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Parshat Shemot: The God of Need, The God of Now

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Here we are at the beginning of a new year, at the beginning of a new book of the Torah and a new chapter in the life of *B'nei Yisrael*. *Parshat Shemot*, vast in the scope of its time horizon, both describes the Israelite descent into slavery in Egypt and lays the seeds for the redemption from this captivity. A new Pharaoh rises to power over a new, growing generation of Israelites. Fearing them, he oppresses them. Moshe is born, raised, morally enraged, and self-exiled, all within two chapters. By the third chapter, God appears to Moshe and charges him to save the Israelites from their cruel captivity. What follows tracks what happens when God tries to re-enter lives, both personal and national, after a period of absence.

God reveals Godself to Moshe in the iconic image of the burning bush.

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the thorn bush, and behold, the thorn bush was burning with fire, but the thorn bush was not being consumed. (Exodus 3:2)

וַיֵּרָא מֵלָאךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלֶבֶת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ
הַסִּנֵּה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסִּנֵּה בֹעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּנֵּה
אֵינְנוֹ אֹכֵל: (שמות ג:ב)

The symbolism is rich and resonant. The medium is the message. As the midrash spells out, invoking Psalms 91:15, "עמו אנכי בצרה" - I am with him in distress." God is close to the Jewish people in their pain and God will not be overcome by it. God's power, having now been sparked, will stay aflame. Alternatively, some see in this symbol a message to Moshe. You, as God's agent, must come close to the suffering of your people yet not be ravaged by it. You must confront it without getting consumed by it. Either way, God's self-disclosure to Moshe highlights that which calls Him into action, namely the suffering of the Jewish people.

Moshe's personal reaction to the voice of God is first to hide and then to question his worthiness to the task. But his reaction on behalf of his people is even more striking:

And Moses said to God, "Behold I come to the children of Israel, and I 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 say to them?" (Exodus 3:13)

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים הֲנֵה אֲנֹכִי בָא אֶל־בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי
אֵלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מִה־שְּׁמוֹ מָה אֵמַר אֲלֵהֶם:
(שמות ג:יג)

The people have been out of contact with God for so long that they simply have no frames of reference for who God is or might be in the world. Generations of slavery have stripped them of any spiritual awareness or historical consciousness or hopeful sense of possibility. Born into captivity, they lost the power to dream of alternative realities, to touch transcendence in any way. How, then, might they ever come to know God?

God said to Moses, "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh* (I will be what I will be)," and He said, "So shall you say to the children of Israel, '*Ehyeh* (I will be) has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר אָהֳרָה וַיֹּאמֶר
כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֱהִיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:
(שמות ג:יד)

It is difficult to see how this highly abstruse response answers this challenge.

Before unpacking the content of this statement, let us note one intriguing feature of the verse. There appear to be two separate claims made to Moshe: one an announcement of God's name; the other the name as it is to be communicated to the people. To Moshe, God ought to be known as *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, but to the people, the truncated form, *Ehyeh*, shall be used. Why?

The Talmud offers the following dialogue in explanation:

I am that I am. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Go and say to Israel: I was with you in this servitude, and I shall be with you in the servitude of the [other] kingdoms. He said to Him: Lord of the Universe, sufficient is the evil in the time thereof! Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Go and tell them: I AM has sent me unto you. (BT Berakhot 9b)

אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה. אָמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמֹשֶׁה: לַךְ אֲמֹר לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: אֲנִי הֵייתִי עִמָּכֶם בְּשַׁעְבֹד זֶה וְאֲנִי אֱהִיָּה עִמָּכֶם בְּשַׁעְבֹד מַלְכוּתוֹת. אָמַר לְפָנָיו: רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם! דִּיה לְצָרָה בְּשַׁעְתָּהּ. אָמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: לַךְ אֲמֹר לָהֶם (שְׁמוֹת ג') אֱהִיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם. (ברכות ט:)

Or, as Rashi more explicitly cites:

He [Moses] said before Him, "O Lord of the universe! Why should I mention to them another trouble? They have enough [problems] with this one." He said to him, "You have spoken well. So shall you say, etc."

אָמַר לְפָנָיו, רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, מָה אֲנִי מְזַכֵּיר לָהֶם צָרָה אַחֶרֶת, דִּינִים בְּצָרָה זוֹ. אָמַר לוֹ, יָפֵה אֲמַרְתָּ, "כִּי תֹאמַר וְגוֹמַר"

In the Talmudic imagination, between the two clauses of our verse (Ex. 3:14), Moshe taught God (whom he had only just met) a profound lesson about humanity. He taught God that there exists an important, necessary gap between who God is and who we need God to be.

When Moshe challenged God to define Godself for the Jewish people, God responded with a sweeping, abstract statement. "*Eheyeh asher eheyeh*." I am the God who transcends time; who made promises ages ago and will fulfill them in ages to come; who is with you now in your pain and will be with you too in your future troubles, for I am a fire that blazes, that will not burn out. I am a presence in history, a force in nature, a friend to your ancestors, and a guardian to your children. That and so very much more. But Moshe pleads to God: Stop. Stop with the lofty claims and the timeless pronouncements. Stop projecting future troubles and future salvations. Stay local. Stay real. Just be the God of here and now. That's what people can hear. That's what people crave. Not a majestic fire, but a humble hearth to keep them warm and shelter them anew. To save them from *this* challenge, *this* moment. And God concedes in what might be described as a second great act of *tzimtzum*, self-contraction. *Eheyeh*, the God of today's possibilities, not yesterday's or tomorrow's, is the God who might actually meet a people long starved of divinity and long bereft of hope.

It seems that Moshe's first great act of spiritual leadership was a rather subtle and subversive one. Upon meeting God, he turned around and helped God meet humanity. He did so by discerning and communicating which God the Jewish people needed to meet.

Moshe's charge to God is no less a charge to us to tolerate, even embrace, the gap that so often exists between heady theological speculations about who God might be and our own existential, soulful cravings for a God who already is. *Eheyeh asher eheyeh*, the God of all times, can continue to shine, but *Eheyeh*, the personal God of now, is the one who will keep us warm.



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