

When We Cannot See What Comes Next

Parshas Vayeira

DELIVERY MANUSCRIPT | Approximately 25-28 minutes

1. The Election Is Over. The Uncertainty Continues.

We sometimes think an election will settle our anxiety.

Once the votes are counted, we'll know where we stand. We'll know who's in charge. We'll know what comes next.

Then the result comes - and **the uncertainty simply takes a different form.**

Here in Toronto, Olivia Chow's reelection leaves many of us concerned. In my judgment, her response to antisemitism has not matched the seriousness of what our community faces. We wonder whether our concerns will receive the attention they deserve.

And we're watching Israel. Who will form the government? What compromises will be made? Could there be a coalition without the charedi parties? What would that mean for yeshivos and the Torah community?

What do we do when we have to make a decision before we know how things will turn out?

Let us go through our parsha and see what happens.

2. Lot: At What Price?

Lot faces a crisis. Two visitors have come to Sodom, and he has brought them into his home. Now a violent crowd surrounds the house and demands that he hand them over. Lot goes outside and closes the door behind him. His guests remain inside. He stands outside, facing the danger.

The Ramban tells us that Lot believes his visitors are ordinary men. He does not know that they can strike the crowd with blindness. There is courage here. He acts without knowing how he will escape.

He risks his life for strangers - and offers his daughters to save them. How does a person become courageous and morally confused at the same time?

The Ramban makes us confront the contradiction: Lot exerts himself to protect his guests, yet is prepared to abandon his children.

His determination to fulfil one responsibility does not justify violating another.

Protecting one thing can become so consuming that we stop asking what our solution is doing to someone else.

In our own lives, the language may sound respectable. "I am doing this for my family." "I have to protect the institution." "We cannot afford to lose." But those statements do not settle whether the proposed means are right.

A person can become so determined to provide for his family that he begins justifying dishonesty. Someone serving a worthy cause can leave the people at home with only his exhaustion and impatience.

Who will pay the price for my solution?

Lot teaches us that an urgent goal cannot justify every means. But is a sincere intention enough to guide us? What if people genuinely believe they must act to save the future?

3. Lot's Daughters: Sincere - but Certain of What?

Sodom is destroyed. Lot and his two daughters survive, and eventually they are living in a cave. What do his daughters believe has happened outside it? Following Rashi, they think the world has been destroyed as it was in the Flood. They believe humanity has no future unless they act, and undertake their drastic plan to preserve human life through their father.

Chazal recognize their sincere intention. We must recognize it too. But intention and judgment are separate questions.

The Abarbanel explains that Lot persuaded them that the world had been destroyed. They accepted that account through weakness of judgment. He acknowledges Chazal's praise while describing the act as disgraceful, and says they subsequently learned the truth from other people: humanity had survived.

But let us press the question. **How could they have been so sure that the whole world was destroyed?** They knew Avraham. Did they really think that Lot and his two daughters had survived, while Avraham had perished? Had they considered that Hashem might have preserved Avraham too?

This is the challenge I would put to their thinking. They had seen a terrible destruction. But they had not seen the whole world. How did "Sodom is gone" become "There is nobody left"? And how did "We do not know who survived" become "We must do this tonight"?

They were prepared to act on the assumption that Avraham was dead before finding out whether Avraham was alive.

Why could they not wait? Leave the cave. Find out. The Abarbanel tells us they eventually learned that other people had survived. That possibility existed before they discovered it.

Their sincerity did not make their assumptions accurate.

We can do this too. "This election means everything is finished." "There is no future for this institution." "My child will never recover from this setback." Once a frightening prediction becomes a fact in our minds, a drastic response begins to look unavoidable.

Before deciding what the catastrophe requires, find out how much you really know.

The Sefer Chassidim adds something crucial. A person may think he is performing a mitzvah when the act is actually an aveirah. When there was nobody to consult, he may receive reward for his intention; it gives Lot's daughters as the example. But when someone has a person to ask and fails to ask, that failure is culpable.

They believed there was nobody left to ask. We generally do have people to ask.

We have rabbanim, experienced advisers, and, where appropriate, doctors and other professionals. Ask a real question. Not simply, "Help me carry out what I have already decided." Ask: **"Have I understood this correctly? Am I overlooking something? Is this really what I should do?"**

So urgency cannot justify an unacceptable act, and sincerity cannot make an assumption true. Perhaps, when the picture is unclear, the safest response is simply to step back. Stop trying. Stay out of it.

Later in the parsha, someone does step away. Let us look at what she does.

4. Hagar: Is Stepping Away the Answer?

Hagar and Yishmael have been sent away from Avraham's home. They wander in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva. The water in her container runs out. She places the boy beneath one of the bushes.

Then the Torah describes her next decision:

ותלך ותשב לה מנגד הרחק כמטחוי קשת

"She went and sat opposite him, at a distance of a bowshot."

Why does she move away? She tells us:

אל אראה במות הילד

"Let me not see the death of the child."

She is overwhelmed by grief. She cries. But she moves away. Rashi sharpens the point: as he draws closer to death, she moves farther away.

She cannot produce water. But her child is still alive. There is still someone to hold.

Then Hashem hears the boy. A malach calls to Hagar, tells her not to fear, and says:

קומי שאי את הנער והחזיקי את ירך בו כי לגוי גדול אשימנו

"Get up, lift the boy, and hold him firmly with your hand, for I will make him a great nation."

Notice what she is being asked to do. Get up. Go back to your child. Lift him. Hold him. She has received a promise and an instruction. **She has not yet seen where the water will come from.**

And what does she do?

The Torah does not say, "Hagar arose and lifted the boy." Instead, the next thing it records is that **Hashem opens her eyes, and she sees a well of water.** Only then does the Torah describe her action: she goes, fills the container, and gives her son a drink.

Why are we not told that she picked him up when instructed?

She was told to act before she could see the solution. The action the Torah records comes after the solution is in sight.

That is the failure we are suggesting in this sequence. The Torah does not explicitly say that she refused; this is our reading of the missing response. But the question is sharp: was she prepared to go back to her child before she could see how he would survive?

Hashem already saw a future for Yishmael. Hagar could not yet see it. She had nevertheless been told what to do: **Get up. Lift the child. Hold him.**

We recognize that temptation. "I cannot fix my child's situation." "I cannot take away my spouse's illness." So we withdraw. We stop calling. We stop trying, because we cannot see what our effort will accomplish.

But can you make the call? Accompany the person? Help with one practical need? You may not be able to resolve the situation. There may still be something you are responsible for doing.

Hagar's episode asks: **Am I waiting to see the solution before doing what I have already been called upon to do?**

Now we have a real difficulty. Lot shows us the danger of solving a crisis by sacrificing another obligation. His daughters show us the danger of acting as though we understand more than we do. Hagar shows us the danger of withdrawing because we cannot see a solution.

We cannot do just anything. We cannot assume we know everything. And we cannot simply stop doing anything.

So how should we respond?

Now we come to the Akeidah. Keep Hagar's unrecorded response in mind as we listen to what the Torah records about Avraham.

5. Avraham: Acting Before the Resolution

Hashem has promised Avraham:

כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע

"Through Yitzchak your descendants will be called."

Then comes the command to bring Yitzchak as an offering. Avraham cannot see how the command fits with the promise. But the Torah records:

וישכם אברהם בבקר

"Avraham rose early in the morning."

She was waiting to see the water. Avraham rose early in the morning.

He prepares for the journey. He takes Yitzchak and travels to the place Hashem has indicated. He continues fulfilling the command before he sees its resolution. We know there will be a ram. We know the malach will call. Avraham begins without our knowledge of the ending.

Avraham knows the command he has received, although he cannot understand how the future will unfold.

For us, the crucial question is how we establish our obligation. Avraham had a direct command. We must not mistake our own certainty for one. We have Torah, halachah, and people qualified to guide us.

Honesty remains an obligation when finances are uncertain. Patience remains an obligation when we are anxious. And when we do not know what our obligation requires, asking is itself part of our responsibility.

We can be uncertain about the outcome and still know the next right step.

During the pandemic, I saw four or five Toronto charedi schools continue operating. In the schools I knew, I knew of no children becoming ill. That experience left a strong impression on me: the determination that children's Torah learning must not become expendable.

How to sustain it required attention to circumstances and halachic guidance. But the question had to remain: **What can we do for these children now?** Uncertainty could not make their Torah lives cease to matter.

At the culmination of the Akeidah, the malach says:

כִּי עֵתָה יִדְעֵתִי כִּי יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֹתָהּ

"Now I know that you are one who fears God."

The Torah calls what has been revealed in Avraham **yiras Hashem**. His inability to explain the future does not displace the authority of Hashem's command.

Then the malach tells him not to harm Yitzchak, and he stops. He is not committed to carrying through his own plan. He remains responsive to Hashem's will throughout.

But there is something deeper here. What enabled Avraham to remain faithful when the command seemed to contradict the promise? What was happening in the relationship between Avraham and Hashem during those three days?

Let us look closely at the name Avraham gives that place, and at what Chazal tell us he said there.

6. He Sees - but Is Not Seen

After the Akeidah, Avraham names the place:

ה' יראה

Hashem yireh - "Hashem will see."

The Midrash describes Avraham addressing Hashem. His argument is this: You promised me, "Through Yitzchak your descendants will be called." Then You told me to bring that very son as an offering. I could have challenged the apparent contradiction. Instead:

כבשתי רחמי לעשות רצונך

"I restrained my compassion in order to do Your will."

He asks that when Yitzchak's descendants need mercy, Hashem remember the Akeidah and have compassion on them. The Pesikta sharpens Avraham's words:

ולא השבתי אותך אלא עשיתי עצמי כאלם וכחורש

"I did not answer You back; I made myself like one who is mute and deaf."

The Pesikta includes an even more startling expression:

אילו השבתי אותך לא היה לך מה להשיבני

"Had I answered You back, You would have had no reply for me."

How can Avraham speak that way? He is describing the contradiction as it stood before him during the test. He could not see how the command and the promise could both be fulfilled. The fact that we know the ending must not make us forget the darkness in which he had to choose. He restrained his challenge and fulfilled the command.[1]

Now comes the expression that makes the whole teaching clear. The Targum Yerushalmi renders Avraham's prayer:

את הוא ה' חמי ולא מתחמי

"You are Hashem, who sees but is not seen."

He sees us. We cannot always see Him. Hashem's presence may be concealed from our perception, while we remain fully before Him.

Rav Avraham Tzvi Kluger explains that this concealment belongs to the nisayon itself. When a person clearly experiences Hashem's presence, he can still have a difficult struggle. His desires may pull him one way and his obligations another. But he knows before Whom he stands. He feels the relationship that gives meaning to his effort.

There is a deeper difficulty. A person wants to do what is right, yet the circumstances seem to contradict what Hashem has promised. He tries to serve Hashem and feels no closeness. He cannot see how Hashem's will is being fulfilled through what is happening.

His struggle now includes the apparent absence of the One he is trying to serve.

During the Akeidah, Avraham could not see how the promise would be fulfilled. But Hashem had not ceased seeing Avraham.

The malach and the ram come at the end. The nisayon lies in the steps he took before they appeared.

The relationship remains real while the reassurance is hidden.

Sometimes a mitzvah leaves us feeling strengthened. Sometimes we do it and still feel empty. Serving Hashem without that reassurance is itself precious avodah.

Now we can look back at the earlier episodes. Hashem had not ceased to be involved in Lot's rescue, in the world beyond the daughters' cave, or in the boy's survival in the wilderness. Their own view was incomplete. Avraham remained faithful while his view, too, was incomplete.

These situations differ, but together they bring us to this lesson: **our inability to perceive Hashem's involvement does not cancel our responsibility to Him.**

7. When Tefillah Brings No Reassurance

What does **chami velo mischami - He sees, but is not seen** mean for someone sitting here this morning? Consider what happens when we daven.

A person davens about a serious problem. Sometimes the problem remains, but tefillah brings relief. He feels steadier. But sometimes he finishes davening and feels no different.

Now he has two burdens: the original trouble and disappointment that his tefillah brought no apparent comfort.

Tomorrow, will he return? Can he say: *"Ribbono shel Olam, I still do not understand. I am finding it difficult even to concentrate. But I still need You, and I am speaking to You again"*?

That return is meaningful avodah.

The teaching gives a very concrete example: someone has been awake all night and begins davening exhausted. Every word requires effort. Perhaps encouragement will come as he continues. Perhaps it will not. Continuing without that felt result is itself his work.

We read biographies of tzaddikim and see their clarity, their closeness to Hashem, their accomplishments. We can imagine their lives always felt that way. But the accounts may omit years of struggle and concealment.

Do not compare your hardest inward moments with a story that describes only someone else's revealed greatness.

"If I were a better Jew, this would feel easier." Who told you? The difficulty does not mean your avodah has been rejected. Remaining faithful through it may be the very avodah Hashem wants from you.

8. The Invitation That Money Could Not Settle

Years ago, Kivi Bernhard stood here at Westmount and told us his story. He is a South African-born businessman and professional speaker. His book, *Leopardology*, brought him invitations to address major corporate audiences.[5]

Then came an invitation through a speakers' bureau: a major Microsoft event. Bill Gates was expected to attend. For a professional speaker, this was an extraordinary engagement.

Kivi initially agreed. Then he checked the date.

Shabbos.

He called back. He could not do it.

But the event had been planned eighteen months in advance. The organizers had their schedule. They wanted their speaker. His refusal caused an uproar, and a senior executive intervened.

The offer increased. According to Kivi's recorded account, the executive offered a blank cheque: name the price, even a six- or seven-figure amount.[6]

Think about what that means. He was being asked to put a number on his refusal. Surely there was some amount that would settle it.

Kivi still said no.

At that moment, he did not know what would happen next. They could hire someone else. The invitation could disappear. He had no assurance that keeping Shabbos would leave his professional opportunity intact.

He refused anyway.

Only after the repeated refusals did the organizers do something remarkable. They changed the opening schedule. Kivi delivered his keynote on Sunday morning.[5]

Pause.

When Kivi told us the story here, he described subsequently speaking directly with Bill Gates. In the account I heard from him, Gates said:

"I wonder what it must be like having something that money can't buy."

Consider who was saying that. A man associated with extraordinary wealth was looking at a Jew and recognizing a possession that no cheque could purchase.

That possession was Shabbos.

But the most important moment in the story came before that conversation. Before the successful speech. Before anyone agreed to change the schedule.

It came when Kivi had to say no without knowing whether anything would replace the opportunity he was giving up.

He knew what Shabbos required. He did not know how Microsoft would respond. He made the decision with the first piece of knowledge, without possessing the second.

That is where this story meets our parsha.

9. Hashem Yireh

So what do we do when the future is unclear? We have followed the parsha from Lot's doorway to the cave, from the wilderness to Har HaMoriah. Each episode has sharpened the question.

Uncertainty cannot make an improper act permissible. It cannot turn a prediction into a fact. It cannot relieve us of every responsibility because we cannot solve the whole problem.

We must ask, we must clarify, and then we must act upon what Hashem requires.

The parsha begins with *Vayeira* - Hashem appearing to Avraham. At the Akeidah we learn what faithfulness requires when the way forward is concealed. And Avraham calls the place:

ה' יראה

"Hashem will see."

חמי ולא מתחמי

He sees, even when He is not seen.

I do not have to see how Hashem will resolve the situation before I take responsibility for what He asks of me.

May Hashem protect His people, guide those responsible for our future, and give us the wisdom to distinguish what we know from what we fear. May He help us serve Him with yirah and steadiness, and grant us the joy of seeing His goodness openly.

Source Notes - Not for Delivery

1. Verified Torah foundation. Rav Avraham Tzvi Kluger, *Ashichah Bechukecha*, Bereishis, Vayeira 5778, "Kirvah el nafshi," teaching headed "Yireh Asher Ye'amer," printed pp. 207-216 (the ten-page excerpt supplied by Rabbi Michalowicz; original export footers pp. 245-254). Printed p. 207 quotes Bereishis Rabbah 56:10 and Pesikta Rabbati 40. Printed p. 208 quotes Targum Yerushalmi, "at hu Hashem chami velo mischami," and explains it through the teaching of the Kozhitzer Maggid. The words mean "You are Hashem, who sees but is not seen"; they are not chai/mechayeh (living/giving life). Printed pp. 208-210 distinguish avodah in recognized closeness from nisayon in concealment; pp. 211-213 develop tefillah without felt results; pp. 214-215 warn about biographies obscuring the struggles of tzaddikim. The manuscript is an English adaptation, not a complete translation. The four-response scheme is the speaker's application, not Kluger's stated structure. The quoted Hebrew and its translation follow the supplied original pages.

Hagar. Bereishis 21:15-19; Rashi 21:16; Rav S. R. Hirsch 21:15-16. The contrast between the instruction to lift the boy and the absence of a recorded response before the well appears is Rabbi Michalowicz's homiletic reading of the sequence. The text does not explicitly state that Hagar refused; this is presented as an inference, not a commentator's explicit conclusion. Rabbeinu Bachya 21:18 places lifting the boy after he drinks.

Lot. Bereishis 19:6-11; Ramban 19:8. This follows Ramban's criticism of offering his daughters and his explanation that Lot thought the visitors were human. Sforno offers a different strategic reading.

2. Pandemic applications. UNICEF, *Education Disrupted*, September 15, 2021, documents losses of in-person learning and urges reopening. [UNICEF: Education Disrupted \(2021\)](#). The four pandemic responses are ethical illustrations, not a study assigning moral motives to groups. Rabbi Michalowicz's account of four or five Toronto schools is his personal testimony; the wording describes the absence of illness known to him, not an independently verified absence of all infections. No general claim of risk-free school opening or religiously guaranteed immunity is made.

Lot's daughters. Rashi, Bereishis 19:31; Abarbanel on 19:30-38, discussion beginning "Vaya'al Lot mi-Tzoar"; Horayos 10b. Abarbanel describes faulty judgment, acknowledges sincere purpose, and says they learned before the births that humanity had survived. The questions about Avraham surviving, waiting, and establishing the catastrophe's extent are the speaker's homiletic application. [Abarbanel, Bereishis 19](#)

Consultation. *Sefer Chassidim* 645. It credits the daughters' intention where nobody was available to consult. It does not accuse them of ignoring available guidance; criticism of failing to consult concerns someone who does have a person to ask. [Sefer Chassidim 645](#)

5. Kivi Bernhard: background and early account. Israel National News, "Watch: Speaker who got Bill Gates to honor Shabbat," May 26, 2016; COLlive, "Saying No to Microsoft," February 27, 2012, reporting Bernhard's own presentation at Chabad of Melbourne CBD. The early report describes an offer of almost double his fee and a meeting sponsored in part by Microsoft. [Israel National News: Kivi Bernhard \(2016\)](#) ; [COLlive: Saying No to Microsoft \(2012\)](#)

6. Kivi Bernhard: first-person retelling and Gates ending. Recorded interview with Yossi Farro, publicly posted with transcript. Bernhard describes a blank-cheque offer of six or seven figures and quotes the Gates response used in the manuscript. The published interview describes the executive relaying a conversation with Gates. Rabbi Michalowicz recalls Kivi telling the Westmount audience of speaking directly with Gates; the manuscript explicitly attributes that version to what he heard from Kivi, rather than claiming independent corroboration. Reports vary on

the offer and exact Gates wording; the manuscript uses the recorded first-person retelling for the fee and Rabbi Michalowicz's recollection for the direct Gates conversation and the wording he heard. Only the short Gates line, in the wording Rabbi Michalowicz supplied, is quoted directly; other exchanges are paraphrased. Rabbi Michalowicz supplies the fact that Bernhard told the story at Westmount. No event date or private thoughts have been invented; the direct Gates encounter follows the speaker's stated firsthand recollection of Kivi's presentation.

[Kivi Bernhard: recorded interview and transcript](#)

Seeing and yirah. Bereishis 18:1; 22:2-14. The four-response scheme and the connections among Vayeira, seeing, yiras Hashem, and Hashem yireh are the speaker's homiletic development, not an etymological explanation of the parsha's name.

Political opening. Prepared October 28, 2026. Toronto assessment is the speaker's judgment. Israeli coalition wording is conditional; update before delivery as needed. CIJA, "Municipal Elections Bring Renewed Responsibility to Keep Communities Safe," October 27, 2026: [CIJA: GTA Elections 2026](#)

Delivery note. Delivery version: approximately 3302 words. Allow about 25-28 minutes with Hebrew and pauses. For a strict 25-minute delivery, shorten the political opening and the school application; retain the narrative progression, the verified Midrash/Targum explanation, and the Kivi story.