Toward the end of this week’s parashah, we are given a second look at Moshe Rabbeinu’s ascent up Har Sinai. The kohanim and the seventy zekeinim follow him to the foot of the mountain, and there they all have a vision. “And they saw Elokei Yisrael, and under His Feet was something like sapir (sapphire or marble) brick-work which was like the middle of heaven in purity” (Shemos 24:10).

What exactly did they see? We have a number of textual problems. Moshe later asked “Please show me your Kavod” (Ibid 33:18) and is told, “a person can not see Me and live” (Ibid v. 20). But if this were a vision of Hashem, Moshe already saw Him so why the request? Additionally, of course, none of those who went up the mountain died because of the vision.

Therefore, the Ramban on our verse explains that the vision was prophetic. It would seem that in the Ramban’s view, a prophecy can be a vision of something that cannot truly exist.

The Ramban disagrees with both. In his commentary on the verse where Hashem promises Yaakov that He will descend with him to Egypt, he holds that “Sh-echinah” is a name of Hashem, not a created thing (nor a class of them). However, this does not mean that Mosheh and the zekeinim actually saw Hashem in human form. The Ramban on our verse explains that the vision was prophetic. It would seem that in the Ramban’s view, a prophecy can be a vision of something that cannot truly exist.
This indicates that underlying our debate there must be a basic difference in how the Rambam and the Ramban understand prophecy. Even though the Rambam agrees that the vision was prophetic, he still argues that it could not have been of Hashem, because He has no body.

We find an instance of a similar debate in their understandings of the beginning of Parashas Vayeira. According to the Rambam, any narrative that involves people seeing malachim must be the retelling of a prophecy. Malachim do not have physical substance; they cannot be physically seen. Therefore, the Rambam holds that the parashah opens by telling us that Hashem visited Avraham, and then elaborates by telling us the substance of the visit, the prophecy that Avraham received. In other words, Avraham did not interrupt Hashem’s visit to welcome what he thought were three people. Rather, the visit itself was the vision in which Avraham hosted the three malachim.6

6 Moreh Nevuchim sec. II, ch. 42

What does the Ramban do with the Ramban’s question? The Abarbanel, in his commentary on the Moreh Nevuchim, writes that according to the Rambam, things seen in prophecy really occur. They are visions of events happening in higher planes of reality. The prophet’s mind and pen may make sense of the vision by interpreting its contents as things familiar from normal sensory experience, but the event seen is real. This is consistent with the Rambam’s position on our verse. Since G-d does not have a body in any plane of existence, their vision had to be of kevod Hashem, something created to be a metaphor for them to see.

The Ramban, on the other hand, understands prophecy to be the relaying of a message by the medium of a metaphor. He, therefore, is not bothered by the idea that the metaphor they were given was an anthropomorphic one, that of Hashem sitting on a throne.

The common point, though, is that the description in the verse is a metaphor. Rav Sa’adia Gaon and the Rambam write that the metaphor was a created object for the prophet to experience. The Ramban says that it was revealed within their minds as a means to communicate deeper truths.

Rav Eliyahu Dessler’s approach is a synthesis of these two. He writes that there is no objective reality; each person is given the world that fits his level and what he needs to experience. Existence itself is perception. He quotes the Ramchal who says that prophecy is communication through metaphor. However, that metaphor is a perception of a higher reality. Therefore, it exists just as much as things we perceive through our regular senses. 8

and refused to help him. Why? Because, the Torah tells us, G-d is compassionate.

This explanation seems a bit out of place. First of all, why do we even need such an explanation? Of course G-d will punish those who disobey his commandments. Additionally, how does it answer the question? Why would a compassionate G-d be any more likely to punish disobedience than a vengeful G-d? Logically, it would seem that the exact opposite would be true, and that an unforgiving and strict G-d would be more inclined to respond harshly.

R’ Itzele Blaser explains that character traits are sometimes more complex than they superficially seem. A distant, rough and physical person who frequently physically abuses others will witness one person beating up another and, contrary to his typical characteristic, will not react physically. He certainly is not affected by another person being hurt, after all he regularly hurts others, so he will not bother interfering in a brawl. However, a gentle and compassionate person who witnesses a fight will want to stop the fight and will, as opposed to his normal demeanor, physically enter a tussle in order to defend the victim. Contrary to their natural behaviors, the rough person will react gently to another person being attacked while the gentle person will react roughly.

Similarly, someone with little sympathy for the poor will not react harshly to the destitute being mistreated. However, someone compassionate will feel the poor person’s pain and will, if necessary, use force to bring about a just outcome. G-d, the Torah tells us, is compassionate and this trait is what drives His reaction to the mistreatment of the poor. More than being vengeful, He acts with sympathy and sometimes that requires a seemingly uncompassionate response. In a similar vein, R’ Elazar tells us that “Whoever is merciful with the cruel will end up being cruel to the merciful.” Part of being merciful is knowing when to be cruel.

Logic and consistency are not always correct. Sometimes the true response is to step out of one’s mold and react in what, on the larger level, is consistent but, in the current situation seems self-contradictory. Sometimes, peace can only be achieved through war. Occasionally, love can only be showered through harsh discipline. The very values that we cherish are absolute only as general rules and as goals, but not necessarily as practical options.

However, as frail and flawed human beings, how are we to know when to be consistent and when to make an exception? On the one hand, once we start violating norms we lose our moral compass and have trouble returning back to the general rule. Everything becomes exceptions until we are in danger of making the exception into the rule. On the other hand, inflexible stubborness yields disastrous results. How do we know when to bend and when to remain taut?

Only two paths can jointly lead us to the best answer – consultation and introspection. “Two are better than one, for they get a greater return for their labor” (Koheles 4:9). A person is biased towards his own benefit and, therefore, an outside opinion is always helpful. A confidante with whom one can honestly discuss potential benefits and pitfalls of various approaches is crucial for finding the right tactic. Yehoshua ben Perachiah tells us, “Make for yourself a teacher and buy for yourself a friend” (Avos 1:6). Whether one chooses a trusted teacher or a friend, one needs to consult with others in order to properly clarify one’s direction.

But, perhaps, more basic than that is introspection. One must spend time thinking about these matters and how best to approach various situations. Sometimes, even the agonizing over a predicament is enough to make any decision correct. There are times when the only incorrect choice is the one not thought out. A caring person, who anxiously tries to do the right thing, will frequently impress others with his concern more than with his actions.

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1 Peninim Mishulchan Gavoha, Shemos 22:26

2 Tanchuma, Metzora 1. Cf. Koheles Rabbah 7:16; Yalkut Shimoni, 1 Shmuel 121.
Kings, Our Third Parent? I want to explore this question, but leave it open, for updates as my understanding and learning grow.

We normally group these into three-word sets, when we pray with a tune, e.g. Ba”H, EM”H, AK”B, vetzivenu to do this or that. The first form, which uses only the first three words, suggests this, based on the verse in Tehillim (119:12), “baruch atah H’ lamdeini chukecha.” I had been wondering if a better grouping might be by twos: Baruch Atah, H’ Elokeinu, Melech HaOlam – first the verb, then the object – H’ Elokeinu – which is after all the middle phrase of the Shema, then the description of sovereignty, which further modifies Hashem Elokeinu.

The more I learn, though, the more convinced I am that the first six words should be said together as one inseparable group. Each part interacts with other parts in ways that draw all six words together.

In my first column1, I described R’ Shimon Schwab’s idea, based on R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch’s, that R’ Shimon Schwab’s idea, based on Sefasai Tiftach in Mesukim MiDvash, the phrase declares our intent and ability to join with G-d in doing in Yechezkel’s vision. Rashi3 explains ratzo vashov as like the flames of a furnace, rising up and falling back.

Ratzo vashov represents man’s quest for the divine. Man reaches up, appeals to G-d for a holy experience. G-d replies by sending down kedushah, sanctifying the object or experience that Man wants to increase. The kedushah comes from the Source of Holiness, not from our use.

Similarly, R Chaim Volozhiner reads BA”H lamdeini chukecha as “since You are the Source of blessing, You can teach me Your laws”, based on the Zohar.

How do these paradigms fit the text of a blessing? Consider: Three words create a relationship between us and G-d, while three words emphasize our distance from Him. Baruch atah ... elokeinu – creates the I-Thou relationship, the dialogue between intimates. However, this intertwines with H’ ... melech ha’olam. Hashem, the singular name of the transcendent G-d, the Infinite, unapproachable Deity, who rules the world – everything happens through His will. The central phraseology, from Shema, H’ Elokeinu, reinforces the paradox of the immanent and transcendent G-d, the intimate yet unapproachable Holy One. He is Our G-d, even as he is the ineffable Hashem. Meanwhile, the first two words Baruch atah oppose the last two, melech ha’olam. The two sentiments are tied together as one, inseparable.

This fits either model of baruch equally well, if emphasizing one side or the other. Some may lean towards the intimacy of the I-Thou while others may prefer the transcendence of a G-d Who sends down sanctity.

Really, the beracha text requires and includes both models. Paradoxically, we reach out for Him and thus increase the sanctity of His world, while He reaches out to us and increases our sanctity in His world. The six words are a unit.

I would be glad to hear readers’ responses to this meditation. I hope, with G-d’s help, to continue exploring this topic, e.g., why some berachos have 3 or 6 words, what is the role of asher kidshanu bemitzvosav, etc. Reader responses will be summarized. Contact me via e-mail at jjbaker@panix.com

1 Sefasai Tiftach in Mesukim MiDvash, Vayeitzei 5764 <http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/vayeitzei.pdf>

2 Cited in Nefesh HaChaim 2:2

3 Yechezkel 1:14