5 Things Vayera Teaches Us About Moral Courage

Your 18Forty Parsha Guide is a weekly newsletter exploring five major takeaways from the weekly parsha. Receive this newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

When Avraham looks up and sees three strangers approaching his tent while recovering from his circumcision in the desert heat, he runs to greet them. This act of hospitality opens Parshat Vayera, one of the Torah's most morally complex narratives. The parsha doesn't offer easy answers about faith and ethics but presents the full spectrum of moral courage: the courage to argue with God for strangers' lives, the courage to maintain hope when circumstances suggest despair, and perhaps most disturbing, the courage to question when divine command seems to contradict divine character.

Research published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* identifies moral courage as involving psychological, social, and economic risks rather than bodily harm. Avraham's tests exemplify this distinction.

In an era marked by moral complexity, Vayera speaks with urgency, offering models of moral courage that span from public advocacy for justice (Sodom) to private resilience through doubt (Sarah), from making painful decisions when all options cause harm (Hagar and Yishmael) to discerning when to resist commands that violate fundamental ethics (Akedah).

In a post-October 7 world, we find ourselves grappling with questions our tradition anticipated: When should we challenge authority? How do we maintain hope amid difficulty? What does it mean to act morally when moral clarity seems impossible?

1. The Courage of Public Advocacy: Challenging Power for Universal Justice

Avraham's unprecedented argument with God over Sodom represents the first recorded instance in human literature of someone challenging divine judgment on moral grounds. His question, *"Hashofet kol ha-aretz lo ya'aseh mishpat?"* ("Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?"), introduces a revolutionary concept: that moral principles transcend even divine will, or at minimum, that God's own character establishes ethical standards we can invoke when advocating for the vulnerable.

The psychological courage required for this confrontation cannot be overstated. Avraham stood entirely alone, with no precedent for such an argument and no assurance of its outcome. As Daniel Statman explains in discussing military ethics, moral courage means upholding principle even when outcomes are uncertain. Avraham's negotiation over Sodom demonstrates exactly this quality, repeatedly pressing his case, moving from 50 righteous people down to 10, each time risking divine displeasure to protect potential innocents.

The text's description of Avraham's approach reveals a sophisticated advocacy strategy. He doesn't simply demand mercy but appeals to God's own character and reputation: What would it mean for divine justice if the righteous were destroyed alongside the wicked? Rashi observes that Avraham's phrasing carefully avoids accusation while nevertheless raising a fundamental ethical challenge. This represents what modern negotiation theory calls "principled argument," grounding advocacy in shared values rather than power dynamics.

Contemporary relevance appears in contexts where protecting innocents conflicts with legitimate defense. The IDF's code of ethics, *Ruach Tzahal*, incorporates principles like 'Purity of Arms' and protection of human life that Avraham's argument anticipates. As Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody writes in *Ethics of Our Fighters*, these principles exist because the dilemmas prove agonizing. Legitimate authority must operate within moral boundaries, but defining those boundaries when facing enemies who embed among civilians remains brutal. Civilian casualties in Gaza force us to confront Avraham's question with fresh urgency: How many innocent deaths render an action unjust, even in self-defense?

The parsha emphasizes that Avraham's courage stems not from certainty but from conviction about basic moral principles. He doesn't claim to know whether 50, 45, or 10 righteous people actually exist in Sodom. His argument rests on the principle that justice demands protecting the innocent, regardless of their association with the guilty. This distinction between advocacy for specific outcomes and for moral principles defines the difference between interest-based negotiation and moral courage.

Rabbi Yitzchak Blau addresses this passage in examining whether morality exists independently of Judaism. Whether we view morality as independent of divine command or as reflecting God's essential nature, Avraham's argument establishes that ethical advocacy requires more than submission; it demands active engagement with moral questions.

The episode concludes without definitive resolution. Sodom is destroyed because insufficient righteous people were found. Yet Avraham's advocacy isn't futile. It establishes precedent for moral argument with authority, demonstrates that questioning can itself be an act of faith, and preserves the principle that justice matters even when specific outcomes disappoint. The value of moral courage isn't measured solely by immediate success but by maintaining ethical principles amid ambiguity.

2. The Courage of Private Resilience: Holding Hope When Logic Says Despair

Sarah's response to the promise of a child at age 90—laughter—has often been read as doubt or even faithlessness. Yet the Torah's treatment of her laughter is more nuanced, revealing a different kind of courage: the psychological strength to maintain hope when every rational calculation suggests impossibility.

The text records Sarah laughing "*b'kirbah*" (within herself), suggesting internal emotional complexity rather than open mockery. Ramban notes her response reflects understandable biological realism. After decades of barrenness and now past childbearing age, Sarah's laughter represents the human struggle to believe what seems impossible.

Modern research on hope and resilience validates this reading. Studies on post-traumatic growth demonstrate that maintaining hope amid adversity requires active psychological work, not passive optimism. Sarah's internal laugh captures this tension, simultaneously acknowledging realistic limitations while processing the possibility of transcending them. Her courage lies not in immediate belief but in remaining open to transformation despite long experience of disappointment.

The divine response to Sarah's laughter is instructive. God challenges Avraham: *"Hayipaleh mi-Hashem davar?"* ("Is anything too difficult for God?"). This question doesn't condemn Sarah's doubt but rather invites her, and us, to consider possibilities beyond natural constraints. The courage required here differs from Avraham's public advocacy; it's the private courage to believe one's situation might improve when all evidence suggests otherwise.

Research on recovery from trauma shows that survivors who maintain hope without denying reality demonstrate stronger resilience. Sarah models this balance. She laughs at the biological impossibility while the narrative arc suggests she remains emotionally open to the possibility of divine intervention. Her courage isn't blind faith but the willingness to hope despite rational doubt.

Our conversations with countless *18Forty Podcast* guests have taught us that—as David Bashevkin discusses—authentic spiritual life requires acknowledging difficulty while continuing to build meaning. Hadas Hershkovitz, whose husband Yossi *Hy"d* was killed while serving on reserve duty in 2023, demonstrates that resilience doesn't mean suppressing grief, but rather finding spiritual clarity to continue living purposefully. Emmi Polansky, who had to rebuild her life as a single mother after her marriage ended, teaches us that teshuva often means celebrating our own worthiness even when plans collapse.

The courage to maintain spiritual connection while acknowledging life's fractures parallels Sarah's laughter: being honest about difficulty while remaining open to transformation.

Ultimately, Sarah does conceive and bear Yitzchak, whose very name (*Yitzchak*, "he will laugh") memorializes his mother's complex response. The Torah doesn't erase her doubt but incorporates it into the narrative, suggesting that honest struggle with hope is itself a form of faith. Moral courage includes the private work of maintaining hope; not naive optimism but genuine openness to positive change despite rational skepticism.

3. The Ultimate Crisis: When Divine Command and Human Ethics Collide

The *Akedah* confronts us with the most disturbing test in Torah: God commands Avraham to sacrifice Yitzchak, the son he waited decades to receive, through whom all divine promises were to be fulfilled. The psychological and moral complexity of this moment cannot be overstated. Avraham faces not a choice between good and evil but between two goods that seem utterly incompatible: obedience to God and the life of his innocent son.

Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* calls this a "teleological suspension of the ethical," the idea that divine command can override universal moral principles. For Kierkegaard, this represents the essence of faith—Avraham's willingness to act beyond ethical reasoning based solely on his relationship with God. The "knight of faith," in Kierkegaard's formulation, possesses courage to transcend ordinary morality when God demands it.

This reading has profoundly influenced modern Jewish thought. Some interpreters embrace the idea that authentic religious commitment sometimes requires setting aside ethical concerns, viewing Avraham's willingness as the paradigm of faith. The psychological pressure to obey authority makes this interpretation psychologically plausible. Avraham faced the ultimate authority figure issuing an unambiguous command.

Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments provide disturbing context for understanding Avraham's situation. In Milgram's studies, 65 percent of ordinary people were willing to administer what they believed were dangerous 450-volt electric shocks to innocent strangers simply because an authority figure told them to continue. The experiment demonstrated that obedience to authority could override moral intuitions even in normal individuals with no particular hostility.

If ordinary people will inflict pain on strangers at an experimenter's command, how much more overwhelming would be the psychological pressure Avraham felt when commanded by God Himself? The Milgram experiments suggest that Avraham's compliance, far from extraordinary faith, might represent the default human response to authoritative command. This reframing raises a disturbing question: Is blind obedience what the story seeks to teach, or is there a deeper lesson we're meant to extract?

The *Akedah* becomes even more psychologically complex when we remember Avraham's earlier behavior. The same man who argued passionately with God for Sodom's potential righteous now proceeds silently toward Mount Moriah without recorded protest. Why advocate for strangers but not for his own innocent son? This apparent inconsistency has troubled commentators for centuries and suggests we may be missing something essential in the story's lesson.

Psychological research on moral courage suggests that situational factors dramatically influence ethical decision-making. The same person might demonstrate remarkable courage in one context while failing to resist unethical commands in another. Variables including proximity to authority, perceived legitimacy of command, gradual escalation of demands, and social support all affect moral resistance. Avraham faced perhaps the worst possible configuration: maximum authority (God), complete isolation (traveling alone with Yitzchak), and a direct rather than graduated command.

The narrative's sparse details compound our interpretive challenges. The Torah records no conversation between Avraham and Yitzchak about the purpose of their journey, no wrestling with moral implications, no expressed anguish. Ramban suggests this silence itself carries meaning, perhaps indicating Abraham's complete absorption in faith, or alternatively, his psychological dissociation from the horror of what he believed he must do.

Modern readers, particularly after the Holocaust, find the Kierkegaardian reading deeply troubling. If faith justifies suspending ethics, if religious duty can license harming innocents, what moral guardrails remain against atrocity committed in God's name? This question animates contemporary Jewish philosophy's approach to the *Akedah*, seeking interpretations that preserve both religious meaning and ethical integrity.

4. The Courage of Painful Decisions: When Competing Obligations Collide

Perhaps no moment in Vayera captures moral complexity more than when Sarah demands that Avraham send away Hagar and Yishmael. The text tells us "*vayeira hadavar me'od b'einei Avraham*" ("the matter was very distressing to Avraham"). This distress reveals moral courage's most agonizing dimension: making decisions when every option causes harm, when protecting one relationship means damaging another.

Ramban emphasizes that Avraham's anguish stemmed from genuine moral conflict—Yishmael was his son, Hagar had served his household faithfully, yet Sarah's concerns for Yitzchak's future carried weight. God's instruction to listen to Sarah doesn't erase the moral difficulty but rather acknowledges that some situations offer no painless resolution. The courage lies not in finding a comfortable answer but in accepting responsibility for an uncomfortable decision.

Research on moral injury—the psychological damage from perpetrating, witnessing, or failing to prevent actions that violate one's moral code—helps contextualize Avraham's distress. Psychologist Brett Litz's foundational work with veterans shows that moral injury often stems from "perpetration-based" trauma: having to take actions that cause harm even when those actions seem necessary or justified. Avraham faces exactly this bind.

The narrative's honest portrayal of Avraham's grief models emotional integrity in moral decision-making. He doesn't rationalize away the harm he's causing or pretend the decision is simple. The text preserves his distress, teaching that moral courage includes acknowledging the full weight of difficult choices rather than minimizing their cost.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein frequently addressed the tension between competing values in halakhic decision-making. In his essay "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?" he argues that authentic religious life requires wrestling with moral complexity rather than retreating into formulaic responses. The Hagar narrative exemplifies this: Even with divine guidance, Avraham must carry the emotional and moral weight of his decision.

As David Bashevkin explores in conversations about engaging with religious complexity and doubt, Judaism honors genuine struggle rather than demanding false certainty. His interview with Aliza and Ephraim Bulow—a couple whose religious paths diverged after the loss of a son, granddaughter, and grandson—demonstrates that maintaining commitment through painful realities requires acknowledging fracture without abandoning relationship—precisely what Avraham models in this episode.

The story's conclusion, with God protecting Hagar and Yishmael in the wilderness and promising them a future, suggests that accepting the limits of our moral agency—recognizing we cannot always prevent all harm—itself requires courage. We act with integrity, accept responsibility for consequences, and trust that our limited perspective doesn't exhaust all possibilities for redemption.

5. The Courage of Responsibility: Rebuilding a Fractured World

Synthesizing Vayera's lessons reveals that moral courage isn't a single virtue but rather situational wisdom—knowing which form of courage each moment requires. Abraham's advocacy for Sodom, Sarah's resilient hope, and the *Akedah*'s complex moral reckoning together present a comprehensive framework for ethical living in morally ambiguous situations.

In *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues that Judaism positions humans as God's partners in creation. This partnership demands active moral agency rather than passive obedience. We bear responsibility for bringing justice, compassion, and healing into the world; not simply following commands, but wrestling with how best to actualize divine values in complex circumstances.

Rav Moshe Weinberger notes that authentic vitality requires confronting spiritual disconnection honestly. His approach models the courage to question institutional norms while remaining committed to authentic spiritual seeking, precisely the balance Avraham demonstrates throughout Parshat Vayera.

The parsha challenges us to develop all these forms of courage. Like Avraham advocating for Sodom, we must find a voice to challenge injustice even when facing powerful opposition. Like Sarah, we must maintain hope while acknowledging difficult realities. And perhaps most importantly, like the angel commanding Avraham to stop, we must recognize that authentic religious devotion requires ethical conduct, sometimes meaning resistance to commands that seem to originate from authority but actually contradict fundamental moral principles.

This comprehensive view of moral courage recognizes that different situations demand different responses. Sometimes courage means speaking up; sometimes maintaining hope; sometimes resisting what appears to be legitimate authority. The wisdom lies in discernment, in understanding which form of courage each moment requires and having cultivated the capacity to act accordingly.

Questions for Reflection:

1. **In a world full of moral gray zones, what does it mean to act with integrity today?**
2. **Can doubt itself be an act of faith if it keeps us honest before God?**
3. **How can we pursue justice without losing our humanity—or our empathy for others' pain?**

This project is made possible with support from the Simchat Torah Challenge and UJA-Federation of New York. Learn more about the Simchat Torah Challenge and get involved at their website.