

D'var Torah on Parashat Vaera

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Welcome to our Sisterhood (Women's League) Shabbat service.

Last Shabbat, we began reading the second book of the Torah—*Shemot*—known in English as Exodus because this book tells of one of the key dramatic events of the history of the Jews—the journey from slavery to freedom.

The actual English translation of the word *Shemot*, however, is “names.” And, as we will learn in the next few minutes, although names are not quite as exciting a subject as other elements in the book of *Shemot*—such as the Plagues, Crossing of the Red Sea, and the Revelation at Sinai—we can gain important insights from looking at the many names of God that are presented in today's parasha of *Vaera*. These names both inform our understanding of our relationship to God and provide guidance for our own behavior.

In the first two verses of the parasha, three distinct names of God appear prominently: *Elohim*, *Adonai* and *El Shaddai*. We read that “*Elohim spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am Adonai. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name Adonai’*”.

This statement has intrigued rabbis and scholars for centuries. It is perplexing because this new name of God “*Adona*” that is revealed to Moses is, in fact, not new. The name *Adonai* appears many times in the book of Genesis: such as when God tells Avram: “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house,” and when Jacob has his famous dream about the angels climbing up and down the stairway, or ladder.

So why does God seemingly present the name *Adonai* as if it were a new one even though it has been used numerous times before?

Rashi—and the many commentators through the ages, who pass on his teachings—explains that the name “*Adonai*” signifies a God who fulfills promises. God promised the Patriarchs that they would inherit the Land of Israel. However, this promise was never fulfilled in their lifetimes and, so, they never knew God fully as *Adonai*. This promise does not materialize in its most complete form until God leads the Children of Israel out of Egypt and brings them to the land of Canaan. It is at that moment that God could truly be known as *Adonai*.

The modern Torah scholar Nechama Leibowitz, who lived from 1905-1997, wrote: “What the verse signifies is that one particular aspect of God was being revealed and that this particular attribute of the Divine had not, till then, been in evidence.” The message here is that a name is not merely a title. A name represents a collection of characteristics and attributes, and with these three names of God, we are immersing ourselves in God’s characteristics and attributes as they evolve, change, and ultimately fully develop.

Other commentators, in trying to understand why God revealed new insights and godly traits related to these names to Moses at this particular time, stress that it is because at this time in their journey—when facing severe oppression in Egypt—that the Israelites needed compassion. Thus, in addition to faith, defined by Rashi as someone who fulfills promises, in the name of Adonai, we see yet another attribute of God—that of compassion.

This “change” in God’s name—or more accurately, as we’ve seen, the enhanced human understanding of God’s name—represents a turning point in God’s relationship with Moses and, by extension, the Jewish people, throughout the ages.

In his teachings about the evolving names of God in Parashat Vaera, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l observed the following: “For the first time in history God was about to get involved in ‘history’, not through natural disasters like the Flood, but by direct interaction with the people who shape history. God was getting ready to appear as the force that shapes the destiny of nations. He was about to do something no one had ever heard of before: bring an entire nation from slavery and servitude, persuade them to follow him into the desert, and eventually to the promised land, and there build a new kind of society, based not on power but on justice, welfare, respect for the dignity of the human person and on collective responsibility for the rule of law.” The changes in the various names as noted in the first two verses in the parsha would account for the changing relationship God has with the nation of Israel as it developed in a new and profound way.

Rabbi Sacks continues by explaining that, at the moment when God told Moses that he and the Israelites were about to experience God with the name Adonai, and witness aspects of God no one had seen before—faith and compassion—the idea was born that we can partner with God to change the world. We would “journey toward the day when all human beings, regardless of class, color, creed or culture, would achieve their full dignity within the image and likeness of God.” Rabbi Sacks is suggesting here that, because we were created B’tselem Elohim, in the image of God, we are capable of changing our “names” and attributes, as we grow and develop our relationship with God, as well as our unique roles in society.

God's careful attention to how Moses, and the Jewish people, understand all of God's different names—including what they signify and how they explain our relationship to the divine—perhaps is a call to all of us to emulate God by paying attention to our own names and attributes in our relationships and treatment of one another.

According to a famous Midrash composed during 500-800 CE:

Whenever a person increases their mitzvot, their good deeds, they earn themselves a good name.

People are called by three names:

One is the name their parents call them.

One is the name others call them.

And one is the name they earn for themselves.

The one they earn for themselves is the best name of all.

It is the most important name of all because it represents Our Reputation and Our Legacy.

How do we earn a “Good Name”, a name that merits being a partner with God? By learning and practicing the attributes we use to describe God. As we integrate these traits and attributes into our own lives, we will evolve, as we witnessed God doing at the beginning of today's parsha, and become our best and most complete selves, truly worthy of partnering with God to repair the world.

As a final thought for tying together this idea of the evolution of the names for God, and for us, and how they relate to the development of a just society, we think ahead to tomorrow night (Sunday night, January 23) when the month of Shevat begins. Why do we think of God's names in conjunction with Shevat? In Jewish tradition, the first of Shevat marks the time when most of the rain has fallen and the trees have enough water to be able to blossom—representing the potential for new life. In the middle of the month, when we celebrate Tu B'Shevat, the trees actually begin to blossom. The month of Shevat, therefore, symbolizes the movement from potential and promise, to reality, and reminds us how much we can achieve in much the same way that, in Vaera, God's names changed from the potential and promise of El Shaddai and Elohim to the reality of Adonai.

SHABBAT SHALOM!