

Vayera 5779

Things are not always what they seem to be. It is often the case that we experience something one way but, looking back, understand the event's meaning quite differently. Information that we lack at one point can, in retrospect, show things in an entirely new light. What is quite rare is to have our understanding of an event change while that event is still in progress, which is what happens at the beginning of parshat Vayera this week.

From its first verse, introducing the episode of the three visitors who come to Abraham and Sarah's tent, the Torah blurs its description of that visit with a visitation from God. "The Lord appeared to him...looking up, he saw three men standing near him." The men seem to already know that Abraham has a wife, and that her name is Sarah. When they are sitting chatting with Abraham, and Sarah laughs to herself, the Torah has God respond with a question to Abraham about why she did so. And when Abraham addresses them, inviting them to sit, rest, wash and eat, he calls them, collectively, "Adonai."

For a text as ancient as the Torah, what never ceases to amaze me is how well it is written. The Torah is rarely haphazard; it carefully deploys its words and images, consciously creating sustained, integrated stories. So what does it mean to say that the Lord visited Abraham, but that Abraham saw three men, that three men sat before him, but that he spoke to God? Rather than allowing those alternating visions to confuse us, we should read them as alternating visions of the same thing. God is present to Abraham, but in a form he can comprehend and respond to. And it is his response that elicits praise from the rabbinic commentators. They see Abraham's attention to the needs of these 'men' as a sign of his hospitality. They understand his turning 'away from God' and 'to them' as an indication of Abraham giving people precedence, even

over God. But in reality, the men are angels, extensions of God; they simply appear to be human, which gives us another possible way to read this text.

Most of don't believe literally in angels, messengers from God. But the Hebrew bible mentions several such semi-divine figures, as does early rabbinic literature. Even their appearance in human form is not so unusual; think of the river spirit with whom Jacob will wrestle in a few weeks' time. These stories provide us an opportunity to re-think the use of angel imagery in our own lives. Knowing that the Torah imagines that angels can take human form, we can ask ourselves whether we can see others as if they were angels. There are people that we meet from time to time that seem so pure and good that they remind us of the ideal that angels represent; they seem angelic. If we remember that angels have no independent existence, that they are the servants of, and expressions of, the divine, what we are really saying when we see such people is that we are catching a glimpse of God.

When Abraham's grandsons Jacob and Esau reconcile, after many years of estrangement, Jacob says to the brother he tricked 'Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.' Now, Jacob knows his brother is not God, or even an angel, but what they have gone through together, and apart, has brought them to a moment when Jacob feels the same kind of uplift that a divine encounter engenders. Years ago I visited a shul on Long Island for Shabbat. At the Shabbat minhah service, their practice was to briefly discuss the parsha, which happened to be Vayera the week I was there. When the rabbi mentioned the image of the strangers as angels, his wife raised her hand and said "What it means is being able to see God in the face of another person." Looking at her husband, she asked "When you look at me, do you see the face of God?" The rabbi replied "You never asked me that before. The minha service continues on page 526..."

Can we look through another person's face and see God? Abraham does. Sarah does, then lies to God's face; she had some hutzpah. Seeing God in other people's faces can alter our interactions with them. Looking at them as if they were a human representation of God can help us to train ourselves to refrain from saying negative things, to strive to do more for their sake, to smile a bit more in appreciation of their presence. That might even be a positive goal for each of us: Inculcating in ourselves the capacity to see God in every face we encounter. Things are not always what they seem; neither are people. We should never lose the ability to see others not only as they are, but as what they may be, to look beyond the superficial to what is hidden within. That is where the spirit of God dwells, the spark of the divine within every human being.