

Thinking Torah

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Parshat Vayera: The Importance Of Chesed

Our Parsha opens with Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent. We are told that God “appeared” to Avraham. However, almost immediately, a small group of wayfarers enter the scene and we witness an display of Avraham’s overwhelming hospitality to them.

This seemingly straightforward Bible story is not without its problems. Let us examine this famous episode and we will see whether we can dig a little under the surface.

Chavruta

1. Study the opening parsha of the sidra. BERESHIT 18:1-25.
 - Analyse , question etc.
 - Pay special attention to the identity of these ‘men’. Who would they seem to be? What names are they referred to by the Torah?
2. See RASHI on passuk1-3 .
 - How does he understand God’s appearance in the opening passuk.
 - What is Avraham’s reaction to God when he sees the three ‘men’?
3. See the commentary of RASHBAM to verses 1, 13 , 14, 16 and especially 20.
 - How does he read the parsha differently to Rashi?
 - How does Rashbam view the opening passuk of our parsha? What difficulty is he trying to solve?
4. See the RAMBAN on 18:1 . A few lines into the Ramban he quotes the Moreh Nevuchim - Look at this view of the Ramban and see also the Ramban’s critique of his view.
 - How does Ramban’s reading in the Moreh Nevuchim differ from that of Rashbam and Rashi?

The Shiur Section:

When reading the first line of this famous story, two basic questions confront the reader. The first concerns Avraham’s behaviour, the second is a question about God.

Firstly - Avraham. The parasha begins with God appearing in a vision to Abraham: "And God appeared to him in Elonei Mamre as he sat at the entrance to his tent." It seems as if God starts to appear to Avraham and then in the middle of it all he gets up to run after some travelers! Is this appropriate conduct towards the Almighty?

And secondly, what was the CONTENT of this Godly vision to Avraham? What did he say to him? Or was he rudely cut off by Avraham’s enthusiasm for welcoming guests? And then we wonder what might God have wanted to show Avraham!

We may add some further questions:

Who exactly are these men?

How do they know that Sarah will have a child?

According to Rabbinic tradition and this is strongly hinted in the text itself, we might assume that two of these ‘men’ proceed down to Sodom. In that case, these men are not human but rather angels. That would explain their message to Sarah. But we may also ask; why are they not called angels in the text? And, how did three angels become two? - To where did the third one go?

THE RAMBAM - VISIONS AND ANGELS.

Maimonides is troubled by these questions. But furthermore, Rambam is concerned by the nature, rather than the specific identity, of these men. He has a philosophical difficulty. If these ‘men’ are indeed angels, how can Avraham see them? Since angels are purely spiritual beings and our eyes, our retina, see only the physical reality before us, how can a human see an angel? (Moreh Nevuchim - The Guide to the Perplexed 2:42)

The truth is that the Rambam has this problem throughout the TaNaKh (The Bible - abbreviation for Torah - Neviim - Ketuvim) whenever a human ‘meets’ an angel. Maimonides feels that this is a metaphysical impossibility. Flesh cannot see spirit. Or maybe let us rephrase that. The only way that a human being can perceive an angel - a solely spiritual being - is through the medium of prophecy and NOT via the retina! Every meeting between angel and human in TaNaKh takes place - says the Rambam - in a prophetic vision.

The Rambam’s approach as regards the angels solves many of the problems that we raised earlier. He reads the entire story as happening in a vision. Thus the opening verse is an introduction to the entire parsha and not part of the narrative itself. The phrase: “The LORD appeared to him (Avraham) at Elonei Mamre” simply serves as the opener and now the vision begins. The curtain rises and we see Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent. In this reading, Avraham does not walk out on God at all - the story simply begins from “he was sitting at the entrance of the tent”. Guests never really arrived, Avraham never ever ran to meet them, Avraham never served any food, Sarah never laughed. It was all a dream! It was a vision transmitted via the medium of a prophecy. And as for the content of God’s vision (in the opening verse,) we have solved that problem too.... the message of God IS the story itself.

WAS IT ALL A DREAM?

Despite this neat solution, the questions on the Rambam’s view are numerous. If it was all a vision, then what is the message that this vision is attempting to communicate? Furthermore, how far do we stretch this vision? According to the Rambam, we should be forced to suggest that Avraham never actually argued with God about Sodom! In fact we may well ask; was Sodom really destroyed or was the entire Sodom episode also a vision? If the angels’ visit is a vision, then Sodom should still be standing after Avraham comes back into full consciousness. If that is not the case, where exactly does the vision end?

Of course we might say that God was sending Avraham a deep message: - That Sarah and he would be rewarded with a son **by virtue** of their Hospitality. Likewise, the parsha continues with Avraham arguing with Sedom, apparently ALSO part of the prophetic encounter. On the backdrop of Avraham’s trait of Chesed, God feels a "need" to inform Avraham of the impending disaster looming over Sedom.

RASHBAM - ALL IN THE LOWER WORLDS

The Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir - grandson of Rashi and master of the rational-grammatical reading of the Biblical text) agrees with the Rambam in seeing the first verse as an opening

line that sets the scene. However, rather than go in the direction of the Rambam's prophetic vision, he prefers to see the entire episode as happening here on earth, in the flesh. He reads the first verse as:

"The LORD appeared to him (Avraham) at the Oaks of Mamre" - How? In what way did the Lord appear? - " he saw three men standing near him".

The three men are the medium through which God appears to Avraham. They are angels but apparently they CAN be seen with the naked eye (and the Rashbam does not relate directly to the philosophical-metaphysical question of how one may visualise an angel). And so these angels appear in human form. This is God's method of providing Avraham, with his "vision." Angels while in the guise of 'men' are still the messengers of God and His representatives. In that capacity they can be referred to as "the Lord".

In the eyes of the Rashbam, the parsha never loses track of these angels; they remain in the spotlight. Even when we see the phrase "the Lord (YHVH) said to Avraham" (18:13), it is not a reference to God but rather the chief angel¹ - representative of the Almighty Himself. Even when Avraham argues and pleads with God to save the city of Sodom from imminent annihilation (18:23-32), the conversation is NOT between "God" and Avraham but rather between the third angel and Avraham. The other two angels are making their way at that very moment to the city of Sodom.

According to Rashbam then, this is a story of Avraham and the angels; angels who represent Hashem on earth. It is rooted firmly in a this-worldly scene and God does not enter the picture "directly". The Rashbam urges us not to be confused by interchanges in terminology between the terms "men", "angels" and "the Lord". In reality, they are all metaphors for the same group of God's messengers - the angels.

PROBLEMS WITH THE RASHBAM

Clearly, Rashbam has his weak points too. The first is exactly the point we have just mentioned. Different names - man, angels, the Lord - DO mean different things. Why should we equate them? Additionally we may ask; If God wishes to give Avraham a message, can he not talk to him directly as we see in countless other stories?

We may also ask, what message exactly was God sending? Was it about Isaac's birth? But Avraham has already been informed of the birth of Isaac. In the previous chapter - when Avraham is commanded to circumcise himself and all his household as a covenant between him and God - he is given the following promise :

"Sarah your wife shall give birth to a son and you shall name him Yitzchak and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come" (17:19)

So what is it about? Sodom? Then why give Avraham the news about Yitzchak? - Unless this is a visit for Sarah too - but the Torah states that God appeared "to him".

The final question for the Rashbam is why we need to read all the manifest details of Avraham's hospitality? The heading of

the parsha indicates that we are to receive a message from God. Why then do we need to see all the detail of Avraham's devoted attention to his guests? It does not fit in with the title of the whole story.

RASHI - CALL WAITING

We have seen how **Rambam perceives the entire parsha as happening in a vision**, and in contrast, **how the Rashbam sees these events occurring solely here in earth**. Both of these scholars are hesitant to see the narrative switch back and forth from heaven to earth; from God to man. Both commentators refrain from reading the text as saying that Avraham let God wait while entertaining some hungry nomads.

Rashi, however is untroubled by such concerns. As we shall see, his approach will reflect a far more complex construction of the narrative. In the eyes of Rashi, the parsha moves up and down; from heaven to earth and back to heaven, again and again.

Let us review some of Rashi's comments:

"THE LORD APPEARED TO HIM: God came to visit the sick. It was the third day after Avraham's circumcision (when the wound is at its most painful) so God came to ask about his welfare....

THREE MEN : One to give Sarah the news (of her child), and one to destroy Sodom and one to heal Avraham (from his brit mila) for each angel can only perform but a single mission....

(3) And he said 'My lord(s), if it please you, do not leave your servant' it can be reread as referring to God. **Avraham asked God to wait for him until he managed to rush and welcome the guests.**"

Let us explain the course of the parasha. There are three separate "actors" in this scene: Avraham, God and the angels. In the opening scene, God appears to Avraham. God is practicing Hesed as he performs the act of Bikkur Cholim! And then suddenly guests arrive. Avraham abandons God in order to attend to his guests. So, the focus of the parsha leaves heaven and descends to earth. We read of the intense activity and hospitality of Avraham and then the guests inform Avraham and Sarah of the miracle of Isaac's birth in a year's time. Sarah laughs in disbelief at a comment from the angels. Immediately, God reprimands her. The angels leave and God resumes his conversation with Avraham. There is a three-way conversation going on in this parsha. There is the vertical "God-Avraham" channel, and the horizontal "angel-Avraham" channel, and the parsha switches, oscillates quite naturally and undisturbed between the two.

Rashi seems unperturbed by the theological problems of interrupting God to attend to the angels (although see Rashi 18:22 on the "Tikkun Sopherim" - based on the midrash). In Rashi's reading, God too is unbothered by Avraham leaving him on "call waiting". He simply continues where he left off, giving Avraham the weighty tidings of his plans of devastation and destruction for Sodom and Gemorrah. Rashi is also unconcerned by the fact that God seems to work in a dual, double mode. He Himself appears to Avraham but at the same time, sends angels, messengers. Why a double channel? Why not simply deliver the message personally?

INTERIM SUMMARY

And so, we have seen three very different ways of reading this parsha, of imagining it. For Rambam it is all a prophetic vision. For Rashbam it is a this worldly occurrence (with an otherworldly message.) For Rashi, the "camera" shifts from God

¹ In the story of the burning bush – see Shemot 3:2-4 the bush is first termed as an angel and then is replaced by YHVH. So in visions, sometimes there can be interchange.

to His messengers and back again.

THE POWER OF KINDNESS (CHESED)

Of course, Rashi's reading is the most familiar. We have imbibed it since our earliest moments of chumash study. And it would be worthwhile to dwell upon the religious implications of Rashi's commentary here.

Maybe Rashi is happy having Avraham leaving God hanging as Avraham welcomes his guests because he sees another focus to the parsha. It seems to me that for Rashi this parsha contains story within story within story. The central theme is that of Chesed - kindness and compassion.

Rashi reads this opening parsha as a paradigm of hospitality, kindness to strangers, care for the disadvantaged and weak. See the manner in which God visits the sick Avraham. See the way that Avraham; recovering from an operation; responds with haste and enthusiasm as he runs to draw guests into his home. The words "run", "quick" are repeated over and over as Avraham hurries to attend to these strangers every need. He personally supervises the kitchens, he acts as a waiter serving their food. He also accompanies them on their way, not letting them leave without an escort.

The Halakha takes precise account of this behaviour:

"The reward of escorting a visitor from one's home is the greatest of all rewards for hospitality. This is a law set in place by Avraham Avinu and the charitable ways which he made his lifestyle. He would give wayfarers food and drink and would escort them on their way." (Mishne Torah. Hilchot Evel . 14:2)

These values are seen to override even the concerns of God Himself . The Halakha continues (based on Gemara Shabbat 127a):

" Hospitality is of greater worth than receiving the Divine Presence itself. This we learn from Genesis 18:2: 'And he looked up and saw three men (and ran towards them)'." (ibid)

Rashi's reading is approved of in Jewish law! The value of hospitality overrides the Holy presence of God. God prefers that we attend to needy strangers than attend to Him. He will wait!

GOD'S MESSAGE

A question which remains looming in the background is: what did God want to tell Avraham? Reading through our Parsha, we have a possible answer. The moment the three visitors leave, God says to Avraham :

"Shall I hide from Avraham what I am about to do ... for I have singled him out that he may instruct his children ... to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right ... And the Lord said 'The outrage of Sodom and Gemorra is great, and their sin so grave'" (18:16-20)

God was about to tell Avraham how he was planning to destroy Sodom. Why does he bother to tell Avraham at all? Because he knows that Avraham is a man of ethical standards. He teaches his children to do that which is "just and right" and God wants to explain his actions. God wants Avraham to understand why God deems it "just and right" to destroy an entire city.

Avraham's reaction is loaded with passion and outrage:

"... Avraham came forward and said 'Will you sweep away innocent along with the guilty? What if there are fifty innocent people within the city; will you then wipe out the place and not forgive it ...? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to bring death upon innocent as well as the guilty... Shall the Judge of all the earth not deal justly?'" (18:23-25)

Avraham upholds the banner of kindness and compassion. He accuses "the Judge of all earth" with malpractice! And the ensuing discussion proves to Avraham that God is in fact correct in his verdict.

A TRANS-PARSHA THEME

In the Torah these stories all form one long flowing narrative. There is not even a paragraph break in the text. It is all one. I would like to suggest that this story tells us volumes about the depth of Avraham's moral sensitivity and passion. God's message to Avraham and Avraham's hospitality are just different facets of the same story. This story is about human sensitivity to hardship and suffering. God feels that He HAS to tell Avraham about Sodom's destruction. Why? Because Avraham is the man on earth who epitomises kindness to all. Independent of who you are, you are invited into his home unquestioningly, you are escorted back into the desert. This story revolves around the theme of Chesed and in a certain sense, the Rambam is correct. It is all a singular vision.

The Chesed theme continues like a thread through our parsha. It seems that every story describes a further angle on this central pillar of Avraham's moral character: Be it Sodom, who practice the grossest lack of hospitality. Be it Avraham's dilemma as whether to follow God's order and send his oldest son - Yishmael - away from home. And then there is the Akeda, the unfathomable of all the trials of Avraham, where Avraham is asked to obey God in sacrificing his very own son - Yitzchak. The tests of Avraham's expansive kindness get closer and closer to home and they get successively more problematic. Each test pushes Avraham's trait of Chesed nearer to the limit.

What the introductory story of our parsha does, is to engrave deep into our minds the extent to which Avraham is a man of Chesed: Kindness, hospitality, openness, expansive generosity - and truth.

Shabbat shalom.