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Parshat Vayera

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How often does someone ever “appear” before you? We meet and greet people every day. People “by chance” appear out of nowhere frequently, but how often does one feel G-d’s presence around them?

“And G-d appeared to Avraham...” The Torah does not tell us what G-d’s mission was in visiting with Avraham. They have no discussion about the future, and there isn’t any commandment issued. The conclusion of our sages is that G-d “appeared” to Avraham to perform the mitzvah of Bikur Cholim (visiting the sick). You could call it “a “ministry of presence,” which is the heart of the mitzvah.

The specifics of the mitzvah of visiting the sick have much more detail to them, such as assistance in feeding, comforting words with prayer, and generally motivating a person to get through the illness. Even with the details of the mitzvah understood, a visit alone raises the spirit of the sick.

The Torah does not list the mitzvahs of visiting the sick, comforting a mourner, or rejoicing with a bride and groom, as mitzvahs in their own right. It is Rambam (Maimonides) who tells us that these mitzvot are Rabbinic in origin and come under the heading of “love your neighbor as yourself.”

G-d visits Avraham to visit the sick. Is it possible that the Torah never bothers to tell us specifically to visit the sick because of G-d’s example here? Or could it be that we normally define a mitzvah in terms of the person performing the mitzvah and how well it is done? Actually the Bikur Cholim mitzvah is defined by the needs of the sick person receiving the visit. Abraham “needed” G-d to visit and “He appeared to him...”

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Nathan W. Langer

