

Avraham's Prophecy

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Question #1: *Vayeira*

How could Avraham *Avinu* attend to his guests if he was in the midst of a prophetic trance?

Question #2: *Kesuvim*

What is the difference between *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim*?

Question #3: *Tehillim*

Is *Tehillim* prophetic?

Parshas Vayeira

Parshas Vayeira begins with Hashem appearing to Avraham. When a *navi*, Avraham included, receives a prophecy, he is in a prophetic trance or a dreamlike state, as we will see later in the words of the Rambam regarding prophecy. Yet, the very next *posuk* has Avraham seeing travelers, racing out to invite them into his tent, cooking and serving them a meal, and carrying on conversation with them. How could he do this if he was in the middle of having a prophetic vision?

The answer to this question involves a dispute among *rishonim*. According to Rashi, the Ramban, the Ritva and the vast majority of *rishonim*, it seems that receiving a prophecy did not preclude Avraham *Avinu* from requesting permission of Hashem to leave his prophetic state in order to attend to the visitors. This is explained by *Chazal* as: *Gedolah hachnasas orchim mei'hakbolas penei Shechina, Bringing in guests is greater than receiving the Divine presence (Shabbos 127a; Shavuos 35b)*. This is based on the observation of what Avraham did. This should seem similar to someone who is on the telephone with "The Rosh Yeshivah (or "The Boss") and says to Him, "Can G-d please hold the telephone line for a moment; I have guests to entertain!" This may sound strange to us – is it not greater to receive Hashem's presence than to receive common people?

The answer is that it is more important that we emulate what Hashem does -- in this case, make sure that wanderers have a place to rest, wash and eat (and, if necessary, sleep), all of which reflects what Hashem does for the entire world daily -- than it is to receive communication from Hashem on the level that a prophet does.

On the other hand, the Rambam has a very different way of understanding what happened, which I will explain after the following introduction:

Levels of prophecy

According to the Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:44), there are twelve different levels of prophecy:

Levels 1 and 2 are different levels of *ruach hakodesh*, which the Rambam considers on a lower level than prophecy, and which I will soon explain in more detail.

Levels 3-11 are various degrees of prophecy. It is unnecessary for us to explore every category in this gamut of qualities of prophecy to explain our topic. We simply need to understand that these are different types of Divine experience that the Rambam includes under the general heading of prophecy.

Level 12 is the highest level of prophecy, which was achieved only by Moshe *Rabbeinu*, and is based on the Torah's description (*Bamidbar* 12:6-8) that Hashem communicates with other prophets in visions and riddles, whereas Hashem speaks to Moshe in regular conversation. As the Rambam explains, Moshe is the father of all prophets, both of those who preceded him and those who succeeded him. Other prophets receive their prophecy when they are asleep or in a trance, when their physical senses are inactive; Moshe could receive a prophecy while awake. Other prophets see symbolic images or allegories; Moshe needed no metaphors. Moshe was able to receive words of prophecy and remain fully composed. Other prophets can only wait and hope to receive a vision; only Moshe could initiate a dialogue with Hashem (*Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah* 7:6; *Commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin*, Chapter 10).

Ruach hakodesh

(1) Divine assistance

At this point, I am going to explain the first level, as I promised above. According to the Rambam, most of the passages in *Tanach* in which it says "and the *Ruach* of Hashem came upon" or enveloped someone mean that the individual received Divine assistance to achieve something that he would, otherwise, probably have been unable to accomplish on his own. The Rambam implies that the individual may not even realize that he has been the beneficiary of special Divine involvement. Among the many personalities in *Tanach* who achieved *ruach hakodesh* are Yosef, Shimshon, Shaul and the many *shoftim*. The Rambam explains that this was the level that Moshe *Rabbeinu* had achieved before his first prophecy at the Burning Bush.

This level is not true prophecy, which is receiving a communication from Hashem; nor does it necessarily effect a permanent change in the individual receiving this Divine blessing, again unlike true prophecy in which the prophet now feels a qualitative difference in his own spirituality that remains with him for the rest of his life.

Many authorities accept fully this approach of the Rambam, including the Radak (in the introduction to his commentary on *Tehillim*) and the Abarbanel (in his commentaries to *Tanach* and *Moreh Nevuchim*).

(2) Higher *Ruach hakodesh*

There is a higher level of *ruach hakodesh*, in which the individual is aware that he has received a Divine gift that allows him to accomplish more than he would otherwise have been able to. This higher level of *ruach hakodesh* enabled Dovid *Hamelech* to compose *Tehillim*, Shelomoh *Hamelech* to write *Mishlei*, *Koheles* and *Shir Hashirim*, and Daniel,

Mordechai, Esther and others to write all the works that we call *Kesuvim*. This was also the level achieved by Eldad and Meidad, when they foretold the future (*Bamidbar* 11:26-27), and by the *kohanim gedolim*, when they requested advice or direction from the *Urim Vetumim*. It is noteworthy that the Rambam places Eldad and Meidad in this category, notwithstanding that the *posuk* says that they prophesied (*misnabe'im*).

While receiving this Divine gift, Dovid, Shelomoh, Daniel and the others retained full possession of their senses, which is why the Rambam explains that this is not true *nevuah*, in which a prophet reaches a state of trance. With this approach, the Rambam explains the passage of the *Gemara* wherein it states that Chaggai, Zecharyah and Malachi were prophets, although Daniel, who was not a prophet, perceived more than they did (*Megillah* 3a; *Sanhedrin* 94a). Daniel did not achieve the level of true prophecy, but his accomplishments in *ruach hakodesh* enabled him to foresee more than Chaggai, Zecharyah and Malachi did with their prophecy.

The Rambam does not consider Dovid, Shelomoh and Daniel to be true prophets, but to have received a high level of *ruach hakodesh*. This does not in any way demean these great Torah leaders of their spiritual genius and accomplishments. It is simply a definition of forms and levels of prophecy that different great Torah leaders achieved.

Other *rishonim*, such as *Rashi* (*Megillah* 14a), disagree with the Rambam and consider Dovid, Shelomoh and Daniel to be true prophets, and, presumably, also place Eldad and Meidad in the same category.

Kesuvim

At this point, we can answer the second of our opening questions: “What is the difference between *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim*?” In other words, why did *Chazal* divide the non-Torah parts of *Tanach* into two sections, one called “*Nevi'im*” and the other called “*Kesuvim*?” According to the Rambam, the words of *Nevi'im* were received as prophecy (levels 3-11), whereas the words of the *Kesuvim* were received in *ruach hakodesh*. In the instances where the same person wrote *seforim* both in *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim*, such as Yirmiyohu, who wrote the book of *Nevi'im* that bears his name, the book of *Melachim*, which is also in *Nevi'im*, and also *Megillas Eicha*, which is part of *Kesuvim* (*Bava Basra* 15a; *Mo'ed Katan* 26a), the book that is in *Kesuvim* was written with *ruach hakodesh*, whereas the books in *Nevi'im* were written with prophecy (Commentary of Abarbanel to *Moreh Nevuchim*).

Since *Rashi* understands that Dovid, Shelomoh and Daniel were prophets, and presumably is of the opinion that the books of *Kesuvim* are also written with prophecy, he cannot accept the Rambam's approach to explain the difference between *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim*. There are many other answers to explain what is the difference between *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim*. In the work, *Ohel Rivkah*, by Rabbi Yitzchak Sender, several approaches to this question are quoted (pages 133-139).

(3-11) The words of the prophets

Levels numbered three through eleven of the Rambam are different intensities of prophecy (*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:44). Prophecy can be received either in a vision or in a dream. The prophet may perceive that Hashem is speaking to him, or that he is receiving communication via an angel, whom he might see and/or hear. He might hear and see a human or an unusual being talking to him, or he may hear only a voice or a series of different voices. It might even be a voice of someone who is familiar to him, such as when Shemuel heard what he thought was the voice of Eili (*Shemuel* I, Chapter 3). A prophet might receive a message that is meant only for his own erudition and growth, but not to be communicated to others, or he might receive a message that is meant to be told to others, as we see numerous times in *Chumash* and *Navi* (*Rambam, Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah* 7:7). A prophet may receive a vision that is anywhere among these levels. The fact that he once received a more intense level of prophecy does not mean that his future prophecies will be as intense.

In the Rambam's opinion, when the Torah describes, in *parshas Shoftim*: "A prophet from among you, from your brothers, like me (Moshe), will Hashem, your G-d, establish for you. You shall listen to him.... Then, Hashem said to me... 'I will establish for you a prophet from among your brothers, like you, and I will put My words in his mouth – everything that I will command him'" (*Devorim* 18: 15-18), it is not referring to someone who received *ruach hakodesh*, but to someone who received true prophecy. Therefore, although the Torah prescribes a stern sentence for someone who pays no attention to the admonition of a prophet, that punishment does not apply to someone who ignored a message received through *ruach hakodesh*.

Two prophets

The *Midrash* teaches that *ein shenei nevi'im misnabe'im besignon echod*, two prophets will never prophesy using the exact same words (*Pesikta* and *Midrash Seichel Tov, parshas Va'eira* 9:14). This is because a prophet saw a vision, which he later describes. Each prophet still maintains his own personality and upbringing that is reflected when he describes what he saw. Since no two people have the same personality, no two people -- not even prophets who see the same Divine vision -- will describe what they saw using the exact same words.

Profitable prophet

The *Rambam* explains: "Prophecy is bestowed only to a very wise *talmid chacham* who is in total control of his personality traits. Prophecy can be achieved only by someone whose *yetzeir hora* never controls him – rather, he is in control of his *yetzeir hora* always. Once he is filled with all these qualities, particularly tremendous and correct understanding, and he is physically complete and healthy, he may begin studying the deeper aspects of Torah. When he is drawn by these deep subjects, his great understanding must be channeled to becoming sanctified and to continue to grow spiritually. At this point, he separates himself from the ways of common people who follow the darkness of the time, and, instead, this individual constantly grows and spurs himself onward. He teaches himself to control his thoughts so as not to think of things that have no value. Rather, his thoughts should always be engaged with the Throne of Hashem, in his attempts to understand holy and pure ideas.... When the spirit of *Hashem*

rests upon him, his soul becomes mixed with that of the angels... and he becomes a new person who understands that he is no longer the same as he was before, but that he has become elevated beyond the level of other *talmidei chachomim*" (*Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah* 7:1).

In the Rambam's opinion, while achieving true prophecy, every prophet, with the exception of Moshe *Rabbeinu*, goes into a trance. The nine different levels of prophecy that the Rambam describes in *Moreh Nevuchim* represent lesser or greater, clearer or more opaque communication from Hashem, but they are all in visions, allegories or dreams.

The intent of the prophecy is clear

It is clear to the prophet what message is intended, and he will be able afterward to explain, in his own words, what he envisioned and what was the message. Even after the prophetic experience has dissipated, the prophet has become a changed person who will live with this experience the rest of his life. This was the level of prophecy of the *avos*, Yehoshua, anyone whom the *posuk* calls a *navi*, and all authors of the books of *Nevi'im*.

Parshas Vayeira

Now that we understand a bit about how the Rambam categorizes the various levels of prophecy, we are faced with a conundrum regarding the first two *pesukim* of *parshas Vayeira*. In the first *posuk*, Hashem appears to Avraham, while he is sitting at the opening of his tent. In the second *posuk*, Avraham sees three travelers outside, in the midday heat of the desert, and he runs to greet them; and then, the *posuk* describes how Avraham invited them to rest and refresh themselves. The problem facing us is that, if all prophecy, except that granted to Moshe, required that the prophet be in a state of trance, how could Avraham have even noticed the three visitors or been able to run to greet them, invite them into his house and provide them with gracious hospitality?

The Rambam's approach is that the appearance of three men in the desert near the entrance to Avraham *Avinu's* tent was the beginning of the prophecy that Avraham *Avinu* received. All the *chesed* that Avraham performed, the ensuing conversation between Avraham and Sarah, the angels visiting Lot, the riot of the men of Sodom concerning Lot's *hachnasas orchim*, and Avraham's prayers and "negotiating" with Hashem to save Sodom were all part of the prophecy. Thus, all the events of the first chapters of the *parsha* are included in the prophecy received by Avraham, and these are introduced with the first words, "And Hashem appeared to him."

The Ramban, in his commentary to the beginning of *parshas Vayeira*, takes great issue with the Rambam's approach. To quote the Ramban: "How can the Torah say that Hashem appeared to Avraham, when [in the details of the prophecy that follows] all he saw was [not Hashem but] three men eating meat! He has no vision or thought of Hashem! This is unlike any other prophecy. Furthermore, according to the Rambam, Sarah never kneaded dough, Avraham never prepared meat and Sarah never laughed, but it was all a vision... what could possibly be the purpose in all this as a vision? In addition, according to the Rambam, no angels ever arrived at Lot's house; he never baked

matzos for them nor did they eat in his house, for it was all a vision! If Lot had achieved prophecy to see the angels, who told the people of Sodom of the arrival of these men in his house? Did they also achieve the level of prophets? And, if indeed, this was also part of the prophecy, when did the angels urge Lot to take his wife and daughters and escape from Sodom? And how did Lot negotiate with the angels to save one city?”

The Ramban disagrees with the Rambam that seeing an angel is a form of prophecy. After all, notes the Ramban, Hagar was not a prophetess, notwithstanding that she had a conversation with an angel, or perhaps four different angels (according to Rashi). (By the way, the Rambam explains that Hagar’s conversation was with a prophet, and not with an angel [*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:42]. He explains that in some places in *Tanach* the word *malach* should be translated as *prophet* and not as *angel*.)

Sefer Hazikaron

We should be aware that the Ritva, known predominantly for his commentaries to *Shas*, authored a work called *Sefer Hazikaron*, whose entire purpose was to answer questions raised by the Ramban, in his commentary on *Chumash*, against positions taught by the Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim*. The Ritva was a disciple of Rabbeinu Aharon Halevi (usually abbreviated to “ReAH”), who himself was a disciple of the Ramban. The Ritva elucidates the Rambam’s opinions and answers the questions of the Ramban, but, invariably, concludes that the Ramban’s approach should be followed. In his understanding of *parshas Vayeira*, the Ramban’s approach is accepted by the vast majority of *rishonim*, including Rashi and the Ibn Ezra. I specifically mention the Ibn Ezra because, in many places where the Rambam’s philosophic approach influences how he understands *Tanach*, statements of *Chazal*, or *halacha*, the Ibn Ezra is often one of his major co-travelers. However, in his interpretation of this *parsha*, Ibn Ezra appears to follow the main highway of exposition – that Avraham interrupted his prophetic experience with Hashem to take care of his guests, and that his conversation with Hashem resumes later in the *parsha*.

Tehillim

At this point, let us examine the next of our opening questions: “Is *Tehillim* prophetic?” Assuming that we define *prophetic* as that which tells about future events, it is, since Dovid sings of events that had not yet occurred in his time, such as the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*, which took place 417 years after his passing, and the tragedies that happened to the Jews in its aftermath (*Tehillim* 74, 79). *Dovid Hamelech* describes the emotional reaction to the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash* and to finally reaching the rivers in Bavel (*Tehillim* 137), although these events transpired hundreds of years after his passing.

Conclusion

In *Sefer Hachinuch*, *Mitzvah* #424 is entitled, “Not to test a true prophet too much.” The *Sefer Hachinuch* explains that if a *navi* is subjected to excessive evaluation to prove his veracity, those jealous or otherwise pained by his success may use inadequate testing as an excuse to disobey his commandments. They might deny the prophet’s authenticity by claiming, unjustifiably, that he did not undergo enough investigation. Thus, we see that

even something so obvious as the ability of a great *tzadik* to foretell the future can be denied by people when they don't want to accept the truth!