

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYERA

AVRAHAM AND THE ANGELS

By Rav Ezra Bick

The story of Avraham and the angels is so full of incidental lessons - the mitzva of visiting the sick (God visiting Avraham, Rashi 18:1), the mitzva of welcoming strangers (Avraham running about to feed the "men," cf. Shabbat 127a), the permissibility to tell a "white lie" (God changing the account of what Sara said about Avraham's age, Rashi 18:13), the modesty of Sara (Rashi 18:9) - that we are wont to ignore the perplexing nature of the story itself. For what purpose did the angels come to visit Avraham? The obvious answer is to inform him of the impending birth of Yitzchak. But this merely forces us to go one step deeper with our question.

1. Why is it important to inform Avraham that Sara will give birth in one year? God has promised him that he will have children since the beginning of Lekh Lekha. Neither Rivka nor Rachel, who were both barren, received prior notice of their impending pregnancy. Somewhat more generally, what is the importance to us, the readers, of the fact that there was a year's advance notice?

2. More specifically, just a day or two earlier God had already told Avraham the same thing. When commanding Avram to perform mila, God changed his name to Avraham and Sarai's to Sara, adding, "I shall bless her and also give you from her a son" (17:16). A few verses later, God tells Avraham explicitly, "But Sara your wife will bear a son for you, and you shall call his name Yitzchak ... and I will establish my covenant with Yitzchak, who Sara will bear for you AT THIS TIME IN THE NEXT YEAR" (17:19-21). This is nearly identical to the message of the angels. (The Ramban surmises that Avraham had not told Sara this piece of news, perhaps because he immediately performed mila, and then was ill. Hence the purpose of the angels' visit was to inform Sara of what Avraham already knew. Aside from the inherent unlikelihood of Avraham "forgetting" to tell his wife that after thirty years she is about to bear a son, I think the Torah itself indicates that this is not so. God changed Sarai's name to Sara. From that point on, she is only called Sara, including by the angels when they ask about her. It seems clear that Avraham had already told her of her new name; how could he not have told her of the birth of Yitzchak, which is bound up with the new name?)

3. Finally, why angels? As we pointed out, God Himself had told Avraham the same news. What's more, God has appeared to Avraham at the time the angels come to his tent. It surely appears very strange that God has sent angels to tell Avraham (or Sara) the good news when He Himself is in the midst of speaking to him. No sooner do the angels leave, then God continues His conversation with Avraham. In general, I think we are justified in not expecting someone like Avraham, to whom God spoke often, to have to rely

on angels for the message of God. In the Torah, other than Avraham, we find angels speaking only to people who have not merited a more direct communication from God, such as Hagar, Lot, or Bil'am. (This does not include prophetic dreams, such as Yaakov in Beit-El). I think we feel that it is indicative of Hagar's relatively lower status that she is visited by an angel rather than by God. This is true generally in Tanakh as well. Prophets are spoken to by God, while others have extraordinary experiences of meeting an angel. Avraham twice is spoken to by angels - here, and later at the climax of the akeida.

4. This brings us to an additional question which we have perhaps avoided in the past. Just how are we supposed to understand the role of angels, here and elsewhere? The angels speak in God's name (according to most commentators, the phrase "shov ashuv" - "I will return to you in a year" [18:10] is fulfilled when "God remembered Sara as He said, and God did unto Sara as He spoke" [21:1]). They are basically manifestations of God's will - how, then, are we to understand the difference between God speaking to Avraham at the end of Lekh Lekha, and an angel speaking to him at the beginning of Vayera?

I think the answer to these questions, as well as the key to understanding parashat Vayera in general, is rooted in the last section of Lekh Lekha. Brit Mila, the physical induction of Avraham into a covenant with God, introduced by the words, "Walk before Me and be perfect," constituted a transformation of the basic relationship of Avraham to the natural world. In Lekh Lekha, Avraham reacts to the surrounding world according to the rules of nature and society, even as he is aided by God. He fights a battle with his private army. God helps him by granting him victory, but nevertheless he has to fight, using his own powers. Avraham lives on Earth, even as, when he has a problem, God speaks to him from the heaven. But after brit mila, Avraham is no longer merely a saintly inhabitant of Earth, a relatively better member of human society. Now, he walks with God. This is clearly indicated by the opening verse of the parasha. The Abrabanel perceptively deduces from the absence of Avraham's name in the opening verse - "God appeared to him in Elonei Mamre," rather than "God appeared to Avraham in Elonei Mamre" - that this appearance is an immediate continuation of the mila, despite the new parasha (compare the Ramban at the end of 18:2). But there seems to be no purpose for this appearance, no message from God to Avraham. The answer is that in this case, the appearance is its own purpose. After the mila, God visits Avraham to spend time with him, in fellowship, for Avraham now belongs to the society of God and not that of men. Every previous appearance of God to Avraham was to tell him something specific. Here it symbolizes the fellowship of God and Avraham. Mila has changed Avraham's status from that of a righteous individual to that of "yedid Hashem," a part of the spiritual community. He is "ba'al brit" Hashem rather than "ba'al brit" Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre.

Now we come to the visit of the angels. Chazal say that when they meet Avraham they are called "men," whereas when meeting Lot they are referred to as "angels," because Avraham was used to angels, so they appeared to him as men, whereas for Lot it was a novelty. Generalizing

somewhat, I think this means that the presence of angels in Avraham's company, from this point on, is the presence of his fellows, his natural environment. "Walk before me and be perfect." Walking before God, as the retinue of the king, is what we imagine angels do. Avraham lives midst the angels now, so angels appear to him as men.

What is the difference between the announcement by God of Yitzchak's birth in Lekh Lekha and that of the angel here? Notice the introduction - "I shall return to you in one year (ka'et chaya) and behold, a son, of Sara your wife." The angel doesn't merely predict the birth, he states that his presence will be with Avraham and it will be manifested in the presence of a son. In other words, the presence of angels, of God, of a heavenly environment in Avraham's house expresses itself naturally in creation and rejuvenation. Not "I will give you a son," but "behold, a son." Sara ("a greater degree of perception is granted to woman") picks up on this immediately. "After I am worn, shall I experience rejuvenation?" (see Rashi). In Avraham's case, it will be very unusual to have a child at such an advanced age, but for Sara, it requires transcendence of time, a return to her youth. Avraham has a child "in his old age" (21:2 and 21:7), but Sara has actually become young again. Not having directly experienced mila, though included in its results (her name is changed too), Sara laughs in amazement at the thought. The usual flow of time has become meaningless in Avraham's house. The angels do not come merely to INFORM, they come to PRODUCE the effect itself (just as they destroy Sodom, and, according to Chazal, they cure Avraham). In other words, the presence of angels here symbolizes the spirit of God and its workings, not as a miracle from afar to correct a difficult situation, but rather as a total transformation of the conditions of Avraham's life in this world.

All of parashat Vayera reflects this new transcendent state of Avraham.

1. As the angels leave Avraham, God states, "Shall I conceal from Avraham that which I am going to do?" Avraham has become a partner of God's in running the world, a companion, one who shares in the responsibility. "Avraham will become a great and mighty nation and in him, ALL THE NATIONS of THE EARTH WILL BE BLESSED." Can God act in Sodom without telling Avraham?
2. Avraham argues with God about God's role in the world - "The judge of all the earth, shall He not do justice?" Avraham is no longer merely an inhabitant of the lower world, but one who is engaged in defining how it should be run from above.
3. Why was Sodom destroyed? The Torah does not elaborate what was so unusually terrible about Sodom, other than a hint that they did not appreciate guests. Surely, there were other cities around the world that were not particularly hospitable that did not suffer this incredible plight. I think the answer is rooted in Avraham's new state - hence the same angels who visit Avraham destroy Sodom. (Rashi deduces from the singular tense used whenever one of the angels fulfils a mission that each act was performed by a different angel - one to cure Avraham, one to destroy Sodom, and one to announce the birth of Yitzchak. This does not contradict my point that the narrative connects Avraham's receiving the announcement of Yitzchak's birth

and the destruction of Sodom precisely by sending the angels to do both. On the contrary. If, for reasons of metaphysical angelology, each angel does one specific and distinct task, why do they travel together? Why do the angels who destroy Sodom and save Lot visit Avraham in the company of the one who has the job of informing him of Yitzchak's birth? Clearly, they are on one long continuous mission.) Sodom is destroyed because Eretz Yisrael does not suffer evil. Compare:

The last generation, your children who will come after you, and the stranger who will come from a far land, shall say, when they see the plagues of that land (of Israel) and its sickness, which God has laid upon it. Brimstone, and salt, and burning all the land, not sown, nor growing, nor producing any grass, like the overthrow of Sodom and Amora, Adma and Tzvoim, which God overthrew in his rage and anger. And all the nations shall ask, why... And God rooted them out of their land. (Devarim 29:21-27)

The destruction of the people is not emphasized as much as the destruction of the land. Why is Sodom destroyed by angels who are coming from visiting Avraham after his mila? This, too, is a reflection of the elevation of Avraham above the natural order. Eretz Yisrael, the land given to Avraham, is no longer a normal land, obeying the natural laws of nature. It is the earthly home of the companions of God, a land which itself cannot suffer wickedness. The same angels (i.e. the presence of God) who, by their presence in Avraham's house, rejuvenate Sara and Avraham via Yitzchak, bring down brimstone and fire by their presence in Sodom.

4. "When God destroyed the cities of the plain, He remembered Avraham, and He sent Lot out of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelled" (19:29). In Lekh Lekha, Avraham saves Lot by attacking the kings who have taken him captive. In Vayera, he saves him once again simply because God, remembering his companion Avraham, separates Lot from his environment, a pale reflection of Avraham's separation from his environment.

5. Avimelech takes Sara to his palace, as Pharaoh had done earlier. In the first case, a plague (which we of course know comes from God) afflicts Pharaoh, and he hurries to return Sara. This time, God Himself comes to tell Avimelech to return Sara. The midrash and the commentators can barely restrain their astonishment that Avimelech merits the word of God. I think the focus should not be the merit of Avimelech, but rather on the relationship of Avraham and God. Someone has caused Avraham a very serious and personal problem. God intervenes personally to set it right. God adds - "Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live" (20:7). In relation to the inhabitants of the land, Avraham has almost magical powers to intercede with God and cure the sick. God is telling Avimelech, "You have a problem, but Avraham has 'proteksia' with Me; he is one of My own, so he can help you."

6. The akeida - well, that is already another stage, but we are running out of time, so I'll leave that for you to work out on your own.

Vayera is a new parasha because it is a totally new stage in the life of Avraham. It is rooted narratively, however, in the end of Lekh Lekha. The brit

of Avram concludes the story of a righteous man; the visit of the angels to Avraham commences the story of heavenly man, what Chazal call "merkava li-Shekhina."

Further questions and points to ponder:

1. On one other occasion, at the end of the akeida, an angel appears to Avraham. Although Chazal claim that angels appear as "men" to Avraham, there he is called an "angel." Why? Notice that the angel there speaks to Avraham "from the heavens."
2. Rashi 23:23 - "Vayihyu chayei Sara." Connect to the shiur.
3. 23:4 - "ger ve-toshav anochi imachem." 23:6 - "nesi elokim ata betocheinu". "All the nations got together and cut cedars and made a great platform. They seated Avraham on it on high and were praising him, saying, 'Nesi elokim ata betocheinu,' you are our king, you are our nasi, you are our god" (Bereishit Rabba 43:5). What is Avraham's social position in Canaan?
4. "'From my flesh I behold God' - Had I not done so (performed mila), from where would God have appeared to me?" (Bereishit Raba 48:2. cf. ibid 48:3-5).
5. "Avraham said, Until I did mila, passersby would come in to me; now that I have done mila, are the passersby not going to come to me anymore? God said to him, Until you did mila, humans would come to you, now I Myself (bi-chevodi, in My glory) will come and appear to you, as it is written, Vayera eilav HaShem" (Bereishit Raba 47:9).
6. The Netziv explains that the difference between God's announcement in Lekh Lekha and the angel's announcement in Vayera is that God said "at this time in the other year (bashana ha-acheret)," which does not necessarily imply the very next year; the angel said "at this time next year (ka'eit chaya)." How else can we explain the difference between the two phrases?