

TORAH
OF
Reconciliation

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VA'ERA נִרְאֶה

(Exodus 6:2-9:35)

Compassion Is Manifest amidst the Plagues

And God spoke to Moses, and said to him: "I am the Lord, and I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by My name YHWH I did not make Myself known to them."
(Exodus 6:2-3)

God is inscrutable. Yet the way God became manifest in relationship to the world could be known, however partially. Each Name of God was understood by later sages to refer to facets of the Divine as God was perceived. El Shaddai, "the Almighty," was understood to refer to the protective and powerful qualities of God. God had made dramatic promises of safety and destiny to the patriarchs and their families. Yet those promises were yet to materialize. The most essential Name of God (the four-letter Tetragrammaton) referred to divine kindness, compassion, and forgiveness and their fulfillment in real time.

At this juncture of history, God's compassion, symbolized by speaking this essential Name, was about to become manifest in the liberation narrative. The compassion would result in the long-awaited freedom from enslavement for the Jewish people. Yet it also seems present in ample measure vis-à-vis the Egyptians. The journey to liberation began with simple, direct petitions to Pharaoh. Dramatic signs followed (the first signs that Moses and Aaron showed Pharaoh), which harmed no one. The warnings before the onset of ten plagues and the plagues themselves modeled patience and restraint. At the outset, they seem carefully calibrated to cause discomfort and inconvenience but not to inflict lasting harm. They brought growing damage first to property and only at the end to human beings. The tenth of

the plagues, the slaying of firstborn sons, was severe and lethal, but it was only invoked as a last resort. Nothing else worked.

The Name of God underscoring compassion opens this Torah portion. It is consistent with the events that follow even in the treatment of Israel's adversary. Later teachings that seek to overcome the tendency to demonize an enemy and even to transform enemies into friends seem to be in alignment with this narrative.

Liberation Means Surrendering Domination

And God spoke to Moses, and said to him: "I am the Lord, and I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by My name YHWH I did not make Myself known to them. And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, where 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. Wherefore say to the children of Israel: I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments; and I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage: I am the Lord." (Exodus 6:2-8)

"And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty": This means with the Name Elohim, "Lord," the title used in the creation narrative: In the beginning the Lord [Elohim] created heaven and earth. His essence in Hebrew is power and strength, meaning the powerful and living Creator Who fashioned nature and all of the laws governing heaven and earth. From His title as Creator, the model and paradigm is taken regarding the

obligation of human progress through the conquest of nature and the world. "And with this title, I appeared to the patriarchs in bestowing blessing on the work of their hands.... However, My Name God, the Tetragramaton, which includes the quality of compassion... (that is, moral progress, to strengthen the good over the bad in the heart), with that Name, I did not make known to them, meaning I had not given a sign that would prove it as a [human] obligation. From nature in creation, one can prove only... [the mandate for] human conquest of nature, but whether one with one's own hands might conquer the conquerors and force them to work for oneself – one cannot learn this from nature. For just as the law that 'the strongest reigns' governs nature, perhaps it is possible to rule over [human] creatures.

"Do not think in all of this that My concern is for material progress alone. Rather My eyes and My heart are given over as well to the advancement of justice and morality. Therefore [it is written] well: And moreover I have heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage in their [the Egyptians'] continuing the progress of the conquest of nature by conquering their fellows as slaves and forcing them to work and toil for them with hard labor. And material progress, the conquest of nature, was transformed into an obstacle before moral progress, righteousness, and justice. Wherefore say to the children of Israel: I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments; and I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. This means: I will go out to make judgments on Pharaoh the oppressor, and I will reveal a distinct sign about the Torah of excising evil from the heart, about abhorring evil and loving justice. And I will bring you to the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for a heritage. This

indicates that you should take possession of the land and occupy yourselves with conquering nature...but let this not be the essence, rather: I am the Lord. The moral complement of righteousness and compassion included in the four-letter Name should stand first and foremost before all of your knowledge and wisdom." (Rabbi Aaron Samuel Tamaret, "The Mission of Israel"³)

In his explication of the first verses of this Torah portion, Rabbi Tamaret delivers his interpretation of why the exodus narrative became so central in Israel's story. On the sixth day of creation, the human species was given permission to shape and control the world of nature. Such power was one facet of emulating God. Yet it easily could be abused, and it could even be exercised over other human beings in the service of ever greater control over the world. The enslavement of the Jewish people symbolized that very excess of power that knew no limits. The liberation of the Jews was intended then as a needed addendum and palliative to the power granted in Genesis. The message to be learned from Egypt was to be a moral one, that justice and compassion walk hand in hand with the power to control. Most especially, no man or society should ever seize oppressive power over another man or group of people. Ruling over others almost invariably leads to violence. The moral fabric has then unraveled.

The exodus narrative became the most rehearsed episode in Jewish history. It was to be endlessly remembered in traditional ritual. Aside from its centrality on Passover, it became a daily focus in prayer, on the Sabbath, and on every other major festival as well. Its prominence exceeds attention to creation, to the gift of Torah on Sinai, and to the promise of the land. The reason for the unceasing litany was not only that the Jews were freed but more to the point that they and every other people should know that God forbids the violent and otherwise forced dominion of one people over another. Perhaps especially as a once-enslaved people, the Jews might have been capable of and vulnerable to acting out their vengeance on another people. Thereby one can understand the oft-reiterated precept "Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." In Rabbi

3. Tamaret, *Musar Hatorah v'Hayahadut*, pp. 87-88.

Tamaret's view, the exodus was to be evermore a strong sign from God that the Jew and all of humanity should follow the divine model of never sanctioning the enslavement of one person or people by another.

The very Names of God juxtaposed in this Torah reading symbolize the two needed and intertwined models for imitating God to which the human being was called. El Shaddai and Elohim represent the mandate to shape the world. The four-letter Tetragrammaton, here introduced to the Jewish people, adds the layer of moral commitment, of kindness and compassion. This Name would ever after serve as the key to understanding the Divine and the concomitant responsibility to bring those qualities to life in human interaction. Mastering the world needed the steady underpinning of a moral standard in which guarding the freedom of every human being is central.

How Can the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart Square with Repentance?

And the Lord said to Moses: "...You shall speak all that I command you; and Aaron your brother shall speak to Pharaoh, that he let the children of Israel go out of his land. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 7:1, 2-3)

"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart": Since God wishes the repentance of the wicked and not their death, as He said: "As I live, says God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11), He said that He would multiply His signs and wonders in order to cause the Egyptians to repent by making known His greatness and kindness with signs and wonders.... And there is no doubt that were it not for [God's] hardening [Pharaoh's] heart, Pharaoh would have sent Israel out not because of repentance and submission before God, may He be blessed, having regretted his rebelliousness...but rather because of not being able to withstand any longer the suffering of the plagues.... And this is not repentance at all. Yet if Pharaoh had desired to submit to God, may He be blessed, and to repent before

Him with full repentance, there would have been no obstacle before him at all. And behold God, may He be blessed, said: "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he persist in bearing the plagues and not release [Israel] due to his fear of the plagues, in order that I reveal My signs in his midst" (Exodus 10:1). (Seforno, Exodus 7:3)

Torah commentators struggle with the message in the text that God would harden Pharaoh's heart, thus making it impossible for him to freely make his decision. In a developing tradition where the door to repentance is always open, even for one guilty of great abuse, how could such a value be suspended in the case of Pharaoh?

As the narrative unfolds, however, Pharaoh is described as willfully hardening his own heart in the course of the first five plagues. Only afterwards is there a distinct change in language, with God apparently taking charge. Seforno asserts that Pharaoh was granted ample opportunity to seek forgiveness. It had become abundantly clear that the only reason for him to allow the exodus would be his fear of the severity of the plagues. When repentance was no longer seen as a possibility, God caused Pharaoh to withstand the later plagues in order that God's might be more fully revealed. Had Pharaoh shown any sign of remorse, however, he would have faced no impediment. Other thinkers suggest that once a pattern of refusal is so firmly set, it is as though the decision making is no longer in one's hands. Pharaoh set his course; he was no longer capable of reversing himself.

Repairing a relationship, repenting for sin, and finding forgiveness are central rabbinic tenets. When the literal meaning of a passage such as this implies the opposite, the sages vigorously search for a way of understanding God's ways that upholds the key value of human choice.