

Divrei Jeshurun

Parshat Vayeira 5761

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KJ

by Rabbi Joshua Cypess

Statistics

- ❖ 4th of the 54 portions;
- ❖ 4th of 12 in Bereshit
- ❖ Written on 252 lines in a Sefer Torah
- ❖ 6 Parshiyot;
- ❖ 4 open, 2 closed
- ❖ 147 verses
 - ranks 7th (4th)
- ❖ 2085 words
 - ranks 2nd (first)
- ❖ 7862 letters
 - ranks 3rd (2nd)

Despite the popular ranking by verses, in terms of words and letters Vayeira is the **second largest portion** in the Torah

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Keywords: *Abraham & Sodom* (Genesis 18:16)

The interactions between Abraham and Sodom form much of the dramatic tension in the life of the patriarch. The city's punishment seems similar to what's meted out to the generation of the Flood, the nemeses of Noah. Just as we compare our heroes (Noah and Abraham) we can compare their enemies.

Notably, Noah and the Flood are not common motifs in the Bible. Noah as a character is referenced only three times (**Isa 54:9 & Ezek 14:14, 20**) and the Flood once (**Ps. 29:10**)

Sodom, on the other hand, occurs quite a number of times later on in the Bible: 13 times in the Prophets and once in the Writings (*for a complete breakdown see below*). That is significantly high, but it is understandable when compared to the numbers for "Abraham" in the latter part of the Bible (24). Abraham and Sodom are the polar opposites and in a way become the Biblical metaphors for Good and Evil.

Noah, as a hero, saves us from the Flood, but he is incapable of rescuing the world from new forms of evil. God promised never to destroy the world again - but individual realms may meet the once global fate. The innovation in the post-flood world is Abraham. God purposefully consults with him about possible destruction (**Gen. 18:17**) - and that partnership with humanity about justice and righteousness is part of the covenants that God makes with the Jewish people.

Sodom is significant event in that it defines some of the limits of God's covenant of Noah (the Rainbow). God promised never to destroy the entire world yet Sodom shows that this does not limit God's punishing hand. Thus, Sodom becomes a favorite metaphor of the prophets to describe the attributes of God as the punisher of the wicked on this world. Alas, the prophets predominantly needed to use this metaphor about Israel.

Halakha in the Parsha

According to Maimonides, none of the 613 commandments is listed in this week's reading. But this is a critical matter of dispute. According to the *Behag*, the commandments of visiting the sick (*bikur cholim*) and welcoming guests (*hachnasat orchim*) are Torah level commands found in this portion. In the introduction to his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Maimonides excoriated the Behag's theory the division of the commandments and used these two mitzvot as an example.

Maimonides includes these two commands of *chesed* (lovingkindness) under one vast command: to emulate God (*Halakhta be-derakhav* in Hebrew, *imatio Dei* in Latin). His source is from Deuteronomy 28:9 and he devotes an entire set of laws to the explication of this metaphysical concept: *Hilkhot Deot* (often translated as the laws of "character traits"). Being kind is not a matter of interpersonal conduct to Maimonides, it is a deep message of philosophy.

Halakha Sources (from *Sefer Mekorot*.)

Emulating Hashem (#1111.08)

Devarim 28:9; **Gemara** - Sotah 14a; **Rambam** - Deot 1:6; **Sefer haMitzvot** - Pos. 8; **Sefer ha-Chinuch** 611; **Semag** - Pos. 7

Redemption of prisoners (#1144.01)

Mishnah - Gittin 4:6 (Gemara 45a), Horayot 3:7 (Gemara 13a); **Gemara** - Bava Batra 8b; **Rambam** - Matanot Aniyim 8:10, 8:12 (# in Zeraim); **Semag** - Pos. 162; **Shulchan Arukh** - YD 252:1

Clothing the Naked (#1144.03)

Mishnah - Horayot 3:7 (Gemara 13a); **Rambam** - Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 8:15; **Semag** - Pos. 162; **Shulchan Arukh** - YD 251:8

Hospitality (#1144.04)

Gemara - Shabbat 127a;
Rambam - Mourning 14:2

Further Reading: A wonderful book for learning lessons of Chesed found in each parsha: Pliskin, Zelig. *Love Your Neighbor*. (Aish Hatorah, New York: 1977).

Behag: Behag is an acronym for the *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot*. It is attributed to Rav Yehudai Gaon or his student Rav Shimon Kaira, written 759 C.E.)

Ha-Amek Jeshurun - Deeper Analysis

Depth: What do the Statistics Mean?

The above set of statistics lists and ranks the different methods we regularly employ to divide the Torah. The methods have different levels of sanctity and authority. The (a) letters, (b) words, (c) order of words, (d) division into verses, (e) the order of verses, and (f) the *parshiyot* (see below) all come from Sinai and thus are sacred and of indisputable authority. There is a dispute whether the cantillation marks were transmitted to Moses at Sinai or are Rabbinic.

The command to read the Torah publicly is a rabbinic commandment from Moses and thus the divisions into weekly portions is at most rabbinic. An annual schedule has become predominant in Jewish practice and is codified by Maimonides (**MT Prayer ch. 12-13**) but even during his time there were communities that had a triennial cycle -- a custom mentioned in the Talmud (**TB Megillah 29b**) and naturally had a different division.

The chapter numbers that are in popular use (e.g. this week's reading is chapters 18 to 22 inclusive) were devised by non-Jewish scholars. Jewish scholars adopted these divisions in order to more effectively defend the Faith in the many forced debates. As such, the chapter numbers have no religious significance and at times contradict Torah lessons.

Parshiyot, mentioned above as being given at Sinai, are the Torah's natural divisions into paragraphs and chapters. There are two types of *parshiya*: **stuma** (closed) & **petucha** (open). The **stuma** (closed) is generally considered to mean a minor change in theme while the **petucha** (open) is a major change -- equivalent to a chapter. When our sages divided up the weekly portions, they often ended on a **petucha**.

In this week's portion the **stumot** are found before 20:1 & 21:1, the **petuchot** are before 21:22, 22:1, 22:20, & 23:1.

Bibliography: Aryeh Kaplan, *Handbook of Jewish Thought, v.1* (Maznaim, NY: 1979) pp. 125-142 (7:20-66).

Indisputable authority: So much so that Maimonides considers their acceptance the eighth of the Thirteen Principles of Faith and will prevent the sinner from the afterlife (**MT Repentance 3:8** "One who says the Torah is not from God...even one word...is a Torah denier"). See also **TB Sanhedrin 99a** which quotes **Numbers 15:31**: "Because he has despised God's word...his soul shall be utterly cut off; his sin shall remain upon him." (Cf. **TB Nedarim 37b, Shavuot 13a**)

Rabbinic: Rabbinic laws from Moses, while given respect commensurate to their age and level of scholarly impetus, the law has the level of any other rabbinic command (with the associated leniencies in times of doubt). Moses was the only prophet who was able to give law via prophecy, and those laws are tightly delimited (see below)

Insight: Structure of Parshiyot

Notice that the non-Jewish division into chapters 18 & 19 do not match what the Torah intends. From 18:1 until 20:1 the narrative is purposefully uninterrupted even though it contains what seems like two different stories, the pledge of Isaac versus the destruction of Sodom. Hence we learn that the two stories are actually to be read as being one theme -- allowing a number of intriguing readings as to why this is so.

Sources:

Scriptural Text Divisions:

(Kaplan, p.141 (7:62); ff. 146: **TB Megillah 3a, Hagigah 6a, Nedarim 37b, TJ Megillah 4:1.**)

Public Torah Readings:

(**Deuteronomy 32:3** (Ramban); **TB Berachot 21a, Baba Kama 82a; Shulchan Arukh OC 134-149** (Bookin, Levi. Sefer Mekorot. #1470, p. 99)

Petucha & Stuma:

TB Shabbat 103b, MT Sefer Torah ch. 8, Semag - Pos. 25, Sh"A YD 275. (Bookin, Levi. Sefer Mekorot. #1312.02, p. 68)

For the application of these principles to Biblical exegesis see Menachem Liebtog, *Introduction to Thematic Study and Parshiot*.

<http://www.tanach.org/brint.htm>

Keyword Details: Abraham

Strong's Number: 00085

Total-159 (Torah: 135, Prophets 11, Writings 13):

Genesis-117, Exodus-9, Leviticus-1, Numbers-1, Deuteronomy-7
Joshua-2, 1 Kings-1, 2 Kings-1, Isaiah-4, Jeremiah-1, Ezekiel-1, Micah-1
Psalms-4, Nehemiah-1, 1 Chronicles-6, 2 Chronicles-2

Keyword Verse Breakdown:

Gen. (17:5,9,15,17,18,22,23,24); (18:6,7,11,13,16-19,22,23,27,33); (19:27,29); (20:1,2,9,10,11,14,17,18); (21:2-4,7-12,14,22,24,25,27-29); (22:1,3-11,13-15,19,20,23); (23:2,3,5,7,10,12,14,16,18-20); (24:1,2,6,9,12,15,27,34,42,48,52,59); (25:1,5,6,7,8,10,11,12,19), (26:1,3,5,15,18,24); (28:4,9,13); (31:42,53); (32:9); (35:12,27); (48:15,16); (49:30,31); (50:13,24);

Ex. (2:24); (3:6,15,16); (4:5); (6:3,8); (32:13); (33:1), **Lev.** 26:42; **Num.** (32:11); **Deut.** (1:8); (6:10); (9:5,27); (29:13); (30:20); (34:4)

Josh. (24:2,3); **1Ki.** (18:36); **2Ki.** (13:23);

Isa. (29:22); (41:8); (51:2); (63:16); **Jer.** (33:26); **Mich.** (7:20);

Psa. (47:9); (105:6,9,42); **Neh.** (9:7);

1Ch. (1:27,28,32,34); (16:16); (29:18); **2Ch.** (20:7); (30:6).

Keyword Details: Sodom

Definition: a Canaanite city, usually paired with Gomorrah, located in the area of the Dead Sea and the Jordan river; both cities destroyed by God in judgment

Strong's Number: 05467

Total-39

(Torah: 22, Prophets 13, Writings 1):

(Genesis-20, Deuteronomy-2, Isaiah-4, Jeremiah-3, Ezekiel-6, Amos-1, Zephaniah-1, Lamentations-1)

Keyword Verse Breakdown:

Gen. (10:19); (13:10,12,13); (14:2,8,12,14,17,21,22); (18:16,20,22,26); (19:1,4,24,28); **Deut** (29:23); (32:32);

Isa. (1:9,10); (3:9); (13:19); **Jer** (23:14); (49:18);

(50:40); **Ezek** (16:46,48,49,53,55,56); **Amos**

(4:11); **Zeph.** (2:9);

Lam. (4:6)