

FOUR

Looking Back to Look Forward
Parashat Vayera (Genesis 18:1–22:24)

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The first word of Genesis 18:1, *vayera*, which connotes both seeing and appearing, alerts the reader to the importance of vision throughout Genesis 18–22. Indeed, *Parashat Vayera* as a whole presents a virtual feast for the eyes. Casting our gaze across the whole picture, we are first brought into the circle, or at least right outside the tent, of Abraham and Sarah. We then peer far beyond this location to the blinding plains of Sodom. And finally, toward the end of the parasha, we are perched on a mountaintop, called *YHWH Yireh* (God sees) in the land of *Moriah* (Seeing).

Although vision provides a powerful leitmotif running through the parasha, many people have continued to see the story about God’s destruction of Sodom as recounted in Genesis 19 in near utter isolation—especially when dealing with what the Bible says about “homosexuality.” Instead of treating Genesis 19 as if it stands alone, here I contextualize the story of Sodom as part of its larger literary unit. The Torah invites precisely such a contextualization since the first explicit mention of God’s plan to destroy Sodom (and Gomorrah) appears in Genesis 18:20,¹ soon after God appears to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (18:1) and promises the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah (18:10–15); Jewish tradition, insofar as both chapters (and the three that follow) are read together in the annual synagogue lectionary, also encourages us to set these chapters in dialogue.

In what follows, I interpret *Parashat Vayera* through one of its own leitmotifs: vision. However, instead of following a heteronormative, homophobic, fixed gaze that places primary import on a purported condemnation of “homosexuality” in the story of Sodom—thus placing queer readers in the role of passive and silenced sacrificial victims—I read *Parashat Vayera* with a “queer eye,” which is never fixed, at least for too long, on, and from, one place. I open up various readings, using different characters and points of view, in an attempt to forefront the multiplicity of available interpretations of almost any given text. For queer theory, a central point is not to find one static, inherent meaning in a text but to view a text from multiple angles—to borrow a well-known rabbinic dictum, “to turn it and turn it”—until, at least for the moment, one glimpses as much as can be seen, differently. This type of reading acknowledges that interpretation is an active, as well as an open, process, which invites LGBTQ readers to offer alternative readings that alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, and to further illuminate what can be seen and

known from this parasha.² In such readings, where *queer* functions as an active verb rather than a more or less fixed noun, queer interpretation describes a process, a fluid movement between reader, text, and world, “that reinscribes (or queers) each and the relations between them.”³ Instead of asking what “the Bible says about homosexuality,” queer readings turn the tables and ask what can LGBTQ people and their allies say—and teach—about the Bible.⁴

In order to reflect more broadly on the process of (queer) interpretation, I begin by using one queer, and feminist, strategy, that of highlighting a character positioned on the margins, “low and outside” any given narrative frame.⁵ My starting point is the unnamed character of Lot’s wife, who toward the end of the Sodom story “looks back” at where she is from and what she is leaving behind: “And his wife looked back from behind him and she became a pillar of salt” (Gen. 19:26). Other writers have filled in the story of Lot’s wife’s looking back by drawing from and building on midrashic sources;⁶ here, my purpose is to use this *peripheral* character’s act of looking back to explore a *central* Jewish preoccupation, Biblical interpretation—the very process of looking back at texts.

Obviously, for a tradition and a people that reconceive their texts and themselves in large part through repeated acts of looking back, as Judaism and Jews do, Lot’s wife, who pays dearly for her perhaps uncontrollable, albeit certainly understandable act, represents an anomaly. We can, of course, delineate the differences between an apparently compulsive act of willed disobedience (Lot and presumably his family were all enjoined, “Escape for your life; look not behind you, nor stay in the plain; escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed”)⁷ and a Jewish compulsion to “turn it [the Torah] and turn it because everything is in it” (*Pirke Avot*. 5:22), which I take to mean interpret the Torah, over and over again, because “It is not in heaven” (Deut. 32:12)⁸ but ours to interpret as we see fit—repeatedly. We can point out that looking at a smoldering site of destruction and looking into the Torah, with which, according to midrashic tradition, God creates the world (*Gen. Rab.* 1:1), are categorically different.

Despite these not insignificant differences, I am struck by Lot’s wife’s act of looking back, which still calls to my mind the value, the centrality, of such an act in and for Judaism and for Jews. Perhaps the lesson in Lot’s wife’s death is that it reminds us of the risks, the dangers, involved in looking back. *Lives are at stake*. Perhaps what might be considered problematic in Lot’s wife’s looking back is neither the act of looking back itself nor that she does so ostensibly against divine command but the inability to see things differently. We need to see with better eyes. If we do not constantly come up with new interpretations, which require continual looking back *and* seeing anew, the text, and its readers, stand in danger of becoming pillars of salt, calcified remnants, memorials—whether enduring or fleeting—to a past long since gone. My point is not to attribute blame to Lot’s wife or to minimize the only act with which the Bible enlivens her; to the contrary, I want to use her act of looking back, despite its fateful consequences, as a call for contemporary readers both to look back again and again and to be able to see things differently so that we might move forward.

Seeing things differently, in the context of *this* queer interpretation of *Parashat Vayera*, entails refusing to allow the Sodom story line to take center stage, eclipsing

all else. However important, and correct, it is to point out that elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic tradition, the sin of Sodom lay not in “homosexuality” but far more primarily in an utter lack of hospitality, this corrective reading still, more often than not, takes the story of Sodom out of its immediate textual context, seeing and setting it apart from most of the rest of *Parashat Vayera*. When I look back at *Parashat Vayera*, I can neither turn a blind eye to the negative costs that the Sodom narrative has exacted on LGBTQ people over the centuries nor remain so blinded by that one segment that I am left unable to see anything else of relevance, of deep significance in this parasha and subsequent rabbinic interpretations for further queer readings. Instead of “detoxifying Sodom” by contextualizing this story amid pertinent verses *elsewhere* in the Bible—for example, Ezekiel 16:49, “Behold, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: pride, surfeit of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters; and she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy”—the strategy pursued here is to keep the story of Sodom more in its immediate textual context and ultimately, in so doing, “to put it in its place.”

The literary context of the story of the destruction of Sodom is the far larger, and for Judaism the much more formative and foundational, story about the relationship between God and Abraham. In fact, the story of Sodom is framed by Abraham and God. At its beginning we read, “And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?” (Gen. 18:17), and it ends not with Lot’s wife looking back but with Abraham: “And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord; And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham” (Gen. 19:27–29). It is time to avert a singular focus on what in the end amounts to only one of its awesome God sightings, only one of the places where God makes God’s presence known to humanity—in the brimstone and fire—and to shift our gaze onto other aspects of this parasha. We too need, as God did, to remember Abraham, and we need to lift up our eyes and see other manifestations of the divine in *Parashat Vayera*.

If, as mentioned earlier, one queer reading strategy takes a point of entry into a text from a marginal character’s perspective, another strategy views the central figures of a text differently, or queerly. Shifting from the periphery to the center, in the remainder of this chapter I look again at the characters, and actions, of God and Abraham.

“God appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre” (Gen. 18:1). In comparison to the other ways God makes Godself known throughout this parasha, for example, in brimstone and fire, as the force that opens a woman’s eyes so that she can see water and life instead of the death of her child (Gen. 21:19), and perhaps most frighteningly of all, in a voice calling for the sacrifice of one’s child (Gen. 22:1), the first verse of *Parashat Vayera* seems exceedingly understated. Certainly it lacks the luster of other divine manifestations in the Torah; this is no burning bush (Ex. 3:2), no pillar of cloud or fire (Ex. 13:20–21), and no smoking mountain (Ex. 20:15). Added to that, this apparition is silent and fleeting. Even before one can grasp it, we,

like Abraham, have missed it. The Torah does not record what transpired when God appeared to Abraham; the text abruptly shifts: “He lifted up his eyes and saw: here, three men standing over against him” (Gen. 18:2).⁹ I find it odd that a parasha that takes its name from the act of seeing forefronts a profound lack of vision in its very first two verses. A simple reading of these verses leads one to picture Abraham as unable to see God; God appears, and Abraham sees three men.¹⁰ His lifting up his eyes to the three men suggests that here, in this parasha’s opening, he has averted his eyes from the divine.

But if Abraham here seems to lack a certain kind of vision, Jewish tradition has shot him through with an abundance of foresight—even in his youth. Most readers already have a vision of Abraham before coming to Genesis 18, midway through the Torah’s narrative about him. We know that in answer to God’s earlier call, Abraham leaves his homeland and his father’s house (Gen. 12:1). The rabbinic midrash about Abraham smashing the idols in his father’s idol shop has struck such a deep chord within Jewish imagination and resonated so much with collective Jewish self-fashioning that I have watched countless students, be they in a 6th-grade Hebrew-school class, seekers in synagogue adult-education courses, or university students, search in vain to find it in their Bibles. But that tradition is found in *Genesis Rabbah*, a 5th-century midrashic compilation:

Terah [Abraham’s father] was an idol maker. Once upon a time he went somewhere and left Abraham selling idols in his stead. A man came to buy one and Abraham said: “How old are you?” He answered, “Fifty-something.” Abraham retorted, “Woe to a fifty-year-old who would bow to a one-day-old!” The man left ashamed. One time a woman came carrying a platter of flour. She asked Abraham, “Can you offer this before them?” Abraham got up and took a club in his hand and smashed the idols. Then he put the club in the hand of the largest remaining idol. When his father came home he asked, “Who did this?” Abraham said, “Why hide it from you? A woman came carrying a platter of flour and asked me to offer it to them. One said, ‘I’ll eat first.’ Another said, ‘I’ll eat first.’ Then this big fellow picked up the club and smashed them!” Terah said, “Are you kidding me? Do these have intelligence!?” Abraham countered, “Cannot your ears hear what your mouth says?”¹¹

This midrashic tale offers a biographical sketch of a youthful Abraham, which is utterly lacking in the Biblical story itself. It paints a portrait of a passionate, even zealous, Abraham, who appears to be able to see nothing but God and wants to make sure everyone else sees things the same way. Young Abraham is, in essence, and in a very literal sense of the word, an *iconoclast*—one who smashes idols—and this image of Abraham has captured our imaginations.

Far less known is another rabbinic tradition that imagines Abraham, along with Sarah—into their nineties—as *genderqueer*. A tradition in the *Babylonian Talmud* (*Yevamot* 64a–b) states, “R. Ammi said, ‘Abraham and Sarah were *tumtumin* [of indeterminate sex/gender],’ as scripture states, ‘Look to the rock from where you have been cut and to the whole from where you have been dug’ (Isaiah 51:1) and after it is

written, ‘Look to Abraham your father, and Sarah who bore you’ (51:2).” When I look back, when I remember, Abraham, I cannot help but superimpose this less-known tradition onto the far more pervasive one. I imagine Abraham as a genderqueer kid in his father’s little shop of horrors, smashing the idols, the false ideals, of heterosexism and gender normativity with as much fervor as he smashed the wood and stone images of false gods.

I cannot help but hope for coming generations to search their Bibles—to turn them and turn them inside out—looking back for where it says that Abraham and Sarah were genderqueer, this teaching having become so well known. And I look forward to the day when we embrace these ancestors not as models of blind faith but as iconoclasts—breaking the old paradigms and ushering in a whole new way of seeing. Perhaps then, when we look back at *Parashat Vayera*, we will be able to see, with better eyes, the awesome vision not of a God who destroys with brimstone and fire or asks for a parent’s willingness to sacrifice a child but the God who appeared, and perhaps still waits, in the trees, quietly saying *Behold, Here I am. Know me.*

NOTES

1. See also Genesis 13:13.

2. See Rosemary Hennesy, “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture,” *Cultural Critique* 29 (Winter 1994–1995): 37.

3. Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 192.

4. See also *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000); *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ken Stone (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001); and *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006).

5. See Virginia Mollenkott, “Reading the Bible from Low and Outside: Lesbians and Gay People as God’s Tricksters,” in Goss and West, *Take Back the Word* (see note 4), 13–22.

6. Rebecca Goldstein, “Looking Back at Lot’s Wife,” in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina Buchman and Celina Spiegel (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 3–12; Michael Carden, “Remembering Pelotit: A Queer Midrash on Calling Down Fire,” in Stone, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (see note 4), 152–168; and “Genesis/Bereshit,” in Guest et al., *Queer Bible Commentary* (see note 4), 38.

7. Genesis 19:17. The verse is, however, stated in the second person singular.

8. See *b. Baba Metzia* 59b.

9. Translated according to Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

10. Of course, one of the rabbinic solutions to this apparent problem, which confirms at least that there is a textual problem, is to read the following verse as “My Lord [God], if it please you, do not go on past your servant” (*b. Shabbat* 127a) and thus to insist that Abraham saw God, imagining that Abraham has asked God to wait while he takes care of his guests.

11. *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13. Translation following Burton Visotzky, *Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 65–66.