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בס"ד

Parashat Va'era Part I

1. Backdrop

G-d had made it clear to Moses in the first prophecy He granted him that Pharaoh would refuse his request to allow the Israelites to go on a three-day journey to serve “Hashem, our G-d” (Exod. 3:19-20). He reinforced this message when Moses was on his way back to Egypt (4:21-23).

Nevertheless, Moses was not prepared for the significant worsening of the Israelites’ condition that the request engendered. There is a big difference between knowing in advance that the king’s refusals are part of a larger, successful narrative, and actually experiencing it. There also is a big difference between being prepared to struggle unsuccessfully with repeated disappointment for a time, and a relentless worsening of a situation that causes greatly increased suffering. This especially applies to the case at hand given that his efforts prompted his brethren to be resentful of him and question his mission.

In any event, Moses had not imagined the possibility of the brutal response that was totally disproportionate to the request. He could not understand that G-d would allow the situation to so deteriorate and he considers his own inadequacy to be part of the problem. Accordingly, he protests G-d’s doings and questions his being selected for the mission (5:22-23).

But G-d had His agenda. Before proceeding, He had deemed it necessary to allow Pharaoh to publicly demonstrate his arrogance, cruelty and tyrannical powers, revealing the pathetic plight of the Israelites. In this way it was to be established that short of divine intervention there was no hope for the enslaved nation; its salvation was totally dependent on it. Without criticizing Moses, G-d answered him that the turning point has arrived: “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh, for by dint of a strong hand...he will chase them from his land” (6:1).

Those who established the chapter and verse numbers widely used in our present-day *humashim* regarded this latter verse to be the start of a new chapter since in the following verses G-d continues with a proclamation of redemption. Together, they begin a new phase of the action. The rabbinic tradition, however, considers 6:1 to be the conclusion of the previous *parasha* and is thus followed by a paragraph break (a *setumah*). A close reading demonstrates the latter construction to be preferable.

Hashem’s statement, “Now you shall see what I will do...” (6:1) is a direct response to Moses’ complaint, assuring him that He will now intervene and that the venture will conclude successfully. It goes together with the complaint and the subject is closed. In the following verse (6:2), the narrative again introduces G-d speaking to Moses with a standard introductory formula, וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו (“G-d spoke to Moses and said to him”). Here, the Torah employs *Elokim*, a different divine appellation from that of the previous verse, and the elaboration goes far beyond a simple continuation of the previous response. In this statement G-d proclaims principles and details of the greatest import, formulated in an artistic manner with self-contained and highly structured internal patterns (as we shall soon demonstrate). Exodus 6:1 does not fit the structure. Accordingly, verse 2 should be seen as the start of a new passage.

2. “Ani Hashem”

In a proclamation that reflects the grandeur and uniqueness of what was now beginning to transpire, G-d informed Moses of the acts of cosmic proportions that He was initiating on behalf of His people. The message is linked with His self-presentation as Y-H-V-H, that is to say, in consonance with the concepts signified in the Tetragrammaton (His four-letter name, referred to traditionally as *Hashem*, “the Name,” a term also used to refer to Him). In the ancient Near

East, as undoubtedly elsewhere, deity names reflected character, attributes and functions, and Hashem's name followed this pattern. G-d transmitted it at the point of the Israelites' greatest demoralization.

The proclamation was comprised of two parts: the first was a message addressed to Moses and the second a message he was to transmit to the Israelites. G-d begins with "I am Y-H-V-H" (using a form of self-presentation then popular with kings and also ascribed to deities). He states that He appeared to the patriarchs as *(K)el Sh-d-y** (Gen. 17:1; 35:11) and did not make Himself known to them by His Tetragrammaton, thus signifying that He is now taking a historic step forward on behalf of Israel. He established a covenant with the patriarchs, pledging to give the land of Canaan to them. He has heard the moaning of the Israelites from their oppression and has recalled His covenant. This segment served as an expansion and reinforcement for Moses of what he was told at the burning bush concerning Hashem's promises to the nation's forefathers and of His faithful nature that extends through the centuries.

To the Israelites, Moses is to announce that G-d, revealing Himself as Y-H-V-H, will soon begin a multistep process on their behalf. He will release them from their burdens, rescue them from slavery and redeem them from Egypt. He will take them as His people,** be their G-d, foster in them the recognition that He is the author of the wondrous doings that He was now going to perform for them (despite their present lack of appreciation of His involvement), bring them to the promised land and grant it to them as an inheritable possession. These verses constitute a breathtaking series of eight consecutive verbal clauses communicating immediacy, definitiveness, enthusiasm and awe-inspiring power.

Many understand Hashem's Tetragrammaton as related to the concept of His eternal existence, which directly leads to the concepts of His capability to make long-term plans for the world, to be conscious of past generations' merit and to intervene in the distant future. They interpret the letters of the Tetragrammaton as a combination of הָיָה (was), הִנֵּה (is) and יִהְיֶה (will be). Others see the Tetragrammaton as a form of the causative verb that is derived from "be" (such as in הָיָה לְאָדָמָה לְבָרִים, "be master to your brothers" [Gen. 27:29]), denoting He who causes to be

all that is, related to the postbiblical term מְהַרְהֵרָה, "who makes happen, creates." With the first letter a *yod*, it would more specifically imply the future, "He will bring into being" or "He will make happen," focusing on His faithfulness. It assumes that He possesses the wherewithal to fulfill His promises; that He is all-powerful. Theologically, the latter interpretation tacitly incorporates the concepts of the former, as the one who brings all that exists into being implies a perpetual status of doing so.

In any event, in elaborating on the Tetragrammaton, the passage proclaims that the One who is eternal and conscious of past generations' merit has decided that now is the time to fulfill the promises He made to the forefathers concerning their progeny and to intervene on their behalf with His great power.

Such enduring divine faithfulness is a direct corollary of monotheism. In the polytheistic world, a deity could not guarantee something over the long term because circumstances might change beyond his control; another deity or primordial force might interfere with his plans. The new belief gave great impetus to humans to work toward a more moral order to better the state of the world, whether for one's children or in general; there was no danger that one's commitment to virtue and sacrificing to better society would be overlooked by a god who was no longer in power, or cancelled by a god with a different perspective.

The statement that G-d did not appear to the patriarchs by His Y-H-V-H name should not be thought to indicate that He did not appear to them at all by that name, as the term is attested in His self-revelations to them (see Gen. 15:7; 28:13). As far as knowing that name, it is often mentioned in dialogue throughout the book of Genesis. Indeed, the patriarchs are several times depicted as "calling in the name of Y-H-V-H" (12:8; 21:33; 26:25). It is even stated in association with Enosh (grandson of Adam), "then they began calling in the name of Y-H-V-H" (4:26).

Rather, the statement that G-d did not appear to the patriarchs by His Y-H-V-H name means that He did not make Himself known to them through their experiencing a public actualization of the potential that the name implies. On a number of occasions in the Bible G-d uses the expression of it becoming

known that “I am Hashem” in conjunction with a mighty manifestation of His power, such that witnesses will have no doubt that what occurred was His doing (e.g., Exod. 7:5; 14:4, 18). Speaking of what it means to know His name, G-d declared, “I will make known to them My hand and My might and they shall know that My name is Hashem” (Jer. 16:21). The patriarchs did experience His intervention in their personal lives in a limited manner but never on the grand, national scale that commands the attention of others.

It surely is possible that the elders of the nation had retained some tradition of the Tetragrammaton to which the proclamation connects, thus providing historical depth and validity to it.

3. “And You Shall Know”

The specific location of the וַיִּדְעֶתְם (“and you shall know”) clause in the series of promises as well as its literary formulation – “and you shall know that it is I, Hashem your G-d, who took you forth from under the burdens of Egypt” (Exod. 6:7b) – raise an important question. The verb follows mention of the various stages that comprise the process of redemption and the declaration that Hashem would take the Israelites as His nation and be their G-d – וְהָיִיתִי, וְהָצַלְתִּי, וְהוֹצֵאתִי. It only precedes reference to His leading the Israelites into the promised land and giving it to them. It is understandable that it follows the stages of redemption, since it refers to them. However, why does it not precede establishment of the G-d-Israel relationship?

In addition, why does the וַיִּדְעֶתְם clause repeat the previous verse’s description of the first stage of the process, deploying virtually the identical terminology that was used there? With וַיִּדְעֶתְם we read הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סְבֻלוֹת מִצְרַיִם (“who took you forth from under the burdens of Egypt”), while the first stage was termed וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת סְבֻלוֹת מִצְרַיִם (“and I shall take you forth from under the burdens of Egypt”).

Perhaps the placement of the וַיִּדְעֶתְם clause where it is indicates G-d’s acknowledgment that while the Israelites were subject to the rigors of slavery they could not be expected to comprehend all that He was doing for them. Their resistance to the message that Moses transmitted to them, “due to impatience and

rigorous labor” (v. 9), evidently extended to some degree throughout the turbulent period of the plagues, although they surely were progressively developing a more positive disposition toward what was happening and subsequently cooperated with instructions.

Consequently, G-d projected the “and you shall know” stage to the enlightenment associated with the Sinai experience of His revelation, which occurred between the Exodus and entering the land. The proclamation informs us that with revelation, which occurs together with His taking the Israelites as His people and becoming their G-d, attitudes will change in a major way; Israel will then clearly realize that it was His intervention at work from the initial moment.

This parallels Hashem’s statement to Moses at the burning bush, “And this shall be for you the sign that I sent you: When you bring the people forth from Egypt you [plural] will worship G-d on this mountain” (3:12). Just as in that context G-d told Moses that a sign (to fully persuade the people that He sent him) was not immediately available but must await the experience on Mount Sinai, here, too, the phrase “and you shall know” refers to that transcendent event scheduled to take place in the near future.

Although “and you shall know” nominally refers to something the Israelites are to do, it does not interrupt the rushing flow of G-d’s actions, as it connotes His assurance to the Israelites that they will soon understand, as if to say He will also make them understand. The number of successive verbal phrases that embrace the message between attestations of the Tetragrammaton is eight: וְהוֹצֵאתִי, וְהָצַלְתִּי, וְהָיִיתִי, וְהָיִיתִי, וְהוֹצֵאתִי, וְהָצַלְתִּי, וְהוֹצֵאתִי, וְהָיִיתִי. This probably is a literary manifestation of the covenantal association of what is transpiring. (See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon.*)

4. On Structure

The passage’s key phrase, *Ani Hashem* (“I am Y-H-V-H”), is attested four times in this proclamation, each strategically located in the text. This phrase comprises: 1) G-d’s first two words; 2) His two center words, which are also the first two words of the message Moses is to transmit to Israel; 3) the two center words of the segment that is directed to

Israel, and 4) His last two words (v. 8). Unquestionably, this is an intended pattern that reflects the importance of the message.

This passage also contains a chiasm that emphasizes the unity of the message and its key point, an A-B-C-D before the center followed by D'-C'-B'-A' after the center (see Nehama Leibowitz *Iyunim Besefer Shemot*, p. 87), as follows:

A - *Ani Y-H-V-H*

B - reference to the patriarchs

C - commitment to grant the land

D - the oppression

Center - *Ani Y-H-V-H*

D' - redemption from the oppression

C' - fulfillment of the oath to grant the land

B' - reference to the patriarchs

A' - *Ani Y-H-V-H*

Another structural feature of this passage involves precise word count. The following is based on methodology demonstrated in many cases by Rabbi S. D. Sassoon. Although in straightforward explication of the Pentateuch most scholars have rejected the validity of interpretations based on the sum of the numerical equivalents of the Hebrew letters of a word or phrase (*gematria*), the following appears legitimate and compelling.

The *gematria* of Y-H-V-H is twenty-six. It and its multiple, fifty-two, appear to be deeply embedded in the structure of this proclamation as well as in that of a coordinate passage later in Exodus that is a thematic complement to this one. The second segment of our passage is composed of fifty-two words. The key two-word phrase *Ani Hashem* comprises its first two words, its last two words and its two center words. Hence, the intervals from the first Y-H-V-H to the second and from the second to the third, are each exactly twenty-six words.

In the first segment, the number of words that Hashem said to Moses up until, but not counting, the first word that Moses is to repeat to Israel, is fifty. (This excludes the six introductory words of the narrative, consistent with the system we often find in such matters.) The first two words are *Ani Hashem*. Counting from that first word *Ani*, words 51 and 52 are *Ani Hashem*, just as was the case in the second

segment. It must be recognized that the fifty words G-d spoke to Moses himself cannot be read totally as a separate segment from the words He asked Moses to transmit to Israel since the last words of the first segment are לְכֹן אָמַר לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“Therefore say to the children of Israel”). To provide the object of the verb to complete the clause, the next two words *Ani Hashem* must be joined to the previous; a proper reading would call for a pause only after reciting those two words. Accordingly, in a way, the first segment would be read as comprising fifty-two words.

It appears likely that the *Ani Hashem* words at the center of G-d’s entire statement, since they complete the connecting clause at the conclusion of segment A, were intended to do double service and be counted with both segments. In a most sophisticated manner, G-d’s 102-word statement appears to be considered to contain two segments of fifty-two words each or a total of 104 words, or 4 x 26. It is likely that this was intended to correspond to the four attestations of *Ani Hashem* in the passage.

(There is a fifth attestation of Hashem in the passage [v. 3], without *Ani*, which is not directly part of the positive message being transmitted. Its purpose is to point out that Y-H-V-H was not the name by which He made Himself known to the patriarchs. Accordingly, it is not included in the *Ani Hashem* pattern. However, it is included in another literary system, as we shall soon point out.)

As we note in our study on *The Song at the Sea* (Exod. 15), the Song’s first stanza (vv. 1-11) is thematically complementary to our Exodus 6 passage. When Israel intones, “Y-H-V-H is His name” (15:3), it recalls Hashem’s proclamation of His name in our passage, “Tell Israel that I am Y-H-V-H” (6:6), a message that the Israelites were too crushed to be attentive to when Moses related it to them. When they saw the miracle at the sea they rectified the situation.

That first stanza of the Song, beginning with its first word *Ashira* (excluding the nine introductory words of superscription) and concluding with verse 11, contains 102 words and subdivides into two parts of fifty and fifty-two words respectively, exactly as G-d’s proclamation does in our passage. The first strophe of that first stanza, concluding with “Y-H-V-H is His name” (v. 3), appropriately comprises twenty-six

words. (In addition, in the Song's second stanza, the combination of the final two strophes [vv. 14-18], concluding with the verse relevant to our theme, "Y-H-V-H will reign for ever and ever," contains fifty-two words.)

This is an example of an extraordinary feature of prophetic literature. Finely nuanced and sublimely written literary passages may contain overlapping patterns, meeting complex and exacting specifications, addressed to the most conscientious and attentive reader, without being stilted or reading as contrived. Indeed, such writing may be recognized as superb literature independent of any knowledge of the presence of internal patterns and subtle intertextual associations.

The two central figures who led G-d's previous new initiatives in the world were Noah and Abraham. Noah was the tenth generation from creation and Abraham was the twentieth. Moses, who leads a third new initiative that incorporates Hashem's name, is the twenty-sixth generation from creation, consistent with the *gematria* of His name.

5. Further Research

The following is based on insights and methodology of Rabbi S. D. Sassoon as expanded and applied in subsequent research, primarily that of Ronald Benun.

The phrase *Ani Hashem* is attested exactly eighty times in the Pentateuch, a number symbolic of the covenant. (See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon.*) Sixteen of those attestations – in two groups of eight – appear in Leviticus 19, a chapter closely linked in content with the Decalogue and the covenant (see our study on that chapter): *Ani Hashem Elokekhem* ("I am Hashem your G-d") appears eight times while *Ani Hashem* without *Elokekhem* attached also appears eight times.

There are a number of remarkable number phenomena associated with our passage (G-d's primary pronouncement of revealing His Y-H-V-H name in Scripture) and the *gematria* of that name, twenty-six (manifest through multiples). When we count the Hashem of the first *Ani Hashem* of our passage (Exod. 6:2) as number one and count forward all the

attestations of the Tetragrammaton when it appears in the pure form – that is, the four letters Y-H-V-H without a prefix (it never appears with a suffix) – the last one in the books of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings) is exactly number 2,600.

When we count the very next Hashem of our passage as number one (Exod. 6:3) – the one that is part of G-d's statement that He did not make himself known to the patriarchs by the Tetragrammaton – and count forward the attestations of Y-H-V-H (again, only when appearing without prefixes) until the end of the Pentateuch, the total is 1,352, again a multiple of twenty-six, interestingly, 26×52 .

True, we are using two different starting points, one verse apart. But each number total is remarkable in itself and each insight stands on its own, especially when considering that our passage contains the many applications of twenty-six that it does. (The explanation of the different starting points may have to do with the differing theme and purpose of each count.)

This system of employing multiples of twenty-six when dealing with the Tetragrammaton also applies to verse count. The total number of verses in the Pentateuch from beginning to end in which the Tetragrammaton appears without prefixes is 1,326, or 26×51 . The total of this category for the Pentateuch plus the books of the Former Prophets is 2,340, or 26×90 .

Beginning from the Exodus 6:3 verse, the number of verses to the end of the Pentateuch in which the Tetragrammaton appears without prefixes is 1,170, or 26×45 . Also beginning from Exodus 6:3, the number of verses in which the Tetragrammaton appears without prefixes through the end of the books of the Former Prophets is 2,184, or 26×84 .

Beginning from Exodus 6:3, the number of verses in which the Tetragrammaton including prefixes is attested through the end of the Former Prophets is 2,496, or 26×96 . Again including prefixes, the total attestations in the Pentateuch is 1,820, or 26×70 .

This is all there in front of the reader. Although such research requires patience and diligence, it is based on

straightforward reading without skipping, without varying the process, without manipulation, using the traditional Masoretic text and simply counting one attestation after the other.

Whatever the full meaning of all this striking, apparently purposeful interconnectedness awaits further research. It surely points to the great care that had been taken through the centuries in the transmittal of the authoritative text of Scripture and the extraordinary degree of accuracy in the traditional text, despite the existence of alternate versions and many variants. It supports the view that the composition of Scripture is of a different order than that of other writing. It also indicates that the books of the prophets are directly linked with the prophecy of the Five Books of the Torah and that in some ways Torah and the Former Prophets should be viewed as an integrated entity. As the sages say on related matters, *גְּלָם מְרוּצָה אֶקֶד נִתְּנִי* (“All were transmitted from one Shepherd” [*Sop.* 16:10]).

Endnotes

* There is as yet no consensus as to the meaning of the word *sh-d-y*, often rendered “Almighty.” Many consider it related to the Akkadian word for mountain; accordingly, the divine appellation may mean the high or mighty G-d. Some scholars presume an association with fertility. Some consider it derived from the Hebrew word for “breasts.” From this verse on, it is no longer deployed in Scripture except in poetic contexts.

** The sages associate the four cups of wine of the Passover *seder* ritual with the first four clauses of this series, whereby each cup of wine celebrates another phase of G-d’s redemption of the Israelites and taking them as His people (*j. Pes.* 10:1).

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