

Easton, yashar koach! I was really very touched by what you shared this morning - not just the caring work that you've done as part of your preparation for becoming bar mitzvah, but also the thoughtful honesty that you brought to your d'var Torah, your teaching.

You shared that before you met the people that you were bringing meals to with CBE, you were a little unsure and uneasy about what to expect - who are they? Might this be scary? Will they be friendly? I loved that you shared this part of your experience because it's so human and we rarely talk about it. It **can** be scary to meet total strangers in such a vulnerable moment. But you did it, and you found that as you met them and connected with them more, it turned out that they were really just nice folks who, as immigrants in America today, needed some support. Yet this seemingly small discreet moment of growth is not small at all - it is transformative. In many ways this openness to moving from our hesitations, our assumptions, and our fears of the other, the stranger, to a place of connection and relationship is the very heart of this Torah portion. And it asks of us some big and serious questions.

Parshat Vayera sets up two opposing worldviews as a way to explore those questions. One takes place under Abraham's tent, as you described. And one takes place in the city of Sodom just a few verses later.

Sodom is a dark place in Torah. It's the city in which God sees so much evil that God is ready to wipe it off the map. In Christian tradition, the sin of Sodom is generally interpreted as homosexuality. But that's not at all what Jewish tradition has to say. Our midrash tells the story of a woman in Sodom who noticed a hungry person in the town square, and so she would hide food in her pitcher every day and secretly bring it to him. Secretly because it was a capital offense in Sodom to offer any help to a poor person or stranger. When she was discovered, they killed her in a gruesome manner. Another midrash recounts: When a stranger would come to town, each Sodomite would write their own name on a coin and give it to him, but they'd refuse to sell him any food. When he starved to death, they would come and reclaim their coins from his pocket.

This is how Jewish tradition describes what God could not stomach - indifference to the hungry and the stranger. Whether the Sodomites acted out of fear or greed or trauma or anxiety, the text doesn't tell us, but we can see that as they desperately try to preserve their society - their actions actually lead to their own destruction. That is one option for how we could choose to relate to the stranger and those in need.

Sodom is set as the foil to the other worldview in parshat Vayera - the world that unfolds under Abraham's tent. Abraham and Sarah are sitting inside their tent in the heat of the day. And from a distance, Abraham sees three strangers approach. According to tradition, Abraham has only just recently circumcised himself, at the age of 99, and is in his tent, recuperating. So as the individuals approach, Abraham has a decision to make. How will he relate to these strangers in front of him who are in need. Who are they? Are they dangerous? Are they friendly? Should he quickly drop down the flaps of his tent and pretend not to be home? Should he send them away so he can continue to heal?

As you know, Abraham does make a choice. The text says: *Vayaratz likratam*. He runs to greet them and he gives them food and drink and he takes them into his tent to rest.

But the text reveals that Abraham didn't come by this decision easily. He, too, is human and took a beat to figure out what to do next.

The text says: וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים. He lifted his eyes, and he saw and behold, *hineh* - here they appear to be three men. The commentator Or HaChaim teaches that when he says: *v'hineh*, it means: this is what they *appeared* to be to Abraham. Most interestingly, he was wrong. He jumped to a wrong conclusion about them, for these three turn out to be, in fact, angels of God. But by saying the word "*v'hineh*," he gives himself some room to **be** wrong. To learn something, to find out that they are not who he initially thought they were.

In addition, The Tzena Ur'ena, a Polish commentary, teaches that the three individuals also experienced hesitation. When they saw that Abraham was rewrapping the bandages from his circumcision, that he was wounded and in pain, they retreated from him. Perhaps they understood that when a person is suffering, they are, we are, considerably less likely to want to help someone else. That was *their* assumption.

So what happens here that Abraham takes such a different path than the people of Sodom do?

This, too, we find in our text. Rashi points out that when Abraham first notices the angels, the word *vayar*, he saw, appears twice, which is repetitious and strange. He teaches that the first *vayar* indicates that Abraham merely sees the individuals. But with the second *vayar*, he saw, it signals that Abraham then came to **understand** them. Or as Sforno teaches, he took a moment to concentrate on seeing them more clearly. Easton, this is what you chose to do and it is more than admirable. It's a blessing.

Today, we find ourselves with similar choices to make. The danger is rising for immigrants in our city and across the country. The President is threatening to increase ICE in NYC to intimidate, threaten, and detain immigrants of all statuses, or just people who speak a non-English language, or have darker skin. There was a traumatic ICE raid this month in downtown Manhattan and every day, we see another video of ICE violently beating someone or tearing them away from their children or partner, pulling people out of cars, arresting people at the court house or in front of their children's school, masked and without ID. This is utterly out of control and our immigrant neighbors are understandably terrified.

And we, as you well identified, Easton, we are a people whose Torah and history call on us to care for and protect the stranger, ourselves having been strangers whether it was in Mitzrayim or Spain or Poland, to stand up now for those just outside the walls of the tent.

AND, like Abraham, in this moment in history, even as we want to do what is good and right, we are also wounded and aching. And it's harder to help another person when that is the case. We

are witnessing rising antisemitism. Swastikas on a Brooklyn Yeshiva and a Manhattan apartment building this week. In France, during a performance by the Israeli Phil Harmonic, anti-Israel protesters brought a lit flare into the audience, endangering lives. And we are fractured as the Jewish community of NYC, in the wake of our mayoral election, which Rabbi Timoner spoke extensively and powerfully about last night. These are real wounds that we will need space to heal. And they make it harder for us to see - *vayar* - both each other and the other. And the administration is certainly doing their best to try to make us afraid of our immigrant sisters and brothers who are in need of support, protection, resources, and most of all allyship. They want us so badly to be Sodomites, but we are the children of Abraham. So what **will** we do?

Rabbi and philosopher, Martin Buber, teaches that all actual life is encounter. Is meeting. Is found in the way that Abraham greeted the stranger, face to face. This is available to us, too, this kind of transformative encounter - to talk to our neighbors, get to know each other, be curious, share stories, build trust, seek out each other's humanity, such that our assumptions and fears fall away. And from the places of our own wounds, I pray that we soon discover what Abraham did - that we heal much more quickly when we turn **toward** the other and not **toward** isolation.

So I want you to know that here at CBE, the actions we are taking to stand with our immigrant neighbors reflect these very Vayera learnings. Each of them, a way for us to get to really know and see our neighbors as we build an Abrahamic neighborhood together.

Every Tuesday, some are gathering for an hour with local church folks outside of The Metropolitan Detention Center, on 3rd Avenue where many terrified ICE detainees are being held. And every Thursday, others are showing up in Grand Army Plaza with Brooklyn neighbors and signs about love and democracy, to shine the light on the world that we stand for.

Next Shabbat, right after Shabbat services, we'll meet in the chapel with other folks from across Brooklyn, to prepare and then we'll go and talk with business owners and workers all along 7th Avenue, as part of a city-wide effort called Signs of Solidarity, to help folks know their rights, and how to protect their employees, and to build real community connections and a shared humanity. And there are other opportunities, too, and you are all invited into all of it.

There are so many things that stand between us and taking action - our wounds, our assumptions, our nervousness, our feeling unprepared - but imagine the expansive and loving tent that we can build together by saying yes. Even just once, even if this all feels very new and intimidating - it's the heat of the day and there are strangers approaching.

This past week at MDC, a pastor was sharing a prayer and there was a man named Raul playing a drum. And the pastor was reminding us that we are all connected. Us, the prisoners being held, the guards who are holding them, all of us, if we will stop and really see each other. He invited us to stand silently for a minute and try to feel that. And he glanced over at the

drummer and he said: give us a heartbeat, Raul. And Raul started drumming the rhythm of a heartbeat.

And we felt Abraham. And we felt the angels at his tent. And we felt the undeniable humanity between us all. God, give us a heartbeat to choose to be like the children of Abraham. Like Easton was, like we are trying to be, like we can be, on this day. Amen and Shabbat shalom.