



Seeing in Genesis

Rabbi Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

Parashat VaYehi 5777

VaYehi marks the closing of the book of Bereishit. This is a book that can be thought of in different ways and from varied angles: The book of Genesis is a voyage from a land of chaos to the creation of Adam and onto a vast tribe; a voyage from “let us create humanity in our image” to a group whose ancestor was called by the decree of *lekh lekha*, go!, a group called the children of Israel because “you have fought with beings human and divine and you prevailed”; a voyage from the creation of the heavens and earth to the children of Israel who are not on their earth, not in their land, but they have upon them the commandment from Yosef to, “when God remembers you, bring up my bones from here [back to the land of Israel]”; and a voyage from a divine creation of heavens and earth to human productivity: “Yosef saw three generations of Ephraim.”

One prominent action that is repeated again and again in the book of Genesis, an action which accompanies much of the doings in the book, marks significant points of transition, and is used as a tool for clarification, is seeing. Thus the book of Genesis, among its many possible nicknames, might be called the “Book of Seeing,” a book in which seeing plays a significant role.

For example, at several points during the creation we find, “God saw that it was good” (Bereishit 1:10, 12, 18 and more there). So too before the flood, “God saw how great was humanity’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by their minds was nothing but evil all the time” (6:5), and again at its end “when Noah removed the covering of the ark, he saw that the surface of the ground was drying” (8:13).





Also prominently during the telling of the *Akeidah* (binding of Yitzhak), at the moment of the dramatic reversal, appears the verb to see: “When Avraham looked up, he *saw* a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Avraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son” (22:13).

Similarly, when Ya’akov is given Yitzhak’s blessing, the events take place in the shadows of a lack of seeing: “When Yitzhak was old and his eyes had stopped seeing, he called Esav... Ya’akov approached... He approached and kissed him. He smelled the scent of his clothes and blessed him, and he said, ‘See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that God has blessed’” (27:1, 22, 27). In this way, the action of seeing appears tens, if not hundreds, of times in the book of Genesis.

In the following lines I will offer a short voyage following the action of seeing in the book.¹ I will focus on seeing that takes place between humanity and God,² and I will mark three stages in this voyage. In the first, God is the one looking and people are the subjects of his vision. In the second stage, God marks objects that become the subjects of both God’s and people’s visions. In the third stage, God reveals Himself as an object to be seen; this revelation eventually produces the product of mutual vision, a vision in which God is known, is revealed in a deeper way than through external seeing, and receives a name given by the people looking at Him and seeing Him.

A. God sees humanity

In different places throughout the beginning of the book of Genesis, God is described looking at people, looking, seeing, and being disappointed—for example in the period of Noah: “God *saw* how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time... When God *saw* how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth” (6:5, 12). And again as God looks at the people building the Tower of Babel: “God came down *to see* the city and tower that man had built” (11:5), and once more when he looks at the people of Sodom and Gomorrah: “I will go down *to see* whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me” (18:21).

¹ I would like to thank Professor Menachem Lorberbaum, whose discussions compressed and deepened my thought on these matters, and to thank him for pointing me to the work of Talia Sutskov on seeing in Genesis, *Sight and Insight in Genesis: A Semantic Study* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

² The topic of people seeing each other and of seeing inanimate objects I leave for another time.





B. God and humanity see together

After these experiences of looking, it seems that there is an attempt by God to create joint experiences of looking by offering objects that both God and people look at, and through this joint looking to create a connection. For example with Noah: “God said, ‘This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you... I have set My bow in the clouds... When the bow *is seen* in the clouds...’” (9:12-14). And once again with Avraham when God tells him to go “to the land that *I will show* you (from the same Hebrew root)” (12:2).

C. Humanity sees God

As *Sefer Bereishit* develops, and with it the relationship between God and humanity, we are witness to change from a joint seeing, a seeing of one object by both people and God, to a process in which God Himself is revealed. God revealed Himself to Avraham (18:1), to Yitzhak (26:2), and to Ya’akov, who actually sees an entire divine camp (32:2-3). Revelation seemingly expresses God’s will to be seen.

From humanity’s point of view, this revelation and exposure of God is the basis for two repeated responses. The first is a looking which is mutual. This mutual looking is often accompanied by an act of giving God a name, a name that is given as a result of the person seeing God, in light of this looking. These responses turn the act of revelation from a one-sided act into one which expresses relationship—not only is God being looked at but He is identified, recognized, known by people for who He is. Secondly, there is an element of establishing, realizing, and affirming in the seeing that is followed by being named.

First: mutuality. This kind of mutuality is expressed in places where the direction of seeing is not perfectly clear in the verses. Thus a double meaning is born which gives birth to a picture in which seeing is being done simultaneously by the two sides looking at each other. For example we are told regarding Avraham at the end of the story of the binding of Yitzhak: “And Abraham named that site ‘God-will-see’, whence the present saying, ‘On the mount of God *he will be seen*’” (22:14). Avraham actually spells out a moment of change, even though the verse speaks of God who sees, a God who will see in future tense, the actual description of the future is in the passive, of a place in which God will be seen, where God will be the subject of the vision of people. We are no longer speaking of a place in which God reveals Himself with





the hope of being seen but a place in which God is seen by people. The emphasis moves from God to people. We can read the verse also as two different simultaneous aspirations: an aspiration that, on the one hand, on this mountain of God people will continue to be seen, and, on the other hand, as an aspiration of God that on this mountain in this place, God will continue to be seen.

Another example for the divine request to be seen which turns into a mutual one is with Ya'akov. As he flees from his uncle Lavan, he has an experience with the divine, at the end of which: "So Ya'akov named the place 'Face-of-God', meaning, 'I have seen God face-to-face'" (32:21).

Second: being given a name. As mentioned before, when God reveals Himself in order to be seen by people the product is often a naming of God by those people. God's revelation to Avraham leads to an act of naming: "God *appeared* (from the same Hebrew root) to Avram... he called God by name" (12:7-8). Also with Yitzhak: "God *appeared* to him... he called God by name" (26:24-25), and once again with Ya'akov (32:2).

Often naming and the mutual relationship with God come hand-in-hand and are described simultaneously: for example, with Hagar. At the peak of her desperation she sees God and is seen by God simultaneously and mutually: "And she called God who spoke to her 'You Are God-sees-me,' by which she meant, 'Have I not gone on *seeing* after He *saw* me!'" (16:13). It would seem that the unclear statement, whether she sees after having seen or sees after having *been* seen, is intentional. In that moment of seeing and being seen, Hagar also calls out to God using a name.³ This is possibly the peak of revelation: Not only is God being seen but He is recognized, identified, known, and thus can receive a name by those seeing Him.

In Bereishit Rabbah, this naming of God is advanced to a very early point in the relationship between humanity and God, possibly due to the understanding that this is the goal and aspiration of God throughout the book. God's expectation "to see what he will call them/Him" (2:19) as he looks at Adam arises in the context of giving names to animals in the garden of Eden in this *midrash*.⁴ It is unclear whether the verse speak of naming the animal or

³ See my essay on parashat Lekh Lekha, "'She Called God by Name': Between Seeing and Hearing in the Meeting of Hagar and the Angel", available [here](#).

⁴ Genesis 2:19: "God formed from the earth all the animals of the field and all the birds of the heavens, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call it/Him. Whatever Adam called the animal, that was its name." This first ambiguous part is expanded in the *midrash*.





giving a name to God—the on-looker. This lack of clarity might be the anchor for the following *midrash*:

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת בראשית פרשה יז סימן ד

א"ר אחא בשעה שבא הקדוש ברוך הוא לבראת את האדם, נמלך במלאכי השרת, אמר להן נעשה אדם. אמרו לו: אדם זה מה טיבו? אמר להן: חכמתו מרובה משלכם. הביא לפניהם את הבהמה, ואת החיה, ואת העוף, אמר להם: זה מה שמו? ולא היו יודעין, העבירן לפני אדם, אמר לו זה מה שמו, אמר זה שור, זה חמור, זה סוס, וזה גמל. ואתה מה שמך? אמר לו: אני נאה להקרא אדם, שנבראתי מן האדמה. ואני מה שמי? אמר לו: לך נאה להקראות אדני שאתה אדון לכל בריותיך".

Bereishit Rabbah 17:4

Rabbi Aḥa said: When the Holy Blessed one came to create humanity, He consulted the ministering angels. He said to them: "Shall we make Adam?" They said to him: "This Adam, what good is he?" He said to them: "His wisdom is greater than yours."⁵ He brought before them the cattle, the wild animals, and the birds. He said to them: "What is its name?" And they didn't know. He passed them before Adam, He said to him: "What is its name?" He said: "This is an ox, this is a donkey, this is a horse, this is a camel." "And you, what is your name?" He said to Him: "I am appropriately called Adam, for I was created from the earth (*adamah*)."

"And Me, what is My name?" He said to Him: "You are appropriate to be called My Master (*Adonai*) for you are the master of all of your creations."

Before us is a description of God at the moment in which He decides to take a step back. After having created many creatures, now He brings them to Adam and looks on: "to see what he would call them". The *midrash* describes how this seeing becomes mutual. God sees Adam, but this seeing brings forth a want to be seen. Thus God asks Adam to give Him a name. In order to do this God must reveal Himself to Adam. Adam sees Him and, as a result, Adam gives God a name.

The outlook that arises from this *midrash* is that Adam's insight is not only towards animals, it is also towards himself, and thus reflective, and it is also toward God—God who is looking at him. In other words it has the potential for mutuality. God's seeing turns him into a being that is seen as well, and through this Adam names Him.

⁵ The struggle between angels and humanity I also leave for another time.





Thus, in the journey of seeing in the book of Genesis, God is not described as satisfied when He sees, He is described as longing and wanting mutuality, mutuality which is enabled when He is also being seen. The peak expression of this seeing is when it gives birth to a name, a name that is given to the divine from the one seeing Him.

May we have the courage to show ourselves, reveal ourselves, and have people surround us with loyalty as they take on the task of seeing and naming. And may we merit to see God and name Him.

