

## "... AND ABRAHAM STOOD YET BEFORE THE LORD"

SHUBERT SPERO

I wish to suggest that the above words, coming at the end of Genesis 18:22, are the key to an understanding of this most important chapter in the life of Abraham. A difficulty is created by the opening verses of the chapter, which make us unsure as to its precise setting: *And the Lord appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. And he [Abraham] lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, three men . . .* (Gen. 18:1-2).

Elsewhere, where God "appears," there is usually a description of what an individual saw, or a verbal communication of some kind: *And the Lord appeared unto Abraham and said . . .* (12:7; see also 15:1,17:1). However, here we are told that God appears to Abraham, but there is no follow-up, no message! The very next verse talks about Abraham's running toward three strangers whom he invites to his tent. A radical solution is offered by Maimonides, who suggests that the subsequent events described, beginning in Verse 2, are actually a continuation of the appearance of God; that is, the **content** of Abraham's prophetic vision. However, according to Maimonides' theory of prophecy, this means that the entire Chapter 18 takes place in Abraham's prophetic dream. Somehow, the realistic tenor of the text does not seem to support this.

There is a kernel of truth in Maimonides' interpretation. It is clear from what follows that while Abraham, as it were, "breaks away" from God to attend to his unexpected guests, God seems to remain in the picture throughout the entire chapter. Consider Verse 12 where, unannounced, God suddenly joins the conversation. And then, later, before Abraham launches his plea on behalf of the people of Sodom, we are assured: . . . *and Abraham stood yet before the Lord*. Closure first comes in the final verse of the chapter: *And the Lord went His way as soon as He had left off speaking to Abraham and Abraham returned to his place* (v. 33).

*Shubert Spero was ordained at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. He has a B.S. from CCNY, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University. He is the Irving Stone Professor of Jewish Thought at Bar Ilan University. He is the author of Morality, Halakha and the Jewish Tradition and God in All Seasons, and recently, Holocaust and Return to Zion: A Study in Jewish Philosophy.*

We need not say, following Maimonides, that the events of Chapter 18 took place within the metaphysical world of the prophetic imagination, but rather that the palpable Presence of God (*Shechina*) entered the material world. The text is asserting that during all of Abraham's service to his guests (vv. 2-8), during the interchange regarding Sarah's reaction to having a son (vv. 9-15) and, of course, Abraham's intervention to save the people of Sodom (vv. 23-32), the God of Abraham, even when not actually conversing, is a felt Presence throughout.

The significance of this for the religious education of Abraham is profound. The fact that his immediate experience of God (. . . *And the Lord appeared to him* . . .) is not disrupted nor diminished by his turning to help his fellow men; that God is not "turned off" but remains present as Abraham turns his attention to the mundane details of attending to the needs of his guests, demonstrates to Abraham that the One Creator God is moral, not only in the sense that this is what He wants for man, but also that He is moral in essence.

In the matter of Sarah's laughter, God's intervention on the one hand established the truth (. . . *Nay but you did laugh!* [v. 15]) and on the other, teaches that the truth may be bent to preserve marital harmony.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the final item in this chapter is most revealing of the moral nature of God. In the course of this remarkable exchange, God confirms that He is committed to justice in the sense that "each one dies for his own sins" and that He is *abundant in kindness* to the extent that the presence of 10 righteous men can save the entire city. In short, the key element in this chapter is not the substance of the many things that happened, but that Abraham experiences God's abiding Presence while engaged in these activities so suffused with moral value.

The rabbis will later teach that when two individuals engage in Torah, the Divine Presence (*Shechina*) rests between them, and that when one is immersed in the *amidah* prayer, he has entered the Presence of God. Here, Abraham learns that when a person is engaged in moral deeds, one can experience the Divine Presence.

This understood, we are able to appreciate the significance and the appropriateness of God's apparent musing which occurs in the middle of the chapter:

*And the Lord said: 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and migh-*

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*ty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have **known him** so that he may command his children and his household after him that they may keep the **way of the Lord** to do **righteousness and justice** so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him' (vv. 17-19).*

This is the first mention in the Bible that *justice and righteousness* is the way of the Lord. Indeed, it is the first mention of *justice and righteousness* as abstract concepts at all. When, where and how did Abraham learn that *justice and righteousness* are values so dear to God that he should be concerned to transmit them to his *children and household after him*? Nothing we have been told about Abraham until Chapter 18 hints at any of this.

However, in the light of our interpretation, Verse 19 takes on a meaning which relates it to the entire chapter. *For I have known him*, says the Lord. Rashi points out that the word *da'at* denotes "love, intimacy, acquaintance-ship." This implies that not only has God *known* Abraham but also that God has made Himself known to Abraham. By making Abraham aware of His Presence throughout the events of this chapter, God has taught Abraham that moral values are the essence of God, that the way of God, Himself, is justice and righteousness. And, therefore, it is precisely the obligation of Abraham, now under the covenant to educate his seed in these moral values.<sup>2</sup> For all of the great promises made by God to Abraham depend upon this: . . . *so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him.*

As Jeremiah was to say: *Judge the cause of the poor and needy, that is the good. 'Is not this to know Me?' says the Lord* (Jer. 22:16).

#### NOTES

1. The Rabbis note that Sarah in her astonishment said . . . *my lord [husband] being old*. . . . (18:12). When God reports her reaction to Abraham, God says. . . *for I [Sarah] am old*... Said the rabbis: This teaches that a person may bend the truth in order to maintain "peace in the home."

2. In the section wherein God establishes His covenant with Abraham involving the rite of circumcision, the phrase *and thy seed after thee* is repeated five times, indicating that the covenant includes the obligation upon Abraham and later the Jew to transmit the teachings to his offspring.