A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

A Lesson in Empowering Leaders

Moses's intransigence continues in this week's parashah as our prophet continues to resist his prophetic role. In response to Moses's self deprecation (referring to himself as "one of impeded speech" (Exod. 6:30), God seeks to bolster Moses's self-confidence. Declaring, "See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet" (Exod. 7:1), God tells Moses that his brother Aaron will speak to the Egyptian ruler. How are we to comprehend that God has seemingly diminished the divine ego for the sake of Moses (i.e., telling Moses that he will play the role of God to Pharaoh)?

Professor Ze'ev Falk comments,

> Standing before Pharaoh, God appoints Moses as God and Aaron as a prophet because Pharaoh views himself as a god. The relationship between God and a prophet is described in fuller detail in Deuteronomy 18:14–16 and in II Chronicles 20:20 . . . Very similar to this is the Muslim declaration of faith: There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet. (*Divrei Torah Ad Tumam,* 130)

As God works on allaying Moses's very real fears about appearing before Pharaoh and being taken seriously by the latter as well as by his own people, there is a keen understanding of the issues at play. First, God understands that Moses must be seen as an equal by Pharaoh; only then will there be a chance of Pharaoh's acquiescence. Pharaoh sees himself as a god, and so protocol dictates he must interact with a fellow "god." Second, Moses's confidence is fragile at best. By appointing him as "god" to Pharaoh, God hopes to boost Moses's stature and self-image and, in so doing, make him a successful messenger. Finally, though Moses has been chosen as the leader, God seeks to teach Moses that he cannot do it alone. His brother Aaron will be his right-hand man and, in this respect, their relationship will resemble that of God and a prophet. Just as God needs a prophetic messenger to mediate the divine word, so too does Moses need Aaron. Overall, it is a humbling experience to realize that one cannot succeed singlehandedly; it "takes a village" in so many different ways. These three lessons are important fruit gleaned from the literal text with the aid of Falk's commentary. May we, like God, have the gumption to diminish our own egos in an effort to empower and embolden others as new leaders blazing their own path toward creativity and freedom.

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Torah from JTS

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PARASHAH COMMENTARY

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Julia Andelman, director of community engagement, JTS.

Divine Compassion

The biblical book that we began last week—Shemot—is known in English as Exodus, a name that highlights one of the key dramatic episodes of the book. But its Hebrew name, *Shemot*, means "names." The names of the five books of the Torah and the parashiyot within them are generally drawn from the first relatively distinctive word or phrase in the book or parashah (skipping over more common words and phrases such as "God said"), and do not always correlate to the most significant narrative elements of the text. Sometimes the opening sentence of a parashah is merely a transition, such that the name actually refers to a significant element of the *previous* parashah (e.g., Hayyei Sarah, Aharei Mot, Pinehas).

And yet, the seemingly coincidental name of a book or parashah also presents an opportunity for midrash, and so it is with the book of Shemot. The book begins with the names of Jacob's family members who left Canaan for Egypt—a minor element of the story compared with the plagues, the Exodus, the Revelation at Sinai, the sin of the Golden Calf, and the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). But the title "Names" beckons us to notice when the theme of names does arise, and to pay attention to potential significance that we may have glossed over while focusing on the high points of the drama. And indeed, Parashat Va-era opens—before moving on to the dramatic stories of Moses and Aaron appearing before Pharaoh, the plagues, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart—with a brief divine monologue on the subject of names.

"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*" (Exod. 6:2–3). (The divine name used here is actually the Tetragrammaton, the four letters *yod-heh-vav-heh,* uttered once a year by the High Priest in Temple times on Yom Kippur; its pronunciation having been lost, we now simply read, "*Adonai* [my Lord]" when this name appears.) God then promises that the Israelites will be delivered from bondage, and begins to instruct Moses in how to approach Pharaoh to demand his people's freedom.

These opening lines raise a few problems, however. Most notably, this new name of God that is revealed to Moses is, in fact, not new at all. The name *Adonai* appears numerous times in the book of Genesis in connection to the patriarchs and matriarchs who supposedly only knew God by the name *El Shaddai*. There are even explicit revelations of this name to Abram at the Covenant between the Parts (Gen. 15:7), as noted by Rashi and others, and to Jacob in his dream of the angelic ladder (Gen. 28:13).

So why does God present this as a new revelation of this particular divine name? While biblical criticism can address the problem for us (see, for example, Dr. Tzemah Yoreh's commentary to Genesis 15:7 in the series Kernel to Canon), the authors of our traditional commentaries had to come up with explanations of difficult texts long before those literary tools were available, and their creative responses have had a lasting impact on our readings of the Bible—and, consequently, on our understandings of human beings' relationships with the divine. One rich midrash on the meaning of God's various names in the context of divine-human relations can be found in Shemot Rabbah 3:6, commenting on the strange *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* name by which God self-identifies in the first encounter with Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14, in last week's parashah). When Moses asks what he should say when the Israelites inquire as to the name of the god who sent him to free them, God replies, according to this midrash:

> You wish to know my name? I am called after my deeds.
> Sometimes I am called *El Shaddai, Tzeva'ot, Elohim, Adonai.*
> When I judge humanity, I am called *Elohim.*
> When I give a person a suspended sentence for her sins, then I am called *El Shaddai.*
> When I wage war against the wicked, I am called *Tzeva'ot.*
> And when I have compassion on my world, I am called *Adonai*—for Adonai is the attribute of compassion, as it is written, "Adonai, Adonai, compassionate and gracious God" [Exod. 34:6]. Thus, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh:* [literally,] "I am what I am, or I will be what I will be"—I am called after my deeds.

This midrash provides one answer to the question of why the "new" divine name is revealed to Moses at this point: it is because, at this stage he and the Children of Israel need compassion more than they need any other aspect of God. Indeed, the subsequent verses represent the height of divine compassion:

> I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. (Exod. 6:4–7)

But this answer raises a new question about the introduction of the name *Adonai* at this point in the story. Why now? The people were suffering just as much in last week's parashah. If compassion is the divine attribute of the moment, why was the divine name symbolizing compassion not revealed to Moses from the beginning at the burning bush? What has changed since last week's parashah such that the all-encompassing *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* must now be replaced with *Adonai*, signaling—according to the rabbinic understanding of these names—a more acute need for compassion than in the initial encounter between God and Moses?

To answer this question, let us look back at that initial encounter, and compare it with the foundational encounters between God and the other individuals in the Torah who are privileged with one-on-one relationships with the divine. In all of those other encounters, God opens with a command or clear statement. In each case, the response—whether in words or in deeds—is affirmative and unquestioning:

- God's first words to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28)—and they do
- God's first words to Noah: "I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood" (Gen. 6:13–14)—and he does
- God's first words to Abraham: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1)—and he does
- God's first words to Rebecca: "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23)—and Rebecca does everything she can to ensure this outcome
- God's first words to Isaac: "Do not go down to Egypt" (Gen. 26:2)—and Isaac stays where he is in Gerar
- God's first words to Jacob: "I am the Lord, the god of your father Abraham and the god of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and your offspring" (Gen. 28:13)—and Jacob proclaims the holiness of the site, and anoints a pillar there to God

The initial encounter with Moses stands in stark contrast to all of these. "Moses, Moses!" God calls to him from the miraculous burning bush (Exod. 3:4). Although Moses initially answers, "Here I am," his tune changes once he hears what God is asking of him. After each eloquent exhortation by God as to what he must now do, he protests in some way:

> "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" he asks first (Exod.

Neither party in this long interchange follows the model of the Genesis characters. God seems to intuit that Moses will not even be available to listen without a miracle to catch his attention; and the opening words that follow are a more aggressive, targeted call, followed by protracted speeches attempting to get Moses on board with the mission—with God even getting angry at one point with all of Moses's naysaying (Exod. 4:14). And Moses, unlike his compliant predecessors, objects at every turn. Overcome with self-doubt, he tries everything he can think of to resist entering into a relationship with God.

And just as Moses predicts, the Israelites are similarly resistant. At the initial Shemot encounter, Moses expresses his fears that the people will not listen to him, and by the initial Va-era encounter, his fears have been born out, despite God's grand promises. When Aaron performs divinely instructed signs before the people, they are briefly convinced that redemption is at hand (Exod. 4:31), but their hopes are dashed when Pharaoh increases their workload in response to Moses and Aaron's demands of freedom. Last week's parashah ends with the Israelites overcome with anger at their leaders (Exod. 5:21). At the beginning of Va-era, they still will not listen to Moses, "their spirits crushed by cruel bondage" (Exod. 6:9).

No wonder, then, that the name symbolizing divine compassion is invoked at the beginning of our parashah. The relationship that began at the burning bush with the name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* has only gone downhill. The divine utterances responded to with perfect faith by the Genesis characters are not working here. Moses's burden is simply too great, and his self-confidence too low, for him to overcome his ambivalence toward God's directives. And so God changes tack, signaling—with the revelation of a new name embodying compassion—an understanding that it is a new era, in which the hands of leaders will need to be held through their challenges, doubts, and fears.

Moses's relationship with God—coming close, then pulling away; flourishing with faith, then faltering with doubt—probably resonates with many of us more than the simple and perfect relationships of the Genesis characters, at least at times. When life's burdens weigh upon us, we often withdraw from others and from God. Perhaps the message of Va-era's opening verses is that, at these times, we must listen for voices of compassion ever more diligently, and try to feel the divine love that is surely there.

A rabbinic colleague of mine once noted that the sermons she gives often contain the messages that she herself needs to hear. Does God also need a message of compassion at this juncture? Another midrash (Shemot Rabbah 2:6) seems to lead us in this direction, suggesting an urgent need in God's initial call to Moses. The midrash points out that the call "Moses, Moses!" differs from similar divine calls before and after it. "Abraham, Abraham," "Jacob, Jacob," "Samuel, Samuel"—all of these calls include a *paseik*, a symbol indicating a brief pause between the two utterances of the name, in the written text. But "Moses, Moses" contains no *paseik*—no pause waiting to see if he might answer before needing another call. Why the difference, the midrash asks? "It is like a person struggling under a great load who calls out 'So-and-so So-and-so, come here! Relieve me from my burden!'" God's call to Moses is one of desperation.

God, too, wants to share the massive divine burden. And now, after a parashah's worth of rocky stops and starts, not getting any closer to the goal of redemption, God needs an affirmation of compassion as well. Perhaps God realizes that the simplicity of those early Genesis relationships is no longer a model, under circumstances of enslavement, cruelty, and the challenges of leading a nation rather than a family. Perhaps God—like Moses—needs the reassurance of compassionate partnership in order to facilitate change in the world. This, then, is another answer to the question of why the name of divine compassion is invoked now. Both Moses and God need compassion and support in the face of an emotionally daunting task.

Our ancient texts—in assigning to the attribute of compassion a unique name of God—teach us that times of struggle, loneliness, self-doubt, confusion, and fear are just as holy as moments of perfect faith and unquestioning love. The valley of shadows—just like the highest heights—is a place where God has been.

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