

Vayera **And He appeared** **The Action Begins**
Torah: Genesis 18:1- 22:24
Haftarah: 2 Kings 4:1-37
Brit Chadashah: Luke 1:26-38; 24:36-52
Reading: Jo pp. 101, 103 & Ps. 11 Jewish Hero: Silas. Carrier: Richard

So far, Abraham has received some pretty amazing promises and with this Torah portion, they begin to be fulfilled. The portion covers five chapters, so there is a lot of material to cover and lots of good spiritual food to feast on.

Chapter 18 deals with the angelic Epiphany, where Abraham welcomes three angels into his home. He prepares a meal for them and as they are eating, he speaks with them. One of them speaks on behalf of the Lord and He tells Abraham that He will return at this same time next year and Sarah will have a son. Sarah laughs at the idea that she could have a child as she is well past menopause and is a senior citizen.

The angel asks why she laughed and she lies and said she didn't. In a way she is choosing her future son's name because Isaac (Yitzak) means laughter in Hebrew. The angel rebukes her with a rhetorical question – he asks her if anything is too difficult for YHVH, which is a powerful way of saying that nothing is too difficult for YHVH.

We are not told why she is not punished for first laughing and then lying, but her laughter was not mocking or expressing doubt. It was just the last thing a ninety year old women expected to be told.

The passage has a repetition of the two aspects of the Abrahamic covenant which states that his descendants will become a great nation and his descendants will be a blessing to all the scattered nations of mankind.

As two of the angels head towards Sodom, Abraham engages in some serious intercession on behalf of the twin communities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He appeals to the mercy of G-d and asks if the city could be spared if there were fifty righteous men in it, which would be a very small portion of the whole population. Abraham repeats his intercession until he has reduced the number of righteous men to ten and this should tell us two things.

First that the city did not contain ten righteous men and was going to be destroyed. Secondly, our unrighteous world is being spared because of the righteous core. In Sodom it has dissolved and only Lot and his righteous family remained. Once the righteous core among the nations dissolves and only righteous believers remain, our dark and dying world will also be destroyed by the final great fire which shall also consume our entire universe.

We need to keep reaching out and welcoming the righteous seekers after truth into our midst, as we pray for our lost and dying world, knowing that we do not have much time left.

Chapter 19 begins with the projected homosexual gang rape of the angels, which they miraculously prevent and warn Lot and his family to leave the city before it is destroyed. He hesitates and they send him towards a small hill sanctuary so he is not also destroyed.

They are warned not to look back, which is another Hebrew expression which means not to go back – kind of the same thing we would say to people who have quit smoking and never looked back. After his wife heads back, he and his two daughters end up living in a cave.

There is an editorial note without much detail which describes a double incident of incest and a time lapse where the two children which Lot's daughters give birth to are described as the ancestors of both Moab and the Ammonites. We are not told why Lot's daughters were not punished for their seduction of their drunken father or how he reacted when he discovered that they were pregnant. When the Bible does not go into detail, we should not indulge in speculation.

In chapter 20, Abraham again gets his wife to lie and say she is his sister and not his wife. We are told G-d appears to the Philistine king and prevents him from taking Sarah into his harem. He pays a dowry penalty to Abraham and later, Abraham and this first group of Philistines make a covenant of peace. (Note: during our people's stay in Egypt, Minoan Greeks conquered this first group of Philistine and took both their land and their name. The first group were not the warlike enemies of Israel which our people had to contend with).

In chapter 21 Isaac is born and is the first Jewish boy to be circumcised on the eighth day. The chapter also deals with the departure of Ishmael and his mother and how he became a famous hunter. There is no historical or biblical indication that Ishmael is the ancestor of the modern Arab people. There is also no biblical indication that there was any hostility between the two brothers, like there was between the twins, Jacob and Esau.

Chapter 22 deals with the binding of Isaac where Abraham is told to offer his son up as a burnt offering to the L-rd (story of the massacre of the Missionaries and my call to surrender my son Philip to the L-rd). Abraham took Isaac to Mount Zion (a far away place) and prepared to make his sacrifice. He did not lie to Isaac when he said that the L-rd would provide. He may have just believed that his son would return to life after he had killed him and burnt him to ashes.

The birth of his son was a miracle. His returning to life after being killed would also be a miracle and Abraham definitely believed in miracles. How about you?

As he was going to slaughter his son, an angel stops him, not because he was only going to pretend to do it, but because he was fully prepared to do it. This is the final covenant test where he put his faith and obedience in the L-rd even before the son he was miraculously given. He was spared the horror of killing and burning his miracle baby and because he did not refuse or try to run away like Jonah, the double covenant is firmly established, first on his faith and then on his obedience.

His posterity will multiply greatly and will become a blessing to all the scattered nations of mankind. This blessing is fulfilled in Yeshua.

The passage ends with another editor's note which mentions the birth of both Rebekah and her father, Bethuel.

Sermon: **Getting Ready for Chanukah: Our Race, His Rules**

Passage: “It is not that I have already taken the prize or have obtained perfection, but I run in order to make it my own, because the Messiah has made me His own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have already crossed the finish line, but I do one thing. Forgetting that which lies behind, I am straining forward to that which lies ahead, and I press on toward the goal in order to obtain the prize of the heavenly call of G-d in Yeshua HaMashiach. Let those of us who are mature be of the same mind and if you think differently about anything, this too, G-d will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to that which we have obtained and walk forward according to the same rules we have followed to this point. (Philippians 3:12-16)

How far and how deep do we want to go in the Messiah and how deep do we want to dig into His word? Some believers want to wallow in the shallow end, but when we came to faith in the Messiah, G-d begins to train us to successfully run a personal spiritual race where our spirituality is what our lives are all about. This is so that we can unpack and repack all of our personal baggage and not only set straight paths for our wounded feet, but also be able to accomplish those things which He has gifted us to achieve. How about you?

By lingering in the shallow end, too many believers get choked and even wither, not because of the severity of any trials which they encounter, but only because they lose their spiritual perspective and fail to walk in faithful obedience. A biblical perspective realizes that G-d knows who we are and what we are capable of. He also knows where we are and what we are going through. He has already provided a way of escape that includes a redemptive strategy which He wants us to adopt. It is our spiritual success which matters more than any other objective which we or others have set for us to accomplish. How about you?

Through it all, we need to realize that we are kingdom bound and that the light weight of our current afflictions is microscopic compared to the immeasurable weight of glory which is waiting for us on the other side of judgment day. We are all truly in a race, but even though it is our race, we need to learn to run according to His rules. Our race, His rules.

You know, I have been in ministry a long time and I have seen a lot of people come and go through my life for a variety of reasons and we are also seeing this same thing in the life of our congregation. Instead of becoming concerned, we just need to stand firm together on the solid rock of His Word and grow into a garden where the fruit of His Spirit blossom. All and any who have a different agenda will move on with our blessing until they get it together spiritually and learn to find their place in the true kingdom purposes of G-d.

As we walk in our beloved Messiah, we need to realize that while we are in a lifelong race, we are not home yet and we have not yet been crowned. In the time when Paul was writing, athletes competed for a crown of laurel leaves which they proudly wore in recognition of their accomplishments. Ours will be a more durable, glorious crown which will be ours, once all the pain and folly of this life is finally over. We need to understand that G-d wants to train us to be spiritual athletes who are determined to win the prize and not get sidetracked, stalled or disqualified. It is not a salvation issue where we are trying to earn our place in heaven, it is a call to give our best to the Messiah because of all the joy we have in Him, both in this life and in the one which is to come. How well are you running the race which He has set before you?

You know, the longer you live and the longer you walk with the L-rd, the tendency to look

backwards looms larger and larger. It is not wrong to learn from previous mistakes and from previous victories, as long as we do not forget that we are not home yet. We should never be content just to coast through life, as if we had already done all that the L-rd has called to achieve and think that we are just putting in time, until the kingdom finally comes and we are home free. He is always calling us to take an active part in the things of the world to come.

Despite all that we have seen and all the places we have been in the L-rd, we should always be forward looking because the kingdom is still in front of us and we have not yet crossed the finish line. I am still excited about all the wonderful things which the L-rd has in store for our community in the next chapter of our homeward journey and the only thing we should let the past teach us is that just as He has never left us nor forsaken us to this point, He will still lead us an guide us through whatever comes our way. He has good things in store for us.

Are you excited about all that is going to be coming our way as we find a new place to hang our hats? When we look behind, it should give us more of a taste for what lies ahead, because truly, in light of the coming kingdom, we ain't seen nothing yet. There will be periods of rest and renewal in our race, but until it is all over and we have crossed the finish line, we need to focus on the coming kingdom and never let the world, the flesh or the enemy distract us from the prize which is waiting for us once it is finally over.

Sometimes life can seem overwhelming, but we need to consider that His kingdom is larger than life and when we press ahead in Him according to His Word, things have a habit of falling into place and we are ready to face whatever comes our way. There are in fact two finish lines we need to be running towards as we wander through the valleys and scale the mountains which rise up to block our path. There is the personal finish line where one day our time on this spinning globe will finally be over and we can lay down and rest with all those who have gone before us. Once our turn is over we rest with those who have finished theirs.

In Hebrews this group of believers is called an invisible cloud of witnesses which began when Abel crossed his finish line and where heroes like Noah and Abraham and Moses and David gratefully took their places as they passed the baton on to the next generation of runners in the great race which is not yet over. While each of them and each of us have our own personal finish lines, there is an even greater one which is coming when the Messiah will bring an end to the entire cosmos. And it couldn't come soon enough to suit me.

This cosmic finish line is one which the world we live in ignores or mocks, but what people believe or disbelieve cannot change the objective reality which G-d's Word so clearly describes. We are in a race which holds forth the promise of a personal reward if we run according to His rules. We are also in a race against time, because time is running out for the world which our people have been wandering through for so many generations.

We need to keep our eyes focused on both finish lines and we need to see our lives as a race which the Messiah is training us to run successfully, no matter how many failures or setbacks we encounter along the way. How well are you running? It does not matter how far away the finish line is as long as we pace ourselves in Him and do not squander our time and energy on things which have no eternal value. Staying in shape physically and spiritually has many benefits for us because we will either learn to run or we will stumble and fall and lose the prize which has been prepared for us. This does not need to happen to any of us. Our world is drawing closer and closer to its end and maybe some of us will live to see the

arrival of this great event, but there is a more personal event happening which G-d wants to prepare us for. Anything and everything which He allows to come our way, becomes part of our personal race when we learn to see things from His perspective. Our world sees things in a different way and our job is to rise above the falsehoods and lies of our current age and not let them crowd out our calling to run the race with our Messiah. Are you learning to run?

We still have to take care of the business of living, but getting ahead in the things of this life should be a very low priority for us. I want you all to have enough of the goods of this life to live and provide for yourselves and for your families. I will always rejoice when people tell me stories of how G-d has provided for them and protected them when the chips were down. But having a lot or having a little should be seen as having no real heavenly importance in the long run. It is what you do with what you have that is important to the L-rd.

People buy lottery tickets and talk about what they will do when all their dreams come true and they are bathing in riches beyond their wildest dreams. They all want the dream house and the dream car as they take their dream vacation in their ideal location. What are you dreaming about? What do you need to have in order to be happy and fulfilled? A big house and a big bank account are dreams which are too small for serious, mature believers to be wasting their time with and that is what the apostle Paul was talking about. How about you?

Part of our race is to learn to detach ourselves from the carnal objectives which our world holds so dear. We are not headed in the same direction and we are certainly do not have the same objectives in mind. Believers are not waiting for that which we do not have in order for us to lead joyful, meaningful spiritual lives. We have the Messiah and the promise of the eternal kingdom and that alone is worth more than all the gold in Fort Knox or all the diamonds which are yet waiting to be extracted from the ground.

His Word is the greatest treasure we can discover in this life and our pilgrimage through this life is the greatest adventure we can ever have. Nothing less than Him and His kingdom is worthy of our full attention, because when all is said and done, nothing else will survive the test of time and eternity. Everything everyone holds dear in this life will wither and fade or eventually end up in someone else's possession once our time in this life is done.

There is nothing permanent in this life except our Messiah and His coming kingdom and the race we run is really a race away from this world with all of its the deceptions and sidetracks. The wise man, the strong man and the rich man really have nothing of true value and all of mankind is sliding into eternity unprepared for what is waiting for them.

We are not called to follow their foolish example. In light of eternity they are blind, naked and all that they hold to be important is nothing but a pile of dust which has no lasting value. We are called to run a different race according to different rules, because we have a different destiny and our calling in this life is so different from theirs. We are heaven bound soldiers equipped with a totally different set of weapons. How well equipped are you spiritually? How detached are you from the fading glory of this foolish life? Are you a good soldier?

Paul uses the illustration of an olympic athlete to show us that we are headed in a direction that is totally opposite from all that this sorry world has to offer. We should never become entangled with anything which would slow us down as we race towards our destiny.

We have to eat in order to live and we need shelter and warm clothes as we settle into another

amazing Canadian winter. We have any number of other valid needs, but they should only be seen as a means to an end. Maturity in the L-rd releases us from grasping for the things in this life as if we were not called to aim for better treasures. Sometimes this life can be quite convincing and we never want to see our families go without life's basic necessities. But that is not what life should be all about. Do you realize what life is all about?

We are called to take a different journey than the one which our society is determined to set before us. Once we have come to faith and have learned to listen to the voice of His Word, we learn to see things differently and are living for the invisible world which the eyes of sinful man refuses to see. The stock market may go up and down and the price of oil may also rise and fall. International trade deals may bring great prosperity to some, while others continue to wallow in crushing poverty across our unpredictable globe. It really doesn't matter.

But that does not even begin to describe what life is really all about and all the noble sounding objectives of all the activists do not even begin to touch on the real problems which are facing our world. We are all in a race against time because the kingdom is coming and unless we live lives focused on being ready, then we are wasting our time no matter how well off or how poor we are. Living for the world to come should be the only thing which matters to us.

Spiritual maturity learns to see things according to G-d's Word and constantly reminds us that we should be focused on the finish line and on that which will come afterwards. It also sees the need for teamwork so that we are all walking the same way and in the same direction. We need to encourage one another and not let each other become snared by that which is passing away. Are you a good, faithful team player as we race through life?

We truly only have one objective and our whole being should be focused on the world which is to come and on the prize which is waiting for those who have learned to run the race according to His rules which are so clearly outlined in His Word. It is never going to be an easy task as we walk through a world which constantly bombards us with what is really fake news of the carnal type about the meaning and purpose of life.

I know we should be concerned about pollution and if our climate is really changing, then there are some changes we need to be making. Human trafficking, drug smuggling and the loss of oxygen producing rain forest are concerns we should be addressing, but there is no one single problem this world is facing which deserves our primary focus.

As believers we are heaven bound and are engaged in race against the increasing folly of this darkening age. Just because nearly everybody is racing in the wrong direction and has their eyes glued to the wrong objectives, doesn't mean that we should follow suit. There is a prize waiting for those who live kingdom focused lives which is infinitely more valuable than the sum total of all the treasures which this fading world has to offer. Which prize do you have your eyes focused on? What direction are you racing in? How well are you learning to run the race which our Messiah has set for you? Are you running with spiritual purpose according to His Word or are you merely stumbling through life with no particular spiritual objective in mind? Let the L-rd change your mind and change your walk until you see things His way and walk according to the stipulations of His Word. This will always be our individual and community objective because nothing less is worth our time and energy. Run with us. Walk with us. Learn with us. Find your place in our midst. We've got your back. Always.