

D'var Haftarah: God's Redemptive Healing

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives, The Conservative Yeshivah

Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot serves as one of the fundamental metaphors of the Jewish mystical tradition. In this vision, Ezekiel sees four heavenly creatures whose form was, at once, human together with other characteristics which are bound to strike the reader as bizarre. Ezekiel describes their manner of standing this way: "the legs of each were [fused into] a single rigid leg (regel yisharah)". (verse 1:7)

Rashi gives two interpretations of what this might have looked like. In the first, he describes the legs of the creature as "directed one toward the other". Rabbi Joseph Kara (12th century France), interpreted this to mean that the feet of these creatures faced in all directions so that like their faces, their feet also faced in all directions. According to Rashi's second interpretation "regel yisharah", literally "straight leggedness" means that these divine creatures "did not have joints in their knees and were therefore incapable of sitting or lying down."

The Talmud (Berachot 10b) contends with an ancillary question. How many legs did each of these creatures have? Did they have one leg or two legs? On this question there is no clear answer but the following passage allows us to infer an answer: "And Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Hanina said in the name of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov: 'One who prays [the Amida] should align his legs [emulating the posture of the divine creatures], as it is written: 'and their legs were a straight leg.'" Rashi, in his commentary to this Talmudic passage, interprets this to mean that when a person recites the Amidah, their legs should appear as if they are "one leg." R. Jacob ben Asher, (14th century) explains that one should position one foot alongside the other foot while praying. (Tur Orach Hayim 95)

This physical posture causes us to emulate the angels when we pray, offering us the opportunity to allow our prayers to soar heavenward. The Hafetz Hayim, Rabbi Israel Meir Hakohen, explained it this way: "since we are speaking with God, it is necessary for a person to remove all bodily thoughts from one's heart and to try as best one can to be like an angel." (Mishnah Berurah Orach Hayim 95:1) Ezekiel's prophecy then becomes not only a model for the mystical tradition but also a model for our every day communion with God.