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## GOD'S DIALOGUE WITH MOSES

TRANSCRIBED BY A STUDENT

### GOD'S NAME

The enactment of the covenant between God and the Jews commences with an interesting discussion between God and Moshe:

*Moshe said to God, "When I come to Bnei Yisrael and say to them, 'The God of your fathers*

*has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moshe, "I will be that I will be." He continued, "Thus shall you say to Bnei Yisrael, 'I will be sent me to you.'" (Exod. 3:13,14)*

First, God refers to his name as, “I will be that I will be.” But then He changes it to, “I will be.” God continues:

*And God said further to Moshe, “Thus shall you speak to Bnei Yisrael: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever, this My appellation for all eternity. (Ibid. 3:15)*

In his *Guide* (book I, chap. lxiii), Maimonides asks, “What question did Moshe ask of God?” Was there a special name that the Jews knew of? If the Jews knew that name, then that is how Moshe knew it [and Moshe’s reciting of that name is insignificant.] And if the name was one that Moshe alone knew, again this proves nothing as Moshe can make up any name he wishes. Maimonides says that it is obvious from the verses that Moshe’s question about which name to tell the Jews did not concern a name per se, but the name represented an idea.

God mentions three names: 1. I will be that I will be, 2. I will be, and 3. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Which name is the correct name that Moshe should tell the Jews?

Rashi quotes an interesting statement by Chazal:

*“I will be that I will be: As I am with the Jews in this trouble, I will be with them in their future troubles.” Moshe then replied, “Why should I mention other troubles to the Jews? Their current troubles are enough.” God replied, “You speak well. This is what you should say, ‘I will be has sent me to you.’”*

God gave Moshe an idea of “I will be that I will be.” But as a leader, Moshe adapted the idea and consulted with God as to whether his adaptation of God’s name was correct.

This is a difficult area and I cannot say with complete certainty that the explanation I will offer is the correct one. Obviously, this area deals with metaphysical ideas that are difficult to comprehend. Maimonides himself says that the only name of God is יהוה. All other names signify attributes. אדני refers to master and אלהי refers to forces; neither refer exclusively to God. Rashi says that אלהי means multi-powers, explaining its pluralistic form. Even שד inherentlly partakes of anthropomorphism to some degree. We are permitted to use these names as they are necessary to convey important ideas concerning certain results of God’s actions. But these names do not describe God Himself. The only name that is free from anthropomorphism is יהוה. Maimonides explains that all God’s other names came into being after creation (*Guide*, book I, chap. lxi), for all other names refer to God in His relationship to the physical world and do not refer to Him per se. But יהוה was God’s name prior to creation. Meaning that יהוה reflects the idea of God’s absolute existence.

“I will be that I will be” is closely tied to יהוה; you can see that. But I would like to attempt to offer an explanation of this name, although, again, I cannot say for certain that I am correct. Nevertheless, insofar as one has the right to understand the Torah, I wish to attempt an explanation. Given that introduction, allow me to offer a pshat.

## EXPLAINING GOD’S NAME

A person cannot make the statement “I will be,” for that is an inherent contradiction. It indicates that one does not exist now. In which case, there is no I. And if one does not exist now, he cannot say “I will exist.” Instead, one

should say, “I exist.” Therefore, it is illogical for a person to make the statement “I will be that I will be.” However, God can make this statement. The meaning of “will be” means that God’s existence will enter the realm of time and space. Man exists within time and space and God exists outside of it. “I will be” is God saying that he will exist in time and space. This does not mean that God will change His existence so that He is subject to time and space. It means that man will perceive God’s existence within man’s time and space system. But what is the implication of this? This means that God will perform a miracle: God’s alteration of natural law. And to alter natural law means that God enters the time and space system, so to speak.

The existence of the universe expresses God’s creation. A miracle means that God intervenes at a certain time. In a manner of speaking, a miracle is God breaking into the realm of time and space. Unlike a miracle, the creation of the universe is not God breaking into time and space [for neither existed yet]. You can say that the universe is the result of God’s essence or a spill-off of His essence. But God is not “in” the universe. “He is the place of the universe and the universe is not his place” (Rav Yosi ben Chalifta, *Yalkut Shimoni*). [God being the “place” of the universe means that He is the prerequisite for the existence of everything, just like place or space is necessary for something to exist. Without a place or space, nothing can exist. Similarly, without God, nothing else can exist, metaphorically stated as, “He is the place of the universe.”]

A miracle means that God affects time and space, as if to say He “enters” time and space. This explains the phrase “I will be.” [God will be evident at a certain time.] But what is meant by the second half of God’s name, “that which I will be?” The full name is difficult to understand, “I will be that which I will be.” “That which I will be” refers to an idea of constancy. It modifies the first phrase, “I will be.” Thus, the meaning is, “I will enter time and space, and this will be always.” Regarding His creation of covenants, God will continually render miracles to sustain

the Jewish people. This entering into time and space (as man views this from his perspective) is part of God’s eternal nature. This means that God’s capacity as a creator of covenants stems from His eternal nature.

Moshe’s reply to God was that telling the Jews that God’s intervention is a part of His eternal nature means that it will happen again; that God will need to intervene again due to future troubles from which the Jews will require salvation. It’s a forecast of future doom. [After so many years of torturous labor and servitude] the Jews would not be able to emotionally tolerate such news. God then told Moshe to say that His name is “I will be,” meaning that God intervenes in time and space, omitting the last part, “that I will be” [with the Jews during future troubles.]

What is the meaning of the third name, “the God of your forefathers?” The answer is precisely as we are saying. In explaining to the people this abstract idea, the end result for man in pondering the abstract nature of God is that man simply gets lost: there is no idea about God to which man can relate, since the concept of God is totally abstract. While Moshe was explaining an abstract metaphysical principle, it was one that left the elders with the unidentifiable and unknowable idea of God. The elders were left with nothing with which to relate. This explains why God said:

*Thus shall you speak to Bnei Yisrael: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.*

With this name, God offered man a means to relate to Him through His providence, expressed to the forefathers. Man is flesh and blood and needs some tangible way to relate to God. This third name was that bridge. The elders could relate to God’s providence, previously expressed to the forefathers.

*This shall be My name forever, this My appellation for all eternity.*

Chazal say the Hebrew word לעלם (forever) is written without the vav, allowing it to be read “I’alame,” meaning hidden. יהוה refers to “This shall be my name forever,” and “This is My appellation for all eternity” refers to “God of the forefathers.” The gemara says regarding God, “I am not read the way I am written.” This means that we do not pronounce יהוה, but instead we read it as אדני. [This is a means of expressing our ignorance of God’s nature; we do not enunciate His name the way it is written, as if to say we do not know what He is.]

What was Moshe’s message to the nation? He presented the people with a new, previously unheard-of religion. That religion is that God’s nature is so abstract that man cannot relate to Him. Nevertheless, man is permitted to relate to God in a certain way: the God of our forefathers. This is our closest relationship to God. Any other image, feeling, or sense behind the word God is prohibited and borders on idolatry. Moshe presented the people with a new religion where one relates to God on his emotional level, while simultaneously conveying that God is unknowable. Man cannot relate to God’s absolute [and unknowable] nature יהוה; he relates only to “God of the forefathers.”

If we only had the identity of God as “God of our forefathers,” man would project anthropomorphic notions onto God. Therefore, we do not pronounce יהוה as it is written to remind ourselves of God’s unknowable nature. This is the central idea of Moshe’s prophecy and a central idea of the new religion he established. This is the essence of Judaism.

## MOSHE: GOD’S MESSENGER

How could Moshe prove that he was God’s messenger? Evidently, signs and wonders

would have been insufficient. As the following verse says, the signs were for the people, not for the elders. For the elders, Moshe needed to convey the concept of “I will be that I will be.”

*Then Moshe and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. Aaron repeated all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moshe, and he performed the signs in the sight of the people. (Exod. 4:29,30)*

God was not satisfied to have the elders believe through wonders. This is in accord with Maimonides:

*One who believes because of a sign has doubts in his heart (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 8:1)*

The belief in wonders does not involve all of man’s faculties. Signs and wonders do not impress the inner man; ideas alone offer this impression. Therefore, the elders, who were capable of grasping the ideas, would be impressed through ideas and not signs. It is so beautiful how the verse works out. “I will be that I will be” was Moshe explaining the mesora to the elders. The only way a man can be accepted as God’s messenger without signs and wonders is by explaining the meaning of the mesora that the elders possessed. ■

# SETBACKS *in* SERVING HASHEM

*Rabbi Reuven Mann*

This week's parsha, Vauera, continues the saga of Moshe Rabbeinu. He had only reluctantly accepted his position as the first leader of the Jews, even though he was chosen by Hashem. In his initial foray into Jewish affairs, he rebuked a Jew who was beating up a friend. In response, the offender said, "Who made you a person who is a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

Moshe's attempt to resolve this conflict was impudently rejected by his fellow Jew, who implied that the slaying of the Egyptian might be "discovered" by the authorities. Moshe managed to escape from Egypt and chose to withdraw from political and social life to be a "stranger in a foreign land."

Accordingly, when Hashem appeared to him, he resisted His call to assume the spiritual and practical leadership of the Jews. But his demurrals were in vain. There are certain things one can't escape in this world. G-d specifically desired the services of the one who was "difficult of speech and of tongue."

Moshe's first encounter with Pharaoh reinforced his conviction that he was not the man for the job. Following Hashem's instructions, he communicated His message to Pharaoh, "So said Hashem the G-d of Israel, 'Send out my people that they may celebrate for Me in the Wilderness.' "

This message met with utter rejection. Not only that, but Pharaoh went further. He accused Moshe and Aharon of interfering with the economic output of Pharaoh's "workers." "Why do Moshe and Aharon distract the people from its work? Behold, the people of the land are now numerous, and you would have them cease from their burdens!"

As a result of Moshe's intervention, the situation of the Jews seriously deteriorated. Now their condition was more akin to that of the Jews in the German concentration camps, where they were given impossible tasks and beaten when they failed to complete them. Pharaoh employed the same canard used by the Nazis that the Jews were all lazy and exploited their religion to be excused from labor.

In addition, Pharaoh charged that the Jews were disloyal to the State and were unconcerned about the impact of their slothfulness on the national economy. "For they are lazy—therefore they cry out, saying, 'Let us go and bring offerings to our G-d.'"

Clearly, Pharaoh was a shrewd and ruthless tyrant. He saw an opportunity to nip Moshe's mini-revolt in the bud. He created a crisis that put the Jews in an impossible situation and blamed it on Moshe. This would discredit him as a leader and divest the slaves of any thoughts of rebellion.

Moshe was deeply affected by the hostility the suffering Jewish foremen threw at him. His desire was to rescue the innocent from their oppression, but he had now become the catalyst for their increased suffering. He blamed himself and wondered why G-d sent him on this counterproductive mission.

Moshe's reaction seems astonishing. Hashem had told him not to expect immediate positive results and that Pharaoh would remain intransigent until Hashem stretched forth His "mighty Hand." But Moshe had not imagined

that matters would become worse and that the pain of the Jews would multiply. Instead of inaugurating the beginning of the redemption, Moshe had instead opened a new chapter in the Book of Jewish Suffering.

Moshe needed an explanation, so he sought out Hashem asking, “My Lord why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name he did evil to this people, but You did not rescue Your people.” Moshe was not one to mince words.

It would appear that Hashem did not answer the question. He merely told him that “now you will see what I shall do to Pharaoh, for through a strong hand will he send them out, and with a strong hand will he drive them from his land.”

We are left to wonder why it was necessary for “things to get worse before they got better.” To better understand this, we must consider the theological significance of the Exodus from Egypt. Twice a day we recite the Shema, which concludes with the words, “I am the Lord your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt to be a G-d to you.” We accept upon ourselves the full obligation to keep all the Commandments and serve Hashem, Who became our Ruler by virtue of removing us from Pharaoh’s enslavement.

Before the Jews could make that commitment, they had to be convinced that the oppression was so powerful that no earthly force could rescue them. The Hagaddah states, “And if the Holy One, blessed is He, had not removed our fathers from Mitzrayim, then we and our children and our children’s children would still be slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt.”

Had things improved at the outset of Moshe’s interaction with Pharaoh, that ruler would have appeared weak and pliable. The Jews would then have believed that they had

overestimated Pharaoh’s power and could have attained their freedom without Hashem.

Hashem needed to demonstrate Pharaoh’s absolute ruthlessness and total control over their fate. G-d hardened his heart, making him impervious to the sufferings imposed by the plagues. It was clear to all that only an unprecedented and devastating miracle like the slaying of the firstborn could coerce the tyrant to release the Jews. Even so, he quickly reverted to his previous position and chased after them to destroy them at the Sea of Reeds. The Jews recognized that the oppression under which they suffered was absolute and that they owed their freedom exclusively to Divine intervention. It was therefore incumbent upon them to accept His Rule.

The worsening of their conditions was a test. Our trust in Hashem cannot be subject to “performance.” It is absolute and based on awareness of His “nature.” He is a “G-d of Faith without iniquity, righteous and fair is He.” We do not know His ways, but are absolutely convinced of their ultimate goodness.

Shabbat shalom. ■

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P.S. Have you finished reading the essays in Eternally Yours: Genesis? Good news, because Eternally Yours: Exodus is now available. The articles offer a new and original perspective on the weekly parsha that will encourage you to think and enhance your appreciation of Torah and enjoyment of Shabbat. And now we are close to finishing the third in the Eternally Yours series on Bamidbar. Please stay tuned.