"BUT ABRAHAM STOOD YET BEFORE THE LORD"

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> *And the Lord appeared unto him* [Abraham] *by the terebinth of Mamre. And he lifted his eyes and looked and behold three men stood over against Him . . . and when he saw them he ran to meet them and bowed down . . .* (Gen. 18:1,2).

The text is plainly problematic in that while the first verse tells us that God "appeared" to Abraham at a particular location, the second verse continues without a break with an account of a visitation to Abraham at that location by three men, without any further reference to God's "appearance." What had been its purpose? Was anything said to Abraham? How long did the "appearance" last?

Maimonides' interpretation is well known.[1] In line with his dream-vision theory of prophesy, he maintains that the first verse merely announces the ontological nature of what follows: the entire chapter of Genesis 18:1-33, all of the subsequent events described in the chapter. That is, the arrival of the three men, Abraham's hospitality, the prediction of the birth of a son to Sarah, and Abraham's pleading for the people of Sodom, all took place within a prophetic vision. It was all of this that constituted the substance of the Lord's "appearance" to Abraham. Few are the objective readers of the Bible to whom this would appear to be the plain meaning or intention of the text. Furthermore, to substitute a mystical prophetic realm for the rough world of ordinary reality would seem to emasculate the pedagogical value of the story.

Yet there are recurring elements in the narrative which give the impression that God is somehow still present even after the first verse, not merely as observer but as participant.

1. As Abraham runs towards the three men, we are told: *And he said*, '*My Lord* [Adonai] *if I have favor in your sight, do not pass away from your servant'* (18:3). Although there were three of them, Abraham apparently addresses their leader, hence the singular *my Lord*. However, it is tantalizing to

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consider the possibility that perhaps here Abraham is addressing God with whom he had been conversing, asking him to remain while he Abraham tends to his guests![1]

2. After the guests have eaten, one of them announces that after a year, the 90- year-old Sarah will give birth to a son. Sarah laughs in disbelief. Without any introduction, verse 13 begins: *And the Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh?'* Apparently, God is still present, aware of the conversation and simply joins in.

3. Verses 17, 18, and 19 enable us to hear God's musings about His regard for Abraham, and what He is about to do with Sodom. In verses 20 and 21, God addresses Abraham and informs him of His judgment on the inhabitants of the cities of Sodom and Gomorra.

4. As two of the men proceed to Sodom, the text assures us: *But Abraham stood yet before the Lord* (v. 22). That would seem to say that the encounter with God which started in the first verse is not yet over.

5. The next 10 verses contain the fascinating negotiations between Abraham and God, in the course of which God agrees that if there are but 10 righteous people in the city, He will for their sake spare the entire city! Verse 33 concludes the chapter: *And the Lord went His way as soon as He had left off speaking to Abraham and Abraham returned to his place.*

Taken together, these would indicate that God was indeed present during all that had occurred in the chapter, which takes place not in a prophetic-vision-dream but in the real world of the here and now. When Abraham breaks off his initial perception of God to greet the three men, God does not leave. Indeed, this has been the original biblical concept of a God who is both transcendent and immanent, whose Presence does not overwhelm and who comes and goes without special effect: . . . *for the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you* (Deut. 23:15). The talmudic sages referred to this felt indwelling Presence of God as the *shechina*.[2] Whatever its philosophic explication (God's effulgence, glory, light, emanation), for biblical man God could be a palpable, living proactive and reactive Presence in real time and real space.

From various biblical and talmudic statements, it would seem that the ability of an individual or group to experience the *shechina* depends upon certain conditions.[3] One has to be worthy, and/or the environment had to have been

prepared with a degree of sanctity [*kedusha*]. *And they shall make for Me a sanctuary* [mikdash] *and I will dwell* [shahanti-shechina] *among them* (Ex. 25:8). *And Moses said,'This is the thing which the Lord commanded that you shall do that the glory* [kavod] *of the Lord may appear to you'* (Lev. 9:16). The sages taught that particular activities such as prayer, judging by the Torah, and Torah study can induce the presence of the *shechina*.

Let us now examine the content of Chapter 18, particularly the activities that Abraham was engaged in to see if they were of a nature that might warrant *gilui shechina*, awareness of the presence of God. The chapter begins with Abraham rushing to greet the three travelers and offer them food and drink, which he personally prepares and serves (vv. 1-8). Then there is the informing of Sarah that she shall give birth to a son (vv. 9-15). In the last section, Abraham pleads for the lives of the people of Sodom (vv. 23-32). What all these have in common is that they exhibit clear moral behavior or involve moral issues. Abraham's response to the arrival of the three strangers is a model of hospitality and kindness to strangers. Sarah's laughter and God's response is a lesson in truth-telling. The negotiations between Abraham and God over the fate of the people of Sodom are a fascinating exercise in the interaction of the values of justice and mercy and the limits of moral intercession.

What therefore, are we to learn from Chapter 18?

1. That the palpable Presence of the *shechina* is a possibility for ordinary human experience. This has sometimes been called "normal mysticism."

2. The human behaviors which may merit *gilui shechina* are not only the sacred activities of prayer and Torah study but also the realization and concretization of moral values such as justice, righteousness, and kindness in our relations with others. For it is primarily through moral action that the human can encounter He who is *Lord, Lord merciful and gracious, patient and abundant in kindness and truth* (Ex. 34:16). And as Jeremiah put it: *He judged the cause of the poor and needy . . . . 'Is this not to know Me?' says the Lord* (Jer. 22:16).

NOTES

1. *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part II Chap. 42
2. See Rashi on Genesis 18:3

3. See Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: their Concepts and Beliefs*, Chap. III (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971).
4. Berachot 6a, Avot 3:3