



Ambiguous Appearances

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The Talmud (in Yevamot 49b) tells us that Moses' prophetic powers were exceptional because he saw "באספקלריא המאירה" - through a clear looking glass." How, then, do we account for ambiguity in the Torah? When we encounter a passage whose meaning is obscure, do we presume some failure in our own understanding? Or is it possible that the Torah of Moses is sometimes deliberately ambiguous? These questions come to the fore again and again in the first section of Parashat VaYera, in which a series of ambiguities serve to convey Abraham's disorienting experience of the appearance of God.

From the beginning of the *parashah* we are confronted with a blurring between the singular figure of God and the three human figures who pass by Abraham's tent. The bolded words in the first two verses below accentuate this flurry of appearances:

בראשית יח:א-ב

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאַלְנֵי מַמְרָא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵקֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם: וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים
עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיֵּרָץ לְקִרְאָתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵקֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ: אַרְצָה.



Genesis 18:1-2

The Eternal **appeared** to [Abraham] by the Oaks of Mamrei, while he was sitting at the opening of the tent, in the heat of the day. He picked up his eyes and **saw** three men standing above him; he **saw**, and he ran towards them from the opening of the tent, and bowed to the ground.

With the *parashah*'s eponymous first word, *vayera* (וַיֵּרָא), God is said to “appear” to Abraham. But when Abraham looks up in verse 2, the first half of verse says, “he saw” (*vayar* - וַיַּרְא), and behold, three men were standing above him.” Then the verse continues and repeats the same verb: “he saw, and he ran towards them...” One “appearance,” but two “sightings”—all spelled the same (וִירָא), but the latter two vowelized differently (וַיֵּרָא vs. וַיַּרְא). Is the Torah signaling a difference between what has appeared and the ways it has been seen?¹

As Abraham begins to speak, in verse 3, he opens with the word “Adonai - my masters”—a word that appears to be in the plural. That would be fitting if he were addressing the three men from verse 2. But that word has so far only been used in the Torah by Abraham to address God directly (just as we do in our prayers when we call God, “Adonai”).² To make matters more confusing, Abraham continues and says “if I find favor in **your eyes** (בְּעֵינַי),” indicating a singular see-er, and “אל נא תעבר מעל עבדך” - do not **go** on past **your** servant,” also using a singular verb and possessive pronoun. To whom Abraham is speaking?³

¹ Bereishit Rabbah (48:9) reads the doubling of “וִירָא - and he saw” this way: “He saw—the Shekhinah; he saw—the *malakhim*.”

² The plural form can be used to refer to the singular God, as I discussed in my essay on Parashat Bereishit, “The Grammar of God,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/grammar-god>. Ibn Ezra, cited there, explained that this form can serve as an honorific. Just as in English we use the third-person as a term of honor, “Her Majesty,” so in Hebrew we use the plural and say “My Lords,” the equivalent of “My Majesties.” Abraham used the term twice that way in Parashat Lekh Lekha (Genesis 15:2, 8), but both times it was in combination with another of God’s names (אֱלֹהֵי דָנִי ה'). This is the first time it has been used independently, which adds to the ambiguity in this case.

³ Rashi considers the alternate possibilities: “He called them all ‘masters’ and then said to the chief among them, ‘Please do not pass!’... Another interpretation: [Adonai] is a sacred term, for he was asking the Holy Blessed One to wait for him while he ran to greet the guests.”



This ambiguity persists throughout the first part of the scene. From verses 4-9, the Torah uses plural verbs to describe the men: “they washed,” “they reclined,” “they ate,” “they said.” But verse 10 abruptly returns to the singular, with this enigmatic declaration:

בראשית יח:

וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְהָיָה בֶן לְשָׂרָה.

Genesis 18:10

And **he** said, “**I will return to you next year at the same time**, and behold—**Sarah will have a child.**”

It seems in context that one of the men is pledging to return. Yet when octogenarian Sarah overhears all this talk of her pregnancy and laughs at the idea, God suddenly addresses Abraham directly:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָהָם לָמָּה זֶה צָחָקָה שָׂרָה

The Eternal said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh?!”

The next verse, however, switches back to describing God in the third person:

הִיפֹלֵא מֶה דְּבַר...

“Is anything too wondrous **for the Eternal**?!”

...and then repeats almost (but not) exactly the phrasing we heard 3 verses earlier about returning:

בראשית יח:יד

אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה וְלִשְׂרָה בֶּן.

Genesis 18:14

I will return to you next year at the same time, and Sarah will have a child.



Is this the man who spoke above, now repeating his promise to return, after a quick insertion from God? Or is this now God speaking, referring self-reflexively to “The Eternal,” and then repeating the words of one of the men (and does that mean they will both come back next year)? Or has it been God doing the talking all along, somehow there beside the three men? It is becoming difficult to keep track of the forking possibilities.

At this point in the narrative, there is a moment of transition towards clarity. The men get up to go, looking out toward Sodom, and Abraham gets up to escort them out. Suddenly, the narrative switches abruptly back to God, speaking out loud, as if in soliloquy:

בראשית יח:יז

ה' אָמַר הַמַּכְסָּה אֲנִי מְאַבְרָהִם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה

Genesis 18:17

The Eternal said, shall I hide what I am doing from Abraham?

God continues by describing the plan to destroy Sodom, but the language of this verse has a greater resonance in this so far confusing scene. Something has shifted; God is ready to stop hiding, to reveal the divine will more clearly to Abraham.⁴

We experience some sense of this transition of focus when we read this:

בראשית יח:כב

וַיִּפְנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֵמָה וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדְנוּ עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי ה'.

Genesis 18:22

The men turned from there, and went towards Sodom; but Abraham was still standing before the Eternal.

⁴ I am tempted to read this verse in the “fragmentation” style of Hasidic interpretation, so that **הַמַּכְסָּה אֲנִי** means, “Shall I hide **myself** from Abraham?”



The human figures have departed, but God remains. “**Still** standing” sounds as if God has been there the whole time. In the next verse, we are told that Abraham “comes close” to God (ויגש אברהם). Indeed, Abraham suddenly seems closer, more emboldened, able to approach God directly.

The rest of Abraham’s dialogue reflects this new relational dynamic, with a consistent direct address in the second-person: “Will **You** sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” (18:23); “far be it from **You** to do such a thing!” (18:25).

Abraham also then returns to using the term Adonai four times in the next several verses (18:27, 30, 31, 32), as if emphasizing its claim: “My Master!” Now, however, there is no doubt to Whom he refers.

How do we account for all the linguistic ambiguity in the first part of our scene, now that it has suddenly disappeared? And, as a matter of narrative, what was the need for the crowded cast of characters shuffling about: God arriving, immediately followed by the arrival of the three men, leaving God to stand by while they carry out their duties, at which point the dialogue switches back to God. Couldn’t God have simply delivered the news of the miraculous birth directly, in the same way that God told Abraham about the destruction of Sodom?

The French medieval commentator, R. Shmuel ben Meir (the Rashbam), offers a framing comment at the beginning of Parashat VaYera that attempts to cut all of our confusion off at the pass:

רשב"ם בראשית יח:

"וירא אליו ה'" - האריך? שבאו אליו שלשה אנשים שהיו מלאכים.

Rashbam to Bereishit 18:1

“And the Eternal appeared to him”—How so? [In the form] of the three men who came to



him, who were *malakhim* [“messengers” or “angels”].⁵

In the Rashbam’s quick summary, the two seemingly disjointed opening verses are read together, as two ways of describing the same phenomenon. God appeared to Abraham, but when Abraham looked up, what he **saw** was three men—because that is how God **appeared** to him.⁶ That makes the rest of the action easy to account for, because, though it is carried out as a conversation between Abraham and three men, we understand from the opening verse that it is actually always God speaking through them. When the men depart and Abraham continues speaking to God, it is as if Abraham has become able to perceive God more directly, without the filter of “messengers.”

There is a certain irony in this method of interpretation. The Rashbam gives us a clear account of events while leaving the ambiguity of the Torah’s language intact. The confusion created by a sudden switch in subjects is meant to reflect a confusion in Abraham’s perception, rather than in the action itself.

This approach offers us the beginnings of a theory of the Torah’s presentation of God. The Rashbam implies that ambiguity can serve as a literary tactic for communicating a sense of the inherently ambiguous nature of the divine encounter. The shifting pronouns; the unnamed speakers; the repeated phrasings with slight variations; and the many titles of our subjects: God, men, messengers (maybe even angels)—all contribute to our sense that the

⁵ The word “מלאכים - *malakhim*” itself is ambiguous in the Torah. Its most basic meaning is simply “messengers” and can refer to any human messenger; but it can also refer to God’s messengers, non-human forces that we usually translate as “angels.” (Indeed, our English word “angel,” although we use it almost exclusively to refer to divine beings, actually comes from the Greek “ἄγγελος - *angellos*,” which has precisely the same ambiguity as *malakhim*). The men who visit Abraham, once they move on to Sodom, are then described as *malakhim* (Genesis 19:1), which is part of what informs the Rashbam’s comments. These messengers do prove to be in the “angels” category, as evidenced by their ability to strike a crowd with blindness (19:11).

⁶ The verb is in the passive construction, which leaves open the possibilities that, (a) God chose to appear to Abraham this way, or (b) that this is how Abraham was able to perceive God.



appearance of God is a dizzying experience, a difficult thing to understand and describe.

If that were so, then we might expect this kind of blurring ambiguity to be present in other descriptions of communication with God in the Torah. Indeed, the Rashbam closes by naming another such episode:

וכן: וירא מלאך ה' אליו בלבת אש מתוך הסנה. וכתוב שם: וירא ה' כי סר לראות [ויקרא אליו אלקים מתוך הסנה].

So, too (in Exodus 3:2): “An **angel of the Eternal appeared** to [Moses] in a blazing fire in the midst of a bush...” and it is written there (two verses later, in Exodus 3:4), “And the **Eternal saw** that [Moses] turned to look and [and **God** called out to him from the midst of the bush].”

The Rashbam has made a remarkable connection, for the encounter at the burning bush also begins with our *parashah*’s lead word: *vayera* (וַיֵּרָא) and then also quickly switches to the active verb form, *vayar* (וַיַּרְא). This scene also contains both an angel and God. It even contains two different names for God in one verse: the Eternal (ה') saw, but God (אלקים) called out. The mystery of the divine encounter is once again projected through layers of ambiguity.⁷

Even for Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, the first appearance of God was hazy, and filtered through a messenger. He saw something, there in the fire, and turned to look, but still did not understand what was happening before him:

⁷ Parashat VaYera ends with another example that the Rashbam could have cited: the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac. For here, too, is scene where God (אלקים) calls out, “Abraham!”—and asks him to sacrifice his son. Then, 10 verses later, an “angel of the Eternal” (מלאך ה') calls out “Abraham! Abraham!” and stops him from doing it. Perhaps the lessons in ambiguity from the parashah’s first chapter are meant to assist with our reading some of the chilling ambiguities in its last chapter.



שמות ג:ג-ד

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה: וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא
אֵלָיו אֱלֹקִים

Exodus 3:3-4

And Moses said, “I must turn and see this great sight! Why doesn’t the bush burn up? And the Eternal saw that he turned to look, and God called out to him.”⁸

Moses will eventually speak to God more directly than anyone before or since. But it took God to call out to him before he could enter into direct dialogue with the Divine. Even then, he could not fully take in the figure before him:

שמות ג:ו

וַיִּסְתֵּר מֹשֶׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יֵרָא מִהִבֵּית אֵל הָאֱלֹקִים:

Exodus 3:6

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to behold God.

Moses, who eventually “beholds the very likeness of God - ותמונת ה' יביט - (Numbers 12:8), at first could not even bear to look.

Tradition tells us that Moses was the one who wrote down Parashat VaYera. We can imagine, then, as Moses attempted to describe the appearance of God at the tent of his forefather Abraham, that he drew on his own experience of the first encounter. How could he communicate that sense of overwhelm in writing? How does one describe the indescribable? Perhaps, he thought, I will scramble the scene a bit. I will play with the subjects and the verbs, the letters and the vowels. I will keep the reader as disoriented as the prophet feels in

⁸ A *midrash* (Exodus Rabbah 2:6) suggests that God called out to Moses **because** he turned to look: “R. Shimon ben Lakish said: he turned his face and looked, as it says, ‘The Eternal saw that he had turned to look.’ Since [Moses] looked at the Holy Blessed One, God said, ‘This is the one who is fit to lead Israel.’”



that moment of contact, when it is not at all clear where the line is between Subject and subjectivity, between What has appeared and how it appears.

Perhaps the author of Parashat VaYera wished to communicate this phenomenon to us so that we might learn to recognize it ourselves. If you should wander deep into the wilderness, and a wondrous sight catches your eye, turn to look a little closer. If weary travelers cross your path, send them a greeting of welcome. Stay open to possibilities. You never know what might be found in the next encounter.

