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Parshat Va'era: Pious Impiety

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In [last week's exploration](#) of *parshat Shemot*, Moshe emerged as a strong spiritual leader willing to teach God about who God needs to be for the Jewish people. In this week's parsha, *Va'era*, he continues audaciously to do the same.

The *parsha* begins with yet another act of self-disclosure on the part of God:

2 God spoke to Moses, and He said to him, "I am the Lord [YHWH].
 3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob with [the name] *El Shaddai* [Almighty God], but [with] My name YHWH [Adonai/Lord], I did not become known to them." (Exodus 6:2-3)

ב וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי
 יְהוָה: ג וַאֲרָא אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֶל־יִצְחָק
 וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שְׁדַי וְשְׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִודַעְתִּי
 לָהֶם: (שמות ו: ב-ג)

God was known by one particular name to the patriarchs (*avot*), *El Shaddai*, but to Moshe, God will be known as *Adonai* (or YHWH). The difference in names signals a difference in relationship. The *avot* were connected to God in a way that is distinct from Moshe's emerging connection. Rashi suggests that the root of this difference lay in the access these respective parties had to the fullness of God in time.

But [with] My name YHWH, I did not become known to them: It is not written here "*lo hodaati*" (I did not *make known* to them), but "*lo nodaati*" (I did not *become known*). For I was not known to them in my attribute of truth, for which I am called YHWH, one who fulfills His word, for I made promises to them, but I did not fulfill them [while they were alive].

וְשְׁמִי ה' לֹא נִודַעְתִּי לָהֶם. 'לֹא הִוָּדַעְתִּי
 אֵין כְּתִיב כַּאֲלֹא "לֹא נִודַעְתִּי", לֹא
 נִכְרַתִּי לָהֶם בְּמַדַּת אֱמֶתִית שְׁלִי שְׁעֲלֵיָהּ
 נִקְרָא שְׁמִי ה', נִאֲמָן לְאַמֶּת דְּבָרִי, שְׁהָרִי
 הַבְּטָחְתִּי וְלֹא קִיַּמְתִּי: (רש"י שם)

Moshe will know not only a different face of God, but a more truthful, more expansive face, because Moshe will see in action a God who is true to His word. The patriarchs were given the gift of promises for land, progeny, and legacy, but they would not live to see any of those given in full. They would die with a lot of trust and with very little evidence. And this, suggests Rashi, meant that their relationship with God was blessed, but still incomplete. They could see only half of the story and therefore only half of God's glory. Moshe, though, primed to experience redemption first hand, is also now gifted with the ability to see a fuller picture of history and, therefore, a fuller picture of who God can be in the world. Moshe will come to know God's *amitat* (attribute of truth).

This privileging of Moshe's relationship with God over that of the *avot* rattled the rabbis, however. Against the plain-sense meaning of the text, the *midrash* in *Shemot Rabbah* 6:4 laments Moshe's *lesser* relationship with God, with God opining:

Alas for those who are unfortunately gone and no more to be found!

חבל על דאבדין ולא משתכחין

The older generation was so much better. The *gemara* in Tractate *Sanhedrin* spells out at length what the *midrash* quotes more tersely.

And for this Moses was punished, as it is said, "For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in thy name, he hath done evil to this people, neither hast Thou delivered thy people at all" [Exod. 5:23]. Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "*Alas for those who are unfortunately gone and no more to be found!* For how many times did I

ועל דבר זה נענש משה רבינו, שנאמר (שמות ה') ומאז באתי אל פרעה לדבר בשמך הרע לעם הזה. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא: חבל על דאבדין ולא משתכחין! הרי כמה פעמים נגליתני על אברהם יצחק ויעקב באל שדי, ולא

reveal Myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the name of *EI Shaddai*, and they did not question my character, nor say to Me, 'What is Thy name?' [Exod. 3:13]. "I said to Abraham, 'Arise, walk through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee'[Gen. 13:17]; yet when he sought a place to bury Sarah, he did not find one, but had to purchase it for four hundred silver *shekels*; and still he did not question my character. I said to Isaac, 'Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee' [Gen. 26:3]; yet his servants sought water to drink, and did not find it without its being disputed, as it is said, 'And the herdsmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdsmen saying, "The water is ours"' [Gen. 26:20]; still he did not question my character. I said to Jacob, 'The land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed' [Gen. 28:13]: yet he sought a place to pitch his tent and did not find one until he purchased it for a hundred *kesitah*; nevertheless he did not question my character; nor did they say to me, 'What is Thy name?' And now thou sayest to Me, 'Neither hast thou delivered thy people at all' [Exod. 5:23]. [Therefore] now shalt thou see what I will do to Pharaoh [Exod. 6:1]: thou shalt behold the war against Pharaoh, but not the war against the thirty-one kings [that is, the conquest of Palestine]." (BT Sanhedrin 101a)

הרהרו על מדותי, ולא אמרו לי מה שמך. אמרתי לאברהם (בראשית י"ג) קום התהלך בארץ לארכה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה, בקש מקום לקבור את שרה ולא מצא, עד שקנה בארבע מאות שקל כסף, ולא הרהר על מדותי. אמרתי ליצחק (בראשית כ"ו) גור בארץ הזאת ואהיה עמך ואברכך, בקשו עבדיו מים לשתות ולא מצאו עד שעשו מריבה, שנאמר (בראשית כ"ו) ויריבו רעי גר עם רעי יצחק לאמר לנו המים ולא הרהר אחר מדותי. אמרתי ליעקב (בראשית כ"ח) הארץ אשר אתה שכב עליה לך אתננה, ביקש מקום לנטוע אהלו ולא מצא, עד שקנה במאה קשיטה ולא הרהר אחר מדותי. ולא אמרו לי מה שמך. ואתה אמרת לי מה שמך בתחלה, ועכשיו אתה אומר לי (שמות ה') והצל לא הצלת את עמך. (שמות ה') עתה תראה (את) אשר אעשה לפרעה במלחמת פרעה אתה רואה, ואי אתה רואה במלחמת שלשים ואחד מלכים. (סנהדרין קיא.)

The greatness of the patriarchs, according to this view, was their willingness to maintain trust in divine promise even when reality contravened those very promises. Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaacov not only died before redemption could come; their life experiences often undermined, quite directly, the very possibility that redemption would come. Forget the big promise of vast land inheritance, for example. The tiny needs of the moment--to bury a loved one, drink some water, or pitch a tent--seemed impossible. Yet even still, they refrained from criticism or doubt. They remained steadfast in their trust in the promising God, even as He failed to fulfill.

Moshe, true to form, balks at this patiently pious approach. He refuses to take the long view, criticizing God for exacerbating the Israelites' pain and demanding that the divine word be fulfilled immediately. He raises questions about God's name from the outset and challenges God's seemingly counterproductive actions as the story unfolds. *EI Shaddai*, the God who promises but does not discernibly deliver, just won't do for him. *Adonai*, the God of action, must now show His face.

According to the *gemara*, Moshe is punished for his *chutzpah*, but note that his needs are nevertheless met. Though God mourns for those "who are unfortunately gone and no more to be found," He also concedes that a new face of God is decidedly necessary for this new generation. The time to fulfill promises has indeed come. It seems that sometimes it is impatience and a certain kind of impiety that actually reveal important, urgently needed, eminently truthful faces of God in the world.



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