

SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING  
PARASHAH, SH'MOT

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As we complete the first week of our new decade, we read and ponder the first parashah of Exodus, called Shemot. Its opening sentence, "Vaele shemot bnai Yisrael" (these are the names of the sons of Israel), refers to the tribes descended from the sons of Jacob, who had become so numerous in the northeast section of Egypt called "Goshen" that the new Pharaoh considered them to be a threat to the security of Egypt.

Shemot is full of memorable scenes, including (1) the oppression of the Israelites by Pharaoh, (2) the birth of Moses, (3) his rescue from the papyrus reeds along the Nile by a royal princess, (4) his murder of an Egyptian man, who had been beating a Hebrew slave, (5) Moses' intervention in a fight between Hebrews, (6) his flight east to Midian (along the west coast of what is now Saudi Arabia), (7) his rescue of seven daughters of Reuel (Jethro), who had been watering their father's flock of sheep at a well and (8) Moses' decision to live with Reuel, to marry his daughter, Zippora, and to herd Reuel's sheep, much as Jacob had lived with Laban.

We then come upon one of the most memorable scenes in the Torah: As Moses drove Reuel's flock of sheep westward toward the pastures at Mount Horeb in what may have been the Sinai peninsula, he saw a bush that was burning, but was not consumed by the flames. Standing there alone in the wilderness, far from home, with only his sheep for company, Moses heard a voice, first identified as that of an angel, call to him from the bush, "Moses, Moses". Moses replied "Hineini", here I am, as Adam and Abraham had done before him. The voice then identified itself as the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. The voice then said

that God had come down to rescue “my people” from their sufferings at the hands of the Egyptians and that God would bring them to a good spacious land flowing with milk and honey, namely the land we now refer to as Israel. God concluded this declaration by saying, “Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall free My people, the Israelites from Egypt”.

Imagine the scene: Moses, who had murdered an Egyptian overseer, had fled Egyptian justice and been given refuge by a Midianite priest, standing under the hot sun of the Sinai, listening to a voice coming from a burning bush instructing him to ask Pharaoh to let his Hebrew slaves leave Egypt. Accepting such a task must have been beyond his imagination. If he returned to Egypt, Moses knew he could be arrested and convicted of murder. Even if he managed to avoid arrest, how could he hope to be admitted into Pharaoh’s presence to ask him to free God’s people. Moses also realized that he could not lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, unless he could first persuade the elders of the Israelite tribes to accept him as their leader in this momentous and unprecedented adventure.

Now Moses was not an uneducated shepherd. He had been raised and educated in Pharaoh’s palace and must have known the names of most of the gods worshiped by the Egyptian people, gods named Horus, Osiris, and the sun god, Ra, for example. He is also likely to have known the names of gods worshiped by Middle Eastern people like, El, Baal and Astarte.

So Moses asked God, “What is your name?” God replies, “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh”, a phrase that has been translated as “I am that I am” or better yet as “I will be what I will be”, This curious response is only the second gender neutral reference to God in the Torah compared with the consistent references to God in the Tanach as a male figure.

The first of the gender neutral references appears in the first creation story told in Genesis 1:27, which reads as follows: “So God created human beings in the divine image, creating them in the image of God, male and female.”

Although the Torah does not say so explicitly, God must have noted Moses’ confusion with God’s reply, because “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh” can hardly be considered God’s name. It is, rather, an obscure verbal phrase that may describe God’s essence, but can not be God’s name. Interestingly, Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh does not appear again in the Torah. That is why God immediately amends his reply to Moses’ question by instructing Moses to tell the elders that “the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob has sent me to you. This shall be my name forever, from generation to generation.”

You will note that God does not refer to him or herself as Elohim, yud, he, vov, he or by any of the usual honorifics that we persist in including in our liturgy, such as, “Adonai eloheinu melech haolom” (Lord, our God, king of eternity), melech malche hamelachim (king of kings) or avinu malkenu (our father, our king).

When Moses asked God 3200 years ago, “What is your name?”, God did not answer his question; but God said, “I will be with you”. And God gave Moses specific instructions as to how he should address Pharaoh; God helped him to perform magic tricks to impress Pharaoh and his court, created the ten events or plagues that broke Pharaoh’s will, parted the Red Sea to save the Israelites from the Egyptian army, entered into a covenant with “my people” at Sinai and protected Moses from marauders and challenges to his authority in the desert, until Moses and “my people”, as God called them, arrived in the land flowing with milk and honey that God had promised. So when Moses delivered his final oration recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy, he had come

to know God, because God had carried out all of the promises God had made to Moses and then some.

Whether God has carried out the promises that were exchanged at Sinai is still an open question, but we have learned that the God of our fathers and mothers can not be defined by name or described by attributes as other ancient people did the gods they worshiped, and that we, like Moses, can come to know the divine spirit that created the universe as we do God's mitzvot.

Moses met God that day at the burning bush. The rest is Torah.