



לעמוד לפני ה' Standing Before G-d

■ Unable to Stand

When recounting G-d's message to a prophet, the Torah often does not suffice with relating its contents. Instead, a description is invariably added of the prophet's emotional or physical state at the time he accepts the prophetic word.

We read, for instance, that Avraham Avinu *"fell on his face"* (B'reshit 17,3) when Hashem first appeared to him regarding Brit Milah, the Covenant of the Circumcision. Rashi explains that he fell "from fear of the Divine Presence; until he was circumcised, he had no strength to stand while G-d's spirit was upon him." That is to say, Avraham lay prostrate on the ground in fear and awe of the Divine Presence. He was unable to stand on his feet before the exalted and commanding power of the Divine appearance.

Rashi mentions that the Gentile prophet Bilam, who was certainly not circumcised, reacted similarly to Divine prophecy – and Torah employs the same word, *fallen*, to describe how it occurred:

...אֲשֶׁר מַחֲזֶה שְׂדֵי יַחֲזֶה נָפַל וּגְלוּי עֵינָיו.
...*who sees the vision of the Al-mighty,*
fallen but with open eyes. (Bamidbar 24,4)

In this connection we can also add the prophecy of the Covenant Between the Pieces:

וַיְהִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לָבוֹא וַתִּרְדָּמָה נָפְלָה עַל אַבְרָם
וַהֲנִיָּה אִימָה חֲשֵׁכָה גְדֹלָה נִפְלְתָה עָלָיו.
The sun was setting and a deep sleep fell over Avram, and behold,
a frightful darkness was falling over him. (B'reshit 15,12)

This deep sleep is the manifestation of how Avraham fell on his face before Hashem.

We can now understand the sharp transformation in Avraham's behavior when he received his next prophecy, after he was circumcised. G-d informed him of the impending destruction of S'dom and neighboring cities:

...וַאֲבִרְהָם עֹדְנוּ עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי ה'.

וַיֵּגֶשׁ אֲבִרְהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֵל תִּסְפֶּה צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע?

Avraham was still standing before G-d. He approached and said:

"Will You then destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (B'reshit 18,22-23)

This time, he does not fall on his face; he rather stands tall. For now that he is circumcised, he is able to stand without fear and speak confidently with G-d.

But why, then, in the previous instances of G-d talking to Avraham, does the Torah not mention that he fell on his face? The answer is that the Torah emphasizes and teaches us this idea precisely at the transition point: Before the Brit Milah, we read that he fell before G-d, and right afterwards, we are informed that he was able to stand straight and tall to receive the Divine word.

To give us a hint of the sensations that accompany a prophet when he hears a G-dly message, let us read how the prophet Daniel describes his experience of receiving a Divine vision: *"I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold a man clad in linen... and his face was like the look of lightning, and his eyes like firebrands...I remained alone, and I saw this great vision, and no strength was left within me... I fell into a sound sleep on my face, and my face was to the ground... a soul was not left in me."* (Daniel 10,5-17)

The reception of prophecy, then, is clearly a shocking event. How does Brit Milah give Avraham strength to overcome these powerful sensations and grant him the ability to stand before G-d without fear?

■ Standing Before G-d

We have been speaking up to now of the physical ability to stand before G-d. The next verses will surprise us, then, as they show that there is actually much more to "standing before Hashem" than bodily strength. It also includes the psychological and ethical capacities to speak to G-d and demand the nullification of His decrees.

For instance, the Prophet Yirmiyahu stands before G-d to defend Israel and ask for Divine mercy on the nation's behalf:

זְכוֹר עֲמָדִי לִפְנֵיךָ לְדַבֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם טוֹבָה לְהָשִׁיב אֶת חֲמַתְךָ מֵהֶם.
*Remember when I stood before You to speak good for them,
 to return Your wrath from them.* (Jer. 18,20)

Hashem, too, refers similarly to “standing before Him,” and explains to Yirmiyahu that even Moshe and Shmuel would not be successful in cancelling the decrees:

אִם יַעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה וּשְׁמוּאֵל לִפְנֵי אֵין נִפְשִׁי אֶל הָעַם הַזֶּה...
*Even if Moshe and Shmuel were to stand before Me,
 My soul would not be to this nation...* (15,1)

G-d also granted to the Cohanim and Leviim (Priests and Levites) this ethical stance of “standing before G-d” – the ability to argue with G-d and intervene for Israel via prayer. They would travel from town to town and from house to house, not only to receive the tithes, but also to teach Torah, make peace between people, and bless Israel in Hashem's name. During their travels, they would be exposed to the day-to-day hardships and troubles of their fellow Jews, and when they would return to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, they would lift their hands in prayer to G-d, as is written:

בָּעֵת הַהוּא הִבְדִּיל ה' אֶת שִׁבְט הַלֵּוִי, לְשֵׂאת אֶת אֲרוֹן בְּרִית ה',
 לַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי ה' לְשִׁרְתּוֹ וּלְבָרְכֵהוּ בְּשֵׁמוֹ עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.
*G-d separated the Levite tribe, to carry the Ark of G-d's
 Covenant, to stand before G-d to serve Him, and to bless in
 His Name, until this day.* (D'varim 10,8)

To “*stand before G-d*” means, then, to stand physically, to beseech G-d on behalf of the Nation of Israel, and the ability to defend a strong moral stance in argumentation and prayer with G-d.

Yet to be explained, however, is how Brit Milah granted Avraham the “ethical vigor” to speak with G-d in this manner. What precisely is the source of his strength that enables him to argue with Hashem about His judgments? How is Avraham able to say:

הֲאֵף תִּסְפֶּה צָדִיק עִם רָשָׁע? ... תִּלְלֶה לְךָ הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט?
*“Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?...
 Far be it from You! Will the judge of the entire earth
 not perform justice?”* (B'reshit 18,23-25)

■ Covenantal Partnership

We can say with near certainty that to argue with Hashem, one must have the status of “partner with Him.” The mitzvah of ritual circumcision elevated Avraham to this level of partnership. When G-d forged this covenant with Avraham, He said: **“I will establish My covenant between Myself and you...”** (17,7) G-d was essentially saying: “Come, Avraham, let us make a partnership, you and I, in which each side commits to fulfilling his part of the bargain.”

Avraham’s part in the deal is the mitzvah of Brit Milah. Only after he actually fulfills his part by undergoing the circumcision is he raised, immediately, to the level of “partner.” We thereupon see him standing and demanding, time after time, the cancellation of the planned destruction of S’dom and the other cities. This is the true depth of the verse we saw above: **“Avraham was still standing before G-d, and he approached and said: ‘Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?’”** (18,22-23)

This explains why Avraham did not react upon learning, at the Covenant Between the Pieces, that his descendants would be cruelly enslaved for so long:

כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זֶרַעְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם וְעֲבָדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה.

*For your seed will be foreigners in a land that is not theirs,
and they will be enslaved and tortured for 400 years.* (15,13)

How can it be that Avraham, who demanded justice regarding S’dom, is silent when it comes to his own descendants? He does not even ask the simple question: “Master of the Universe! What sin could my children have committed to bring upon them such terrible affliction?”

The answer is as we have said: He had not yet been circumcised and was not yet a covenantal partner with Hashem; he therefore lacked the necessary strengths for such a stance before G-d. And though we read in the above passage that **“on that day, Hashem forged a covenant with Avram”** (15,18), that covenant was only a one-sided affair; it does not state that it was **“between G-d and you.”**

But, what about Noach? He, too, was offered a covenant with G-d, yet did not stand before G-d to demand justice! As we read:

וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתְּךָ וּבָאתָ אֵל הַתֵּבָה אִתָּהּ וּבְנֶיךָ
וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וְנָשֵׁי בְנֶיךָ אִתְּךָ.

*I will establish My covenant with you, and you will enter
the ark – you and your sons and your wife and your sons’
wives with you. (6,18)*

Why did this covenant not uplift Noah to the level of a “partner” and empower him with the strength to argue against the cruel decree of world destruction? The answer is that the covenant with Noah was not yet forged at the time; the above promise is just that: a promise for the future. Throughout the flood, Noah did not have the status of Divine partner, and did not have the necessary capacities to argue with G-d.

The promise to Noah was fulfilled only after he left the ark and the rainbow appeared in the sky – and it then became a two-way commitment. Hashem said that mankind must *“be fruitful and multiply”* (B’reshit 9,7), while for His part, He will *“establish My covenant... and there will not be another flood to destroy the earth”* (verses 9-11). And the bottom line is: *“This is the sign of the covenant that I emplace between Myself and you.”* (verse 12)

■ The Land of Israel

In R. Yehuda HaLevi’s classic *Sefer HaKuzari* (2,14), we read that *“before G-d”* refers to Eretz Yisrael. For instance, when Adam’s son Kayin was punished and forced to wander in the world, we read that he went out *“from before G-d”* (B’reshit 4,16); he left the Land of Israel. Similarly, when the Prophet Yonah ran away from G-d’s mission, we read that he *“arose to run to Tarshish from before G-d”* (Yonah 1,3); from the context it is clear that he was leaving the land of prophecy, Eretz Yisrael.

R. HaLevy explains that this phrase *“before G-d”* expresses the light of prophetic abundance – a light that shines nowhere other than in the Land of Israel. The source for this statement is the Mechilta D’Rebbe Yishmael to Parashat Bo:

At first, all lands were conducive for prophetic speech, but once Eretz Yisrael was Divinely chosen, all the others were excluded from prophecy... Know that the Divine Presence does not reveal itself outside the Land, as is written: *“Yonah arose to run to Tarshish from before G-d”* (Yonah 1,3); he said, *“I will leave the Land and go where the Divine Presence does not reveal itself.”*

R. HaLevy links this phrase “*before G-d*” with the special Divine Providence over Eretz Yisrael and its rainfall, as this verse teaches:

אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיהָ דֹרֵשׁ אֹתָהּ,
תָּמִיד עֵינֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיהָ בָּהּ מֵרֵשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרִית שָׁנָה.
...*The Land that Hashem your G-d tends to; His eyes are always on it,
from the beginning of the year until the end of the year.* (D'varim 11,12)

■ The Land-Brit Connection

When was the connection between Brit Milah and inheriting the Land founded? It happened when Hashem forged His covenant with Avraham:

וְנָתַתִּי לָךְ וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אֶחָדִיקָה אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרִיךָ אֵת כָּל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְאֻחָזֶת עוֹלָם...
זֹאת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְרוּ... הַמּוֹל לָכֶם כָּל זָכָר.
*I will give you and your descendants after you... all of the Land of
Canaan, for an everlasting inheritance... This is My covenant which
you must preserve... Circumcise all your males.* (B'reshit 17,8-10)

Accordingly, before Yehoshua bin Nun entered the Land, he circumcised all of the males who had been born in the wilderness. The Medrash B'reshit Rabba (46,7) notes the Land-Brit connection quite clearly:

“This is the reason why Yehoshua circumcised” (Yehoshua 5,4). He said to Israel: What, do you think you will enter the Land uncircumcised? G-d promised Avraham, *“I will give you and your descendants the land of your dwellings”* so that *“you shall keep My covenant.”* (B'reshit 17,8-9)

Thus, inheriting the Land is impossible without Brit Milah, as follows: Eretz Yisrael is the only land that enables prophecy – the link between Hashem and Israel. Therefore, when Am Yisrael enters the land, each and every individual is obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of Brit Milah, so that when the time comes and he merits to receive prophecy, he will be able to stand before G-d and defend Israel – precisely the mission of a prophet, as we will now see.

■ Divine Revelation in Eretz Yisrael

Let us explain in more detail why the Divine Presence is revealed only in the Land of Israel and nowhere else. It is predicated on two important assumptions.

We first assume, axiomatically, that the Divine Presence rests only on a nation, that is, one with at least 600,000 males aged 20 and older, such as Bnei Yisrael when they left Egypt. This is because only a nation contains all the necessary treasures, talents and character traits that enable the establishment of a basis for the dwelling of Hashem, the ultimate in perfection and completeness. This is why G-d does not appear to individuals, except for those who represent an entire nation and relay Divine messages to that nation. So teaches the Medrash:

Hashem spoke with Moshe in Israel's merit, and the same is true for all the prophets with whom Hashem spoke. (Mechilta D'Rabbe Yishmael, introduction to Parashat Bo)

The Mechilta brings incontrovertible proof of this from Baruch Ben Neriah, prize student of the Prophet Jeremiah. Baruch wanted very much to be a prophet, and was worthy of the position. But it was a time of national destruction, and G-d rebuked him, via Yirmiyahu: *"Say to [Baruch] as follows: G-d said, That which I built, I will raze... and you request greatness for yourself?!"* (Jeremiah 45) G-d is explaining that a prophet must realize that he is an emissary to the Nation of Israel in the Land of Israel – and when both of these are facing destruction, to whom can a prophet be sent? The prophecy is only for Israel!

This is the reason why the prophecies given to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov were always combined with a promise for many descendants. For instance, Hashem said to Yaakov: *"I am E-l Shad-dai, be fruitful and multiply; a nation and congregation of nations will [come] from you."* (B'reshit 35,11)

Our second assumption is that the Nation of Israel functions as an independent, sovereign nation only in Eretz Yisrael – the land that was designated for it and it alone. Outside the Land, the Nation of Israel is a *"dispersed and separated people."* (Esther 3,8)

One might ask: "Israel became a nation at Mt. Sinai, when they received the Torah, and even heard G-d speaking directly with them – outside Eretz Yisrael!"

The answer is that the giving of the Torah at Sinai did not render Israel a nation, but rather prepared Israel for this role. Just as Hashem spoke with the Patriarchs as a preparation for the formation of Am Yisrael, so did He speak to and prepare the entire nation for its new national status, via the

Torah and its commandments. This occurs just as they are about to enter the Land of Israel, the only place in which the commandments take on their true significance: only here will be built a permanent sanctuary for the Divine Presence, and only from here will the People of Israel shine its light unto the Nations. As the Medrash teaches:

“You shall place My words on your hearts” (D'varim 11,18) – **Even when you are in exile from the Land, be accustomed and familiar with the Torah and its mitzvot, so that when you return, they will not be new for you. As Jeremiah states: “Set markers for yourself” (31,20) – **this refers to markers for the mitzvot.** (Medrash P'sikta Zutreta (Lekach Tov), Parashat Ekev)**

This Medrash defines our fulfillment of the mitzvot outside the Land as merely a “sign” by which to remember how to observe them when we return to Eretz Yisrael.

Let us summarize the fundamentals as follows:

1. G-d's word is directed at a nation, not individuals.
2. Only in Eretz Yisrael does Am Yisrael function as a nation carrying G-d's message.
3. The result of the above two is as expected: G-d's word is heard only in the Land of Israel, and only there can there be prophecy.

The links of this chain are spelled out clearly in the Torah (Bamidbar 35,34):

1. ***“Do not defile the Land in which you reside”*** (Am Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael)
2. ***“in which I dwell”*** (Divine prophecy is only in Eretz Yisrael)
3. ***“for I, G-d, dwell amidst the Children of Israel”*** (because G-d's word is given on a national scale, not individually).

Today, slowly but surely, Am Yisrael is returning home to its Land. It is becoming increasingly purified, and will soon reach the point when it will have the merit to ***“stand before G-d,”*** to plead both for itself and for the nations of the world.

