

PARSHAS VAERA - WORSE IS BETTER

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Worse is Better¹

Elokim spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am Hashem." I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchok, and to Yaakov as Kel Shakkai, but with My Name Hashem I did not make Myself known to them.

Moshe gets a good deal more than he bargained for, it would seem. We understand his doubts about a mission he never wanted. Always prepared to take up the cause of his people, Moshe had voiced his disappointment a few pesukim prior. "Why have you done evil to this people; why have you sent me?...You did not rescue Your people!"[2] We also note, however, that he received an answer sufficient for the question. "Now you will see what I shall do to Paroh..."[3] You think, Moshe, that something has gone terribly awry? Don't worry. I assure you that nothing has changed. You don't understand why things have taken a turn for the worse. That may be, but do you really need to understand? Surely humans need not understand what they cannot - the Mind of G-d. You will be glad to know that nothing we discussed has changed, and that the end of the ordeal is in sight.

That could have worked. Hashem, however, wanted to tell him more. Even if we did not know what events were about to occur, we could detect something profound and momentous in our pesukim, where three different Names of G-d are juggled in a single breath. Elokim speaks, telling Moshe that He is Hashem, the revelation of Whose nature is only now going to become a reality, having been hidden from the Avos who knew Him in the capacity of Kel Shakkai.

What do these three Names mean to us?

Elokim works in and through Nature. He is the invisible cause of all that is observable and visible. In the world of natural cause and effect, the predicament of the Jews was entirely unremarkable. The Egyptians were strong and immoral; the Jews small and powerless. That the former enslaved the latter is hardly surprising. Nothing, however, simply "happens." Behind all predictable phenomena is Elokim, the One Who masterminded all the conditions that produced their results. There was a reason that the Bnei Yisrael found themselves in such dire straits. (We will return later to examine it.) All that has happened was foreseen and coordinated by a Divine Will.

While the Name "Elokim" sufficed to explain the state of affairs current at the time of Moshe's conversation with Him, G-d advances the argument to the next rung. Something new will be added. He tells Moshe, "Ani Hashem." The four-letter Name combines the words for was, is, and will be. All Being is resident in Him. The new and unexpected are completely possible, because everything that

we think of as new exists within Him. Hashem tells Moshe that the rules are changing. From here on, He will display His Will independent of existing conditions. Predictions based on perceived causes and their effects would fail; anything would become possible.

This is a sea-change, Hashem goes on to say, because the Avos never saw such a manifestation of this aspect of Him. He related to them with the Name "Kel Shakkai," the G-d of sufficiency. When the Avos needed help, He was there to provide it, providing assistance proportionate and sufficient to the need, but keeping within certain bounds. From this point on, there would be no bounds, no limits.

Ironically, showing Himself to human beings to be the G-d Without Conditions required certain conditions! In them, Moshe is shown the answer to his question about the downward trajectory of the fortunes of the Bnei Yisrael.

This is what Hashem says to him. You are pained, Moshe, by the worsening treatment of the people. Have you noticed that this is nothing new, and that the history of the people almost from its beginning has been travelling on a downward slope? Avraham was received as a respected "prince of G-d" by those with whom he met. Two generations later, his grandson Yaakov was reduced to near-slavery in the house of Lavan. Even in Avraham's lifetime, things did not go according to "expectation." It would not have been difficult for Hashem to have granted Avraham a family much earlier in life than the age of one hundred. His children could have flourished from his tutelage, and thrived to become the beginning of a new nation.

This, though, would not have worked. The people that emerged from such a conventional background might have become a nation that served G-d, but not one in which G-d becomes revealed as the absolute Master and Source of all being! A people created by the same natural processes as created all other peoples would look to its own resources and power for its security. It would turn to spiritual endeavors only in the space allowed for it by small gaps in its materialism.

This was not G-d's plan for His people. He wanted that people to have no foundation and no recourse to their own power. Everything that they would have should come from Him, and be devoted to serving Him. Every aspect of their existence would point to Hashem.

Most importantly, this people would remind the world of the human gift of free choice. Any fundamental dependency on material factors would leave people with that much less freedom. Hashem wished to create a people whose existence and survival would point to transcending all dependency, all limitation. Their utter dependence upon G-d and G-d alone would point to the Source of full freedom of human will. G-d's absolute free choice would be the engine that drove theirs. The world would not be able to explain the latter without the former. Through the Jewish people, a humankind for whom freedom of will was lost and forgotten by being mired in the physical could once again remember it. Through them, the rest of the world would reclaim the freedom of will that is one of Man's most important gifts.

To make this work, the Jewish people could not develop like other nations did. It would have to

begin in abject need and vulnerability, looking at itself in despair and loathing. Bnei Yisrael would have to rebound from the abyss, from a place that others would regard as beyond hope. When life would stir in its almost lifeless corpse, all would recognize in it nothing less than the creative call of Hashem Himself. In Him, and Him alone, mankind could find freedom.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 6:2-3
 2. Shemos 5:22-23
 3. Shemos 6:1
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