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Parshat Va'era: What Does It Mean To Be A God?

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Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class

There is a striking moment as God sends Moshe to speak to Pharaoh, in which God tells Moshe (Shemot 7:1), "See, I have made you a God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother will be your prophet." It is a strange moment; what does it mean that God made Moshe a god to Pharaoh?

If we examine the narrative of this week's portion, and those following, we see that the Torah is explaining something about the nature of just rule. The narrative of the exodus sets up opposing views for us of what it means to wield power. Pharaoh's view of the world leads him to believe that power is its own justification, but the Torah teaches us that power must ultimately be used in service of justice.

Pharaoh believes himself to be a god. In Ezekiel (29:3), Pharaoh's practice of walking out to the river every morning is described as "Pharaoh King of Egypt, the great crocodile that lies in the midst of his rivers that said: 'My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself.'" The prophet paints Pharaoh as seeing himself as the reptile-god, the divine source of mystery and power that rules over the lives of people as the Nile, in whom the fate of Egypt rests. Thus Pharaoh believes that, as divine, he has the right to exert power without question, and his whims are to be obeyed. He has placed himself above other mortals, and equated his power with God's. He is the ultimate and absolute ruler. His power comes from his position and his ability to coerce others at every moment.

Our God does not behave this way.

Within the first two verses of our portion, we encounter three different ways to refer to God, "Elohim," "El Shaddai," and "Adonai." The midrash explains them (Shemot Rabbah 3:6), "'God (Elohim) said to Moses: ' You wish to know My name. Well, I am called according to My work; sometimes I am called "El Shaddai", "Tzvaot", "Elohim", "Adonai". When I am judging people, I am called "Elohim", ' and when I am waging war against the wicked, I am called "Tzvaot (Lord of Hosts) ¹". When I suspend judgment for a person's sins, I am called "El Shadday " (Almighty God), and when I am merciful towards My world, I am called "Adonai"², for "Adonai" refers to the Attribute of Mercy, as it is said: The Lord, the Lord (Adonai, Adonai), God, merciful and gracious (ib. 34: 6). Hence I AM THAT I AM in virtue of My deeds.' "Each of the names of God spelled out in the midrash reinforce that God's power is wielded in service of justice and mercy.

When God sends Moshe to speak to Pharaoh, Moshe responds in anguish, "How can I make Pharaoh listen to me? I have this speech problem!" He points it out twice, noting the first time that even the Israelites can't be made to listen to him – so how can it go any better with Pharaoh?

In response, this is when God instructs him, "I have made you a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron will be your prophet." The word God uses for Moshe is "Elohim." This is not a careless choice: It is, in fact,

¹ I Sam. 15: 2, Isa. 12:14-15

² Gen. R. LI, 2

the same name for God with which we open this Torah portion. The very first verse states, “Elohim spoke to Moses and said to him, I am Adonai.”

Far from being capricious, God’s names reveal the importance God places on rule *of* law over rule *by* law. In contrast, God teaches that a ruler must exercise judgment. Pharaoh believes himself to be a god, so God sends Moshe to be an “Elohim to Pharaoh.” In doing so, he is sending both a rebuke not only to Pharaoh’s arrogance (“You think you’re a god? I’ll send a messenger to be a god over you”), but also to his exercise of arbitrary and unjust power.

But that’s not all God is doing: he is also sending a message to Moshe that humans, too, with God’s approval, are a source of judgment of the powerful.

It is not until the very end of Parshat Va’era that God’s message seems to start sinking in. After the plague of hail, Pharaoh admits for the first time (Shemot 9:27), “I sinned this time; God is just and I and my people are wicked.” He immediately reverts back when the hail stops, and now, for the first time, the Torah describes him as sinning (*Vayosef lachato* – “he added to his sin” (Shemot 9:34)).

Throughout the first seven plagues, he remains impervious to the understanding of what a ruler should be. He genuinely believes himself to be acting as a God-ruler should. Like many who rule with caprice, he rationalizes why he needs to oppress the Israelites – there are too many of them, they breed like rabbits; they might be a fifth column and join with our enemies at a time of war. But... in doing so he reveals his inner weakness.

But now, the aspect of judgment that Moshe was sent to wield has been absorbed – a little. Pharaoh finally understands that he has been judged and found wanting. God is just – and Pharaoh is not.



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