

Introduction to Parsha #4: Vayera¹

<i>Torah:</i>	Genesis 18:1 - 22:24
<i>Haftarah:</i>	II Kings 4:1-37
<i>B'rit Chadasha:</i>	II Peter 2:4-11; and Hebrews 11:13-19



Then he lifted his eyes
[Genesis 18:2a]

Vayera elav Adonai b'Elonei Mamre – *And the Holy One appeared/manifested/made Himself visible to human sight² in/at the Oaks of Mamre* **Genesis 18:1a.**

The *Avrahamic Initiative* is underway! Moshe the storyteller is dazzling us with tales of a rather average sheepherder from Mesopotamia whose life was recently changed by a series of paradigm-shifting encounters with the Creator of the Universe. As a result of those encounters first ‘Avram’, then his wife ‘Sarai’ have gone from being nobodies to playing the central role in the Holy One’s ‘Grand Plan’ of redemption for mankind and restoration for planet earth. Through the lives and life-stories of this very average couple and their progeny the Holy One plans to offer the world an alternative to the toxicity being spread about by all the nations that rage and all the angry ethnic groups within those nations that insist on indulging vain imaginations. The Holy One’s plan is radical. He will gradually reintroduce the pure language spoken in the Heavenly Realm – *i.e.* the beautiful Hebrew language with which He created the universe - to humankind. He will put key words and phrases from that Divine-energy-infused language to work fixing the world - one person, family, and household at a time.

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² This is by no means an isolated instance. For a few of other instances in Torah which describe the Holy One as ‘appearing’ to man, *see* Genesis 12:7, 15:17, 17:1, and 18:1 in relation to Avraham; *see* Genesis 26:2 and 26:24 in relation to Yitzchak; and *see* Genesis 35:1, 7, and 9 in relation to Ya’akov; and *see* Exodus 3:2, among many others, in relation to Moshe.

Temptations Common to Man – Meet the Holy One’s Secret Agent of Wholeness, Wellness, & Shalom!

Last week in parsha *Lech Lecha* we saw the wealth of the wicked offered to Avram. He was not moved in the least. Indeed, he flat out refused to take as much as a shoestring from it. All he wanted for his trouble was for those – including his kinsman Lot - who had been carried away into captivity with all his family - to be set free and given another chance at life. Mountains of gold, silver, and storehouses of grain and oil were of no interest to Avram; he had set his heart on something far more valuable and lasting. He had tasted the goodness of the Creator of the Universe – and he could not – would not – *un-taste* it. He was not about to be seduced back into the ‘wealth-and-power-obsession’ mindset of the raging nations. As he has every time he was challenged to rejoin the rat race or take up the offense of fallen humanity, he did exactly what he was told to do at the beginning – he *walked away*. The Holy One’s call for him to “***Lech Lecha!***” was not a once-and-done call for him – it was his life-mission! Through he was just as thoroughly subject to the slings and arrow onslaught of outrageous fortune as other men are, Avraham had a secret source of strength and focus: he had a Divine Covenant Partner Who watched over and guided his every move. So, when trials, temptations, and troubles came, he just pressed in even harder to the Holy One, listened for and wholeheartedly *sh’ma*-ed His Voice, and followed His every instruction and prompting. Avram modeled what walking in Covenant with the Holy One – not just for a few minutes in a meeting, but over the course decades – looks like and consists of. Avram ‘walked’ with the Holy One – and learned from Him the disciplines of alignment. His highest priority in life became to serve his Maker, his wife and household, his fellow members of the human race, and Creation, faithfully, humbly, gently, and self-lessly. What a tale! What a story!

Ah, but every such ‘sudden success’ story on the world stage comes an equally stunning – though far less glorious - back-story. First of all, whatever personal issues, and relational difficulties the shepherd and his wife faced before the world-changing brush were now overshadowed by the challenges of being the Holy One’s go-to asset to deal with the *ra*, *shachat*, and *chamas* obsession of fallen man. The weight of the problems Avram was now expected to deal with would crush the strongest of men and tax the strongest of marriages – yet somehow Avram and Sarai, and their marriage, seem to keep coming out of each situation smelling like a rose.

Welcome to the Prototypical Journey of the Awestruck Heart

The great Avrahamic adventure started with the Creator softly whispering two Hebrew words: ‘***Lech Lecha***’. Avram did not just ‘hear’ that phrase – he *sh’ma*-ed it. Deep in his innermost being he began to resonate with the frequency of the

Divine Speaker's Voice and Tone and Persona as well as His verbal Message. The shepherd's brain, heart, kidneys, hands; feet; and fingers all began to pulse with *kedusha*³ energy. The Holy One therefore had both Avram's full attention and undying devotion the moment those words were whispered. The associated call to ***'go out to a land I will show you'*** was then able to stir something even deeper in the old man's soul. The prospect of walking with the Creator of the Universe exhilarated him. The invitation to be made over by the Master of all Creative Arts and Processes into the beautiful person he had been designed to be - instead of the fruitless shadow of a person that he had let culture, family, age, pseudo-intellect, and life experience reduce him to - captured his awestruck heart. The seven great "I Will" commitments the Holy One made thereafter were merely icing on the cake. Heaven's *Strategic Initiative* to fix the post-Flood/City-and-Tower-Obsessed world is 'on'. Avram and Sarai are 'in'. So ... how about you, Beloved?

The identities and destinies of Avram and Sarai have been totally recast. They have begun a beautiful *journey of Glorious Fascination* that is destined to last forever, being relived *dor v'dor* [generation after generation]. Out of this prototype – in all its reproductions - the Holy One intends to bring about both the redemption of mankind as a species, bloodline by bloodline, and the restoration of the Creation, realm by realm, sphere by sphere, genus by genus. But it all started with Avram, who has been given a new name that matches his newly expanded destiny. Instead of Avram he is now known as *Avraham – father of multitudes*. His wife, meanwhile, is no longer known as Sarai, but has taken on the identity and character of *Sarah – a noble princess*. These two 'new creations' are pioneering for us the great search for a city with foundations - a city not built by human hands - a city whose Builder and Maker is none other than the Holy One Himself. They have embarked upon a timeless odyssey – an epic journey of 'faith' that will inspire millions of ordinary people like them over the course of at least a thousand generations, to seek that same city.

Welcome to the era in which acts of *emunah* [KJV 'faith'] flow in covenantal response to the Holy One's gift of *chen* [KJV 'grace']. Every great journey begins with *a single step*. Are you ready?

The Exquisite Choreography of Divine Romance

The inspired narrative of *Lech Lecha* demonstrates the classic pattern under which the Holy One engages in *Divine Romance* with man. What the Holy One did with

³ *Kedusha* is usually translated into English as 'holiness'. It is the energy/empowerment produced by being in the Presence of the Holy One or anything He has touched and set apart for exclusive use in/by His Household – e.g. the 'Holy' Sabbath, the 'Holy' Torah, the 'Holy' Spirit, the 'Holy' Seed of Messiah, the 'Holy' Tabernacle and Temple, the 'Holy' Festivals, the 'Holy' City of Jerusalem, the 'Holy' hill of *Tziyon*, the 'Holy' priesthood and its 'Holy' 'garments', 'offerings'/'sacrifices', etc.

Avram, you see, is what He longs to do with all of us. It is just a matter of when and how we respond to His Enthralling Under-the-Radar Choreography. The precise steps of the dance of the ages are uniquely choreographed by our Glorious Suitor for each one of us. But the pattern - and the goals - always remain the same. He wants us to *know Him* and to *understand the intimate depth to which we are known and adored by Him*. He wants to *shower us with love*. He wants to *take all our burdens onto His Own Strong Shoulders*. He wants to *absorb all our wounds, diseases, and offenses into His Flesh*, and *take all our stressors onto His Heart*. He wants to *make our lives meaningful* beyond our human capacity to ask or hope or think. Like the True Immaculate Lover He is, He will stop at absolutely nothing – except our firm ‘No’ - to make His dream for each of us to have a world-changing destiny a reality.

Phase I – The Silent Pursuit Phase

The Holy One always initiates the Courtship process by *pursuing us silently and stealthily*, completely under the radar of our consciousness. Even while we are spending decades consumed with our own self-interests; our social status; our romances and families; our educational pursuits; our careers; our finances; our – political causes; our moral crusades; our caustic ideologies; and our religious creeds and sacraments, He is always ‘arranging coincidences’ and ‘painting horizons’. He is always whispering – though we are not listening: “My child, *I am here for you! I am waiting for you – and will wait as long as necessary for you to awaken to why you are really here on earth. Meanwhile, I am watching over you, keeping you alive, sustaining you, bringing you through every crisis, and loving you like you will never be loved by anyone or anything on earth*”.

The Holy One, you see, is both patient and *unoffendable*. Why? Because He is absolutely *confident* that your *Lech Lecha* day is coming. After all, He has been planning for that day since before the foundation of the world. Your new creation name is already written in His Book. Angels, Elders, and Living Creatures in Heaven have been singing songs about your assigned role in the Kingdom since before you were born. The thread of your story has been woven all up into and through a Coat of Many Colors that he has designed for you to one day don and model to the world.

After days, weeks, months, years, and sometimes decades of silent, stealthy pursuit by our Creator, one day our innermost beings will awaken with an *unexplained stirring of spiritual restlessness*, a *sudden inability to be satisfied with the status quo*, and an *ever-increasing longing for a greater destiny that we cannot begin to define or quantify*. Then it will be time for Him to take the relationship to Phase II.

Phase II – The Initial Encounter Phase

As soon as He perceives we are ready the Holy One will find a way to *inject Himself into our individual little worlds* – and do it in a way that *captivates both our attention and affection*. He may *speak to our hearts* – as He did to Avram - *or He may heal our bodies*. He may *appeal to our minds* or He may *appear to our eyes*. But He will *find a way to make contact with us*. And when He does this - however He chooses to do it - the resulting Visitation will start a chain reaction in us, and eventually turn our world upside down. He will stir in us a radical consciousness of both His existence and our need to respond to Him. This is *the initial encounter phase*. Think of Avraham's *Lech Lecha* moment. Think of Ya'akov's '*Angelic Staircase*' dream. Think of Moshe's *burning bush* experience. Think of Iyov's life-changing '*Voice From the Whirlwind*' encounter. Think of the Woman of Samaria's '*I perceive you are a prophet*' surprise, and the Woman Caught in Adultery's '*Where are Your Accusers?*' moment. Think of Shaul of Tarsus' experience on the *Road to Damascus*.

In connection with this initial encounter phase the Heavenly Suitor will *apprehend us* and calls us to a greater destiny. *Many are called* in this manner - but few are chosen. It all depends upon *our response to the call*. If we *shrug off the call*, analyzing it not in terms of *its beauty and magnitude* but in terms of our own perception of its likelihood and feasibility, we will find hundreds of ways to *reason it away*, and to *justify our choice to continue living in the comfortable physical, biological, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual shadow boxes*, well ... He will honor our choice. But if, instead, we *surrender our hearts to His call*, and take just one small step toward His waiting arms – well, if we do that, *something wonderful happens inside us*, and we embark upon the universe's most glorious adventure.

Phase III - The Glorious Adventure Phase

The *glorious adventure phase* of Divine Romance always begins with *a departure*. It *has to*. We have to invest ourselves in the pilgrimage in some way. It has to feel to us like it *cost us something* in order for us to fully appreciate its worth. We must at least feel like we are *leaving something behind* if we are ever to develop a meaningful appetite for the glorious inheritance that lies before us.

Sometimes what we are called to leave behind is as simple as a *destructive behavior pattern* or a *cynical worldview*. Other times it is a *bankrupt philosophy of life*, or a *critical, ungrateful attitude of entitlement or victimization*. Still other times it is a *convenient network of doubts and excuses*, or a *whirlpool of self-pity*, or *arrogant self-righteousness*, or *anger or fear*, or a *sense of self-importance*, or a *relationship that is going nowhere*, or a *comfortable physical or emotional crutch*.

Whatever it is, at the time it seems like a *horrible tearing of the flesh* - the *scaling of an impossible barrier*, the *accomplishment of an impossible dream*.

Very shortly after we make our departure however we find it is not what we have been called to leave behind that is important as what we have been called to search for. It is not where we came from or what we came out of that really matters - as all our stories will be different; instead the important thing is *Who we are called to follow*, and *where He is calling us to go*. Those two ‘*destination factors*’ – the WHO and the WHERE of the Divine Romance - we soon discover, are what makes the adventure we have undertaken truly glorious. Whatever we left behind - however critical to our self-concept it seemed at the time we were called to leave – will quickly start to seem like ‘rubbish’ in comparison to the glorious adventure we have begun to taste. And the moment that revelation dawns we embrace the Divine Romance fully, joyfully accepting it as our portion and destiny forever. Gradually we begin to realize that we would be fools to ever, ever even *look back*, much less hold onto the slightest twinge of desire to return for one moment to whatever wretched place from which we came. The Holy One will then lead us through a uniquely engineered series of faith-shaking life challenges and re-affirming God-encounters designed to purify our hearts and renew our minds. I call this the *strategic maze phase of the Divine Romance*.

V'escha l'goy-gadol

I will make you into a great nation.

v'avareicheicha v'agadeilah shemeicha

I will bless you and make you great.

V'heyeh b'rachah

You will be a blessing.

V'avarechah mevaracheicha umekaleleicha a'or

I will bless those who bless you, and he who accurses you, I will accurse.

v'nivreichu vecha kol mishpechot ha-adamah

All the families of the earth will be blessed through you.'

[Genesis 12:1-3]

Phase IV - The Strategic Maze Phase

The strategic maze phase of Divine Romance almost always involves such things as the Holy One: [a] letting us make a few mistakes and miscalculations independent of Him, [b] allowing us to taste an unforgettable quantity of the bitter fruit of those bad choices, [c] fixing our messes for us in ways we know we do not deserve and could not have dreamed up by ourselves; [d] just when we are about to panic and quit, revealing to us exactly what we need to see and hear.

All of this is designed to release us from *the restrictions and limitations that our cultures, our physical bloodlines, our inherited worldviews and our personal set of pre-call wounds and scars have placed upon us*, individually and collectively. *It is this phase of Divine Romance, you see, that is designed to free us from the tyranny of the other lovers we have embraced before meeting the true Love of our lives.*

At some point in this process we start to realize that what the Holy One wants and *deserves* from us is not just our ‘obedience’ but *our hearts*. We are amazed to discover that He wants our *friendship*, and desires us to *prefer His company over anything the world has to offer*. We are humbled to find that He wants us to invest years, and untold Kingdom assets in us, in order to teach us to trust Him, to *sh’ma* His Voice, and to walk with Him in all His ways, as we gradually mature into doing only what we see Him doing and speaking only what we hear Him saying. We gradually discover that He ultimately intends... *gasp ... dare we think such a thing* - to cut a covenant with us that looks a lot like a marriage covenant. He wants our affections, our devotion, and our passion. He wants an enthralled Covenant Partner who voluntarily chooses Him and His Ways over all other alternatives - and who is both wholehearted in devotion to Him and finds ultimate fulfillment and joy in walking, talking, and co-laboring with Him. He wants us to be His co-regent in the administration of the Kingdom of Heaven’s policies of *redemption and restoration, wisdom and understanding, healing and wholeness, mercy and kindness, forgiveness and blessing, harmony and fruitfulness*.

If these realizations do not frighten us away, He knows that nothing will. Not famine; not pestilence; not the sword; not deprivation; and not even death. About the time we realize this, the Holy One takes our arm and escorts us into the next phase of Immaculate Romance - the *eternal covenant phase*.

Phase V – The Eternal Covenant Phase

The final phase of Divine Romance is an extended season of ever deepening personal and Kingdom community commitment. This is the season of putting away the last vestiges of our old identities – with their self-absorption, self-consciousness, self-will, and negative patterns of thought, speech, consumption, reaction, and behavior, and beginning to settle into and function in our new creation identities. This is the season of abiding in our Bridegroom-King – where it is in Him that we live, and move, and have our being. This is the season we become recognizable as *bone of His Bone*, and *flesh of His Flesh*. This is the season of *mission*. This is the season of *purpose*. This is the season of *co-laboring*. This is the season of *delegation of Divine Authority*. This is the season of *Kingdom Ambassadorship*. This is the season of *putting the hand to the plow* – and not turning back. This is the season of *sowing and reaping*.

How far along the continuum of Divine Romance are you, Dear Reader? Are you ready to embark on *a new season of expanded interaction between the man and his Creator*? The stage is set. The *b'rit* [covenant] is now firmly *in place*. It is now time for Avraham and Sarah – and all their progeny - to start to walk it out in real time.

The Avraham Chronicles – Part II

Last week's parsha ended with Avraham consummating the *b'rit* by marking himself and all males in his household with the *unmistakable sign of Covenant Commitment*. This week we will discover if the dedication of the heart is as real as the mark in the flesh. We are now ready for *part II* of the Avraham chronicles – and for *phase II* of the Divine Romance! This *new era in God-man relations* upon which we now find ourselves ready to embark is going to be kicked-off in royal style - with one of the most dramatic God-encounters yet. The Divine Visitation with which new era in God-man relations will begin will be a significant upgrade from the God encounters about which we studied in parsha *Lech Lecha*. The first post-*b'rit* God-encounter will in fact be unique among all the God encounters of the book of Genesis, because it will be the only God-encounter of the patriarchal period that *will involve more than one human being*. This Divine Visitation will involve not only Avraham, the Holy One's new covenant partner, but also Avraham's beloved *wife* Sarah. And before this Visitation is over, Lot, his unnamed wife, their unnamed daughters, and all the men of the Sodom will receive a Divine Touch as well. How will they respond?

A Vayera Travelogue

What will we read about in Torah this week? With *b'rit* now in place the action is about to get *really intense*. *Angels are going to be everywhere* it seems. Sarah will finally get to participate in a God encounter. In the course of it she will hear for herself – from the lips of angels - the *promise of a child*. And what will she do? She'll *laugh*! And all Heaven will laugh with her.

Before the events of *Vayera* transpired who knows how long it had been since Sarah laughed! The journey of faith into which Avraham has drug her has definitely not been easy – especially for her. She has been uprooted from her home, from her country of birth, and from all familiar surroundings, family members and friends. She has endured the rigors of a long, perilous journey on foot through treacherous mountains, through dry, dusty deserts, and through foreign lands where she was leered at and looked upon as prey to be seized. She has been taken against her will into Pharaoh's harem. She has watched her husband - her only means of support as well as companionship – ride off to wage a war against vastly superior forces that logic told her was 99.9 % sure to result in his death and her widowhood. She has seen her husband take another woman to his tent, and felt the scorn of that woman when she was able to give Avraham the child

Sarah had never been able to. No, this journey has not been easy for Sarah. It has undoubtedly been quite some time since she felt like she had any reason to laugh. Ah, but Dear Reader, she who laughs *last* laughs *best*!

Avraham's Mission Is Upgraded

In the course of the first Divine Visitation of *Vayera* the mission of Avraham and his descendants in the earth – i.e. the part Avraham and his progeny are called to play in the redemptive plan of the Holy One, will be revealed in stark simplicity. The Holy One will explain that mission as: ... ***that he may enjoin/teach/instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of Adonai, to do 'righteousness' [Hebrew tzedekah] and 'justice' [Hebrew mishpat].*** Genesis 18:19. What the redemptive plan of the Holy One for mankind and Creation involves begins and ends with fathers training their children in the 'Ways of the Holy One', and bringing the Holy One's 'righteousness' and the Holy One's 'justice' into operation in real time on a real earth. Wow! If you weren't paying attention, Dear One, you just missed the ultimate Creator of the Universe's 'Drop the Mike' moment! It is not about *institutions*. It is not about *religious symbols, or sacraments, or 'worship services'*. It is not about *clergymen*. It is not about *seminaries*. It is not about *public ministry*. It is not about *creeds*. It is not about *hype*. It is not about *holy wars or crusades*. It is not about *heresy hunting*. It is not about *inquisitions*. It is not about *reformations*. It is not about 'social justice'. It is not about *political or ideological activism*. Instead, what the Kingdom of Heaven is about is *households – i.e. 'lovely tents'*. It is about fathers and mothers being *inspired models for and faithful teachers of their own children*. More specifically, it is about heads of households being models and teachers of three closely related 'martial arts – [1] *Keeping the Way of the Holy One*, [2] *building tzedakah*, and [3] *shaping mishpat*. It almost sounds like Micah 6:8's formulation of what the Holy One 'requires' of a man – and/or Ecclesiastes 12:13's summary of the 'whole' duty of man. This is ... well ... *beyond radical*. He who has an ear, let him *sh'ma*!

What, then, is the 'way of the Holy One'? Consider a few verses from the Psalms:

The humble He guides in mishpat; and the humble He teaches His Way.

*Who is the man that fears the Holy One?
Him He will teach in the Way He chooses.*

[Psalm 25:9, 12]

*I will instruct you and teach you in the Way you should go;
I will guide you with My Eye.*

[Psalm 32:8]

*He made known His Ways to Moshe;
His acts to the children of Israel.*

[Psalm 107:3]

*Blessed are the undefiled in the Way,
who walk in the Torah of the Holy One*
[Psalm 119:1]

What is ‘the Way of the Holy One’?

From these references to ‘the Way’ of the Holy One, there are two things we know for certain about that ‘Way’: First, it must be the product of the Holy One’s very personal guidance, teaching, and instructing of one who is [1] *humble* and [b] *fears/reverses/honors/subjugates himself to the Holy One*. Second, the Divine Discourses, *Mitzvot*, and *Mishpatim* of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and the teachings of Moshe in Deuteronomy provide the treasure map and the mile markers for the Way. Arrogant academics, proud theologians, and popular preachers acclaimed by millions cannot teach you the Way, for they simply do not know it. Only humble, gentle, and kind bondservants, compelled by love and constrained by Divine Call to serve mankind and Creation, even know the way, much less can teach it to anyone else.

A. What Does it Mean to ‘Do [Hebrew *asah*] Tzedakah?

Usually translated into English as ‘righteousness’, *tzedakah* is derived from a verb root that means ‘*make straight, bring to plumb and/or level, and make ‘right’ as in a ‘right’ angle*. So to ‘do’ *tzedakah* [Hebrew, *asah it, artistically forming it, shaping/finishing it, and making it functional*], is about *building/creating something according to, and that will work to facilitate, if not culminate, a long-range Plan*. It involves learning to *use the Author/Designer’s design specifications as the filter* through which one looks at [*i.e.* Hebrew *ra’ah* – to *behold, to perceive the reality and potential behind the appearance*], relates to, and works with all the people, places, time periods, and things that come into in one’s sphere of influence. It means to show both creativity and subordination to the Author/Designer’s Vision and Plan. It means, with regard to all people, places, time periods, and things the Holy One brings into your zone of impact, to choose to think, speak, react, and behave in ways that will help make the Author’s vision for those people, places, time periods, and things come an efficient, sustainable state of harmony and functionality. Conversely, it means not to judge any person, place, time period, or thing prematurely, or try to redesign same to suit one’s own tastes or to further one’s own self-interest but instead to collaborate with and facilitate, whatever the Holy One is trying to construct in the person, place, time, and/or thing in question.

The key to *tzedakah* is real-time, hands-on, solution/resolution focused Kingdom-building engagement and activity, as opposed to wasting time and energy talking/arguing/pontificating about abstractions, ideas, theories, concepts, opinions, principles, morals, or value judgments. See Proverbs 14:34a: *Tzedakah ‘exalts’* [Hebrew *rum*, to build up, to cause to grow, to uplift, to cause to arise or ascend] *a nation*.

See also James 3:8: *The fruit of tzedakah is sown in shalom by those who make shalom.*

Perhaps the best way to explain what it means to ‘*asah tzedakah*’ is to look at a familiar Biblical narrative and see how *tzedakah* – and the opposite of *tzedakah* – played out. Consider the famous story of Yeshua, the angry crowd at Jericho, and Zacchaeus, the crooked tax collector. The crowd was very displeased that Yeshua went to eat with such a traitor and outright thief. They would have been happy for Yeshua to at least refuse to eat with Zacchaeus, if not rebuke him sternly and publicly. But while that might have pleased the crowd, it would have done nothing to heal the wound or improve the situation – either for Israel or Zacchaeus. It would, therefore, not have been *tzedekah*. What Yeshua did, with a solution/resolution, and the common good of Israel as well as the redemption of Zacchaeus in mind, was to look past the tax collector’s present sinful state, and see his potential as a child of the Holy One who could, with the application of an appropriate level of mercy and kindness, be gloriously redeemed. Remember, it is the demonstration of the goodness, forbearance, longsuffering and kindness of God – not chastisement, ranting, ostracism, or so-called ‘righteous indignation’ - that leads men to *teshuvah*/repentance. **Romans 2:4.**

C. What Does it Mean to ‘Do [Hebrew asah] Mishpat’?

Usually translated into English as either ‘justice’ or ‘judgment’, *mishpat* means the *development, issuance, publication, administration, enforcement, and oversight of royal decrees designed bring about the purposes and policies of the King*. To ‘*asah mishpat*’ is thus means to employ, for the good of specific people, places, time periods, and creatures, a functional infrastructure that gathers and processes information/data, and makes decisions, through the lens of, and implements those decisions in practical ways that support and advance the King’s announced short- and long-term Plans and agenda. See Psalm 89:14a: *Tzedakah and mishpat are the foundation of Your Throne*. And see Psalm 119:149b: *O Holy One, revive me according to Your mishpat*. To ‘*asah mishpat*’ is therefore to join the Holy One in doing whatever He has decreed should be done in a given situation, to advance His Plan for the Redemption of Mankind and the Restoration of Creation to its intended state of beauty, harmony, and fruitfulness. *Mishpat* is always goal-advancing in focus – never blame, shame, or evil-deed obsessing. *Mishpat* is always present-future oriented, present-past oriented. The goal of *mishpat* is never blame or punishment, but always redemption, restoration, and what it will take to get past the obstacles, challenges, offenses, attitudes, and emotions that stand in the way so that the King’s agenda can advance to the next stage. *Mishpat* is always about Kingdom advancement, as opposed to individual or societal morals, rights, slights, outrages, or bloodlust.

Perhaps the best way to understand what it means to ‘do *mishpat*’ is to look at a narrative and see how *mishpat* – and the opposite of *mishpat* – played out. Let’s look at the story of Yeshua, the Pharisees, and the woman caught in adultery. What the Pharisees sought was ostensibly, at a surface level, to have *part of one mishpat* of Torah – the one that called for stones to be piled up against an adulterer and an adulteress [Leviticus 20:10] – enforced as if it were the only part that mattered. Yeshua refused to cooperate. All applicable provisions of Torah must be applied for *mishpat* to be done. The Pharisees were ignoring both the procedural aspects of Torah [especially [a] that two or more credible witnesses are required, and [b] that the Sanhedrin, not an itinerant rabbi, was to pronounce any judgment of death], as well as a very important substantive one [i.e. the requirement that death be inflicted on both adulterous parties, not just one of them]. Since stoning the woman the way the Pharisees wanted would have violated at least three *mishpatim* of Torah, for the sake of one, Yeshua did *mishpat*. And in the course of it, said to the woman: ***go, and stray from the Covenant path no more.***’ The goal was redemption, restoration, and moving on with the King’s agenda – not punishing an adulteress.

Avraham Bargains With the Holy One Over the Lives of Men

After the details of Avraham’s and his descendant’s mission are revealed we will see Avraham engage in a level of God-man interaction that would have totally boggled the mind of the Ancients. Avraham will actually *barter* with the Creator of the Universe over the security of perverted cities and the lives of fallen men. The currency of the negotiation? You could probably have guessed it – it is *tzedakah* and *mishpat* – i.e. the second and third subjects the Holy One just told us He intends for us to model for and teach to our children and in our households. But what we are to model and teach are most definitely not the world’s or any human culture’s or institution’s idea of ‘righteousness’; nor are we to adopt, live by, or teach any man’s concept of ‘fairness’ or ‘justice’. Avraham is about to discover – as are we –that man’s flawed idea of what is ‘righteous’ – a concept of self-satisfaction obtained when comparing oneself to others⁴ - is nowhere close to the *tzedakah* the Holy One offers, and that no man’s idea of ‘justice’ - a Western ideological concept totally foreign to Torah - is even in the same universe as what the Holy One defines *mishpat* to be.

⁴ See, for example, Luke 18:10-13: *Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed by himself: “God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I give tithes of all that I possess. Meanwhile the tax collector, standing far off, would not so much as raise his eyes toward Heaven, but beat his breast, saying: ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this [the latter] man went to his home justified, rather than the other; everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but everyone who humbles himself will be exalted.*

Sodom and Gomorrah Receive Their Own Divine Visitation

Meanwhile, do you remember Lot's chosen retirement communities, Sodom and Gomorrah? Torah is going to give us an up close and personal view into the *unspeakable self-obsessed perversions* that made the destruction of those toxic seedbeds of uncleanness absolutely essential. The destruction of these cities of perversion will then be described for us in extremely graphic terms, lest we ever forget what kind of fate lies in store for those who *reject the lifestyle examples of godly men and families and the opportunities of teshuvah provided to them their Creator and choose instead to double down on perverse, violent and totally self-centered lifestyles*. As the Psalmist declares:

***He observes the sons of men; His eyes examine them.
The Holy One examines the tzaddik,
but the wicked and those who love violence His soul hates.
On the wicked He will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur;
a scorching wind will be their lot.
For the Holy One is tzedek; and He loves tzedekah;
straight/upright men will see His Face.***
[Psalm 11:4(b)-7]

In the aftermath of the surgical removal of the cities of the plain from Eretz Yisrael Torah will take a brief moment to explain to us how the nations of *Moav* (Moab) and *Ammon* - which will become Yisrael's closest neighbors a few generations hence - came into being.

The Ph'lishtim [Philistines] Get Introduced Into the Narrative of Torah

Toward the end of the parsha the focus will shift back to Avraham Avinu. Driven westward toward the coast of the Mediterranean by the fallout from the recent events in the Jordan River Valley, Avraham will meet the *Ph'lishtim* [you may know them as "*Philistines*"] for the first time. While he is sojourning in their dominion Avraham will have a life experience reminiscent of what happened in Egypt a few chapters earlier. He will again allow Sarah to be taken into a foreign palace by a pagan king - and the Holy One will again miraculously intervene on her behalf to keep her virtue and their relationship intact.

Think that's enough action for one week? Hardly! Indeed, the most *exciting* part of the parsha is yet to come.

The Promised Child is Born!

After Sarah is returned to Avraham safe and sound, the child of promise – the son and heir that the Holy One promised Avraham and Sarah years before - will finally arrive! His name will be '*Yitzchak*'. We will be guests at both his *b'rit milah* [circumcision ceremony] and at the *chag* [joyful festival] held to celebrate his weaning.

Avraham's Ties With Yishma'el Are Severed

Shortly after Yitzchak's weaning party Avraham will suffer what must have seemed like a stunning personal tragedy – as his son Yishma'el, along with Yishma'el's mother Hagar, will be expelled from the patriarchal camp and establish a bloodline – and a way of life – of their own.

The First Middle East Peace Agreement Is Negotiated

Also in this week's parsha Avraham will cut the first-ever Mid-East Peace Agreement – a 'land for peace' covenant with the Ph'lishtim that will, for better or worse, change the history of the world forever.

The Darkest Night of Avraham's Soul – the Moriyah Experience

Finally, Dear Reader, we will walk with Avraham through the darkest night of his soul – as Torah takes us with him and Yitzchak on the climb up *Mount Moriyah*. The inspired narrative will cause us to feel the heat of the flames of the Holy One's altar and shudder at the sight of a sharp flint knife. It will then allow us to experience with Avraham something so indescribably wonderful – so magnificent – so transcendent and Divine and ... well, let's just say it is something that will insure we – and our relationship with the Holy One - will never be the same again.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves again. Let's go back and begin at the beginning, shall we?

Avraham's 1st Post-Brit Encounter With the Holy One

Torah does not tell us the date of the Divine Visitation that makes up Avraham's 6th overall, and first post-*b'rit*, encounter with the Holy One. The sages⁵ say, however, that the events of Genesis 18 took place *3 days after Avraham's circumcision*. As this week's parsha begins, the sages say, Avraham is still recovering from the painful procedure of cutting away excess flesh. It is further

⁵ Some who study Torah like to at least consider what the sages of Israel have to say about the narrative of the *parsha ha-shavua*, because they are aware of and appreciate the lifetimes of study, prayer, humility, deprivation, and in many cases horrible persecution, Israel's sages invested in their endeavors. Others take offense at the sages, and take up the attitude that anything and everything contributed by rabbis – whether in Mishnah, Gemora, Midrash, or otherwise – is automatically dangerous and destructive. Strangely, in this author's experience, people who take this approach often turn right around and quote – if not follow and fawn over other – other human writers – writers who happen to share their own religious predispositions and negativity towards all things “Jewish” or “rabbinical”. Each person has to decide for himself, of course, what weight, if any he or she will attribute to the writings or opinions of any sage or scholar – of any religious background. The author of these studies sometimes refers to the writings of Israel's sages. These occasional references should not be interpreted to suggest in any way that the writings of sages, scholars, or theologians – be they from a Hebrew or Christian background, are anything close to equal in weight to the Torah of the Holy One. Scripture is Scripture. But wisdom is also wisdom, and revelation is also revelation – whoever its receiver may be.

taught by the sages that the Holy One's instruction to Avraham to circumcise himself and the males of his household was given on the 10th of Tishri [what later would be known as *Yom Kippur*]. The blood of circumcision was thus associated with the blood covering of the Day of Atonement. Atonement is, after all, what the *b'rit* between the Holy One and Avraham is all about.

Let us assume for the sake of discussion that the sages have the timing of this God encounter correct. If so, Day 1 after the circumcision would be *11 Tishri*. Day 2 after the circumcision would be *12 Tishri*. Day 3 after the *circumcision would be 13 Tishri*. The events of Genesis 18 would then occur on *14 Tishri* – on the eve what would later come to be known as day 1 of *Sukkot* [the *Feast of Tabernacles*]. What better day would there be for Avraham to be sitting 'at the entrance' to his tent awaiting visitors?

***A New and Exciting Kind of Divine Visitation
and A New and Exciting Level of God-Man Interaction***

Whatever day it may have been, we know that the Divine visitation began as Avraham was sitting in the entrance to his tent *in the heat of the day*. We also know that the Holy One *appeared* [Hebrew *yera*, a form of *ra'ah*, Strong's Hebrew word #7200] to him. But this manifestation of the Holy One is different from any of the previous encounters we have studied. This time the Holy One appears in the form of [or is it *along with*?] three angelic messengers who, interestingly, mostly act *as a unit* [an *echad*] throughout the passage⁶. We know the destination of these angelic visitors – they are going to Sodom, to bear witness against it. No city, nor any man, is to be condemned except upon the testimony of two or three witnesses. These 'men' are the witnesses. Here is how the parsha begins:

Vayera elav Adonai b'Elonei Mamre

And the Holy One appeared to [Avraham] in the Plains of Mamre

V'hu yoshev petach-ha-ohel kechom ha-yom

while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the hottest part of the day

Vayisa eynav vayar v'hineh sh'loshah anashim

And [Avraham] lifted his eyes. And behold! Three strangers⁷

nitzavim alav vayar v'yarotz

standing a short distance from him

[Genesis 18:1-2 (a)]

⁶ This brings to mind the events on the 'Mount of Transfiguration', when a Divine manifestation took place involving two groups of three – namely, Moshe, Eliyahu, and Yeshua on the one hand, and *Kefa* [Peter], *Ya'akov* [James], and *Yochanan* [John] on the other.

⁷ Rashi's commentary says these 'men' were angels in disguise.

Who *are* these who appear suddenly opposite Avraham's tent? We are not told in so many words. We are given no names⁸, no pedigrees, no personal information. Those who appeared to Avraham in the heat of the day are in Torah simply called *anashim* [the masculine plural form of the Hebrew word *enosh*, *alef*, *nun*, *shin*]. Perhaps there is a Hebraic message for us encoded in this description. The word *anash*, or *enosh*, as it is more commonly transliterated, is usually translated 'man', or 'mortal'. In Hebraic pictograph however it paints a picture of the ultimate Source/Creator of all things [*alef*] making a son or heir [*nun*] manifest and visible [*shin*]. That picture could be described as '*the manifestation of the Son of God*'.

Although we know the *destination* of these three *anashim* we are not told specifically from whence they *came*. What is clear however is that, wherever they came from, Avraham did not see them until he '*lifted his eyes*' – *i.e.* 'looked up' [see verse 2]. By that time, we are told, they were '*standing beside him*' [Id.]. Where do you think these *anashim* came from?

Next we are told that despite the discomfort of his recent circumcision Avraham painfully, almost desperately, *runs* to the three messengers and *prostrates himself* before them. And then he cries out – not as to three but as to *One*: ***If I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, do not pass your servant by!***⁹ Genesis 18:3. Please hear Avraham's *passion* for the Holy One in this cry. This is not a casual invitation to share supper. It is instead a *gut-wrenching wail* for which there is really no language. Avraham, you see, has *tasted the Divine Presence*; and he *cannot bear the thought of being without it*.

Don't Pass Me By!

Let these words of Avraham be *your cry* this week. As things are being 'cut away' from you, sometimes painfully, and as the heat of 'the day' bears down on you, look for the Holy One – seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. And when you find Him Beloved, *do not let Him go*. Do not let Him pass you by. Wash His Feet. Set a table for Him. Kill the fatted calf. Break bread with Him. And in the course of it all let Him *reveal His counsel* to you. And let your loved ones eavesdrop and overhear – even if they laugh.

Alas, our families live very close to Sodom and Gomorrah, and the judgment of our cities surely approaches. Pray this week for the appearance of *tzadikim* [righteous ones] in our cities, villages, towns and communities. Without their arising and assuming their places it takes little imagination to know what will happen.

⁸ It is posited by some that these three were the angels Michael, Gabriel, and Rafael, based upon the fact that the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew phrase of this phrase *V'hineh sh'loshah* – usually translated "*And Behold! Three*" - (*i.e.* 701) is identical to that of the phrase *These are Michael, Gabriel and Rafael*.

⁹ In transliterated Hebrew: ***im-na matzati chen b'eyneycha al-na ta'avur me'al av'deicha.***

Negotiate with the Holy One this week concerning your loved ones, as Avraham negotiated with the Holy One over Lot and his family. And *pray earnestly* each day this week. Do not let your prayers become a vain repetition. Pray *in the spirit of our father Avraham ... with your face in the sand ... in the heat of the day.*

Haftarah Vayera

II Kings 4:1-37

Our haftarah reading this week is taken from the 4th chapter of II Kings. The narrative revolves around interactions between a prophet named Elisha, two women, and those women's two sons. The first woman we meet in this haftarah is a widow - the widow of a prophet. After her husband died this woman was without means of support and saddled with debts she could not pay. Her creditors were prepared to take her son – the son of the Holy One's prophet - as an indentured servant, to pay off her debt. She cried out, and *Elisha heard.*

Elisha will give this widow and her condemned son instructions on what to do with her only worldly possession – a 'pot of oil', and the results will prove to be nothing short of miraculous. The son will not be sold into bondage; instead he and his mother will see the redemption of the Compassionate One.

Then the narrative will turn to a season of interaction between Elisha and a woman on the absolute opposite end of the social and economic spectrum – a 'great' woman in the Israeli town of Shunem. This woman and her husband were financial supporters of Elisha, with whom he stayed when he was in their area. As the narrative begins however this couple is childless - and the woman's husband sterile. Over the course of the passages we read the Holy One will supernaturally bless this couple with a 'miracle' son - somewhat as he blessed Avraham and Sarah with Yitzchak. The son of this couple will, after many years, become stricken with illness and die. Through Elisha's intercession, however, he will be resurrected and returned to his mother and father. Hence what we will witness in this week's haftarah will be the redemption of two sons.

Look for prophetic parallels, Dear Reader. While Elisha, the widows and their sons were all real people, their stories are included in the text of Scripture because they are symbolic of other things – not to mention which are the Holy One's dealings with Yish'mael on the one hand, and with Yitzchak on the other, in parsha *Vayera.*

The Apostolic Writings

II Peter 2:4-11 and Hebrews 11:13-19

For the week of *Vayera* I have selected two separate passages from the writings of Yeshua's *talmidim*. First, from Kefa's second letter I have selected a passage that discusses our purpose in life - to serve as a *royal priesthood*, a *holy nation*, and a *treasured possession* of the Holy One, to show forth His praises. I have also selected a passage from the 11th chapter of Hebrews that summarizes – and calls us to embrace as our lifestyle - the 'grace + covenant relationship model' that Avraham, Sarah, and the Holy One pioneered.

May the Holy One of Israel visit us all this week, Beloved.

The Rabbi's son

Amidah Prayer Focus For Week #4

The 1st Petition: Da-at - Understanding

Atah chanen l'adam da-at

You graciously give man understanding

u'm'lamed l'enosh binah

and teach mortal men wisdom

Chanenu mayiteicha da'at, binah, v'haskel

Generously endow us with Your understanding, wisdom, and discernment

Baruch Atah Adonai, chanen ha-da'at

Blessed are You, O Holy One, Who graces with the understanding