

PORTION	DATE	HEB DATE	TORAH	NEVIIM	RENEWED
Vayeira	16 Nov. 2019	18 Cheshvan 5780	Gen. 18:1-22:24	2Kings 4:1-37	Luke 17:28-37

This week's Torah portion Vayiera does not have positive or negative commandments.

For this year's Torah cycle, we will study from the teachings of Or HaChaim.

It is written (v. 1), "Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. In Hebrew, וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה (*va-yei-ra e-lav ha-shem*), when we follow the sentence structure, it is translated as "Appeared / to him / YHWH" which is unusual and out of character. A proper sentence should be "Appeared / YHWH / to him." In other verses, "וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה, אֶל-אַבְרָם" (*va-yei-ra ha-shem, el-'av-ram*; appeared YHWH to Avram) (Gen. 12:7); "וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה, אֶל-אַבְרָם" (*va-yei-ra ha-shem, el-'av-ram*; appeared YHWH to Avram) (Gen. 17:1). In both verses, the verse puts the words *vayeira* and *Hashem* together (*vayeira Hashem el Avram*), and does not interject *el Avram* (to Avram) between *vayeira* and *Hashem*. So, why did the Torah arrange to read the verse as "*va-yei-ra e-lav ha-shem*"?

Second question: The verse simply explains that Hashem appeared, but it does not explain what Hashem said to Avraham. Instead, it proceeds to relate the incident of the three angels. Since this is the case, what was the purpose of Hashem appearing to Avraham here? When the Torah says that "Hashem appeared" to Avraham or anyone else, it obviously does not mean that Hashem Himself appeared in physical sense. Rather, it means that Hashem appeared to someone, in this case, Avraham, in the sense of prophecy.

Rashi explains that Hashem came to visit Avraham who was going through pain of circumcision. Thus, Hashem's appearance was not to give any prophecy, but simply to visit him as one would visit the sick. However, this cannot be the simple explanation, as there is no indication of this fact in the verse.

Or HaChaim suggests that answers these questions. The Torah's intention to phrase as "*va-yei-ra e-lav ha-shem*" informs us that, by appearing to Avraham at this time, Hashem was resting His Shechinah upon him so that he became a "chariot" of the Shechinah. The sages say the "chariot" refers to the Patriarchs who negated their personal urges and interests, and subjugated themselves completely to the Will of Hashem. Thereby, making them worthy to sit on the chair of "chariot". And wherever they went, the Shechinah went with them. Therefore, the Shechinah in this verse was not momentarily appear and depart, rather She became an appearance that became permanent part of Avraham's essence.

If the verse followed normal pattern of writing, "*va-yei-ra ha-shem e-lav*", for then the word "Hashem" would have separated between the word for the revelation (*vayeira*) and the one upon whom the revelation was made (*eilav*), and there would be no indication that there was a permanent revelation forged here. Since this is not the case here, the word "appearance" here was a permanent resting of the Shechinah upon Avraham. Because after this, "Hashem said to Avraham."

It is written (v. 2), "And he lifted up his eyes and saw: and, behold! Three men were standing over him. He saw, and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent; and bowed toward the ground." Or HaChaim begins with a series of questions. (1), why did the Torah need to emphasize "behold!", when it should have been enough saying, "He lifted up his eyes and saw three men were standing." (2) Why does the verse need to point out that the angels were "standing"? (3) What does the phrase "over him" mean, if they were in fact not next to him? (4) Why does it say, "he saw" two times? (5) Why did Avraham bow to them, not knowing yet that they were angels?

Answer to Q1: The Gemara¹ answers that the angels at first came and stood next to him. But when they saw that he was in pain, they moved away out of respect. Avraham then had to run toward them to bring them back. Or HaChaim

¹ Bava Metzia86b

disagrees as this verse is not that simple. If the verse says, “And he lifted up his eyes and saw: and, behold three men,” it would indicate that the [three men] were in fact people. However, the Scripture says, “and behold!” indicates that the angels came in the form of people seeking to lodge by Avraham so that he could perform the mitzvah of hosting guests. The Gemara² explains that Hashem brought a heat wave so that no travelers were up and about that day. But, Avraham longed for guests, so Hashem sent him three angels in the form of travelers looking for lodging.

Answer to Q2 and Q3: Or HaChaim translates נִצְבִּים עָלָיו (*nit-tza-vim a-lav*), normally translated as “standing over” as “appointees” for *nit-tza-vim*, and *a-lav* as “for him.” In this context, we can say that Hashem sent “appointees”, that is the angels, were given certain tasks to perform “for him.” And Avraham recognized that “the appointees” for sent “for him.” One was to heal him from pain. The other was sent to inform him of Yitzchak’s birth (v. 10). And the last one’s purpose was for Hashem to speak to Avraham about His plan so that he can intercede for Sodom. Therefore, even though it appears that the third angel was not there for the sake of Avraham, he was nevertheless indirectly an “appointee” to prompt for Avraham in intercessory prayer. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that all three of them were the appointed for the sake of Avraham (*nit-tza-vim a-lav*).

Answer to Q4 and Q5: The first “saw” refers to physical sight that Avraham “saw.” And the second “saw” refers to “understanding” that Avraham recognized the three men as angels when he “saw” and was healed. Therefore, he was able to get up and “ran to meet them from the tent door.” And he bowed toward the ground in gratitude to these servants of Most High.

It is written (v. 3), “And he said, ‘My lord, if I find favor in your eyes now, please do not pass from before your servant.’” Avraham speaks to the angels in the singular ‘lord’ instead of ‘lords,’ even though he surely meant to invite all three of them. Some commentaries explain that Avraham addressed them individually, repeating his request to each of them. Or HaChaim counters by asking a question: If Avraham addressed them individually, why then did he not make his request in plural? The Midrash³ says that he spoke to Micha’el who was the greatest of the three angels (Daniel 12:1) which he recognized as it was the tradition that the highest honored individual would walk in the middle.⁴ Thus as Avraham was addressing him in singular, and he assumed that if he would agree to join him, certainly the others would follow his lead.

It is written (v.4), “Let some water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree.” Since Avraham already knew his guests were angels and do not need any physical needs, why did he offer them to bring some water? One of the reasons is that during Avraham’s life, there were many nomads who traveled in the desert worshipped the ground. Thus, Avraham did not want to deviate from the typical way he treated his guests which is to ask them to wash their feet so as not to bring any *avodah zarah* (idol worship) into his home.⁵ Thus, knowing that they were angels and not needed much water to wash their feet, he said, “some water be brought,” and to show that he is not exerting himself much effort for them as it would embarrass them. In reality, though, Avraham brought as much water as they needed.

Next question we need to ask ourselves, what does it mean when Avraham said, “wash your feet”? The peshat level of “wash” or “purify” their “feet.” It refers to the bodily form in which they (angels) appeared. So, the peshat level of learning the Torah, they would “wash their feet,” meaning they would purify these quasi-physical bodies in which they had come. And Avraham was teaching these angels to purify their more simplistic “bodies.”

“Recline beneath the tree,” Avraham said to the angels. Rather than saying, “a tree,” he said, “the tree” which is also a reference to Torah, and the Torah is called “the Tree of Life” (Prov. 3:18). Thus, when we “recline” on the Torah, it gives us “Life.”

² ibid

³ Beresheet Rabbah 48:10

⁴ The Talmud, Yoma 37

⁵ Bava Metzia 86b

It is written (v. 5), “And let me bring a piece of bread and refresh your hearts, and then go on, for this is why you have come to your servant.” And they said, “Do as you have said.” The English translation of “a piece (or morsel) of bread” is translated from פַּת־לֶחֶם (*fat-le-chem*). Now, “פַּת” means “bread, morsel, crumb.” Aside from offering the angels Torah on *peshat* level, Avraham also offered to “bring a פַּת־לֶחֶם,” which alludes to the inner mystical aspect of Torah. However, Or HaChaim questions why the Torah, in literal translation, would be “bread of bread,” would have redundant words. It is said, “A righteous person eats to satisfy his soul” (Prov. 13:25). Physical food has the ability to provide more than just nourishment for the body. Food contains within it sparks of holiness that actually nourish the soul of the person as well. When a righteous person eats, he focuses on incorporating those spiritual elements into his being.

As mentioned earlier, the angels came in the form of humans rather than as angels was to allow Avraham to fulfill the mitzvah of welcoming guests and offering them hospitality. By saying, “Do as you have said,” the angels were telling him that he had correctly understood the reason for coming as men, and therefore he was right to offer them food.

It is written (v. 9), “And they said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?’ And he said, ‘See, in the tent.’” The angels asked about Sarah, but in the end they spoke only with Avraham. Since it was the angel’s tasks to announce the birth of Yitzchak to Sarah, the angel is saying he came for her rather than Avraham. Therefore, Avraham said, “See, in the tent.”

It is written (v. 10), “And he said, ‘I will surely return to you at this time next year, and behold Sarah your wife will have a son.’” This verse clarifies that only one angel said that Sarah “will have a son.” But in verse 9, it was “they” who asked where was Sarah. Or HaChaim answers that it is improper for one person to ask about someone’s wife. Therefore, the angels, in plural, asked Avraham about his wife. In the olden days and even today, it is a taboo even considered ill manner to ask the welfare of the wife of someone. Avraham knowing and understanding social etiquette and its customs, said, “See, in the tent,” meaning permitting them to converse with her.

Continuing in verse 10, “And Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.” According to this verse, the angel’s back was turned away from the tent Sarah was in when he delivered the message he was tasked to do. In literal sense, the message that Sarah will have a son was delivered directly to Avraham and Sarah only overheard the message. But the angel’s back was turned away from where she was, and his message was not delivered directly. For this reason, the Midrash⁶ explains that the angel was punished for deviating from His plan for not relaying the news directly to her.

It is written (v. 13), “And יהוה said to Avraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I truly have a child, since I am old?’” In the previous parashah (Gen. 17: 17), Avraham also “laughed,” but Hashem did not say anything. So, we can question why is Avraham’s laugh differs from Sarah’s laugh? Why did Hashem point out her laugh? Or HaChaim explains that Avraham’s laugh was joyous with the tidings that he and Sarah would have a son. Not so with Sarah. Even though her laugh was not in a scoffing manner, she did not laugh when she was informed by the angel that she would have a son, rather when she saw later that her body had been rejuvenated, she laughed. He supports his opinion from the same verse, “Shall I truly have a child, since I am old?” While other commentators agree that the sentence ends with a question mark, Or HaChaim changes it with an exclamation mark. Thus making the statement Sarah only accepted His words “after” her body was changed and she accepted that she would give birth as true. Therefore, Hashem said, “Why did Sarah laugh?”

Another aspect of understanding: Sarah saw herself withered, therefore she did not immediately believe the news. It was in fact her age and not Avraham’s that held her back from rejoicing when she first heard the promise as said, “I have grown old.” (v. 12) Thus, Hashem said to Avraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I truly have a child, since I am old?’” However, she “laughed” with joy when her body was rejuvenated and said, “Shall I have pleasure.”

⁶ Yalkut Reuveni, Vayeira 23

Meaning, she knew her body was young again and she will “have pleasure” of having a child even though “my master (Avraham) is old. Therefore, Hashem was not critical for this part and did not need to mention them to Avraham.

It is written (v. 14), “At the appointed time I am going to return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah is to have a son.” Hashem repeated the promise so that Avraham should not think that because Hashem was critical of Sarah and retract His promise to him. Thus, He said He would keep His promise “at the appointed time.”

It is written (v. 15), “But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. And He said, “No, but you did laugh!” The difficulty on this verse is that it would have been better just for Sarah to say, “I did not laugh.” However, she denied it and said, “I did not laugh.” Although, she did laugh in verse 12. On *peshat* level, it would seem that she is not being honest with Hashem, Heaven forbid, because “she was afraid.” Or HaChaim explains that Sarah’s error was not in her laughing, as that was joyous, but rather in having held back that laughter until she saw a physical change in her body.

Or HaChaim further explains by using an example of a master and a servant. If the master confronts his servant for doing something wrong, the servant could not brazenly admit for what he did. Rather, he would by expressing denial, he is admitting the accusation toward him is true because he was afraid of his master. Same rules can be applied to Sarah the reason for her meek denial was that she was frightened by the awe of Hashem.

“No, but you did laugh!” Meaning, although your denial stems from the fear of Hashem, it is more fitting to admit that you laughed. The word “No,” should be understood as Avraham telling Sarah, “You are not doing the right thing through your denial.” Since that is what Hashem desires as it is said, “He who confesses and forsakes [his sins] will be granted mercy.” (Prov. 28:13)

It is written (v. 17), “And יהוה said, “Shall I hide from Avraham what I am doing.” The reason Hashem used this expression is because Avraham saw the third angel and understood that he had come down to this world for a purpose. But that purpose was not revealed to him. He knew that one angel came to heal him from his pain, and the other angel to announce that Sarah will have a son. However, Avraham did not know the task of third angel and remained hidden. Thus, “Hashem said, “Shall I hide from Avraham what I am doing?”

Another approach to understand this verse: When Avraham saw two angels walking toward Sedom, he was wondering, “Were there not twenty or even ten righteous people among them (Sedom)? Why did Hashem did not suspend the punishment for them in the merit of the righteous people during the Generation of the Flood?” Therefore, Hashem decided to tell Avraham about His intention to destroy Sedom, so that Avraham would argue in their defense that perhaps there are some righteous people among them. See ADB 11112019 for detailed explanation.

It is written (v. 18), “Since Avraham is certainly going to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?” Since Hashem decided not to conceal from Avraham the destruction of Sedom, it is the intention of Hashem to teach him the value of righteous people so that they can not only save themselves but others as well from their destruction. Originally, Avraham thought that the destruction of the Generation of the Flood came in spite of the presence of the righteous people.

The sages explain that Hashem knew Avraham will teach his children using the destruction of Sedom and would invest effort to teach them to be more righteous as we will see later Ya’akov who was taught by his grandfather, Avraham. They continue to explain that because of the righteous people, they will provide protection for the nations of the earth. As always, the righteous are Yisrael who follow the Will of Hashem by observance of His commandments and His teachings as our Messiah, Yehushua said, “This is the bread that comes down from heaven.” (John 6:50)