

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



THE DUEL IN PENUEL

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

“These words contradict Scripture (and) are forbidden to hear, all the more so to believe”. It was a transgressive thrill to read that passage of Ramban (Bereishis 18:1) in tenth grade. Did he really just say that about Rambam? Yes, he did. Rishonim really talked that way about each other’s ideas. If Ramban could think Rambam had strayed so far from truth, surely it was ok for me to think the same of my teachers on occasion, or even to side with Rambam against Ramban here.

Ramban was reacting to Rambam’s statement in Guide to the Perplexed 2:41 that any Torah narrative in which a human being sees or hears an angel must be either a dream or else a prophetic vision. (Presumably the same is true if someone feels or smells or tastes an angel.) Guide to the Perplexed 2:42 explains that this is so even if the human being does not recognize the angel as such, and even if the Torah never explicitly identifies the angel as such. So long as it actually was an angel, the story must be a vision or dream.

Rambam argues that readers sensitive to literary structure should recognize that the Torah often tips its hand that what follows will not take place in the physical world. For example, Parashat Vayeira begins “*And Hashem appeared to him . . . he saw, and behold three men*”. This is an example of the literary device *klal uprat*, in which a broad introductory statement is followed by a detailed exposition. Avraham’s seeing of “*three men*” and all that follows (at least) until Avraham *gets up early in the morning* after Sodom’s destruction, is the exposition of how Hashem appeared to him. Similarly, Bereishis 32:2

ויעקב הלך לדרכו ויפגעו בו מלאכי אלהים

and Yaakov went on his way, and angels of G?d encountered him

is a broad introductory statement that subsumes Yaakov sending *angels* to his brother Esav, and the ominous report they returned. Rambam contends that it covers everything up to and including the end of the wrestling match.

How do we know that Yaakov’s wrestling partner was an angel? Rambam states that “*it becomes obvious at the end*”. I’m not certain how. Because Yaakov demands a blessing? Human beings give each other blessings throughout Tanakh, and of course Yaakov and Esav’s relationship fractured over such a blessing. Because the loser refuses to give his name? Many rishonim contend that it is impolite to ask a vanquished foe for their name, for the same reason that this happens all the time in Arthurian stories – it allows the victor to re-humiliate the loser every time the story is retold. Most likely Rambam is referring to the content of the blessing - *because you have striven with Elo?im and with men* - and Yaakov’s naming of the location - *because I have seen Elo?im face to face, and my nefesh was preserved*. But the word El?him can just mean “mighty”.

Ramban counters that all these narratives seem to have direct consequences in the physical world. Sodom is really destroyed, and Yaakov limps away from the wrestling match. How can purely mental events effect such consequences?

(If Rambam is correct), I don’t know why (Yaakov) was limping on his thigh when awake . . .

According to this opinion of his, we’d have to say the same about the matter of Lot, that the angels never came to his house, and that he never baked matzot for them that they ate, rather it was all a vision. But even if he raised Lot to the level of prophecy, how could the evil sinning people of Sodom be prophets? yet otherwise, how would they know that men had come to Lot’s house? If (you say that the entire story” is Lot’s prophetic vision . . . then Lot should have remained in Sodom (during its destruction, and be dead)?! So (Ramban) must think that all these things happened on their own (i.e. naturally), but the statements (in the Torah about them) are all visions.

Rambam’s partisans respond that Yaakov limped because mental events can have physical effects on one’s own body, and that Avraham’s vision was a religiously filtered experience of the actual destruction of Sodom; he perceived e.g. a volcanic eruption as G-d making it rain sulfur and salt. I don’t know why Ramban thinks that this understanding of

Avraham's vision "contradicts Scripture". (Sara Krishtul correctly wonders why, in Ramban's critique, Lot could not have escaped Sodom in a time between his vision and the actual destruction.)

Furthermore, I suggest tentatively that Ramban misunderstands Rambam in a crucial way. Rambam does not think that the people of Sodom, including Lot, have any visions. They are all just characters in Avraham's vision. Similarly, the "real" Esav never encounters Yaakov's messengers.

I also don't understand why Ramban sets the stakes of this disagreement so high. Immediately after his anti-Rambam flourish, he too insists that angels are not part of the physical world:

*In truth,
everywhere that Scripture mentions the seeing of an angel, or
the speech of an angel,
it is in a vision or dream,
because the senses cannot capture angels.*
ובאמת
כי כל מקום שהוזכר בכתוב ראיית מלאך או דבור מלאך –
הוא במראה או בחלום,
כי ההרגשים לא ישיגו המלאכים.

What differentiates this position from Ramban's? Ramban spends considerable ink explaining the difference between prophetic and non-prophetic visions and differentiating among types of angels. But I still do not understand why people are more likely to emerge limping from nonprophetic rather than from prophetic visions, or for that matter the difference between angels that appear in visions and those that are

כבוד נברא במלאכים,
יקרא אצל היודעים "מלבוש",
יושב לעיני בשר בוכי הנפשות כחסידים ובני הנביאים.
*Glory created as angels
called by the cognoscenti "Attire"*
*perceptible to flesh-and-blood eyes of the pure of soul like the
pious and the students of prophets*

Ramban's frustrating last words on the subject are

ולא אוכל לפרש
I am unable to explain.

This is not I think a statement of humility, but rather a claim about the (lacking) spiritual stature of his readership – one completely accurate with regard to this reader. Perhaps this is poetic justice for my youthful celebration of his sharpness against Rambam, which, to be fully honest, is not wholly in the past.

I have long been partial to Nechama Leibowitz's understanding, and Howard Fast's, that angels who wrestle are aspects of the self that are not fully integrated. This is the most powerful understanding of the midrashic reading that the angel in our story is the avatar of Esav. Aviva Zornberg brilliantly contends that Yaakov has been wrestling with a sense that his impersonation of Esav was as much self-discovery as impersonation. This seems to require an angel with a purely psychic manifestation.

The contrasting position was Rashbam, who seemed to require a physical angel. Rashbam argues that the angel came in order to prevent Yaakov from running away, and therefore left at dawn when Yaakov could no longer flee successfully. I've said some harsh things about Rashbam's position. I didn't declare it forbidden. But his pure instrumentalization of the angel seemed to me close to contradicting Scripture, which imho clearly gives the angel a persona.

However, Rabbi Aviad Tabory gave a shiur at YI Sharon several weeks ago that opened up a possibility I had overlooked. Perhaps Yaakov intended to flee not because he was afraid of losing the battle, but rather because he was afraid that winning would cement his identification with Esav. He wrestles with this challenge – procrastinates? - long enough that fleeing is no longer an option. This understanding makes Rashbam compatible with the position that the angel was internal to Yaakov.

My question then is whether the issue of angelic materiality – really how many angels can dance on the head of a pin - has any implications at all for the meaning of Chumash, and if it has none, why Ramban chose to foment this tempest in this teacup. Suggestions and corrections are welcome.

Shabbat shalom!