

PARASHAT VAYERA

God's Revelation to Avraham

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1. The aim of the revelation

Last week's *Parasha, Lekh-Lekha*, began with a Divine revelation to Avraham: "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace..." No background preceded this command; the Torah provides no explanation as to why Avraham is special, why it is to him that God appears with this command, what the point is of his moving to a different place, or what is special about that place. Similarly, *Parashat Vayera* begins with a Divine revelation with no apparent explanation:

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

Contrary to what we would expect following the record of this "appearance," the Torah tells us nothing of what God said to Avraham at Alonei Mamrei, nor what the aim of the revelation is.

Some commentators understand this revelation as being related to Avraham's circumcision, which we read about at the end of last week's *parasha*; the revelation comes to honor Avraham, "to visit the sick." A different interpretation views the words "God appeared to him..." as a general heading whose content is set forth in the rest of the *parasha*. In other words, according to this view, God's revelation to Avraham at Alonei Mamrei came in the form of the three men (angels) whom Avraham sees standing before him and whom he invites into his home.

If we adopt the second interpretation – that the revelation comes through the angels that appear to Avraham – we must address the question of what this revelation is supposed to tell Avraham, beyond what God already told him at the time of his circumcision.

Unquestionably, the *parasha* teaches us much about Avraham's quality of kindness and his hospitality. Despite the fact that the incident takes place "in the heat of the day" and immediately after his circumcision, Avraham does not hesitate, but rather runs towards the three men and invites them into his home to eat and drink. The Torah takes pains to emphasize his haste. He himself hurries to the tent; he asks Sarah to hurry and prepare cakes; he runs to find a good and tender calf and urges his servant to prepare it quickly.

When everything is ready, he brings the entire feast before his guests and stands by, ready to serve them, as they sit under the tree.

However, the text indicates that the purpose of the revelation was not only to test Avraham and to demonstrate to all his outstanding altruism, but first and foremost to inform him that he will have a son. The only message that the angels convey to Avraham is, "I shall surely return to you at this season, and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son."

This being so, it is difficult to understand the need for the revelation, since God had already conveyed all this explicitly to Avraham at the time of his circumcision:

"Sarai, your wife – you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah is her name. And I shall bless her, and shall also give you a son from her."
(17:15-16)

Likewise, the time appointed for the birth – "*ke-et chaya*" ("at this season") – comes as no news, since God had already told Avraham explicitly:

"As to Yishma'el, I have heard you... But My covenant I shall establish with Yitzchak, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year."
(17:20-21)

What, then, is new in the message of the angels, and why does God reveal Himself to Avraham once again through them?

2. Why is Sarah criticized for laughing?

It is also difficult to understand why God is angry at Sarah for laughing when she hears the news. It appears that Avraham himself reproaches her for this:

And Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh" – for she was afraid, and he said, "No, but you did laugh."

After all, the Torah records that Avraham himself had reacted in the same way upon hearing the news:

And Avraham fell upon his face and he laughed (*va-yitzchak*), and he said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to one who is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (17:17)

But God had not reproached him; He had even gone on to command him to call the son that would be born "Yitzchak" – seemingly as a result of that laughter. What is the reason for the discrepancy in response to these two instances of laughing?

Most difficult of all is the question of why God (or the angel) saw fit to tell Avraham *lashon ha-ra* about his wife, informing him of her laughter:

And God said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child – I, who am old?'"

Why not confront Sarah directly, rather than telling Avraham about her laughter and bringing about unnecessary friction between them?

3. Laughter as an expression of the miracle

Apparently, what the Torah is telling us and impressing on our consciousness is that the birth of Yitzchak was a miracle that went entirely against nature. Laughter is an expression of a sort of cognitive dissonance, a response to the disparity between the natural, ordinary course of events that was to be expected and the unnatural, extraordinary, and altogether surprising reality that is now developing. The Torah emphasizes that Avraham laughed in disbelief, as did Sarah, since it was clear to both of them that there was no possibility of them bearing a child in a natural manner. Thus, the purpose of the second revelation was to lead Sarah to also internalize the fact that this was a miracle, something outside of the laws of nature, causing her to laugh – just as Avraham had laughed when God had previously revealed this to him.

But Sarah laughs "within herself," not openly, as Avraham had. It is for this reason that the Torah publicizes her laughter, such that she is forced to admit it openly and give explicit expression to the fact that the birth of a child at her age is altogether illogical, outside of the boundaries of nature, and a miracle. Therefore, God says to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?," and when Sarah denies it, out of fear of Avraham's reproach, he – or the angel – confirms, "No, but you did laugh." What God means by this is not to disparage Sarah, nor even to rebuke her, but rather the opposite – to make it clear that she, too, understands that this is a miracle, and that faced with the incomprehensible and unbridgeable gap between their natural state ("and Avraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age, and Sarah had ceased to have the manner of women") and the news that she has heard, she too has responded with laughter.

Perhaps the Targum Yonatan expresses the depth of the plain meaning of the text when he translates the response to Sarah's denial as, "Do not fear, for you laughed truly [in the sense of "with justification"]" – for the reality is indeed deserving of laughter. Yitzchak is named after this laughter – of both Avraham and Sarah – in order to express and memorialize the fact that his birth was an unnatural event that came about by God's word.

Since Yitzchak represents the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise of progeny ("for in Yitzchak shall your seed be called" – 21:12), through the miraculous event of Yitzchak's birth the Torah teaches us that all of Jewish existence – its presence in the world, its survival – lies outside of the boundaries of the natural.

4. Circumcision likewise expresses the miracle of Yitzchak's birth

Furthermore, the news that he will have a son comes to Avraham not only at the advanced age of 99, but also, surprisingly, right after the removal of his foreskin. From a natural perspective, one might have expected this procedure to damage his reproductive ability. Yet it is specifically upon his circumcision that Avraham is told that he will now bear a son, Yitzchak. The Torah therefore emphasizes that Avraham circumcised himself at the age of 99 – exactly a year before Yitzchak's birth. Perhaps the purpose of the circumcision at precisely this time is likewise meant to emphasize that the birth of Yitzchak, the offspring of Avraham through whom the promise of numerous progeny will be fulfilled, goes against the ways of nature; it is in the wake of the removal of Avraham's foreskin that he fathers Yitzchak.

This being so, the circumcision of every Jewish male, to this day, represents the stamp of the unnatural, miraculous reality of Jewish existence and survival. "Walk before me and be perfect" – it is specifically the removal of the foreskin, which impedes us like a physical blemish, that perfects us. The entire reality of *Am Yisrael* is not natural; God's supernatural involvement represents the very nature and essence of the nation. This is the unique and special covenant that exists between *Am Yisrael* and God, reaffirmed in our consciousness with the circumcision of every male member of the Jewish nation, as well as converts who become part of the nation.

5. God's revelation prior to the overthrow of Sedom

According to the interpretation proposed above, the revelation at the beginning of our *parasha* represents a continuation and complement to the account of Avraham's circumcision at the end of *Parashat Lekh-lekha*. In other words, our *parasha* is a continuation not only according to the view that the purpose of the revelation is to visit Avraham, who is weak as a result of his circumcision, but even according to the second view, according to which the purpose is to announce the son that will be born. This represents an important and necessary complement to the promise that had already been conveyed to Avraham at the time of his circumcision; it allows Sarah to also recognize and internalize the fact that God's promise entails a reality that lies outside of the normal, familiar rules of nature.

A third possibility for explaining why "God appeared to him in Alonei Mamrei" connects this revelation to the events that follow immediately after the story of the angels and their message:

And God said, "Shall I hide from Avraham that which I intend to do? For Avraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the world shall be blessed through him. For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of God, performing justice and judgment, in

order that God may bring upon Avraham that which He has spoken of him." And God said, "[Since] the cry of Sedom and Amora is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I shall go down now and see whether what they have done is altogether as the cry of it, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know."

In other words, according to this view, the revelation is a preface to the story of the overturning of Sedom.

The *midrash*, and Rashi in the same vein, raises the possibility that "the value of hospitality supersedes receiving the Divine Presence;" Avraham thus apologizes to God, Who has appeared to him, asking Him to wait until he finishes his business with his guests.¹[1] According to this view, the verse, "And he said, 'My Lord (*ado-nay*), if I have found favor in Your eyes, I pray you, do not pass away from Your servant'" is directed to God, requesting that the Divine Presence remain while Avraham attends to his guests.²[2] The verse, "And Avraham stood yet before God" (18:23), according to this view, tells us that God indeed acceded to Avraham's request and waited for him: the *midrash* maintains that the formulation of this verse is actually an emendation of the text by the Sages, and that what it means is that "God was still standing before Avraham."³[3]

Another way of explaining the view that the revelation at the beginning of the *parasha* continues with the story of Sedom is to propose that the text inserts the story of the angels as a sort of parenthetical account. The opening verse, "And God appeared to him..." continues with, "And God said: Shall I

1 [1] It is not clear how this interpretation can be reconciled with the halakha, which states that if a person is in the midst of prayer, even if the king himself inquires after his health, he is not permitted to interrupt his prayer in order to answer. How is it possible to propose that a person who stands before God and communicates with Him, should halt his prayer in order to welcome mortal guests?

2 [2] Alternatively, Avraham is addressing the men-angels, entreating them to stop and not journey on. This interpretation is also possible given the ambiguous word "*ado-nay*," which may also be meant as the plural form of address, "my lords".

3 [3] The meaning of this emendation is likewise not clear. Does the *midrash* really mean that originally the text read, "And God stood yet before Avraham", and that the Men of the Great Assembly changed the wording around out of honor to God?

hide from Avraham...," and in between the text recounts the story of the angels, who were on their way to Sodom. It is on account of their journey to overturn the cities of the plain that God reveals Himself to Avraham and tells him what is going to happen to Sodom and the surrounding areas.

6. Is Avraham truly different from Noach?

In any event, in the wake of God's revelation to Avraham concerning the fate of Sodom, there follows a long and tiresome set of negotiations whose purpose is not clear. God tells Avraham:

"I shall go down now and see whether what they have done is altogether as the cry of it, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know."

Upon hearing this, Avraham appeals to God no less than six times, asking whether the verdict might be repealed for the sake of the righteous people who might be living there. Perhaps there are fifty; if not, perhaps forty-five, or forty, or thirty; perhaps twenty, possibly even only ten. God promises that if there are even ten righteous people, He will spare the area on their account.

Many commentators have drawn a comparison between Avraham, who pleads for Sodom and tries to save the city, and Noach, who seemingly is concerned only for himself and makes no effort to pray and to plead for compassion on behalf of the people of his generation. However, I believe that Avraham is not trying to plead for or to save the people of Sodom, nor is he trying to annul the Divine decree. Indeed, what good could come of God refraining from punishing such a wicked population?

If we look carefully at the text, we see that God makes no mention of His intention to overthrow Sodom. Rather, He says only that He will "go down now and see whether what they have done is altogether as the cry of it." How could Avraham know with such clarity what the result of this investigation would be? And even if he is aware of the extent of the evil in Sodom and it is clear to him what God's conclusion will be, how is it clear to him that these people are worthy of mercy and that God will forgive their sins and not punish them?

7. Avraham does not try to save Sodom and Amora

It seems that Avraham is not pleading for mercy for Sodom; rather, he speaks with God concerning the criteria for the investigation that He intends to carry out. Avraham is asking how God judges an entire city, an entire population, where there are many evil, wicked people and a few who are righteous. He asks what God will do if it turns out that the cry of Sodom and Amora is indeed very great, but there are fifty righteous people living in the city – will God not spare the city for their sake? In other words, Avraham is responding to God's declaration that the cry of the city has come before Him.

He suggests that it is not enough to assess whether the evil of the city is indeed as great as it sounds. Even if the situation is as bad as it seems, if there is also a group of righteous people, then the city cannot be utterly destroyed, such that the righteous will be annihilated along with the wicked. The negotiations are an attempt to determine the limit – how many righteous people are needed to save an entirely wicked city? The conclusion of this discussion is that a group of ten has the power to save the city. If the city lacks even ten righteous inhabitants, then it will be destroyed for its sins. The handful of righteous individuals will be lost; alternatively, they may be saved individually, but they will not save the city.

Thus, what we have here is a discussion about the principles of Divine justice and retribution. God conducts this discussion with Avraham because He knows that Avraham is an outstanding model of justice and judgment, as He Himself testifies:

"For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of God, performing justice and judgment..."

8. **"Whether it is altogether as the cry of it"**

In light of the above, let us now see whether God indeed carries out the investigation and what its results are. Does God really go down to assess what is happening in Sodom? It would seem that the angels are dispatched by God to carry out this investigation. They arrive in Sodom in the evening, and before dawn comes, they are already able to conclude their appraisal, as the text attests to what happens there:

Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house – both young and old, all the people from every quarter.

The entire population of the city – both young and old, from every quarter – joins in the demand to abuse Lot's guests. They even refuse Lot's offer (outrageous in its own right) to take his daughters instead and to deal with them as they see fit. They demand that the guests themselves be brought out; they threaten to harm Lot and crowd around to break down the door. At this point, the investigation is over; there is no need to wait until morning, and the angels tell Lot:

"Who else do you have here? Son-in-law and your sons and your daughters and whatever you have in the city – bring them out of this place, for we will destroy this place, for the cry of them has grown great before the face of God, and God has sent us to destroy it." (19:12-13)

The answer to the question of "whether it is as the cry of it" is answered explicitly in the angels' words: "For the cry of them has grown great... and God has sent us to destroy it." There are not fifty righteous people to be found in the city, nor even ten; the entire population, young and old, is party to the evil of the place.

9. Was Lot greater than Avraham?

The proof that Avraham did not pray or plead for mercy for Sodom, nor try to save the city and its environs from their punishment, but rather conducted a discussion of what should happen if there are some righteous people who live amongst a wicked majority, is the fact that Lot, with no effort whatsoever and with far less merit than Avraham possesses, manages to save a city from being overthrown:

And Lot said to them, "I pray you, my Lord, let it not be so. Behold, now, Your servant has found favor in Your sight, and You have magnified Your mercy which You have shown to me in saving my life, but I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die. Behold, now, this city is near to flee to, and it is a small place. I pray You, let me escape there – is it not a small place? – that my soul might live." And He said to him, "Behold, I have acceded to you also in this matter, that I will not overthrow this city of which you have spoken." (19:18-21)

God accedes to Lot's supplication and refrains from destroying the city where Lot seeks to take refuge. Avraham did not succeed in causing God to leave the place alone, nor even part of it. Apparently, Avraham never made any such request, and it is indeed questionable whether it would be proper not to punish a city as wicked as Sodom. Rather, God operates within the boundaries of Divine justice and judgment. We learn from this episode that even when there is a city that is altogether evil, even the presence of a small group of righteous individuals has the power to save the entire city.

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