

Vayeira, Genesis 18:1-22:24

When God appears in Genesis 18:1, the text uses the nifal form of the verb “to see” in the sense of the passive, meaning “was seen” or “appeared.” So the phrase means “it was seen” by him or “it appeared” to him, that is, to Abraham. God was seen by Abraham in the plains of Mamre, as Abraham sat at the entrance of a tent in the heat of the day.

Rashbam (Rashi’s grandson, twelfth century) asks the crucial question: God appears, but how? “The revelation of the Divine presence is usually followed by the statement ‘and He said unto him’” (Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, vol. 1 [Jerusalem: Haomanim Press] p. 158). The next thing we know, Abraham lifts his eyes and there are three men—angels, according to Rashi (on Genesis 18:2)—standing over him. The game is on.

Here’s the problem with this opening: God appeared, and then what? Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson, says the meaning is in the p’shat, the plain sense of the text. His grandfather taught that God appears in the form of three men, angels actually, who come visiting. Still, the problem is clear to these commentators: God appears, and what? What’s the message?

According to Maimonides (twelfth century), it was all a vision. He notes that “whenever it is mentioned that an angel was seen or had spoken, this has happened only in a vision of prophecy or in a dream . . .” (Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, II:42 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963] p. 388). The Ramban (Moses ben Nachman, Nachmanides, thirteenth century) cites his predecessor, Maimonides, but wants the reader to know that while vayeira may mean “a vision,” it is not “a prophecy.” Rather, it is something called “an opening of eyes” (Ramban: *Commentary on the Torah*, trans. Charles B. Chavel, vol. 1 [Brooklyn: Shilo Publishing House, 2001] p. 227).

What we are witnessing here is the privilege of divine revelation, in the form of a vision. My eyes opened, and my mind lit up like Chinese fireworks; the moon rose over my understanding, and I reached out, grabbed the moon, and rolled it across the universe.

I see now that the whole sequence of events, perhaps the entire sidrah, is a dream, an apparition. “It was seen” or “God appeared” suggests a dream or a vision, a revelation for sure, the lifting of the eyes, the sudden appearance of three men-angels, no speaking, the sense that what follows is imagined, like a dream. It’s a vision.

There are many stories in this sidrah; some are among the most difficult in the Torah to understand. But at the end of Vayeira, as if to frame our holy discussion on the sacred tale, we come upon Genesis 22:13–14, translated by JPS, “So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, ‘On the mount of Adonai there is vision.’” I am thankful for that translation, because the language here is ambiguous and uses an old literary trick: first the entire story is told, then at the end the hook appears, “there is vision,” intimating that the entire tale was, or has the quality of, a vision.

God appears and then everything that transpires—the whole serpentine story—is God-ambiguous, difficult to fathom, though the sequence resolves with the same root-words with which it began. The stories, the silences, the talk, the absence of talk, the visiting, the blessing, the laugh of Sarah, the argument with God, the flight of Lot, the trickiness of Abraham, the remembering of Sarah, the circumcising of Isaac, the alienation of Hagar and Ishmael, and the terrible trek to the mountain of God: all of it is a revelation, a vision, an appearance of godliness—somehow.

In the blessings, there is God. In the mess, there is God too. This is so much like life as we know it. It is up and down, light and dark, holy and not-yet-holy, silent and loud—all infused in some hidden way with vision.

I am writing this to remind myself when I will need it: through the losses, in the mess, in the Godliness, in the holy, and in the not-yet-holy—throughout the whole story, there is vision. God appears and—the entire sidrah—all of it, is revelatory. Every part—it’s all about God, a vision.

Walk away from the Torah for a second. Take a ride on the moon. Roll across the sky and look at the whole story from without, as it were. Take a God’s-eye view, as the Chasidim say, the long look.

The serpentine story line of Vayeira : the blessings, the curses, the deceit, the alienation, the resistance, the argument, the righteous, the wicked, the sneaking off, the return, the resolutions, the black fire, the white fire, the spoken, the unspoken, the blessings, the mess—it’s all God. The whole story, all over, is Godliness.

God appeared in a whole bunch of difficult stories. It’s all a vision of Godliness. Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Hagar, Sarah, Abimelech, the people of Sodom—good or bad—they can’t leave the story. The story is God—all God, all over.

At the end of this sequence of stories, the verb “to see” appears in yet another form in the phrase Adonai yireh, meaning “God will be seen” or “God will see” (Genesis 22:14). God will be seen in that place of integration—its original name was Shalem, meaning “wholeness,” the integrating vision, the long look. There is vision, the view from above, as it were. According to midrash, God combines the two words to form Yeru-shalayim, “the place of wholeness, where God will be seen.” In the end, we will awaken from our sleep or we will awaken to our vision, in the place where God will appear, Jerusalem.

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The story of Abraham’s discussion with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is usually described as Abraham bargaining with God. But a close reading of the text shows that God is not bargaining with Abraham!

The discussion begins, after all, with God’s rhetorical question, “Should I hide from Abraham what I am doing?” (Genesis 18:17; italics added). The question is not, “Should I hide from Abraham what I am considering doing?” which would suggest that God is open to other possibilities. No, the text clearly tells us that God knows what will happen to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Still, God engages with Abraham in a lengthy discussion about the presence of righteous people among the wicked. Why?

A clue to the answer can be found in the preface to the bargaining discussion. Following that rhetorical question in Genesis 18:17, we continue to eavesdrop on God’s thinking, as the Eternal notes that Abraham has been chosen as the source for blessings for all humanity, and further, that Abraham “. . . may teach his children and those who come after him to keep the way of the Eternal, doing what is right and just . . .” (Genesis 18:19).

If Abraham is to teach his descendants “what is right and just” he will have to know those things himself. So God tells Abraham that the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah requires their destruction.

Here, Abraham sets himself apart from his ancestor, Noah, who, upon being told that the whole world must be destroyed because of its wickedness, remains remarkably silent (Genesis 6:9–7:5). So instantly Abraham shows his colors, asking whether the innocent should perish with the guilty. Knowing that he himself and his family and entourage are “innocent,” and knowing that his nephew Lot and his family are residents of Sodom, he is confident that

there are good people among the evil ones of that wicked place.

But he does not ask God to save only the good people. He bargains for the forgiveness of the whole place. And God clearly accepts Abraham’s terms, as Genesis 18:26 shows: “The Eternal One said, ‘If I find fifty innocent people in Sodom, I will pardon the whole place for their sake.’”

But God says this knowing that there are not fifty good people, nor forty-five, nor forty; in fact, there are not even ten good people in Sodom (Lot, his wife, daughters, and sons-in-law total eight).

The bargaining concludes when Abraham proposes that the cities be saved for the sake of ten righteous people, and God agrees (Genesis 18:32). God departs and the good people (at least those who accept God’s advance warning) are saved, but the cities are destroyed, as per the discussion with Abraham. Had there been ten good people, the cities would have been saved.

Interestingly, the saving of the good people was never at issue. The point here seems to be that goodness must reach a critical mass in order to offset the evil around it. The critical mass is apparently ten, the number of people required for a minyan, which represents a Jewish community. But even when that critical mass is not achieved, goodness is preserved and evil is punished.

So, if God knew all along that there were not enough righteous people to save the cities and that the righteous ones themselves would nonetheless be saved, what is the point of the whole discussion with Abraham? It is not to change the predetermined outcome, but rather to offer Abraham the opportunity to demonstrate his own righteousness, by pressing God to save the cities for the sake of the righteous among them.

The God who knew that there were not enough righteous people in Sodom to save it must also have known that Abraham would rise to press the point of justice. Perhaps that explains why God chose Abraham to be the source of blessings for all humanity.

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Not all silences are equal. There is angry silence, and there is stymied silence. There’s silence that is imposed externally by oppression or trauma, and there is the holy silence of contemplation and inner quiet. The latter is a silence that is chosen, practiced, and rewarded with wisdom, creativity, and a sense of God’s presence.

Although this week’s Torah portion begins with holy silence, it also contains some rather disturbing silences. For

instance, while much is made in commentaries about Sarah's laughter (Genesis 18:12), rarely is it noted that she does not laugh aloud: She laughs to herself and only finds her own true voice after Isaac is born. She is also silenced in the episode with Abimelech (Genesis 20), having been implored by Abraham to tell the king a half-truth about their marriage. Furthermore, Lot's wife, who is unnamed, never utters a word about the destruction of her home and becomes fossilized in her unvoiced pain (Genesis 19:26). The text is also noticeably silent about Lot's willingness to sacrifice his daughters to a rapacious mob and about the incest that ultimately takes place between him and his traumatized daughters (Genesis 19:8, 30–38).

Later in the parashah, although it is Hagar who cries out in Genesis 21:16, we are informed that "God heard the cry of the boy" (Genesis 21:19). Rabbi Mendl of Viorki asked why the Torah said such a thing when we have no indication that Ishmael cried out at all. His answer was "that sometimes one can cry out without uttering a syllable, and it is that cry which pierces the heavens, although only God hears it" (Torah Gems, volume 1, p. 168). Thus Ishmael's silence was louder than words. This is reminiscent of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav's teaching that "you can shout loudly in a 'still small voice' (I Kings 19:12). You can scream without anyone hearing you shouting with this soundless still small voice. Anyone can do this. Just imagine the sound of such a scream in your mind. Depict the shout in your imagination exactly as it would sound. Keep this up until you are literally screaming with this soundless 'still small voice.'" (Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom, Sichos HaRan 16, p. 118). Interestingly, then, God responded to Ishmael's silence rather than to Hagar's plaintive plea.

And what about Isaac's silence in this parashah? Isaac initially asks questions like "Where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" as he and his father approach Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:8), but Abraham's betrayal ultimately silences him. Isaac never speaks to his father again.

Despite all of these painfully disturbing silences in Vayeira, the Torah portion opens with a holy silence. Abraham is sitting at the opening of the tent in the heat of the day when God appears to him. Does God appear unexpectedly, or was Abraham anticipating God's visit by meditating in an attempt to draw God's presence to him? Torah commentators have been troubled by this opening verse because it is the only instance in the Torah of God's revelation without a particular message, command, promise, or blessing. Therefore, the theophany has often been unsatisfactorily interpreted as a *bikur cholim*, "visit to the sick," after Abraham's circumcision, which occurred at the end of the previous chapter.

I would contend, however, that this revelation is a perfect example of "show" rather than "tell." While our Sages say that "the deed of hospitality is greater than the welcoming of the Divine Presence" (Talmud, Shabbat 127a), thereby belittling Abraham's communion with God in favor of the hospitality to the three visitors that immediately follows, perhaps it was because of Abraham's communion with God that he was able to offer hospitality so willingly and openheartedly. Let us understand Abraham's fulfillment of the mitzvah of hospitality as the direct result of God's revelation to him, for the goal of holy silence is not a withdrawal from community in favor of a relationship only with God but rather a fuller, more loving engagement with community, informed by one's relationship with God. As Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl taught, "Might we not say that in the performing of that commandment [of hospitality] one also evokes the presence of the Shechinah? Commandment, after all, is called mitzvah because it joins together the part of God that dwells within the person with the infinite God beyond" (Upright Practices, The Light of the Eyes, Ramsay, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982, p. 136).

While most commentators read Adonai in Genesis 18:3 as an address to the three men/angels ("my lords"), Menahem Nahum considers Adonai to be a reference to God ("my Lord"), as it normally is, asserting that Abraham is asking God to remain with him during his encounter with the three men: "Adonai, pass not away, I pray You, from Your servant. There, too, may I remain attached to You so that this not be an empty mitzvah. Be with me so that I may perform the mitzvah in such a state that it, too, be a 'greeting of the Shechinah'" (ibid., p. 137). Abraham understood that everything he did in his life was in partnership with God and was informed by his relationship with God.

Abraham knew how to ignore external noise, the hustle-bustle of a busy household that demanded his attention, and to focus instead inward on what is truly God's voice, as discovered through meditation, silence, perhaps long walks, and certainly long sits at the door of his tent, contemplating the desert. However, his practice was not to disengage from the world but rather to engage himself ever more fully and intimately in it. It was the calm learned through his contemplative practice that allowed Abraham to change course immediately when the angel told him not to harm Isaac: A lesser man may not have been as flexible or as ready to hear God's voice.

A meditative lifestyle does not necessitate living in a hermetically sealed cave. What it does involve is the discipline to give oneself silent time each day in which to discern God's voice.

May we all learn to listen to the sounds of silence, ultimately finding the true voice with which God speaks and with which we ourselves can speak.

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Adonai appeared to Abraham . . . The theme of seeing God—or not seeing God—recurs throughout Parashat Vayeira . But seeing God in this Genesis context bears little relation to what today we might consider “spiritual experience”—radical amazement, or transcendence. To the contrary, each time the Hebrew root reish-alef-hei is employed in Vayeira , it offers us a model of seeing God in the earthly substance that surrounds us each day. To see God in this instance opens us up to possibility, even (or especially) in the direst circumstances when paths to redemption are concealed. The human capacity to see God in the physical substance of our daily lives is necessary, we learn from Vayeira , and linked in an almost frighteningly direct way to human survival itself. The stakes are indeed high, for at least in this narrative, where there is a refusal to see, a turning away from, or blindness to God, death and destruction soon follow. The reader then notes who is blind to God, who averts her eyes, and who develops the capacity to see.

Vayeira begins with a visit of angels, or messengers, to Abraham and Sarah and the subsequent birth of Isaac; the Akeidah tale concludes the parashah . The stories bracketed in between—those of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the expulsion of Ishmael—portray characters with vastly different ways of seeing. The men of Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, attempt to rape Lot’s visitors, revealing their refusal to see any aspect of the Divine in their human guests. They are subsequently cast with a blindness that leaves them helpless to find their way, and they are ultimately consumed in the destruction of the two cities.

Hagar, too, in very different circumstances, initially declines to see. Instead she averts her eyes from her dying child Ishmael, perhaps hoping that if she refuses to see God in her suffering child, then she and the child both might be spared. But unlike the men of Sodom and Gomorrah, Hagar is anything but blind, and ultimately she is compelled to turn toward her son with open eyes. And when she does look toward her dying child, she sees a way to alter his tragic fate. She spots a well, and she acts; giving the boy water, she saves his life and enables him and his descendants to become a people. Hagar, by seeing, transforms the course of human destiny.

Later in the text, Abraham too seems initially unable to see; so caught up is he in fastening his son to the altar that he nearly misses the signal God sends to prevent him from slaughtering his son. Yet, he does manage to look. And when he does, he sees the ram that will replace his son on the altar. Seeing, Abraham is able to fashion for himself a way out of the “bind” he has created.

Through Hagar’s actions and those of Abraham as well, the message of Vayeira is one of hope: God is manifest in all things, and we need only allow ourselves to look. Unlike the men of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham and Hagar (and elsewhere in the parashah , Lot and Sarah) actively cast their eyes about and see God in their surroundings: in strangers walking down the road, in the deepest well and the highest mountaintop, and in the struggle of a tiny ram trying to extricate its curled horns from a thicket. And they act with urgency, moving desperately to ensure their own survival. At the start of Vayeira , Abraham hastens to perform the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim , hospitality; Hagar gives the boy water to drink; Abraham and Isaac ascend the mountain; and finally, Abraham offers the ram in place of his son. In each case, the act of seeing enables our characters to steer away from impending doom and move toward salvation instead.

Through the act of looking and seeing, we open a realm of possible paths not readily apparent when we objectify and take for granted all that fills our daily surroundings—the people, animals, and natural resources with which this earth is blessed. Vayeira reminds that even in the most desperate of circumstances, we must open our eyes and look about us. Recognizing God in all creation, we may have the capacity to act with urgency to ensure our survival.

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