

PARASHAT VAEIRA

The Appointment of Moshe

by Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

At the beginning of Parashat Vaeira, Moshe finds out who he has been dealing with. Seemingly without preamble, God introduces himself and his proper name.

And God spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am the Lord" (6:2)

As God continues on (6:2-8), he informs Moshe that he, "the Lord," is identical with the God of the forefathers (6:3-4) and that he has heard the pain and suffering of the Children of Israel enslaved in Egypt (6:5). God intends to save them, take them out of Egypt and bring them to a different land (6:8). Moreover, God has chosen Moshe for the task. Moshe is supposed to go to Paro and arrange for the freeing of the Children of Israel (6:11). He is supposed to deliver them from slavery (6:13).

Most probably, none of this was particularly shocking to Moshe. Nor should it strike we the readers of Sefer Shemot as particularly informative. All of this has happened before.

Back at the burning bush, God introduced himself to Moshe as the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, the God of the forefathers (3:6, 15). He subsequently informed Moshe that he has seen the oppression of his people at the hand of the Egyptians and "knows" their suffering (3:7). He intends to save them from hand of the Egyptians and take them up from Egypt to a better place, the land of the Canaanites (3:8). Needless to say, God wants Moshe to carry out the task. God charges Moshe with the mission of delivering the Children of Israel from Egypt (3:10).

The only apparent difference between the two "mission commands," the revelation at the burning bush (3:6-15) and the revelation at the beginning of Parashat Vaeira (6:2-13), seems to be the revelation of a new divine identity, the name the Lord (6:2-3), in the latter conversation with Moshe. In fact, the first "mission command," the scene at the burning bush, also includes the revelation of a hitherto "unknown" divine identity.

At the burning bush, after proclaiming his inappropriateness for the mission and being told by God that God will accompany him, Moshe voices a second objection. The

Children of Israel will ask the name of this "God of the forefathers" that has tasked Moshe with redeeming them. What will he say? God responds with the mysterious statement best translated as "I will be what I will be" (3:14). Moshe should say that "I will be," a name composed of the letters "aleph," "heh," "yud," "heh," sent him (3:14). Here too the mission command includes the revelation of a divine name.

In point of fact this name is composed of four letters, just as is the Tetragramaton, the name translated as "the Lord". Moreover, immediately following the revelation of the "I will be" name, God uses the name "The Lord" for the first time in his dialogue with Moshe. Where as before, God had referred to himself solely as the God of the forefathers, or Elokim (3:6, 12, 13), now he refers to himself by the Tetragramaton and conjoins it with his identity as God of the forefathers (3:15).

To put all of this together, and factoring in the reluctance of Moshe in both stories (3:11-13, 6:12), the two stories jointly comprise a paradigm which may be termed "The Appointment of Moshe". The logical and textual components may be mapped out as follows.

- Revelation of divine identity - (the proper name of God)- (3:13-15 & 6:2-3)
- God's apprehension of the Children of Israel's suffering - (3:7, 9 & 6:5)
- Declaration of God's intent to "save" - (including transfer to another land) - (3:8 & 6:6-8)
- The charging of Moshe - (3:10 & 6:11, 13)
- Moshe's reluctance - (3:11-13 & 6:12)

This parallel raises an obvious problem. God has already charged Moshe with his mission back at the burning bush. Why does all of this need to happen again? Why does the Torah include a second story of God's appointing of Moshe?

II

Let us take a look at the literary and physical contexts of the second revelation to Moshe, the second "mission command". Although the masoretic text of the Torah presents the second "mission command" (6:2-6:13) as an independent textual unit, bracketed on each side by spaces known as "stumot," it is in fact thematically part of a larger segment. While reading the text in isolation does indeed impart a sense of unprompted revelation by God, the unit is in fact part of a larger dialogue between Moshe and God.

Shortly after returning to Egypt, Moshe, along with his brother Aharon, comes before Paro and demands, in the name of "the Lord, God of Israel," a religious holiday in the desert for the Children of Israel (5:1).

Disaster ensues. Rather than capitulate to their demands, Paro questions the existence of "the Lord," denies any knowledge of "the Lord" and refuses to free the Children of Israel (5:2). He concludes that his slaves are lazy and that their excess free time has led to fanciful ambitions and false hopes (5:8-9, 17). He increases their burdens, demanding that they locate their own straw and yet still produce the same quota of

bricks (5:4-11). Unable to withstand the additional burdens (5:12-14), and having learnt the reason for their increased suffering from Paro himself (5:15-19), the Children of Israel blame Moshe. Their "officers" accuse him of "having put a sword in their hands to slay us" (5:21).

At this point, Moshe "returns to God" (5:22) and complains.

Why have you brought evil upon this people? Why have you sent me?
Since I came to Paro to speak in your name he has done evil to this
people; nor have you saved your people at all. (5:22-23)

Much of Moshe's diatribe plays off of the dialogue between God and Moshe at the burning bush. God had twice referred to "his people" (ami) in revealing himself to Moshe (3:7, 10). Due to this possessive connection, God intends to "save" the people from the Egyptians, to take them out of the narrow confines of Egyptian bondage to a "good" and "spacious" land (3:8). Here, in a series of pointed references, Moshe throws it all back at God. He refers to "your people," the people and possessive connection that God had previously referred to. But instead of saving his people and doing "good" for them, God has not "saved" his people and has brought "evil" upon them. Rather than spreading out in the "spacious" land of Canaan, they are now spread across the entire land of Egypt, engaged in a backbreaking search for straw (5:12).

Moreover, Moshe explicitly queries God as to why he has been sent. Once again, the usage of the term "sent" echoes the "mission command" at the burning bush. God had twice used terms based upon the verb stem for send, (SH, L, CH,) in commanding Moshe (3:10, 12). Moshe seems to be questioning and rejecting the very rationale for the existence of his mission.

In other words, Moshe has not succeeded. God has not been with him and Paro has cracked down. Metaphorically, Moshe once again stands at the burning bush and attempts to refuse his mission.

This may be more than metaphor. As pointed out previously, the Torah prefaces Moshe's speech with the fact that "Moshe returned to God". While this may be a metaphor for prayer, it most probably also describes a physical relocation. Moshe journeys back to where one can find God and pray to him. This of course is the place know in the text as "the mountain of God," the place where Moshe was supposed to bring the Children of Israel upon bringing them out of Egypt, the location of the theophany of the burning bush (3:1, 12, Rashbam 5:22).

If so, Moshe now returns to the site where God had commanded him. He returns to the place where God had reassured him and promised him that he would bring the Children of Israel to serve God (3:12). But he returns without the Children of Israel. They remain back in Egypt, crushed under the ever heavier yoke of Paro's slavery. The plan for the religious holiday in the desert has failed. The mission is in shambles. Moshe tells God so, and once again tries to opt out of his task.

By now we need no longer wonder as to the inclusion of the second "mission command," the revelation at the beginning of Parashat Va'eira (6:2-13), in the Torah.

Moshe's questioning of God (5:22-23), his explicit declaration of failure and his implicit rejection of continuing the mission are almost immediately followed by the re-commanding of Moshe. After a brief promise by God of "what he will do to Paro" (6:1) and a mention of the "strong hand" that will force Paro to release the people (6:1), God renews Moshe's mandate (6:2-13). In the very same place, he once again reveals himself and charges Moshe with his mission. In sum, the second appointment of Moshe constitutes a consequence of the setback, the failure, experienced the first time around.

But all of this merely shifts the question of the inclusion of the second mission command to another plane. Perhaps we need not be disturbed by the problem of repetition. The second appointment comes about in a particular context, in response to the petering out of the first mission. Yet this fact itself constitutes the nub of the problem. Why does the redemption proceed by first shifting into reverse? Why is there a need for a second appointment and second mission at all? In other words, what constitutes the divine purpose in designing a two part redemption process?

III

Although, each "appointment of Moshe" contains the five elements outlined earlier, nevertheless the two "mission commands" differ in their emphases and composition. These differences may provide the key. Let us begin with our point of origin, the revelation at the beginning of Parashat Vaeira (6:2-13).

After the revelation of divine identity (6:2-3), which here includes a reference to the forefathers, God states the following.

And I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, in which they lived as sojourners. And I have also heard the moaning of the Children of Israel kept in bondage in Egypt and I have remembered my covenant. (6:4-5)

The second element of the mission command structure, God's awareness of the Children of Israel's suffering, here includes a reference to the covenant with the forefathers. The term "covenant" appears twice and brackets God's hearing of the moaning of the Israelites both textually and conceptually. It is the case that God hears their suffering. Yet his primary concern is the covenant with the forefathers. In fact, God's last reference to the covenant is followed by the term "therefore," which segues into his declaration of intent to save the Israelites from Egyptian oppression (6:6). The covenant constitutes the real cause of the redemption.

An extensive linguistic parallel to the covenant of circumcision further emphasizes this point. The phrase and concept "land of sojourning" first appears in the covenant of circumcision (Bereishit 17:8) and is conjoined there, just as here in Parashat Vaeira, with the term "the land of Canaan" (Bereishit 17:8). Moreover, in the covenant of circumcision, these phrases are followed by the promise "v'hayiti lahem lailokim," and I will be their God (17:8). Likewise here in Parashat Vayeira, God follows the promise of redemption with the statement of "v'hayiti lahem lailokim," and I will be their God (6:7).

All of this creates a clear contrast with the first "mission command," the appointment of Moshe at the burning bush (3:1-15). The term "covenant" never once appears in the entire story. No echoes or parallels of any covenant narrative in the Book of Bereishit can be found in the story.

This brings us to a second and related point. In Va'eira, the land that God promises to bring the Children of Israel to is always referred to in covenantal terminology. It is "the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings" (6:5) or a bit later on, "the land that I swore to give to Avraham, Yitzchak and to Ya'akov" (6:8). In contrast to the story of the burning bush (3:8), no reference to the quality or size of the land is made. Likewise, the reverse is true. In the story of the burning bush, God refers to the land as "good," "spacious," "flowing with milk and honey" and as the place of various nations (3:8). He never refers to it as "the land of the forefathers," "the promised land" or by any other possible variant on covenantal terminology.

Finally, we may note a third striking difference related to the covenant focus of the narrative in Va'eira. In line with the inclusion of the phrase "And I will be their God" (6:7), the text places extensive emphasis on God's name and knowing God. God promises that the people "will know that I am the Lord" (6:7). The set of promises that God instructs Moshe to transmit to the people begins and ends with the phrase "I am the Lord" (6:6, 8). Likewise, God's speech to Moshe begins with the statement that "I am the Lord". Finally, the divine name "the Lord" appears repeatedly, eight times throughout the entire section (6:2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12-13). In sum, in line with the covenant theme, the second mission command is also about recognizing and knowing God as part of a covenantal relationship, apparently in a way that he has not been known and recognized until now.

Once again, this contrasts with the narrative of the burning bush. While the story of the burning bush does include the revelation of a new divine name, the four lettered "I will be," and this name is associated with the Tetragramaton, the proper name of God (3:14-15), the focus is not on recognizing and knowing God. God does not begin his speech with a revelation of his name nor is the newly revealed divine name or proper name of God emphasized throughout the story. In contrast to the second mission command, the "revelation of divine identity-the name of God," the first component in Va'eira (6:2-3), comes last at the burning bush (3:13-15).

Furthermore, it comes not at God's initiative, but only as a response to Moshe's request for a proper name (3:13). God's response to Moshe and the literal meaning of the name further telegraph that God is not particularly interested in revealing his name, his identity or teaching anything essential about himself. He states that "I will be what I will be," tells Moshe to tell them that "I will be" sent you and as quickly as possible segues back to talking about the God of the forefathers (3:14-15).

All this raises a crucial question. The revelation in Va'eira, the second "mission command" is about the covenant and God's fulfillment of the covenant. The land sworn to the forefathers and intimate knowing of God comprise the logical content and essence of the covenant. Consequently these motifs are emphasized in the second appointment of Moshe.

But none of these themes are emphasized in the first appointment of Moshe. As pointed out above, the term "covenant" never appears. The land has a different identity and knowledge of God constitutes a Moshe-initiated and muted theme. If so what comprises the basis of the first mission command? If the Exodus from Egypt and the appointment of Moshe is not about fulfilling the covenant, what is it about?

IV

The answer lies in what replaces the covenant and knowledge of God emphasis. Before announcing his intent to save the Israelites, God explains his motivation.

I have surely seen (raoh raiti) the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. And I have come down to save them... (3:7-8)

God apprehends the suffering of his people with numerous senses. He not only "hears," but also "sees". In the only use of the term for knowledge in the entire story, God states that he "knows" the pain of the people. He refers to them as "my people" defining them as connected to him and they as connected to him. The themes here are compassionate connection and empathy.

After a short interlude describing the "good" and "spacious" land that God intends to take the people to, he returns to the same themes. He refers to "the cries" that have reached him and "seeing" the oppression of the Children of Israel (3:10). But this time reaches a practical conclusion focused on Moshe.

And now therefore, come and I will send you to Paro and you will free my people the Children of Israel from Egypt (3:10)

The redemption of compassionate connection demands the participation of a specific person, it demands the participation of Moshe. God twice says "you" to Moshe and emphasizes that he will be the one to free the Children of Israel. The story is about recruiting Moshe.

In line with this theme, God's speech in the first mission command opens not with the declaration of his name, but with the calling of Moshe. God calls "Moshe, Moshe" and summons him to his mission (3:4).

Although Moshe does not know it, and responds to God with "Who am I to go to Paro and free the Children of Israel from Egypt?" (3:11), he constitutes the right man for the job. Much of the material that precedes the narrative of the burning bush is about making this point. He has already proven himself a redeemer.

To work backwards, upon arriving in Midyan at the well, he promptly rescues the daughters of Re'uel from the persecution of the local shepherds (2:16-17). The daughters describe this occurrence in their report to their father as having been "saved" (hitzilanu) (2:19), the exact term God uses to describe his upcoming action in Egypt (3:8).

Right before this, the Torah presents the story of Moshe's going out to "his brothers" (2:11-15), the cause of his exile from Egypt. On the "first day" he "saw" (vayar) his brother's burdens (2:11). He "saw" an Egyptian beating one of his brothers and immediately took action, smiting the Egyptian and ending the oppression (2:11-12). This parallels and foreshadows how God begins "the recruitment of Moshe". Employing a doubling of the verb for emphasis, he tells Moshe that he has "seen" (raoh raiti) the suffering of his people at the hands of the Egyptian (3:7-8). Once again, as part of the redemption of compassion, God recruits a compassionate redeemer.

Realizing that the first mission command is about compassion rather than covenant should help explain the various differences noted above. We are no longer surprised by the absence of the word covenant. Likewise, the presentation of the land in the first "mission command" no longer seems mysterious. From the perspective of compassionate redemption, it does not matter whether Canaan has been promised to the forefathers or whether they have lived there or not. What matters is that it is a good place, a spacious place, wholly other than the oppressive and painful confines of Egyptian slavery. Consequently, this is what is emphasized about the land.

Finally, we also understand why the revelation of divine identity comes last, reluctantly, and only in response to Moshe's query. It only sneaks in as part of relating to the cares and concerns of Moshe, as part of the recruitment of the compassionate redeemer.

V

To close the circle, it turns out that each of the "mission command" stories, both the "appointment of Moshe" at the burning bush, and "the appointment of Moshe" at the beginning of Parashat Vaeira, embody a particular aspect of the exodus from Egypt. The story of the burning bush presents the redemption from Egypt as a product of God's empathy and compassion for a people he is connected with. The connection stems from his having been the God of their forefathers. To carry out this redemption of compassion, God seeks a man who possesses these very divine attributes, a man of compassion, connection and caring. From this point of view, Moshe the leader is essential to what the redemption is all about. He represents its conceptual core and spirit. Consequently, the story of the burning bush, the first appointment of Moshe, dwells upon Moshe, his first journey to the mountain of God (3:1), his experience at the burning bush (3:2-5), his hesitations and his concerns (3:11-15).

The story at the beginning of Vaeira embodies an altogether different aspect of the exodus. Here the Torah presents the redemption from Egypt as a product of God's covenantal promise to grant the land of Canaan to the descendants of the forefathers and to engage in an intimate relationship, a relationship of "knowing the Lord" with the Children of Israel. Consequently, the emphasis in the second "appointment of Moshe" is not on Moshe or compassion, but rather on God himself, the covenant, the land and the name of God. Although Moshe is once again being "appointed" Moshe comprises no more than an instrument, a tool to execute God's promise. Consequently, almost no time is spent on his relation to God nor on plumbing the depths of his soul and his deep set hesitations.

This brings us back to the problem we have been grappling with. We need no longer be bothered by the doubling of the "appointment of Moshe" and the two part structure of the redemption. The redemption is in fact dual. On the one hand it is about empathy, compassion, connection and Moshe the leader. In sum, the story of the first "mission command". But on the other hand, the redemption is about the covenant. It is about God's fulfilling his promises and knowing God. Hence, the story of Parashat Vaeira and the second appointment of Moshe. The telling of both stories emphasizes the importance of each distinct aspect.

At the same time, we must not forget the dialectical nature of the redemption. Before the second mission command, before the focus on the covenant and knowing God, things have gone from bad to worse. Moshe has returned to God and declared the mission a failure. Apparently, we are meant to realize and remember that compassionate connection alone is not enough. Empathy alone does not shatter the bonds of Egyptian slavery. God's promise and the future intimate relation with the nation of Israel are also necessary and apparently more effective. Only after both mission commands, after compassion and covenant, does the redemption move forward.

Further Study

1. Read 6:3. The verse is normally translated as something like "I did not make myself known to them by the name the Lord". A cursory glance at the book of Bereishit seems sufficient to raise a serious problem. The problem seems even worse if one translates the verse as "my name the Lord was not known to them. See Rashi 6:3, Ibn Ezra 6:3 (end of comments) and Ramban 6:2 for some of the traditional possible interpretations. Even if one adopts one of the various "solutions" we still must account for the misleading "mode of presentation". Although I have skirted this issue in the shiur above, its core ideas emerged through an attempt to provide a "literary" answer to the "misleading mode of presentation" problem. Try to formulate a solution based upon the shiur.
2. Reread 5:22-23. See Ibn Ezra and Ramban on what exactly disturbs Moshe. Differentiate between the opinions. Contrast them with Rashi 6:1. How do the two approaches differ in their evaluation of Moshe?
3. Try to think of an alternative explanation for the setback experienced at the outset of the redemption. Take a look at 3:18-19. Is this sufficient? (reread Ibn Ezra 5:22). Try comparing 5:1-3 and 3:18. Has Moshe faithfully executed God's instructions? How does this issue interact with the central idea of the shiur?
4. See 6:10-13. Compare it to 4:10-17. Try to explain the different presentations of "Aharon" and "speech". Use the shiur as a basis.
5. The shiur above contains the claim that the first "mission command" is compassion rather than covenant based. See 3:7-8 and Bereishit 15:13, 18-20. Does this provide an alternative? Does it disprove the central thesis of the shiur? (for the very ambitious- reread the shiur on Parashat Lekh Lekha for a review of the covenant of the pieces)

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