

## מאור עינים – Me'or Eynayim Rabbi Menahem Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl

Translations based on: “*The Light of the Eyes: Homilies on the Torah*”, Rabbi Arthur Green, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2021 and Yiscah Smith’s understanding.

### פרשת וירא – Parashat Va-yera’

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלְנֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח־הָאֵהָל כְּחֵם הַיּוֹם: וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָץ וַיֵּרָץ לְקִרְאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַרְצָה: וַיֹּאמֶר, “אֲדֹנָי, אִם־נָא מִצָּאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ, אֵל־נָא תֵעָבֵר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ: (בראשית יח, א-ג)

The Eternal appeared to him [Avraham] by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat near the tent-opening in the heat of the day. He raised up his eyes and saw: Behold there were three men standing near him. Perceiving this, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, “My L/lord! If I find favor in Your eyes **please do not pass by Your servant...**” (Gen. 18:1-3).

The tradition is unclear as to whom “my L/lord” refers. Rashi (Shlomo Yizthaki, 11th c., France) offers two ways this can be understood.

One interpretation suggests that Avraham is addressing the leader of the three strangers, in keeping with the ancient use of the term “my lord” as a traditional way of showing respect to other people. In this scenario, even in the midst of his own spiritual encounter with the Divine, Avraham notices the three strangers, runs towards them, bows down to the ground before them, addresses the leader as “my lord,” and graciously urges them to stay. Avraham and Sara then make haste to receive their guests in their home, lavishing them with food and drink.

The second interpretation suggests that Avraham is speaking to the Blessed Holy One. In this case “my Lord” actually means “my Eternal One.” In this scenario, as with the first, Avraham becomes aware of three strangers passing by in the midst of his encountering God; he hurries from his tent door to meet them and bows down to the guests; and then — this time turning to God — asks God to wait (“My Lord! If it please You, do not go on past Your servant”) while he provides the strangers with the necessary hospitality. This is an extraordinary interpretation: in the midst of his own Divine revelation, Avraham asks God to wait while he attends to the needs of his guests! Yet this is how most commentators rule the passage should be read.

והנה להבין לשון הפסוק “אל נא תעבור מעל עבדך”, כי הלא בשכינתו יתברך אי אפשר לומר כך, שהרי “מלא כל הארץ כבודו” (ישעיהו ו,ג), ו“לית אתר פנוי מיניה” (תיקוני זוהר, נז, צא.), והיאך יאמר “אל נא תעבור מעל עבדך”, דמשמע ששם, כביכול, אינו מקום כבודו — וזה אינו.

Now we must understand the language of the verse, “**please do not pass by Your servant.**” How could Avraham be saying this to the the Blessed Shekhinah since “all the earth is full of God’s glory.” (Isa. 6:3) and “There is no place devoid of Him.” (*Tikkunei Zohar* 57:91b); and how could he say, “do not pass by Your servant”, which implies that afterward that place (as if it were possible) would not contain His glory— which is impossible.

וגם להבין לפי זה דרשת רב יהודה אמר רב דאמר: “גדולה הכנסת אורחים יותר מקבלת פני השכינה.” (שבת קכז.) איך מוכח מזה שהכנסת אורחים גדולה מקבלת פני השכינה? דלמא משום שבקיימו מצות הכנסת אורחים, יהיה שם גם כן קבלת פני השכינה. כנודע, שלכך נקרא המצוות “מצוה”, על שם הדביקות שמדבק האדם חלק האלוקי השוכן בקרבו אל הכלל אין סוף ברוך הוא—מלשון “צוותא”. ואם כן אפשר שהמצווה בעצמה אינה גדולה מקבלת פני השכינה, רק שגם שם יש קבלת פני השכינה ומקיים, שתיהם.

And, according to this, we must also understand the interpretation of Rav Yehudah, quoting Rav, who said, “Welcoming guests is greater than receiving the *Shekhinah*.” (*Shabbat* 127a). How can he prove from this verse that welcoming guests is more important? Perhaps [Abraham acted this way] because in fulfilling the *mitzvah* of welcoming guests **he will also** simultaneously be receiving the *Shekhinah*. As is known, that is why *mitzvot* are called by the name *mitzvah*, on account of joining together and attaching that part of God that dwells within the person to the collective Blessed Infinite One beyond— from the terminology of *tzavta*— connection. And if so, then it is possible that the *mitzvah* itself is not really greater than receiving the the *Shekhinah*, but rather that it too contains the *Shekhinah*, and in fulfilling it, one has both, the commandment and presence.

אך שבאמת בקשת אברהם אבינו, עליו השלום, היתה כך: “אל נא תעבור מעל עבדך”, כי הוא היה עוסק בקבלת פני השכינה בוודאי, כמפורש בפסוק “וירא אליו ה'”. ובעת שראה את האורחים, ביקש מאתו יתברך שמו, “שגם שם כשאלך לקיים הכנסת אורחים 'לא תעבור מעל עבדך', וגם שם אהיה דבוק בך שלא יהיה מצווה בריקניא, חס ושלום. [כי לולא זאת נקרא מצווה בריקניא, שהוא בלי חיות ונשמה, ואינו רק גוף המצווה] רק שתהיה עמדי גם שם, שאקיים המצווה בדביקות, שהוא בחינת קבלת פני השכינה.

But in truth the request made by our father Abraham, peace be upon him, was this: “**please do not pass by Your servant**”, because he was clearly in the midst of receiving the *Shekhinah*, as the verse states, “**And the Eternal appeared to him.**” And at the moment when he saw the guests, he asked of the Blessed One, “that even when I go to fulfill [the *mitzvah* of] welcoming guests ‘do not pass by Your servant.’ May I remain attached to You in that act too, so that this not be an empty *mitzvah*, God forbid. [For without this, the *mitzvah* is called “empty,” meaning it is without life-force and soul, and is merely the body of the *mitzvah*.] Rather, also be with me there, so that I may perform the *mitzvah* in such a state that it will be ‘receiving the *Shekhinah*’ as well.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, echoing the Meor Eynayim's sentiment, answers the question, "Is it not disrespectful at best — and heretical at worst — to put the needs of human beings before attending to the presence of the Divine?" Rabbi Sacks answers with a resounding, NO! The passage is telling us something of immense profundity.

You cannot worship impersonal forces and remain... compassionate, humane, generous, and forgiving. Precisely because we believe that God is indeed personal — a deity to whom we can say "You" —we honor human dignity as sacrosanct. Abraham knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to encounter the Divine Presence when God appears as God to the individual. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when He comes disguised as three anonymous passersby. That was Abraham's greatness. **He knew that attending to God and offering hospitality to the strangers were not two things but One.** (Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation* "Even Higher Than Angels", 2010).

To this point, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 20th c., America) suggests that we might understand Avraham's plea, "Please do not go on past Your servant," in two senses—**first**, that the Divine should not depart from him, and **second**, even more so, that the Divine should accompany him in the *mitzvah* of *hachnasat orchim* (hospitality).

According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe,

the Divine revelation to Avraham was in the very highest manner of revelation. Avraham was reaching a state of intimate closeness with the Divine he had never attained before. And still he understood that the *mitzvah* of *hachnasat orchim* was beckoning him. So, he asked the Divine to remain with him **in** this same elevated state while he took care of what appeared to be human beings with physical needs. In this way God remained present with Abraham **while revealing the Divine self to the strangers as well, and this became part of Abraham's own encounter with the Divine.** God didn't depart, because Avraham was sensing the Divine presence **in** the strangers. (Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Likkutei Sichot: Vayeira* 1962, adapted and translated by Eliyahu Tauger).