Sparks
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Enjoying Heaven on Earth

In this week's Torah portion G-d appeared to Abraham and yet He said nothing.

"G-d appeared to [Abraham] in the Plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the hottest part of the day. [Abraham] lifted his eyes and he saw three strangers approaching and ran towards them."

Until now G-d appeared to Abraham to instruct, promise or bless him. The Talmud (Sotah 14A) comments that G-d was visiting sick Abraham who was recuperating from his circumcision. What does this mean?

When you visit a person who is ill it is not in order to say something; your mere presence communicates your pure desire to identify with this person in his/her time of need. You go for the sole purpose of being there. So it was when G-d visited Abraham. For the first time G-d appears to Abraham only to be with him, identify with him and share this special moment.

Sometimes the highest moment of love is when we have nothing to say to each other. We just want to share each other's presence in silence.

You can be sure this moment was sheer ecstasy for Abraham. This profound meeting in itself was ample reward for fulfilling the *mitzvah* (religious duty) of circumcision. In fact, this kind of ecstatic intimacy with G-d is the ultimate reward for the fulfillment of any *mitzvah*.

This will be the eternal joy experienced in the World to Come, which is the era that follows the coming of the Messiah, as it is recorded in the Talmud:

There the righteous will sit with crowns on their heads enjoying the splendor of the *Shechina* — G-d's presence.

Maimonides explains:
They know and grasp the truth of G-d... this is the reward, no other reward could be better, this is the goodness, no greater goodness could follow.

BEING OR HAVING

How awesome an experience this must have been for Abraham, and yet upon seeing three strangers he, without hesitation, runs out to greet them and invite them into his home. As we read the Torah's description of Abraham anxiously preparing food for these strangers, we wonder how he was able to tear himself away from such an awesome G-d experience? The Talmud justifies Abraham's actions:

Inviting guests into your home is greater then receiving the very face of the *Shechina*.

How are we to understand this enigmatic statement?

Martin Buber, famous for his "I-Thou" philosophy, recounted a personal story, which he saw as a turning point in his spiritual ambitions.

One day while Buber was absorbed in a mystifying G- d experience he heard a knock at his door. Tearing himself away from his spiritual ecstasy, he opened the door. There stood a stranger, who obviously wished to be invited in. Although Buber did usher the man inside, the stranger sensed that he had come at an awkward time. Feeling uncomfortable, he was unable to communicate to Buber, so he apologized for disturbing and quickly departed. Some time later, Buber heard that a tragedy befell this man. He realized that this man had come to him with something pressing on his mind. Buber admitted that he really was not there for this troubled man because he was absorbed and entranced in a G-d experience.

This painful realization helped Buber discover the sharp difference between having a G-d experience and being in a relationship with G-d.

A G-d experience is just another form of a selfish desire. Some people like to have a lot of material wealth, and others prefer spiritual riches. These are just different forms of selfish desires.

However, an encounter and relationship with G-d fills a person with a profound sense of "responsibility" towards both G-d and His creations.

Responsible people are those who are "able" to "respond." Such people are aware of themselves and others. Entering into a relationship with G-d only increases their love and sensitivity towards the needs of others.

That is the difference between a G-d experience and a G-d relationship. Imagine a woman who is meditating in a beautiful forest; the rays of the setting sun fill the scene with a serene glow and there is a gentle breeze whispering sounds of sweet tranquility. This woman claims to have achieved a great state of enlightenment. How can she know if she had a "G-d experience" or an encounter that advanced her relationship with G-d?

If this moment inspires her to take action to do something about improving the environment, or to do something for another person, then she can be sure this was an encounter with G-d.

However, if she remains insensitive and negligent to the daily responsibilities toward other individuals and the environment, then this was only a spiritual experience. This may just be another form of selfish "having," another kind of materialism — spiritual materialism. This was not love.

Greater than meeting the Divine is performing kindness to His creatures. This itself is the very fruit of such an encounter — the joy of responsibility. When you love G-d, you love all and always seek ways to put your love into action.

The ability to respond to the needs of others is G-d's gift to humanity. The power of covenant is expressed when we become G-d's partner in caring for this world.

In summary, the reward for entering into a loving relationship with G-d — what the Torah calls a covenant — is the feeling of love for G-d, G-d's love for you and your love for the world.

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