Dvar Torah Outline

Parashat Vayera: The Three Angels, the Patriarchs, and the Covenant

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explores Rav Tzadok's explanation of the three visitors who came to Abraham after his circumcision: they represent both three angels and the spiritual qualities of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their missions reveal the interaction of kindness, judgment, and mercy, including the connection between Isaac's impending birth and Sodom's destruction. These qualities become the spiritual inheritance of the Jewish people, expressed through kindness, compassion, and a humble sense of awe before God.

I

The three visitors: angels or patriarchs?

A. *The opening verse*

- **Genesis 18:2:** > וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אֲנָשִׁים נִצָּבִים עָלָיו וַיַּרְא וַיָּרָץ לִקְרָאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אָרְצָה: > (He lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing near him. When he saw them, he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent and bowed to the ground.)

B. *Two identifications in the Midrash*

- One Midrash identifies the three men as **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**.
- Another identifies them as **Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael**, as Rashi explains.
- Rabbi Shulman presents Rav Tzadok's explanation of how these interpretations fit together.

C. *Circumcision reveals the spiritual future within Abraham*

- Through entering the covenant with God, Abraham gained a connection to the holiness of the entire Jewish people who would descend from him.
- This included the distinct spiritual qualities of all three patriarchs.
- The Midrash does not mean that Isaac and Jacob physically visited Abraham; their spiritual qualities were already becoming accessible and revealed to him.

D. *The angels express the same three qualities*

- Each patriarch embodies a fundamental spiritual quality, also represented by an angel:

| Patriarch | Spiritual quality | Corresponding angel | |---|---|---| | Abraham | Kindness | Michael | | Isaac | Strength and judgment | Gabriel | | Jacob | Mercy | Raphael |

- Thus, the two Midrashic interpretations describe the same underlying spiritual structure.

II

The angels' missions express their qualities

2:30

A. *Michael: announcing Sarah's son*

- Michael comes to announce that Sarah will bear a child.
- His mission expresses **extraordinary kindness**:
  - Sarah was already beyond the natural age of childbearing.
  - She had given up hope of having a child.
  - The promise therefore goes beyond an ordinary blessing.

B. *Why this is kindness rather than merely mercy*

- Rabbi Shulman distinguishes the ordinary longing for children from Sarah's circumstances.
- Ordinarily, granting children can be understood as mercy: a person longs to share a blessing that others receive.
- For Sarah, however, the natural possibility had already passed.
- Restoring that possibility is an exceptional gift, corresponding to Michael's quality of kindness.

C. *Gabriel and Raphael*

- **Gabriel** comes to overturn Sodom, expressing divine judgment.
- **Raphael** comes to:
  - Heal Abraham after his circumcision.
  - Save Lot and his family.
- Raphael's missions express mercy.

D. *The question about Gabriel*

- Michael and Raphael have clear reasons to visit Abraham's home.
- But if Gabriel's mission concerns Sodom, **why does he first appear at Abraham's home?**

III

Isaac's emergence brings judgment into the world

4:30

A. *The announcement has two dimensions*

- For Sarah, the promise of a child is an act of kindness.

- But the child being announced is **Isaac**, whose defining quality is judgment.
- Rav Tzadok explains that announcing Isaac's birth already begins to reveal Isaac's spiritual presence in the world.

B. *How "Isaac came" to Abraham*

- The Midrash's statement that Isaac visited Abraham refers to this emerging revelation.
- Even before his birth, Isaac's distinctive quality begins to find expression through the announcement that he will be born.

C. *Why Sodom is destroyed now*

- Rabbi Shulman explains that Isaac's emergence and Sodom's destruction are connected:
  - Before Isaac's quality was revealed, Sodom could continue to exist.
  - Once the world begins to contain Isaac's wholehearted acceptance of divine judgment, Sodom faces that judgment.
- The righteous do not merely tolerate God's judgment; they can rejoice in its revelation.

D. *Gabriel belongs at Abraham's home*

- Gabriel's presence connects the announcement of Isaac with the impending judgment of Sodom.
- Sodom's destruction specifically through **fire** reflects the "holy fire" associated with Isaac's spiritual quality.

IV

Jacob's presence: mercy and the continuity of Israel

6:31

A. *Beyond Abraham's healing*

- Raphael's healing of Abraham already expresses mercy.
- Rav Tzadok finds a further expression of Jacob's presence in **the rescue of Lot and his daughters**.

B. *Preserving the future messianic lineage*

- Lot's descendants will include:
  - **Ruth the Moabite**
  - **Naamah the Ammonite**
- These two women become part of the royal lineage leading toward the Messiah.
- Saving Lot's family therefore preserves a future essential to the Jewish people's ultimate destiny.

C. *Jacob represents enduring Jewish life*

- Rabbi Shulman connects this with the rabbinic teaching that **"Jacob our father did not die."**
- Jacob represents the unbroken continuity of the Jewish people, extending to the ultimate redemption.
- That continuity is already present within the events surrounding Abraham's covenant.

V

The three qualities as the Jewish people's inheritance

7:30

A. *Three defining national traits*

- The Jewish people are described as:
  - **Compassionate**
  - **Bashful**
  - **Performers of acts of kindness**
- Rabbi Shulman explains that these are inherited from the three patriarchs.

B. *Their correspondence to the patriarchs*

- **Compassion** comes from Jacob's quality of mercy.
- **Acts of kindness** come from Abraham.
- **Bashfulness** corresponds to Isaac's quality of awe and judgment.

C. *Why bashfulness belongs to awe*

- Drawing on Ramchal, Rabbi Shulman explains that shame or bashfulness is a branch of awe.
- It involves recognizing one's limitations and feeling unworthy when approaching divine service.
- This is not merely social shyness, but a humble awareness of standing before God.

D. *Living the covenant*

- Just as Abraham's circumcision connected him to all three patriarchal qualities, circumcision connects a Jew to this same spiritual inheritance.
- The three angels symbolize qualities that accompany the covenant.
- Rabbi Shulman concludes with the hope that we will have opportunities to **live in accordance with these inherited qualities**.

VI

In Summary

- **The two Midrashic readings are complementary:** the three angels embody the same spiritual qualities as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- **Abraham's covenant reveals the future within him:** circumcision connects him to the holiness and qualities of the Jewish people who will descend from him.
- **Isaac's announcement helps explain Sodom's judgment:** Gabriel appears at Abraham's home because Isaac's emerging quality of judgment is linked to Sodom's destruction.

- **Lot's rescue expresses Jacob's enduring continuity:** preserving the ancestors of Ruth and Naamah safeguards the future messianic lineage.
- **The message is practical:** compassion, humility before God, and active kindness are inherited qualities that Jews are called to express in their lives.