

DA'AT TEVUNOT - SECTION 7: CHAPTER 5

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

1. This whole issue is puzzling, for as any astute reader could point out, we've been taught that no one "saw an image of any sort on the day that G-d spoke" on Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:15). So how could anyone -- even a prophet -- claim to be subject to visions?

In fact, there are a couple of other contradictions when it comes to this. Didn't we already cite the verse that indicated that G-d spoke to Moses "face to face" and that he saw "G-d as He is" (Numbers 12:8) which would confirm the idea of visions? Along the same lines, didn't Ezekiel report in the course of his great and terrifying vision of the heavens that "on this throne high above was a figure whose appearance resembled a man" (Ezekiel 1:26)?

Yet weren't we told, "to whom (or, what) then can you liken Me ... says the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25), as well as "with whom (or, what), then, will you compare G-d? To what image will you liken him?" (Isaiah 40:18), which would then deny the idea of seeing things that represent G-d's presence?

What, then, did the prophets envision, and what did they derive from what they were allowed to see?

2. You certainly couldn't say that G-d had the prophets sin by seeing things they weren't permitted to; what G-d did to the prophet, according to Ramchal, was to "make him wise, and to set him upon the truth". That is, G-d saw to it that each prophet would "grasp the truth" of what he was actually observing -- and that he would know the limitations of his visions.

For, as we explained already, prophetic insight was unlike any other sort of insight in the natural world. As the prophet fully understood the unquestionable deep intent behind everything he was privileged to see.

And he knew for a fact and without question that it was G-d Himself or one of His appointed angels who was revealing something to him; that he was being granted important information; and, most importantly for our purposes, that the prophet wasn't to stare head-on upon what he was being allowed to see -- either literally or figuratively.

That's to say, not only wasn't he allowed to peer upon what he was seeing, he also wasn't allowed to ruminate upon it too long in his mind. For what he was privy to was a prophetic glimpse into the truth of things put symbolically that had the power to reveal something that needed to be known, but could easily be misunderstood.

And the prophet was also made to know that he wasn't seeing G-d Himself, which is simply impossible, but rather that he was being granted a quick, short-lived image that G-d wanted him to see just then that represented His will and intentions for humankind [1].

[1] For kabbalistic references to this chapter see R' Shriki's note 182 and R' Goldblatt's note 87 on p. 490 of his edition.

Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.