

# YHWH Reveals Himself to Avraham

## Bereshith 18:1-3

By Rabbi Levi bar Ido / B'nai Avraham

||18||And YHWH appeared<sup>1</sup> unto him in the terebinth trees of Mamre<sup>2</sup>; and he sat in the entrance of the ohel (tent) in the heat of the day<sup>3</sup>; |2| And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, hinei, Shloshah Anashim (Three Men, [Yeshayahu 6:3]) stood by him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the entrance of the ohel, and prostrated himself on the ground, |3| And said, YHWH<sup>4</sup> [YHWH, see v.13]<sup>5</sup>, if now I have found chen (favor) in Thy sight, pass not on by, please, from Thy servant; Bereshith 18:1-3 OJB

### Is the One Whom speaks to Avraham YHWH?

Can YHWH manifest Himself as a man? What does the Torah teach concerning the Hebraic understanding of this truth?

In verse one of **Bereshith 18** the Hebrew verb “appeared” does not have the connotation of “reveal” in the sense to “make known” as some translate the Hebrew. This *nifil* verb *va'yera* ( וַיֵּרָא )<sup>6</sup> is used 49 times in the Torah, and all of them are used in the context of “appear” or a visual experience of some manner. So, in this context we cannot interpret this verse to mean that YHWH “revealed” Himself to Avraham. Rather YHWH made Himself visible in a body in order to be seen with the eyes (and he lifted-*va'yisa*- eyes of him-*einav* and he saw-*vayar*) of Avraham.

The Hebrew Adonai ( אֲדֹנָי ) uses the vowel point of *qametz* not *patach*. This clue indicates that the Masoretic scribes held to the opinion that Avraham was speaking to YHWH. Also, in this verse, the word Adonai is considered “set-apart”<sup>7</sup> or אֲדֹנָיִךְ. Adonai is used in the *TaNak* 134 times<sup>8</sup> with *qametz* without the Name YHWH or Elohim accompanying it (see **Gen.19:18; 20:4; Ex.4:10, 13: 5:22; 15:17; 34:9; Num.14:17**).

- “From time immemorial the Jewish Canons decreed that the incommunicable Name be pronounced Adonai as if it was written Adonai instead of YHWH. Nothing was, therefore, more natural for the copyists than to substitute the expression which they were forbidden to pronounce. This is confirmed by the fact that the Massorah itself in giving the catchword of a passage substitutes Adonai for YHWH and that the Easterns read Adonai where the Westerns have YHWH and visa versa (see Is.38:14; Mal.1:14; Lam.5:21). Hence we may safely assume that though the Scribe wrote Adonai for YHWH he would not insert the incommunicable Name instead of Adonai. The reading, therefore, in the conflicting passages is in favor of the Tetragrammaton.”  
Ginsberg, The Massorah, Vol.4:28-29

It is clear that modern scholars and the Masorettes agree that the text is to be interpreted as referring to YHWH when Adonai is written with a *qametz*.

The Jewish sages of the *Talmud* also agree that the Name is used in **Bereshith 18:3**.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Chama explains the “heat of the day” was the third day following Avraham’s circumcision and the Holy One Blessed be He, came to inquire as to the welfare of Avraham...Elohim visited Avraham in honor of the mitzvah of circumcision that Avraham had performed. Baal HaTurim –Chumash Bereshith pg.134.This sets the example for us of visiting the sick (bikkur cholim).

<sup>2</sup> Near Hebron. The Zohar teaches that Mamre is actually Ya’akov. See Zohar Vol.3:2:22-26 From the K.Centre

<sup>3</sup> According to the Zohar this phrase means when the greatest Revelation of the Light occurs.

<sup>4</sup> Masoretic text has Adonai. This is one of 134 places that the scribes replaced YHWH with Adonai. The Aramaic Peshitta has MARYA which translates YHWH not Adonai. The Targum Onkelos has אֲדֹנָי, which this Targum renders YHWH.

<sup>5</sup> |13| And YHWH said unto Avraham, Why did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I which am old of a surety bear a child?

3.1b) (Niphal)1b1) to appear, present oneself 1b2) to be seen1b 3) to be visible

<sup>7</sup> Notes on the Text of Genesis –Oxford 1896

<sup>8</sup> The Massorah-Ktav- 4 Vol.1:25-26

- TO MAKE ROOM FOR THE GUESTS, etc. R. Johanan said: Hospitality to wayfarers<sup>14</sup> is as ‘great’ as early attendance at the Beth Hamidrash, since he [the Tanna] states, TO MAKE ROOM FOR GUESTS OR ON ACCOUNT OF THE NEGLECT OF THE BETH HAMIDRASH. R. Dimi of Nehardea said: It is ‘greater’ than early attendance at the Beth Hamidrash, because he states, TO MAKE ROOM FOR GUESTS, and then, AND ON ACCOUNT OF THE NEGLECT OF THE BETH HAMIDRASH. Rab Judah said in Rab’s name: Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shechinah, for it is written, And he said, Adonai, if now I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away, etc.<sup>15</sup> R. Eleazar said: Come and observe how the conduct of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not like that of mortals. The conduct of mortals [is such that] an inferior person cannot say to a great[er] man, Wait for me until I come to you; whereas in the case of the Holy One, blessed be He, it is written, and he said, Adonai, if now I have found, etc. **Talmud Shabbat 127a**
- All the Names mentioned in Scripture in connection with Abraham are sacred, except this which is secular: it is said; And he said, ‘Adonai<sup>9</sup>, if now I have found favor in thy sight’.<sup>8</sup> Hanina, the son of R. Joshua’s brother, and R. Eleazar b. Azariah in the name of R. Eliezer of Modin, said, this also is sacred.<sup>9</sup> With whom will [the following] agree? Rab Judah said that Rab said: Greater is hospitality to wayfarers than receiving the Divine Presence. With whom [will this agree]? With this pair. **Talmud Shavuot 35b**
- Maimonides also interprets the phrase “Adonai” as YHWH<sup>10</sup> in **Yad, Yesodai HaTorah 6:9**
- “Elohim, in this conception, can nonetheless make Himself known to humans in sort of emanation from the Divine (G-dhead) that is visible to human eyes. It is a hypostasis, a concrete expression of the Divine presence, which is otherwise inexpressible to human beings. What the human sees when such a hypostasis is in front of him or her looks like people, like a man.” **Commentary on the Torah by Friedman pg.63**
- “And YHWH was seen by him by the oaks of Mamre...” **Bereshith 18:1 –The Five Books of Moses ;The Schocken Bible pg.75**
- “The Eternal appeared to Avraham at Elonei, the plain of Mamre...” **Rashi Chumash: Bereshith ,pg.162**
- “The final letters of the Hebrew Alef-Bet also correspond to Mamre. The five final letters (plus the Oneness of the Creator) add up to 281, the same numerical value of Mamre. The five final letters also correlate to THE MESSIAH and the concept of the resurrection of the dead. Hence, through the word Mamre, we bring about the arrival of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead in our day. The resurrection of the dead includes any area of our lives that has undergone death<sup>11</sup>, be it a business, a relationship, a marriage, or our inner peace and happiness.” **Kabbalistic Bible: Bereshith; K Centre page 131**

The context of this account adds to the correct interpretation of that YHWH appeared to Avraham by using the singular not the plural. The account speaks of YHWH appearing to Avraham and then three men stand by his tent. Yet, according to the Hebrew, Avraham speaks to only one of the men because the Hebrew reads in the second person singular “You” **בְּעֵינֶיךָ** ( *be’einieicha*- eyes of you)and **עַבְדְּךָ** (*avdecha*- servant of you). Then Avraham, being a man of great hospitality invites all three men to stay and eat with him. The account then uses the plural **וַיֹּמְרוּ** (*va’yomru*) in verse 9 with all three speaking to Avraham.

- 10. And He (**וַיֹּמֶר**) said (*va’yomer*), I will certainly return to you when the season comes around; and, behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him.

In verse 10 the Hebrew reverts back to the singular, indicating that the Eternal One is speaking to Avraham. Then, in verse 13 it is the general “he said” is translated as “And YHWH said (**וַיֹּמֶר יְהוָה**)” indicating the one speaking to Avraham *Avinu* is YHWH.

<sup>9</sup> The Artscroll Chumash on page 79 says, “Adonai: According to most interpretations, the word Adonai in this passage is sacred, referring to Elohim.

<sup>10</sup> Also see Etz Chayyim notes pg.100.Because it is clear that the patriarch is unaware of the strangers’ true identity, the unusual vocalization may be a signal to the reader that the three “men” are no ordinary wayfarers.

<sup>11</sup> This would also include the bringing alive of the womb of Sarah.

- 13. And YHWH<sup>12</sup> said (*va'yomer YHWH*) to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? 14. Is any thing too hard for YHWH? At the set time I will return to you, when season comes around<sup>13</sup>, and Sarah shall have a son. **Bereshith 18:13-14**

We also have a clue that is found in verse 22 that is indicated by a *tigunne sophrim* or a “correction of the scribes”. In the original text it read “while YHWH stood before Avraham<sup>14</sup>”.

But, the scribes changed the text due to their interpretation that the Greater does not stand before the lesser, and thus actually changed the text. Because of this particular *tigunne sophrim*, we can prove from the original Hebrew text that YHWH appeared in the form of a man to Avraham.

- “ But surely it was not Avraham who had gone to stand before Him, but rather the Holy One, Source of Blessing, who had come to him and said, ‘ The cries of Sedom and Amorah have become great.’ It should therefore have written: ‘The Eternal was still standing near Avraham.’ It is, however, a variation, such as writers make to avoid an irreverent expression.” **Rashi Chumash: Bereshith ,pg.173**

Obviously Mosheh in writing the Torah had no problem with YHWH taking on the form of a man and walking on the earth as a man. Another surprise is that Avraham was not shocked at the idea of a human manifestation of YHWH and while as a man retaining all His Divine Essence and authority. Avraham obviously knew the One he was holding a conversation with was Elohim, so he bowed down ( *va'yishtachu*)before him.

- 2. And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, three men<sup>15</sup> stood over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed<sup>16</sup> down to the earth. **Bereshith 18:2**
- 25. Be it far from You to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, be it far from you; Shall not the Judge of all the earth (*ha'shofet kol ha'aretz lo*) do judgment ( *va'aseh mishpat*)? **Bereshith 18:25**

The concept of an Elohim Who is unable to manifest Himself in this world in human form comes from later rabbinical thought.

The context of this account point to the Deity of the One Man who was speaking to Avraham.

1. The conversation regarding Sodom and Gomorrah.
2. The One speaking had to return in order to cause the pregnancy of Sarah.
3. Avraham calls the One speaking to him “the Judge of all the earth.”
4. The Hebrew text makes it very clear that the One speaking with Avraham is YHWH. Bereshith 18:17, 26 speaks as “I” meaning YHWH.
5. The account of Bereshith chapter 19 starts with “the Two Angels came to Sodom.” What happened to the third “man”? He did not go with them to Sedom.

<sup>12</sup> “In the Torah, an angel is often the manifestation of Elohim in human form” Etz Chayyim notes-pg.101.Rashi also translates this as the Eternal (YHWH).

<sup>13</sup> Zohar Vol.3:7:135-“the time appointed” This is the time that is known to Me for the resurrection of the dead. “I will return to you the same body which is sacred, renewed as before, because you are like the holy angels.And that day shall be merry before Me and I shall rejoice in them...” Zohar 3:7:137

<sup>14</sup> The Masoretic text has “Avraham stood yet before YHWH.” This is one of the eighteen texts that the scribes altered the reading because they felt the text diminished the holiness of YHWH. According to the Massorah it originally read “YHWH stood yet before Avraham.” The Schocken Bible notes on page 77 states, “Some manuscripts read ‘But YHWH still stood in the presence of Avraham.’ The subject of the sentence has been reversed by scribes who were uncomfortable with the passage’s human portrayal of Elohim.”

<sup>15</sup> “The aim of this introduction is to make clear that the visitors in the following story are an apparition of the Divine.” The Torah: A Modern Commentary pg.122

<sup>16</sup> See Gen.22:5;24:26,48

5. And Avraham said to his young men, Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship (*ve'nishtachaveh*), and come back to you. Gen.22:5

26. And the man bowed down his head, and worshipped (*va'yishtachu*) YHWH. Gen.24:26

48. And I bowed down my head, and worshipped (*va'eshtachaveh*) YHWH, and blessed YHWH the Elohim of my master Avraham, who had led me in the right way to take my master’s brother’s daughter to his son.Gen.24:48

Any student of the Torah would arrive at the conclusion that this account proves that YHWH came in the form of a Man to Avraham. Thus, the idea of Elohim “incarnating” within a man is not a strange concept to the Hebrew mind.