

Why Did the Lord Visit Abraham?

“The Lord appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot” (Gen: 18:1).

Just one verse into this Bible story (Genesis 18:1-15) and the Jewish sages of old were already probing and puzzling over the text. What do you think caught their attention?

‘The day grew hot.’ Why would this apparently irrelevant detail be mentioned?

Look closely. . . The Lord ‘appeared’ (v.1), yet there is no indication that the Lord appears to say or do anything special as is the usual case (e.g., “The Lord appeared and said to so-and-so...”).

Nor is Abraham doing anything special to warrant a divine appearance. He is not calling out to God or offering a sacrifice. He is just, well... sitting.

Then there is the ambiguous use of pronouns: ‘he,’ ‘him.’ Although 18:1 is the opening of a new chapter, it reads as if it is continuing a previous story. And what is the preceding story? The account of Abraham’s circumcision. In fact, one rabbinic view regards the divine appearance as the grand conclusion to the story of Abraham’s circumcision, rather than the opener to the hospitality story which follows.

There are, of course other rabbinic interpretations, but let’s stay with this one and follow it a little further. Ask yourself: why would God be showing up, now, at this moment, if there is no divine command to be issued, no blessing to give, no message to be delivered?

Rashi (11th c. Torah commentator), echoing other voices in the tradition, teaches that on this occasion God visits Abraham, not for the purpose of an important declaration or commissioning, but simply out of personal concern. For, having just been circumcised, Abraham is physically recuperating:

R’Chama the son of Chanina said: It was the third day since his circumcision, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, came and inquired about [Abraham’s] welfare.

Of course, this explanation is not meant to be

taken literally, yet what a tender, imaginative portrayal of God’s personal compassion and care for a faithful man. Sometimes this interpretation is used to affirm the importance of visiting the sick, for this is what God did for Abraham.

So then, this divine appearance, unlike so many others recorded in the Torah, is not a means to an end, but is given for its own sake; much like friends who get together, not always to accomplish a practical purpose, but simply for the pleasure and comfort of being in each others’ presence.

The text tells us “The day grew hot” (18:1). Rashi teaches that God even “bought the sun out of its sheath” so that Abraham would not be troubled by guests, because no one travels during the hottest part of the day. But then, seeing that Abraham was lonely for company, he “brought the angels to him in the form of men.”

One story from the midrash (Jewish storytelling traditions) suggests that Abraham was not only physically aggrieved by his circumcision but also experiencing emotional turmoil over the thought that the sign of the covenant might lead to his isolation. “Now that I am circumcised, perhaps [travellers] will no longer visit me?” [Genesis Rabbah 48,9]. To this, God offers reassurance through a divine visitation!

As much as these imaginative interpretations make us smile, they also massage our minds and refresh our spirit. We might ask: Has God ever ‘appeared’ to me when I was physically/emotionally/spiritually vulnerable? How might Rashi’s interpretation of Gen.18:1 enrich the way I live my life? •

Sources: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (London, 1983); Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: The Torah with Rashi’s Commentary*, Sapirstein ed. (New York, 1999); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (New York, 1994); Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1989).

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