

And “the Word of the L-rd Came to Abram in a Vision”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

After these incidents, the word of the L-rd came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Fear not, Abram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great,” *Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Our *pasuk* (verse) is the introduction to the well-known narrative of the *Brit bein Habetarim* (Covenant of the Pieces) wherein the broad outline of the destiny of the Jewish people was revealed to *Avraham Avinu* (our father, Abraham). The *pasuk* is unique in that it is the sole instance in the Torah’s multi-chapter encounter between the Almighty and Avraham that utilizes the phrase “in a vision” (“*ba-mahazeh*”). Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508) elaborated upon the singular nature of our verse in the following manner:

It is the case that the Torah relates that prophecy was vouchsafed to Avraham on numerous occasions. It never explained, however, on which level of the prophetic experience the prophecy was to be found. For the types of prophecy are of two kinds or varieties; namely, dreams and visions... The terms “*mareh*” (“visualization”) and “*mahazeh*” (“vision”) are synonymous. As such, why did the Torah inform us in this particular case that Avraham’s prophecy was specifically a “*mahazeh*?” After all, this information is irrelevant to the matter [i.e. the *Brit bein Habetarim*] at hand. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, translation and brackets my own)

The Abarbanel was not the first interpreter to raise the question as to why the Torah utilized the term “*mahazeh*.” Two classic commentators who addressed this issue were the Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160-1235) and the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270). The Radak suggested that the Torah used “*mahazeh*” in order to linguistically differentiate the impending prophetic experience from those that had come before:

Mahazeh is used in this instance – even though it was never said regarding any matter about which Hashem spoke to him prior to this moment – since this prophecy was not just verbal in nature. Instead, it contained elements of action, namely, G-d taking Avraham outside, the counting of the stars and the specific matter of the *Brit bein Habetarim*. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, translation and brackets my own.)

In sum, Rav Kimchi opined that the Torah employed the term “*mahazeh*” in order to prepare us for the new kind of prophecy Avraham Avinu was about to experience, a prophecy of words and action, rather than one comprised solely of verbal communication.

In contrast to the Radak, who focused upon the new nature of the prophecy foreshadowed by the term “*mahazeh*,” the Ramban suggested that the Torah used our expression to inform us that Avraham was now able to receive G-d’s message at a new time: “Now Avraham was able to receive *devar Hashem* (the word of G-d) in a vision during the day, whereas at first, his prophecy [like all of the other prophets except Moshe,] had been limited to visualizations of the night.” (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 15:1, translation and brackets my own)

In our own time, my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and disciples, took a different approach regarding the meaning of “*mahazeh*” than either the Radak or the Ramban. For the Rav, our term signified a different kind of visionary experience than those Avraham had shared with the

Almighty in the past. Heretofore, G-d's prophecies had enabled Avraham to experience his Creator's warmth, care and concern. Now, however, "*ba-mahazeh*," Avraham was confronted with distance and separation from the Master of the Universe. In part, Rav Soloveitchik derived this concept from the glaring absence of the term "*va-yomer*" ("and He said") that had accompanied all of Avraham's other prophetic encounters, and the presence of the newly introduced term "*devar Hashem*":

The introduction, "*hayah devar Hashem el Avram ba-mahazeh*, the word of the L-rd came to Abram in a vision" (Gen. 15:1), is very interesting... Here the Torah omits the term *va-yomer*, which it had used repeatedly to describe G-d's encounters with Abraham, and adds the word *ba-mahazeh*. *Va-yomer* means a dialogue, a conversation held face to face. G-d encountered Abraham and addressed Himself to him. *Devar Hashem* connotes communication from a distance; the message got to Abraham, but indirectly, G-d was not present. *Ba-mahazeh* means perspective, vision. *Va-yomer* is a higher medium of prophecy than *devar Hashem*. Here G-d was a little distant because the message G-d delivered to him [in the *Brit bein Habetarim*] was one of *galut*, of exile, oppression, humiliation, and suffering. (*Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, pages 139-140, underlining and brackets my own)

At this juncture, the Rav focused his energies on further elucidating the term, "*ba-mahazeh*:" "Before G-d spoke to him face to face; now, suddenly it is *ba-mahazeh*, from a distance. The word reaches him from infinity, from G-d's transcendent abode." In other words, for the first time in Avraham's adult life, he experienced G-d's remoteness rather than His immanence. Little wonder, then, that he desperately needed to hear Hashem immediately declare, "Fear not, Abram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great." (Underlining my own)

We are *b'nai Avraham*, the descendants of Avraham, and we continue to live in a world in which the message of G-d is far too often "one of *galut*, of exile, oppression, humiliation, and suffering." As such, like the first Patriarch, we long to hear G-d's reassuring words: "Fear not, Abram; I am your Shield; your reward is exceedingly great."

With G-d's endless mercy, may the time of our reward as His chosen and beloved nation be ushered in by *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the Righteous Messiah), when will we witness the fulfillment of Zechariah's most famous prophecy: "And the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one." (14:9) May this vision be realized soon and in our days – *amen v'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom,

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

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