

Parashat Vaera 5771, 2010:

Understanding the Name “Hashem”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The Master of the Universe has a variety of names including *Kale*, *Shakai*, Y-H-W-H (Hashem), and *Elokim* that are found throughout the *Tanach*. In the context of this week’s *parasha*, however, I would like to explore the meaning of the name “Y-H-W-H”. It appears a total of 47 times in *Sefer Bereishit*. A number of these instances take place in the context of G-d’s direct communication with the *Avot* (Patriarchs). Then, too, in Parashat Shemot, following Moshe’s request from the Almighty as to what he should tell *B’nai Yisrael* when they ask: “What is His name? What shall I say to them?” the Creator responds: “So shall you say to the children of Israel, ‘The L-rd G-d [Y-H-W-H] of your forefathers, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and this is how I should be mentioned in every generation.” (*Sefer Shemot* 3:13 and 15, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

Given the above, it is very difficult to understand one of the opening *pasukim* (verses) in our *parasha*: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob with [the name] Almighty G-d (*Kale Shakai*), but [with] My name Y-H-W-H [Hashem], I did not become known to them.” (*Sefer Shemot* 6:3) This appears to be a blatant contradiction: Either G-d appeared to the *Avot* as Y-H-W-H (Hashem) or He did not!

Rashi (1040-1105) explains this seeming inconsistency in the following manner:

It is not written here *lo hodaati*, “but My Name Y-H-W-H [*Hashem*] I did not make known to them,” but *lo nodaati*, “I did not become known.” [I.e.,] I was not recognized by them with My attribute of keeping faith, by dint of which My name is called Y-H-W-H [*Hashem*], [which means that I am] faithful to keep My words, for I made promises to them, but I did not fulfill [them while they were alive]. (*Sefer Shemot* 6:3)

Rashi notes that the terminology of the verse itself contains the solution to the above-noted perceived incongruity. While the *Avot* were well aware of the name Y-H-W-H, they had not yet witnessed the full power of this name, since G-d’s demonstrative actions as *Hashem* i.e., He who promises and fulfills, would take place in the future rather than in their time. As the celebrated Bible scholar Dr. Nechama Leibowitz *zatzal* (1905-1997) so beautifully explained:

[As a result of Rashi’s analysis] we can now understand what the Torah actually meant [when it stated: “... but [with] My name *Hashem*, I did not become known to them.”] *Hashem* promised promises to the *Avot*. He promised to them that the Land of Israel would be their children’s permanent possession – as of their time, however, the time of the fulfillment of this promise had not yet arrived. This, then, is what the Torah meant [in our verse.] That is to say that as of their time G-d had not fully revealed Himself to them as “*Hashem*,” – as “He who is faithful to fulfill His promises” and Who, as a result, is thereby called “*Hashem*.” (*Iunyim Chadashim b’Sefer Shemot*, page 99, translation and brackets my own)

The great Spanish exegete, Avraham Ibn Ezra (1092 –1167), presents an insightful resolution to our textual conundrum that essentially parallels that of Rashi. He, too, suggests that the *Avot* surely knew the name “Y-H-W-H,” since it is used throughout *Sefer Bereishit*. He labels this use of the name “*Hashem*” as the *shame etzem* (the proper name) aspect of this term. In other words, they certainly knew G-d by this title. They did not, however, know *Hashem* in a manner that was empirically based upon the complete fulfillment of His promised actions and deeds, since He had not yet carried them out. The Ibn Ezra calls this aspect of the name “*Hashem*” the *shame toar* (the adjectival

descriptive name). It specifically refers to G-d's name as manifested through His actions and as He who fulfills His promises. Rav Ibn Ezra places a great deal of emphasis on this newly revealed aspect of G-d's name. In fact, he suggests that the true purpose inherent in Moshe's agency was none other than: "... to make this name [Y-H-W-H, Hashem] known [to mankind]." (Ibn Ezra, *Sefer Shemot* 6:3) When viewed in this light, "Hashem" clearly carries the connotation of He who promises, and fulfills that which He promises. In sum, it was this new "persona" of G-d that Moshe now publicized to the Jewish people, and to the world.

In light of the interpretation of the name "Hashem" presented by both Rashi and Ibn Ezra, we may now ask another question: "Who was on a higher spiritual level? Was it the generation who left Egypt (the *Dor Hamidbar*), since they witnessed the wonders and miracles associated with the name "Hashem," or was it the *Avot* who did not know G-d in this manner?" At first blush, one might be tempted to suggest that the *Dor Hamidbar* was superior to the *Avot*, since G-d, as Hashem, demonstrated His power and glory to them on numerous occasions. The great Spanish Jewish physician, poet and philosopher, Rabbi Yehudah Halevi (1075-1141), however, took the polar opposite position, noting that G-d:

"... appeared unto Abraham . . . as *Kale Shakāi*" (*Sefer Shemot* 6:3), i.e. , in the way of power and dominion, as is said: "He let no man oppress them, and He reprov'd kings on their account" (*Sefer Tehillim* 105:14). He did not, however, perform any miracle for the patriarchs as He did for Moses, saying: "but [with] My name Y-H-W-H [Hashem], I did not become known to them." (*Sefer Shemot*, *ibid.*). This means by My name Y-H-W-H, since the letter bēth in *b'Kale Shakaiāi* refers to the former. The wonders done for Moses and the Israelites left no manner of doubt in their souls that the Creator of the world also created these things which He brought into existence immediately by His will, as the plagues of Egypt, the dividing of the Red Sea, the manna, the pillar of a cloud, and the like. The reason of this was not because they were higher than the Patriarchs, but because they were a multitude, and had nourished doubt in their souls, whereas the Patriarchs had fostered the utmost faith and purity of mind. If they had all their lives been pursued by misfortune, their faith in G-d would not have suffered. Therefore they required no signs.

(*Kitab al Khazari* 2:2, translated from the Arabic by Hartwig Hirschfeld, underlining and emendations my own)

In sum, the *Avot* were on a far higher spiritual level than the *Dor Hamidbar*. They had perfect and unquestioned faith in G-d in all of His manifestations, even if they did not personally experience each of them. As Rabbi Yehudah Halevi states: “the Patriarchs had fostered the utmost faith and purity of mind” to the extent that even “if they had all their lives been pursued by misfortune, their faith in G-d would not have suffered.” In contrast, the *Dor Hamidbar* needed to see unmistakable demonstrations of Hashem’s power, as expressed in the 10 Plagues, the Splitting of the Red Sea, and the manna – to name just a few of the miracles G-d did for them - since “they were a multitude, and had nourished doubt in their souls.”

We are citizens of a frequently anti-religious modern Western society. Unlike the *Dor Hamidbar*, however, we do not witness explicit miracles wherein G-d temporarily suspends the Laws of Nature in an unmatched display of His divine power. Therefore, in order to remain strong and grow in our *emunah* (faith) and *bitachon* (belief) in G-d, we must emulate our *Avot* and *Emahot* (Matriarchs) and strive to see G-d’s “hand” writ large in all aspects of daily living. Then, too, we must ever be sensitive to the Almighty’s “gentle touch” upon our shoulder, particularly when we engage in Torah study, *tefilah* (prayer), and *gemilut chasadim* (acts of loving-kindness toward our fellow Jews). Thus, like the *Avot* and *Emahot*, to paraphrase Eliyahu’s experience in *Sefer Melachim* I: 19:12, we must learn to sense G-d’s presence in the “still small sound,” rather than through supernatural and miraculous manifestations of His power. May Hashem give us the strength and wisdom to do so, and may it be His will (*v’chane yihi ratzon*).

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdb718@gmail.com.