Cloud Cover: God Among Us?

By Rabbi Elana Nemitoff-Bresler

1

שמות כ"ה:ח'

(ח) וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם:

Exodus 25:8

(8) And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

2

במדבר ט':ט"ו-כ"ג

(טו) וּבְיוֹם הָקִים אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן כִּסָּה הֶעָנָן אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן לְאֹהֶל הָעֵדֻת
וּבָעֶרֶב יִהְיֶה עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן כְּמַרְאֵה־אֵשׁ עַד־בֹּקֶר: (טז) כֵּן יִהְיֶה תָּמִיד
הֶעָנָן יְכַסֶּנּוּ וּמַרְאֵה־אֵשׁ לָיְלָה: (יז) וְלִפְּי הֵעָלוֹת הֶעָנָן מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל
וְאַחֲרֵי כֵּן יִסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבִמְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכָּן־שָׁם הֶעָנָן שָׁם יַחֲנוּ
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (יח) עַל־פִּי יְהוָה יִסְעוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל־פִּי יְהוָה יַחֲנוּ
כָּל־יְמֵי אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכֹּן הֶעָנָן עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן יַחֲנוּ: (יט) וּבְהַאֲרִיךְ הֶעָנָן
עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן יָמִים רַבִּים וְשָׁמְרוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת יְהוָה וְלֹא
יִסָּעוּ: (כ) וְיֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה הֶעָנָן יָמִים מִסְפָּר עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן עַל־פִּי יְהוָה
יַחֲנוּ וְעַל־פִּי יְהוָה יִסָּעוּ: (כא) וְיֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה הֶעָנָן מֵעֶרֶב עַד־בֹּקֶר
וְנַעֲלָה הֶעָנָן בַּבֹּקֶר וְנָסָעוּ אוֹ יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה וְנַעֲלָה הֶעָנָן וְנָסָעוּ: (כב)
אוֹ־יֹמַיִם אוֹ־חֹדֶשׁ אוֹ־יָמִים בְּהַאֲרִיךְ הֶעָנָן עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן לִשְׁכֹּן עָלָיו

יַחֲנוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא יִסָּעוּ וּבְהֵעָלֹתָוֹ יִסָּעוּ׃ (כג) עַל־פִּי יְהוָה יַחֲנוּ
וְעַל־פִּי יְהוָה יִסָּעוּ אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת יְהוָה שָׁמָרוּ עַל־פִּי יְהוָה בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה׃
{פ}

Numbers 9:15-23

(15) On the day that the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Pact; and in the evening it rested over the Tabernacle in the likeness of fire until morning. (16) It was always so: the cloud covered it, appearing as fire by night. (17) And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp. (18) At a command of Adonai the Israelites broke camp, and at a command of Adonai they made camp: they remained encamped as long as the cloud stayed over the Tabernacle. (19) When the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle many days, the Israelites observed Adonai's mandate and did not journey on. (20) At such times as the cloud rested over the Tabernacle for but a few days, they remained encamped at a command of Adonai, and broke camp at a command of Adonai. (21) And at such times as the cloud stayed from evening until morning, they broke camp as soon as the cloud lifted in the morning. Day or night, whenever the cloud lifted, they would break camp. (22) Whether it was two days or a month or a year—however long the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle—the Israelites remained encamped and did not set out; only when it lifted did they break camp. (23) On a sign from Adonai

they made camp and on a sign from Adonai they broke camp; they observed Adonai's mandate at Adonai's bidding through Moses.

3

במדבר ט׳:י״א-י״ב

(יא) בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בְּאַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם בֵּין הָעַרְבַּיִם יַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ
עַל־מַצּוֹת וּמְרֹרִים יֹאכְלֻהוּ: (יב) לֹא־יַשְׁאִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ עַד־בֹּקֶר וְעֶצֶם לֹא
יִשְׁבְּרוּ־בוֹ כְּכָל־חֻקַּת הַפֶּסַח יַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ:

Numbers 9:11-12

(11) they shall offer it in the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, (12) and they shall not leave any of it over until morning. They shall not break a bone of it. They shall offer it in strict accord with the law of the passover sacrifice.

4

במדבר י״ב:ד׳-י׳

(ד) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה פִּתְאֹם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־מִרְיָם צְאוּ
שְׁלָשְׁתְּכֶם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁלָשְׁתָּם: (ה) וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בְּעַמּוּד
עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֹד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּקְרָא אַהֲרֹן וּמִרְיָם וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם: (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר
שִׁמְעוּ־נָא דְבָרָי אִם־יִהְיֶה נְבִיאֲכֶם יְהוָה בַּמַּרְאָה אֵלָיו אֶתְוַדָּע
בַּחֲלוֹם אֲדַבֶּר־בּוֹ: (ז) לֹא־כֵן עַבְדִּי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל־בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא: (ח)
פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה אֲדַבֶּר־בּוֹ וּמַרְאֶה וְלֹא בְחִידֹת וּתְמֻנַת יְהוָה יַבִּיט וּמַדּוּעַ

לֹא יְרֹאתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדִּי בְמֹשֶׁה: (ט) וַיִּחַר־אַף יְהוָה בָּם וַיֵּלַךְ: (י)
וְהֶעָנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהִנֵּה מִרְיָם מְצֹרַעַת כַּשָּׁלֶג וַיִּפֶן אַהֲרֹן
אֶל־מִרְיָם וְהִנֵּה מְצֹרָעַת:

Numbers 12:4-10

(4) Suddenly Adonai called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting." So the three of them went out. (5) Adonai came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, "Aaron and Miriam!" The two of them came forward; (6) and He said, "Hear these My words: When a prophet of Adonai arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. (7) Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. (8) With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of Adonai. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!" (9) Still incensed with them, Adonai departed. (10) As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales.

רמב"ן על במדבר ט':ט"ו:א'

וביום הקים את המשכן עתה יחזור לספר בעניני הנסיעה והמצות שנצטוו בה כגון החצוצרות שנצטוה בהן עכשיו להיותן למקרא העדה ולמסע את המחנות וטעם כסה הענן את המשכן

לאהל העדות להגיד שלא היה הענן מכסה אלא אהל העדות לא חצר המשכן:

Ramban on Numbers 9:15:1

AND ON THE DAY THE TABERNACLE WAS RAISED UP. Now He resumes the telling of the journey [through the wilderness] and the commandments which they were commanded about it, such as the trumpets, which Moses was now commanded were to be *for the calling of the congregation, and for causing the camps to set forward.* The sense of the expression [*And on the day the Tabernacle was raised up*] *the cloud covered the Tabernacle, even the Tent of the Testimony* is to state that the cloud covered only the Tent of the Testimony, but not the court of the Tabernacle.

חזקוני, במדבר ט׳:ט״ו:ב׳

כסה הענן את המשכן על המשכן לבדו היה ענן מיוחד ומעולה יותר מאותן שהיו בשביל ישראל כדאיתא בתנחומא וענן השכינה שהיה מהלך על גבי מחנה הלויים וכו׳.

Chizkuni, Numbers 9:15:2

כסה הענן את המשכן, "the cloud covered the Tabernacle." This cloud was not the same cloud as the one that enveloped the entire camp of the Jewish people, and which therefore was at a higher elevation, as pointed out by Tanchuma Bamidbar 12. The cloud mentioned as

covering the Tabernacle actually covered it as well as the surrounding area where the Levites had their dwellings.

רמב"ן על במדבר ט':י"ט:א'

וטעם **ובהאריך הענן** לומר כי אם יאריך הענן על המשכן ימים רבים והמקום ההוא איננו טוב בעיניהם והיו חפצים ומתאוים מאד לנסוע מן המקום אעפ"כ לא יעברו על רצון השם וזה טעם ושמרו בני ישראל את משמרת ה' ולא יסעו כי מיראת השם ומשמרם משמרת מצותו לא יסעו וכן אם יהיה הענן ימים מספר כשנים או שלשה ימים והיו העם יגעים מאד וענה בדרך כחם יעשו רצון השם ללכת אחרי הענן וסיפר עוד (במדבר ט':כ"א) כי יש שלא יעמדו רק לילה אחד ויסעו בבקר אע"פ שהוא טורח גדול להם ולפעמים יעמוד הענן יומם ולילה כי הלכו כל הלילה ובאו במקום ההוא בבקר וינוח הענן שם כל היום ההוא וכל הלילה ונעלה בבקר השני ונסעו והוא טורח גדול מן הראשון כי היו העם סבורים שיעמדו שם ופרקו העגלות והניחו משאם כמנהג הבאים מן הדרך ובהעלות הענן יחזרו לטעון ולא יוכלו לעשות להם תקון לדרך או יומים (במדבר ט':כ"ב) ויסעו בלילה ויתכן שאירע להם במסעות שעשו כמסופר בכאן ולא בענין אחר כי עמד הענן מערב ועד בקר ויומם ולילה ויומים וחדש ושנה ולכך הזכיר הכתוב אלו השעורין בפרטן ועמד שנים רבות כאשר הזכיר תחילה כגון

בקדש שאמר (דברים א מו) ותשבו בקדש ימים רבים כימים אשר ישבתם:

Ramban on Numbers 9:19:1

AND WHEN THE CLOUD TARRIED. This means that if *the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle many days*, and the place [where they happened to be camped] was not good in their eyes, so that they very much desired and wanted to journey away from there, they were nonetheless not to transgress the will of G-d; this being the meaning of the verse, *and the children of Israel kept the charge of the Eternal, and journeyed not*, namely that [it was only] because of their fear of G-d and because they kept the charge of His command that they did not journey. Similarly, *if* the cloud *was* there only *a few days*, for instance two or three days, and the people were very tired because their *strength had weakened in the way*, they would nonetheless fulfill the will of G-d and walk after the cloud. And Scripture further relates that sometimes they tarried for only one night and journeyed in the [next] morning, although it was a great strain for them. And at times the cloud tarried *a day and a night*, when they had journeyed throughout the night and arrived at that place in the morning, and the cloud stayed there all that day and all the night, *and was taken up* on the second morning *and they journeyed*. This was an even greater trouble for them than the previously-mentioned one, because the people would think that they were to stay there [for a long time], and would unload the wagons and lay down their burdens, as is the

custom of those who come from a journey, *and when the cloud was taken up* they began reloading, and could not make any preparations for the journey. *Whether it were two days*, and they journeyed at night.

It is possible that it happened during their journeys that they had to do as is narrated here, and not in another way, namely that the cloud first tarried *from evening until morning*, then *a day and night*, then *two days*, then *a month* and finally *a year*. This is why Scripture mentioned these periods in detail. It [the cloud] would also tarry for many years, as Scripture mentioned at the beginning [of this section], such as in Kadesh of which Scripture states, *And ye abode in Kadesh many days, according to the days that ye abode there*.

תנחומא בובר, חקת כ"ב:א'

[קוראים אל ה' והוא יענם (תהלים צט ו). זה קורא ונענה, וזה קורא ונענה. בעמוד ענן (שם שם ז), הרי שמענו במשה שנדבר עמו בעמוד ענן, שנאמר וירד ה' בענן ויתיצב עמו שם (שמות לד ה), ובאהרן נדבר עמו בענן, שנאמר וירד ה' בענן ויעמוד פתח האהל (במדבר יב ה), אבל במשואל לא שמענו, והיכן שמענו מן הדין קרא, ותענינה אותם ותאמרנה יש הנה לפניך (ש"א ט יב), ר' יודן בשם ר' מרי בר יעקב, אמרו להם הנשים, אי אתם רואים ענן קשור למעלה מחצירו, ואין יש אלא ענן, כמה דתימר ויש אשר

יהיה הענן (במדבר ט כ). ושמואל בקוראי שמו, שמענו במשה שנכתבה תורה לשמו, שנאמר זכרו תורת משה עבדי (מלאכי ג כב), ובשמואל נכתב לו ספר, שנאמר ויכתב בספר וינח לפני ה' (ש"א י כה), אבל באהרן לא שמענו, אלא מלמד שניתנה לו הפרשה הזו, שלא תזוז ממנו ולא מבניו, עד סוף כל הדורות, ואיזו זו זאת חוקת התורה].

Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Chukat 22:1

[(Ps. 99:6, cont.): **THEY (i.e., Moses, Aaron, and Samuel) CRIED UNTO Adonai AND HE ANSWERED THEM. The first cried out and was answered; the second also cried out and was answered. (Ibid., vs. 7): <HE SPOKE UNTO THEM> IN A PILLAR OF CLOUD. See, we heard about Moses, that he conversed with him in a pillar of cloud, as stated (in Exod. 34:5): Adonai DESCENDED IN THE CLOUD AND HE STOOD WITH HIM THERE. So also with Aaron, he conversed with him in the cloud, where it is stated (in Numb. 12:5): SO Adonai CAME DOWN IN a <PILLAR OF> CLOUD, STOOD AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE TENT, <AND CALLED AARON AND MIRIAM>.**

שמות י"ג:כ"א-כ"ב

(כא) וַיְיָ הֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן לַנְחֹתָם הַדָּרֶךְ וְלַיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד
אֵשׁ לְהָאִיר לָהֶם לָלֶכֶת יוֹמָם וָלָיְלָה: (כב) לֹא־יָמִישׁ עַמּוּד הֶעָנָן

יוֹמָם וְעַמּוּד הָאֵשׁ לָיְלָה לִפְנֵי הָעָם: (פ)

Exodus 13:21-22

(21) God went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night. (22) The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

10

שמות ל״ד:ד׳-ה׳

(ד) וַיִּפְס�ֹל שְׁנֵי־לֻחֹת אֲבָנִים כָּרִאשֹׁנִים וַיַּשְׁכֵּם מֹשֶׁה בַבֹּקֶר וַיַּעַל אֶל־הַר סִינַי כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֹתוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ שְׁנֵי לֻחֹת אֲבָנִים: (ה) וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בֶּעָנָן וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ שָׁם וַיִּקְרָא בְשֵׁם יְהוָה:

Exodus 34:4-5

(4) So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as Adonai had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him. (5) Adonai came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name Adonai.

11

שמות מ׳:ל״ג-ל״ח

(לג) וַיָּקֶם אֶת־הֶחָצֵר סָבִיב לַמִּשְׁכָּן וְלַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־מָסַךְ שַׁעַר הֶחָצֵר וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמְּלָאכָה: {פ}

(לד) וַיְכַס הֶעָנָן אֶת־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּכְבוֹד יְהוָה מָלֵא אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן: (לה)

וְלֹא־יָכֹל מֹשֶׁה לָבוֹא אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד כִּי־שָׁכַן עָלָיו הֶעָנָן וּכְבוֹד יְהוָה
מָלֵא אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן: (לו) וּבְהֵעָלוֹת הֶעָנָן מֵעַל הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִסְעוּ בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכֹל מַסְעֵיהֶם: (לז) וְאִם־לֹא יֵעָלֶה הֶעָנָן וְלֹא יִסְעוּ עַד־יוֹם
הֵעָלֹתוֹ: (לח) כִּי עֲנַן יְהוָה עַל־הַמִּשְׁכָּן יוֹמָם וְאֵשׁ תִּהְיֶה לַיְלָה בּוֹ
לְעֵינֵי כָל־בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל־מַסְעֵיהֶם:

Exodus 40:33-38

(33) ...When Moses had finished the work, (34) the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of Adonai filled the Tabernacle. (35) Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of Adonai filled the Tabernacle. (36) When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys; (37) but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. (38) For over the Tabernacle a cloud of the LORD rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.

"[The cloud] was the manifestation of God's Presence in the Tabernacle."

Ovadia Sforno, c.1470-1550 (Italy)

שמות י"ג:כ"א-כ"ב

(כא) וַיהוָה הֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן לַנְחֹתָם הַדָּרֶךְ וְלַיְלָה
בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ לְהָאִיר לָהֶם לָלֶכֶת יוֹמָם וָלָיְלָה: (כב) לֹא־יָמִישׁ עַמּוּד
הֶעָנָן יוֹמָם וְעַמּוּד הָאֵשׁ לָיְלָה לִפְנֵי הָעָם: {פ}

Exodus 13:21-22

(21) The LORD went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they might travel day and night. (22) The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

This is a different kind of cloud. Does it change our understanding of the function of the cloud?

Harold Kushner in *Etz Hayim:* We can think of [the cloud and the fire] as representing a theology of encounter and a theology of presence. There are moments [a wedding, the birth of a child, an escape from danger] when God erupts into our lies with a special intensity that transforms us but that is too intense to be lived constantly. Then there are times when God is a constant presence in our lives [marriage, parenthood, years of good health] in an equally real but less intense manner. The challenge is to recognize God's presence in our lives without it becoming so ordinary that we take it for granted.

God as Direction

The cloud does not blanket and obscure, as we expect clouds to do; instead, it is contained in a pillar and provides direction for the Israelites. Similarly, the fire does not spread and destroy whatever is in its path, as we expect fire to do; like the cloud, the fire is contained, giant torch. In both of these manifestations, the Israelites begin to see, just as Moses saw in the [burning] bush, the possibility of natural things, things of-this-earth, being bent and shaped in unnatural, divine ways....So it is for us: We need not be wary of looking for visual evidence of God's presence in the world around us. Seeking God's presence with our eyes is not idolatrous; it is only idolatry when we "know" in advance what we will see, when our expectations restrain us. Unfortunately, we may have been so afraid of making idols that we have limited ourselves to develop a relationship with God without using our eyes. What would happen if we started looking for God's presence in fire and clouds once more? How much do our relationships with God stand to gain from our actually seeing what may ahve been there all along? At the very least, we will benefit from the search alone, from our looking day and night. And at best, it is possible that if we look, we will see. --Rabbi Noa Kushner

Collected from midrashim in *Mechilta Beshalach, Yalkut Shim'oni, Shir Hashirim Rabbah, and Pesiqta D'Rav Kahana*

Not just one cloud of glory accompanied the travelling Israelites, but seven: one at each of the four sides; one above them; one beneath them; and one to lead the way. This last cloud, while advancing before the people, raised the lowlands and lowered the hills, turning them into level ground. In addition, it swept and sprinkled the road ahead of them to

make their walking easier; it also killed snakes and scorpions along the way, and maintained the Israelites' clothes, keeping them fresh and clean.

אור החיים על שמות מ׳:ל״ה:א׳

ולא יכול משה וגו׳. והגם שאמר הכתוב בפרשת משפטים (כ״ד י״ח) ויבא משה בתוך הענן, שם היה אחר שקרא אליו ה׳ נתן בו כח. או יאמר על זה הדרך **ולא יכול משה** וגו׳, והטעם **כי שכן עליו הענן** ואין מציאות זה כמציאות האמור בפרשת משפטים כי כאן.

Or HaChaim on Exodus 40:35:1

ולא יכול משה לכא אל אהל מועד, and Moses was unable to enter the Tent of Testimony, etc. It seems strange that the "cloud" prevented Moses from entering the Tent seeing that the Torah had told us in Exodus 24,18 that "Moses went inside the cloud, etc." The difference is clear. In *Parshat Mishpatim* Moses entered the cloud after God had summoned him. In this instance no summons from God had been forthcoming.

Here we might be able to tie together all the clouds. How does this text help us understand them as one?

- Maybe we have to be invited into God's presence to have it descend...but we cannot enter God's presence alone

Often, the cloud is used to direct individuals or groups, to make something happen to them, or as a moment when God interacts with them. In thinking about Covid and the changes in our lives:

- How do you feel directed? And by what?
- Do you feel stuck in one place? In what ways?
- When does the cloud appear for you?
- When does the cloud lift and how?

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