PARASHA OF THE WEEK / 04

Vayera

וירא

A heart that learns to see

31 October 2026 · 20 Cheshvan 5787 · Genesis 18:1-22:24

Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. God appears to him. Then he notices three travelers and runs to welcome them. What does a person learn to see when he comes close to God?

THE STORY OF THE PARSHA

At Mamre, Abraham offers the visitors water, shade and food. One announces that Sarah will have a son. Listening from the tent, she laughs: can this still happen at her age? God reaffirms the promise. The visitors turn toward Sodom, and Abraham pleads for its people: will the righteous be swept away with the wicked? He keeps asking, down to ten righteous people. [2, ch. 18]

In Sodom, Lot welcomes two visitors. A violent crowd surrounds his home; his offer to hand over his daughters is deeply disturbing. The visitors rescue him and his family. His wife looks back and becomes a pillar of salt as the cities are destroyed. Later, his daughters intoxicate him and conceive by him; their sons become the ancestors of Moab and Ammon. In Gerar, Abraham calls Sarah his sister and Abimelech takes her. Warned by God in a dream, Abimelech returns her; Abraham prays for his household. [2, chs. 19-20]

The promised child arrives: Sarah gives birth to Isaac, who is circumcised on the eighth day. Later, at Sarah's insistence and with God's instruction to heed her, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away. Their water runs out in the wilderness. God hears the boy, opens Hagar's eyes to a well and promises him a future. Abraham and Abimelech settle a dispute over a well and make a covenant at Beersheba. [2, ch. 21]

Then comes the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. God tests Abraham by commanding him to offer his son. Father and son travel to the mountain together. Abraham binds Isaac, but an angel stops him before he harms him. Abraham sees a ram and offers it instead. The promise of blessing is renewed. News of Nahor's family, including Rebecca, closes the portion. [2, ch. 22]

A THOUGHT TO CARRY THROUGH SHABBAT

Seeing the person before us

The opening seems to interrupt itself. The Torah begins with God appearing to Abraham, then turns to a meal for strangers. Why does it tell us about washing feet, kneading dough and preparing food at the very moment we expect an account of revelation? What has the meal to do with the encounter with God?

The Talmud reads Abraham's request in Genesis 18:3 as asking God to wait while he tends to his guests. From this it teaches that welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. This is a rabbinic reading of the verse, and its force is striking: Abraham's closeness to God makes room for the needs of a traveler. [7]

What Kabbalah adds

Kabbalah speaks of the *sefirot*: the divine attributes through which God relates to creation. These also have a reflection in the qualities of the human soul. Two help us read Vayera: *chesed*, lovingkindness that reaches outward, and *gevurah*, strength expressed through awe, restraint and measure. Abraham is associated with chesed; Isaac with gevurah. Rabbi Moshe Miller's introduction explains these correspondences. [8]

Think of someone who readily opens the door, gives time and says yes. Think also of someone who can keep a promise, hold a boundary and remain steady when something is difficult. Both capacities matter. The daily examples are our application of the teaching: a generous heart can learn when to pause; a firm heart can learn how to welcome.

A divine likeness we can practice

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, the Kabbalist of Safed, opens *Tomer Devorah* by teaching that resembling the Creator requires deeds that express divine mercy. Appearance alone cannot fulfill that likeness. Spiritual learning asks something of our conduct. Its depth becomes visible in how we treat another person. [4]

Read in that light, Abraham's tent becomes a place to practice what he knows of God. He sees dusty feet and offers water. He sees people on a journey and offers rest. The revelation and the welcome belong in one story: attention to God can train our attention toward the person standing at the door.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY THROUGH SHABBAT

When love learns strength

The same Abraham later walks toward the mountain with Isaac. The change of scene is immense. A letter about kindness cannot pass lightly over the Akedah. The Torah calls it a test; the son is bound, and Abraham is stopped. Its ending matters: Isaac lives, and the ram is offered in his place. [2, Genesis 22:1-13]

Water and fire

The Zohar reads this encounter through the joining of water and fire: Abraham's quality and Isaac's quality become included in one another. Each is brought toward completion through the other. Its mystical language describes a meeting of chesed and gevurah, love and awe, within an account that remains difficult and demanding. [3]

This does not make every painful detail easy to explain. It does offer a direction for working on ourselves: our strongest quality still has something to learn. Someone naturally generous may need the strength to listen before promising. Someone naturally disciplined may need the courage to show tenderness. We grow when goodness can take the form another person actually needs.

The measure inside kindness

Rabbi Eli Mansour notices Abraham's offer that a little water be brought. In the published lecture text, he explains that a servant would carry it: Abraham's personal enthusiasm did not entitle him to impose extra work on someone else. Even generosity needs to notice who bears its cost. [5]

Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, in his published video transcript, draws a different detail from the same scene: Abraham repeatedly hurries. He reads that haste as empathy for hungry guests. Together, these teachings give our reflection a concrete shape. We can hurry to meet a real need while taking care not to exhaust the person helping us. [6]

Seeing returns elsewhere in Vayera. God opens Hagar's eyes to a well; on the mountain Abraham raises his eyes and sees the ram. Those scenes have their own meanings. Beside the travelers at the opening, they also invite this reflection: distress or certainty can narrow our attention. Sometimes the next faithful act begins when we notice what we had not yet seen. [2, Genesis 21:19; 22:13]

For this Shabbat, we can begin with one person. Ask what would help, listen to the answer and do what we can sustain. The generous person may practice pausing; the reserved person may practice reaching out. We return to the entrance of Abraham's tent with a little more room in the heart, and a clearer view of who is there.

Around the table

Abraham sees travelers while receiving a divine visit. Can you remember a time when someone's attention made you feel that you mattered? What did they notice that others had missed?

Which comes more naturally to you: reaching out or holding steady? Where might that strength need help from the other quality? Keep the conversation close to real life: a guest, a child, a friend or a responsibility you share.

The Zohar speaks of qualities becoming complete through one another. What would one small act of generous, thoughtful care look like in the week ahead? Leave room for different answers; the person who needs warmth and the person who needs rest may need very different kinds of kindness.

SOURCES & FURTHER LEARNING

[1] The week's reading
Both regions: 31 Oct, 20 Cheshvan. Sephardic haftarah: II Kings 4:1-23; Ashkenazi/Chabad: 4:1-37.
Hebcal · Vayera 5787

[2] Torah · Genesis 18:1-22:24
Full narrative; seeing in 18:2, 21:19 and 22:13. The connections in the letter are editorial reflection.
Sefaria · Genesis 18-22

[3] Zohar · I 119b
Vayera 33:490-493: water and fire included in one another at the Akedah. Aramaic and translation consulted.
Sefaria · Zohar, Vayera 33

[4] Cordovero · Tomer Devorah 1:1
Divine likeness expressed in merciful deeds. Hebrew and translation consulted.
Sefaria · Tomer Devorah 1:1

[5] Rabbi Eli Mansour · 25 Oct 2007
Imposing Personal Stringencies Upon Others. Published lecture text; the water and servant's labor.
iTorah · Published lecture text

[6] Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis · 20 Oct 2021
True kindness has empathy at its heart. Publisher's video transcript; Abraham's haste.
Chief Rabbi · Video transcript

[7] Talmud · Shabbat 127a:13
Hospitality and receiving the Divine Presence; the sages' reading of Genesis 18:3.
Sefaria · Shabbat 127a:13

[8] Rabbi Moshe Miller · Chabad
Ten Powers of the Soul. Introduction to the soul's qualities and the patriarchs' associations.
Chabad · Ten Powers of the Soul

Revised 27 October 2026. Original Kavaná letter with attributed paraphrases. Published lecture/video transcripts were read. The everyday examples and synthesis are editorial applications of the cited teachings.

Print at actual size on US Letter paper. Four pages; two sheets printed on both sides. Please treat Torah pages respectfully.