

Between the Lines—Va-era

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Charlie Schwartz

Shemot Rabbah Va-era 6:4

וארא אל אברהם, אמר לו הקב"ה למשה חבל על דאבדין ולא משתכחין, הרבה פעמים נגליתי על אברהם יצחק ויעקב באל שדי ולא הודעתי להם כי שמי ה' כשם שאמרתי לך ולא הרהרו אחר מדותי ... ולא הרהרו אחר מדותי ולא שאלני מה שמי כשם ששאלת אתה, ואתה תחלת שליחותי אמרת לי מה שמי

["God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am the Lord.] I appeared to Abraham, [Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by my name *Adonai*"] (Shemot 6:2–3). God said to Moses, 'Woe for those who have been lost and are no longer among us, many times I revealed myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, but I did not make myself known to them with my name *Adonai*, as I have done with you, because they did not ponder my essence . . . they didn't ponder my essence and they did not ask my name as you have, and you, at the start of my mission for you, you asked me my name.'"

Parashat Va-era opens with a dejected and depressed Moses, crestfallen after an unfruitful encounter with Pharaoh. From the text it seems that Moses had expected the redemption of the Children of Israel to be a quick in-and-out operation, leading to his dismay when the full extent of his mission became clear. This first verse of the parashah, which our midrash builds upon, forms a kind of pep talk from God to Moses, with the Divine trying to reinvigorate and restore faith to God's servant. According to our midrash, God lifts Moses's spirits by noting his distinction from the patriarchs. While Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew God as *El Shaddai*, only with Moses did God reveal God's self with the ineffable name that approaches the core of God's essence.

But why was Moses deserving of such a powerful understanding of God's nature, an understanding not achieved by previous prophets and pious ones? According to our midrash, it is because he asked. Unlike the patriarchs, Moses inquired after God's nature; not satisfied with a passive reception of the Divine, Moses wanted to know more, to see God's ways. Because Moses actively questioned the nature of God, because Moses asked, "Who are You?," Moses was rewarded with an intimate knowledge of God's nature, a knowledge that would sustain him through his long and arduous path leading the Children of Israel.

It is often the Abrahams, Isaacs, and Jacobs of the world who are pointed to as the paragons of the religious spirit—those bestowed with unwavering, unshakable, unquestioning faith. But our midrash suggests that those who possess the faith of the patriarchs have access only to an outer level of God's nature. It is those who ask, who question, who doubt, like Moses returning from his first encounter with Pharaoh, who can begin to truly comprehend the nature of God's name.

For more information about JTS programs and events, or to learn more about JTS, please visit www.jtsa.edu.

Rabbi Marc Wolf
Vice Chancellor and
Chief Development Officer
(212) 678-8933
mawolf@jtsa.edu



Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-era
Exodus 6:2–9:35
January 21, 2012
26 Tevet 5772

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Judith Hauptman, E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture, JTS.

A Study in Repetition

This week's Torah portion, Va-era, describes the events leading up to the Exodus. It opens with God's statement to Moshe that He will take the Israelites out of Egypt and bring them to the land He promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 6:2–4). As a first step, God sends Moshe to Pharaoh to ask for freedom for the Israelite slaves. The next section presents Moshe's lineage in great detail (6:13–29). Moshe then says to God that Pharaoh will not listen to him because he is speech-impaired (v. 30). God tells Moshe that Aaron will be his spokesman (7:1–2). God adds that if Pharaoh asks for a sign, Moses should say to Aaron, "take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh," and then, God indicates, it will turn into a snake (7:9). The Torah goes on to say that when Moshe and Aaron successfully executed God's commands, the Egyptian magicians were able to match their deeds. A skeptical Pharaoh sends the two brothers away. God then tells Moses to appear before the Egyptian ruler in the morning, when he goes down to the Nile. Moses is to take the same staff that turned into a snake and strike the waters of the Nile with it, which God says will turn to blood (7:17, 18). This sequence of events becomes the first of the 10 plagues. The rest of the parashah describes the next six punishments: an onslaught of frogs, insects, wild animals, pestilence, boils, and hail.

By now, some of you might be scratching your head in puzzlement. If you followed last week's Torah portion closely, you are probably sensing that this week's portion, in the words of Yogi Berra, is "déjà vu all over again." Last week, in Parashat Shemot, we read an account of Moses's lineage, of God's announcing that He will take the people out of Egypt, of a staff turning into a snake and water into blood, of Moshe's speech-impairment, and of God's appointing Aaron as surrogate spokesperson for Moshe. Every one of these topics appears in this week's parashah too.

What are we to make of the striking similarities between the two Torah portions? Moshe Greenberg, the great Bible scholar, acknowledges the redundancy but claims that it is for a purpose. The same series of events that precede and follow the opening speech of this week's parashah draw attention to it, highlight it. And for good reason. It is, notes Greenberg, one of the most majestic passages of the entire Torah.

The speech opens with God stating His name, "I am Adonai," which is a formula of power in the Ancient Near East. It continues with a series of seven verbs, all in the first person future tense: **"I will free you** (*v'hozeiti*) from the labors of the Egyptians, **I will deliver you** (*v'hizalti*) from their bondage, **I will redeem you** (*v'ga'alti*) with an outstretched arm, **I will take you** (*v'lakhti*) to be My people, **I will be** (*v'hayyiti*) **your God**, **I will bring you** (*v'heiveiti*) to the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and **I will give it to you** (*v'natati*) for a possession" (Exod. 6:6-7). The speech ends the same way it began, with the words "I am Adonai." This *inclusio*, Greenberg further notes, marks it off as a self-contained unit.

In these seven action verbs (not just the four that correlate with the Passover seder's four cups of wine), God renews for the Israelites in Egypt the covenant He made with the patriarchs. God states that He will free the Israelites from slavery, enter into a "marital" relationship with them of care and protection, and bring them to the Promised Land. The commentators note that the verbs "LKH" and "HYH" (numbers four and five above) are used in the Bible in marital contexts. In exchange for God's kindnesses, the Israelites are expected to acknowledge that it is God who accomplished these feats for them, which means that they must worship Him alone. Later, at Sinai, they will be asked by God to observe many mitzvot. Here, in Va-era, they are only asked for fidelity to the relationship. So the reason for the repetition of so many incidents in two adjacent Torah portions is to urge us to think more deeply about the nature of the relationship between God and the Jewish People. As this speech clearly indicates, it is one of reciprocity and commitment.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

At the beginning of Parashat Va-era, God appears to Moses with promises of support and deliverance. Prior to heralding this new chapter in the Israelite journey, however, God establishes authority with Moses by placing the Divine Self within the context of the entire span of history. Past, present, and future are woven together. First, God acknowledges the past, establishing a chain of tradition from Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob (Exod. 6:3). Second, God turns to the present declaring, "I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites" (Exod. 6:5). Third, God turns to the future, employing what is popularly known as the "four languages of redemption": "I will free you (*v'hotzayti*) . . . I will deliver you (*v'hizalti*) . . . I will redeem you (*v'ga'alti*) . . . I will take you (*v'lakakhti*) . . ." (Exod. 6:6-7). Why emphasize Israelite deliverance in this fourfold repetition? And specifically, what is the practical difference between "delivering" and "redeeming"?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains:

In Egypt you have no relatives, no soul that feels itself injured by the mishandling that you suffer. I stand up as your relation. I am injured, I am hurt, when any one of My Children is hurt. In Me you will find again your rights and your feeling of self-assertion. Whereas *hatzil* is deliverance from a threatening danger, *ga'al* is deliverance from a destruction which has already occurred. In Jewish Law, the *go'el*, redeemer, steps up out of dire necessity . . . That is God's relation to us. The Egyptians had not the slightest right to the sufferings or labors imposed on us . . . Then God, with arm stretched from far afield . . . entered the arena for the homeless ones who, on that account, had been declared without rights. (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Exodus*, 67).

Hirsch paints a painful and realistic picture reflecting the existential otherness and isolation of the enslaved Israelites. Far from having the support of their Egyptian "neighbors," the Israelites were vulnerable, powerless, and exposed. They lived their oppressive reality in the absence of allies and advocates. Utter hopelessness became the signature of their moribund existence. Now God steps into the fray. God's ability to redeem the people derives, as Samson Raphael Hirsch explains, from God's role as Protector. Having established a connection with the ancestors of this people, God answers the call as Relative and Guardian. The dire situation of the Israelites dictates that God intervene. Yet, as Hirsch points out, this deliverance is both from a threatening danger as well as a destruction that has already unfolded. Divine deliverance for the Israelites will not only be realized; redemption will be all-encompassing and complete—reviving the lives of individuals and of the nation alike. Hope will once again become the trademark of Israelite destiny.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.