

Vayera

GOD APPEARS TO AVRAHAM, AND TO US, WHEN WE MOST NEED GOD

We've all experienced it. We call it by different names. God's presence. *Ruach ha-kodesh*. Epiphany. A moment of profound meaning, when things make sense and the actions in front of us seem clear. A calling. A momentary sense of unity with the world around us. Connectedness with a universal spirit

Whatever the Pew Study says about Jews' belief in God, I don't believe it. We just call and experience *it* by different names.

What better parasha to explicate the diversity of ways in which we experience the Almighty than parashat Vayera? And what better character through which to explore these diverse expressions than Avraham?

The Midrash describes Avram's long wrestling with and then embrace of belief in God. As I mentioned last week, Avram doesn't leap into faith. He reasons his way into faith. You must take a look on-line or in print at Louis Ginsberg's [Legends of the Jews](#) and read his wonderful novel-like account of Avram's path to faith in his native land.

Avram is already a believer when he experiences his first textual calling in parashat Lech L'cha. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם, "God says to Avram" to leave his land, his birthplace and the house of his father to go to the land he will show Avram. Avram dutifully follows God's command and embarks on his journey.

Only when he's embarked on his journey, and, in fact, when he completes its first leg, arrival in the land of Canaan, does God communicate to him at a whole other level. It's a moment at which Avram might be thinking, "Well, what next? I've followed God's command, and I've come to Canaan." It is a moment of vulnerability, when Avram could look backwards, towards his native land, or forwards, towards his new surroundings, with trepidation. Avram, remember, is on a road never travelled.

Take a look at the first text on the sheet, or in the Etz Chaim at the beginning of parashat Lech L'cha.

1) בראשית פרק יב, פסוק ז -- *[Once Avram arrives in Canaan, God promises the land to Avram's descendants, and Avram builds an altar.]*

וירא יהוה, אל-אברם, ויאמר, לזרעך אתו את-הארץ הזאת; ויבן שם מזבח, ליהוה הנראה אליו.

The key word here is וירא. God doesn't just ויאמר to Avram, he also וירא to Avram. Ramban picks up on this.

רמב"ן

וטעם לה' הנראה אליו - כי הודה לשם הנכבד וזבח לו זבח תודה על שנראה אליו, כי עד הנה לא נראה אליו השם ולא נתודע אליו במראה ולא במחזה, אבל נאמר לו "לך לך מארצך" בחלום הלילה או ברוח הקדש....

"And the reason 'to the Lord who had appeared to him' -- that Avram acknowledged the honored God and offered a thanksgiving offering to him

when God appeared to him, because until this point God had not appeared to him and had not acknowledged him in an appearance or vision. When it is said to him, 'Go for yourself from your land,' [this is] in a dream or [through] the holy spirit..... "

God וירא, appears to Avram at a moment of vulnerability and need. Avram ascends another rung in his ladder of experience of God at a moment we could otherwise expect his weakness. Inspired by his encounter with the almighty, he responds rather with strength, thanksgiving and selflessness, voluntarily building an altar. Avram's moment with God raises Avram to new heights in his character.

God next appears, וירא, to Avram in the midst of another journey, at another moment of vulnerability, that of aging. When God וירא to Avram, the text tells us, Avram is 99 years old, finishing a century in the world, yet with issues of succession and continuity unresolved.

2) בראשית יז, פסוק א

[א וַיְהִי אַבְרָם, בן-תשעים שָׁנָה וְתֵשַׁע שָׁנִים; וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי-אל שְׂדֵי-הַתְּהֵלֶךְ לְפָנַי, וְהָיָה תָמִים]. ב וַאֲתָנָה בְרִיתִי, בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ; וְאַרְבָּה אוֹתְךָ, בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד. ג וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָם, עַל-פָּנָיו; וַיְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ אֱלֹהִים, לֵאמֹר. ד אֲנִי, הִנֵּה בְרִיתִי אִתְּךָ; וְהָיִיתָ, לְאֵב הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם. ה וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת-שְׁמֶךָ, אַבְרָם; וְהָיָה שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָהָם, כִּי אֵב-הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ. ו וְהִפְרַתִּי אִתְּךָ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד, וְנִתְּתִיךָ לְגוֹיִם; וּמְלָכִים, מִמֶּךָ יֵצְאוּ. ז וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ, וּבִין זָרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ לְדוֹרָתָם--לְבְרִית עוֹלָם: לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים, וּלְזָרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ. ח וְנִתְּתִי לְךָ וּלְזָרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיךָ, אֶת כָּל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, לְאַחֲזֹת, עוֹלָם; וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם, לְאֱלֹהִים. ט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם, וַאֲתָה אֶת-בְּרִיתִי תִשְׁמֹר--אֵתָהּ וְזָרְעֶךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ, לְדוֹרָתָם. י זֹאת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְרוּ, בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם, וּבִין זָרְעֶךָ, אַחֲרֶיךָ: הַמּוֹל לָכֶם,

כָּל-זָכָר. יֵאָמְרוּ לָכֵן, אֶת בְּשַׂר עֶרְוַתְכֶם; וְהָיָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית, בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם. יֵב וּבֹן-
שְׂמֹנֶת יָמִים, יִמּוֹל לָכֶם כָּל-זָכָר--לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם: יֵלֵד בַּיִת--וּמִקְנֵת-כֶּסֶף מִכָּל בֶּן-נָכָר,
אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִזֶּרְעֶךָ הוּא. יֵג הַמּוֹל יִמּוֹל יֵלֵד בֵּיתְךָ, וּמִקְנֵת כֶּסֶף; וְהָיְתָה בְרִיתִי
בְּבִשְׂרֹכֶם, לְבְרִית עוֹלָם. יָד וְעַרְל זָכָר, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִמּוֹל אֶת-בְּשַׂר עֶרְוַתּוֹ--וּנְכַרְתָּהּ
הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא, מֵעַמִּיָּה: אֶת-בְּרִיתִי, הִפֵּר. {ס}

טו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, אֶל-אַבְרָהָם, שְׂרִי אֲשַׁתְּךָ, לֹא-תִקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמָהּ שְׂרָי: כִּי שָׂרָה,
שְׁמָהּ. טז וּבִרְכֹתַי אֲתָהּ, וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֶּן; וּבִרְכֹתֶיהָ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם, מְלֻכֵי
עַמִּים מִמֶּנָּה יִהְיוּ. יז וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו, וַיִּצְחָק; וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ, הֲלִבֵּן מֵאָה-שָׁנָה
יִוָּלֵד, וְאִם-שָׂרָה, הִבֵּת-תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד. יח וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם, אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים: לו
יִשְׁמַעֲלִי, יַחֲיֶיהָ לְפָנֶיךָ. יט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, אֲבָל שָׂרָה אֲשַׁתְּךָ יִלְדֶת לְךָ בֶּן, וְקִרְאתָ
אֶת-שְׁמוֹ, יִצְחָק; וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם, לְזָרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו. כ
וְלִישְׁמַעֲלִי, שְׁמַעְתִּיךָ--הִנֵּה בְרִכְתִּי אִתּוֹ וְהִפְרִיתִי אִתּוֹ וְהִרְבִּיתִי אִתּוֹ, בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד:
שָׁנִים-עֶשְׂרִים נָשִׂיאִם יוֹלִיד, וְנָתַתִּיו לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל. כא וְאֶת-בְּרִיתִי, אָקִים אֶת-יִצְחָק,
אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לְךָ שָׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה, בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחֲרֹת.

God appears to the aged Avram, tells him to be perfect, restates the covenant to him, changes his and Sarai's names, commands him concerning circumcision, and tells him that he will have another son. God strengthens Avram in his uncertainty and infirmity and inspires in him the confidence to move forward in his leadership.

The power of the moment is not lost on the text.

כב ויכל לדבר אתו; ויעל אלהים, מעל אברהם.

Avraham is inspired, and moves forward by immediately circumcizing himself, Ishmael and the rest of the males in his camp.

You probably can see where I'm going here. There is a cycle repeating. Avraham is at his most vulnerable. God appears most imminently. Avraham is strengthened by God and inspired to action.

And so we come to our parasha, וִירָא.

-- בראשית יח:א 3)

א וִירָא אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה, בְּאֵלֵי מְרָא; וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח-הָאֹהֶל, כְּחֵם הַיּוֹם. ב וַיֵּשֶׁא עֵינָיו, וִירָא, וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים, נֹצְבִים עָלָיו; וִירָא, וַיֵּרֶץ לְקִרְאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל, וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ, אֲרָצָה.

God, as the Rabbis famously explicate, visits Avraham at this moment as an expression of *bikkur cholim*, when Avraham is recovering from his circumcision at the entrance to his tent. I don't know about you, but, if I'm recovering from surgery, I'm complaining and moaning and self-absorbed. And perhaps Avraham is too. God appears to Avraham, restores some of his strength -- and, by the way, the Rabbis firmly believe, and express through exact calculations, that visits help restore the strength of the sick -- and inspires Avraham to resume being Avraham.

Despite his condition, Avraham immediately sets upon the the passers-by angels and welcomes them into his home.

I must mention another time that the cycle repeats itself with Avraham. The words are a bit different but the image and moment are equally powerful -- after he plunges into the battles of the local kings and perilously rescues Lot from captivity. Avraham repeatedly assumes new aspects of lead-

ership, and could be excused for being tired and weary after becoming not only a warrior but a general at that.

4) בראשית טו

The Word of God this time comes to Avraham in a vision -- in a מחזה.

א אחר הדברים האלה, היה דבר-יהוה אל-אברם, במחזה, לאמר: אל-תירא אברם, אנכי מגן לך--שכרך, הרבה מאד. ב ויאמר אברם, אדני יהוה מה-תתן-לי, ואנכי, הולך עירי; ובן-משק ביתי, הוא דמשק אליעזר. ג ויאמר אברם--הן לי, לא נתתה זרע; והנה בן-ביתי, יורש אתי. ד והנה דבר-יהוה אליו לאמר, לא יירשך זה: כי-אם אשר יצא ממעיך, הוא יירשך. ה ויוצא אתו החוזה, ויאמר הבט-נא השמימה וספר הכוכבים--אם-תוכל, לספר אתם; ויאמר לו, כה יהיה זרעך. ו והאמו, ביהוה; ויחשבה לו, צדקה. ז ויאמר, אליו: אני יהוה, אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים--לתת לך את-הארץ הזאת, לרשתה. ח ויאמר: אדני יהוה, במה אדע כי איךשנה. ט ויאמר אליו, קחה לי עגלה משלשת, ועז משלשת, ואיל משלש; ותור, וגזל. י ויקח-לו את-כל-אלה, ויבתר אתם בתוך, ויתן איש-בתרו, לקראת רעהו; ואת-הצפור, לא בתר. יא וירד העיט, על-הפגרים; וישב אתם, אברם. יב ויהי השמש לבוא, ותרדמה נפלה על-אברם; והנה אימה חשכה גדלה, נפלת עליו. יג ויאמר לאברם, ידע תדע כי-גר יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם, ועבדום, וענו אתם--ארבע מאות, שנה. יד וגם את-הגוי אשר יעבדו, דן אנכי; ואחרי-כן יצאו, ברכש גדול. טו ואתה תבוא אל-אבתיך, בשלום: תקבר, בשיבה טובה. טז ודור רביעי, ישובו הנה: כי לא-שלם עון האמרי, עד-הנה. יז ויהי השמש באה, ועלטה היה; והנה תנור עשן, ולפיד אש, אשר עבר, בין הגזרים האלה. יח ביום ההוא, כרת יהוה את-אברם--ברית לאמר: לזרעך, נתתי את-הארץ הזאת, מנהר מצרים, עד-הנהר הגדל נהר-פרת. יט את-הקניני, ואת-הקנזי, ואת, הקדמני. כ ואת-החתי ואת-הפרזי, ואת-הרפאים. כא ואת-האמרי, ואת-הכנעני, ואת-הגרגשי, ואת-היבوسی.

He's followed commands, he's journeyed, he's fought, he's built, and, what for, so far? Unfulfilled promises and a lot of tzures. Avraham wants a demonstration of God's commitment to him and the succession to his leadership. God and Avram make the ברית בין הבתרים -- the covenant of the pieces. God expands on the future of Avraham's descendants. This is God's ultimate statement to Avraham of not to worry, either about himself or his future. Avraham will die peacefully in old age.

God speaks to Avraham all the time, but with varying intensity and in different modes. It seems to me that God makes Godself most present at the times of Avraham's greatest vulnerability and worry, the times he is tired and weary, the times that he'd be most inclined to walk away from his mission and call it a day.

The Akeda is not one of these times, interestingly. Why not? That's a question for another time. Perhaps, near the end of his saga, Avraham is so fully-formed in his leadership that he does not doubt God's inexplicable command. He has great faith in God and in the future. But, again, that's for another time.

5) בר אשית כב -- Akeda

א ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלהים נסה את-אברהם ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר הנני. ב ויאמר קח-נא את-בגדך את-יחידך אשר-אהבת את-יצחק ולך-לך אל-ארץ המדינה והעלהו שם לעלה על אחד ההרים אשר אמר אליך.

Avraham experiences God most potently when he is vulnerable and alone - on his journey, in his aging and after his circumcision.

What's the message for us? I believe that God speaks to us most powerfully at our moments of vulnerability, validating our vulnerability and enabling us to transform it into positive strength and action. God is certainly present at moments of achievement - but the reality is that we don't need God as much at those times, when our inclination is already to feel affirmed and have others to affirm our achievements.

It's at our moments of vulnerability, when people do not always succeed in getting through to us, that we most need God. In a sense, we avail ourselves of God's presence through acknowledging the tenuous nature of our existence, accepting the challenging moments that most question our faith and most imperil our strength. And we often emerged strengthened, with a firmer grip on life and faith, and, as important, inspired to move forward in ways that share our gifts more broadly with the world.

It's not the path that we would necessarily wish to experience the divine, the ultimate spirit or however we describe the source of ultimate meaning. We'd like it to be easier to find and to know God. That being said, it's most important that God be there when we really need God. The message of Avraham.