

Vayera: I Have Known Him

Genesis 18:19

"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing... For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and household after him..."

In this section of the portion, God chooses to reveal to Abraham what He is doing--be it with Sodom and Gomorrah or other aspects of His will. God provides several reasons for choosing to share with Abraham, among them God says that He has *known* Abraham. This is no small statement from God. This word in Hebrew carries a deeper meaning than it does in English. We generally use this word in English when we speak about having information about someone or knowing them primarily on a superficial level. When I say that I know so-and-so, I am saying that I know who they are--what they like, where they live, what they do, and maybe some information about their personality or character. But in Hebrew, when the word *know* (*yada*) is used, it refers to more than just a general knowledge about someone or something. On one hand, it carries with it a physical intimacy, intended to be shared between a husband and wife. In other places, we find that is an understanding or a connection that is acquired or developed, not just by sharing general facts and details with another person, but through experiencing another person on various levels and in different circumstances--experiencing them physically, emotionally, spiritually, and even sexually.

One of the initial times we encounter this word is when it is used to describe the intimacy between Adam and Eve: *"Now Adam **knew** Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, 'I have acquired a man from the Lord'" (Genesis 4:1).* Here the word is used to describe a sexual intimacy between Adam and Eve. Adam knew his wife, and they experienced each other on a sexual level. This type of knowing was not an exchange of information, but a knowing through a physical and emotional connection. It was a type knowing that brought the couple together and made them one--in flesh and spirit. Later, we see this word used to convey other levels of knowledge and intimacy. The most profound use of this word, in my opinion, is when God uses it at the height of Abraham's trial with Isaac. After commanding Abraham to hold back the knife from Isaac, He says, *"Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for **now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (22:12).*** Did you catch that? God said, "Now I *know* that you fear God." Did God not "know" this about Abraham prior to this trial? Why make Abraham go through all of this in order to figure this out? The type of "knowing" we witness in this moment is one that comes through experiencing someone on the deepest level. Every aspect of Abraham is being put into the fire. He was being asked to offer up what he most prized. Through this trial God wanted--or perhaps needed--to experience Abraham in order to truly know the depths of His devotion, his thinking, his feelings, his fears, his doubts, the entirety of his heart, spirit, and mind. There is something about trials, about being in the fire, that reveals the depths of men and women. When Abraham carried out the command, God learned that Abraham feared Him; He experienced the depth of faith that Abraham possessed.

In Psalm 139, David says, *"O Lord, **You have searched me and know me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my***

lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it all together" (vs. 1-4). In this descriptive, intimate Psalm, we come to understand just how much God knows and continues to pursue an even deeper knowledge of us. From the womb He has known us because He formed us, and through the course of our lives He examines us. In our trials and in our triumphs, on the mountain and in the valley, God is there searching us, understanding our thoughts, becoming acquainted with ALL our ways. When a word leaves our mouths, He knows the weight and intention it carries. How awesome He is! He knows us because He fashioned us, but He also knows us because He continues to experience us. So when God says of Abraham, *"I have known him,"* this is what He means. Up to this point, He has been experiencing Abraham. He experienced Abraham when he said goodbye to his family and departed from Babylon; He experienced Abraham when he fled to Egypt with his wife; He experienced Abraham when Lot was taken captive and he gathered his servants and went forth, outnumbered, to deliver him. In all of these experiences, God was searching and becoming acquainted with Abraham. He didn't just "know" that Abraham had faith, but He was present through the development and forging of this faith. In all this, God was demonstrating, through Abraham, the relationship He intends to share with His creation, the intimacy He desires with His people.

Later, in the book of Exodus, we find God initiating this relationship when Israel cries out to Him from the throes of Egypt. After hearing them and delivering them from the oppression of Egypt, God leads His people straight into the wilderness. Why? With God nothing is by accident, and there is never an opportunity wasted. God spends every moment seeking to know His people, His creation, and there is not better place than the wilderness. It is here that God stretches us to examine and test the depth of our devotion and the strength of our trust. It isn't until later, in the book of Deuteronomy, that Moses shares God's intentions: *"And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not" (8:2).* God led His people into the wilderness, humbled them, tested them, and allowed them to thirst and hunger, so that He would *know* what was in their hearts. In other words, He led them through the same process as Abraham. Here again, we wonder: doesn't God already know what is in their hearts... in our hearts? Perhaps. Or, maybe He chooses to know by journeying through the wilderness with us. As he reflects back on Israel's time in the wilderness, Moses does not say that God watched them from on high as they struggled for forty years. No, he reminds them that their God *led* them through the wilderness these forty years to *KNOW* them. He sought to know what was in their hearts, and nothing reveals this more than thirst, hunger, exhaustion, doubt, uncertainty, and so forth.

With all of this in mind, it's important for us to also remember that He led them all these forty years for another reason: that they might also *KNOW* Him. Every step of the journey God was going before and behind them, feeding them physical and spiritual manna and quenching their thirst with physical and spiritual water. Their garments did not wear out, nor did their feet swell. God worked wonders, led them in battle, and put fear in their enemies. Even more, He commanded them to build a sanctuary so that He might dwell among them. All of this was a demonstration of His presence, His love, His devotion, and His passion for relationship. This is God's heart, to experience life alongside us, to know us and for us to know Him--the God of love, of mercy, of compassion, of long-suffering, of justice, and so forth. At the beginning of this

week's portion, this is where we find Abraham. He is being invited into the heart and mind of God, because God is giving Him deeper insight. When the angels set out for Sodom, it is in this moment that God says of Abraham, "*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him*" (**Genesis 18:17**). This is a key turning point in the life of Abraham, because God draws him closer to a deeper understanding, and again, it will come in the form of a test.

God informs Abraham of the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah, saying, "*Because the outcry of against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know*" (**18:20-21**). First off, it's worth noting that we see God use the word *know* (yada) here when referring to the events taking place Sodom and Gomorrah. In order to truly understand the depth of their sin and the seriousness of the situation, God tells Abraham that He is going to go down and see, so that way He can *know* for sure if the outcry is as serious as it appears. God is a God of justice, mercy, and righteousness. All of His judgements are right and are thoroughly sought out. He is engaged with His creation, seeking to know our hearts, whether they are humble and obedient or hardened and corrupt. Even in these terrible, heartbreaking situations, God is searching and examining. As we later learn in the book of Ezekiel, God visited and found that Sodom and Gomorrah "*had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me...*" (**Ezekiel 16:49:50**). As a result of their pride and haughtiness, the people become very corrupt, both violent and perverted, as we will soon see. Perhaps God already knew this; nevertheless, He goes to investigate in order to confirm the outcry against them.

In this opportune moment, perhaps sensing that the future will not be favorable for the two cities, Abraham approaches God to plead on their behalf: "*Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*" (**Genesis 18:23-25**). In an awesome display of courage, Abraham begins to plead, to question, and to wrestle with God on behalf of the corrupt cities. It's at this point, that I begin wonder: did God intentionally invite Abraham into this dilemma for this purpose? Did He let Abraham in on His plans with Sodom and Gomorrah in order to test him, to know what was in his heart? The more knowledge God unveils about Himself, the more He is moved to see what we will do and how we will respond when tested. God is not just interested that we know His heart, His mind, and His will, He wants to see if we will emulate them! God previously said that He has known Abraham, "*in order that He may command His children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice...*" (**18:19**). This was Abraham's test, to see how he would discern the scales of justice and how he would apply righteousness. God led Him in in order to test His resolve, to test his understanding of God's heart and will for humanity, the righteous and the wicked. Why? In order to become the nation he was destined to become and command his children and household to "keep the way of the Lord" and "to do righteousness and justice," God had to train him up in what this meant. God needed to show him.

The question is, then, how did Abraham do? This was the perfect opportunity for Abraham show that he *knew* God--His mind, His heart, and His will--and it was another opportunity for God to, once again, experience Abraham. Knowing the state of these two cities, it would have been easy for Abraham to quickly pull the lever of retribution and approve of their destruction. Abraham had to have known how corrupt and wicked the people were, based on the torment his nephew Lot had been experiencing. Despite all this, he refuses to hastily jump at the opportunity to swing the hammer of justice. Instead, Abraham defaults to mercy on behalf of the righteous... even if there were only a few. Abraham knows that God is THE God of justice, THE Judge of all the earth, so he pleads on behalf of the righteous, that God might spare the city for them. Abraham further reveals his heart by calling into question whether it is even right to destroy the righteous with the wicked. In his mind--which he voices--it is far from the character of God to do such a thing. Does God not already know and understand these things? What a fascinating display of courage and passion on the part of Abraham to stand boldly before King of Universe. With that, God agrees to not destroy the city on account of fifty righteous, but Abraham doesn't back down. He pleads with God, convincing Him to spare the cities for the sake of ten righteous. What is even more inspiring is to listen to Abraham's humility through the process. Abraham knows whom he stands before, and it is reflected in His language: "*Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes... Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak...*" (18:27, 30). He does not speak to God as though he knows better. He petitions God based on what he already understands about God's character. In all this, Abraham proves that he *knows* God.

Though the two cities were eventually destroyed, Abraham was afforded a glimpse into the mind of God and given a moment to see the world through His eyes. Abraham experienced the divine struggle between mercy and justice. He petitions God on behalf of the cities, and he does so knowing that he is speaking to the God who has "*no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live*" (33:11). Abraham possessed a deep understanding of God, which is why he knew what to say, how to respond, and how to approach God. This didn't mean it was easy though. A short time before all this, Abraham witnessed the hand of God when He delivered Lot and the king of Sodom. Yet, in this situation, Abraham witnessed the difficult reality of justice. Instead of deliverance, he saw destruction. Through the good and the bad, the triumphs and the tragedies, God opens the door to learning. At the same time, we can prove ourselves to God as he experiences us in these moments. We may not all be called to the same testing grounds as Abraham, but each day we are given small opportunities to experience God, to learn from Him and to know Him. He allows us to be where we are, even when it is difficult, so that we can grow in the grace and the knowledge of Him. Even more, God presents these opportunities so that He can also experience us--to know our thoughts, our feelings, our hearts, and so forth. This is our desire: to stand before the God of the universe and hear Him say, "I have known you."