FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER
STUDY PRAY EXPLORE

Parashah:	Vayera
Read On:	October 31, 2026 | 20 Cheshvan 5787
Torah:	Genesis 18:1-22:24
Haftorah:	II Kings 4:1-37

TORAH SPARKS

The Road Less Traveled By

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Dvar Parashah

The promise of Genesis is progeny. We are told, first of all, פרו ורבו, be fruitful and multiply. The generations of Genesis are punctuated by begatting. There is a whole world to fill with humans. That is, until the project grinds to a stop with Sarah and Abraham. God, who created the world only to destroy it in the flood, seems to put the creation project on pause. The first thing we are told about Sarah is that she is עֲקָרָה אֵין לָהּ וָלָד, "barren, she has no child." And the first promise that Abraham receives is וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, "And I will make you into a great nation." The rest of the story of Abraham is resolving this contradiction, is bringing children to a childless couple, is ensuring a line of succession to one old man far from the home he knew. But the problem isn't totally solved until the beginning of Exodus, until we have been fruitful and multiplied, until even the biggest, most powerful super villain cannot kill us off because there are too many of us having too many kids.

The trick to having children is finding someone with whom to have those children. In Genesis, the chosen wife will always be barren, with her womb opened by God at the appropriate time. But the finding of these wives will happen in what Robert Alter describes as a type scene. Rebecca and Rachel are both found by a well. There are shared elements between these stories (and that of Moses and Zipporah's meeting by a well) that indicate that these scenes follow a pattern which creates expectations for the reader. We know that the meeting will lead to a marriage. We know that the woman is the chosen woman. We know that God is involved somehow. There is a test that has been passed. And we know that the hero will be welcomed into the foreign family for a while.

The fun thing about type scenes is that they are not identical. And the changes invite scrutiny. We find an obsession with wells in our story, in the thick of the story of the promise to Abraham. The promise is finally consummated at the well with Rebecca, found for Isaac, son of Abraham, in our first well-betrothal type scene. But shortly before that, we read about the well of Hagar and the wells of Abimelech.

I would argue that Hagar's well is the ideal well-betrothal scene, that the following well-betrothal scenes are mere shadows of it. Hagar is in need of rescue. She cannot access water for her child, who will die without water. This is certainly a notch above the wells of Rebecca and Rachel, where access to the well is not a matter of life and death. The hero, in Hagar's case, is God. It is God who will open Hagar's eyes to the well so that she can וּתְשָׁקְ אֶת־הַנָּעַר, "give drink to the boy," just as Rebecca, Jacob, and Moses do. And so the betrothal here is with God. Hagar is given access to God, and is given a relationship with God at a well. She founds a family, a nation at that well with God: כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׂימֶנּוּ׃, "because I will make him (Ishmael) a great nation," the same promise given to Abraham. The subsequent well type scenes are giving the chosen women access to God through the chosen men, access to the legacy of the promise once given to Abraham. Hagar is given a promise by God in her own right.

And then Abimelech tries to get in on it, tries to make his own betrothal scene with Abraham at the wells. He knows God is with Abraham, he knows wells are where it all goes down. But God was not in the well. The best Abimelech can do is to be blessed because he blessed Abraham. He cannot force a betrothal of his own. The most stable way to take part in the blessing is to betroth the carrier of the blessing by a well. But Sarah was already taken. Perhaps he should have asked Hagar.