TIMELESS TORAH

VAYERA: LIVING WITH TENSION: FROM PROMISE TO FULFILMENT

The Open Door

Parshat Vayera is full of tension: anticipation, personal struggles, national tragedy and sacrifice. Running through it is a recurring question: when should we open our homes to others, and when must we protect the privacy of those within them? Four episodes explore different aspects of the relationship between hospitality and personal boundaries.

The first is Avraham's welcome to three strangers. The Torah describes in extraordinary detail the lengths to which he goes to make them comfortable. Why devote so many verses to Avraham's hospitality when so many of his other mitzvot receive barely a mention?

Rav Soloveitchik (*Abraham's Journey*, p. 168) explains that *hachnasat orchim* (welcoming guests) is more than an expression of *chessed*. Charity can be given at arm's length: the coin is handed over, the door closed. Hospitality is different. Inviting a stranger into your home recognises their full human dignity and equality.

In a similar vein, Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston whose work focuses on courage, vulnerability and empathy, highlights the importance of vulnerability in building meaningful human connections. Welcoming someone unfamiliar into our personal space requires vulnerability. Yet vulnerability need not be a weakness; in the right context, it demonstrates the courage to engage wholeheartedly with others.

The Gemara (Shabbat 127a) teaches that welcoming guests is greater than receiving the *Shechinah*. It derives this from Avraham's request that Hashem should not pass by while he attends to his visitors. The Maharal explains the deeper significance of this idea. Every human being is created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God. Welcoming a stranger is therefore more than an act of kindness; it is an opportunity to encounter the Divine through the dignity of another person.

The Rashbam (d. c. 1158) takes this connection further in his interpretation of the opening verses. Hashem's appearance to Avraham is expressed through the arrival of the three men, who were angels. The Divine encounter and the act of hospitality are thus inseparable. Recovering in the midday heat, Avraham lifts his eyes and sees three strangers. Rather than remain absorbed in his own encounter with Hashem, he turns towards them, recognising that welcoming them is itself a way of drawing close to the Divine.

> **"Hospitality is an opportunity to encounter the Divine**

'What's Mine Is Mine'

Sodom represents the opposite worldview. *Pirkei Avot* (5:10) describes four attitudes towards possessions and generosity. The first, 'What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours', appears to express simple fairness. Yet the Mishnah adds that some regard this as the way of Sodom, whose people rejected hospitality and generosity.

The problem is precisely that the principle sounds so reasonable. It creates a world of sealed boundaries, in which what belongs to me is my concern and what belongs to you is yours. Sodom could not see the *tzelem Elokim* in a stranger, and so could not imagine opening its doors to one.

The Ohr HaChaim (d. 1743) explains that Lot was tested on precisely this point. Even after he invited the angels into his home, they initially resisted his hospitality. Only when Lot demonstrated his commitment did they accept.



Despite his years in Sodom, he had retained something of Avraham's outlook.

The episode involving Avimelech, who takes Sarah into his household, presents a further distortion of the relationship between personal boundaries and human dignity. If Sodom represents 'What is mine is mine', Avimelech's conduct approaches the opposite extreme: 'What is yours is mine'. Rather than respecting Sarah's dignity, he treats her as someone he can simply claim for himself.

Yet here, too, Avraham's response reveals the depth of his character. Avimelech and his household are afflicted with a condition that prevents their bodily functions from working normally, and Avraham prays for their recovery. The Gemara (*Bava Kamma* 92a) teaches that because Avraham prayed for someone else to receive what he himself needed, he was answered first: Sarah subsequently conceived.

There is a further dimension to Avraham's prayer. As highlighted by the Sages, Sarah's pregnancy so soon after her encounter with Avimelech could have exposed her to cruel suspicions. In this light, Avimelech's continued affliction might have helped establish her innocence. Avraham could therefore have allowed the punishment to continue. Instead, he prays for the recovery of the very man whose actions had put Sarah in this position. This offers a striking perspective on the extent of Avraham's *chessed*. Even when Avimelech has failed to respect another person's dignity, Avraham cannot ignore his suffering.

When the Door Must Close

Finally, Avraham faces the painful decision to send Hagar and Yishmael away at Sarah's insistence. The Torah tells us that the matter was 'very grievous in Avraham's eyes' (21:11). How can the man whose defining characteristic is opening his home bring himself to close it to his own son?

The Haktav V'Hakabbalah (d. 1865) explains that Sarah's concern was for Avraham's spiritual legacy: who would carry forward his vision of ethical monotheism? She recognised that Yishmael was developing in a direction that threatened this future, and that Yitzchak's role as its bearer had to be protected.

The Chafetz Chaim (d. 1933) adds that although Yishmael would have benefited from remaining ith Avraham, his presence would have come at the expense of Yitzchak's development. Here Avraham had to learn something subtle about *chessed*. His years of recognising the Divine image in others had taught him to look beyond his own instincts. Now he had to recognise the wisdom of Sarah's judgement, even when it meant doing something deeply painful.

"Wisdom lies in knowing when to open the door and when to close it

Hospitality cannot mean opening the door indiscriminately. A home has responsibilities to those already within it, as well as to those who stand outside. Sometimes genuine *chessed* requires welcoming a stranger; sometimes it requires protecting those in our care, even at the cost of turning someone away.

Avraham's greatness lay in his ability to recognise the dignity of every person he encountered. That same sensitivity enabled him to appreciate that Sarah's decision was not a rejection of *chessed*, but an expression of a different responsibility. An open door is a powerful symbol of generosity, but wisdom lies in knowing when to open it and when, however painfully, it must close.

CHAYEI SARAH: Succession, Status and the Promise of Continuity