

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

The recognition of that infinite presence within our limited existence is true liberation. God represents freedom from all limitations, freedom from all bondage, freedom from all oppression. God's very name represents the breaking of boundaries and the linking of opposites. God's name shows the infinite unity behind all of being, the oneness underneath the many. This unity forms the core of our moral and spiritual purposes in life. Why does justice apply to all people? Why should we care for all of creation? Why and how can I integrate my limited perception into a larger whole? Because all of existence comes from the same source and shares the same bond of unity.

The rabbis identified ten proper names that the Torah uses for the divine. These ten names form the backbone of the Kabbalistic system that identifies ten different attributes of the divine, allowing us to speak about the one as many. The name *El Shaddai* denotes the *Shechinah*, God's indwelling presence on earth. The Zohar 2:23b claims that the patriarchs knew this lower level but only Moshe could know the higher level of YHVH, *Tiferet*, the principle of harmony that unites all opposites. Only Moshe could see how behind the divisions we see in the natural world, all things stem from one source, interconnected in the chain of being.

The Zohar goes on to parallel the ten plagues with the ten *sefirot*, divine attributes or names. Even the plagues visited upon the Egyptians, as horrific as they are, are meant to demonstrate the underlying interconnected unity of nature and our dependence upon that chain of being. We depend upon the rain falling, the river flowing, the land growing. It is the natural order of things to keep disease, vermin and wild beasts at bay, for the sun to shine light and for children to outlive their parents. When the forces of nature are balanced and working together, all goes well for us. But if any single element becomes out of balance, separate from the whole, the system falls apart. If the water becomes too salty, too polluted with blood and poison, we will go thirsty, the crops will fail and pestilence will spread. Only the slightest change in the wind or the temperature can result in hail falling instead of rain. The consequences of nature out of balance are famine and death. The floods and fires of today are all of our shared problem. Our unique challenge in the world is to recognize that the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land that produces the food we eat are all connected by the same animating principle, the essence of the divine coming into being.

The plagues are not meant to be weapons sent to end oppression, but a lesson about oppression. They are meant to teach Pharaoh the lesson of the divine name. If, like Moshe, we strive to see the unity of the divine name behind all things, we will understand that we are responsible for preserving that balance that connects and unites all of us. We cannot continue to pollute the land, sea or air if we see how our very lives are bound to the system of nature that unites all of existence. So too, we cannot suffer the oppression or injustice of any people if we recognize the unity of all people.

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## TORAH SPARKS

### *Parashat Va'era* *Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh*

January 25, 2020 | 28 Tevet 5780

Annual | Exodus 6:2-9:35 (Etz Hayim p.351-368; Hertz p. 232-244)

Triennial | Exodus 6:2-7:7 (Etz Hayim p. 351-357; Hertz p. 232-236)

Haftarah | Ezekiel 28:25-29:21 (Etz Hayim p.1219-1223; Hertz p. 944-947)

### D'var Torah: The Unity of the Divine Name

*Bill Shackman, Conservative Yeshiva Alumnus (1996-99)*

Parashat Va'era in Exodus places two passages next to each other. It begins with a teaching about the Divine name and finishes with the story of the plagues. What connects these two passages? Their juxtaposition teaches us an important lesson about how we treat nature and each other.

The parashah begins with a lesson in theology: What is God's name? To approach the Jewish people as their leader and to speak to Pharaoh, Moshe will have to tell them who he represents. What god are the people going to worship out in the desert? Who was listening to their oppressed cries and who will free them?

Earlier, when asked to be named, God replied, "I will be what I will be." As unsatisfactory as it sounds, God still refuses to be named. Now God tells Moshe that the Divine has many names and that they change over time. The God that appeared to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov was known by another name, *El Shaddai*. Now God appears to Moshe as YHVH, the ineffable essence of being and becoming. This name is special, an unpronounceable amalgamation of the past, present and future tenses of the verb to be. The divine name represents what was, what is and what will be. Loosely translated, God's name would be rendered as, "being becoming." In Hebrew the name is made up of only the breathy phonetically fluid consonants: y, h and w. Though we can put these letters together, they don't form a sound in any recognizable pattern. We cannot say God's name. We cannot limit God's presence in any way.

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# D'var Haftarah: Fashioning Oneself an Idol

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

It is an understatement to say that the Tanakh or Jewish Bible was particularly concerned with the problem of idolatry. Normally when we think of idolatry, we think of deities competing for the attention of human attendees. The whole story of the exodus from Egypt, though, represented a variant on this theme. It is the tale of a tyrant, Pharaoh, who deified himself, challenging God's sovereignty and being brought down low to establish God's unparalleled position.

Centuries later, the Pharaoh in the times of the prophet Ezekiel, exhibited similar propensities. Ezekiel, who lived during the period of the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians, understood well the predicament of his countrymen who were caught in a geopolitical bind between two great powers, Babylonia and Egypt. Many of his countrymen presumed that Egypt would be their savior from the onslaught of the Babylonians to the north, in part, because Pharaoh falsely represented himself as such: "Thus said the Lord God, I am going to deal with you, O Pharaoh king of Egypt, mighty monster sprawling in your channels, who said, 'The Nile is my own, I made it for myself.'" (29:3) Pharaoh arrogated to himself divine attributes but proved hollow when it came to fulfilling his promises. (See Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, p. 217)

In the following midrash, these personality traits which seem to taint political leaders to this day are disparaged as characteristics antithetical to the Jewish spirit: "Rabbi Yehudah bar Simon said: 'Know that the Lord God made us and we did not' (Psalms 100:3) create ourselves, unlike Pharaoh, of whom it says: The Nile is my own, and I made myself" (Bereishit Rabbah 100:1, Albeck ed. p. 1283)

As you may have noticed, Rabbi Yehudah did some creative reading here. First of all, he read the verse from Psalms according to the "ketiv" or written tradition, while we traditionally read it according to the "kri" or read tradition, thus changing it from "I made **it for** myself" to "I made myself.". This way he proposes that one who recognizes God is sensitive to the contrast between God and human beings, asserting that only God is capable of creating life. Pharaoh, according to Rabbi Yehudah's reading, claims in all of his arrogance the godlike ability to create himself. This quality qualifies him as idolatrous.

Arrogance is more than simply poor behavior. A healthy appreciation of one's abilities and accomplishments requires recognizing their source. Without that, it can too easily cross over into hubris, self-worship, and even idolatry.

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# Parashah Study: What Does a Pharaoh Do When He Gets Up in the Morning?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

## **Text: Shemot 7:14-17**

(14) And the LORD said to Moshe, "Pharaoh's heart is hard, he refuses to let the people go. (15) **Go to Pharaoh in the morning. Behold, he will be going out to the water**, and you shall be poised to meet him on the bank of the Nile, and the staff that turned into a snake you shall take in your hand. (16) And you shall say to him, 'the LORD God of the Hebrews sent me to you, saying, 'let my people go' ... (17) By this you shall know that I am the LORD.' Behold, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the staff that is in my hand, and it will turn into blood.

- Why do you think that Moshe is told to confront Pharaoh in the morning by the water?
- What do you think is Pharaoh's feeling seeing Moshe there at the start of the day?
- How (if at all) might the time and location affect Pharaoh's hard heart?

## **Commentary: Rashi Shemot 7:15**

**Behold, he will be going out to the water:** to relieve himself, for he had deified himself and said that he did not need to relieve himself; so, early in the morning, he went out to the Nile and there he would perform his needs.

## **Commentary: Ibn Ezra Shemot 7:15**

**Go to Pharaoh in the morning:** It is the practice of the king of Egypt until this day to go out during the months of Tammuz and Av, for then the Nile will swell, to see how many degrees it has risen. And the Lord commanded Moshe to go in the morning and stand before the Nile and do the sign which is the plague of the Nile before Pharaoh.

## **Commentary: Rashbam Shemot 7:15**

**Behold, he will be going out to the water:** As it the habit of high-powered people to go for a morning outing and ride hither and thither.

- The 3 commentators offer 3 different pictures of Pharaoh. What is the purpose of going to the water according to each of them? What aspect of Pharaoh does each point to?
- Based on the 3 readings, what might Pharaoh's reaction be to the confrontation by Moshe as he gets to the Nile?
- Which one of these images of Pharaoh's morning best describes your morning? Which one would you like to describe your morning?