

## 5780 - Genesis 18-22 - Vayera (And he appeared)

God appears to Abraham. Three strangers pass by. Abraham offers them hospitality. One of them tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child. Sarah, overhearing, laughs in disbelief.

God then tells Abraham of the judgment He is about to visit on the people of Sodom. **Abraham engages in a momentous dialogue with God about justice. God agrees that if there are ten innocent men in the city He will spare it.**

Two of the visitors, by now identified as angels, go to Abraham's nephew, Lot, in Sodom and rescue him, his wife and two of their daughters from the destruction.

Eventually, the promised child, Isaac, is born to Sarah. The parshah ends with the great test of the "binding of Isaac."

The first of the following essays looks at **the significance of the way the Torah describes Abraham's hospitality to strangers**. The second reflects on **Abraham's dialogue with God and its implications for the nature of justice**. The third is about **Lot's reluctance to leave Sodom despite the fact that he knew it was about to be destroyed**. The fourth offers an interpretation of the delays and trials involved in the birth and binding of Isaac.<sup>1</sup>

### *God and Strangers*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>18:1</sup> **God appeared to Abraham** by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. **He lifted up his eyes and looked, and lo, three men** were standing over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them and bowed low to the ground ...

*Parashat Vayera* opens with one of the most famous scenes in the Bible: Abraham's meeting with the three enigmatic strangers. The text calls them men. We later discover that they were in fact angels, each with a specific mission.

**The chapter at first glance seems simple, almost fable-like. It is, however, complex and ambiguous.** It consists of three sections:

- Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.
- Verses 2-16: Abraham meets the men/angels.
- Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

The relationship between these sections is far from clear. Do they represent one scene, two or three?

**The most obvious possibility is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event.** First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, "to visit the sick"<sup>(1)</sup> after Abraham's circumcision. Then the visitors arrive with the news that Sarah will have a child. Then takes place the great dialogue about justice and the imminent punishment of the people of Sodom.

**Maimonides suggests that there are only two scenes:** The visit of the angels, and the dialogue with God. The first verse does not describe an event at all; it is, rather, a chapter heading.<sup>(2)</sup> It tells us that the events that follow are all part of a prophetic revelation, a divine-human encounter.

**The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. God appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks God to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed – in verse 17 – does he turn to God, and the conversation begins.**

The interpretation of the chapter affects – and hinges upon – the way we translate the word *Adonai* in Abraham's appeal: "Please *Adonai*, if now I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by, I pray you, from your servant" (18:3). *Adonai* can be a reference to one of the names of God. It can also be read as "my lords" or "sirs." **In the first case, Abraham would be addressing God. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by.** The same linguistic ambiguity appears in the next chapter (19:2), when two of Abraham's visitors – now described as angels – visit Lot in Sodom:

And the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot sat by the city gates. When he saw them, he rose to meet them and bowing low, he said, "I pray you now, *adonai*, turn aside to your servant's house and tarry all night and bathe your feet and you shall rise up early and go on your way." (19:1-2)

**As there is no contextual element to suggest that Lot might be speaking to God, it seems clear, in this case, that *adonai* refers to the visitors.**

The simplest reading then of both texts – the one concerning Abraham, the other, Lot – would be to read the word consistently as "sirs." Several English translations indeed take this approach. Here, for example, is the New English Bible's:<sup>3</sup>

The Lord appeared to Abraham ... He looked up, and saw three men standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the opening of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. "Sirs," he said, "if I have deserved your favour, do not pass by my humble self without a visit."

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-101.

<sup>3</sup> The "NT" of the New English Bible (NEB) was published in 1961, the "OT" (with the Apocrypha) in 1970. In 1989, it was significantly revised.

**Jewish tradition, however, does not.**

Normally, differences of interpretation of biblical narrative have no halakhic implications. They are matters of legitimate disagreement. This case of Abraham's addressee is unusual, however, because if we translate *Adonai* as "God," it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. If by contrast, we translate it as "my lords" or "sirs," it has no special sanctity. **Jewish law rules that in the scene with Lot, *adonai* is read as "sirs," but in the case of Abraham it is read as "God."**

This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that ***Abraham actually interrupted God as He was about to speak, asking Him to wait while he attended to the visitors.*** According to tradition, the passage should be read thus:

The Lord appeared to Abraham ... He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them, and bowed down. [Turning to God] he said: "My God, if I have found favour in Your eyes, do not leave Your servant [i.e. Please wait until I have given hospitality to these men]." [He then turned to the men and said:] "Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet and rest under this tree ..."<sup>(3)</sup>

**This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence."**<sup>(4)</sup> Faced with a choice between listening to God, and offering hospitality to what seemed to be human beings, Abraham chose the latter. God acceded to his request, and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

How can this be so? It seems disrespectful at best, heretical at worst, **to put the needs of human beings before attending on the presence of God.**

**What the passage is telling us, though, is something of immense profundity.** The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew however, that God is not in nature but beyond nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, every person, powerful and powerless alike.

**The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity.** As the book of Psalms puts it:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.  
They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see;  
they have ears, but cannot hear, nostrils but cannot smell ...  
They that make them become like them, and so do all who put their trust in them. (Psalms 115:4—8)

**One cannot worship impersonal forces and remain a person;** compassionate, humane, generous, forgiving. **Precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say "You," we honour human dignity as sacrosanct.**

**Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger.** It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham's greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one. In one of the most beautiful comments on this episode, Rabbi Shalom of Belz<sup>4</sup> notes that in verse 2, the visitors are spoken of as standing above Abraham (*nitzavim alav*), while in verse 8, Abraham is described as standing above them (*omed aleihem*). At first, the visitors were higher than Abraham because they were angels and he a mere human being. But when he gave them food and drink and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels.<sup>(5)</sup>

By choosing the most radical of the three possible interpretations of Genesis 18, the sages allowed us to hear one of the most fundamental principles of the life of faith: We honour God by honouring His image, humankind.

(1) Rashi to *Bereshit* 18:1; *Sotah* 14a

(2) Moreh Nevuhim 11:42

(3) See *Shabbat* 127a

(4) *Ibid.* See also *Shavuot* 35b

(5) Dover Shalom ad loc.; cited in *Peninei Hassidut* (Jerusalem, 1987) to *Bereshit* 18:2.

1. *The most obvious possibility is three. Each of the above sections is a separate event.*

Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.

Verses 2-16: Abraham meets the men/angels.

Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham ...

<sup>18:1</sup> **And** the LORD appeared to Abraham (*lit. "to him"*) near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. **And** <sup>2</sup>Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby ...

<sup>1</sup>וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵלָיו מִמָּרָא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב בְּתַח־הָאֵהָל כְּחֶם הַיּוֹם: <sup>2</sup>וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אֲנָשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו ...

(*va-yei-ra eilav Adonai b'eilonei mam-rei v'hu yo-shev pe-tach ha-ohel k'chom ha-yom. Va-yi-sah ei-nav va-yar v'hineh shlo-sha ana-shim nitza-vim a-lav ...*)

<sup>4</sup> Sholom Rokeach (1781–1855), also known as the *Sar Sholom* was the first Belzer Rebbe.

<sup>17:22</sup> **And** when he had finished speaking with **Abraham**, God went up from him. <sup>23</sup> **And** on that very day **Abraham** took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. <sup>24</sup> **And Abraham** was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, <sup>25</sup> **and** his son Ishmael was thirteen; <sup>26</sup> **Abraham** and his son Ishmael were both circumcised on that very day. <sup>27</sup> **And** every male in Abraham's (lit., "in his") household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him.

a. What is the theological implication of the understanding that "each of the(se) sections (are) separate event(s)."

1) Without changing the profound moral lesson that the text provides (i.e., regarding hospitality)—it does avoid the inevitable inference that one of the "three men" is a visible manifestation of HaShem in a physical "form."

<sup>18:1</sup> **The LORD appeared to Abraham** near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup> **Abraham looked up and saw three men** standing nearby ... <sup>3</sup> He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, **my lord**, do not pass your servant by ...

<sup>9</sup> "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he said. <sup>10</sup> **Then one of them said**, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" <sup>13</sup> **Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' "Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son" ...**

<sup>16</sup> When **the men got up to leave**, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. <sup>17</sup> Then **the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"** <sup>18</sup> Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. <sup>19</sup> For **I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just**, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." <sup>20</sup> Then **the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous** <sup>21</sup> **that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.** If not, I will know."

<sup>22</sup> **THE MEN TURNED AWAY AND WENT TOWARD SODOM, BUT ABRAHAM REMAINED STANDING BEFORE THE LORD ...** <sup>25</sup> Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ... <sup>33</sup> **When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.**

1) *The verbs in v. 3 are singular, i.e., only one of the three strangers is spoken to, whereas the verbs in vv. 4-5 are plural.*

a) Genesis Rabbah XLVIII:9

9. He [Abraham] complained: ' Before I was circumcised travellers used to visit me; now that I am circumcised, perhaps they will no longer visit me? ' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'Hitherto uncircumcised mortals visited thee; but now I and My retinue (attendants) will appear to thee. Thus it is written, AND HE LIFTED UP HIS EYES AND LOOKED (XVIII, 2)—**he saw the Shechinah and saw the angels.**

2) Exodus 3:1-6

<sup>2</sup> There **the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush ...** <sup>4</sup> When **the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush**, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup> **Do not come any closer," God said.** "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> Then he said, "**I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.**" **At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.**

a) Soncino Zohar, Bereshith, Section 1, Page 166a

Jacob said when he saw them, etc. (Ibid. 3). It was from these angels that he sent a mission to Esau, as it says: And Jacob sent angels (*mal'akhim*). R. Isaac said: Why, in one place in the Psalms does it say The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him and delivereth them (Ps. XXXIV, 8), in the singular, and in another place, For he will give his angels charge over thee (Ibid. XCI, 11), in the plural? The reason is that the term angels is a reference to angels proper, **whereas in the verse: The angel of the Lord encampeth, the reference is to the Shekinah, as in the verse: And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush (Ex. III, 2) ...**

3) For other references to the "Angel of the LORD," see *Messiah: Another Jewish View*, Chapter 8, pp. 76-78.

2. First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, "to visit the sick"<sup>11</sup>

a. Sotah (Suspected Adulteress) 14a

R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What means the text: Ye shall walk after the Lord your God?<sup>(4)</sup> Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the Shechinah; for has it not been said: For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire?<sup>(5)</sup> But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written: And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them,<sup>(6)</sup> so do thou also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written: And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre,<sup>(7)</sup> so do thou also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written: And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son,<sup>(8)</sup> so do thou also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written: And He buried him in the valley,<sup>(9)</sup> so do thou also bury the dead.

(4) Deut. XIII, 5.

(5) Ibid. IV, 24.

(6) Gen. III, 21.

(7) Ibid. XVIII, 1. Since the preceding verses deal with Abraham's circumcision, it is deduced that the occasion was when he was recovering.

(8) Gen. XXV, 11.

(9) Deut. XXXIV, 6.

b. Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>35</sup>For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup>I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

c. This theophany is not accompanied by an act of worship or the building of an altar—hospitality to strangers itself is considered an act of worship.

1) Shabbat 127a

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shechinah.

2) Genesis 12:7-8

<sup>8</sup>There he built an altar to the LORD ...

d. Romans 12:12-13

<sup>13</sup>Practice hospitality (welcome, warmth, kindness, generosity).

e. 1Timothy 3:1 (cf., Tit 1:7-8)

<sup>1</sup>If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he (must be) temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach ...

f. 1Peter 4:7

<sup>9</sup>Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

3. This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: "Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence (Shabbat 127a; Shavuot 35b)."

a. Baba Metzia (The Middle Gate) 87a

It is written, And I will fetch a morsel of bread; but it is also written, And Abraham ran unto the herd: Said R. Eleazar: This teaches that righteous men promise little and perform much; whereas the wicked promise much and do not perform even little.

b. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan<sup>5</sup> on Genesis 19

3. But he urged them strongly, and they turned aside to him and went into his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread for them, and it seemed to him that they were eating ...

c. Avot 5:19

MISHNAH 19. WHOEVER POSSESSES THESE THREE THINGS, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER; AND [WHOEVER POSSESSES] THREE OTHER THINGS, HE IS OF THE DISCIPLES OF BALAAM, THE WICKED.<sup>(113)</sup> THE DISCIPLES OF ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER, [POSSESS] A GOOD EYE,<sup>(114)</sup> AN HUMBLE SPIRIT<sup>(115)</sup> AND A LOWLY SOUL.<sup>(116)</sup> THE DISCIPLES OF BALAAM, THE WICKED, [POSSESS] AN EVIL EYE,<sup>(117)</sup> A HAUGHTY SPIRIT<sup>(118)</sup> AND AN OVER-AMBITIOUS SOUL.<sup>(119)</sup>

(113) So designated in Jewish literature, as his wickedness is proved by his own willingness, even eagerness, to go with Balak's messengers, and his 'apologies' for not being able to curse Israel; it is he, too, who is said to have counselled the seduction of the Israelites by the Moabite women.

(114) V. supra II, 9. Abraham demonstrated his generous and ungrudging nature in his dealings with the King of Sodom (Gen. XIV, 22f.) and with Ephron the Hittite (Gen. XXIII).

(115) Abraham's humility is evident from his words: . . . I . . . 'who am but dust and ashes (Gen. XVIII, 27).

(116) נפש (soul) is used here of 'desire,' 'appetite,' a meaning which it has already in Biblical Hebrew. שפלה would thus mean 'kept low,' 'subdued.' Cf. Abraham's dealing with Lot, Gen. XIII. The three above qualities are among those sought for when appointing judges. v. J. Sanh. I, 4.

(117) Balaam's avarice is clear from his own words; v. Num. XXII, 18; XXIV, 13.

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5 Jonathan ben Uzziel was a student of Hillel. The Targum, first called Targum Eretz Yisrael and later Targum Yerushalmi I was erroneously attributed from the 14th century to Jonathan. The Jerusalem Targums is interpretative and exegetical in nature, i.e., it sought to reflect the exegetical traditions of the Oral Torah and to introduce well-known Halachic and Aggadic interpretations of the verses.

(118) A reference to Balaam's claim that he was one that knoweth the knowledge of the Most High (Num. XXIV, 16).

(119) Balaam's 'handling' of Balak, and his attempts at 'outwitting' God, reveal an insatiable desire for power.

1) Matthew 6:22-23 (CJB)

<sup>22</sup>So **if you have a 'good eye' [that is, if you are generous]** your whole body will be full of light ...

2) Matthew 5:3

<sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

3) Matthew 11:29 (KJV)

<sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for **I am meek and lowly in heart (i.e. not demanding)** ...

a) One who can exercise restraint and self-control over forbidden physical desires (*Meiri*,<sup>6</sup> *Rav*<sup>7</sup>) or even over excessive luxuries (*Meiri*) enjoys a spiritually healthy soul with desire for lust or sin (*R' Yonah*<sup>8</sup>). According to *Tiferes Yisrael*,<sup>9</sup> this also connotes a sense of satisfaction with one's lot.<sup>10</sup>

4. *The forces of nature are impersonal, which is why those who worship them eventually lose their humanity.*

a. Isaiah 44:9-11

<sup>9</sup>All who make idols are nothing, **and the things they treasure are worthless.**

b. Acts 17:29-31

<sup>29</sup>"Therefore since we are God's offspring, **we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone**—an image made by human design and skill.

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6 Menachem ben Solomon Meiri (1249–1306) was a famous Catalan rabbi, Talmudist and Maimonidean.

7 Abba Arikha (175–247) was a Jewish Talmudist who was born and lived in Babylonia, known as an Amora (commentator on the Oral Law) of the 3rd-century who established the systematic study of the rabbinic traditions, which, using the Mishnah as text, led to the compilation of the Talmud. He is commonly known simply as Rav.

8 Rabbi Yonah was an Amora (*Expounder*) of the 4th-generation (320–350 ce) active in *Eretz Yisrael*.

9 Tiferet Yisrael (*Glory [of] Israel*) is a commentary on the Mishnah written by Rabbi Israel Lipschitz (1782–1860). It is separated into two separate commentaries: *Yakhin* and *Bo'az*.

10 Rabbi Moshe Lieber, Ed., *The Pirkei Avos Treasury*, (Mesorah Publications, Ltd.), p. 361.