

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT VAYERA

Rashbam's Interpretation of the Story of

Avraham and the Angels

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A. ANGELS DISGUISED AS HUMANS

"(18:1)And God appeared to him in Elonei Mamrei, while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.

(18:2)And he lifted his eyes and saw, behold, three men were standing before him. And he saw, and he ran towards them from the entrance to the tent, and he bowed down to the ground".

What is the content of this revelation of God to Avraham? Verse 2 seems to move on directly to a new subject: "And he lifted his eyes and saw, behold, three men..." From this moment onwards, Avraham is energetically involved in welcoming his guests. What, then, is the purpose of God's revelation to him in verse 1?

The Rashbam sees verse 1 as a general description, whose details are to follow – starting with verse 2. The content of God's revelation to Avraham, then, is the appearance of the three angels, and what they say to him. The Rashbam comments:

"'And God appeared to him' – how? In that three men came to him, who were really angels. For there are many instances where, if an angel appears, he is called by the name of the Shekhina, as it is written (Shemot 23:21), 'For My Name is within him' – the emissary is considered like the one who sent him. Likewise, (Shemot 3:2), 'And an ANGEL OF GOD appeared to him in a plume of fire from within the shrub,' and there we find (verse 4), 'And GOD saw that he had turned aside to look,' [i.e. the angel is later called God".]

Although at the beginning of chapter 19, and again later on (verse 15), they are called "angels," they are not explicitly called "angels of God," and for this reason one could still argue that the Torah is perhaps referring to mortal emissaries, who are also called "malakhim" in the Torah.

The perception of these three men as angels of God creates a most serious difficulty, formulated by Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor in his commentary on verse 2:

"And he saw, behold, three men' – according to the literal text they were three ordinary men, FOR WE HAVE NO PRECEDENT FOR ANGELS EATING AND DRINKING and staying over in a person's house, as they did in the house of Lot, but [rather] as the angel said to Manoach (Shoftim 13:17), 'If you detain me, I shall not eat of your bread,' etc. But we cannot argue with the words of the Sages [who conclude that they were really angels], who themselves were like angels".

But it is not only because of "the words of the Sages, who themselves are like angels" that we should agree with the view that the three men were angels. This is, in fact, what becomes apparent from what we are told concerning them in several places – descriptions that would not apply to human agents. The following are two examples:

" (19:13)For we shall destroy this place... and God has sent us to destroy it".

A human agent (i.e., prophet) does not have the power to destroy a city, and therefore would not say such a thing. He would only warn that such an event was going to happen, as did Yona (3:4): "In another forty days, Ninveh will be overturned".

" (19:21)And he said to him: I have accepted your appeal concerning this thing too, and I shall not overturn the city of which you have spoken".

A human agent would not have the authority to accept Lot's request not to overthrow one of the cities that had already been decreed for destruction.

But if our three men are angels of God, how are we to answer R. Bekhor Shor's question concerning their eating? Rashi offers an explanation in his commentary on 18:9 (following the lead of Bava Metzi'a 86b:(

"And they ate' – it appeared that they were eating. From here we learn that a person should not stray from the prevailing custom".

This answer satisfies us only partially, since R. Bekhor Shor's question is posed against the backdrop of appearances by angels of God in two other places in the Torah, in which the angels emphasize their identity as such specifically within the context of avoiding eating. Why, then, do our angels here depart from the custom of other angels described in the Torah, and pretend to be eating? By doing this they are blurring their identity and deceiving people to think that they are in fact human.

The answer to this question would seem to be related to the function of hospitality in the story, as described in chapter 18 with regard to Avraham, and in chapter 19 with regard to Lot. The angels in our story have no wish to identify themselves immediately as messengers of God. On the contrary: they specifically want to appear at first as people, since their appearance itself is meant to test both Avraham and Lot with regard to their hospitality. If they would act immediately like angels, then there would be no real significance to the respective hosts' preparation of the meals; even if they openly avoided eating – like the angels who revealed themselves to Gidon and to Manoach – they would damage the display of hospitality on the part of their hosts.

Some support for the view of the Rashbam, who perceives verse 1 – "and God appeared to him" – as the general heading with details following in verse 2 onwards, is to be found in the

second half of verse 1: "while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day." This sentence describes the time and place in which Avraham was situated at the time of the revelation. If verse 1 were describing a "regular" prophetic revelation by God to Avraham, then what would be the point of noting Avraham's situation at the time? Ramban senses this difficulty and attempts to resolve it by proposing that because of Avraham's weakness, having just circumcised himself, he "was sitting and cooling himself at the entrance to his tent because of the heat of the day, which was weakening him." But other commentators have countered that neither this verse, nor anything else in the continuation of the story, contains any hint of the act of circumcision.

However, if the words "And God appeared to him" really mean that three angels revealed themselves to Avraham in the form of men, then the description of the time and place where Avraham was situated at the time of the revelation would hint at the conditions in which he received the angels. "At the entrance to the tent" and "in the heat of the day" appear again in the description that follows, in verse 2: "And he saw, and he ran towards them FROM THE ENTRANCE TO THE TENT," and again in verse 4: "... And rest UNDER THE TREE" (i.e., in the shade, rather than inside the hot tent.)

There is great significance to the mention of the time and place of God's revelation to Avraham in the form of these three men, for it is the time and place that determine the nature of his hospitality. The fact that he was sitting at the entrance to his tent made it possible for him to see these people; his running towards them "in the heat of the day" and his energetic activity thereafter are a shining example of hospitality, since the midday hours make running and physical exertion especially difficult.

The nature of Avraham's proposal to these wayfarers is also appropriate to the time of day, just as Lot's proposal to the wayfarers who arrived in Sodom was appropriate for people who had come to a strange city at evening time. The Rashbam notes this aspect of the importance of the time of revelation:

"What need is there for the Torah to say, 'in the heat of the day'? It is to show us that concerning Lot it says (19:1), 'And the two angels came to Sodom AT EVENING TIME,' and therefore Lot says to them, 'Please turn aside to the house of your servant, and STAY OVER.' But in the case of Avraham, they came to him in the heat of the day, when it is not customary for guests to stay over, but rather just to eat and to move on – therefore Avraham did not suggest to them to stay, but rather, 'Eat and soothe your hearts,' and 'then you shall pass on'".

B. AN ANGEL CALLED BY GOD'S NAME

Does the exchange of terms noted by the Rashbam – "When an angel appears, he is called in the name of the Shekhina" – occur elsewhere in the story? Such an exchange does indeed occur in a few other places, and the Rashbam notes this on some occasions:

"(18:9)AND THEY SAID to him, Where is Sarai, your wife...

(10)AND HE (Radak: the senior one among them) SAID, I SHALL SURELY RETURN TO YOU AT THIS SEASON, AND BEHOLD, SARAH YOUR WIFE WILL HAVE A SON...

(12)And Sarah laughed in her heart...

(13)AND GOD SAID to Avraham: Why did Sarah now laugh...

(14)Is anything too wondrous for God? At the appointed time I SHALL RETURN TO YOU AT THIS SEASON, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON.

(15)And Sarah denied it, saying: I did not laugh...

And he said: No, for you laughed".

Rashbam comments on verse 13, "And God said," with the words, "The angel – the most senior among them" – and this interpretation seems correct for several reasons.

Firstly, God's words in verse 14 are an almost verbatim repetition of what the angel said in verse 10, and are meant to confirm its fulfillment, like a person who repeats a point that he has said in order to emphasize and confirm it.

Secondly, if we claim that God suddenly appeared to Avraham and asked him in a prophecy, "Why did Sarah now laugh?," then how could Sarah have heard this question and responded to it – "I did not laugh"? We are not told that God spoke to her, too, nor that Avraham conveyed to her what God had said. But if it was the angel who said this to Avraham, then we have no problem, for already in verse 10 we read that "Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent"....

Why, then, is the angel referred to in verse 13 by the name of the One who sent him – "And God said..."? It would seem that this exchange is meant to signify the change that took place in Avraham's consciousness: from this utterance of the angel onwards, Avraham knows with certainty that the "person" speaking to him is an angel of God, for his words (both in his previous speech in verse 10 and in the present) prove that he is such. (Below we shall propose a different answer to the question).

C. IS THE SECOND HALF OF CHAPTER 18 (17-33) A NEW STORY?

The order of events in the text forces us to think that God's speech to Avraham regarding Sedom in verses 20-21 (and also God's deliberation "out loud" in verses 17-19) came at the time when Avraham was busy with the angels. If this is the case, then there is no distinction between the scene of "Avraham and the angels" (re Sedom) and the scene of "God's revelation to Avraham" (re his son) as we had thought. Rather, they are interwoven, just as in verses 1-2 ("And GOD appeared to him... and he saw, behold, three MEN") and in verses 9-14 ("AND THEY SAID to him... and GOD said to him("...

In other words, we have come back to the Rashbam's conclusion that when God speaks to Avraham in the second half of the chapter, it is simply one of the angels, who is called after the One who sent him. Indeed, Rashbam maintains this claim with impressive consistency not only with regard to God's speech prior to verse 22, i.e., so long as the angels are in the company of Avraham, who is walking with them as they depart, but even thereafter, where we are told, "And the men turned from there and went to Sedom." How can this be?

The answer is provided by the Rashbam in his explanation that appears to be attached to verse 16, on the words "And the men got up from there..." but which turns out to belong in

actual fact to verse 22, "And the men turned from there and went to Sedom." This is the verse that raises a question concerning its position. The Rashbam comments:

"Two of them went to Sedom, as it is written (19:1), 'And the TWO angels came to Sedom,' and the most senior among them spoke to Avraham. This is as it is written of him (18:17), 'And God said, Shall I conceal...', and also (22), 'And Avraham was still standing before God.' Both of these verses refer to the third angel".

D. SECOND HALF OF CHAPTER 18 ACCORDING TO THE RASHBAM

Let us now focus on the transition from the first half of chapter 18 to the second half, and on the second half itself according to the Rashbam.

The five instances where the angels ("men") are named after the One who sent them (God) are now joined by an additional three:

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"(16)And THE MEN got up from there and looked towards Sedom, and Avraham walked with them to take leave of them.

(17)AND GOD SAID: Shall I conceal from Avraham that which I shall do...

(20)And GOD said: The cry of Sedom and Amora"...

By looking out at Sedom before setting off on their way, the angels express their intention concerning their next mission, in Sedom. But this hint is not initially clear to the reader – nor to Avraham, who is accompanying them as they depart.

Now we find God's deliberation: "And God said: Shall I conceal from Avraham that which I shall do, while Avraham shall surely be a great nation...." Rashbam, in his explanation quoted above, maintains that this deliberation goes on in the mind of the most senior among the three angels, and he explains its outcome in verse 20 in the same light; "'And God said' – the angel said, to Avraham." This explanation seems logical. Firstly, if God wished to notify Avraham of what He was about to do to Sedom, then there would be no need for the prior deliberation in verses 17-19. God would reveal Himself directly to Avraham and say whatever He wished to say, in which case the verse would read something like this: "And God appeared to Avraham and said to him: The cry of Sedom and Amora"....

The prior deliberation is characteristic of the almost-human atmosphere that prevails in the story of Avraham and the angels: while Avraham accompanies them as they set off, without knowing where they are headed, the senior angel among them feels some discomfort at his concealing from Avraham, his host, the purpose of their present journey. He says to himself, "Shall I conceal from Avraham that which I shall do?" – is this proper? After all, Avraham is not just a regular person, but rather the covenantal partner of God, Who sent me. How, then, can I conceal my plans from him? The tone is one of friendship, appropriate to the relations between Avraham and the angels as described thus far.

Secondly, just as the deliberations in verses 17-19 are internal, the statement in verses 20-21 is likewise not actually conveyed to Avraham. We are not told, in verse 20, that "God said

TO AVRAHAM: The cry of Sedom...." The senior angel, who is called after the One who sent him, says this to himself, as it were, or to his two companions, but with a clear intention that Avraham should hear it. Indeed, Avraham does hear, and responds.

But if we claim that God revealed Himself to Avraham in a prophecy and informed him of what was about to occur, then it is difficult to understand why the verse doesn't say, "And God said TO AVRAHAM...." (It is also difficult to understand why there is no prior mention of the revelation itself, with an expression like, "And God appeared to Avraham("....

Thirdly, in God's speech in verses 17-19 there is a transition from speech in the first person – "Shall I conceal from Avraham that which I shall do... for I know..." to speech about God in the third person: "And they shall keep they way of GOD... in order that GOD may bring... that which HE has spoken of him." If it is God Himself, and not His angel, who is speaking in these verses, then why do we find this change of voice? If it is the angel speaking, the exchange is easier to understand.

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" (20)And GOD said: The cry of Sedom and Amora, for it is great...

(21)LET ME GO DOWN and LET ME SEE if they have indeed done as the cry that has come to ME, and if not, I SHALL know it.

(22)And THE MEN turned from there AND WENT to Sedom".

We quoted the beginning of Rashbam's explanation of verse 20 above; let us now complete it:

"'And God said' – the angel said, to Avraham: 'These are emissaries that I am sending because of the cry of Sedom,' as it is written (13:13), 'And the men of Sedom were evil and sinners'".

By the expression, "These are emissaries," the Rashbam refers, obviously, to the angels who will be going to Sedom. But where in the angel's words in verses 20-21 is there any notice of emissaries being sent to Sedom? The Rashbam finds this in the words, "Let Me go down and let Me see." How shall God descend and see? Verse 21 answers this: "And the men turned from there and went to Sedom".

This "descent" to Sedom, then, is not the descent of the Supreme Judge from heaven down to earth, as in the descent described in the parasha of the Tower of Babel (11:5), "And God descended to see the city and the tower...", but rather a descent from the higher Hebron to the lower Sedom, which is situated at its feet. Likewise, the seeing whether the situation is "like the cry" does not refer to the seeing and knowing of the Hidden One Who dwells in the heaven, but rather the almost-human experience of these angels who are so similar to men, and who find themselves under attack by the throngs of Sedom, demanding that Lot hand them over in order that they may be subjected to sexual abuse. Thus the angels "saw" that indeed, the deeds of Sedom were "like its cry," and their fate was sealed.

Thus we conclude that the location of verse 22 ("And the men turned from there and went to Sedom") after the words of the "senior angel" ("Let me go down and see") is necessary, and serves as a powerful proof for the Rashbam's line of interpretation, as he says in verse 22: "I cannot do anything until you arrive there".

"(22)And THE MEN turned from there and went to Sedom, and Avraham was still standing before GOD".

The first half of verse 22 serves to "disperse" the various characters, but it is a unilateral and partial dispersion only: unilateral, because the men leave Avraham for Sedom, but Avraham does not return to his initial place, and partial, because one of the angels (the "senior one") remains behind to hear Avraham's claims and to answer them. Thus, Avraham has yet to part from the last of the angels. This is the significance of the word "still" in the second half of verse 22: Avraham is still standing before this angel and does not take his leave of him, for he has something that he wishes to say to him.

Now Avraham launches into his debate with the remaining angel concerning the fate of Sedom. This angel is called God in the text - "for My name is within him" – and the Rashbam notes this in his commentary to verse 26, the only verse in which Avraham's partner in debate is called "God:"

"And God said [If I find fifty righteous men in Sedom...]' – i.e., the angel. Likewise, 'standing before God' [verse 22] means that he stood before the angel, to present his case".

Rashbam brings verse 22 – "And Avraham was still standing before God" – as proof that God, as mentioned in verse 26 (and referred to until the end of the chapter) refers in fact to the same angel before whom Avraham remains standing. For what is the purpose of his continued standing in front of the angel, as mentioned in verse 22? "To present his claim" – to plead the case of Sedom. This being the case, we must conclude that this plea was indeed presented to the angel.

Here we must comment that this angel is referred to in several places in the text as "God," but Avraham addresses him four times in the course of the debate as "master" (which is not a normal form of address to God) and uses no other name. This fact, too, serves to strengthen the interpretation of the Rashbam, namely, that the dialogue was being conducted with the angel and not with God Himself.

At the conclusion of the debate between Avraham and the angel, the "dispersion of characters" that began in verse 16 – "And Avraham went with them to see them off" – and continued with the departure of the two angels for Sedom, also concludes:

"(33)And God went, when He had finished speaking to Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place".

The text does not tell us where the angel went, but from his words in verse 21 – "Let me go down and see" – we may understand that he, too, went down to Sedom to join the other two angels, who had already become Lot's guests.

E. RASHBAM AND "PESHAT"

Rashbam's straightforward commentary resolves many textual difficulties. For example, the verse 19:1 – "And the TWO angels came to Sedom" - raises a question: where did the third

angel go? The familiar aggada quoted by Rashi (from Bereishit Rabba, and from Tanchuma) teaches that "the third, who came to bring the good news to Sarah, had now performed his mission and therefore disappeared." But a literal reading of the text gives no hint of such a division of tasks between the three angels. On the contrary, our impression is that there is a fixed hierarchy among them: one of them – the "senior one," as Rashbam calls him – is the principal speaker in every instance, and it is him whom Avraham and Lot address whenever they speak in the second person singular. [Here we may note that in the exchanges of names mentioned previously serve as a means of distinguishing between a reference to the three angels (or two of them) and reference to one – the senior one among them, who, when speaking alone, is called "God" in the text].

The answer to our question about the two angels who arrive in Sedom was already provided in 18:22: "And the men turned from there and went to Sedom, and Avraham was still standing before God." As the Rashbam explains, "Two of them went to Sedom... and the senior one among them was talking to Avraham, and this is as it is said of him... 'And Avraham was still standing before God' – he was talking to the third one." At the same time that this third angel was answering Avraham, "I shall not destroy if I find there forty-five... thirty... twenty... ten," his answer was being validated by his two colleagues, who were guests in Lot's house (19:4): "Before they lay down, the men of the city – the men of Sedom – surrounded the house, both youth and the elderly, ALL THE PEOPLE from every quarter".

After reading the narrative with the guidance of Rashbam, it is difficult to understand how it could be read any other way. The greatness of this commentary lies in its simplicity, and in its independence from the influence of the many midrashim and other commentaries that explain the story in ways that are not consistent with the literal text. Even we, reading the commentary of Rashbam hundreds of years after its composition, find it difficult to free ourselves from the interpretation of Rashi, based on the various midrashim, which is the way we have understood the story since childhood. Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, paves the way for the "peshat".

F. ANGELS AS MEN, AND A MAN WHO WAS LIKE AN ANGEL

Thus, chapter 18 is all one story, describing the continuing encounter between Avraham and the angels (or one of them). This encounter concludes at the end of the chapter, with a complete "dispersal of characters." But clearly the story as a whole does not conclude here. Although in chapter 19 we move to a new location – Sedom – and to a new main character – Lot – this chapter undoubtedly represents a continuation of the story in chapter 18. Three different elements confirm the unity of the narrative: a. unity of subject: the overthrow of Sedom; b. the angels, who are leading characters from the beginning of the story almost until the end; and c. the dimensions of time and space of these two chapters, which are clearly continuous. We are able to follow the movement of the angels from the moment of their appearance in the middle of the day in Hevron, via their descent to Sedom and their arrival there in the evening, up until they bring down fire and brimstone upon it when "the sun came up over the earth" the next morning.

What is the subject of this long narrative, and what does it teach us? The answer to this question depends, to a large extent, on a study of the structure – its division into two parts, and the parallel between them. This task, though, lies beyond the scope of the present study. We shall therefore conclude with a clarification of two questions pertaining to chapter 18, which was the main focus of our study.

Following the interpretation of the Rashbam, we arrived at a conception of the unity of chapter 18 from the point of view of the plot: the entire chapter describes Avraham's encounter with the angels. But it is precisely this unifying framework that gives rise to a question: What is the internal common ground between the first half of the chapter (1-16) and the second half (17-33)? Are their respective subjects, and the atmosphere that prevails in each, not entirely different from one another?

The common denominator between the two halves appears to be the appearance of Avraham in both as "the father of many nations," as a lover of humanity. In the first half, he displays outstanding hospitality towards the three men, who "he believes are Arabs;" and in the second half, he stands courageously in defense of the Sedomites, lest they be destroyed. In both halves, the people Avraham deals with are not close or even familiar to him, but his love of mankind knows no bounds. The horrifying opposite of this characteristic of Avraham appears in the second half of the story, in chapter 19, in the behavior of the people of Sedom.

Finally, let us pose the following question, which also arises from the Rashbam's interpretation of chapter 18: What is the meaning of such a unique revelation to Avraham, through the agency of three angels who appear to him at first as men? Even when it becomes clear to him that they are angels, they continue to act in a human way, up until – and including – their farewell to him (unlike the angels who appeared to Gidon and to the parents of Shimshon, who miraculously disappeared). In many places in Tanakh, the vision of an angel represents a level of revelation for a person who is not on the level of a prophet, but Avraham certainly cannot fall into this category. In any case, it seems that the appearance of the angels to him has, for him, the same value as a completely prophetic revelation, for the text introduces the narrative with the words, "And God appeared to him" – which usually signify a prophetic revelation. The continuous exchange of terms in the story between "men" and "God" when referring to the angels (or one of them) likewise conveys the same impression. Why, then, are these angels sent to Avraham?

The answer is that specifically this story may represent one of the climaxes of Avraham's closeness to God. When God seeks to treat a person as His "friend," out of an intimacy that allows even for free argument, then He does so through the agency of His angels. On one hand, the agent represents his Master, and the emissary is considered like the One who sent him; on the other hand, the angel is able to perform actions which are inappropriate to the glory of God Himself. Chapter 18 is therefore a revelation of God's closeness to Avraham at its peak, and it is specifically for this reason that this revelation comes about through angels.

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(