

PARASHAT VA'ERA

Exodus 6:2–9:35

Parashat Va'era begins with God saying to Moses: “*Va'era* . . . ‘And I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’” We are told of the relationship between God and the Jewish people and of the promise to give the Land of Israel to the people. God tells Moses that the time has come to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Moses is told that he should go before Pharaoh to ask that the Egyptian ruler allow the Israelites to depart. Twice Moses responds by saying that Pharaoh will not listen and apologetically explains that, because of a speech impediment, he is not the right person to represent the Jewish people. God answers by declaring that Moses’ brother, Aaron, will accompany him as the spokesman.

The two brothers appear before Pharaoh to request the freedom of their people, but Pharaoh refuses to liberate them. As a consequence, terrible plagues are set upon Egypt. The waters of the Nile are bloodied; then the land is filled with frogs and swarms of insects; then there is the death of Egyptian livestock; and later there is destructive hail. These plagues are sent to punish Pharaoh and to force him to free the Israelites.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Moses returns to Egypt and speaks to the Israelites. He tells them that God, who was called *El Shaddai*, meaning “God Almighty,” by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, appeared to him by the name *Yahveh* and instructed him to return to Egypt and say to the Israelites:

“I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. . . . I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. . . . I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession.”

When Moses shares God’s promise with the people, they reject it. Their spirits have been crushed by slavery.



God then tells Moses: "Go to Pharaoh and tell him to free the Israelites." Moses refuses, arguing that, if the Israelites would not listen to him, Pharaoh will also reject his request. He also reminds God of his speech impediment. God answers Moses by declaring that his brother, Aaron, would be his spokesman.

• 2 •

God also warns Moses that Pharaoh will not easily be convinced that he should free the Israelites. "I will harden Pharaoh's heart," God tells Moses. "I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people, the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with heavy punishments. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. . . ."

• 3 •

The first time Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh they follow God's direction, and Aaron magically turns his staff into a serpent. Pharaoh's magicians

respond by turning their staffs into serpents, but Aaron's serpent swallows theirs. Pharaoh's heart, however, is hard; he will not listen to their plea for the freedom of the Israelites.

So Aaron and Moses appear before Pharaoh a second time as he is finishing his morning swim in the Nile River. Speaking for God, Moses says to him: "Let My people go. Today I will turn the waters of the Nile into blood. All the fish will die. The stink will fill Egypt, and no one will be able to drink the water." Aaron waves his staff over the river, and everything God has predicted comes to pass. But, when Pharaoh's magicians perform the same act, Pharaoh's heart hardens once again.

Seven days later, God tells Moses to return to Pharaoh and threaten him with a plague of frogs unless he frees the Israelites. When Aaron waves his staff and brings the frogs, the Egyptian magicians also perform the same act. This time, however, Pharaoh tells Moses that, if God will remove the frogs, he will allow the Israelites to depart and worship God. But, when Moses removes the frogs, Pharaoh's heart once again hardens, and he refuses to free the Israelites.

God then instructs Moses to have Aaron strike the earth with his rod. When he does, Egypt is suddenly filled with lice. Afterwards, the Egyptian magicians try to produce lice, but they cannot. They say to Pharaoh, "This is the power of God," but Pharaoh's heart remains hard.

During the next days, Moses pleads with Pharaoh on behalf of God, but each time Pharaoh refuses to listen. God sends swarms of insects; then God kills off Egypt's livestock (horses, asses, camels, cattle, sheep). Afterwards, boils appear on the bodies of all Egyptians; then hail storms are sent. After each terrible event, Pharaoh seems to weaken. He promises to free the people, but then, quite suddenly, his heart hardens, and he refuses.

Speaking for God, Moses warns the Egyptian ruler: "Let My people go to worship Me. For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world."

THEMES

Parashat Va'era contains two important themes:

1. Different "names" for God.
2. The "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart.

PEREK ALEF: *Why So Many Names for One God?*

This Torah portion begins with a surprising statement. Using the name *Yahveh*, God speaks to Moses, telling him that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all called God by the name *El Shaddai* ("God Almighty"), but they did not know God by the name *Yahveh*. Why does the Torah use two names for one God?

While the question is logical, the fact is that the Torah uses many different names for God. For instance, earlier, as Moses speaks with God at the burning bush (Exodus 3), Moses inquires: "When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers [Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob] has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is God's name?' what shall I say to them?" God tells him to say "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*. Tell them '*Ehyeh* sent me to you.'"

Ehyeh: another view

Philosopher Hugo Bergmann writes that "*Ehyeh is an imperfect tense (I will be), and it teaches us that God is the 'yet to be perfected I.'*"

Commentators and Jewish philosophers have tried to unravel the meaning of the phrase *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*, just as they have sought to understand the meaning of *Yahveh* and all the other names for God found in the Torah. Since the Hebrew of *Ehyeh* translates into "I will be," many accept the translation "I will be what I will be" as the name for God. By comparison, the most likely Hebrew root for *Yahveh* is *hayah*, meaning "to be." Both *Yahveh* and *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* suggest that God is not a fixed thing, or person, or object of any kind known to human beings; God is rather an evolving, mysterious, dynamic power

that is always in the process of becoming more than what it was or is.

Jews believe that God can never be fully defined. All we can know are traces of God's wonder. We perceive hints of God in the beauty and order of nature, in the triumphs of justice and freedom in history, in the advance of human knowledge, or in the quest for love and peace by human beings. Nonetheless, Jewish tradition counsels great caution when it comes to speaking or writing about God.

For example, through the centuries, Jews were forbidden to say the word *Yahveh*. Instead, it was pronounced *Adonai*, which means "my Lord." Only once a year, on Yom Kippur, was the name used and then only by the High Priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. (*Yoma* 39b) Later, among some Jews, it became the custom to refer to God as *ha-Shem*, "the Name," and to write the word "God" with a hyphen, "G-d." In this way, referring to God was separated from the ordinary use of language and uplifted to the highest realm of honor.

Throughout the ages, many names for God other than *Yahveh*, *El Shaddai*, and *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* emerged within Jewish tradition. Within the Torah the oldest is *El*, which some scholars speculate means "the Most Powerful." Other names for God within the Torah include *El Elyon*, "the Highest God"; *El Olam*, "the Everlasting God"; *El Ro'i*, "God who sees me"; and *Eloha*, or its plural, *Elohim*, which are used over two thousand times in the Hebrew Bible and mean "God" or "gods."

The rabbis of the Talmud also developed a number of names for God. Among them were *ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*, "the Holy One, praised be He"; *Ribono shel Olam*, "Sovereign of the universe"; *ha-Rachaman*, "the Merciful One"; *ha-Makom*, "the Place"; *Shamayim*, "Heaven"; *Shechinah*, "Presence"; and *Avinu sheba-Shamayim*, "our Father in heaven." During the Middle Ages,

Jewish mystics who believed that no person could understand the dimensions of God's power called God the *Ein Sof*, "Without End."

What is clear is that, throughout Jewish history, various designations for God have emerged. Why? Why so many different names for *one* God?

Some modern commentators believe that the names used within the Torah actually identify various traditions within early biblical religion. For instance, all the stories that use the name *Yahveh*, or *Jehovah*, are grouped together and called the J documents; those using *Elohim* are called the E documents. Biblical scholar Richard Elliot Friedman suggests that the J documents were created by people living in the kingdom of ancient Judah while the E documents originated in the kingdom of Israel.

Friedman also points out that "E has much less than J about the world before Moses. E has no creation story, no Flood story, and relatively less on the patriarchs. But E has more than J on Moses." The emphasis in E on Moses, Friedman argues, has to do with those authors who traced their history to the liberation from Egypt. For them, the Exodus was the most important event in the history of the Jewish people. So they worked to combine the past as reported by the J tradition with that event. As a result, says Friedman, they were the first to combine the two names for God, *Yahveh* and *Elohim*, and to link them in the story of Moses asking God, "What is Your name?" (*Who Wrote the Bible?* Summit Books, New York, 1987, p. 83)

For other biblical interpreters the names for God are more than a means of identifying the origins of different Torah stories.



Sarna

The modern commentator Nahum Sarna explains that names for God in the Torah reveal the "character and nature"—the "makeup of the whole personality"—of God. As for the variety of names for God found in the Torah, Sarna reports that it was a common custom in the ancient Middle East for gods to have many names. Each name

provides another valuable insight into how biblical Jews thought about God. (*Exploring Exodus*, pp. 42–45, 50–52)

Sarna's view is close to the one advanced by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver. Silver says that "it was a common practice among ancient peoples to change the names of their deity or to add an additional one to indicate that the deity had assumed a new or an additional role." Since God was about to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, a new name, *Yahveh*, was announced to Moses. The new name, Silver speculates, means "accomplisher," or the "God who performs what is promised." God's new name would not only inspire confidence and hope in the hearts of the enslaved Israelites but would be a reminder to all Jews, after their liberation, that God had freed them from oppression. God's name foreshadowed what God was about to do.

The idea that names for God reveal what God does or will do was also held by Rabbi Abba ben Mammel, who lived in Tiberias during the third century. He claimed that God is called *Elohim* when making judgments about people and nations; *Tzevaot*, "Hosts," when making war against evildoers; *El Shaddai*, "God Almighty," when forgiving human beings for harming themselves and others; and *Adonai* when increasing compassion and love in the world. "God's names reveal God's deeds." In other words, just as the names we sometimes give to people identify their most important traits, so also with the names Jewish tradition has given to God. They identify God as a doer of justice, righteousness, compassion, and love. (*Midrash Rabbah* 3:6)



Peli

Modern commentator Pinchas Peli argues that the names for God serve a very valuable function. "Human beings are not capable of grasping the essence of God. All they are able to perceive is God's name, to wit, that side of God's being revealed to them through God's acts." For that reason, Peli says, the rabbis claim there are seventy names for God within the Hebrew Bible. God's

powers are so great, awesome, and mysterious that even seventy names are not enough to exhaust the number of ways we encounter God in our lives. Peli, however, concludes with a note of warning: "Even after we call God by all the names—the mystery of God's being is not lifted." ("Torah Today," *Va'era*, in the *Jerusalem Post*, January 18, 1985, p. 16)

Psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm also believes that the mystery of God is beyond human comprehension, but he offers a very different view of names for God in the Torah. Fromm believes that all names for God are forms of idolatry. God, he writes, "cannot be represented by any kind of image, neither by an image of sound—that is, a name—nor by an image of stone or wood." He suggests that the best translation of the answer God gives to Moses after he has asked "What is Your name?" is "My name is *Nameless*." In other words, names can be misleading, even dangerous if people assume that they are representations of the whole truth. God cannot be grasped or defined by a name. God is beyond all names, all designations, and definitions. (*You Shall Be as Gods*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1966, pp. 29–32)

As we can see, the issue of giving God names is a controversial one among Jewish commentators. Names help us express our understanding of God, our reverence for God. Yet all are agreed that no "name," however clever or beautiful, lofty or wise, can completely describe God's power or the mystery of God's presence in our lives. Names are merely human language, the tools we use to capture and express concepts, ideas, and meanings. God is beyond our "names," beyond the bounds of our wonder. No human being can depict in words or any other forms of expression the essence of God.

PEREK BET: The "Hardening" of Pharaoh's Heart

Our Torah portion presents us with a difficult question. Moses and Aaron come before Pharaoh. They ask that he allow the Israelites to leave Egypt. Pharaoh listens to their request but refuses to let the people go. Then a terrible plague is sent to punish Egypt and to force Pharaoh into changing

his mind. The same cycle is repeated ten times. Each time the Egyptian ruler seems to indicate that he is ready to say yes to the demand for freedom put forth by Aaron and Moses. Then, mysteriously, his "heart hardens," and he says no.

The difficult question is what the Torah means by "hardening of the heart." What happened to Pharaoh each time he was about to say yes and instead said no? Was God overriding the Egyptian ruler or playing with him like a puppet on strings? Or was Pharaoh freely making his own decisions?

Interpreters point out that the Torah mentions the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart a total of twenty times. The first ten have to do with the first five plagues, and in each case we are told that "Pharaoh hardened his heart." Clearly, it would seem that whatever is happening is being caused by Pharaoh. Yet the next ten references to the "hardened heart" are different. They occur with the last five plagues, and in each case we are told that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." Here it would seem that God, not Pharaoh, is in control and is bringing about the change in Pharaoh's heart. (Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, p. 64)

Ten plagues

The ten plagues are (1) blood in the Nile River; (2) frogs; (3) swarms of insects; (4) flies; (5) cattle disease; (6) boils; (7) hail; (8) locusts; (9) darkness; and (10) death of the firstborn.



Hirsch

One reading of our Torah text might be that God "hardened" Pharaoh's heart in order to demonstrate divine power over all creatures. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points out that the Torah uses three different Hebrew words to describe the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart. The first is *kashah*, meaning "to be hard altogether, to let everything pass over one without making any impression." The second is *kaved*, meaning "heavy." One can receive impressions, but there can be a big gap between the impression and the moment one lets oneself be guided by this impression. Finally, the

Torah uses the word *chazak*, meaning “firm,” consciously opposing any pliancy, any submission.

Hirsch argues that “Pharaoh’s coldness, his apathetic insensibility” was used by God so that “all subsequent ages could derive a knowledge and conviction of the Almightyness, the Presence, and the Direction of God in human history.” Never again, Hirsch says, would there be a “necessity for miracles.” In other words, God pulled the strings and directed the choices for the Egyptian ruler. God made his heart *kashah*, *kaved*, and *chazak* in order to demonstrate where the power and control really is!



Zugot

Centuries ago Rabbi Yochanan was troubled by an explanation similar to the one offered by Rabbi Hirsch. In contrast, he reasoned that if God is pulling all the strings, and Pharaoh has no free choice, then the Egyptian ruler could not be held responsible for his choices. That would mean that none of us is really free and that our choices between acts of love or hatred, caring or selfishness, justice or indifference are an illusion. “Is that what the Torah teaches us when it speaks of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart?” Rabbi Yochanan asked his brother-in-law who was his close friend and study companion, Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish.

Resh Lakish, as he was known, responded by explaining that God gave Pharaoh several opportunities to change his mind and allow the Israelites to leave Egypt. The plagues were warnings. God hoped that Pharaoh would repent and free the slaves. “Since God warned him five times and Pharaoh refused to pay any attention and continued to stiffen his heart, God told him, ‘I will now add more trouble to what you have made for yourself.’” That is what the Torah means when it says that “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” Pharaoh brought on the condition by his own stubbornness. (*Exodus Rabbah* 13:3)

Making choices

Resh Lakish taught: “If a person seeks to do evil, that person will find a way. If one seeks to do

good, to improve oneself, and to better one’s society, God will help.” (Shabbat 104a)

God does not predetermine whether a person shall be righteous or wicked; that is left to the free choice of each person. (Tanchuma, Pikude, 3)

Every time we disobey the voice of conscience, it becomes fainter and feebler, and the human heart becomes harder to reach and move. Judaism affirms the principle of free will. We are each the master of our own spirit. “One evil deed leads to another.” (Pirke Avot 4:2) And, conversely, “One good deed leads to another,” and we are that much more liberated from bondage. (Rabbi Hillel E. Silverman, From Week to Week, Hartmore House, New York, 1975, p. 57)



Rambam (Maimonides)

Moses Maimonides agrees with Resh Lakish emphasizing “that it was not God who forced Pharaoh to do evil to Israel”; the decision was his alone. Free will “is a fundamental principle of Judaism,” says Maimonides. “No one forces, preordains, or impels a person to act. People do as they wish to do. Each is absolutely free to perform any deed, be it bad or good.” Pharaoh made his choices, one after the other; as he made them, it became more difficult for him to reverse them. One bad choice led to the next and then to the next until his range of choices narrowed, and he could no longer turn back.

Modern psychologist Erich Fromm amplifies Maimonides’ view about the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Fromm writes that the Torah’s description presents “one of the most fundamental laws of human behavior. Every evil act tends to harden man’s heart, that is, to deaden it. Every good act tends to soften it, to make it more alive. The more man’s heart hardens, the less freedom he has to change; the more is he determined already by previous action. But there comes a point of no return, when man’s heart has become so hardened and so deadened that he has lost the

possibility of freedom, when he is forced to go on and on until the unavoidable end which is, in the last analysis, his own physical or spiritual destruction." (*You Shall Be as Gods*, p. 101)

So Pharaoh's first choices to continue persecuting and oppressing the Israelites ultimately led him to "a point of no return." He must have thought that "if I give in to their demands and do not stiffen my heart and rule them harshly, then both the Jews and the Egyptians will conclude that I am weak and will rebel." Trapped by fear of failure and unable to develop creative solutions to his problems, Pharaoh fell victim to his own bad decisions. In a tragic way, he chose the steep path and, once he was plunging down it, could not stop or save himself from crashing at the bottom.

One other view about this story of Pharaoh's hardening heart deserves consideration. A comment in the Midrash explains that "Pharaoh used to boast that he was a god." Certainly he had more power at his disposal than any other human being alive in his time. He ruled great armies equipped with weapons to slaughter and trample anyone who might rise against him. Through his taskmasters, he dictated the life or death of thousands of slaves building his cities, Pithom and Raamses. The author of the Midrash imagined that, because Pharaoh possessed the power of life and death over so many, the Egyptian ruler concluded that he was invincible. Nothing could defeat him or ruin his plans. (*Exodus Rabbah* 8:2)

The plagues against Pharaoh

Pharaoh was destroyed by ten plagues because he claimed to be a god. What did he say? "My Nile is my own, I made it for myself." (Ezekiel 29:3) As a consequence of Pharaoh's claim, God punished him with plagues. (Exodus Rabbah 8:2)



Leibowitz

The purpose of the plagues was educational—to instill acknowledgment of God in those who had refused to recognize God's power.

The purpose of our Torah portion is to "describe the relentless attempt to break Pharaoh's arrogant heart and teach him to "know the Lord." (Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Shemot, pp. 170-177)

Finally, it must be remembered that the entire story of the plagues is about a contest between the will of the Pharaoh and the will of the God whom only the Israelites recognized. . . . Consequently, the plagues, the ignoble defeat, and the ignominious end of the god-king constitute a saga that breathes contempt for Egyptian paganism. (Nahum M. Sarna, Exploring Exodus, p. 80)

Yet Pharaoh was defeated. All his armies and weapons were not enough to snuff out the will of freedom God had placed in the hearts of the Israelites. The more Pharaoh brutalized them, the stronger became their determination to be free. Each time he had a chance to stop the plagues and let them go, he hardened his heart. He thought he was battling with weak, beaten slaves. He could not understand that within them God had planted a yearning for liberation against which he was powerless.

Finally, according to those who related this *midrash*, God decided to teach Pharaoh, and all who would hear of him, a lesson. Now God would harden his heart. The Egyptian ruler, who had claimed to be a god and who had brought suffering to thousands, would be destroyed. God would reveal Pharaoh's weakness to all his people and demonstrate that the God of liberation ultimately wins every battle against oppression.

According to this version, the story of God and Pharaoh is not about whether human beings are free or not free to make good or bad choices. Rather, it is about the confrontation between those who claim to be god and God, between those who claim to rule the world and the liberating God of the world. It is the victory of the spiritual God, who wills freedom, justice, and the sacred equality of each human being, over the godlike Pharaoh, who must enslave and crush others to rule them.

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the miraculous plagues that are sent to destroy him are all meant to dramatize the power of the God of

freedom. Nothing, the Torah claims, neither hard-hearted Pharaoh nor any other ruler or institution, can stop God's will for human liberation. It is always triumphant. God wants us to be free!

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How might the various names for God in Jewish tradition help us to understand what Jews believe and do not believe about God and the origins of Torah? If you were creating new names for God today, what might some of them be? Make a list and explain each name you suggest.
2. Erich Fromm claims that "every evil act tends to harden man's heart, that is, to deaden it." Would you agree? Do we bring on our own stubbornness or do other people and stressful situations cause us to become insensitive and incapable of making balanced and just decisions? How was Pharaoh's heart "hardened" each time he changed his mind and refused to free the Israelites?