

Vayera 5778 Sermon

From its first word, this week's parshah expresses multiple meanings of the verb 'to see.' *Vayera eilav Adonai b'eilonei Mamrei*, "The Lord appeared to [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre." Later, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah get God's attention: "I will go down to see," God says, "whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me." After those cities are destroyed, the wife of Lot lingers to look back at the ruin cities, and is turned into a pillar of salt. Throughout Vayera God or angels are appearing, and people are looking or seeing. When there is such consistency in the words of the Torah in such a short series of passages, we should pay very close attention to how those words are being used, and to what we can learn from their usage.

In the section that we read today, about the birth of Isaac and its consequences, the same verb keeps popping up. *Vateirei Sarah et ben Hagar hamitzrit yaldah l'Avraham*, "Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham..." Having finally had a child of her own, Sarah now begins to notice, disapprovingly, the presence of Ishmael, the half-brother to Isaac that Abraham conceived with her handmaid. Seeing him, she seems to become jealous or feel threatened, and commands Abraham to banish both the child and his mother. Abraham does so, and when Hagar, wandering in the wilderness, thinks that they will both die of hunger or thirst, she leaves the boy and wanders some distance off. She thinks "Let me not look on (*al eireh*) as the child dies." God hears her weeping and the text then says *Vayifkakh Elohim et eineihah vateirei b'eir mayim*, "God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water."

Just as Ishmael is endangered and then saved, the Torah soon tells a parallel story about Isaac, who faces sacrifice but then is saved. And as with all of the stories in Vayera, the key verb

is seeing. When Abraham approaches Mount Moriah, where Isaac is to be sacrificed, the Torah says *Vayisa Avraham et einav vayyar et hamakom...*, “Abraham looked up and saw the place. At the dramatic moment of sacrifice, when God’s angel cries out to Abraham to stop him from killing Isaac, the text is strikingly similar, saying *Vayisa Avraham et einav vayar v’hinei ayil...* “When Abraham looked up, he saw a ram.”

Each of these ‘seeings’ drives the action forward or stops it cold, moving the characters to their next destination or their next significant experience. Sarah sees Ishmael as a threat to her son, and has him and Hagar sent into the wilderness, but in the end Hagar sees well water that saves them both. Abraham sees where he will kill his son, but that seeing is reversed by his seeing the ram that will take Isaac’s place on the altar. In each of the episodes of an endangered son, seeing leads to danger and then resolves the danger.

Constructing the drama of these stories through the use of the ‘seeing’ frame, the Torah teaches us that it is equally possible to see danger, and even be led to it, as it is to see how to be saved from it. We are often quick to notice when things are wrong; seeing error is almost a hobby to some. But we are just as capable of seeing solutions, of understanding that – however we got into a tight spot – there is a way out, a path forward that will save us. The same capacity for seeing the bad can be turned to seeing the good; the ability to see what is broken can also be utilized to imagine how we can repair and build up a world in much need of saving. There is much we see around us, but how we see it depends upon us. There is much to celebrate, much to learn, much to achieve. We just have to see it.

Shabbat shalom