

HOW GOD INTRODUCED HIMSELF TO THE PATRIARCHS

JEFFREY M. COHEN

*And God [Elohim] spoke to Moses, and He said to him: 'I am the Lord.'¹ And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as **El Shaddai**, but by My name **Hashem** I did not make Myself known to them (Ex. 6:2-3).*

There are three problems contained in these verses. First, in the opening verse, the Torah refers to God by one name [*Elohim*] and then proceeds to quote God, in direct speech, as employing an entirely different name which we refer to as the Tetragrammaton [*Hashem*]. Secondly, what is the relevance of the issue of the names by which God introduced Himself to the Patriarchs to this context of God's promise of future deliverance (Ex. 6:5-9)? Thirdly, how can the statement that the name "*Hashem*" was not known to the Patriarchs be justified, given that Abraham instinctively calls the place where God appeared to him at the Akeda by the name "*Hashem yir'eh*" (Gen. 22:14)? On a further occasion Abraham employs that name when assuring his servant that his mission to find a wife for Isaac would be heaven-blessed by "*Hashem*, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house" (24:7). Not surprisingly, the servant subsequently invokes that very name several times during the course of his mission, both when addressing God directly and when referring to Him in the conversation at the home of Laban. Isaac refers to it when explaining the significance of giving the name Rehovoth to the well he had dug: *Ki attah hirchiv Hashem lanu* [For now *Hashem* has granted us] (26:22). God reveals Himself to Jacob by that name at the scene of the latter's famous dream of the ladder spanning heaven and earth (28:13). Jacob also takes up that name in describing his reaction to the Divine revelation he had witnessed (28:16). How, then, do we make any sense of the

Jeffrey M. Cohen is rabbi emeritus of the Stanmore Synagogue in London. He is the author of several books, the most recent of which are 1001 Questions and Answers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (1997), Issues of the Day (1999), Let My People Go: Insights into Pesach and the Haggadah (2002), 500 Questions and Answers on Chanukah (2005) and Torah for Teens: Growing Up Spiritually with the Weekly Sidrah.

statement that God was only known to the Patriarchs by the name *El Shaddai*, and not by *Hashem*?

Many attempts have been made to resolve these problems. Rashi (on verse 2) links God's opening statement with what went immediately before: '*Umeiaz ba'ti . . . ledabber bishmekha* [For since I came to Pharaoh to speak *in Your name* he has dealt ill with this people] ...' Moses is not just complaining that Pharaoh disregarded his demand, but expressing incredulity that this could possibly have happened when he had invoked [*shmekha*] God's name. How could the latent spiritual power of that name have failed? After all, *Y-H-V-H* means 'It will be.' When that name is employed, it is invincible. Pharaoh simply is unable to withstand its imperative!

In this context, it is essential to appreciate how Judaism perceives of a name as representing the essence, power, and potential contained in that to which it is attached. (For that reason, halakha states that we must never call a child after a wicked person.) Examples of the employment of names to convey either a core essence or an extended potential are: (1) God bringing the animals to Adam to see what names he would give them; (2) the extension of the name of Avram to Avraham to convey his future universal influence; (3) the additional name Israel, bestowed on Jacob; (4) the Egyptian name bestowed on Joseph by Pharaoh.

In this way we understand God's response to Moses' plea that God disclose to him '*et kevodekha* [Your glory] (Ex. 33:18); that is, God's essential nature. He tells Moses: '*I will make all My goodness pass before you* [vekaratiy v'sheim Hashem lefanekha] *and I shall invoke the name of Hashem in Your presence*' (v. 19). In other words, God promises to reveal to Moses the secret of the power contained in His name *Hashem*, in the power of His attributes of invincibility, of bringing to fruition His every wish. *Hashem* in the sense of '*It will be!*'

In Exodus 6:2-3, God sets out to teach Moses the lesson that even He, God, is, on occasions, 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'El Shaddai.' *Shaddai* is a contraction of the two words "*she* [the One (who has to be content with)]" and "*dai* [that which is (merely) sufficient]." Sufficiency denotes "less than totality." God was telling Moses not to be impatient, but rather to follow the way of the Patriarchs. God had mani-

fested Himself to them as *El Shaddai*, a God who provides that which He regards as sufficient, though not necessarily the total and immediate fulfillment of His petitioners' desires.

God had told them that their offspring would inherit the land and be a blessing. But that would not be a blessing underpinned by *Hashem*, to be realized immediately by Divine fiat. It remained merely a promise, a *Shaddai*, an as-yet-unfulfilled blessing. And that is the meaning of God appearing to them as *El Shaddai*, but not revealing Himself as *Hashem*, an immediate provider, Who speaks and Whose will is immediately implemented.

This may also be read into Rashi's comment on '*Ushmi Hashem lo noda'ati lahem*' (verse 3): "The Torah does not say *lo hoda'ti*, but rather *lo noda'ti*." The sense is: I did, indeed, make known the name *Hashem* to them (the Patriarchs). They themselves employed it. But when I revealed my purpose to them, it was in the 'nature' of *El Shaddai*, an unfulfilled purpose, one that had to be 'sufficient' for the time being.

We can now understand Rashi's comment on '*Vayyedaber Elohim*' (verse 2):

Dibber itto mishpat – God spoke reprovingly to Moses, since he had made so bold as to say, "Why have you done evil to this people?" – *Vayyomer eilav Ani Hashem*, And God said to Him, "I am, indeed, *Hashem*, the One whose mere word has the power to bring all things 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 have employed my attribute of *El Shaddai*, of long-sufferance. The Patriarchs were prepared to accept it, and so must you!"

This is the import of Exodus 6:6: '*Lakhein emor livnei Yisrael Ani Hashem*' – therefore tell the Israelites (not to despair). I remain *Hashem*, the God Who can deliver on His promise, and I shall definitely bring them out, deliver them, save them and bring them to the land. Interpreted in this way, our original three questions are all answered.

NOTES

1. Both the Old JPS and the NJPS substitute "Hashem" for the Tetragrammaton.
2. See Genesis 24:12, 21, 26, 27 (x2), 35, 40, 42, 44, 48, 56.

