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בס"ד

Parashat Vayera Part I Genesis 18

1. Linkage to the Previous Chapter

The opening verse of Genesis 18 states that “Hashem appeared to him,” employing a pronoun for Abraham, although it is the beginning of a new passage (following a *petuha* break) and initiates a relatively new subject. The several verses that follow also use pronouns for Abraham; his name does not appear until verse 6. The substitution of pronouns for his proper name compels the reader to rely on the end of the previous chapter for this basic information. This links our passage with the directly preceding account of Abraham undergoing circumcision, which placed the newly established sign of the Covenant on his foreskin. It should also be noted that our opening clause is formulated with the object of the verb preceding the subject, not “And Hashem appeared to him,” but, “And appeared to him, Hashem,” which also indicates specific continuity with the preceding episode. These literary devices point to an important message.

Since a basic purpose of this Divine appearance to Abraham is to formally confirm that he will have a son from Sarah in the coming year, it appears to be saying this: Now that Abraham has been physically consecrated with the sign of the Covenant, the time has arrived that he may father a son by Sarah. The very initiation of the process of conception of this son (i.e., the male seed passing into the reproductive channel), would now fall within the scope of the Covenant. The symbolism is clear: The nation descending from Abraham is one whose sanctification with the Covenant is total, underlying its existence from its origin.

Rabbi S. D. Sassoon viewed this notion as celebrated in the blessing formula recited at a circumcision. He explained the phrase *אֲשֶׁר קִדַּשׁ יְדִיד מִבֶּטֶן*, “Who has consecrated the beloved from the womb,” to refer to sanctification from the moment of the conjugal

relations that brought about conception (with the seed passing through the sign of the Covenant). This follows the source-verse of this clause, *בְּטֶרֶם אֶצְרְךָ בֶּבֶטֶן בְּטֶרֶם יִדְעֶתִיךָ וּבְטֶרֶם תֵּצֵא מִרְחֹם הַקֶּדֶשׁ* (“Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you; and before you came out of the womb, I sanctified you” [Jer. 1:5]).

2. Concerning the Visitors

Genesis 18 begins in an unusual manner. We are informed that Hashem appeared to Abraham in *Elone Mamre* while he was sitting at the tent entrance in the heat of day. But there is no verbal communication attached to this statement, as invariably is the case. “He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing by him. He saw and ran to greet them” (vv. 2-3).

Many have interpreted the divine appearance mentioned in verse 1 to be the episode of the three visitors disguised as human wayfarers that is narrated in the immediately following verses. Although the interpretation of these first verses is a matter of dispute, surely Abraham is not aware that his guests were a celestial delegation. The reader is informed in advance to understand what is going on. It appears that this visit begins with a type of test of Abraham or an opportunity for him to demonstrate his worthiness for G-d to confirm the miracle that He had planned for him. Perhaps G-d’s purpose was (as the Radak puts it) to strengthen Abraham’s faith in the miracle or for Sarah to hear the announcement directly. Perhaps it was to demonstrate Abraham’s worthiness to the world before the public proclamation. Or it may be connected to the Sodom story, to designate Abraham as G-d’s confidant.

Viewing his visitors as travelers who, in the heat of day, would surely benefit from refreshments, Abraham goes into action. With fervor, boundless generosity of spirit and a great degree of humility,

together with his cooperating wife and household assistants, who obviously were imbued with his spirit, Abraham extends to his guests a remarkable degree of hospitality. He himself waits upon them while they eat. He exemplifies “the righteous who say little and do much” (*b. B. Meṣ. 87a*).

The scene is just perfect and G-d is obviously impressed. It is a magnificent precedent for the nation-to-be, inspiring all who revere Abraham to continue his tradition in treating those in need with sensitivity and magnanimity. G-d promptly announces the miracle-to-be.

3. Further Concerning the Visitors

Abraham’s first word in our passage, often translated as “my lords” for *adonai* (Gen. 18:3) has engendered much discussion. The Talmud reports a Tannaitic dispute concerning it. Is it to be understood in the singular and as sacred, addressing G-d, or as the nonsacred plural term meaning “my lords,” a greeting to all three visitors together (*b. Sheb. 35:2*)? In the continuation of the verse Abraham speaks in the singular, “if I find favor בְּעֵינֶיךָ (in your [singular] eyes), אַל נָא תֵּעָבֵר, (please do not depart [singular]) from your servant.” Rashi and Ibn Ezra suggest that after his one-word plural salutation to all three men (“my lords”) he addressed the one who was the leader of the group (in accordance with protocol), asking him not to depart, assuming that he would make the decision for all three. In the following two verses, as he offers to provide his guests with basic human needs (“bathe your feet,” “recline under the tree,” “refresh yourselves”), Abraham again speaks in the plural.

The Talmud does not elaborate on how to understand the opinion (cited in the name of Rabbi Elazar Hamoda’i) that Abraham’s opening word was sacred, addressing G-d. Some later Sages in that Talmudic discussion relate to it the aphorism of אָמַר רַב יְהוֹנָתָן אָמַר רַב, that, “Hospitality to guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.” They interpret the verses as follows: In verse 1, Hashem appeared to Abraham in a vision (to “visit the sick,” as Abraham was presumably recovering from his circumcision), in verse 2 Abraham saw three men in need of hospitality and in verse 3 he requested of Hashem (who had begun His “visit” in verse 1) to please not depart while he attended to the wayfarers. Thus, Abraham exemplified the principle of the aphorism.

However, Abraham ran toward his three visitors and bowed to them in verse 2! Rashi therefore resorts to a variation of the principle that “there is no earlier or later in the Torah,” placing the statement of verse 3 before the actions of verse 2. However, verse 4 (which begins with “let a little water be taken”) continues the statement of verse 3 and is addressed to the three visitors! Surely this explanation – marvelous as the moral is – was not intended as *peshat* of the Torah text. We will return to the question of how to interpret the view that Abraham’s first word referred to G-d toward the end of this study.

The Rambam has a different approach. According to him, since verse 1 of our chapter states that G-d appeared to Abraham in a prophetic vision it means that all the particulars that follow in the succeeding episode occurred in his imaginative faculty and represent the outer dimension, “the attire,” of the essential message (*Guide to the Perplexed 2:42*). Many have objected that interpreting Abraham’s superlative comportment as occurring in a vision diminishes its value as an example. The fact that the Torah described Abraham’s actions at relatively great length and in such detail has been thought to be an indication contrary to the Rambam. Defenders of the Rambam point out that whatever is depicted as occurring in a prophetic vision is to be taken by readers as a model of ideal behavior transmitted by the Deity and just as effective, if not more so, than what might have happened to take place on a particular occasion.

In disagreement with the Rambam’s interpretation, the Ramban asked, if this episode is a happening in a prophetic vision, where is the dividing line in the text between the vision and the return to the description of events occurring in the “real” world? And how could the Rambam explain the story’s continuation with two of the angels going to Sodom and Lot having ongoing interaction with them? The Radak, who also is of the opinion that the episode of the visitors was in a prophetic vision, sees the vision concluding with verse 33 that states, “Hashem departed when He finished speaking with Abraham and Abraham returned to his place.” The next verse that speaks of the two angels coming to Sodom resumes occurrences in the “real” world. However, the difficulty is apparent. The two angels are part of the group of three and the narrative continues without a break until Lot’s daughters give birth.

A modification of the Rambam's interpretation of our passage is to see it as a literary vignette that is part of the prophecy to Moses and Israel as part of the Torah. It would be an allegorical representation of Abraham's superlative behavior that merited G-d's most favorable disposition toward him.

It should be borne in mind that a nonliteral interpretation averts the theological difficulty that many see in positing G-d to be one of the three disguised visitors, a matter we will discuss shortly.

4. Sarah's Doubts

In the previous chapter G-d had informed Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son (Gen. 17:16, 19); surely Abraham communicated that message to his wife given that it was exceedingly joyful news and she was a necessary principal in fulfillment. Included in that previous prophecy was Sarai's name change to Sarah, a modification associated with her becoming a mother, and that is her name in our passage, indicating her awareness of that prophecy.

Clearly, an aspect of the present visit was for Sarah to hear the tidings directly, to remove any possible doubts that she might have that she would be able to have a child, and it materializes that she did indeed have doubts. The patriarchs lived their lives in the sphere of the natural order of the world. Regardless of their great faith in G-d and His power, when receiving a commitment of a supernatural occurrence that He was to perform they were not necessarily prepared to internalize it quickly. Hearing G-d's pledge that she would bear a son directly would raise Sarah's spirits and suffuse her with optimism, motivating her to appropriately engage in the necessary undertaking.

The first remark made by the visitors after the repast was, "Where is Sarah your wife?" implying that she should hear the message. Of course, with this query, Abraham and Sarah realize their guests are not human beings. Upon Abraham's reply that she was "here in the tent," that is, she was within hearing range, one of the visitors stated, "I will surely return to you when the season comes around and behold, there shall be a son to Sarah your wife" (v. 10).

In an artistic flourish, there is a one-verse poetic interlude in the narrative between the statement that informs of Sarah's hearing the announcement and the

reporting of her reaction. This verse describes the situation in the objective mode, namely, that Abraham and Sarah were elderly, "old in days," and Sarah had ceased having the way of women (v. 11). This highlights the reality that, short of a miracle, it was impossible for Sarah to conceive.

Upon hearing the announcement Sarah laughs in disbelief, commenting to herself, "After I have become worn out am I to have pleasure, [also given that] my husband is old?" (v. 12). Hashem immediately questions Abraham about Sarah's incredulity, paraphrasing her remarks.

Many commentators, assuming that Abraham's three visitors did not include Hashem Himself, but were all angels, explain Hashem's direct speech to Abraham – inserted naturally in the narrative as if coming from one who is present – in the following manner. The appearance of an angel who represents G-d is equivalent to His own appearance, *שְׁלוּחֵוּ כְּמוֹתוֹ* (one's agent is as himself). It is the Torah's style for G-d's angel to manifest His presence. In Torah narrative, an angel may speak in G-d's name or set the stage for Him to speak without any transitional phrase. The text may cite the relevant spoken words exactly as G-d Himself speaking (see Gen.16:10; 21:18; 22:12, 16-18). At the burning bush the angel appeared to Moshe and the speaker was G-d Himself (Exod. 3:2-4). But in our case it does appear that Hashem Himself was present.

In Hashem's reproof of Abraham concerning Sarah's comments, He sensitively omitted her graphic depiction of her physical deterioration as well as her concern about her husband's age, portraying her as focused merely on her own elderly age (v. 13). To transmit her full interior monologue to Abraham would be counterproductive to the enterprise at hand since it requires that they engage in conjugal relations. The Sages, sensitive to this issue of being in the proper frame of mind, transmitted this lesson in their interpretation of the inquiry concerning "where is Sarah, your wife?" They commented, "It is proper to make the wife more desirous on her husband" (*b. B. Mes. 87a*). Tanna D.R. Ishmael commented, "Great is peace for even the Holy One Blessed be He modified [Sarah's statement] for its sake" (*ibid.*).

Previously, when Abraham laughed upon receiving the identical information (Gen. 17:17), expressing a similar skeptical attitude as did Sarah here, G-d did

not reprove him, but rather accommodated him. How are we to account for the difference? Onkelos, followed by Rashi, interprets Abraham's laughter as one of joy and Sarah's as one of doubt. However, a close reading of Abraham's response on that occasion and G-d's reassuring words do not support such an explanation. Abraham immediately prayed on behalf of a successful future for Ishmael – לו ישמעאל תקה (v. 18), employing language that indicates he means, "This is my hope, this is possible, would that this come about." G-d's response, "But Sarah your wife will indeed bear you a son...and as to Ishmael, I have heard you," confirms the understanding that Abraham's laughter was also one of incredulity.

The explanation may be that Abraham was hearing the amazing news for the first time; thus, the normal, human reaction is one of doubt, for which he might be excused. When Sarah heard the confirmation of the prophecy, however, she should not have so reacted. Since Abraham had already informed her of the upcoming wonder, she should have internalized the message.

Perhaps Hashem's reproof regarding Sarah's reaction, stated to Abraham, was partially directed to him for not having successfully transmitted to her a full measure of confidence in His promise. Abraham himself may still have had a scintilla of doubt if the amazing occurrence would ever come about.

Hashem's reply to the lingering doubt was הֲיִפְלֵא מִהּ דְּבָרָ? A parallel case of a prophet's suspension of belief of an amazing outcome, although Hashem had given him clear-cut notice of it, involved Jeremiah. In that case Hashem employed virtually the same words He used here in His response. Shortly before the destruction and exile of Judah, Hashem instructed Jeremiah to redeem (with a monetary payment) the property of his cousin Hanamel (Jer. 32) to show the people that he has faith in the eventual redemption of the nation. Upon dutifully fulfilling His instructions (he does not allow his behavior to be affected), the prophet asks Hashem how He could have instructed him to do such a foolhardy act, considering that destruction and exile are imminent. He acknowledges that Hashem made heaven and earth and לֹא יִפְלֵא מִמֶּךָּ כֵּל דְּבָרָ ("nothing is too wondrous for You"), etc., yet he has the question. Hashem answers, הֲמִמֶּנִּי יִפְלֵא כֵּל דְּבָרָ? ("Is anything too wondrous for Me?" [Jer. 32:27]).

5. G-d's Confidant

G-d was impressed with the superlative commitment to *hesed* manifested by Abraham and Sarah, the announcement of the birth was made and G-d moved to the next step on His agenda: the issue of the destruction of Sodom. He was now certain that Abraham would instruct his children and household after him to comport with righteousness and justice and become a great nation through whom the nations of the earth will be blessed. Accordingly, He deemed it appropriate to bestow upon Abraham the extraordinary status of being His "confidant," one to whom He reveals his plans. This is reminiscent of the concept articulated in the verse, "For the Lord G-d does not do anything without revealing His counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). Also along these lines, in condemning the false prophets, G-d states: "If they [truly] have stood in My council, let them make My words heard to My people and make them repent from their evil ways" (Jer. 23:22).

Here G-d rhetorically asks, "Am I concealing from Abraham that which I am doing [on earth] considering that he...will instruct his children and household after him to observe the way of Hashem to do righteousness and justice?" (Gen. 18:17-19). Throughout Scripture, righteousness and justice – צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט – are the primary standards by which peoples and nations are judged and it is in heroic commitment to these values that true greatness may be found.* Abraham's behavior toward the strangers made it clear that his family and household were fully imbued with these values and in complete harmony with them. He has proven himself worthy of being informed by Hashem regarding actions He may be taking on earth. Presumably, Abraham is to be given an opportunity to advise the Deity concerning His actions.

The concept of G-d's servants the prophets being privy to His purpose and doings points to an important aspect of His providence on earth. It indicates His keen interest in the input of those exceptional individuals who totally and genuinely commit their lives to His will and the welfare of others. To a degree, His servants have a special responsibility to express their opinions, to protest when necessary and request that His actions be consistent with a morally honed human conscience. His plans may be modified by the intervention of His righteous servants.

G-d informs Abraham that He is investigating the case of Sodom and Gomorrah's wickedness; if they are guilty as evidenced by preliminary indications from the cry of the suffering, their destruction is imminent. (With this "speaking in the language of man," He sets an example of judicial procedure; that is, one is not to rely on preliminary indications but on direct investigation.)

With passion and boldness, Abraham immediately begins to plead Sodom's case. He expresses the view that if there were a certain minimum number of righteous people in the city it would be proper to spare the city for their sake. He touches on the point of the unfairness of treating righteous and wicked alike. He induces G-d to agree to spare the city if the specified number of righteous is found, gradually lowering the number from fifty until he reaches ten. Abraham recognizes that there must be a basic core of righteous people in the city for there to be any realistic hope for its reformation and accordingly stops at ten.

This remarkable episode sets another example for the new nation. It reveals Abraham's concern even for sinners, recognizing the possible potential even for the most wicked of cities. It manifests his willingness to "take on" the Deity when it genuinely appears to him justice was not being served. Later in Scripture, prayers of Moses and other prophets are reminiscent of Abraham's prayer.

In the case of the golden calf apostasy, G-d hinted to Moses that ultimately prayer on behalf of the sinners was welcome by saying, "leave Me alone" and I will destroy them and make you into a great nation (Exod. 32:10; Deut. 9:14). Perhaps in the case of Abraham, G-d's informing him of the impending doom was to be understood as an indication that prayer is called for and could influence, even alter, the outcome.

The Midrash apparently saw a more tangible hint here. According to an ancient tradition (cited by Rashi on this verse), the original text of verse 18:22b did not read "And Abraham remained standing before Hashem" while the two other visitors departed to Sodom, as we have it today, but that "Hashem remained standing before Abraham." A *tiqqun sofrim* (scribal emendation of the Sages of antiquity) reversed the subject and object of the clause to our present-day reading (*Gen. Rab.* 49:7; *Tanḥuma Beshalah* 16). The Sages' purpose may have been to

defend G-d's honor in accordance with a later-evolved standard of respect by which it may strike the reader as inappropriate to state, "Hashem remained standing before Abraham," even if the word sequence plays a role in what the narrative is relating. Or they may have been uncomfortable with portrayal of G-d in such human terms.

In any event, the Sages might very well have understood the supposed original order of the verse to be alluding to our point. Why is G-d waiting for Abraham – He already informed him of His plans for Sodom and sent His two agents there – if not to encourage him to pray? The verse does otherwise appear redundant.

As with an individual, so is it with a city or nation. G-d's plan of action, and His sense of what is an appropriate judgment in a particular situation, in the absence of sincere human prayer is different from what it may be when prayer is proffered, even if that prayer results from a human protest regarding His intentions. And He prompts and encourages that prayer; in a way of speaking, He desires and awaits it. The potency of prayer is an intrinsic feature of the system He established, by which He governs the world.

If the supposed original reading is "G-d remained standing before Abraham," it would seem to imply that He was one of the three visitors. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain how it came about that He was standing before Abraham. This would explain the view of Rabbi Elazar Hamoda'i. Abraham's opening word to his visitors is sacred in that he was addressing the Deity even though he did not realize at the time that it was the Deity he was addressing. Since that was indeed the case, the term is *qodesh*. Of course this may be the explanation of Rabbi Elazar Hamoda'i even if he does not subscribe to the *tiqqun sofrim* interpretation on 18:22.

(Some have seen Gen. 19:27 as a contraindication to the *tiqqun sofrim* interpretation: "Abraham...[returns] to the place where he stood before Hashem.")

It is interesting that the announcement confirming the forthcoming birth of Isaac and the destruction of the wicked cities were combined in one compound process. The former represents the continuation of the commitment to *derekh Hashem* while the latter

constitutes Hashem's destruction of the symbol of its opposite.

Endnote

*Although many Biblical descriptions of G-d's attributes and the basic values He desires cite *ṣedaqah* and *mishpat*, in many others *ḥesed* (kindness, compassionate or faithful behavior) is also attested. "But let him who chooses to be praised be praised in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am Hashem who does *ḥesed*, *mishpat* and *ṣedaqah* in the earth, for in these do I desire, declared Hashem" (Jer. 9:23). "*Ḥesed umishpat* observe" (Hosea 12:7). "What is it the Lord requires of you, only to do *mishpat*, love *ḥesed*, and walk modestly with your G-d" (Micah 6:8). One may wonder why *ḥesed* appears in some cases and not in others. In the case of Abraham's

comportment toward the visitors as described in our chapter, many consider the quality of *ḥesed* to have been the most prominent! However, it may be that *mishpat* and *ṣedaqah* stem from a higher motivation, one based on a recognition as to what "must" be done from the point of view of justice and what is right, viewing the needy individual as having a right to what others may do for him. Abraham acts in a manner that it was evident he recognizes to be right; visitors should be graciously welcomed and treated according to the ability of the host. It should not be a matter that is considered compassion and charity. The latter would generally only go so far without the foundation of "it is right." Perhaps in the compound usages, *ḥesed* and *ṣedaqah* are a type of hendiadys, bringing out the idea of *ḥesed* that stems from the recognition of what is just and right.

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