This American-Jewish Life

Ellen Todras

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Parshe Vayera

Shabbat shalom!

Rabbi Ruhi asked me to start by summarizing the parshe. This week's parshe is Vayera, which means "he had a vision." The parshe begins with 3 men coming to Abraham's tent. But they are really angels. Abraham and Sarah extend great hospitality to them, and they predict the birth of Isaac. The angels continue on their way; they are going to Sodom, which G-d intends to destroy. G-d reveals this plan to Abraham, who argues with G-d about sweeping away the innocent with the guilty. The angels meet Lot and his family, and Lot, who extends courtesy to them, is spared the destruction that visits Sodom and Gomorrah.

The parshe's focus returns to Abraham and his family. Sarah gives birth to Isaac, as was foretold. She convinces Abraham to cast out Hagar, whose son, Ishmael, is also Abraham's son. An angel softens the sentence by promising Hagar in her despair: "I will make a great nation

of him [Ishmael].” The parshe ends with the near sacrifice of Isaac. For obeying G-d’s command, G-d gives his blessing to Abraham.

Whew! What a lot of ground is covered here. If it were on TV, this parshe would easily fill a three-part mini-series. I’d like to focus on several concepts in the parshe as they relate to my life. But let me first give you some background on my life—the setting, as it were, of my being.

I grew up in the Catskills, about 90 miles northwest of New York City. I was born in 1947, so my early life parallels what could be called the Golden Years or heyday of the Catskills—also known as the Borsht Belt and the Jewish Alps.

My father’s family came from Romania. My dad, Sid, was born in 1916, in the Harlem Hospital—Harlem was a Jewish neighborhood then. Sometime after that, my dad and his family moved to Hurleyville, NY—in the Catskills. His father was a baker, and the family opened a bakery there.

My mother, Rose, was born in Lvov. Her family came from Derazhniya, in the Ukraine. Before my mom turned 2, her mother had died. Chana

Sura must have been aware that her death was imminent, because she asked my grandfather to bring Rose to Toronto, so that she could be grow up among family. Chana Sura's father and her brother and his family all lived there.

In the early 1920s, civil war raged through Russia and neighboring lands as the Communists strove to secure power. Somehow my mom and grandfather ended up in a refugee camp in Romania. I think HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) helped them. They traveled to Germany and they took passage on a ship—the *Presidente Wilson*—that landed in Halifax, Canada, on November 20, 1924. My mom grew up in Toronto. At the age of 15, after her dad remarried, she was very unhappy, and she left home and went to live with her aunt and her family, in Woodridge, New York, another Catskill village. This aunt is the woman we called Bubbie when we were growing up. She was the mother that my mother never had.

Bubbie had a store. On one side was a tavern. On the other side was a candy store. In the middle were tables. Things you would never see today—a candy store and a bar side by side?—were apparently commonplace in 1935.

My parents met on a blind date and were married in 1942. My older sister, Anita, was born in 1945 and I arrived exactly 2 years after that—we were both born on November 20, the same day that my mother arrived in North America. I also have a younger sister, Carol, and a brother, Art.

When I was about 8 years old, my parents bought a bungalow colony. What was a bungalow colony? Well, start by imagining a time when there was no air conditioning and very little air travel. People who lived in cities were more than eager to escape the intolerable summer heat. Many Jews lived in New York City. Where did they go in the summer in the mid-1900s? To the Catskills.

Some people, who were better off economically, stayed at hotels. Lower middle-class folks stayed at bungalow colonies. These were groups, or communities of cabins. They were furnished in a spare way. No TVs and no telephones in the cabins. Families would come up to the Catskills the week before July 4. The father would drop off his wife and children, and then he would return to the city to work all week. He came back on weekends, for a summer season of 10 weeks. Hundreds of bungalow colonies dotted the Catskills. Ours was called Pine View Bungalows.

Living in the Catskills was like being a stagehand for a fantastic play or opera with an expensive set and thousands of actors. During the off-season—September through Memorial Day—everything was dormant. In the spring, we began to prepare for the summer. My dad did repairs, my mom cleaned units, and we kids helped. Then—come the weekend before July 4—action, camera, go! The set came to life in living color. Thousands upon thousands of people arrived at their bungalows. Our bungalow colony had perhaps 30 units, so we are talking about maybe 100 renters.

Summer was filled with life. At the colony, we kids ran the little store that was set up first, in our garage, and then in the casino when my parents added that building. There were washing machines in a space beneath our house. I remember the machines breaking, often because someone stuffed so much into them. There was a pay phone and a loud speaker, and when someone phoned, we in the store turned on the speaker and announced the call. “Telephone call for Goldy Bernstein; Goldy Bernstein, there is a call for you.” Sometimes the speaker was used for other ends. “Richie Weinblatt, go home right now. Your mother has dinner on the table.” There was movie night on Sunday, and entertainment night on Saturday. As many of you know, some of

our most famous entertainers got their start in the Catskills.

Have any of you seen the movie *A Walk on the Moon*? It came out in 1999. Diane Lane plays a housewife at a bungalow colony. Liev Shreiber is her well-meaning husband. And there is a shmatta-man. This is someone who drives a panel truck up to the Catskills, and in the truck is mostly women's clothing, which he sells as he travels from one bungalow colony to another. When the Garment District was supreme in NYC, these were often name brands that were from last year's season, so they sold for less. In *A Walk on the Moon*, Viggo Mortensen plays the shmatta-man. I can tell you with assurance, no shmatta-man I ever saw in the Catskills looked like Viggo Mortensen—and I saw many!

And then, Labor Day arrived. Everything in reverse—the season over—poof! Like it had been a dream. We fell back to a very quiet place. I used to feel sadness and loss when summers were over, echoed by the fall leaves. I wonder if I'd feel that way now.

The Catskills was a Jewish resort area, and the vast majority of the year-round residents were Jewish as well. So I grew up in a community where there was no anti-semitism. On the other hand, as I was growing up, more and more about the Holocaust was coming to light, and my

parents did not shield us from that knowledge. That, I think, has affected me deeply throughout my life.

So what was it like to live in a Jewish area? Jewish holidays were school holidays. The butcher was kosher. Every town had a Jewish bakery—Oh! Mortman's onion rolls—I have never found their equal. And the custard donuts from Katz's Bakery in Liberty—divine. There was only one shul in Woodridge, and it was Orthodox—Congregation Ohave Shalom. I think had there been other options, much of the community would have gone for Conservative or Reform temples. Woodridge-ites behaved in one way, and when they attended shul, it was another way. Still, I received a solid Jewish education, for which I am grateful.

When I was about 12 years old, I joined NCSY—National Council for Synagogue Youth—an Orthodox youth organization. There I made friends with kids from many regions of the country—even the South. (So there is precedent here, Rebecca!) I also attended several national NCSY conventions, and it was at one of those that I experienced an epiphany of sorts. I was present at a sermon or a breakout session where the topic was "I am the servant of G-d." *Well!* I thought, repulsed. *I am no one's servant. I refuse to be a servant.* A wedge

between my understanding of Judaism and my understanding of myself formed. Such was my adolescent understanding of service.

The concept of service is apparent in this week's parshe, where, when the three angels approach Abraham's tent, he does everything he can to make them feel welcome. Hospitality is a kind of service—the situation comes to you in your space. There is another form of service as well, of course, when we seek out opportunities to help others.

I am happy to report that my sense of service has evolved over time, past my 14-year-old understanding. I consider two events in my life to have much responsibility for that change. First, I met Mark, my future husband. He was a hippie in 1969, and I who had just graduated with an English degree from a women's college in Maryland, was interested in literature, fashion, urban life: I imagined myself living in NYC and working for a publishing house, or maybe being the drama critic for the *New York Times*. Yet this guy was entrancing, with his intelligence and humor and general scruffiness. Definitely "the other" for me. Mark demonstrated out a different way of life to me—a life where living every moment was the point, where we don't have to be on a track heading toward success, whatever that was. Like Strawberry Fields Forever, it opened my mind.

Mark and I were together on and off through our 20s. He was very interested in yoga and became a follower of Baba Hari Dass, who lived outside of Santa Cruz. Through Mark, I met Babaji, and even more, that turned my life around. The idea of spirituality was suddenly real and necessary to life. In a way I never had before, I understood how godliness could permeate life. So we studied with Babaji and practiced yoga and meditation for a number of years. (Mark still adheres to this practice.)

We got married in 1979. First we had a yogi wedding up on Mount Madonna. When our parents declined to attend, we had a Jewish wedding 10 days later, officiated by the local Reform rabbi.

Once our first child, Ben, arrived in 1980, living in the yoga community became untenable. We moved to a small house and then began bouncing back and forth between Santa Cruz and Eugene over the next several years, settling here as Ben started first grade. By that time Ani, our daughter, had arrived. I must say that if anything has expanded my understanding of service, it has been my dear children!

All this time, I had not felt the need to affiliate with Judaism in any way but culturally. Two events changed that for me. Mark was working with a group of people at an educational company in town. One of those men was Jewish—also not affiliated. But when Jerry's mom died, he contacted the temple and Rabbi Myron Kinberg officiated at the funeral. I had never been to such a funeral. I was so impressed with Myron's depth and understanding and approachability. Maybe Judaism was OK after all.

The second event took place on Purim, about the same time—late 1980s perhaps—at the old TBI building. Purim was a wild carnival there—very fun for kids—and so I went with our son Ben. He was 6 or 7 at the time, I think. When he saw kids wearing kippahs, he made fun of them. I was astounded and ashamed. And I realized that I had been failing my children (and myself) in not providing them with a sense of who they were and where they came from. Shortly after that, we enrolled Ben in Talmud Torah. And that was my entrée into TBI life.

From the start, I loved TBI for its inclusiveness and egalitarianism. They are the cornerstones of what it means to be human, I think. Through TBI and through the Eugene schools, I became involved in volunteering for causes or organizations that I believed in. I won't bore you with

details. But as time passed, these activities gave me so much. They gave me a place to actively pursue justice and excellence. They gave me a venue to find and exercise my voice. They gave me an opportunity to do something for others, which is a means to express love. My sense of service has come full circle from my adolescent misconception.

This month, our lives and the life of our country took a sharp turn toward the opposite of my ideals. We are faced with the despairing question of how to deal with the event and its aftermath. I find an answer in this week's parshe. *Hineni:* I am here. I don't want to tell others what to do, but I do want to say that to be there for those you love and for what you love is a good way to live. (And a shoutout to one of my heroes, Leonard Cohen, of blessed memory, who incorporated this word in his album released only weeks before his death)

I wanted to close with a funny story, but I just can't think of one that works. So I'll close with an experience that struck me deeply, about 10 years ago. My brother's wife died of breast cancer at the age of 51. She was a brilliant woman and she had suffered for 10 years. We were at the cemetery, waiting for the family and coffin to arrive. I was walking around, looking at the gravestones and what was written on them. "So-and-so, beloved father and grandfather." "So-and-so, loved by her

children.” And so on. Then I came to a headstone for a woman, and on it was written the usual name and dates. But beneath that these words: “In the end, only kindness matters.” That struck me like an arrow. I resolved to make that my mantra—I have been only partially successful—but we have to try.