Portion map Sodom reclaimed Tent & gate The women Hagar & Ishmael Sarah’s laughter The Akedah Questions Weekly workflow

Genesis 18:1–22:24 · Shabbat, October 31, 2026

The tent, the gate, the altar.

Vayera holds the Torah’s most weaponized story—Sodom—and the tradition’s most radical welcome, side by side. This guide follows the queer Jewish reclamation of the portion: hospitality against violence, the cast-out son heard in the wilderness, a laugh that would not stay hidden, and the knife that an angel stays.

וַיֵּרָ֥א אֵלָ֛יו יְהוָ֖ה בְּאֵלֹנֵ֣י מַמְרֵ֑א

“God appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.”

Genesis 18:1 · JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition, via Sefaria · Haftarah: II Kings 4:1–37

Text What Genesis and classical sources say.
Reclamation How queer Jews read and reuse the tradition.
Caution Where a creative reading goes beyond plain sense.
01 · MAP

Eight movements through the portion

A compact route through the narrative before the interpretive work begins.

18:1–15

The three visitors

God appears at Mamre. Abraham runs to greet three strangers and stages an extravagant meal. They promise Sarah a son within the year; Sarah, listening at the tent entrance, laughs —and denies it.

18:16–33

Abraham pleads for Sodom

God shares the plan to investigate Sodom’s outcry. Abraham bargains from fifty righteous down to ten: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (18:25)

Chapter 19

Sodom & Gomorrah

The city’s men besiege Lot’s house demanding the guests. The angels strike them blind; Lot flees; his wife looks back and becomes salt; fire falls. In a cave, his daughters conceive Moab and Ammon.

Chapter 20

Abimelech & Sarah

Abraham again calls Sarah his sister. Abimelech takes her; warned in a dream, he returns her with compensation—and Abraham prays for his household’s healing.

21:1–21

Isaac born; Hagar expelled

Isaac—“he laughs”—is born. At the weaning feast Sarah sees Ishmael playing and demands the expulsion of “this slave woman and her son.” In the wilderness, God hears the boy and opens Hagar’s eyes to a well.

21:22–34

The well at Beersheba

Abimelech makes a covenant with Abraham over a disputed well. Abraham plants a tamarisk and calls on God’s name—the portion’s one quiet treaty between former adversaries.

Chapter 22

The Akedah

“Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love.” Three days to Moriah; the binding; the angel’s double call stays the knife; a ram is offered instead. The blessing is renewed.

A reading posture

Two sons, both heard

The rabbis set Ishmael’s expulsion and Isaac’s binding side by side as the Rosh Hashanah readings. This guide keeps both sons—and the women the story spends—in the same frame.

02 · SODOM

Reclaiming the clobber story

Genesis 19 gave the world the word “sodomy” and centuries of condemnation. The queer Jewish reclamation does not dodge the chapter—it rereads what the sin actually was.

הִנֵּה־זֶה הָיָה עֲוֹן סְדֹם אֲחוֹתֵךְ גְּאוֹן שִׂבְעַת־לֶחֶם וְשַׁלְוַת הַשְׁקֵט הָיָה לָהּ וְלִבְנוֹתֶיהָ וְיַד־עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן לֹא הֶחֱזִיקָה
“Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy.”Ezekiel 16:49 · JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition, via Sefaria
The weaponized reading

What the clobber text claims

The mob surrounds Lot’s house: “Where are the ones who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them” (19:5). Read as homosexual desire, the verse made the city’s destruction a divine verdict on same-sex relations—and “sodomy” a legal and theological term of abuse.

Genesis 19:5, via Sefaria. The JPS note on the verse glosses “know them” as “in order to humiliate them”—the humiliation is in the translation itself.

Queer reclamation · Keshet

It is about rape, not sex

Amy Soule’s Torah Queery pairs Genesis 19 with Judges 19, its “alternative haftarah”: a nearly identical mob demands a male guest, is offered women instead, and gang-rapes the concubine to death. Why is one story used to condemn gay sex while the other—with an opposite-sex victim—is never used to condemn heterosexual sex? “No matter the sex of the people involved, rape is rape.” The through-line is sexual violence and the broken guest-code, not orientation.

Amy Soule, “Sin of Sodom” (Keshet, 2010) · Keshet Torah Queeries archive

Prophetic & rabbinic

The prophet names the real sin

Ezekiel 16:49–50 defines Sodom’s sin as arrogance, fullness, and abandoning the poor; Genesis 18:20 names the city’s “outcry” without specifying it, and the prophet fills in the content. Midrash elaborates a city where compassion itself was criminalized—where a maiden who shared food was executed for it.

My Jewish Learning, “The Real Sin of Sodom” · Reform Judaism, “Judge a Society by Its Hospitality”

From inside Orthodoxy

Greenberg: domination, not love

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, argues in Wrestling with God and Men (2004) that the tradition’s concern in Sodom and Leviticus alike is sex as humiliation and domination—“power, humiliation, and social order rather than consensual,

loving relationships.” An argument made from within Orthodoxy, useful for groups bridging traditional and queer.

Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with God and Men (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). Summarized from published reviews; Publishers Weekly notes Greenberg “admits that he is ‘not a disinterested party.’”

The philology, honestly: “that we may know them” (19:5) and “my daughters who have not known a man” (19:8) use the same verb, yada—the sexual sense is linguistically sound in both verses (Alter, Sarna). The queer argument does not dispute the meaning; it disputes the moral. What is condemned is non-consensual, violent seizure—and Lot’s own offer of his daughters is the text’s internal indictment of the whole economy.

Present both: the hospitality-and-violence reading has deep classical roots and is the affirming standard. Conservative readers still cite the mob’s demand for men as the city’s signature corruption. One scholar’s extension—the Brill article “Sarah’s Laugh, Sodom’s Sin, Hagar’s Kin”—re-reads Sodom’s “violent grasp for control” as a response to “queer futures arriving as wandering divine visitors”; it is academic queer theology, known from its abstract only. IxTheo record

03 · TENT & GATE

Hospitality against the siege

The portion opens with the Torah’s great hospitality scene, then shows its inversion in the same family, one chapter later.

Genesis 18 · the tent

Open on all four sides

Tradition pictures Abraham’s tent open on every side so no traveler could miss the welcome. Still recovering from circumcision, he runs to strangers in the heat of the day and serves a feast. Rashi notes that Ishmael helped prepare the meal—the “other” son included in the mitzvah of hakhnasat orchim, welcoming guests.

Reform Judaism, “Vayeira for Tweens: And God Appeared”

Genesis 19 · the gate

The city answers with a siege

Lot sits in Sodom’s gate and offers the same hospitality—and the city besieges his house for it. Lot is himself a foreigner there; the mob’s retort gives the game away: “This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge!” (19:9). Welcoming the outsider is the real taboo.

Genesis 19:9. Before the siege, Abraham's plea (18:16–33) models the other posture: the insider who argues with God on behalf of the condemned city—"Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (18:25, via Sefaria).

The queer deployment: welcoming the stranger becomes the parashah's positive command—the community that makes room for the unexpected guest set against the community that polices its boundaries with violence. For LGBTQ Jews the question lands personally: which kind of space are our institutions—a tent, or a gate?

04 · WOMEN

The women offered up

In both Genesis 19 and its twin, Judges 19, men protect male guests by offering women. Feminist and trauma-informed readers insist the cost be counted.

The offer (19:8)

Lot offers his virgin daughters to the mob; the crowd refuses and turns on Lot himself (19:9). Even a conservative commentator like Hamilton calls these "incredible words" from Lot's mouth—part of the story's indictment of Lot's character, not an endorsement of it.

The daughters, twice victimized

A 2020 Open Theology reading follows the daughters through cumulative trauma: offered to the mob by their father, witnesses to their city's annihilation, then—in the cave (19:30–38)—a traumatic re-enactment that secures the patriarchal line. They live with "no rights, no voice, no self-determination."

Lot's wife (19:26)

One line, one backward glance, a pillar of salt. Feminist midrash often reads her not as disobedient but as grieving—the only figure in the story who mourns the destroyed city. Who gets to grieve what the tradition calls righteous destruction?

Soule's structural point
In Genesis 19 and Judges 19 alike, hosts "feel they have to offer vulnerable women as an alternative" to protect male guests—and it destroys the women in both cases: Lot's daughters are left violated in all but act; the concubine of Gibeah is raped to death and dismembered. The pattern, not any single verse, is the indictment. Keshet: "Sin of Sodom"
Moab, Ammon—and Ruth
The daughters' sons become the ancestors of Moab and Ammon, peoples Torah itself treats with suspicion ("a Moabite shall not enter the assembly," Deut 23:4). Yet Ruth the Moabite enters Israel's own royal line. A queer midrashic opening: the "illegitimate" origin is woven into the covenant story, and the boundary of who belongs keeps getting redrawn.
Responsible framing: the trauma readings are modern creative applications on what the plain text presents as an etiological legend about Moab and Ammon's origins. The 2020

article is scholarly but not specifically Jewish; use it as a feminist lens, labeled as such.
“Look at What They’ve Turned Us Into,” Open Theology (2020)
05 · HAGAR

The other family, heard in the wilderness

The portion’s second expulsion: Sarah demands it, Abraham grieves it, and God refuses to abandon the cast-out.

> “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.”

Genesis 21:17 · JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition, via Sefaria

The wilderness is where God shows up

Sarah sees Ishmael “playing” (metzachek) and demands: “Cast out this slave woman and her son” (21:10). God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah—and promises Ishmael nationhood too (21:13, 18). When the water runs out, Hagar sets the boy down and weeps; God hears, and opens her eyes to a well. Ishmael grows up in the wilderness of Paran.

Hagar is also the only human in Tanakh to name God—El Ro’i, “God who sees me” (16:13), from last week’s portion and this one’s backstory.

Queer & trans resonance

Cast off, yet accompanied

The Binary-Breaking Worship reflection reads Hagar—enslaved, then cast off by God’s own chosen people, yet met by God’s solidarity in the wilderness—as a text for “queer & trans people of faith” who remain in, or leave, wounding communities. It also names Sarah’s gaze: she reads something sinister into Ishmael’s play, “not unlike how some people today read sinister things into queer play, into drag queens and gender expansive youth.” The scarcity myth—only one son can inherit—makes the other’s existence itself the threat.

Binary-Breaking Worship on Genesis 21 · modern pastoral reading, flagged as creative application

Traditional counterpoint

Blessing is not zero-sum

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s “counternarrative” notes that the text insists four times that Ishmael will be blessed (17:20; 21:13, 18): chosenness through Isaac was never a rejection of Ishmael. And the rabbis built the point into the liturgy—Ishmael’s expulsion is the Rosh Hashanah Day 1 reading, the Akedah Day 2, the two nearly-lost sons deliberately juxtaposed.

Via the research report’s summary of Sacks’s counternarrative reading and the Jewish Review of Books essay in §07.

06 · LAUGHTER

“You did laugh”

Sarah laughs at the promise, denies it, and is answered with the plain truth. Isaac—“he laughs”—carries the moment in his name forever.

וַתִּ צְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרֵי בְלֹתִי הָיְתָה־לִּ י עֶדְנָה וַאדֹנִי זָקֵן
“And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘Now that I’ve lost the ability, am I to have enjoyment —with my husband so old?’”Genesis 18:12 · JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition, via Sefaria
Traditional puzzle

Why is Sarah rebuked?

Abraham laughed at the same news (17:17) without rebuke; Sarah is challenged. One classical resolution turns on shalom bayit: God edits Sarah’s words when reporting them—her “with my husband so old” becomes her own age—to keep peace in the household, the sages’ source for permitting a white lie for family harmony. Rabbi Elazar Muskin, following Hannah Levine and the haftarah’s Shunammite woman, adds that Sarah’s denial came from fear, and God’s correction is gentle.

Rabbi Elazar Muskin, “Silence Is Golden,” Jewish Journal (2003) · Reform Judaism, “Vayeira for Tweens”

Feminist reading

The laugh of a woman handed over

Temple Beth Ami’s Rabbi Pokras hears the laugh of a woman twice handed to foreign kings by her husband, silenced through both episodes, now told the impossible at ninety. The miracle, the d’var suggests, is not only the pregnancy but that two people “old and set in their ways” found their way back to each other.

Rabbi Pokras, “VaYeira 5780,” Temple Beth Ami

A queer opening—offered as one: no established queer-Jewish commentary on Sarah’s laughter surfaced in this research. What the group can build: non-normative conception as a text for LGBTQ family-building, and the denied laugh—“I did not laugh” / “You did”—as a moment of being truly seen despite concealment. Label it in the room as the group’s own midrash, not a found source.

07 · AKEDAH

The hardest text in the portion

The binding of Isaac has centuries of commentary—and, honestly, almost no queer commentary yet. That absence is part of the study.

קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּנְךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֵךְ־לְךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה
“Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering…”Genesis 22:2 · JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition, via Sefaria

Obedience

Soloveitchik’s homo religiosus models absolute obedience as the religious ideal; Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith” makes Abraham’s silence the paradox of faith itself. The traditional pole: the test is passed precisely because Abraham does not argue.

Conscience

Rabbi Harold Schulweis sets the counter-voice: conscience against obedience. And the midrash itself stages Abraham’s resistance—at “your son,” he answers “I have two sons”; at “the one you love,” “I love both of them” (Genesis Rabbah 55:7; b. Sanhedrin 89b, via Rashi on 22:2).

Hineni

A 2026 Rosh Hashanah sermon counts three “here I am”s: to God (22:1), to the angel (22:11), and between them, to Isaac—“Hineni b’ni,” here I am, my son (22:7). The father who would not plead for his son still answers him.

The child nearly sacrificed to an ideology
Some LGBTQ readers hear the Akedah through family rejection and so-called “conversion” efforts: a parent prepared to give up the child in front of them for the belief system above them. The angel’s words become the tradition’s own correction—“Do not raise your hand against the boy” (22:12, via Sefaria). Creative application; the group does this midrash itself.
The ram, and what substitutes
A ram caught in the thicket dies in Isaac’s place. What substitutes does a tradition offer when it will not sacrifice its children—what stands between the knife and the kid, and who provides it?
Isaac the survivor; the paired rescues
After chapter 22, Isaac effectively vanishes from his father’s story; midrashic traditions carry his trauma in his blindness and in the “ashes of the Akedah.” Set beside chapter 21: an angel stays Abraham’s knife; an angel opens Hagar’s eyes to the well. Both sons live.
Honest flag: unlike Sodom, the Akedah has no deep queer-commentary bench yet—no established queer-Jewish reading surfaced in this research. The openings above are creative applications for the group to test, not sources to cite. Schulweis, “Obedience and Conscience” · “‘The One You Love’? A Case of Divine Disappointment,” Jewish Review of Books · “Hineni,” Torah MiHamayim (2026)

Questions that keep the text open

Eight prompts for paired study, full-group conversation, or personal reflection.

The famous story and the forgotten one

Soule pairs Genesis 19 with Judges 19 and asks why only one story is famous. What work does the selective memory do—and where do we see the same selectivity in how communities remember their own histories?

Reclaiming a text used against you

Ezekiel says Sodom's sin was arrogance and abandoning the poor—not sexuality. When has a text you love been used against you, and what did it take to reclaim it?

Tent or gate?

Abraham's tent is open on four sides; Sodom's gate is a siege. What makes a Jewish space a tent rather than a gate? When have you experienced each?

Who gets offered up?

In both Genesis 19 and Judges 19, men offer women to protect male honor. Who gets offered up in our communities' conflicts today, and who decides?

Two ways of seeing

Lot's wife looks back and is frozen; Hagar is told to lift up her eyes and sees a well. Two ways of seeing the place of destruction—which one do you need right now?

Being seen through concealment

Sarah laughs and denies it; God says, "You did laugh." Where in your life has being truly seen felt like rebuke, and where has it felt like grace?

Refusing to choose a son

The rabbis read Ishmael's expulsion and Isaac's binding on the two days of Rosh Hashanah, side by side. What changes when we refuse to choose which son matters?

Write the first queer midrash

The Akedah has almost no queer commentary yet. If you were writing it, where would you begin—with Abraham, with Isaac, with the ram, or with the angel who says "do not raise your hand"?

A 75-minute study path

10 min Read Genesis 18:1–15 aloud; name a welcome you have never forgotten.
20 min Sodom in paired lenses: 19:5 beside Ezekiel 16:49 and Soule's Judges 19 pairing.
15 min Choose a text study: the women of ch. 19, or Hagar and the well (ch. 21).
15 min The Akedah: obedience, conscience, and the group's own first queer midrash.
15 min Discussion questions, one closing word, and the blessing both sons receive.
09 · REUSE

The weekly research route

Five recurring stops, each with a distinct role. The goal is not forced agreement but an honest, sourced conversation among them.

Hebcal

Confirm portion, verses, reading date, and haftarah.

Portion calendar

Sefaria

Read the bilingual text, classical commentaries, and community source sheets.

Open Sefaria

Chabad.org

Establish the traditional commentary baseline: text, Rashi, and Chassidic readings.

Weekly Torah

Reform Judaism

Gather contemporary Reform commentary and its ethical framing.

Vayeira text page

Keshet

Search queer Jewish commentary, Torah Queeries, and teaching resources.

Torah Queeries archive

Open questions from this research

- The Vayera chapter of Torah Queeries (NYU Press, 2009) exists, but its full text was not read in this research pass; one reader describes it as abstract and queer-theoretical. If

the group owns the book, assign the chapter directly—the Keshet essays are the verified core here.
- No specifically queer-Jewish commentary on the Akedah or on Sarah's laughter surfaced; this guide develops creative applications for both and flags them as such.
- The Brill article "Sarah's Laugh, Sodom's Sin, Hagar's Kin" was available as an abstract only; its full argument is worth tracking down for a group that wants the scholarly edge.
- Several commentary pages (My Jewish Learning, Reform Judaism, Temple Israel Duluth) were verified via detailed search-index snippets rather than full live reads; quoted phrases from them are kept brief.

Selected source shelf

1. Amy Soule, "Sin of Sodom: Looking at a similar story in Judges 19" (Keshet Torah Queeries, 2010)
2. Keshet, Torah Queeries archive
3. Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible (NYU Press, 2009)
4. Steven Greenberg, Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004)
5. My Jewish Learning, "The Real Sin of Sodom"
6. Reform Judaism, "Judge a Society by Its Hospitality"
7. "Fire and Brimstone," Temple Israel Duluth (2010)
8. Rabbi Pokras, "VaYeira 5780," Temple Beth Ami
9. Reform Judaism, "Vayeira for Tweens: And God Appeared"
10. Reform Judaism, "A Test of Fear, a Quest for Love"
11. Rabbi Elazar Muskin, "Silence Is Golden," Jewish Journal (2003)
12. Rabbi Harold Schulweis, "Obedience and Conscience," Valley Beth Shalom
13. "'The One You Love'? A Case of Divine Disappointment," Jewish Review of Books
14. "Rosh Hashanah Day 2, Hineni," Torah MiHamayim (2026)
15. Binary-Breaking Worship on Genesis 21
16. "Look at What They've Turned Us Into," Open Theology (2020)
17. "Sarah's Laugh, Sodom's Sin, Hagar's Kin," Biblical Interpretation (Brill; abstract)
18. Reform Judaism, Vayeira text page

Prepared from web research completed in October 2026. Interpretive claims are labeled as traditional, modern queer reclamation, or study-leader extension.

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