



*Parshat Vayera*  
**October 19, 2013—15 Cheshvan 5774**  
**Overcoming Abraham's Eleventh Trial**  
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Our Torah reading this morning begins with a bang but ends with a whimper. It starts dramatically with the angels of God telling Abraham and Sarah that, after they had long given up hope, she would have a baby after all. It moves on to *akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, a story full of climactic moments: God's call to Abraham, Abraham's answer of *henei*, here I am, the command to sacrifice Isaac, the ascent up the mountain, the binding of Isaac, the last-minute intercession of the angel, the substitution of the ram, and God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of multitudes. But after all this drama and passion and climax, the Torah reading ends with the most dry and uninspiring of all Biblical texts, a genealogy—and further a genealogy of people who do not figure in any way in the preceding story:

Some time later, Abraham was told, Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor: Uz the first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram; and Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel—Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

Who cares? Of what conceivable relevance is this? Why, in a story all about Abraham, are we suddenly informed about his distant brother Nahor's progeny, with his wife 8 sons, with his concubine 4 sons? And why, if this epilogue is about *Nahor's* dozen sons, does it refer to *Abraham*, not once, but twice?

This seemingly dry genealogy at the end of the *akeida* has long fascinated me; over the years I have talked about it before; allow me this morning to share a modern midrash on what it has to say to us now.

Traditionally Abraham is thought to have undergone ten tests or trials of faith—the first of which was to leave his home and all he knew behind, and the tenth and final of which was to sacrifice Isaac. In between these he underwent other trials, such as the command to circumcise himself at an older age; the war against the four invading kings; rescuing his nephew Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah and the destruction of those towns; years of infertility with Sarah; and the banishment of his son Ishmael and Hagar.

So consider what Abraham has been through at the time he gets word of his brother's good fortune, of his brother's happy family. Abraham is bereft of his family of origin, whom he does not see after leaving home, bereft of his son Ishmael, whom he does not speak to after the banishment, bereft of Hagar, whom he does not see after the banishment, bereft of Isaac, whom he does not speak to after the binding, and bereft of Sarah, who dies soon after the akeida. Abraham is, in short, all alone. He sits alone in his tent. It is quiet enough for him to hear the sound of the clock ticking.

Now the Torah does not tell us how Abraham gets word from his brother far away. But I have always imagined that one lonely day, sitting in his tent, he gets an email from Mesopotamia.

*“My dear brother Abraham. How are you? I haven't seen you in such a long time. How is Sarah doing? I hope you are enjoying growing older together. How are your boys? Ishmael must be big and strong, and Isaac must have a sparkle in his eye. Do you have any grandchildren yet, dear brother? Meanwhile, I am doing great! Milcah and I are so blessed. Since you last saw me, eight children have been born to us. Plus I have a concubine named Reumah—she is fabulous!—and she has given birth to four gorgeous boys. It is hectic around*

*here, but basically happy. I would love for you to see my beautiful family if you can ever make your way back home. Know that we miss you. Love, Nahor.”*

Getting this happy email in his sad tent stirs uncomfortable feelings in Abraham that he cannot control. He says to himself: “Nahor never went through ten trials! Nahor was never commanded to leave home and wander about! Was never commanded to banish or sacrifice his children! Yet, here is, leading this happy life filled with pleasantness and plenty, lots of children, lots of love. God promised me that I would be the father of multitudes. But all I’ve got is broken relationships with two sons. Meanwhile, my brother, this pedestrian Mesopotamian, never promised anything, he’s the one sitting at the big dinner table filled with laughter and children.”

After reading this email, Abraham experiences his eleventh trial, which consists of three things.

Abraham has to ask himself: “Have I failed in life? Life has just not worked out the way I would have wanted it to. I don’t have a relationship with my son Ishmael. I don’t have a relationship with my son Isaac. I don’t have a relationship with Hagar. My marriage with Sarah was so hard and full of heart-ache. I miss my family back home in Mesopotamia. How is, exactly, that I’m eating dinner every night all alone?”

Second, he begins second-guessing the decisions he made. “Maybe I should have never left Mesopotamia in the first place. I should have married a nice Mesopotamian woman, had a gaggle of kids, struck roots in the community, settled down. Why did I expel Ishmael? Why did I bind Isaac? Why couldn’t I just be a normal father, and have good relationships with my sons.”

And finally, Abraham envies Nahor. “Nahor has everything I don’t have. I have broken relationships with two sons; Nahor has wonderful relationships with twelve sons. I don’t have

Sarah. Nahor has an adoring wife. I don't have Hagar. Nahor has a concubine. She's fabulous, he writes. I don't have roots in any community. Nahor has been settled in Mesopotamia. The grass is so much greener on Nahor's side of the fence."

But if Abraham endures this trial, it seems likely that Nahor experiences the same thing.

Nahor has to ask himself: "Has my life been such a success? What do I really have? I have 12 sons, but that's 12 hungry mouths to feed. Add to that a wife and concubine. I spend my whole life providing for the needs of others. Every day is the same. I get up in the morning, drag my weary body out of bed, put in a long day of work, come home exhausted, only to face this swirl of chaos. I have no time to myself. After I put the last of the children to bed, I collapse, only to wake up the next morning, and do it again. I am trapped. I am stuck. I'll spend the rest of my days satisfying the needs of these 14 people. On my tombstone put the epitaph 'beleaguered provider.'"

Nahor second-guesses the decisions he has made. "Maybe I should have left Mesopotamia when I was younger. Broadened my horizons. Why did I get married so young and weigh myself down with kid after kid?"

Finally, Nahor envies Abraham. "Abraham has got everything I don't have. I'm mired down in Mesopotamia, feeding fourteen people. But Abraham is light and breezy and free, flitting here, flitting there—Egypt, Canaan—rubbing elbows with princes, hobnobbing with potentates. There's no glory to my life, the same humdrum routine. But Abraham is a valorous warrior, conquering the four invading kings. I live hand to mouth. But Abraham is rich in cattle and sheep, possessions galore. My energies are taken up with the here and now, just making it through the day. But Abraham is a man of God, a spiritual pioneer who is going to leave this huge legacy. All in all, the grass is greener on Abraham's side of the fence."

So Abraham and Nahor each think the grass is greener on the other's side of the fence, and each undergoes the eleventh trial. The eleventh trial is a human problem, and all of us are heir to it from time to time. We look at our life and grapple with the fact that it has not turned out how we would have wanted. We second-guess decisions we've made. We envy others whose grass seems greener than our own. How do we overcome our own eleventh trial?

This genealogy teaches us that the price of adulthood is accepting the reality that no one—not even Abraham—can have it all. If he had stayed in Mesopotamia and raised twelve children like Nahor, he would have had deep roots in a community and an enormous immediate family. But he would not have had the freedom and time and energy to heed God's call to become the father of the Jewish people. And Nahor, if he had opted to be light and breezy and free, seeing the world, avoiding the relentless grind of routine, if he had done all that, he could not have had his big and happy family. This is the insight yielded by growing up. There are costs and consequences, tradeoffs and sacrifices, to every decision we make. *To live is to choose, and then to own our choices.* Abraham and Nahor can ultimately accept what they lack by appreciating what they have, by realizing that the grass on their own side of the fence was greener than they had sometimes appreciated.

Once they can accept what they lack, and appreciate what they have, they can go the next step, being genuinely happy for one another. Abraham can get *nachus* from his brother the family man, proud of Nahor's 12 children, wife and concubine. Nahor can get *nachus* from his brother the religious visionary, proud of Abraham's uniquely compelling destiny. At peace with themselves, they can grow to rejoice in one another.

And Abraham keeps on living. He refuses to act like his life is over before it's over. After he gets this email from Mesopotamia, he sets out to make his life better and happier. After

Sarah's death, he marries again, to a woman named Keturah and, in his twilight years, he begins again, starting a new family, siring six more children. Abraham's insistence on living and growing recalls the teaching of that great sage Yogi Berra, who said. "it ain't over till it's over." It's never too late to rejuvenate.

This genealogy is far from anti-climactic. It leaves us with important spiritual challenges. May we see the green grass on our own side of the fence. May we be at peace with our own choices so that we can be happy for the green grass on our neighbor's side of the fence. May we have the courage to recreate our lives when they need recreating. Where there is life there is hope, and with that hope we can overcome Abraham's eleventh trial in our own lives. Shabbat shalom.