּקַּח חֲמָאָה וְחֶלֶב וּבֶן-הַבָּקָר אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּתֵּן לְפָנֵיהֶם וְהוּא עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם תַּחַת הָעֵץ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו אֵיךְ שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְּאֵהָל: י וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוֹב אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְהִנֵּה-כֵּן לְשָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וְשָׂרָה שְׂמֵעַת פְּתַח הָאֵהָל וְהוּא אֲחֲרָיו: יא וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זָקְנִים בָּאִים בְּיָמִים חֲדָל לְהַיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה אַרְחַ כְּנָשִׁים: יב וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי כִּלְתִּי הִיתָה-לִּי עֹדֶנָּה וְאֲדֹנָי זָקֵן: יג וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָהָם לְמָה זֶה צִחְקָה שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הָאֵף אֲמַנָּם אֵלֶּד וְאַנִּי זָקְנָתִי: יד הִיפְלֵא מִיָּהוָה דְּבַר לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְלְשָׂרָה בֶן: [שְׁנַי] טו וַתִּכְחַשׁ שָׂרָה | לֵאמֹר לֹא צִחְקָתִי כִּי | יֵרָאָה וַיֹּאמֶר | לֹא כִּי צִחְקָתִי:

A few observations may be made regarding the opening verses in Parashat Vayera.

Observations

- Abraham was very humble, (18:2) וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה ב שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיִּרְא וַיִּרְץ לְקָרְאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיִּשָּׂא אֶרְצוֹ: He bowed himself down to honor those who had come to visit him.
- A further demonstration of his humility is in the washing of the feet of those who had come (18:3, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם-נָא מְצֵאתִי, חוּ בְעֵינָיִךְ אֶל-נָא תֵעָבֵר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ:),
- Notice the urgency of his faith in his approach to these who had visited him, he was quick to get food and bread to set before his guests. This is related to the concept of “*Table Fellowship*” which couples relationships and faith according to the covenant context. Is there an urgency of faith like this in your life today? (18:6-7, וַיִּמְהַר אַבְרָהָם הָאֵהָלָה אֶל-שָׂרָה וַיֹּאמֶר מְהֵרָה וְשֵׁלֶשׁ סָאִים קִמַּח סֶלֶת לְיֹשְׁבֵי וְעֲשֵׂי עֲגוֹת: ז וְאֶל-הַבָּקָר רֵץ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח (בֶּן-בָּקָר רֶדֶד וְטוֹב וַיִּתֵּן אֶל-הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּמְהַר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתוֹ:)
- Sarah laughed about the Lord’s promise of a child. (18:12) Sarah was afraid and lied, but the Lord knows our hearts (18:15, טו וַתִּכְחַשׁ שָׂרָה | לֵאמֹר לֹא צָחַקְתִּי כִּי | יִרְאָה וַיֹּאמֶר | לֹא כִּי צָחַקְתִּי:)

Abraham took his faith very seriously. The MT indicates a sense of urgency when Abraham rushed to bless others. He rushed to bless the angels with food and drink and the Lord responded with a promise. (8:10) These Scriptures speak of the Lord’s ability to give faith and life no matter what age we are! It is important to recognize how Abraham’s faith was connected to his actions. (*Note Yeshua’s faith as it is connected to the Scriptures, taking Abraham’s example, he washed the feet of his disciples.*) Faith is to be used as a verb, something that is shown forth by our actions. The Apostle James wrote in his book that

“Faith without works is dead.” (James 2:14-26) The entire book of James speaks of the kind of faith that changes how we live our earthly existence. According to the example given by Abraham, the question is *“How is your faith making an impact on others?”* We should be about developing creative ways for putting our faith into action. This is the point of studying the Torah. We are called to *“work at our faith with fear and trembling,”* to push through life with faith, and to prove our faith, which is the meaning of Paul’s words in *Philippians 2:12*. This is why the rabbis place so much emphasis upon the importance of Studying God’s word and then it’s application, as the example given in the Talmud Bavli Menachot 43b.

Talmud Bavli Menachot 43b

It was taught in a Baraita: Rabbi Meir said: a person must make 100 blessings each day, as it is written... (Deuteronomy 10:12) “And now Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you...” (תניא היה רבי מאיר אומר) חייב אדם לברך מאה ברכות בכל יום שנאמר (דברים י, יב) (ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך שואל מעמך)

The rabbis in the Talmud teach the Lord expects us to make 100 blessings each day. The Lord chose this as a means for humbling our lives before Him and before others, so that we do not forget the Lord or who we are as His children. It is in the blessing, and being blessed that reminds us to be grateful to the Lord and to give praise to His Name.

For example, Midrash Tehillim 105, Part 1 opens with the Dibur Hamathil (דיבור המתחיל) saying, *“O give thanks unto the Lord, call upon His name, Sing unto Him, sing praises unto Him, Seek His face continually (Tehillim / Psalms 105:2-4).”* The homiletic introduction to the midrash states, *“Rabbi Jose son of Halafta said to his son, Rabbi Ishmael, If you would see the face of the Presence in this world, then occupy yourself with Torah in the Land of Israel...”* In the rabbinic literature, as we see here in the Midrash, there is a lot of emphasis that is placed upon the importance of studying the Torah. When the rabbis speak of Torah study, the Chazal (Sages) connect the Torah to gemilut hassadim (acts of loving kindness). The rabbis place much emphasis upon the importance of Studying God’s word and then it’s application

and this is what Paul meant when he said we are to “*work at our faith with fear and trembling,*” (*Philippians 2:12.*)

As a result of the connection of Torah study to gemilut hassadim the rabbis ask the question saying, “*We are all very busy and very pressed for time. If we only have a few hours a week of free time, should we devote it to Torah study or to gemilut hassadim?*” A similar and related point is that it is as important to teach Torah to children and young adults as it is to Adults, and so coupled with the significance of studying Torah, we also need to take children and young adults out into the field in order to practice gemilut hassadim. This is related to the ultimate purpose for studying the Torah is all about, living our lives for the Lord. The midrash states “*Rabbi Jose son of Halafta said to his son, Rabbi Ishmael, If you would see the face of the Presence in this world, then occupy yourself with Torah in the Land of Israel, for it is said, Seek the Lord and His strength; seek His face continually (Tehillim / Psalms 105:4).*” The purpose of digging into God’s Word is to seek the Lord, His strength in our lives, and His face (His presence) continually.

These comments and questions on the Torah versus gemilut hassadim draw to mind a fundamental principle in rabbinic exegesis known as the “*Kal Vachomer*” (קל וחומר). The “*Kal Vachomer*” (קל וחומר) is a *fortiori inference*, and a fundamental principle of rabbinic thought. The Kal Vachomer is a rule of logical argumentation by means of which two cases are compared, one lenient and the other more stringent. The *Kal Vachomer* principle asserts that if the law is stringent in a case where we are usually lenient, then it will certainly be stringent in a more serious case. The question then is “*What is the more serious case here with respect to judgment of sin in our lives?*” In Jewish life and the Torah, we are frequently confronted by competing values as it is related to this principle of thought, for example, the competing values such as the following:

- Saving a life vs. observing Shabbat
- Honoring a parent vs. transgressing a commandment
- Easing pain vs. shortening a person’s life
- Mourning for a relative vs. rejoicing on a Jewish festival.” (i.e.

Christmas and Easter, etc, the list can go on.)

In these situations, we are often confronted by the case of conflicting values. In the rabbinic literature, the term *gemilut hassadim* (acts of loving kindness), are generally coupled to the mitzvot such as visiting the sick, burying the dead, comforting the mourner, helping a bride and groom rejoice, and clothing the naked, etc. The medieval rabbis understood the mitzvah of *gemilut hassadim* in this way and that these mitzvot may also be more generalized which represent the believers attitude of seeking the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness by the way we love others. A true believer will seek any way he or she can to bring glory to God by the way he or she treats others. Studying the rabbinic literature, it becomes clear that both Torah study and *gemilut hassadim* are very basic Jewish values. Studying the Apostolic Writings reveals these basic truths were also a part of what Yeshua and the disciples taught as well.

It is interesting to observe in the Apostolic Writings that Yeshua used many “*Kal Vachomer*” arguments during His teaching ministry while here on earth. Many of the *Kal Vachomer* arguments that Yeshua used were directly related to our relationship with God and with others, which is the point of the rabbinic dictum of Torah study. The relationship that we have with the Lord God of Israel was what Yeshua was teaching and focusing upon in *Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7*. Yeshua told His disciples saying in *Matthew 19:23*, ויאמר ישוע אל תלמידי, ואמן אמר אני לכם קשה לעשיר לבוא אל מלכות השמים: (Ο δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πλούσιος δυσκόλως εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν.) “... *truly I say unto you, it is difficult for the rich to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.*” (NASB) The reason for the difficulty of the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven is by reason of their trust being placed in one’s wealth over trusting in God. The Torah teaches us that our wealth is a blessing from God and it is meant to remind us of the source of our blessings (see *Devarim / Deuteornomy 8:11-20*). Trusting in the Lord God for everything is directly connected to a relationship a father has with his son and recognizing the source of life, food, home, and wealth, which truly comes from our Father in Heaven and not by our own making. Yeshua taught

at length on these things in *Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7*. Our relationship with the Lord is connected to putting our faith into practice. This is what Abraham did and this is why the rabbis discuss gemilut hassadim in the way they do according to the following references:

Kohelet Rabbah 7, ed. Vilna, fol. 18b

Rabbi Judah said: to teach you that whoever denies gemilut hassadim it is as if he denies God.

Talmud Bavli Sotah 14a

R. Simlai expounded: Torah begins with gemilut hassadim and ends with gemilut hassadim. It begins with gemilut hassadim, for it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21), and it ends with gemilut hassadim, for it is written: “And He buried him [=Moses] in the valley” (Deut. 34:6).

Talmud Bavli Sukkah 49b (Tosefta Peah 4:19, ed. Lieberman, pp. 60-61)

Our Rabbis taught: In three respects is gemilut hassadim superior to charity: charity can be done only with one’s money, but gemilut hassadim can be done with one’s person and one’s money. Charity can be given only to the poor, gemilut hassadim both to the rich and the poor. Charity can be given to the living only, gemilut hassadim can be done both to the living and to the dead.

Talmud Bavli Nedarim 40a

...Did it not once happen that one of R. Akiba’s disciples fell sick, and the Sages did not visit him? So R. Akiba himself entered [his house] to visit him, and because he swept and sprinkled the ground before him, he recovered. “My master,” said he, “you have revived me!”. R. Akiba went forth and lectured: “He who does not visit the sick, is like a shedder of blood”.

Note the significance of putting our faith into action. *Kohelet Rabbah 7, ed. Vilna, fol. 18b* states that denying gemilut hassadim is like denying God. Putting it another way, not putting our faith into action is like denying God. Can you think of any NT examples of this? (The entire book of James?) In a previous study, the rabbis say that the Torah begins with grace and ends with grace. Here in the *Talmud Bavli Sota 14a*, the rabbis say that the Torah begins with gemilut hassadim and ends with gemilut hassadim. There is a parallel reference being made here to the grace of God and good deeds. The reason being, putting our faith into action requires the mercy of God (רַחֲמֵי) because we do not always get it right the first time. This is related to the Kol Vachomer in the sense of the weightier matter, whether to disobey a mitzvah in order to save a life or not. The rabbis say that gemilut hassadim is greater than charity, because charity is only the giving of money, where the visiting of the sick (gemilut hassadim) is as saving a life, and not visiting the sick is like the shedding of blood. The question then of whether Torah study (the study of the Scriptures) or gemilut hassadim are more important, the conclusion is that both are absolutely important as these things are fundamental and foundational to our salvation, in the sense that as a child of God and a disciple of Yeshua, we would not forsake the study of God's Word or neglect putting our faith into action right? Remember that the Scriptures clearly show us the Lord is passionately in love with His people, and so we too should be passionately in love with the Lord God of Israel! In our lives as believers and disciples of Yeshua, we need to find ways to devote time every day both to studying the Scriptures and to gemilut hassadim.

These things are related to the covenant relationship that we have with the Lord God of Israel in the Messiah Yeshua. Note that the message of the modern church is to settle for something lukewarm in regards to our faith and the covenant of God. We essentially are told at the pulpit that once our penalty was paid for by someone else (Jesus), that we could break the law again and it would be OK, as long as our denomination approves of the law being broken. The truth is, the very laws that convicted us of our sins is what sent us to our knees in the first place. These are the same laws that were meant to teach us how to live as part of God's eternal family in the covenant that we have with Him in His Messiah. They are the house rules for a loving Father.

They teach us how to love the Lord and love one another, they teach us that there is a way we can know that we are pleasing to Him. We do not want to just hope we will be considered good and faithful servants, without producing the fruit of good works, right? If we are planted in the garden that the Lord God Almighty is tending, then we will produce the kind of fruit He is looking for. If we are not producing good fruit, what will the Lord do?

Abraham provides us with a picture of a man who lived a repentant life, and who actively sought others by teaching them to walk in God's Ways according to God's Word. He had an urgency of faith in relation to others. He believed all of God's Word, including the Torah was obligatory for all people, and he did not want to see men perish. Abraham recognized his role in being a blessing to others, and doing so quickly. This is the significance of putting our faith into action because we do not want to deny the Lord God in heaven by neglecting to live what we believe. The conclusion, the Torah teaches us to get out and practice our faith! This among other reasons is why the Torah is foundational for the life of a believer as it teaches us how to abide in the Messiah Yeshua!