On the Threshold: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And the Lord appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day” (Bereishith 18:1).

The Torah presents an amazing scene. Abraham was sitting at the opening of his tent and the Lord appeared to him. We can imagine the overwhelming experience of Abraham’s confronting the presence of God. But as Abraham was on this spiritual high, his eyes drifted outside his tent and he saw three strangers. He thought they may need hospitality.

Abraham sat at the threshold of his tent. Inside was the presence of God. Outside were three strangers. What should be done—remain in the presence of God or go out to greet three passers-by?

Abraham decided: he rushed to the strangers and offered generous hospitality. He asked his wife to bake cakes. He himself ran to the herd, fetched a tender calf and instructed his servant to prepare it. Then Abraham brought the meal to his guests.

We might have thought that Abraham made the wrong choice. How did he dare to leave the presence of God in order to greet three total strangers? Wouldn’t the Almighty be “insulted” to have been left behind?

But after this episode, God demonstrated great appreciation of Abraham. Instead of being angry or insulted, God saw Abraham’s gesture of kindness to strangers as a virtue. God chose to inform Abraham that He will soon destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He wanted to confide in Abraham because He knew that Abraham would command his children and household to do righteousness and justice.

This episode teaches something important about the Jewish approach to spirituality. While we yearn for closeness to the presence of God, we also keep our eyes on the needs of fellow human beings. Our spirituality is located on a threshold; we balance the interiority of meditative relationship with the Almighty and the exteriority of connecting with human beings. But the tilt is toward humanity—and that is how God wants it!

A Midrash (Eicha Rabba Petichta 2) cites a statement attributed to Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, who commented on a verse in Jeremiah (16:11): “’They deserted Me and did not keep My Torah.’ If only they deserted me but kept My Torah.!” In a sense, God prefers that we observe the Torah and mitzvoth rather than focus directly on a relationship with Him. By living righteously according to the Torah, we

will thereby come closer to God. Acts of lovingkindness are not a diversion from God's presence but an entryway to the Divine. (See also Jerusalem Talmud, Hagiga 1:7.)

We sit at the threshold. We seek the presence of God through prayer and meditation. But our eyes wander outside to our fellow human beings. When we leave the threshold to help others, we aren't actually leaving God's presence. We are coming closer to Him and His will.