YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat VAERA**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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In memory of Albert W. and Evelyn G. Bloom,
who taught "Am Yisrael, Torat Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael" in deed and word.

Akiva and Shanen Werber and family

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**The Novelty of Divine Revelation by Way of the Tetragrammation**

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

*Parashat Vaera* opens with a solemn revelation, introduced by a verse that seems a bit obscure:

And God spoke to Moshe, and said to him: I am the Lord; and I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, as God Almighty [*Sha-da*i], but by My name the Lord [the Teragrammaton = Y-H-V-H] I made Me not known to them. And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, wherein they sojourned. And moreover, I have heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am the Lord… And Moshe spoke so to the children of Israel; but they hearkened not to Moshe for impatience of spirit, and for cruel bondage. (*Shemot* 6:2-9)

The declaration, "but by My name the Lord [the Tetragrammaton] I made Me not known to them," aroused great bewilderment among the commentators. Is it true that the patriarchs did not know the name of the Lord? But surely God revealed Himself to them by that name on many occasions. If so, what is the big innovation now?

In response to this difficulty, the commentators – including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and the Ramban – explained, each in his own way, that the reference here is to a type of governance that was now introduced for the people of Israel, which had not been known to the patriarchs.

What exactly was new? Some of the commentators turned to metaphysical analyses, but we will try to understand the novelty in a slightly different way, by first considering the point at which we stand in the story of leaving Egypt.

**“Neither Have You Delivered Your People at All”**

 The beginning of *Parashat Vaera* is the lowest point in the story. *Parashat Shemot* ends with the (apparently) complete failure of Moshe's mission to Pharaoh: not only did Pharaoh not listen to his words, but he increased the burden on the Hebrews. In response, the people turned to Moshe with complaints, and Moshe in turn appealed to God:

And they met Moshe and Aharon, who stood on the way, as they came forth from Pharaoh; and they said to them: The Lord look upon you, and judge; because you have made our savor to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us. And Moshe returned to the Lord, and said: Lord, why have You dealt ill with this people? why is it that You have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt ill with this people; neither have You delivered Your people at all. (*Shemot* 5:20-23)

The Midrash puts extremely difficult words into Moshe's mouth in two different formulations:[[1]](#footnote-1)

What is meant by "You have not delivered your people at all"? Rabbi Yishmael said: "You have not delivered your people at all" – certainly. Rabbi Akiva said: I know that you will eventually deliver them. But what do you care about those poor people crushed meanwhile under those buildings? (*Shemot Rabba* 5:22)

It is difficult to decide which statement is harsher: is it Rabbi Yishmael's statement, "Certainly You [cannot] deliver them," or is it Rabbi Akiva's statement, which essentially claims, "You *can* deliver, but You do not care about us." Either way, we are dealing here with acute distress that is reflected in a correspondingly sharp argument.

**“The Cry of the Children of Israel”**

In order to better understand the distress behind Moshe’s words, we must understand what actually happened in the Egyptian bondage.

The Torah tells us very little about the difficult years of slavery. The motives for the enslavement are also unclear: was it a security concern regarding the Hebrews, or was it economic exploitation, or was it perhaps antisemitism for its own sake? At the beginning of chapter 1, there seems to be a certain logic in the actions of the king of Egypt, who fears a future rebellion, but as the story continues, he seems to be overcome by an antisemitic frenzy for its own sake, so much so that *Chazal* interpret the verse: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river" (*Shemot* 1:22) as a command that all male infants – both Egyptian and Israelite – be killed, to ensure that none of the Israelite children would escape.

This change is also expressed in the name by which the Egyptian ruler is called. Initially, he is "the king of Egypt" (*Shemot* 1:15, 17, 18) – a reasonable ruler, acting for the benefit of his people. Later, however, he is "Pharaoh" (*Shemot* 1:22), the dictatorial monster whose hatred for the Hebrews wreaks havoc on his own people.

The story of Israel's slavery in Egypt can thus be seen as paralleling the suffering that our people underwent in Europe during the years of the Holocaust, or our suffering in the U.S.S.R. in the early 1960s: a great empire harnesses its forces in order to crush the people of Israel to the ground. This is a terrible and hopeless reality, because it is not clear how the servitude can end. It is not for nothing that the people are in total despair.

Their desperation was so great that it expressed itself in reluctance to have children. The text of the *Haggada* expounds the verses that describe the bondage, among them the verse: "And we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression" (*Devarim* 26:7). Each phrase in this verse is interpretated, including: "'And our toil [*amaleinu*]' – these are the children." The term "*amal*" in the Bible denotes not just any work, but rather futile work, as in the verse: "But man is born to toil" (*Iyov* 5:7). This is a striking description of the experience of the people of Israel in Egypt. Amram's decision to separate from his wife Yocheved (*Sota* 12a) seems to be a most natural and necessary step; why bring children into such a wretched and hopeless world?

In light of this, the interpretations of Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva are also very understandable. In such a terrible situation, it is impossible not to think, God forbid, that God is unable to save us from slavery, or even worse, God forbid, that He is able, but simply does not care.

**The Solution to Despair**

The religious solution required in such situations does not lie in philosophical-theological answers and proofs, concerning the understanding of the problem of evil in the world, or similar questions. The difficulty experienced by the people of Israel in Egypt was not intellectual, but emotional: How can one believe that God cares about us and is capable of saving us, when the situation is so gloomy and hopeless?

Matching this difficulty, the innovation Moshe is to announce is also not philosophical, but experiential. Without going into metaphysics, it may be argued that among all the various designations for God, the Tetragrammaton is unique in that it is not an adjective, but, so to speak, a "proper noun," which expresses personal closeness and connection. We are dealing here with a different – and new – experience of closeness to God, which did not exist earlier.

In the days of the patriarchs, the relationship with God was somewhat distant: God is in the sky, and they worship Him in on earth. Avraham recognized his Creator by discerning His greatness in His governance of nature, not by recognizing His personal relationship with human beings. But now God's mode of governance is changing: God is, literally, with us wherever we go, or as the Gemara says: "When they went down to Egypt, the *Shekhina* was with them" (*Megilla* 29a). There is a sense of connection and belonging that was not there before, one that will strengthen the ability of the people of Israel not to give in.

In addition to the sense of connection and belonging, God's new mode of governance includes another facet. At the burning bush, God says to Moshe:

Thus shall you say to the children of Israel: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov, has sent me to you; this is My name for ever, and this is My memorial to all generations. (*Shemot* 3:15)

The emphasis here is on the tradition of the patriarchs; the relationship between the people and God is not merely a matter of the present, but is based on a long shared past and will continue in the future. This is another point that allows the people to maintain their commitment and hope in God, as we saw among Holocaust survivors. People often decided not to assimilate, but to continue fighting for their Judaism, out of commitment to the great chain of generations – what was, and what will continue to be.

In conclusion, the revelation to Moshe specifically through the Tetragrammaton comes precisely at the peak of Israel's suffering, when even Moshe himself reached a point of desperation and cast harsh words up to God. At that moment of need, God promises that from now on, He will lead the people of Israel in a new way, through a direct and intimate connection with them, while at the same time emphasizing the tradition of the patriarchs. In this way, hope was planted in the hearts of the people.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Vaera* 5781.]

1. The Midrash continues with a long discussion of the question of what types of arguments can be cast up to God, and when, but that is not our present concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)