

Parsha Va-ayra

Exodus Chapter 6 v.2 – Chapter 9 v.35

This week's parsha is the second in the Book of Exodus. In the first parsha, a new pharaoh begins to enslave the Israelites in Goshen. Pharaoh orders all new male babies to be killed, but Moses is saved and raised by the pharaoh's daughter. The parsha contains a history of Moses's life as he kills an Egyptian overseer, flees into the desert, meets Jethro and marries his daughter Zipporah, and receives his calling from God in the presence of the Burning Bush. The Exodus from Egypt is foretold by God, and Moses returns to Egypt. With Aaron speaking for him, he tells the Israelites that they will soon be released from their hard and bitter bondage. Then Moses and Aaron confront the Pharaoh to "set the Israelites free".

Framed in this setting, this second parsha, Va-ayra, contains 2 main themes. The first comes in the early verses of chapter 6 when God speaks to Moses and says that while Abraham, Isaac and Jacob knew God in many ways, they knew him only as "El Shaddai" or God Almighty. They never knew him as "Yud Hay Vav Hay", pronounced Adonay, the God of Redemption and Faithfulness, since our patriarchs were never oppressed by foreign rulers. But in the spirit of freeing the Children of Israel from the yolk of their Egyptian taskmasters and the cruel Pharaoh, this is a new aspect of God that is being presented to Moses and the Children of Israel. While God promised our patriarchs a nation as numerous as the stars in the skies, the present condition of the Children of Israel, enslaved by evil Pharaohs for hundreds of years, requires that Moses understand that this same God is obviously more than that, and that this God will be able to redeem them from their suffering. Chabad.org says the following lines in Chapter 6, verses 5 thru 8, illustrate the four expressions of redemption:

1. I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage.
2. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments.
3. I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God.
4. I will bring you in unto 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 really don't think of God in different ways. I don't think many of us do. In English, he is God or the Lord or slight variations of that theme, but

during the early times in the Bible, his names had different meanings, such as Adonay, Yud Yud, Yud Hay Vav Hay, Eloheim (or Elohainu), El Shaddai, etc. As I just learned from this parsha, there are significant differences between the terms.

Let's look at the second theme – the plagues. At ages 80 and 83 respectively, Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites in the name of God. We are all familiar with the fact that God hardened Pharaoh's heart so he would not let the people go. In this parsha, the Egyptian people in general suffer greatly to the first 7 plagues – Blood, Frogs, Gnats, Beetles/Flies, Cattle Murrain, Boils and Hail/Fire/Brimstone – for all the plagues affect the River Nile, which keeps them alive on a daily basis. And in every case, whether Pharaoh's magicians were able to weakly respond to the power of God or not, Pharaoh would eventually agree to release the Israelites only to refuse once the plague ended. The Pharaoh was in a difficult position, for his God-like stature in Egypt made it almost impossible for him to humble himself to an invisible God and his two aged emissaries. And while all of Egypt endured the wrath of God, these first 7 seven plagues were still not enough for Pharaoh to recognize a power greater than himself. An in-depth description of each plague and their consequences is more completely described in Chapter 7, v.14 thru Chapter 9, v.35.

There are parallels between Pharaoh's "plight", or his need to save face, and Hebrew prophets who spoke out against the unfaithful kings in the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel. History tells us the names and fates of many political activists who called out the evils of their country's rulers. I marvel that Pharaoh never thought of killing Moses and Aaron.

The Haftarah comes from the later parts of the Book of Ezekiel. The prophet was exiled to Babylon in 597 BCE prior to the destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE. During these years, Egypt was an enemy of the Kingdom of Judah, and Ezekiel prophesizes that the Babylonians will conquer Egypt. History reveals that in 570 BCE the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Egypt, which made the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem a lot easier in 530 BCE. Hence there is an Egyptian connection between Exodus and Ezekiel.