



**Partners In Torah**  
**San Diego**  
**Study Guide &**  
**Take home Dvar Torah**

פרשת וירא  
*Parshat Vayeira*  
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## Partners In Torah San Diego

### Mission Statement:

**Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant. Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.**

**Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.**

**Welcome. Thank you for coming. Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.**

## Abraham, the Leader

Understanding the life and times of Abraham, founder of the Jewish people, requires some thought and investigation. It is interesting that Maimonides has access to historical records outside of the Torah which he drew upon in seeking to gain perspective on Abraham's life.

In 'The Guide to the Perplexed' (Section 3, Chapter 29) Maimonides quotes from these historic documents, which he read in their Arabic translation. He quotes background details on the life of Abraham sourced from contemporaneous accounts of events:

*Abraham, who grew up in Kuta, argued with everyone there, saying that there is a force behind the sun. The people argued against him with different forms of evidence based on the obvious way the sun works. Abraham said to them. "You are correct (the sun exerts great influence over our lives); however, the sun is similar to an axe in the hands of a woodchopper, who controls the ax." (the woodchopper being the One G-d, creator and supervisor of all that exists.)*

*The king imprisoned Abraham because of his beliefs, but he continued to convince people from his prison cell, and the king was afraid he would lose his kingdom, so he banished him after taking all that he had from him.*

Why would the opinions of Abraham so threaten the king, lead to his imprisonment, and to his banishment? Did Abraham aspire to be king, and use the platform of ruler to teach these people his beliefs in Hashem?

many moments in history we know of individuals who proposed new ideas and ways of looking at the world, and were persecuted by the authorities for putting forward iconoclastic ideas.

The Torah alludes to these background events discovered by Maimonides directly, when G-d speaks to Abraham early on. When showing Abraham a vision that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens, and that we, the Jewish people will be a permanent fixture within human history, we read:

וַיֹּאמֶר רַא לְיוֹאֵבֵיִי דְנֻדְאַשׁ הוֹצֵאתָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי דָּיִם

*And Hashem said to him: I am Hashem who took you out from the fire of Kasdim. (Gen. 15:7)*

Take special note of the language used, which exactly mirrors the first of the Ten Commandments. (Exodus Ch. 20:2) At the moment of Revelation at Sinai, when G-d spoke to the entire Jewish people, we are taught to relate to G-d as our rescuer and redeemer who took us out of Egyptian bondage, provided us with our freedom, and with the opportunity to freely choose to uphold the commandments based on this direct experience with G-d. Here, too, with Abraham, G-d is forging a parallel basis for their ongoing relationship.

This emphasis on personal relationship with G-d seems to take precedence over aspirations to supplant rulers and to command political authority. We might reasonably conclude that Abraham was perhaps thinking that ruling on the national level was to be left up to G-d. Abraham remains focused on the task of creating a foundational family, which could transmit, parent to child, family to community, generation to generation, one people to the entire world, in order to make the world a better place. This approach would fulfill G-d's promise that he and his descendants be just like the stars in the

all. This future people would act as exemplars of what living in close relationship to G-d looks like. This people would, in its everyday behavior and interaction with others, reflect the convictions that every human being is created in G-d's image and that human life is sacred, Abraham's essential beliefs.

This would explain why so much of the narrative of the Torah recounts the mundane details of Abraham and Sarah's lives. We might even consider jumping to the conclusion that Abraham was inspired by an idea written down much later by the Prophet Zechariah: *'not through armies and not through might, but through My spirit'* says Hashem, Who is the Master of Legions. (Zechariah 4: 6)

Let's see how this plays out in our Torah portion this week.

At the outset of the Torah portion of Vayeira (Gen. 18 – 22) Abraham greets three strangers. Just following Abraham's amazing acts of hospitality, and learning that the wayfarers are angels announcing the upcoming birth of Isaac, we read the following:

And the men rose up from there, and looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to escort them on the way. And the Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; (18) seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him? (19) For I know him (*love him*), he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, acting with righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him.

(20) So the Lord said, 'Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave; I will descend and



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done altogether according to the cry – if not, I will know.’ (Gen. 18: 16 – 21)

It is difficult to explain the relevance of verses 18 and 19 to the matter at hand. Try reading the section deleting verse them; nothing is left out of the story.

*Rashi* (foundational commentator, d. 1105, France) wonders about these verses in this context, and explains that at the mere mention of Abraham’s name, G-d out of endearment wants to highlight the basis for His love of Abraham (זכר צדיק לברכה). *Rashi* is highlighting the extent to which Abraham has become, by virtue of his virtuous behavior and devotion to kindness, an intimate of G-d’s. Quite an inspiring detail, and one which highlights for us that relationship with G-d is a two way street, a loving connection from both sides.

*Nachmonides* (later commentator, d. 1270, Israel) takes a different approach, integrating these verses directly into the narrative at hand. He explains that because Abraham is the foundation of a future great nation meant to influence everyone, G-d wants to give Abraham an opportunity to demonstrate his greatness by choosing to pray on behalf of these wicked people. *Nachmonides* places into G-d’s thinking the concern that future generations might question Abraham’s importance if the destruction of Sodom were to happen without his involvement. And, future generations would not fully learn the extent to which Abraham acted in sync with G-d’s balance of compassion and justice if Abraham chose, upon learning of the upcoming judgment, not to pray (argue) on their behalf. Abraham passes the test, so to speak, and follows through with his prayers.

What is perplexing is that if you were Abraham, diligently circulating within society, interacting with kindness and compassion toward others, defending victims of oppression (the rescue of Lot who was

might you not decide not to try to  
ing a wicked society which represents the  
antithesis of all that you teach? Or, perhaps, after praying on their  
behalf, exploring the limits of G-d's compassion and the nature of G-  
d's justice in your prayers, might you become disappointed in G-d if  
their evil were to continue unabated?

We rather see from Nachmonides insinuation of these ideas into this  
story the extent to which Abraham was seeking to understand G-d's  
character, in order to find within himself the proper way of living.  
We see that this loving relationship between Abraham and G-d was a  
serious interaction, aimed at understanding one another to the  
fullest extent. The outcome of this mutual understanding would be  
that Abraham would be most able to instruct future generations how  
to balance their own lives and properly respond to whatever  
circumstances they would encounter.

Here too there is an important parallel in the Book of Exodus, when  
Moses, in the midst of praying for the forgiveness of the Jewish  
people following the sin of the Golden Calf, insists that G-d 'make  
your ways known to me' (Exodus 33: 13). Moses wanted to be a  
more capable leader and teacher, a so that once forgiven he can  
guide the Jewish people to better fulfill their mission. Perhaps we  
will study that more in detail several weeks from now.

These perspectives are reflected in Pirkei Avot, where we are taught:

*Abraham our forefather was tested ten times, and he succeeded in all  
of them, to show the degree of our forefather Abraham's love for G-d.  
Pirkei Avot, Chapter 5, Mishnah 4*

This underscores that in studying and comprehending the moral  
challenges which Abraham and Sarah faced during their lives, their



In short, we can develop for ourselves a path toward living lives in relationship to G-d. Rather than simply idolizing Abraham as a great person, we become instructed in the meaning of moral greatness. Most important, we begin to sort through the character traits (middot) and the attitudes which can emerge through life experience, and be better equipped ourselves to strive toward moral greatness / closeness to G-d.

This notion is highlighted in the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (d. 1888, Germany) who states “not for Abraham’s sake, to make him rich or powerful (do these interactions with G-d take place), but rather so that Abraham can be the educator of a nation, charged with a noble mission. “The only reason I reveal my plans to him is to give him insight into My decision making... because long after he, the patriarch will have departed this world, his descendants will be standing strong on this firm foundation.” (Hirsch Chumash, Gen. 18: 17 – 19)

In order to be founder of and role model for a family that would grow into a nation and a society, and eventually a people among the peoples of the world throughout human history, Abraham needed to stay true to this mission. Had Abraham decided to do otherwise, to find a shortcut to fulfilling his mission by seizing power or by conquering others, the future of Jewish life would have been lost.

Case in point, let’s read about the aftermath of Abraham waging war and defeating four powerful kings in order to free his nephew Lot; we learn:

And he (Abraham) brought back all the possessions, he also brought back his relative Lot, and his possessions, as well as the (captured) women and people. And the king of Sodom (who had been defeated and captured, but was now set free) went



after his return from defeating the kings on his side, in the Valley of Shaveh, which is the king's valley. But Malchizedek, king of Shalem brought forth bread and wine; he was a priest of the most high G-d, and blessed him, saying 'Blessed be Abram of the most high G-d, possessor of heaven and earth; blessed be G-d the Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand. (Gen. 14: 16 – 20)

This meeting of Abraham with the King of Sodom takes place in a special place – the Valley of Shaveh. Shaveh is the Hebrew word for equivalent / equal, and this valley got its name because the King of Sodom, rather than feeling humbled by his military defeat and indebted to Abraham for rescuing him and his people, sought to portray himself as Abraham's equal. The people did not buy it. In fact, the Medrash tells us that this effort by the King of Sodom backfired, and the people, impressed by Abraham's military victory and grateful for being rescued, cried out "Abraham is our king and our god!" Their attitude was in keeping with the prevailing conviction that with victory comes power, that might equals right. At this moment, perhaps Abraham could have deluded himself and think 'Now is my chance to take charge of G-d's world, and by ruling over it remake it into the image of society that I choose.' Rather, the Medrash records that Abraham's emphatic reply was "the world already has its King, and the world does not lack for its G-d."

So instead of Abraham embarking on a new career as king, society returned to its previous order. The King of Sodom, unrepentant, returned home to rule over his corrupted society. Lot chose to return with him. Abraham renounces the spoils of war (I will not take a thread or a shoe strap, so that you shall not say it is I who enrich Abraham) and returns back to his household. And G-d resumes His

Abraham telling him “I am your shield.”

Based on this, we state three times a day in our prayers “Blessed are You, Shield of Abraham.”

It is interesting to note that we remember that 500 years ago this week Martin Luther nailed upon the door of the Wittenberg Castle church his questions and propositions. Martin Luther was seeking peacefully to make his Church a better place. Historians point to these events as landmark, because implicit in Martin Luther’s disputation, was the notion (then remarkable and unacceptable to the powers that were) that power and authority do not give anyone ownership of truth, or the privilege of determining what is right and wrong. It is fair to say that these ethos were long embedded within the tradition of Judaism. We vividly see it depicted in the example set by Abraham our Forefather.