

מתוקים מדבש

*Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah*

REB MICHA BERGER

Bemachashvah Techilah

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 *E-lokei 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. Furthermore, at the conclusion of the Torah we are told that no prophet other than Moshe ever encountered Hashem "face to face" (Devarim 34:10). Therefore, we cannot understand this vision in a way that the others who shared it actually did have such an encounter, thereby contradicting an explicit statement in Devarim.

And, of course, there is a fundamental problem in Jewish thought. G-d has no body, no feet, no image to be seen.

Rashi says that they saw something like the *Ma'aseh HaMerka-*

vah, the chariot that Yechezkel saw. "And above the firmament which was over [the *chayos*'] heads looked like sapir stone, the image of a throne; and on the image of a throne was an image that looked like a person upon it above it" (Yechezkel 1:26). And, in fact, Targum Onkelos on our verse inserts the word "*yekar*" to say that they saw the "glory of the G-d of Israel". This parallels Yechezkel's description of seeing something that "looked like the image of *Kevod Hashem*, the glory of Hashem".¹

According to Rav Sa'adia Gaon², there is a *kavod nivra* – *kavod* as a created thing. The vision at Mount Sinai and that of Yechezkel were not of Hashem, as that is logically impossible. Rather, they saw this *kavod*. The Rambam's approach is similar to Rav Sa'adia's, except that he writes³ that the phrase "*Kevod Hashem*" is a synonym; it could refer to either Hashem Himself, in all His glory, or it could be used to refer to the *kavod nivra*. In our case, the text means that they saw the *kavod nivra*. However, in Moshe's later request, he was asking to see Hashem Himself, which is why he was unable to have his desire granted.

Rav Sa'adia Gaon writes that the *shechinah* is indeed part of the

physical world, but that it is a *kavod nivra*. In fact, Rav Sa'adia Gaon holds that the term "*shechinah*" refers to any miraculous thing that reminds the viewer that Hashem is *shochein bekirbo*, dwelling with him. Thus, the pillars of fire and of cloud were the *shechinah*, as were the vision of Mount Sinai and of the *Merkavah*. Rav Sa'adia Gaon's notion of *kavod nivra* can be a physical object. Therefore this vision could occur through regular, physical sight.

This is where the Rambam's opinion diverges. He holds⁴ that the *kavod nivra* could only be seen prophetically. It is different in kind to the pillars of fire and of smoke, which were physical entities created miraculously.

The Ramban disagrees with both. In his commentary on the verse where Hashem promises Yaakov that He will descend with him to Egypt⁵, the Ramban says 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.

¹ Ibid v. 28

² Emunos VeDei'os 2:10

³ Moreh Nevuchim sec. I, ch. 64

⁴ Ibid sec. II, ch. 6

⁵ Bereishis 46:1

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

The Ramban takes issue with this understanding. After all, did these *malachim* not then proceed to Sodom where they saved Lot? Was Lot not really saved? According to the Ramban, the story physically occurred. Avraham saw the *malachim* in the regular sense, actually fed them food, etc...⁷

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 medi-

⁷ Bereishis 18:2

um 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

⁸ Michtav meiEliyahu vol. 1 pp. 310-312. See also our discussion in the Beshalach issue <<http://www.aishdas.org/mesukim/5764/beshalach.pdf>>.

RABBI GIL STUDENT

Bakeish Shalom

“When you lend money to My people, to the poor person who is with you, do not act toward him as a creditor; do not exact interest from him. If you take your fellow's garment as security, you return it to him before sunset. For it may be his only clothing to use as a cover; in what else should he sleep? And if he cries out to Me, I shall listen, for I am compassionate” (Shemos 22:24-26).

We are taught here that not only must we give charity to those who need it, but we must also lend money to those with such a need. Indeed, it might even be a greater form of charity. And even when one performs the mitzvah and lends money to a fellow Jew, one must be careful with collateral and return it when needed. If night-clothing is taken as collateral then it must be returned in the evening for use. This is all intended,

among other things, to teach us and instill within us a true sympathy and compassion for our fellow people.

What happens if we neglect our duty and do not lend money to our poor brothers as required by the Torah? “And if he cries out to Me, I shall listen, for I am compassionate.” G-d will avenge the downtrodden person's neglect. He will cry out to G-d and G-d will answer, i.e. punish those who disdained this poor person

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 unfor-giving and strict G-d would be more inclined to respond harshly.

R' Itzele Blaser¹ 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 mis-treated. However, someone com- passionate 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 uncom- passionate response. In a similar vein, R' Elazar tells us that "Whoever is merciful with the cruel will end up being cruel to the merciful."² 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 situ- ation seems self-contradictory. Some- times, 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 stubbornness 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 po- tential 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.

REB JONATHAN BAKER

Sefasai Tiftach

We say these words perhaps a hundred times a day. But what do they mean? What do they imply? What are we to think when ad- dressing G-d, the King of Kings of

² Tanchuma, Metzora 1. Cf. Koheles Rabbah 7:16; Yalkut Shimoni, I Shmuel 121.

¹ *Peninim MiShulchan Gavoha*, Shemos 22:26

ברוך אתה ה'
ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם
ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם
... אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וציונו ...

This is more of a personal exploration than most of my other columns.

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, *vetzivanu* 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 *baruch* came from “increase”, that the phrase declares our intent and ability to join with G-d in increasing that in the world which is dedicated to Him, be it things (blessings on food), commanded actions (blessings on mitzvos), or mundane actions (the morning blessings).

This idea reflects, I submit, a common perspective of Chazal in the Talmud. For example, in Megillah 26b, there is an argument about recycling bricks from a synagogue. It is determined that “old” bricks, from a synagogue that had been used as such, may not be recycled, but bricks from a building that had yet to be used as a

synagogue, may. Thus, use confers *kedushah*. By our use for a holy purpose, we increase that in the world which is dedicated to Him; we increase *kedushah*.

There is another model for understanding *baruch*, also based in antiquity, in the Avudraham and in the Zohar² – that *baruch*, by analogy with *rachum* and *chanun*, refers to the Source of blessing. One of His active attributes is blessing, sanctifying that which we dedicate through our *beracha*. This fits the Chabad paradigm of *ratzo vashov*, running and returning, as the *Chayos* were 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

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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