## [Open the Gates – HESED and Parshat Vayeira](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/opening-the-gate-hesed-and-parshat-vayeira)

Once, some thieves broke into the home of Rabbi Zev Wolf of Zbarazh. The rabbi hid in his room and watched as they went through the house and took whatever valuables they could find. Just as they were about to leave with all their loot, one of them grabbed a goblet from the kitchen and tossed it into his sack.

The rabbi burst out from his hiding place and ran after them, shouting: “My brothers! My brothers! Please – you can keep everything you have taken – it is yours. But, that goblet was recently used by a sick man. Please be careful that you don’t put it to your lips and catch his disease!”

From that point on, before Rabbi Zev Wolf went to sleep at night, he would say: “All my possessions are common property” so that, just in case more thieves would come, they would not be guilty of theft.

This week’s *parshah* tells of the three angels who visit Avraham and Sarah, before visiting the wicked city of Sodom. Avraham’s hospitality toward the angels is what defines him in Kabbalah as the embodiment of *Hesed,* “loving-kindness.” The inhabitants of Sodom, however, embody the opposite. When Avraham’s nephew Lot (who lives in Sodom) invites the angels into his home to try and keep them safe from the inhabitants of Sodom, men from the city quickly descend upon Lot’s house and demand that the visitors be handed over to them:

הוֹצִיאֵ֣ם אֵלֵ֔ינוּ וְנֵדְעָ֖ה אֹתָֽם׃

*“Bring them out to us, that we may know them.”*

* Genesis 9:5

 נֵדְעָ֖ה אֹתָֽם – *neida otam – we will “know” them.* The implication here is that they wish to sexually assault Lot’s visitors! The use of the verb *to know* as an expression of sexual intimacy is first introduced in *Bereisheet,* describing Adam and Eve. But here it is ironic, because it is no longer describing the “knowing” connection between beings, but rather it describes an aggressive intention to do harm.

The assaulters attempt to fight their way into the house:

וַֽיִּגְּשׁ֖וּ לִשְׁבֹּ֥ר הַדָּֽלֶת – *vayigshu lishbor hadelet – they approached to break the door…*

* Genesis 19:9

At this point, the angels frustrate their evil efforts:

וְֽאֶת־הָאֲנָשִׁ֞ים אֲשֶׁר־פֶּ֣תַח הַבַּ֗יִת הִכּוּ֙ בַּסַּנְוֵרִ֔ים מִקָּטֹ֖ן וְעַד־גָּד֑וֹל וַיִּלְא֖וּ לִמְצֹ֥א הַפָּֽתַח׃

*And the men who were at the entrance of the house, they* (the angels) *struck with dazzling blindness, from small to great, so that they wearied to find the entrance…*

* Genesis 9:11

There is something incongruous about this scene. First, they are trying to break the door down. Then, when the angels strike them with “blindness,” they are no longer able to find the door. But, they were already at the door! A loss of sight shouldn’t prevent them from finding the door. Furthermore, the ordinary word for blind is עיוור – *iver.* The word used here, סַּנְוֵרִ֔ים *sanveirim,* means “dazzled,” as if temporarily blinded by an intense light.

Descriptions in the Torah that don’t make sense are invitations to look a little more deeply…

When they are trying to break down the door, the word used is *delet,* “door.” But when it says that they could no longer find the door, it used the word *petakh,* which literally means “opening.”

There is another example of this word *petakh:*

פִּתְחוּ־לִ֥י שַׁעֲרֵי־צֶ֑דֶק אָֽבֹא־בָ֝ם אוֹדֶ֥ה יָֽהּ – *Pitkhu li sha’arei tzedek; avo vam, odeh Yah!*

*Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them and thank the Divine...*

* Psalm 118:18

In this verse, *petakh* becomes the verb – *pitkhu li sha’arei tzedek – open for me the gates of* tzedek.

צֶ֑דֶק *Tzedek* literally means “justice” but not in the sense of punishing the guilty, (which would be *din*)but in the sense of fairness or equity, as in the famous *pasuk*:

צֶ֥דֶק צֶ֖דֶק תִּרְדֹּ֑ף לְמַ֤עַן תִּֽחְיֶה֙ – *Tzedek tzedek tirdof, l’ma’an tikhyeh – Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may live!*

* Deuteronomy 16:20

צֶ֑דֶק *Tzedek* is also related also to צדקה *tzedakah,* which is “charity” – that is, justice and fairness toward those in need through *giving*. And giving, of course, is another way of saying כסד *Hesed,* Loving-Kindness.

With these in mind, we can understand the “opening” that the assailants couldn’t find as the “Gates of *Tzedek” –* they could no longer access their own inner goodness. Thus, we can re-translate our verse:

וַיִּלְא֖וּ לִמְצֹ֥א הַפָּֽתַח – *vayil’u limtzo hapatakh –*

*“They were no longer able to find an opening to loving-kindness within themselves…”*

Why?

Because their relationship with the *ger,* the stranger, had become so corrupted that rather than respond to wayfarers with hospitality, they saw them as their victims. Rather than “getting to know” the stranger, their “knowing” was perverted into its opposite. This is the inner message of their eventual destruction: the *sha’arei tzedek,* the “gates of loving-kindness,” could no longer be found within them, because they had become so identified with their aggressive impulses.

בֶּן עַזַּאי אוֹמֵר, הֱוֵי רָץ לְמִצְוָה קַלָּה כְבַחֲמוּרָה, וּבוֹרֵחַ מִן הָעֲבֵרָה. שֶׁמִּצְוָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה, וַעֲבֵרָה גוֹרֶרֶת עֲבֵרָה. שֶׁשְּׂכַר מִצְוָה, מִצְוָה. וּשְׂכַר עֲבֵרָה, עֲבֵרָה:

*Ben Azzai said: Be one who runs/*ratz *to do a minor mitzvah, just as a major one, and make distance from misdeeds, for a mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, and a misdeed leads to another misdeed; for the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the consequence of a misdeed is a misdeed.*

* Pirkei Avot 4:2

This beautiful *mishna* expresses this basic truth – what you do, you will likely do again. Do good, and goodness will likely become your habit. Do bad, and you will likely do more of the same, leading down a path of self-destruction. Or, read a slightly different way, doing good is its own reward – you become what you do!

This, I believe, is the true Jewish version of heaven and hell. It is not an afterlife (though there does exist the belief in an afterlife in the rabbinic tradition); it is rather the recognition that heaven and hell exist as potentials within us, and our choices moment to moment determine which potential is brought forth.

Therefore, find the *petakh/*openness within yourself through which *hesed* flows, and *ratz/*runto do loving-kindness! This is what *Avraham* did:

וַיֵּרָ֤א אֵלָיו֙ יְהוָ֔ה בְּאֵלֹנֵ֖י מַמְרֵ֑א וְה֛וּא יֹשֵׁ֥ב פֶּֽתַח־הָאֹ֖הֶל כְּחֹ֥ם הַיּֽוֹם׃

*The Divine appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre; he was sitting at the* petakh*/entrance of the tent in the heat of the day.*

וַיִּשָּׂ֤א עֵינָיו֙ וַיַּ֔רְא וְהִנֵּה֙ שְׁלֹשָׁ֣ה אֲנָשִׁ֔ים נִצָּבִ֖ים עָלָ֑יו וַיַּ֗רְא וַיָּ֤רָץ לִקְרָאתָם֙ מִפֶּ֣תַח הָאֹ֔הֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּ֖חוּ אָֽרְצָה׃

*He raised his eyes, and behold! Three men were standing over him; he saw, and he ran/*ratz *to greet them from the entrance/*petakh *of the tent, and he bowed to the ground…*

* Genesis 18:1, 2

The rabbis drew a connection between these opening verses in our *parshah* and the closing verses of the last *parshah:*

בְּעֶ֙צֶם֙ הַיּ֣וֹם הַזֶּ֔ה נִמּ֖וֹל אַבְרָהָ֑ם וְיִשְׁמָעֵ֖אל בְּנֽוֹ׃

*Thus, on that day, Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised…*

* Genesis 17:26

When Avraham sat in the *petakh/*opening of his tent, he was in pain; he had just been circumcised. Furthermore, he sat *k’khom hayom –* “in the heat of the day.” The word for “the day” – *hayom –* can also mean “today” – the present moment. Heat, *khom,* is also an expression of discomfort. The scene, then, is that as Avraham dwells simply sits with his discomfort, he nevertheless dwells in the *petakh,* the openness of the heart, the *sha’arei tzedek,* the gates of loving-kindness. Even in his pain, he *ratz*/runs to invite in the *ger,* to do hospitality toward the stranger.

This is the inner reality of true meditation: יֹשֵׁ֥ב פֶּֽתַח־הָאֹ֖הֶל כְּחֹ֥ם הַיּֽוֹם – to sit in openness to whatever comes, even in discomfort. The tendency, in meditation, is of course to want peace, to want a nice and quiet environment. And *b’ezrat Hashem* we should have plenty of that! But the disturbances are also part of the training; they are a necessary gift, helping us to stay conscious and not allow our practice to devolve into egocentricity.

There are six primary *mitzvot* of *Hesed,* all coming from two consecutive verses in *Vayikra*/Leviticus*:*

לֹֽא־תִשְׂנָ֥א אֶת־אָחִ֖יךָ בִּלְבָבֶ֑ךָ ׃ – *Lo tisna et akhikha bilvavekha*

“You shall not hate your kinsfolk (literally “brother”) in your heart.”

הוֹכֵ֤חַ תּוֹכִ֙יחַ֙ אֶת־עֲמִיתֶ֔ךָ – *Hokheyakh tokhiyakh et amitekha*

“You shall (repeatedly) reprove your friends” – meaning, when we see our friends walking a dangerous or destructive path, we are responsible to try and help them make better decisions. This only applies when there is a possibility they will listen.

לֹא־תִשָּׂ֥א עָלָ֖יו חֵֽטְא – *Lo tisa alav kheit*

“Don’t embarrass anyone.”

(Literally*:* “Don’t place sin upon him” – i.e., don’t make him look bad.)

לֹֽא־תִקֹּ֤ם אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י עַמֶּ֔ךָ – *Lo tikom et b’nei amekha*

*Don’t take vengeance upon the children of your people*

וְלֹֽא־תִטֹּר֙ – *Lo titor*

*Don’t bear a grudge*

וְאָֽהַבְתָּ֥ לְרֵעֲךָ֖ כָּמ֑וֹךָ

*Love your neighbor as yourself!*

* Leviticus 19:17, 18

The fourth of the Ten Commandments, which is the practice of *Shabbat,* is sometimes associated with the fourth path of *Hesed,* but in my view the more appropriate one is the sixth of the Ten Commandments, לֹא תִּֿרְצָ֖ח *lo tirtzakh –* “do not murder.” This *mitzvah* prohibiting murder is so obvious that it may seem not worth discussing, but the rabbis drew a connection between this *mitzvah* and prohibition above of not embarrassing anyone, as this passage from the Talmud demonstrates:

תני תנא קמיה דרב נחמן בר יצחק כל המלבין פני חבירו ברבים כאילו שופך דמים א"ל שפיר קא אמרת דחזינא ליה דאזיל סומקא ואתי חוורא אמר ליה אביי לרב דימי במערבא במאי זהירי א"ל באחוורי אפי דאמר רבי חנינא הכל יורדין לגיהנם חוץ משלשה

**The *tanna*** **taught** **before Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak: Anyone who humiliates another in public, it is as though he were spilling blood.** Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak **said to him: You have spoken well, as we see that** after the humiliated person blushes, **the red leaves** his face **and pallor comes** in its place, which is tantamount to spilling his blood. **Abaye said to Rav Dimi: In the West,** i.e., *Eretz Yisrael*, **with regard to what** *mitzvah* **are they** particularly **vigilant?** Rav Dimi **said to him:** They are vigilant **in** refraining from **humiliating** others…

* *Talmud, Bava Metzia* 58b

***More on Vayeira...***

[**The Rooster – Parshat Vayeira**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/the-rooster-parshat-vayeira)
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The foundation of spiritual transformation is Presence, meaning: intentional attentiveness to whatever is present. But, is it possible that Presence can be misused? Is it possible for Presence to be harmful?

There’s a strange story in the Talmud about Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: he had a neighbor who would mock him and constantly disrupt his prayers and study. Rabbi Yehoshua was so tormented by this heretic that he resolved to put a curse on him.

So, he took a rooster, tied it to his bedpost and proceeded to stare at it intently. Why a rooster? According to another passage in the Talmud, there is an instant every day – a rega – that God becomes angry, and if you were to curse someone right at that precise moment, your curse would be successful.

But how could you know exactly when that moment happens?

Well, you know it by seeing the crest on a rooster’s head pale from its normal red color while it stands on one foot, during the first three hours of the day. As soon as you see a rooster doing this in the morning, that’s the moment!

So, Rabbi Yehoshua got ready with his rooster, watching it intently for the exact moment to pronounce his curse. But, he dozed off, and the next thing he knew he was waking up in the evening, long after the supposed moment had passed. From this he concluded that it is not proper to curse someone this way; for as it says in Psalm 145:

וְ֝רַחֲמָ֗יו עַל־כָּל־מַעֲשָֽׂיו – Rakhamav al kol ma’asav – Its compassion is upon all of Its creations!

In this bizarre story, Rabbi Yehoshua stares intently at his rooster – he’s being present, in a sense, but he has an ulterior motive. His attentiveness is based on ego – he wants to get revenge on this guy who’s been giving him a hard time.

This isn’t true Presence; it is only half of the equation. Presence includes attentiveness, but the attentiveness has to be given freely, without ulterior motive; Presence is not just a matter of the mind, but also a matter of the heart. That’s why the rooster is “standing on one foot” – Rabbi Yehoshua’s attentiveness “stands” on the mind, but not the heart.

When Presence is firmly rooted in both the mind and the heart, it results in being spiritually awake – meaning, you come to know yourself as the awareness. When there is an ulterior motive, on the other hand, you know yourself (at least partially) as that motive. So, in the example of the above story, Rabbi Yehoshua is being attentive but he is motivated by anger, so he experiences the “dream” of being the anger, rather than the “wakefulness” of being the awareness of the anger. That’s why he “dozes off.”

Furthermore, the rooster is itself a symbol of ego – that’s why we have the idiom of arrogant people being “cocky.” The crest that stands upright on its head is like a crown, and the redness leaving the crest is like blood leaving the brain ­– another symbol of unconsciousness.

So, Rabbi Yehoshua’s attempt at “knowing the mind of God” fails, because it leads him to unconsciousness. Compare this with our parshah, when the “mind of God” is revealed to Abraham. This revelation comes after Abraham and Sarah give hospitality to three mysterious beings who are alternatingly described as men, as angels and even as God. The idea here is that whatever beings appear to us in the moment, they are manifestations of God, and they are also “angels” in a sense, because our meeting with them fulfills a particular Divine purpose.

As the angels leave, Abraham escorts them away, and then it says:

וְאַ֨בְרָהָ֔ם עוֹדֶ֥נּוּ עֹמֵ֖ד לִפְנֵ֥י יְהוָֽה – And Abraham was continuously standing before the Divine…
(Genesis 18:22)

Abraham is being present, continuously standing, but unlike Rabbi Yehoshua, there is no ulterior motive. There is simply a spirit of hospitality, of being of service – that’s standing before the Divine.

From this attitude of complete Presence, revelation naturally flows:

וַֽיהֹוָ֖ה אָמָ֑ר הַֽמְכַסֶּ֤ה אֲנִי֙ מֵֽאַבְרָהָ֔ם אֲשֶׁ֖ר אֲנִ֥י עֹשֶֽׂה׃
Hashem said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?

Next, the Divine reveals that the sins of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are very great, and the cities are about it be destroyed. Again, Abraham’s response is one of love:

וַיִּגַּ֥שׁ אַבְרָהָ֖ם וַיֹּאמַ֑ר הַאַ֣ף תִּסְפֶּ֔ה צַדִּ֖יק עִם־רָשָֽׁע׃
Abraham came forward and said, “Will You sweep away the righteous along with the wicked?

Abraham then argues with God on behalf of the inhabitants of the cities. At the conclusion of the dialogue, and after securing the safety of the cities on the condition that at least ten righteous people are found living there, it says:

וַיֵּ֣לֶךְ יְהוָ֔ה כַּאֲשֶׁ֣ר כִּלָּ֔ה לְדַבֵּ֖ר אֶל־אַבְרָהָ֑ם וְאַבְרָהָ֖ם שָׁ֥ב לִמְקֹמֽוֹ׃
The Divine went after finishing speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place.

The words for “returned to his place” – Avraham shav limkomo – hint at the supreme rhythm of the Divine-conscious life: Begin by being present with the Divine as It appears in the moment:

וְאַ֨בְרָהָ֔ם עוֹדֶ֥נּוּ עֹמֵ֖ד לִפְנֵ֥י יְהוָֽה – And Abraham was continuously standing before the Divine…

When it is necessary, step out of the moment in order to serve the future:

וַיִּגַּ֥שׁ אַבְרָהָ֖ם וַיֹּאמַ֑ר – Abraham came forward and spoke…

When the task of creating a better future is finished, return to Presence:

וְאַבְרָהָ֖ם שָׁ֥ב לִמְקֹמֽוֹ – and Avraham returned to his place…

The word here for “place” – Makom – is itself a Divine name, hinting at this truth: to return our awareness to where we are, to this Makom, is to return to the Divine.

Of course, when life becomes difficult, it can be extremely challenging to maintain the simplicity of this paradigm. We may feel depleted; we may feel that we don’t have any consciousness left for devoting to service or returning to Presence – we’re just barely getting by.

It is for this reason that we have the gifts given to us by the tradition.

The gifts of the tradition – the texts, teachings, prayers, rituals and holy days – have the power to enliven our consciousness when the weight of life threatens to extinguish it. That is, after all, the purpose of reading these words right now.

In the haftora (II Kings, 4), there’s the story of an impoverished woman with two sons. When her husband dies, she is terrified that a creditor will come and take her sons as slaves, because without her husband she has no means of paying off her debt. So, she brings her case to the prophet Elisha and cries to him about her plight.

Elisha asks her what she has of value, to which she replies that she only has one jug of oil. Elisha then tells her to go out borrow as many empty vessels from her neighbors as she can, and to start filling the vessels with oil from her one jug. She does so, and – a miracle! The one jug of oil fills up many vessels. She sells the oil and becomes so wealthy that she is able to not only pay off her creditor, but she also has enough to live off the remainder.

Sound familiar?

This is another version of the Hannukah miracle. Oil is a metaphor for consciousness, and consciousness is infinite – meaning, in this moment, the field of consciousness reading these words right now has no boundary, no fixed shape – it is a vast and unlimited field, and you are that field.

But, to know this experientially, we need “vessels” into which the oil is poured. These “vessels” are the sacred texts and practices that come to us from the tradition. In this sense, they are “external” to us. We have to “borrow” them from our “neighbors” – meaning, we have to receive them from our lineage; we can’t invent them ourselves. And, “receiving the vessels” is not something that is ever finished; it is an ongoing and infinite process:

וַיְהִ֣י ׀ כִּמְלֹ֣את הַכֵּלִ֗ים וַתֹּ֤אמֶר אֶל־בְּנָהּ֙ הַגִּ֨ישָׁה אֵלַ֥י עוֹד֙ כֶּ֔לִי וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֵלֶ֔יהָ אֵ֥ין ע֖וֹד כֶּ֑לִי וַֽיַּעֲמֹ֖ד הַשָּֽׁמֶן׃
When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” He answered her, “There are no more vessels”; and the oil stopped.

In our culture, we tend to think that learning is something you do while you’re in school. After high school, or after college, or after the end of whatever was your last official schooling, we think “Okay, I’m done with learning, now it’s time for life.” But spiritually speaking, learning and growing must become the way of life itself; there are always “more vessels” to “borrow” from our great tradition. In this way, the oil will continuously find new forms and flow ever stronger…

**​**[**Hello Death! Parshat Vayeira**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/hello-death-parshat-vayeira)
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Last week I heard a story on NPR, that Coca-Cola had put a sign on vending machines in New Zealand, which said, Ki Ora Mate!

The words Ki Ora are Māori words that mean something like “Hello,” similar to “Shalom” or “Aloha,” and Mate is just the New Zealand English word meaning “friend.” The intention was to mix English and Māori to create a friendly multi-cultural greeting that would mean something like, “Hello, friend!”

The only problem is, the word Mate in Māori means “Death.” So, to a Māori reader, the sign looks like, “Hello Death!”

Probably not what Coca-Cola intended, yet the message is appropriate. Coca-Cola is not a healthy product. Many nutritional authorities cite soft drinks as the absolute worst of all junk foods. And in fact, New Zealand has one of the highest rates of obesity in the developed world, with one out of three New Zealanders classified as obese. In addition,fifty percent of Māori adults are obese, as well as eighteen percent of Māori children.

What’s the lesson here? Truth finds a way!

We are a funny species. In many situations, we know exactly what’s good for us and what isn’t, and yet so often we seem to do what is not good for us. It is no secret that Coke and other soft drinks are dangerous; that’s what makes this story so funny. But ultimately, it’s not so funny that we cause ourselves so much misery. Why do we do it?

We do it because we crave experiences. We seem to be wired to seek certain experiences, regardless of the effects, so we are often in denial about what we know to be true. This isn’t to say that we always know what’s best for ourselves; sometimes we have to try things and learn from our mistakes. But often we know exactly what’s good for us and what isn’t, yet we choose the dangerous path because of our cravings. Even when it tells us how bad it is right on the label!  We don’t need the irony of “Hello death!” – just read the ingredients. If the thing you focus on is made out of greed, arrogance, or negativity – those are the “corn syrups” ands “artificial colorings” of the ego.

But the real irony is that while we focus on all the little shiny, distracting objects in that appear in our consciousness, we ignore consciousness. If only we would turn around and pay attention to the attention itself…

There was once a king who held a great outdoor festival and invited the whole kingdom. He put all his treasures out in a big field, and anyone could come and take one treasure from the field, whatever they chose. On the day of the festival, thousands came and took whatever special treasure they wanted most.

Then, a little old woman walked right through the field, past all the treasures, and up to the king himself. “Is it true we can take any treasure we want?”

“Yes, anything,” said the king.

“Then I take you!” said the woman.

“Ah, you have chosen wisely!” said the king. “Now you get me and the whole kingdom!”

Everything we wish to experience arises in consciousness. We lust after this and that, but we already have consciousness; we already have the completeness that we seek, as the whole field of awareness within which this moment arises. Experiences span an immense spectrum of pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, love and hate; but the consciousness itself is simple, vast and unbroken. Find that, find that which is behind and beyond all experience, and you’ve found the ultimate treasure.

In this week’s reading, Parshat Vayeira, Sarah gives birth to a son, Yitzhak, which means “laughter.” He is named Yitzhak because Sarah and Avraham were very old, so Sarah said, “The Divine has made laughter (tzekhok) for me.”

One day, the son of Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar, was found mocking Yitzhak. So, Sarah told Avraham to send away Hagar and her son into the desert, with nothing but a little bread and a skin of water. Soon after, the water ran out. Fearing that her son would die of thirst, Hagar despaired and wept.

The ego often craves satisfaction by putting another person down. But, the scrap if satisfaction we receive from feeling superior to another is just a drop of water in a dry desert. To break the spell of the ego, the heart often needs to be broken; we need to come face to face with our own delusion. Then, another possibility can reveal itself:

אֶל־הָגָר֙ אַל־תִּ֣ירְאִ֔י… וַיִּקְרָא֩ מַלְאַ֨ךְ אֱלֹהִ֤ים
A divine angel called to Hagar, “Don’t be afraid…”

There is more to Reality than the drama of the ego after all:

וַיִּפְקַ֤ח אֱלֹהִים֙ אֶת־עֵינֶ֔יהָ וַתֵּ֖רֶא בְּאֵ֣ר מָ֑יִם
The Divine opened her eyes and she saw a well of water…

The “water” we need to quench our thirst was there all along, if we would but shift our focus from the desert of the ego to the wellspring of the sacred that hides in plain sight. How do we do that?

וַתֵּ֣שֶׁב מִנֶּ֔גֶד וַתִּשָּׂ֥א אֶת־קֹלָ֖הּ וַתֵּֽבְךְּ:
She sat at a distance, lifted her voice, and wept…

Feel the “distance” – feel the pain of lack, of incompleteness, and let yourself cry out; transform your pain into prayer. The tears are like a cleansing river, washing away the trivial, the egocentric, the immature. And then, be attentive – that’s meditation. Within the depths of the heart from which your prayer pours forth, there is a great light. It might be just a glimmer at first, but make that glimmer the center of your attention, and it will become a great illumination…

**"Inviting Reality in for Tea" – Parshat Vayeira and Morning Sh'ma Blessing**
10/30/2017  0 Comments

This week’s Torah reading, Parshat Vayeira, begins with Avraham having a vision of the Divine: “Vayeira eilav Hashem b’eilonei mamrei – and the Divine appeared to him in the plains of Mamrei – v’hu yosheiv petakh ha’ohel k’khom hayom – and he was sitting in the opening of his tent in the heat of the day.” (Bereisheet 18:1)

It then goes on to say that three men (who we later come to understand are actually angels) pay Avraham a visit. Avraham runs from his tent to greet them, invites them to stay a while, to wash their feet and eat a meal. The angels then tell Avraham and Sara that Sara will give birth to a son, even though Sara is already ninety years old.

After this, the angels leave and head toward the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God appears again to Avraham and tells him that the cities are about to be destroyed because of the wicked people who live there. Avraham pleads with God not to destroy them, arguing that there might be some good people among the wicked, and that it would be unfair to destroy the innocent along with the guilty.

One interesting thing about this passage is that there seems to be a confounding of the characters. At first it says God appears to Avraham.  But then it says, "...and he raised his eyes and saw – three men were standing over him." First it says that God appears, then it says Avraham looked and saw three men. It’s as if God is now appearing as the three men. Then, later in the story, it describes the same men, saying, "the two angels came to Sodom." Now they’re two? Before, they were three. Furthermore, before they were described as anashim – men, and now they're malakhim – angels.

And in between these two bookends, the text moves fluidly back and forth between saying what the men, or angels are saying and doing, and what God is saying and doing, as if the angels and God are interchangeable. You can check out the passage in Genesis, chapter 18 and 19 to see what I mean.

This kind of ambiguity in the text is so gorgeous, because it all comes to highlight the opening phrase: Vayeira eilav Hashem – and the Divine appeared to him. This is, of course, the whole point of the mystical path – to perceive beyond the surface of things, through to Divine Reality. And what is the Divine Reality? Hu Eloheinu, Ayn od – Existence is the Divine, there is nothing else. And, Hashem Ekhad – the Divine is One. Meaning not that there is only one god, but that there is only God as the One Reality.

So, to perceive the Divine doesn’t mean perceiving something in addition to everything else you’re already perceiving, as many folks imagine. When we begin the spiritual journey, it’s common to think that God is something different from what you normally perceive, like some kind of Mount Sinai experience. But, while such experiences do happen, perceiving the Divine for the most part means to uncover the Divine nature of everything that you’re already perceiving. And since the Divine nature is Hashem Ekhad – Divine Oneness, this means you have to learn to relax the natural tendency of the mind to frame things as separate. Not to erase separateness all together – that would render you unable to function as a human being, G-d forbid, but to balance the separateness with the perception that everything arising right now in your field of awareness is part of one experience, One Reality.

And how do you do that?

“V’hu yosheiv petakh ha’ohel k’khom hayom – and he was sitting in the opening of his tent in the heat of the day.”

So, what is a tent? It’s a barrier that defines your personal space. There’s a vast world just outside, but you put this flimsy material around you, call it a tent, and you have some sense of separateness from the rest of the world. Just like our egos: there’s a vast Reality, and we are in no way separate from that Reality, but we tend to identify with our bodies, our personalities, our personal stories and so on, and call all of that “me.” That’s the ego; that’s the tent.

But rather than shutting himself up inside the tent, he yosheiv petakh ha’ohel – he sits in the opening of his tent. In other words, there’s still a tent, there’s still a sense of “me,” but he sits in the petakh, in the opening, so there’s also a sense that the space within the tent and the space outside the tent are one thing, one space. Meaning, be aware that everything arising in your experience in this moment, both your perception of things outside your “tent,” meaning outside your body, and things inside your “tent,” such as your emotions and your thoughts, are all arising in the one space that is your awareness. You can still think of this tiny corner of your awareness that encompasses your body and heart and mind as “me,” but the entirety of your experience, even your perception of the stars millions of light years away, are all arising in the one space that is your field of awareness, and that’s actually the deepest you – that formless, borderless, field of awareness.

But to really do that, you have to consciously invite everything within your experience to exist, even if it’s unpleasant. That’s the key. Because when you resist certain aspects of your experience, that’s the equivalent of shutting the flap on your tent, so there’s no more petakh, no more opening. That’s why Avraham is seen as the embodiment of hospitality, just as in the story when he runs to greet his guests and gives them food. He sits in the opening of his tent, and whatever happens to come by, he invites in. That’s why is says, Vayeira eilav Hashem– and the Divine appeared to him, because when you consciously invite everything to be as it is, you sit in the open space between separateness and Oneness, and you can sense that everything is a manifestation of the One Thing; first It appears as three men, then as two angels, it doesn’t matter, because everything are forms of the One Thing.

And this brings us to a kind of paradox, because when it’s revealed to Avraham that God is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he argues with God; he tries to change the course of what’s happening. So, on one hand, he invites everything to be as it is, but on the other, he’s arguing and trying to change it for the sake of compassion.

And this is really the supreme spiritual teaching. When we talk about acceptance, about inviting everything to be as it is, our minds tend to go in the direction of passivity. But this creates a false duality. If we really invite everything to be as it is, that includes our own desire for things to be different. So, on one hand, we accept Reality as it is, but on the other, Reality includes our own desire to change things; Reality is dynamic, alive, and always in motion. The distinction is that when we are hospitable to Reality as it arises, inviting things to be as they are rather than resisting how things are, we can work for change from a spirit of love and openness, rather than from judgment and anger.

This is hinted at in the opening words: v’hu yosheiv petakh ha’ohel k’khom hayom – and he was sitting in the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. The word for “the day” is hayom, which can also mean, “today” – in other words, the right now. The word for heat, khom, can also mean “warmth.” So, in this sense, khom hayom could mean “the warmth of Presence.” If you want to pierce through the separateness of things to the underlying Divine unity, open your heart to this moment. Warmly invite Reality to be as it is, and then when you act to change things, do it from a place of inviting change, rather than forcing. Even in those rare times when you do have to force something, you can still do it from a place of love rather than resistance and anger. Just like when you abruptly grab a child away from the danger of a precipice or an oncoming car – externally there might be a violent forcing quality, but of course you’re not angry at the child, you just have to act swiftly and effectively. If you have the right kavanah, the right attitude that arises from Presence rather than resistance, then your action toward change will flow from the Oneness, and will be an expression of the Oneness, even when there’s conflict. That’s why Avraham can argue with God, and yet the argument itself is an expression of God, because Avraham is arguing that God should be more compassionate, and yet elsewhere in the Torah, Moses calls God El Rakhum v’Hanun, erekh apayim – Compassionate and Gracious God, slow to anger…

Last week we chanted some words that come from the first blessing before the Sh’ma. The words were, Or Hadash Ta’ir – Shine a New Light, pointing to the quality of fresh aliveness that emerges when you are present. Now let’s look at some words from the second blessing of the Sh’ma: “V’ha’eir eineinu b’toratekha, v’dabek libeinu b’mitzvotekha – Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah, attach our hearts to Your commandments.”

The two pieces of this phrase express the paradox we explored earlier: V’ha’eir eineinu b’toratekha – Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah, meaning, open us to “see” the Oneness in everything, to see everything as an expression of the Divine. This is expressed in the hospitality of Avraham, and hinted at by the words we looked at earlier: Vayisa einav vayar – and he raised his eyes and saw. Avraham sits in the opening of his tent, a master of hospitality, and so he is able to see, vayar, the Divine in everything. This is also the root of the name of this parsha, Vayeira.

But the second part says, v’dabek libeinu b’mitzvotekha – attach our hearts to Your commandments.What are the commandments? They are actions we take to bring more kindness into the world. Externally, Reality can manifest as chaos and suffering. But as Reality becomes conscious through us, we are “commanded,” in a sense, to manifest compassion, so that the Divine qualities of Rakhum v’Hanun, erekh apayim – Compassionate and Gracious, slow to anger, reveals Itself through us.​

[**Parshat Vayeira- The Heat is On!**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/parshat-vayeira-the-heat-is-on)
11/17/2016  [1 Comment
​](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/parshat-vayeira-the-heat-is-on#comments)
​A friend of mine once said to me, “I don’t understand this ‘present moment’ stuff. What if the present moment is terrible? Why would I want to ‘be in the moment’ when the moment is so painful and awful?”

This week’s reading begins with Abraham sitting in his tent on a scorching hot day. Suddenly, he is visited by a Divine revelation:

"Vayeira eilav Hashem b’eilonei Mamrei, v’hu yosheiv petakh ha’ohel k’khom hayom-

“The Divine appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamrei, while he was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day.”

Let’s look at the Hebrew in this opening line carefully. The usual translation says that the Divine appeared to him “in the heat of the day.”

But, the Hebrew doesn’t actually say that.

“In the heat of the day” would normally be **“B**’khom hayom.”

The Hebrew says- “**K**’khom hayom”- AS the heat of the day.

Read this way, the verse says that the Divine is appearing to him as the discomfort of the heat! Furthermore, the word “Hayom” which means “the day” can also simply mean “today”- that is, this moment.

In other words, yes- the present moment sometimes appears as discomfort, as ugliness, as pain. But the crucial thing to remember is: everything that arises in your experience is a gateway to the Divine, if you open to it.

As it says,

“…v’hu yosheiv petakh ha’ohel-

“… and he was sitting at opening of the tent…”

The “tent” is your identity- your individual self. The “opening” is the willingness to open to Reality as it presents itself, even when it appears as “heat”- as discomfort. In that willingness, in that openness, is the appearance of the Divine.

Why?

Because in the open space of simple Presence with what is, there's no big distinction between the “outside” and the “inside”- between the inner world of thought and feeling, on one hand, and the outer world you take in through your senses, on the other. Everything that happens in your experience- outside as well as inside- is part of one experience. And your one experience is nothing but your one consciousness, constantly taking on different forms.

When you really see this, when you realize that all of your experiences are always only One Experience, and that your One Experience is ultimately made out you- meaning, made out of your consciousness- there can be a relaxing of resistance, a relaxing of the “me” that’s separate, that’s judges, that wants. After all, why would you resist yourself? That just creates inner tension, unnecessary suffering.

Then you can see- there is simply this Reality, everpresent- the Divine appearing as the form of this moment, suffering and ugliness and all.

The famous brothers and Hassidic rebbes- Zusya and Elimelech- were the sons of a village innkeeper who was unusually hospitable.

One day a band of beggars came to the doorstep of his inn. He and his wife received them warmly, served them food and drink, and prepared them a place to sleep. Seeing that their guests wanted to bathe, they went down to the bathhouse and heated water for them.

Among the beggars was a pauper whose entire body was covered with repulsive sores, and none of the other vagrants was willing to help him wash. The innkeeper’s wife had compassion and helped him, whereupon he turned to her and said: “In return for your kindness, let me bestow upon you my blessing- that you bear sons like me.”

Dismay came over her- sons like him?

But within seconds, this man and all his companions along with their wagon vanished before her very eyes. Years later, when her sons grew up, it then dawned on her- she had been put through a test, in order to bestow upon her the gift of such saintly children.

When Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi once recounted this story, one of his listeners asked him: “Who was that leper?”

But the rebbe gave not a word of reply.

There are no words to describe this Reality that is appearing, just now. Sometimes ugly, sometimes repulsive, it is the gateway to the sacred- to the most beautiful essence that you are. Even if ugliness arises as your own thoughts, as your own feelings- when you welcome them, the welcoming Presence is Itself beautiful, and in Its Light, everything has a sacred purpose.

So on this Shabbat Vayeira, the Sabbath of Appearance, may we embody the supreme art of hospitality- not only external hospitality, but also the inner kind- welcoming the ugliness that arises, until it too vanishes and reveals its secret blessing...

Good Shabbisss!
love,
​brian yosef

**​**[**The Move- Parshat Vayeira**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-move-parshat-vayeira)
10/30/2015  [3 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-move-parshat-vayeira#comments)

This past Tuesday, my family left for Costa Rica. I’ll join them in a few weeks, but first I had to stay behind and get the house ready for our renters who moved in on Thursday.

I had no idea what “getting the house ready” really meant, but I knew I wasn’t so good at making beds. So, I called our friend and space-artist Devorah for help. I thought it would take her about a half an hour at most.

Once we got started, however, every task we finished seemed to reveal a new task that needed to be done. What I thought would be a half hour turned into 11.5 hours! Thank G-d for Devorah- I couldn’t have done it without her.

All the little details- the soaps, the towels, the flowers, the toilet paper- I wanted to arrange everything just right so that the space would be welcoming to our new guests.

Not that any of those little details were so significant in and of themselves; their significance was that all together, they created a welcoming space. For me, a space that’s clear, beautiful and uncluttered says “welcome”. But even more importantly, a beautiful space makes room to notice a different kind of space- your inner space.

What is inner space?

Space- inner or outer- isn’t something we generally hear about very much. People like to talk about the things that occupy space- objects in the outer world or thoughts and ideas in the inner world- but rarely do we hear about the space itself. After all, space is nothing, so there’s nothing much to talk about. You can’t see or touch it.

And yet, your inner space is that which sees and touches. It’s the space of your own awareness. It’s the openness in which these words are appearing, in this moment. In fact, your own inner space is not something different from this moment.

And that’s why a beautiful external space can help you to connect with your inner space-

When you feel welcomed, it’s easy to be welcoming. In that inner opening of welcome, the beauty of this moment can blossom.

But once you are conscious of this, you no longer need anything external to welcome this moment. In fact, you can welcome a moment of pain and ugliness just as you can welcome a moment of beauty and peace.

This week’s reading begins with a story of Avraham’s ability to embody hospitality even in the midst of intense discomfort:

“Vayeira eilav Hashem b’eilonei Mamrei, v’hu yosheiv petakh ha’ohel k’khom hayom-

"The Divine appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamrei, while he was sitting at entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.”

Rashi comments that Avraham was not merely basking in the Divine bliss, he was experiencing intense discomfort-

“Said Rabbi Chama the son of Chanina: It was the third day from his circumcision, and the Holy Blessed One came and inquired about his welfare.” (Rashi, Bereishis 18:1)

Avraham is recovering from being circumcised, while roasting in the intense heat! And, to make it worse, three strangers suddenly show up.

What does he do?

“Vayar vayarotz likratam-

“He saw and ran to greet them…”

He runs out to the strangers and begs them to stop and rest. He fetches water to wash their feet. He and Sarah prepare food.

How is he able to be so welcoming in such an unpleasant situation?

Let’s look back at the Hebrew in the opening line. The usual translation says that the Divine appeared to him “in the heat of the day.”

But, the Hebrew doesn’t actually say that.

“In the heat of the day” would normally be **“B**’khom hayom.”

The Hebrew is actually- “**K**’khom hayom”- AS the heat of the day!

Read this way, it’s saying that the Divine is appearing to him as the discomfort of the heat! Discomfort is a form of God.

Furthermore, the word “Hayom” which means “the day” can also simply mean “today”.

What is “today”?  Today is the open space of this moment, in which these words are now appearing.

So Avraham welcomes the painful moment in which he finds himself as his Divine guest. The very next moment, Avraham’s solitude is over, and God appears as three strangers- so he welcomes them as well and feeds them.

Whatever the moment brings, it’s all just different forms of the One Reality. The message?

Welcome this moment! God is visiting!

Take a moment now to see, hear, feel the presence of this moment. Take a breath- welcome it's ever-changing appearance. Let this moment be your friend, your intimate. As the Sabbath hymn says, "Boi Kalah- Come, oh Bride!"

As I write these words on this particularly warm day in the East Bay, I am (thank G-d) not in pain, and I’m recovering nicely from pushing myself to the limit for the sake of hospitality.

And thanks to my friend Janet who has generously taken in this new wayfarer for the next few weeks, I am now the recipient of her wonderful hospitality! Thank you Janet!!

There’s a story that on a particularly cold winter evening in early nineteenth century Poland, a group of learned guests came to visit the father of then five-year-old Simchah Bunem. While they were eating, the father called in his son, and said: “My boy, go and prepare us some novel interpretation of the laws of hospitality.”

When the child returned after a little while, his father asked, “Well, what have you got?”

The boy beckoned the guests to follow him into another room. Curious, they followed him, eagerly anticipating some impressive teaching from the young prodigy. When they entered the room, they were caught pleasantly by surprise: for each of them the boy had made up a bed for the night, with pillows and quilts all neatly in place!

On this Shabbat Vayeira, the Sabbath of Appearance, may we grow ever more deeply in the Torah of Welcome- welcoming those who appear to us in our lives with a generous spirit of hospitality.

And, may we always remember to welcome this moment as the appearance of the One Reality- be it hot or cool, remote or intimate- making room for That which is now appearing…

Good Shabbiisss!
​-b yosef

**​**[**In The World, Not of the World- Parshat Veyeira**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/in-the-world-not-of-the-world-parshat-veyeira)
11/6/2014
[7 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/in-the-world-not-of-the-world-parshat-veyeira#comments)

There is an aphorism often heard in spiritual circles-

“Be in the world, but not of the world.”

What does this mean exactly?

There are at least two questions that come to mind about this phrase. First, what does it mean to “be in the world”? Aren’t we always already in the world? Second, what does it mean to not be “of the world”? Aren’t all of us of this world? What other world would be “of”?

To understand, let’s look at what our activities ordinarily consist of. Usually we spend our waking hours acting on the world or being acted on. We do things bring about some result. And yet, if our actions are to be sensitive and responsive to the beings around us, there needs to also be an element of just being with the world, not only acting upon it. There needs to be awareness and receptivity. This is the act of being in the world; it doesn’t mean merely existing, it means doing the activity of being with- of being present, aware, and open.

With this receptivity, however, there can be the fear of getting trapped by that which we are open to. Did you ever walk the longer route in order to avoid being seen by somebody? Often we will ignore or avoid people and situations because we fear some negative experience. But there is another way. You don’t have to shut down or hide; you can remain fully open to whatever comes, but also not cling to it. Let things come and let things go. Open yourself, let things come, and then return to openness- let things go. This is being “not of the world”, in the sense that you don’t let things in the world define who you are. You can become intimately involved with whatever comes along and then totally let go of it, let it pass on its way.

This week’s Parshat Vayera begins with a story of Avraham sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day in the Plains of Mamre. Rather than shut himself up in the shade of his tent, he goes and sits at the entrance, looking to see who will come along. Three strangers appear, and he runs to them and bows before them. He invites them to come, rest, wash, eat- “v’sa’adu libkhem- and sustain your hearts”- and then “akhar ta’avoru- afterward, pass on”. He doesn’t only invite them in, he also invites them to leave.

The “tent” is like our sense of self, which can be closed off or open to what is now emerging in this moment. Even in the “heat”, meaning times of difficulty and suffering, you can welcome what this moment brings. Avraham’s tent sits in the vast “plains”- our little self sits in the vastness of this moment. Eternity is stretched out before us. There is infinite potential and infinite uncertainty. And yet, we need not fear what comes. We need not contract into our “tent”. We can be the supreme host like Sarah and Avraham, who epitomized hospitality, welcoming and offering our attention to whatever this moment brings. And then, let it pass on and return our attention to the vast openness. Things and beings and situations come and go, even our “tent” will eventually go, but the vastness remains.

This is the secret of the enigmatic first verse of the parshah- “Veyeira eilav Hashem b’eilonei Mamre- and the Divine appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre.” It says the Divine appears, but then Avraham looks up and sees three strangers approaching. What happened to the appearance of the Divine? But that’s the point: when we are open to the fullness of this moment, there can be the recognition that every appearance is an appearance of G-d. Everything emerges from the vastness and eventually returns there.

So welcome what is, right now. There is only one G-d, and This is It!