

PARSHAS SHEMOS - ONLY WHAT YOU UNDERSTAND

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Only What You Understand¹

So shall you say to the Bnei Yisrael: "Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers, the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchok, and the G-d of Yaakov has sent me to you. This is my Name forever, and this is My remembrance from generation to generation.

Did the Bnei Yisrael need a review lesson about their lineage? What was it about the word "forefathers" that was not entirely clear? Did they need to be told that their avos were Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov?

Think again. As Moshe readied himself to present Hashem's calling card to the Jewish people, he could point to two distinct kinds of Divine providence that had manifested itself in their past.

One kind of providence was common to all of the Jewish founding fathers. Constant and ubiquitous, it responded to their each and every need. It operated quietly and without fanfare, accomplishing what needed to be done without causing any great commotion. Because it was common to all of the avos, it was a providence "of...[the] forefathers."

A different variety of providence extended special treatment to each of the avos individually. It was specific to each av, and to him alone. It knew no boundaries or limits. When it acted, it often disregarded the familiar constraints of Nature. It responded to the special spiritual quality of each av. Thus, Avraham saw miraculous Divine assistance in overcoming his enemies. He deserved it in the merit of his superhuman efforts in studying Torah, i.e. plumbing the ways of G-d to the fullest, even without the help of a human teacher. Yitzchok's material needs were supported by miraculous assistance, because he was a specialist in avodah. The quality and depth of our prayer determine Hashem's responsiveness to our material needs. Yaakov exerted himself in the ways of peace, by doing chesed to those close to him, while seeking peaceful coexistence with those distant from him. His great accomplishments were rewarded by Hashem providentially - and sometimes miraculously - allowing him to survive in peace, even with those who despised him.

All three of these areas were important, more or less, to each of the avos. Yet, outside of their individual specialty need, G-d provided for the other two requirements quietly, without miracles. Thus, looking at the totality of their needs, we can see a common thread. Hashem took care of all of

them, of "the forefathers" in general, albeit in a manner that did not scream out His presence. His role could be detected only in retrospect, in the overall pattern. Besides this, He showed Himself openly and dramatically - in a manner that called attention to His presence - in specific incidents in the lives of individual avos. He showed himself at some times to be the G-d of Avraham, at others the G-d of Yitzchok, and at yet others the G-d of Yaakov.

The general, quiet providence shown to all of them operates all the time - "forever." The moments of dramatic and miraculous intervention come only from "generation to generation" - i.e. at specific times, here and there in history.

The Gemara^[2] finds in our pasuk a directive to change the pronunciation of Hashem's Four Letter Name. Instead of pronouncing it as it is actually written, we substitute the Name of Adnus. While it may be difficult to see how this derives from our verse (other than the fact that the word le-olam/forever can also be vowelized as le-alem/to hide), our development above shows why this halacha follows from the meaning of the text.

According to what we said, the last part of the verse speaks of two different kinds of Providence, one constant but relatively hidden, the other manifest and dramatic, but displayed only from time to time. These two ways that Hashem relates to His world are signified by two of His Names. The four-letter Name of Being telescopes the words for was, is, and will be. It relates the constancy of Hashem's empowering the world as its only Source and its only Leader. The other Name, that of Adnus, literally translates as "my Master." This Name expresses Hashem's role as complete and ultimate Master of everything in creation. As their true Master, He can do whatever He wants to do with them, and indeed sometimes reverses the rules that He set up to govern them. In other words, He is free to sometimes perform overt miracles with them.

We understand the truth of the first Name of G-d, but we cannot say that we can relate to it as part of our personal, limited experience. The Name of Adnus is a different. When its power is displayed - when we experience it directly - we are shaken to the core.

Why do we use the second Name as a substitute for the first? Because we are instructed never to directly praise Hashem in davening and in our berachos with praises that we do not fully comprehend! (Doniel and Ezra would not use the praises gadol and norah in their davening, according to the gemara^[3] because they could not fully comprehend Hashem's greatness and awesomeness in those dark times. They certainly believed that He was great and awesome, but that was not sufficient for them. If they could not wrap their minds around a concept, they refused to make use of it in their davening.)

For this reason, Chazal saw in our pasuk a directive to disguise the Four-Letter Name. When we refer to "Hashem, the G-d of our forefathers," we need to be circumspect. We fully believe in His constant Providence in all matters, but we cannot say that we understand it. We therefore "hide" the pronunciation of that Name, and substitute one with which we have experience, and thus

comprehend.

Chazal also find[4] in our pasuk a basis for the way we begin the Amidah: "Our G-d, and G-d of our fathers, the G-d of Avrohom, the G-d of Yitzchok, and the G-d of Yaakov." They noticed that the very next pasuk gives Moshe different words to offer the Jewish people to inform them of Hashem's readiness to assist them. What, then, was the purpose of our pasuk?

Chazal understood that Hashem showed Moshe how davening in all places and times should be conducted, before moving on to the needs that faced the Bnei Yisrael at that moment. Our pasuk introduces them to the structure of davening in general. It therefore includes a reference to the constant, unseen Providence of "G-d of our forefathers," as well as one to the specific areas of overt assistance that He offered each of the three avos. In this way, all the needs of Man are covered: war, sustenance, peace - whether by working within the constraints of Nature, or by miraculous intervention.

Our Amidah adds an element missing in our pasuk - the phrase "our G-d," preceding "G-d of our fathers." The pasuk does not contain this phrase. When Moshe stood before the Bnei Yisrael, prior to Hashem taking them out of bondage, they did not fully appreciate Hashem's role as their Protector and Leader, neither through direct experience nor through revelation and generations of study.

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1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Shemos 3:15, and Ha'amek Davar, Shemos 3:6
 2. Pesachim 50A
 3. Yoma 69B
 4. Mechilta, Bo 16
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