

Parashat Va'eira ואֵרָא

Torah: Exodus 6:2–9:35

Haftarah: Ezekiel 28:25–29:21

God Will Be Known Through Relationship With Him

General Overview

Perhaps the most famous commentary written on the story of the Exodus is the Passover Haggadah. In the Haggadah we find that the whole Passover celebration (Seder) is divided into four parts and drinking a cup of wine marks off each section. This practice dates at least from the time of the Mishnah (about 200 CE) and probably as far back as the late Second Temple period. These cups of wine even have traditional names. According to the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud, the name for each cup is taken from our Torah portion this week, *Parashat Va'eira*.¹ Specifically, the names are derived from four main verbs found in Exodus 6:6–7:

I am the Lord, and *I shall take you out* from under the burdens of Egypt; *I shall rescue you* from their service, *I shall redeem you* with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. *I shall take you* to Me for a people and *I shall be a God* to you; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God (author's translation and italics).

Exposition

The outline for our commentary this week is based on those four verbs — and the other two verbs, not mentioned in the Passover Haggadah. It is a summary of all that the Lord began to do in this parasha in order to bring His people out from Egyptian slavery. Each point represented by these six verbs is expanded in the rest of the parasha.

- I. I Shall Take You Out — Sanctification
- II. I Shall Rescue You — Salvation
- III. I Shall Redeem You — Redemption
- IV. I Shall Take You to Me — Acceptance
- V. I Shall Be a God to You — Relationship
- VI. I Shall Bring You to the Land — Inheritance

In this excerpt from Parashat Va'eira, we will focus on sections from part 1 and 5.

I. I Shall Take You Out — Sanctification

A. *What's His Name?*

Parashat Va'eira opens with the Lord's response to Moshe's objections from the previous parasha. God demonstrated perfect patience in His dialogue with Moshe. It seems that what the Holy One did was to give Moshe an important task to perform, and all Moshe did was object to it. Here in the opening of this sidra, God put an end to Moshe's refusals by declaring conclusively to him Who it was with whom he was speaking.

God had already identified Himself once to Moshe (in chapter three) in a way in which He had never done before. Now in 6:2–4, God again is trying to communicate to him that if he will only understand who his Commissioner is, he need have no fear in doing what He says.

God told Moshe that He appeared to Abraham and Jacob under the name of El Shaddai. Now, He says, He is describing His name to Moshe as YHVH, יהוה, a name by which the patriarchs did not call Him. However, those who know the Torah realize that there is a problem. If we examine Genesis 15:7 and 28:13, we see that God had already referred to Himself as YHVH to Abraham and Jacob respectively. If that is true, then why would God tell Moshe that his forefathers did not know Him by that name?

There are, naturally, several explanations for this, but if we remember that a Semitic name signifies an attribute or attributes, then this passage becomes a little easier to understand. What the verse signifies is that one particular aspect of the Godhead was being revealed and that this particular attribute of the Divine had not, till then, been in evidence.²

What is that one particular aspect of God? It is that the Patriarchs knew God as great, mighty, and powerful. This is what is signified by the terms *El* (אֱל), *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים), and *El Shaddai* (אֱלֹשַׁדַּי), the three most common names for God in the Patriarchal accounts. The meaning of this is that they knew the Holy One as a God who *made* promises, but He never related to them as a God who *fulfilled* them. Thus, “The full impact of that name was not disclosed to them.” [the patriarchs]³

God gave some far reaching promises to the Patriarchs, but they were never brought to completion in their time. Now, as God sends Moshe and Aaron to confront Pharaoh, He is about to begin to bring to fulfilment some of those promises. Hence, He will now reveal the full extent of His name, YHVH, so that all can see that He is a God who loves those to whom He makes promises, and is merciful and faithful to bring those promises to pass. Let us now explore some of the things God intends to bring about.

V. I Shall Be a God to You — Relationship

The theme of the fourth promise of 6:6–7, divine marriage, naturally leads to the theme of the fifth one — divine relationship. God married His people so that He could grant them one of the most precious and sacred gifts of all, a personal relationship with Him.

This promise told Israel in Moshe’s day that what God desired for them was in stark contrast to what the Egyptians had from their gods. The Egyptians made idols, thinking that they could see or perhaps even touch their gods. Moreover, they might even have heard demons speak from their gods, but they lived in fear of them — as does anyone who lives in a false religious system. One thing they certainly did not possess was a personal relationship of goodness, love, grace, and joy with their gods.

This is what the Eternal One was promising to Israel. When He promised to be their God, quite probably, the average Israelite did not fully comprehend the impact of that statement. They had little to help them understand it or to help

them relate to it. God was about to lead them on an unforgettable adventure, teaching them what it means to be in a personal relationship with the Holy One.

When He promised to be their God, He did not mean it in the pagan sense that He would be the national god of their nation. Although there is a measure of truth to that, the Almighty meant it in a more profound way. God meant that He wanted to relate to each and every one of them in a personal and loving way, where they could speak to Him and receive answers from Him from His Word. God offers many of the dynamics that are present in a husband/wife relationship — the love, intimacy, exchange, service, benefits, growth, and more — in this personal relationship with Him.

The Pesach Seder ends with the drinking of the fourth cup. There is no fifth or sixth cup to represent these last two promises of 6:6–7, but, in a way the theme of the fourth cup paves the way for the theme of a fifth one. The drinking of the fourth cup follows discussion of the theme of Messiah's coming. This is a time when the Lord will be our God and we will be His people in the fullest sense. This will be the time when we will all enjoy the pleasures of His closest intimacy as our Bridegroom. This will be the ultimate joy. Joy is what wine symbolizes. Thus, the Seder concludes with praise to His glory and for the joy He gives us as His bride. The drinking of that fourth cup is a symbol of the joy. Perhaps in a Seder, we should include a fifth cup to help us celebrate that joy of an intimate personal relationship with the Holy One of Israel who promised to be our God.

¹ Mishnah Pesachim 10:1 (and 7:5) as well as the Jerusalem Talmud, according

² Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot*, Volume 1, 133.

³ F. C. Cook, ed. *Barnes Notes: Exodus to Esther*, 18.