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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAERA

“Why Do You Ask My Name?”

Rav Gad Eldad

a. God’s surprising response

Our *parasha* opens in the middle of the dispute between Moshe and God as to the effectiveness of the mission that Moshe is supposed to be carrying out:

And Moshe returned to the Lord (Y-H-V-H) and said, “Lord, why have You dealt ill with this people? Why is it that You have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he has done evil to this people, neither have You delivered Your people at all.”

Then the Lord (Y-H-V-H) said to Moshe, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand he shall let them go, and with a strong hand he shall drive them out of his land.”

And God (*Elokim*) spoke to Moshe, and said to him, “I am the Lord (Y-H-V-H); and I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov by the Name of God Almighty (*El Sha-dai*), but by My Name, Y-H-V-H, I was not known to them. And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned. And I have also heard the groaning of *Bnei Yisrael*, kept in bondage by Egypt, and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to *Bnei Yisrael*: I am the Lord (Y-H-V-H), and I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and deliver you out of their bondage, and redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments...” (*Shemot* 5:22-6:8).

Commentators throughout the ages have struggled to understand the meaning of this exchange of Divine Names and the significance of God’s choice to use one Name rather than another during the period of the forefathers.¹ Another difficulty pertains to the content of this declaration, since the same message had already been conveyed to Moshe at the burning bush. What new message is God telling him now?

Beyond all of this, the point of this entire discussion of Divine Names demands some clarity, since Moshe’s claim makes no reference to this subject. He is deploring the lack of success (or even the slightest progress) in his mission to bring *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt. Would God’s response have been any less informative if the discussion of His Names were omitted?

¹ See the commentaries on these verses. R. Elchanan Samet, in his *Iyyunim Be-Parashat Ha-Shavu’a* (second series), *Parashat Va’era*, offers a detailed discussion and some conclusions.

b. “And they shall say to me: What is His Name?”

In order to answer this question, we need to return to the beginning of the discourse between Moshe and God at the burning bush:

And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, “Moshe, Moshe.” And he said, “Here I am”... And the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows... Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring My people, *Bnei Yisrael*, out of Egypt.” And Moshe said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt?” And He said, “Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.” And Moshe said to God, “Behold, when I come to *Bnei Yisrael*, and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they shall say to me, ‘What is His Name?’ – what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moshe, “*Ehe-yeh asher Ehe-yeh*,” and He said, “Thus shall you say to *Bnei Yisrael*: *Ehe-yeh* has sent me to you; this is My Name for ever, and this is My memorial to all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, ‘The Lord (Y-H-V-H) God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak, and of Yaakov, has appeared to me, saying: I have surely remembered you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt...’” (*Shemot* 3:4-16)

Over the course of this dialogue Moshe raises various different arguments and problems, and he receives answers to each of them. However, God’s response in the matter of His Name is not only obscure, but also difficult to reconcile with reality. First, God answers him with a new Name – *Ehe-yeh asher Ehe-yeh* – whose meaning is unclear. Second, immediately thereafter, God tells Moshe exactly what to say to *Bnei Yisrael* – and here He identifies Himself with the Name Y-H-V-H, seemingly going against what He told Moshe just a moment before!

c. “*Ehe-yeh asher Ehe-yeh*”

Among the commentators we find two main approaches to understanding this Name. Some opinions propose that this is not actually a Divine Name in its own right, but rather an allusion to the Tetragrammaton:²

“*Ehe-ye asher Ehe-ye*” – the first [*Ehe-yeh*] is a Name, while the second [*Ehe-yeh*] is the meaning of the Name. In other words, [God says,] “My Name is *Ehe-yeh* [literally, “I shall be”], because I shall be and shall exist forever and ever without end, and I shall be with

² As suggested by the Targum Yonatan and Targum Yerushalmi.

them and redeem them from the affliction of Egypt.” And this Name, **a reference to the Tetragrammaton**, was conveyed by Yaakov to his sons, as it is written, “And the Lord (Y-H-V-H) will be with you and bring you back...” – so when someone comes and tells you of the imminent redemption from Egypt using the Name Y-H-V-H, making mention of God’s remembrance [*pekida*, a reference to the expression “*pakod yifkod*,” *Bereishit* 50:24], believe what he says. And so it was: When Moshe and Aharon came and mentioned **this Name, the Tetragrammaton**, immediately “the people believed, [and when they heard] that the Lord had remembered (*pakad*) the Children of Israel...” (*Shemot* 4:31).” (Chizkuni 3:14)

If we adopt this approach, then the fact that after stating the Name *Ehe-yeh* God immediately goes on to identify Himself by the Tetragrammaton in the following verses ceases to present a textual difficulty; instead, it proves the argument. The proof that *Ehe-yeh asher Ehe-yeh* alludes to the Tetragrammaton is the fact that God uses this Name immediately afterwards.

Other commentators accept the plain meaning of the text, which suggests that *Ehe-yeh asher Ehe-yeh* is a Name in its own right:

[God says, as it were,] If you do not know My Name, I tell you that My Name is “*Ehe-yeh* [I shall be] forever,” and I have the power to carry out that which I promise, and hence I tell you that My Name is *Ehe-yeh*. (Rashbam, ad loc.)³

This interpretation presents a number of difficulties. First, as noted, it fails to explain why God reverts to the Tetragrammaton immediately afterwards. Second, at no point later in the narrative do we find Moshe speaking to *Bnei Yisrael* about God and using the Name *Ehe-yeh*.

Following this exchange, Moshe continues to raise doubts as to the viability of his mission (“But, behold, they will not believe me...”; “I am not an eloquent man...”). Apparently, he has received an answer to his previous questions – but to the reader, the meaning of God’s response is not at all clear.

d. “Why do you ask thus about my name?”

On two different occasions of an encounter between a man and an angel, we find a request to know the angel’s name, and in both instances the request is denied.

1. At the conclusion of Yaakov’s struggle with the mysterious man who appears and wrestles with him all night, we read:

And Yakaov asked and he said, “Tell me, I pray you,

³ Rashi cites the *midrash*: “I shall be (*Ehe-yeh*) with them in this trouble just as I shall be (*asher Ehe-yeh*) with them in subjugation to other kingdoms” (Rashi, ad loc.). Ramban, however, understands the *midrash* as teaching that God rejects the need for His Name to be revealed: “But the Holy One, blessed be He, answered, ‘Why should they ask My Name? They have no need for any further proof, for I shall be with them in all their trouble; they shall call to Me and I shall answer them’” (Ramban, ad loc.). See also the continuation of our discussion below.

your name.” And he said, “Why do you ask my name?” And he blessed him there. (*Bereishit* 32:30)

2. At the conclusion of the dialogue between Manoach and the man of God, who turns out to be an angel, we read:

And Manoach said to the angel of God, “What is your name, that when you sayings come to pass we might do you honor?” And the angel of the Lord said to him, “Why do you ask thus about my name, seeing it is hidden?” (*Shoftim* 13:17-18)

Thus, we see that the angels refuse to give their names. Although these are only angels, this background may help to point our discussion in the right direction.

In the second instance, Manoach offers a reason for his request. He asks for the name of the man before him so that he will be able to thank him when his words come to pass. After they go their separate ways following this exchange, the man will disappear among the people in the area, and Manoach needs his name in order to identify him and know that it was specifically this “man” and no other who brought the news of the son that was to be born to him.

Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that the angel refuses to give his name. The angel is merely an agent, a vehicle like many others. He has no power of his own, and therefore is not deserving of thanks. This being the case, it is appropriate that the angel remain anonymous; there is no need for his name to be specified.

Now let us try to apply this understanding to Moshe’s quest to know God’s Name. In light of the above, we might argue that the very request to know God’s Name is improper. Specifically because a name is meant to identify its owner, the declaration of God as sole Creator of all that exists renders the need to name Him redundant. There is no need to identify Him and distinguish Him from the multitude of earthly gods, since He is the only God.

Before trying to understand God’s identification by the Name *Ehe-yeh*, let us look back to the verses preceding Moshe’s question:

And Moshe said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt?” And He said, “**Certainly I will be with you (*Ehe-yeh imakh*)**, and this shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.” And Moshe said to God, “Behold, when I come to *Bnei Yisrael*, and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers, has sent me to you,’ and they shall say to me, ‘What is His Name?’ – what shall I say to them?” **And God (*Elokim*) said to Moshe, “*Ehe-yeh asher Ehe-yeh*,”** and He said, “Thus shall you say to *Bnei Yisrael*: ‘***Ehe-ye has sent me to you...***’” (*Shemot* 3:12-15)

Attention should be paid to the fact that the Name *Ehe-yeh* is not a new invention that appears here for the first time; rather, it is a quote from God’s answer to Moshe in the context of Moshe’s preceding attempt to evade his mission.

Against this background, we might propose a different way of understanding God's next answer about the Name *Ehe-yeh*.

To my mind, it seems that this time it is God Who "evades" Moshe's question ("...When I come to *Bnei Yisrael*, and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they shall say to me, 'What is His Name?' – what shall I say to them?"). God gives an "off-hand" answer that clearly points back to His previous words. His answer seems to indicate that the question is out of place; it has no relevance, or no legitimacy. If and when *Bnei Yisrael* ask God's Name, they will need to know no more than what has already been said: that God "will be with them."

If this is the case, then God never intended *Ehe-yeh* as a way of identifying Himself; rather, it is meant as a way of telling Moshe that his question is out of line. It then makes sense that Moshe indeed makes no use of this Name later on.

e. "... and they say to me, 'What is His Name?'"

When God first reveals Himself to Moshe at the burning bush, Moshe does not ask to know the Name of God, Who presents Himself as the God of his forefathers:

And He said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Yitzchak and the God of Yaakov." And Moshe hid his face, for he feared to look upon God. (*Shemot* 3:6)

In keeping with our discussion above, there is indeed no place for asking the Name of the one and only Creator. Later on, however, Moshe raises this question and the need for an answer in anticipation of this request on the part of the nation, to whom he is being dispatched:

And Moshe said to God, "Behold, when I come to *Bnei Yisrael* and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you', and they say to me, 'What is His Name?' – what shall I tell them?" (*Shemot* 3:13)

Apparently, Moshe felt that after hundreds of years spent in the midst of Egyptian society, the nation might best be approached with some strategy that would sit well with Egyptian culture. Since the pagan culture is full of different gods, the struggle must be waged using the language with which *Bnei Yisrael* have become familiar. In this way, there may be a better chance of inculcating the message in the nation's Egyptian-influenced consciousness, and thereby strengthening their faith in the process. To this end, Moshe suggests, there must be a Name for the God in Whose Name *Bnei Yisrael* must be freed.

But God rejects Moshe's approach and brushes him off with a non-answer. The message underlying God's response to Moshe ("Thus shall you say to *Bnei Yisrael*: '*Ehe-yeh* has sent me to you...") is that the nation must focus on faith in God and must cleave to Him, and in that way everything will work out.

Accordingly, God directs Moshe to identify Him as the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists⁴ – a concept quite

⁴ God uses His Name in the chapters that follow in introducing and concluding His words: "I am the Lord...." This might be compared to a

foreign to Egyptian culture.

f. "I do not know the Lord"

And Moshe and Aharon went and gathered together all the elders of *Bnei Yisrael*, and Aharon spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moshe, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. **And the people believed;** and when they heard that the Lord had remembered *Bnei Yisrael* and that He had looked upon their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshipped. (*Shemot* 4:29-31)

Moshe's concern turns out to have been unfounded. The people believe him and accept his message about the imminent redemption, sufficing with his announcement using the Tetragrammaton.

At the same time, there is support for Moshe's earlier concern from an unexpected source. Encouraged by their success with the people, Moshe and Aharon enter to speak to Pharaoh. As expected, he is neither accommodating nor obliging. However, the formulation of his response is important for our discussion:

And afterwards Moshe and Aharon went in, and told Pharaoh, "So says the Lord God of Israel: Let My people go, that they might hold a feast to Me in the wilderness." And Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let *Bnei Yisrael* go? **I do not know the Lord**, nor will I let Israel go." And they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us; let us go, we pray you, three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." (*Shemot* 5:1-3)

Pharaoh attacks the very foundation of their submission.⁵ The essence of the God in Whose Name these representatives of *Bnei Yisrael* make their appeal is not clear to him. Pharaoh does not recognize Him:

"I do not know the Lord" – I do not know of any being that brings another into existence *ex nihilo*. (*Seforno*, ad loc.)

Note that immediately after Pharaoh's statement, Moshe and Aharon take a different approach, presenting God anew, this time as "the God of the Hebrews". Nevertheless, the whole matter is already painted in negative colors as far as Pharaoh is concerned, and the practical results are disastrous for *Bnei Yisrael*:

And Pharaoh the same day commanded the taskmasters of the people and their officers, saying,

person who signs his declarations, showing that he stands behind them. However, this is a form of identification that God Himself initiates; the desire to identify the Creator from the human perspective has a different meaning, as we have seen. A person may address God using a Name with which God Himself has "signed," as it were, and yet the request to know His Name is still out of place.

⁵ In the *midrashim*, Pharaoh's response is interpreted, in keeping with our discussion above, in terms of the pagan reality of Egypt: "I do not know the Lord" – I have reviewed all the names of the gods, and have not found one whose name was Y-H-V-H" (Sekhel Tov, *Shemot* 5:2).

"You shall no more give the people straw to make bricks, as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. And the quantity of the bricks, which they made heretofore, you shall lay upon them; you shall not diminish anything of it. For they are idle, therefore they cry, saying, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' Let more work be laid upon the men, that they may labor in it, and let them pay no heed to vain words." (*Shemot* 5:6-9)

In a chain reaction, the success that Moshe has managed to achieve thus far is erased, and he finds himself attacked by his brethren:

And they met Moshe and Aharon, who stood in the way, as they came out from Pharaoh. And they said to them, "The Lord look upon you and judge, because you have made us abhorrent in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us." (*Shemot* 5:20-21)

In anguish, Moshe turns to God and expresses his pain at this turn of events. Close attention should be paid to his complaint:

And Moshe returned to the Lord and said, "Lord, why have You dealt ill with this people? Why is it that You have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh **to speak in Your Name**, he has done evil to this people; nor have You delivered Your people at all." (*5:22-23*)

Moshe hints here to his earlier "argument" with God, which had been left unresolved. He had asked God to identify Himself by a Name that could be grasped by people living in Egyptian society, but his request had been refused. And while God's approach had worked among *Bnei Yisrael*, it had failed in the critical encounter with Pharaoh. Ultimately, this sticking point has ruined the whole endeavor, causing even *Bnei Yisrael* to lose faith.

Now it is clear why God speaks of His Names in His response to Moshe, justifying and explaining the situation.

g. **"But by My Name, Y-H-V –H, I was not known to them"**

And God (*Elokim*) spoke to Moshe, and said to him, "**I am the Lord** (Y-H-V-H); and I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov by the Name of God Almighty (*El Sha-dai*), **by My Name, Y-H-V-H, I was not known to them**. And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Cana'an, the land of their sojournings, in which they sojourned. And I have also heard the groaning of *Bnei Yisrael*, kept in bondage by Egypt, and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore, say to *Bnei Yisrael*: **I am the Lord** (Y-H-V-H), and I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and deliver you out of their bondage, and redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be your God, **and you shall know that I am the Lord** your God Who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, and I will give it to you for a heritage; **I am the Lord**." (*Shemot* 6:2-8).

For the purposes of our discussion here we need not dwell on the difference between the Tetragrammaton ("the Lord" – Y-H-V-H) and "*Elokim*" ("God"). The message God is conveying is that although He had revealed Himself to the forefathers by a different Name, in the context of this redemption He deliberately chooses the Name Y-H-V-H, and so it will continue until the entire process reaches its proper conclusion.

Further on, God emphasizes the importance of inculcating the Name in the consciousness of the people even at this early stage:

"And you shall know that I am the Lord your God Who brings You out from under the burdens of Egypt." (*Shemot* 6:7)

Perhaps Pharaoh's puzzlement upon hearing this Name is the best expression of the need to disseminate God's Name in the world.⁶ This Name indicates a new concept of the relations between God and His creatures. As *Am Yisrael* take their first steps as a nation, God takes the opportunity to direct and guide His world in this special relationship.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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⁶ In the *midrash* cited above, Moshe's response to Pharaoh is: "What business would a Kohen have in a graveyard? And what business does a king have in a slaughterhouse?" *Chazal* hereby express the idea that a whole new chapter is beginning in the relations between man and God.