

“How God introduced Himself to the Patriarchs”

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And God (**Elokim**) spoke to Moses, and He said to him: “I am **Y-K-V-K** (*Ha-Shem*). And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and Jacob as **KEl Shaddai**, but by My name **YKVK** I did not make Myself known to them” (Exodus 6:2-3).

Three problems present themselves here: First, in the opening verse, the Torah refers to God by one name (*Elokim*) and then proceeds to quote God, in direct speech, as referring to Himself by an entirely different name: the *Tetragrammaton* (‘four-letter word’: **Y-K-V-K**). Secondly, the relevance of the name (**K**)*El Shaddai* – by which God introduced Himself to the Patriarchs – to the context of God’s promise of the future deliverance of the Israelites (Ex. 6: 5-9). Thirdly, the validity of the statement that the name **Y-K-V-K** was not known to the Patriarchs, given that Abraham already called the place where God appeared to him at the *Akedah* by the name “**Y-K-V-K Yir’eh**” (Gen. 22:14)

Once again, Abraham employed the latter name when assuring his servant, Eliezer, that his mission to find a wife for Isaac would be heaven-blessed by “**Y-K-V-K**, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house” (24:7). Not surprisingly, his steward, Eliezer subsequently invoked that same name several times during his mission,¹ both when addressing God directly and when referring to Him in the

home of Laban while trying to persuade him to allow his sister, Rebekah, to leave to become the wife of Isaac.

Isaac also employed that name when explaining the significance of his having given the name Rechovot to the well he had dug: *Ki attah hirchiv Y-K-V-K lanu* (“For now Y-K-V-K has given us space”: 26:22). God also revealed Himself to Jacob by that same name at the scene of the latter’s famous dream of the ladder spanning heaven and earth (28:13), as did Jacob when describing his astonishment at the divine revelation he had witnessed in that dream (28:16).

All this begs the question of how God could have asserted that He was only known to the Patriarchs by the name *(K)El Shaddai*, and not by *Y-K-V-K*!

Many attempts have been made to resolve these problems. Rashi² links God’s opening statement with what was said shortly before: *Umeiaz ba’ti el Par’oh ledabber bish’mecha* (“For, since the time I came to Pharaoh to speak **in Your name** he has only dealt ill with this people”: Ex. 5:23).

Moses was not simply complaining that Pharaoh had disregarded his [Moses’] demand, but rather was expressing incredulity that this could have occurred, given that, in addressing Pharaoh, he had invoked **sh’mecha**, God’s name! Moses could not understand how the divine power invested in that name (the *Tetragrammaton*) – with its clear and

incontrovertible connotation of ‘It will be!’³ – could possibly have been countermanded.

In this context, we may note how Judaism perceives a name as representing the essence, character, and potential, vested in the person to whom it is attached. Hence the caution against naming one’s child after a wicked person lest his or her negative characteristics might be passed down to the child.⁴

Examples of the employment of names to convey perceived potential, essence, or characteristics are: (i) God bringing the animals to Adam to see what names he would give them (2:19-20); (ii) the extension of the name of Avram to Avraham (17:5) and Sarai to Sarah (v.15), to convey their universal influence; (iii) the (additional) name, Israel, bestowed on Jacob to mark his victory over the heavenly being in a human form, who wrestled with him (32:29), and (iv) the Egyptian name *Tzafnat Pa’ne’ach* (Gen.41:45) given to Joseph by Pharaoh.⁵

In this way, we understand God’s response to Moses’ plea for God to disclose to him – *et k’vod’cha* – “Your Glory” (Ex. 33:18), or essential nature. He tells Moses, “I will make all my goodness pass before you – *v’karatiy v’sheim YKVK lefanecha* – and I shall invoke the name of YKVK in your presence” (v.19). In other words, God promises to reveal to Moses the secret of the power contained in His name YKVK, namely His attribute of invincibility and the capacity to bring every aspect of His

Will to immediate fruition. YKVK is thus the equivalent of *yih'yeh*, 'It shall be!' 'It is a certainty!'

However, in the opening sentences of our sidrah, God sets out to teach Moses the lesson that even He, God, on occasions, feels constrained to suspend or delay the carrying out of His purpose. And this is the implication of the phrase, 'I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob *b'(K)El Shaddai* (Ex. 6:3).

Shaddai is a contraction of two words: The relative pronoun, *sheh*, 'The One who' [may content Himself) and *dai*, ('with that which is [merely] sufficient). Sufficiency connotes less than totality.

Moments earlier, Moses had criticized God for sending him on a fruitless mission to Pharaoh, to lighten the burden of the Israelites, the effect of which had been to make things worse for them (see Ex.5:1 – 23). Hence, in the opening sentences of our sidrah, God chides him for his impatience and advises him to emulate the Patriarchs to whom He had manifested Himself as *(K)El Shaddai*, the God who could offer no more than a long-to-be-delayed promise, one that had to be *dai*, 'sufficient for the moment,' but which would not be accomplished for centuries. In His relationship with the patriarchs, God could only act in His capacity as *Shaddai*, but not as YKVK, the One whose word and its fulfilment were inseparable.

The Torah employs two words for ‘speaking,’ *amar* and *dabbeir*. The former connotes gentle communication; the latter, a firm, even harsh, one. We can now understand why, in the opening words of our sidrah – *Vayyedaber Elokim* (v.2) – Rashi states, *dibber itto mishpat* - ‘God spoke reprovably to Moses since he had made so bold as to say, “Why have you done evil to this people?”’ This tone is reinforced by the use of the divine name, Elokim - which also bears the connotation of a disapproving God - rather than YKVK, One who is benign and well-disposed.

The sentence ends with the affirmation, *Vayyomer eilav ani YKVK* – ‘God said to him [Moses], “I am, indeed, YKVK” – the One by whose Word alone all things can be brought into being. Nothing has changed. I could have made Pharaoh acquiesce immediately had I been prepared to deprive him of his freedom. But, instead, I employed my attribute of *(K)El Shaddai*, ‘long-sufferance.’ The Patriarchs were prepared to accept that, and so must you!”

This is the import of the continuation, *Lachein emor livnei Yisrael Ani YKVK*. “Therefore, speak *gently* to the Israelites [telling them not to despair]. I remain YKVK [the God Who delivers on His promises], and I shall certainly bring them out, deliver them, save them, and bring them to the land” (6:6-8). Interpreted this way, the three problems we posed at the outset are all resolved.

NOTES

1. See 24: 12, 21, 26, 27 (x2), 35, 40, 42, 44, 48, 56
2. See Rashi on Ex. 6:2.
3. The incontrovertible nature of the tetragrammaton, Y-K-V-K, is conveyed by its identification with the word *yihyeh*, 'it shall be,' the imperfect tense of the verb *h-y-h*, 'to be.'
4. See Tal. *Yoma* 38b.
5. The abstruse name Tzofnat Pane'ach, bestowed on Joseph by Pharaoh, is consistently explained by the ancient Jewish translators (Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonatan) and medieval commentators (Rashi, Nachmanides, Rabbenu Bachya, *et al*) as 'revealer (or expounder) of that which was concealed' (The root *tz-f-n*, 'to hide,' will be recognised from the Haggadah ritual of *Tzafun*, 'hiding the Afikoman.'). This explanation was also borrowed by the 15th and 16th centuries Protestant Bible translations and was presumably a reference to Joseph's interpretations of the butler and baker's obscure dreams. This leaves problematic, however, the fact that no such name is found in Egyptian sources and that it is strange that the king would have invested him with a Hebrew name!

May all our hostages be speedily released.

Shalom al am Yisrael, v'al medinat Yisrael v'chayyaleha,

Shabbat shalom,

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