

Seeing God

Vayeira – Rav Hanan Schlesinger

Many years ago I got a hug and a kiss from Rav Shlomo Carlebach. Only once - the first time and the last time that I met him. And I wasn't the only one: Rav Shlomo showered love and affection on literally everyone that he met, and he met an awful lot of people. For him, every human being was "my holiest brother", or "my holiest sister".

Someone once asked him, how could everyone be the 'holiest'. Rav Shlomo answered without missing a beat. He replied that when he made face to face contact with another person, that person was at that moment the absolute holiest in his eyes. And he really meant it.

Everyone is a diamond in the rough, he once said to a group of diamond merchants who asked him why he spent so much time with the homeless, the convicts, and those whose luck had betrayed them. They just have to be polished, and then o' will they shine.

Where we might see just a person holding up the line at the supermarket, or a nudnik, or a smelly irresponsible alcoholic, Rav Shlomo saw God. He didn't just know that every human beings is created in the image of God and has that divine spark within him, he actually experienced it. For him it was the most real thing in the world.

And he would do almost anything to prevent that spark from smoldering, to help it shine. He spent a good part of his life plucking discarded diamonds from the garbage bin, and buffing them until they shone.

Our parasha, parashat Vayeira, opens with the wounded Avraham suffering and in pain, sitting at the entrance to his tent. He has just circumcised himself, not an easy thing to do for a ninety nine year old man. The first verse tells us that the Lord appeared to him, and it immediately



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goes on to say that he raised his eyes and saw three men, towards whom he ran and invited into the tent as his honored guests.

God, that is to say, appeared to him as three men. And why did God not appear to him as He is, in some transcendental vision, in some other-worldly spiritual fashion? Perhaps because Avraham was uniquely able to see divinity where others would see only men. He did not need a mystical experience to see God.

And indeed, seeing is behaving. The Torah immediately goes on to recount how the Patriarch challenged God upon hearing that the wrath of the Creator was set to destroy Sedom for its wickedness. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice?", he demands. But it is not only justice but rather mercy that he is after. "Far be it from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked", he almost berates God, while at the same time asking that the whole city be spared for the few righteous within it. Avraham wants even the wicked to be saved. After all, they were created by God as well. The divine flame within may not be burning brightly, but it has not been extinguished. It can't be. Avraham felt that in every bone of his body.

The prophet Isaiah has God saying: "Avraham Ohavee", "Avraham who loves me so". He is the paradigm of the lover of God. But he is also the paradigm of the lover of humankind. For him the two were inseparable. To love man is to love God, and to love God is to love man. He knew that they are all - we are all - diamonds in the rough.

All of them - all of us. God's diamonds.



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