Dvar Torah Vayera

Genesis 18:1

Now the Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot.

Rashi:

לבקר את החולה. אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא יום שלישי למילתו היה, ובא הקב"ה ושאל בשלומו

This verse raises a number of questions.

1. When did God appear to Abraham? Rashi says it was on the third day after his circumcision, others suggest it was on that very same day.

2. What did Abraham see? The Rashbam says that it was the angels who came to visit him and the message they brought. See also the debate between the Rambam and the Ramban as to what Abraham "saw"

3. Unlike earlier revelations to Abraham, there is no direct mention of God saying anything to him. Some suggest that the content is provided later on in his discussion with the angels.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik describes this encounter as a moment of transformation from a formal contractual relationship to God to one of friendship. The following excerpt is taken from Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.

The Lord Appeared to Him

Parashat Lekh Lekha speaks about promise, but the road leading from promise to fulfillment is a tortuous one. In *Parashat Va-yera,* we confront the beginning of the fulfillment of Abraham's destiny, at least insofar as the birth of Isaac is concerned. "The Lord appeared to him, *va-yera eilav Hashem*, in the groves of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day" (Gen. 18:1).

What first attracts our attention to this verse are the parallel verses of God's appearing to Abraham: "The Lord appeared to Abram, and said, *va-yomer*" (Gen. 12:7). After Abraham won the battle with the kings, "The word of God came to him in a

vision *lemor*, saying" (Gen. 15:1). Again there was a message, God told him something. And then, "When Abram was ninety nine years old, the Lord appeared, *va-yera,* to Abram, and He said to him, *va-yomer eilav*" (Gen. 17:1). He appeared to him, He revealed Himself and told him something, commanded him or promised him or enlightened him—a message was delivered. But here there is no *va-yomer*. What was the purpose of the revelation, what objective was God seeking; what did He tell him? There was no message. Moreover, none of the preceding verses

describing God's appearances to Abraham use the pronoun *eilav*. Abraham is always referred to by name. But here we have "*Va-yera eilav Hashem,* the Lord appeared to him." The pronoun *eilav* refers back to Abraham, who is mentioned in the preceding chapter. But why does the verse relate this revelation to the story recorded in the last chapter and not start *de novo,* from scratch?

Rashi says: "*Va-yera eilav,* He appeared to him in order to visit the sick." God paid Abraham a sick call because he was in pain after his circumcision. Rabbi Hama ben Hanina said that it was the third day following the circumcision, when one suffers severe pain, and the Almighty appeared to ask about his state of health (*Bava Metzi'a* 86b). Abraham was in need, and God came to visit him. There is no *va-yomer*, no message, no command, no law, no promise. God simply came to see him. If two individuals are close friends, sharing a sense of intimacy

and companionship, then one of them need not have a message to deliver in order to walk into the other's home. That is where Martin Buber made his biggest mistake. Conversation or dialogue is not the highest form of friendship. Once a conversation comes to an end, there is nothing else to do but leave the house. But the highest form of friendship does not require words. I do not have to tell my friend why I came to see him. I just come, because I like to be present in his home. This usually happens between husband and wife, between brother and sister or parent and child. Except in our halakhic studies, my father talked very little to me; he never confided in me. But he wanted me to be around, because he liked me. There was no need for words, for an exchange of remarks. Why does a mother like to have her baby sleep in her room, or in a room next to her? It is not simply because of the safety of the baby. The mere feeling that the baby is nearby gives her satisfaction.

Before this visit, the relationship between God and Abraham was a formal one; it did not involve friendship. There was a contractual relationship between employer and employee, between master and servant. Every *va-yera* was accompanied by a *va-yomer*. But after Abraham was circumcised and the covenant established, there was a new intimacy, a new kind of friendship—one that did not have to be expressed in words, that did not need speech or a message. Familiarity has changed into friendship, where the *va-yomer* is completely superfluous. The purpose of visiting is not to tell him anything, but just to see him, to listen to his voice. God came because Abraham was ill, but even if Abraham had been well, God would have been there.

Now we understand why *eilav* is used. As long as the relationship is a formal one, it is guided by the rules of courtesy. Formality requires mentioning the name. But when we visit a friend, there is no need for the name. Furthermore, in the Bible, the verb and the subject are usually not separated. If *va-yera* is the verb and God is the subject, the verse should have read *va-yera Hashem eilav*, not *va-yera eilav Hashem.* By reversing the subject and the object, the Torah means to emphasize that Abraham was very close to God, that God longed to see him. He felt lonely without Abraham, so to speak. He wanted to see him, just as a mother wants to see her baby, or a father his child. There is no need for *va-yomer*; God simply wanted to be near Abraham. That is why Isaiah (41:8) calls him *Avraham ohavi,* "My beloved." Up to this point we have been reading the story of *Avraham avdi,* Abraham the servant of God. From *Parashat Va-yera* on is a new story; a new tale is introduced, the story of Abraham the friend of God.

Let us compare God's revelation to Abraham in the *berit bein ha-betarim* with this visit. We read in *Lekh Lekha*, "And it came to pass that, when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and lo, a dread, even a great darkness, fell upon him. And He said unto Abram, Know of a certainty that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs" (Gen. 15:12–13). When God reveals Himself to Abraham here, the story is told in three words: "*Va-yera eilav Hashem.*" The elements of fear and fright, the overpowering sleep, the loss of fac-

ulties in the earlier encounter with the Almighty are not mentioned.

Apparently there are two kinds of revelation, and the contrast between them is huge. The experience of revelation as described in *Lekh Lekha* is accompanied by fright and horror. Man is completely awed and feels crushed by the impact of his confrontation with the Almighty. Confused and frightened, he finds himself standing on the brink of infinity, which is about to rob him of his existential autonomy and dignity. The encounter with God means the end of man, for he cannot stand up in the presence of God without losing his own identity. When finitude is added to infinity, the result is infinity. If man stands too close to God, man disappears.

That man is frightened by the presence of God is well known to us from the Bible. For instance, David says: "Where shall I go from Your spirit, or where shall I flee from Your presence?" (Ps. 139:7). This is the *pahad* or *yir'at Elokim* that man feels in the presence of God. Consider an ignorant person—one who knows that he is ignorant—meeting with the greatest of scholars. He has a feeling of humility and worthlessness that will ultimately be translated into an experience of fright or even non-existence. Man loses his human dignity when he comes close to the Master of the Universe because he compares his existence with the eternal, infinite existence of the Almighty, and this leads to fear of God. This is exactly what transpired at the *berit bein ha-betarim*. Abraham completely lost his self-worth and dignity when he was overpowered by the presence of God.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Ps. 23:6). When God accompanies me, I do not have to be afraid of anything. When God appears to man and receives him like an old friend, man is elated, invigorated, and happy. He feels secure and safe.

The revelation described in *Va-yera* is more of a redemptive experience, cathartic and joyous. Man is no longer frightened by the appearance of the Almighty; on the contrary, it gives him a sense of unshakable security and confidence. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; in lush meadows He lays me down" (Ps. 23:1–2). When I am close to God, I feel safe. I know that He will take care of all my needs. I feel His hand on my neck, just as the sheep feels the hand of the shepherd; I lack nothing.

If I may introduce a personal note, many times I feel very close to God. I feel His hand on my shoulder. This happens not only during *tefillah*, prayer, but during *talmud Torah*, when I am studying. I may study at night alone in the room, delving into a passage in Tosafot that on its face makes no sense. When I restore the coherence of the Tosafot and succeed in conceptualizing the text, I feel happy not only because this is creative work, but because I feel the presence of *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* over my shoulder, looking into the book, at the text. I then feel that all my prayers will be implemented if I *daven* properly. Our experience of the Holy One should be intimate, as if I can touch Him and feel Him looking at me. Thus God came to Abraham *lish'ol bi-shlomo*, to inquire after his health, to show friendship and involvement.