



Parashat Yitro - #268

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On the Haftarah... Seeing that Which Cannot be Seen

[Ashkenazim: Yeshayahu 6:1-7, 9:5-6
Sefardim: Yeshayahu 6:1-13
Yemenite Jews: Yeshayahu 6:1-13, 9:5-6]

"In the year of King Uziyahu's death, I saw Hashem seated on a high, elevated throne, and the hem of His robe filled the sanctuary" (Yeshayahu 6:1). This is a most startling declaration. How is it possible to see Hashem? Isn't it clear that He does not have any form visible to the eye, as the Torah says: "For you saw no form" (Devarim 4:15).

The prophet Yeshayahu was asked this question by a person who we would hardly expect to be interested in this issue: King Menashe. This cruel and blood-thirsty man, who spilled so much blood in his lifetime, turned to Yeshayahu with these words: "How dare you contradict the words of Moshe, your Rabbi! He taught us that it is impossible to see Hashem! 'For man will not see me and live' (Shemot 33:20), and you said: 'I saw Hashem.'" Yeshayahu did not respond, and King Menashe ruled that he was to receive capital punishment for this blasphemy. The prophet succeeded in fleeing, but was quickly captured and paid with his life for his prophetic declaration (Yevamot 49b).

Why didn't the prophet bother to answer the king? Because he knew that there would be no benefit to giving explanations that the king would definitely not accept (ibid.). King Menashe was not bothered by the problems of pure theology. He was simply looking for a reason to kill Yeshayahu, who disrupted his criminal plans by demanding holiness.

Nonetheless, the Talmud too raises this question: How was it possible for Yeshayahu to see Hashem when Moshe Rabbenu stated that this was impossible? Was Yeshayahu's vision able to penetrate deeper than Moshe Rabbenu's? The Talmud

explains that just the opposite is true. Every prophet is defined as a "seer" but Moshe Rabbenu's vision was the clearest of any. Our Sages relate that Moshe looked through a clear glass, while other prophets looked through glass that was dim, and their ability of discernment was thus less precise. This is the reason that Moshe Rabbenu - with his clear sight - understood that there was nothing to see, while Yeshayahu - with his comparatively foggy sight - thought he saw something (Yevamot ibid.).

This analysis obviously precedes our central question: What is the meaning of Yeshayahu's vision? In line with his general approach, the Rambam explained in "Moreh Nevuchim" (2, 42) that this vision, like all prophetic visions, was not seen by the human eyes of the prophet but through a dream. The Torah teaches that all prophets besides Moshe Rabbenu received prophecy in a dream, whether they were asleep or not (Bamidbar 12:6-8). The prophet received the prophecy in a dream through his imagination. But Moshe Rabbenu's ability was totally different: his prophecy appeared through the intellect, and was thus immeasurably more clear and precise (Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 7:6).

In order to advance in our analysis, we will examine another Divine revelation in the first chapter of Yechezkel, known as the "Maase Merkavah" (the prophetic vision of the Divine Chariot). Yechezkel also saw Hashem. While Yeshayahu's description was summarized in three verses (6:1-3), Yechezkel's gives a much more detailed description. This does not mean that Yechezkel was greater than Yeshayahu. Just the opposite! In the time of Yeshayahu, the Nation of Israel was still on its Land, had independence and a Jewish king as its leader. In contrast, Yechezkel lived almost his entire life in the Exile, and the spiritual light was dimmed to a noticeable extent. According to our Rabbis, the abundance of details given by Yechezkel is explained by the following parable: A king who lived in the city was described by a city-dweller and a villager. The city-dweller, who regularly met the king, gave a brief and general description. The farmer, in contrast, who was greatly impressed by the king's glory, gave a grandiose, detailed description. "All that Yechezkel saw, Yeshayahu saw. To what can Yechezkel be compared? To a villager who saw the king. And to what can Yeshayahu be compared? A city-dweller who saw the king" (Chagigah 13b).

According to the Rambam, prophetic visions have their source in the imagination, influenced by Divine direction. A large portion of the first part of his work "Moreh Nevuchim" is his lexicon for all of the parables used by the Tanach to discuss the Master of the Universe. "The Torah speaks in the language of man" (Berachot 31b). In relation to the giving of the Torah, it says: "And Hashem descended" (Shemot 19:20) to the Children of Israel. The Master of the Universe uses our expressions and intellectual concepts in order to approach us, since we know nothing of His essence. We only have human tools to understand Him. In His great mercy, Hashem agrees to describe the 'Upper World' in the words of the 'Lower World.'

Hashem is outside of time and space. Not only is He beyond human concepts, but is a completely different type of existence. Hashem is both transcendental and imminent. Hashem is distant as distant can be and near as near can be.

Any Jew who recites a blessing notices that it begins in the second person, "You," i.e. He is close to us, but it ends in the third person, i.e. we acknowledge that He is immeasurably far away.

Moshe Rabbenu is objectively correct: there is no possibility of seeing the spiritual realms, but with human subjectivity, it is possible to "see" with the help of our imagination. It is obviously forbidden to create a statue or picture of Hashem. This is idol worship. The anthropomorphisms are only verbal in nature, and with the express purpose of bringing the creatures close to the Creator. Hashem therefore reveals Himself in different forms. During a time of war, He is described as a soldier who advances at the head of our army. On Mt. Sinai He reveals himself as an elder teaching Torah. "Hashem is one and His Name is one," but He still reveals Himself in a thousand names.

Despite these revelations, the Master of the Universe is beyond any subjective concept through which we meet Him, and this is a fundamental element of our faith. Our great, inner yearning for Hashem in the depths of our Divine soul helps us grasp a small amount of Hashem, who is the most supreme.

Rav Aviner on... The Populist Rabbi

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Yitro 5773 – translated by R. Blumberg]

Many hold that in our world, which suffers from media overload, all aspects of life must be managed by those who are popular, the populists, the politically correct, etc., and if someone conducts himself with innocent integrity he will just make a mess of things.

This has resulted in the creation of a popular/populist Rabbi, who believes that only by doing what the people want can he bring them closer to our Father in Heaven.

Nonetheless, the populist Rabbi does not like being labeled as such, for the connotation is that he has low self-esteem, and that he therefore positions himself at the representative center.

Following are the characteristics of the populist Rabbi. Obviously, one populism is not the same as the next. All the same, we can distinguish several general characteristics that apply, more or less, in most cases.

1. Enlists support and admiration amongst a broad spectrum of the public, especially the secular and the liberal religious.
2. Gains this support by emphasizing frustration, adapting prejudices against certain Jewish laws, and promising overnight miracle solutions.
3. Emphasizes and focuses upon topics that are dear to the hearts of those populations, such as: democracy, academics and the status of women, and shows lenience regarding conversion, sexual modesty, and other matters
4. Wages a stubborn battle against Charedi Rabbis who possess political power due to their spiritual greatness or their genius in Jewish law, and seeks constantly to undermine them by sabotaging that power.
5. At the same time, makes selective use of isolated, lenient Charedi rulings, fleshing out those rulings, extending them and establishing them as representative examples.
6. Systematically blames Torah scholars, and the whole Charedi public, for numerous troubles in society and presents themselves as the bearers of light for the generation.
7. Repeatedly presents Torah scholars as extremists, far removed and cut off from the public, who distance the public from the Torah, while they themselves have a monopoly on the mainstream approach, and are connected to, friendly with and in touch with the people. By such means they claim glory for themselves at the cost of shaming others.
8. Renders moral messages shallow, glossing over them with their personal charisma. These Rabbis are not like Moshe, who testified about his own speech impediments. See Maran Ha-

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Cohain Kook's letter in this regard to his son, Rabbenu Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah in his youth.

9. Attempts to bring secular Jews closer to religion and liberal Jews to Torah by issuing less-demanding rulings. They gauge their rulings by asking themselves: Will the public be pleased when less demanding rulings are issued?

10. Without openly taking a stand against Halachah, but having learned Torah and speaking in the Torah's name, avails himself of three magic formulas to neutralize Jewish laws that people find inconvenient.

11. ruse #: claiming irrelevance. The Talmud and Rambam are not always relevant to our life circumstances. Rav Kook and the Chief Rabbinate are irrelevant.

If they lived in our midst, they would not say what they said then. Moreover, The Chief Rabbinate, itself, is no longer relevant. It goes without saying that the rulings of most Torah scholars and Torah luminaries, especially those who are Charedi, are irrelevant since those authorities are accused of being cut off from the people. The Torah, originally considered the truth, is henceforth to be violated, the way a vow may be annulled. Such an approach jeopardizes the whole eternity of Torah.

It's like the story of the wagon driver who refused to obey the Rabbi's ruling obligating him to pay for damage caused when he slipped on the ice. "The Torah was given in the summer" he argued, "Had it been given in the winter, it would exempt me."

12. The realm that merits the most sweeping stamp of "irrelevance" is the laws of sexual modesty, most of which disturb both the secular and liberal religious. This includes branding as irrelevant our Sages' dictum that "there is no guardian against unchastity" (Ketubot 13b).

13. ruse #2: misusing our Sages' ruling "Better they should err in ignorance than brazenly" (Beitza 30a). To their mind, this requires our contradicting or neutralizing anything that will be the least bit displeasing to the secular or half/third/quarter of religious Jews. This frees them from the heavy responsibility of giving rebuke, it crowns public opinion as a major factor in determining Jewish law, and renders the populist Rabbi a captive of the media.

14. ruse #3: spiritual pragmatism. If something is important, but not easy for the public to accept, then better not to teach it than to drive the "straddlers" to the side of the secular/Reform side or alienate the secular. That is: there are laws we do not teach because we need a Torah that one can communicate with and attach oneself to. The facts on the ground determine the "Truth" that is conveyed.

15. Due to this, the populist Rabbi is considered by great Torah scholars like a driver who drives on the white line and even commonly crosses over it. The populist Rabbi unrelentingly seeks to receive the legitimacy of the great Torah luminaries -- and he does not succeed. Yet since those great luminaries relate to him with love and brotherhood and peace and friendship, he very often interprets that position as agreement.

16. And in conclusion, his external appearance is that of "just plain folks". He dresses in a non-Rabbinic fashion, has a small yarmulke, and sometimes no beard, and if he has a beard, it is small and carefully trimmed. And he certainly does not have a beard like that of Ha-Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin, which was not symmetric, but was longer on one side than the other.

*

Our Father our King, for the sake of Your Great Name, and for the sake of our ancestors who trusted in You, and to whom You taught the living Torah so that they might fulfill your wishes wholeheartedly, so shall You have mercy on us and teach us as well.

Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law

Halachot of Visiting Museum

Art Museums

Q: It is permissible to visit an art museum which displays both modest and immodest art, in order to see only the Kosher art?

A: It depends on the nature of the museum, and one must be certain that he will not stumble at all (Maran Ha-Rav Kook wrote: "When I lived in London, I would visit the National Gallery and the pictures which were most beloved to me were from Rembrandt." Yovel Orot, p. 168. And see further in Moadei Ha-Re'eiyah of Ha-Rav Neria, chap. 13 on Chanukah. And the Lubavitcher Rebbe said about the Rebbe Rashab - the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe – that he spent many hours in the Louvre in Paris staring at a painting which stimulated many Chasidic ideas. Igrot Kodesh, vol. 26, #9, p. 669. Igrot Kodesh of the Rebbe Rayatz, pp. 397-398. And in 5773, the Admor of Karlin-Stolin visited the Israel Museum in order to see an exhibition about Chasidic culture).

"Body Works" Exhibition?

Q: Is it permissible to visit the "Body Works" exhibition which presents dead bodies?

A: No. Shaming the deceased (This is the ruling of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. See Shut Da'at Cohain #199. Piskei Uziel #32).

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