

## PARASHAT VAYERA

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This shiur is dedicated by Mr. Mark Gross in honor of Ayelet and Dani Gross

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### Avraham and the Angels By Rav Amnon Bazak

#### A. "And God Appeared to Him"

The encounter between Avraham and the angels described at the beginning of our *parasha* raises several difficulties, some of them well-known and treated extensively by the commentators. In the opening verse of the *parasha* we read:[\[1\]](#)

- (1) God appeared to him at Alonei Mamrei, as he sat at the entrance to the tent in the heat of the day.

However, immediately afterwards, the text describes the revelation of the angels to Avraham, seemingly unrelated to God's revelation:

- (2) He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing before him, and when he saw them, he ran towards them from the entrance to the tent, and prostrated himself to the ground.
- (3) And he said, "My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not turn away from your servant.
- (4) Let a little water be fetched that you may wash your feet, and recline under the tree."

What is the connection between these two encounters? The commentators adopt different approaches.

Rashi explains that God revealed himself to Avraham as a "visit to the sick," but what was actually said in that revelation (if anything) is unknown, because when Avraham caught sight of the angels, he halted his "conversation" with God and turned to welcome the guests. The problem with this interpretation is that it provides almost no connection between the first verse and the rest of the story. Furthermore, as Chizkuni notes, "Wherever the word '*va-yera*' (he appeared/revealed himself) is used, it is always followed by a statement or speech."

A different approach is proposed by the Rambam in *Moreh Nevukhim* (II: 42), in accordance with his rule that "Wherever the text mentions the sight or speech of an angel, it is only in a prophetic vision or a dream." In his view, God's revelation to Avraham is itself all that is described afterwards. The text first summarizes the event (a

sort of "heading") and then goes on to elaborate: "The text first says that God appeared to him in prophetic visions. But how did this vision come about? He lifted his eyes in a vision and behold, three men were standing before him..." (the Ramban's explanation of the Rambam's interpretation). According to this view, the entire episode involving the angels took place in a prophetic vision, not in reality.

Ramban disagrees vehemently and at great length.<sup>[2]</sup> Aside from the theological question, the Rambam's approach also entails exegetical difficulties, the most important of these being, "How could the text then say, 'God appeared to him'? For behold, God does not appear to him [according to the Rambam's view] either in a vision nor even in thought!" (Ramban ad loc.).

Ramban therefore adopts a different interpretation. He maintains that the revelation of the Divine Presence was an episode in its own right – a reward to Avraham for performing the circumcision, similar to God's revelation to *Am Yisrael* on the eighth day of the *Mishkan* dedication (*Vayikra* 9:23) as a reward for their efforts in fulfilling the commandments pertaining to the *Mishkan*: "The revelation of the Divine Presence here was not to convey any mitzva to them nor for any speech at all, but rather a reward for the commandment which had already been fulfilled and to announce that God was pleased with their actions."

Ramban's explanation is similar to Rashi's in that it focuses on the relationship between God's revelation and the revelation of the angels; according to both views, there were two separate revelations. By the same token, Chizkuni's question on Rashi's interpretation applies here, as well.

In the subsequent verses we encounter further difficulties, two of which we will discuss here. First, in the description of Avraham seeing the angels and addressing them, we read:

- (2) He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing before him, and when he saw them, he ran towards them from the entrance to the tent, and prostrated himself to the ground.
- (3) And he said, "My lords (*adonay*), if I have found favor in your eyes (*be-einekha*), please do not pass on from your servant (*avadekha*)."

Whom is Avraham addressing with the title "*adonay*"? Is he speaking to God or to the angels? (The name is in plural form, like another of God's Names, "*Elokim*.") Rashi notes both possibilities, each entailing a different problem. If he is talking to the angels and not to God, then why does Avraham change to the singular form in the latter part of the verse (*einekha/avadekha*)? Rashi explains that Avraham first addressed all three of them, calling them "my lords," and then turned to the senior one among them, to whom he addresses his invitation. But there is nothing in the text to indicate the transition from speaking to all of the angels to speaking to just one of them.

Rashi also raises the possibility that Avraham is speaking to God, asking Him "to wait for him while he runs to invite the guests in." This audacious idea resolves the problem of the switch from singular to plural, but it is also complicated on the exegetical level. In the very next verse, Avraham says, "Let a little water be taken that you may wash your feet and rest under the tree" (verse 4), and this offer is clearly directed to the angels. Once again, the text gives no indication of the transition between the end of Avraham's conversation with God and the beginning of his speech to the angels.

Another problem concerns the number of angels. Throughout the chapter, the text speaks of three men, but at the beginning of the next chapter, we read: "The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting at the gate of Sodom" (19:1). What happened to the third angel? Rashi writes at the end of chapter 18: "The third [angel], who had come to inform Sarah [that she would bear a son], departed, having completed his mission." Once again, if the third angel left, why is this not mentioned explicitly in the text?

## **B. Rashbam's Solution**

All of the above problems, along with many others, are easily solved by Rashbam's approach in explaining this *parasha*. His *chiddush* is very simple – he posits that one of the three angels represents God Himself:

"God appeared to him" How? Three men, who were [in reality] angels, came to him. In many places, when an angel appears, it is referred to as the Divine Presence, as it is written, "For My Name is within him" (*Shemot* 23:21) – that is, God's messenger is like Himself. Similarly, "An angel of God appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the bush" (*Shemot* 3:2), and we read there, "And God saw that he [Moshe] had turned aside to see" (*ibid.* 3:4).

In many places in *Tanakh*, we find that the distinction between God and an angel is not clear, and Rashbam assumes that our *parasha* is yet another example. God reveals Himself by means of the angels, and the appearance of the three men is therefore the elaboration of the opening statement, "God appeared to him."<sup>[3]</sup> Avraham runs towards them and receives them in the appropriate manner, and then the three men address him: "They said to him, 'Where is Sara, your wife?'" (verse 9). When Avraham answers, "Behold, she is in the tent," the angel representing God speaks to him:

(10) He said, "I shall surely return to you at this season, and behold, Sara your wife will have a son..."

Sara also hears these words, as we read at the end of verse 10: "And Sara heard, [located as she was] at the tent door, for he was on the other side of it," and she reacts with disbelief: "And Sara laughed inwardly, saying, 'Having grown, old shall I have pleasure, being that my lord is also old?'" (verse 12), and the angel representing God expresses surprise:

- (13) And God<sup>[4]</sup> said to Avraham: "Why then does Sara laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed give birth, being that I am old'?"
- (14) Is anything beyond God? At the set time I shall return to you, at this season, and Sara shall have a son."

This also explains the verse that follows:

- (15) And Sara denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she feared; and He said, "No, but you laughed."

This exchange between the stranger and Sara actually happened. Sara, inside the tent, did not know who was speaking, and therefore denied her inward reaction. But the angel, representing God, Who sees into every heart, confronts her with the truth – that she did in fact laugh. This represents decisive support for Rashbam's approach, for if God was not among the angels, having appeared to Avraham separately, how could Sara hear His question, "Why then does Sara laugh?" And if God revealed himself separately to Avraham and also to Sara, how could Sara protest and deny her reaction? A literal understanding of the narrative is only possible if we adopt the view that one of the men was the angel representing God.

The angels then turn to leave, but the angel representing God remains in order to inform Avraham of what is about to happen to Sedom:

- (16) The men got up from there and looked out over Sedom, and Avraham walked with them, to send them off.
- (17) And God said, "Shall I hide from Avraham what which I am doing?"

At this stage, the group separates; the other two angels set off for Sedom, while the angel representing God remains with Avraham:<sup>[5]</sup>

- (22) The men turned away from there and they went to Sedom, and Avraham was still standing before God.<sup>[6]</sup>

Avraham negotiates with God about saving Sedom if righteous people are found in it, and at the end of this discussion, he and the angel take leave of each other:

- (33) God departed, when He had finished talking to Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place.

Meanwhile, the other two angels reach Sedom:

- (19:1) And the two angels came to Sedom, in the evening....

Thus, Rashbam's interpretation offers a satisfactory approach to this narrative. However, we must still address the question of whether it was clear to Avraham from the outset that the men before him were in fact angels and that one of them represented God.

It seems that at the beginning of the story, Avraham thought that the angels were regular people, and he therefore related to them in accordance with the usual norms of hospitality. At the same time, it is clear that at some stage, he understood that it was God Who stood in front of him – otherwise, he would not have haggled with Him over Sedom. At which point, then, did Avraham realize that it was God Who was revealed to him?

It appears that the turning point came where God's Name appears for the first time in the *parasha*, with a clear hint that it is God Who is talking with Avraham: "And God said to Avraham: 'Why then does Sara laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed give birth, being that I am old'? Is anything beyond God? At the set time I shall return to you, at this season, and Sara shall have a son.'" God states explicitly that it is not beyond His power to return the next year to see the son that Sara will have borne, and here Avraham must have known that it was God talking to him.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **C. The Way of God – Performing Righteousness and Justice**

In conclusion, we must ask: What was the value of this revelation? Why did God reveal Himself to Avraham in the form of mortals? Why were His messages concerning the son to be born to Avraham and concerning Sedom not conveyed in a direct revelation?

Apparently, the development of the story is integral to our understanding of its two parts. The promise of progeny in our chapter appears to be connected directly to Avraham's hospitality. In reward for this act of kindness, carried out selflessly and with sensitivity, Avraham earned the promise of a child.<sup>[8]</sup> That being so, the promise could not have been given through direct revelation, since it was specifically the disguise as guests that facilitated Avraham's response and his reward.

Then, after the true identity of his visitors had become clear to him during the course of the events, Avraham was faced with a second test. He heard about the imminent destruction of Sedom; shall he remain silent in the face of impending disaster, or shall he now, knowing that he is standing before God, attempt to help them?

- (17) And God said, "Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am going to do?"
- (18) For Avraham shall surely be a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed through him..."
- (20) And God said, "The cry of Sedom and Amorah, for it is great, and their sin, for it is exceedingly severe."

This test is the exact inverse of the first one. The first test concerned how Avraham would treat the angels specifically when he viewed them as humans. The second test concerned his attitude towards the people of Sedom once he knew that before him stood an angel representing God, with the power to overturn the decree.

Avraham passes the second test, too, with flying colors. He conducts lengthy "negotiations" with God, until he is assured that if even ten righteous people can be found in Sedom, God will not destroy the city.

The link between these two episodes is God's special characterization of Avraham, appearing in the narrative in between them:

- (19) "For I know him, in order that he will instruct his children and his household after him, that they will observe the way of God, performing righteousness and justice, in order that God may bring upon Avraham that concerning which He has spoken."

The promise of progeny is given to Avraham because God knows that Avraham will instruct his descendants to follow the way of God, which may be summed up in two words: "righteousness" and "justice." The combination of performing acts of righteousness and kindness, on one hand, along with maintaining truth and justice, on the other, is the central idea behind the selection of Avraham. This combination finds expression in these two stories involving the angels: "righteousness" – in his warm hospitality, and "justice" – in his attempt to defend the people of Sedom with the argument, "Far be it from You to act in this manner, to put the righteous to death together with the wicked, such that the righteous shall be equivalent to the wicked; far be it from You, shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly?" (verse 25). These two qualities of Avraham are revealed in the special story of God's revelation to him in the form of the angels.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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[1] All verses cited are from *Bereishit* 18 unless otherwise specified.

[2] Inter alia, Ramban writes the following about the Rambam's approach here: "These words contradict the text; it is forbidden to hear such things and certainly to believe them." The controversy between the Ramban and Rambam transcends the boundaries of this *parasha* and pertains to many other biblical narratives, some of which Ramban mentions here explicitly, but this lies beyond the scope of our present discussion.

[3] According to this view, we have here a general heading followed by an elaboration, as in the Rambam's interpretation. However, according to the Rambam's view, the three angels appeared in a prophetic vision, and this vision in and of itself is God's revelation – a problematic exegetical assertion, as noted above. According to Rashbam, on the other hand, God reveals Himself to Avraham through the angels, who appear before him in reality.

[4] As Rashbam comments there: "'And God said' – [meaning], the angel; the most senior among them."

5 As Rashbam comments (verse 16): "'The men got up from there' – two of them went to Sedom, as it is written, 'And the two angels came to Sedom', while the most senior among them remained talking to Avraham. This is the meaning of the text saying of him, 'God said, 'Shall I hide from Avraham...,' as well as 'Avraham was still standing before God': both of these verses are talking about the third [angel]."

[6] Rashi notes: "But he [Avraham] had not gone to stand before Him; rather, God came to him and told him, 'The cry of Sedom and Amora, for it is great.' The text should therefore read, 'And God was still standing before Avraham.' However, this is an amendment by the Sages (who turned the expression here around)." According to Rashi, what the verse is telling us is that God was still standing before Avraham, but out of honor for God, the Sages (*Soferim*) introduced a textual amendment here. This situation is easily imagined if we adopt Rashbam's understanding of the episode: "The men turned away from there" – i.e., the two angels who did not represent God, "and went to Sedom," while the angel representing God is still standing before Avraham (with the "vav" in the word "ve-Avraham" indicating the contrast between the two angels and the other one).

The words in parentheses at the end of Rashi's comment reflect the extensive discourse over the phenomenon of "*tikkun Soferim*." *Midrashei Halakha* (such as *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Beshalach*, *Massekhta De-Shira*, *parasha* 6) refer to the phenomenon as "*kinaha-katuv*" and seem to suggest that the text amends itself. *Midrashei Aggada*, on the other hand, mention instances of "*tikkun Soferim*" (as in *Shemot Rabba*, *parashot* 13 and 41), suggesting that these textual amendments are from a later period; see also *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Beshalach*, *parasha* 16: "And the text reads thus, being an amendment by the Sages – the Men of the Great Assembly." The same impression is conveyed by the words in parentheses in Rashi's comment.

For a discussion on this subject, see Minchat Shai on *Zekharia* 2:12, who vehemently rejects the possibility of a later amendment. It is this view that regards the final words of Rashi's comment as not being part of his original commentary and therefore to be ignored.

Ibn Ezra rejects the notion of such a phenomenon out of hand, commenting that "even in the commentaries which are straightforward, there is no need for [invoking] *tikkun Soferim*" (introduction to his commentary on the Torah, the "Fifth Path"). In other words, there is no need to introduce any change into the words of the text; every instance where a "*tikkun Soferim*" is invoked, the plain meaning of the text could be explained without it (in our instance, by explaining that Avraham did, in fact, stand before God).

[7] When Avraham first sets eyes on the angels, he addresses them with the words, "My lords (*adonay*), if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass on from your servant." We have already discussed the two possibilities for understanding this expression. If Avraham means it in the Divine sense, then he is in fact saying that he recognizes that the man (angel) before him represents God.

At the same time, it must be noted that throughout the narrative – both in his initial words (verse 2) and in his negotiations over the fate of Sedom – Avraham addresses God with the Name "*Adonay*" (while the narrative itself always uses the Name Y-H-V-H.) Avraham's use of this Name is apparently related to God's manifestation through an angel, in human form.

Perhaps, in light of our discussion, we might suggest that the "*adonay*" in Avraham's invitation to the angels offers a dual reading. Initially, not yet understanding that it was God Who stood before him, Avraham spoke in the second person – "*adoni*," directing his words to the middle angel (who appeared, even in his outward human form, to be the most senior amongst the group). Once Avraham realized that he was standing before an angel who represented God, the vowelization of the word changed to "*adonay*," such that it could be read either as a normal human address or as addressing God.

A similar phenomenon occurs in the story of Gidon, who is visited by an angel who tells him, "'God is with you, mighty man of valor.' And Gidon said to him, 'Oh my lord (*bi adoni*) – if God is with us...!... And God turned towards him and said, 'Go in this... and save Israel...!' And he said to Him: "Oh my Lord (*bi adonay*) – with what shall I save Israel?...'" (*Shoftim* 6:12-15), although there it is stated explicitly that only later did Gidon understand "that he was an angel of God" (verse 22).

[8] God had promised Avraham progeny also in the previous chapter, but the two narratives reflect two different aspects of this promise to Avraham – an idea developed by my friend R. Yonatan Grossman, in his *shiur* on *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. see <http://www.etzion.org.il/vbm/archive/4-parsha/04vayera.php>.