

Line-in-the-Sand_Vayera_Nov7-2025_raw

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The New York Times had a piece on Wednesday morning about the coming boon in South Florida's real estate market, but I went down to Miami on Tuesday, this week of all weeks, left on Tuesday morning on the very day that New York elected its new mayor. And what was I doing down in Miami? I was attending a three-day workshop for an intimate group of rabbis on viewpoint diversity. Timely, I know.

So yesterday morning, our instructor asked us to do something really simple, or it's how it sounded. We were waking up every morning to be on the beach and work out and do some kind of physical activities, and he had us draw a line in the sand. Viewpoint diversity.

Draw a line in the sand. So he drew a line in the sand, and then he had us stand on the line as if it were a balance beam. So one foot in front of the other in a direct line on the line in the sand that we had drawn.

And so we all stood there. He said, don't move, but find your balance. So we're like standing there on this warm Miami beach, wobbling like this.

Like, you know, people are watching us, and we're like this. And we're moving from one side to the other, and he comes over and he pushes us, and we fall off the line. And these small moments, these micro-movements and subtle awareness that was required to stay balanced on the very line that we had drawn, it's really tough.

And as I stood there, feeling the heat of that sand under my feet, I thought, this is the work. This is the work, to be centered. Not in theory, but in practice.

Not some abstract idea of balance, but embodied balance. Not just intellectually open-minded, but physically grounded. Alive to the pull of the extremes, wanting to tear me apart and choosing breath by breath to remain upright.

And so this week, while I was in Miami trying to find that balance, our city was finding itself in a very different place. We elected a new mayor whose victory means very different things to very different New Yorkers, hope for some and heartbreak for others. And at the very same time, headlines announced that Elon Musk is poised to become the world's first trillionaire.

And at the very same time, 42 of our fellow, 42 million of our fellow Americans are anxiously awaiting SNAP benefits, wondering how they'll feed their children on \$1.48. If there was ever a week in which we needed balance, this was it. We live in an age of extremes. Moral, political, economic, emotional, and each and every one of us is pulled to the edges.

The noise demands that we choose a side, outrage or apathy, wealth or want, solidarity or

survival. And in the process, we lose our center. Abstractions lead to extremes.

Abstractions lead to extremes. Principles without facts are like maps without territory. Capitalism without compassion, or socialism without ambition, both dehumanizing.

The center isn't compromise. Let's say that again. The center isn't compromise.

It isn't selling out. It's incarnation. It's where the ideal meets the real, where our values take flesh, where our faith meets our feet in the sand.

Give you an example from this week's Torah portion, one of my favorite examples in the Torah. The Torah opens in chapter 18 of the book of Genesis with an Abraham who is convalescing after a very strange operation that he had at a very, very old age. Circumcised at an age where he should be in an old age home probably or somewhere.

Abraham is now in a tent. And God appears to Abraham. According to our tradition, this appearance was a theophany.

It was God's presence to Abraham. God is with Abraham. He sees him clearly.

And before we're even in the midst of that remarkable vision, Abraham is being visited by God. That's a big deal. God's knocking on the door.

Abraham's in the middle of samadhi, nirvikalpi samadhi. He's in like non-dual awareness. He's completely absorbed in God.

It's all amazing. It's like LSD thousand times over, right? He's just like, he's in a trip. And the Torah says he's tripping in his tent.

And three angels invite. Behold, three men appear. Abraham is in some altered state of divine consciousness.

The kind of thing that you dream of. Literally, figuratively. And three guys show up.

And the Torah tells us that Abraham lifted his eyes. In the mystical works of our tradition, it means that he came out of that state and noticed them. His meditation wasn't so immersive that he wasn't aware of the world of form that was before him.

He saw these characters, and immediately he ran to them. Vayar, Vayaratz, all of the verbs. He's running to them.

He's primed. He's thinking, wow, I get a chance to serve these guys. The rabbis of the Midrash pick up on this moment.

And the rabbis say something remarkable in the Masach at Shabbat, in the tractate Shabbat.

Wasn't Abraham in the middle of his trip? Wasn't he like having an intimate face time with God? And someone knocks on the door. You know what? I'll get that later.

You know, we're having this thing. God doesn't seem to say, do you want to get the door? It just seems that Abraham of his own accord says, hmm, I better, hmm, you know, I better go. I'll be right back, God.

Do you mind waiting? God, hang out. I'll be right back. The rabbis say greater is hospitality than receiving the face of God.

Greater is it to receive the face of a guest. To be incarnational. To have your abstraction.

Like what good is your abstraction if these people need you and you're in the middle of your vertical ascent. When on the horizontal plane in the world of ethics and morality and human interactions, the messy place, you're not able to meet the moment. Greater is receiving guests and hospitality than is receiving God.

How many people do we know that go on retreats? They've done every weekend human potential available. Next week they're doing this and the other week they're doing that. And every shamanistic, they've been in Peru.

They've been on yoga retreats. I know. I've been there.

Six months silent retreats. And they come back and they're still the same schmuck they were when they left. I know people like that.

I might even be one of them. You know, I don't know. God isn't found in the abstractions, but in encounters.

Or maybe say differently. I don't like the way I said that. I want to say differently.

Maybe it's the true revelation of the kind of divine illumination you had is when the encounter arrives. If your experience of the divine or your abstract principles aren't sufficiently integrated so that you don't know how to apply them, then you're living in some ideological extreme that's nice in the world of ideas like a mathematical formula that doesn't actually, does it work? Revelation doesn't happen in the clouds. It happens in the tents, and in the hallways, and in the cabs, and on the corners, and in the pews, and in the elevators.

It's with one another, face-to-face. The rabbis imagine that Avram, Abraham has a tent that is open on all four sides, north, south, east, and west, to welcome travelers from every direction. I'd like to imagine that the four-letter name of God is that tent, each letter positioned at one of those openings, each one of those letters at one of those openings, to welcome strangers from every direction.

Avram's tent is not a bunker of an ideology. It's a sanctuary of balance. Avram is rooted in covenant, and he's open to the world.

That is the spiritual architecture of the center. The leader of this viewpoint diversity workshop for three days was someone who was deeply immersed in democratic political movement. He was very much involved in President Obama's administration, and he recognized in himself that he had become an extremist.

He recognized in himself that he had become, in himself, in his own way of approaching other humans who were on the other side, he felt that he wasn't open to them. And so he started to look at that, and started to wonder about his own lines in the sand. And he said to me as we were walking back one night, he said, David, you know, when you're confident in your position, you can have a soft front and a tough back.

He said, when you're confident and your back is strong, you can open yourself. You don't have to be as guarded. You can be curious.

You can see a mystery in front of you. Ask a question. What Maimonides called the golden mean.

The way down the center. He taught that virtue lies on that golden path, the middle way. Not the middle as mediocrity, but as moral calibration.

Between cowardice and recklessness, there is courage, he said. Between stinginess and wastefulness is generosity. Between arrogance and self-abasement, there is humility.

The mean is not average. It's excellence in equilibrium. Excellence in equilibrium.

Right? We get thrown, and then we get our center. We hold the center. The center is not where passion goes to die.

It's where it is refined. The rabbis teach us, make for yourself a heart of many chambers. A heart of many chambers.

That's the Torah's language for a centered soul. A heart that can hold contradiction without collapsing. That's what it means to live with complexity.

Not to dissolve our differences, but to hold them in dialogue. Avram's tent is like a four-chambered heart. One opening to each direction of our human experience.

Another Avram, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, faith is not refuge from tension, but a life lived within it. We pray, he said, not to escape contradiction, but to be enlarged by it. The spiritual life is not about choosing one pole, heaven or earth, justice or mercy, but learning to stand in the stretch between them.

To live, as he put it, in the polarity of all that is. That's Avram's life, stretched between the promise and the prophecy and the enactment and the living it out. And he holds it.

Over the last 20 years of my rabbinate, when people hear that my story began in the Orthodox world, they'll often say to me, the first question out of their mouths, what kind of synagogue do you have? They want to put it into a box. It's like, is it this kind? Is it that kind? Are you still Orthodox? And I say, and tongue in cheek and no insult intended, I'm nervous whenever I say things like this. Love Orthodox people, I know some of my family are Orthodox.

But I say, no, I'm paradox now. The task at hand this week is to rebuild the center, one moment at a time. Every single time we resist the urge to shout and instead choose to listen, we are rebuilding the center.

Every time we act on behalf of the hungry, we are rebuilding the center. Every time we speak moral truth calmly and clearly, we rebuild the center. And every time we hold fast to our Jewish identity while making room for others, we rebuild the center.

To be centered doesn't mean to be moderate. It means to be anchored in reality. My teacher, Reb Zalman Shakir Shalom, used to say that at the rim of every wheel, the world spins too fast.

That's where you get dizzy. But at the center, everything revolves around you, and you can see clearly from that center. That is our work now more than it has ever been.

We Jews in the world have always been safer when the center holds. At the places along our political continuums and our social continuums, where extremes and ideas and abstractions live and flourish, we Jews have never been safe. And so we must rebuild the center, what I call the sane center, a place where spirit and world are meeting and where compassion has real traction.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that before you judge someone, imagine their soul as your own reflected in the mirror. He would ask his students, what part of me is this person showing? That too is Avraham's teaching. When he lifts his eyes to see the three strangers, he doesn't put them into categories, he recognizes them and serves them.

He sees them as reflections of the divine, and that's why hospitality is greater than revelation, because in that moment Avraham himself becomes the revelation. He sees his guests as the revelation, and so when he runs to feed them with milk and bread, he models the antidote to our modern disease of abstraction. He doesn't post about his experience, he pours about it.

He doesn't theorize about justice, he practices it. Hospitality is his theology, embodied compassion and the holiness of action. Imagine if our city learned that.

Imagine now if our mayor will turn not to relitigating the Middle East, but to helping put food on tables. Imagine if our leaders, while upholding the virtues of capitalism, recognize that in the

person of a trillionaire we have an abomination, an aberration, where one polarity is winning out at the expense of millions upon millions of our fellow citizens, who can barely put food on the table. Abstractions winning each and every day, polls and algorithms driving us further from one another, but what if leaders govern from focus and not from performance? If billionaires remember the hungry before the headlines, if the Jewish community could hold faster our moral clarity, without moral panic, to be strategic and not reactive.

If we reclaim the center, not as a bland middle, but as a brave middle, because the center isn't where everything is safe, it's where everything is seen. It's a space where God still appears in the face of the stranger, the neighbor, the one who disagrees, and also the one who hungers. The world's extremes will not heal through louder shouting.

They will heal when enough of us take our place at the center, grounded, generous, and unafraid. The Midrash teaches us that when Avraham built his tent, there was a pillar of light that rose up from its center and could be seen for miles. Travelers would follow that light, and in following that light, they found food and rest and blessing beneath his open canopy.

May we be that light. May we find our balance on the narrow line that we ourselves have drawn in the space between heaven and earth, principle and fact, faith and reality. May we build tents on all, open on all sides, hearts with many chambers, and lives that hold the golden mean.

And may God, the one who appeared to Avraham in the faces of those strangers, appear again to us in the faces of all of our neighbors, the faces of those we need to feed, the faces of those we need to love, the faces of those we need to understand, and the faces of those who dare to stand with us in the center, in a center that can hold us all. Please rise.

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