

Two Names of God –  
Alyth Gardens  
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Our parasha begins with a magnificent address by God to Moses, that begins with two rather puzzling verses.

וידבר אלהים אל משה ויאמר אליו אני יהוה. וארא אל אברהם אל יצחק ואל  
יעקב באל שדי, ושמי יהוה לא נודעתי להם.

“God spoke to Moses and said to him, I am Adonai (the ineffable, four-letter name, for which we use the substitute Adonai). I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by My name Adonai.” Now this is problematic in several ways. After all, this is not the first time God has introduced Himself to Moses. That occurred in our reading last week at the burning bush, where God said, (Hebrew)

ויאמר אנכי אלהי אביך אלהי אברהם אלהי יצחק ואלהי יעקב

“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” Why not introduce Himself by name then? Why at this new juncture in the narrative?

Furthermore, if we look back at the patriarchal narratives, we see that God did indeed use the name Adonai. In Genesis 15:7, speaking to Abraham: “I am Adonai, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land for a possession.” And in Genesis 28:13, to Jacob, “I am Adonai, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.” What does it mean to say that “I did not make myself known to them by My name Adonai”?

I’m sure you can imagine that this is a problem about which traditional Jewish commentators (ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, Abravanel and others) have written many thousands of words. One suggestive view is that God was speaking here not about names and aliases and cognomens, but rather about the different aspects of divinity, the different ways in which the divine presence can be manifest. El Shaddai is usually translated “God Almighty”. This is God as the creator of the universe, the governing force of nature, the sustainer of and nurturer of existence. (The radical American Jewish rabbi Arthur Waskow has suggested that the name is linked with the Hebrew word *shadayim*, breasts, vividly indicating the aspect of God that nurtures).

We find this name used in Genesis when God makes promises to the patriarchs about the bounty of their offspring.

Genesis 17:1, to Abraham: “I am El Shaddai . . . and I will make you extremely numerous.”

Genesis 28:3, Isaac’s blessing of Jacob: “May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples”

Genesis 35:11, God directly to Jacob: “I am El Shaddai, be fertile and increase, A nation, yea an assembly of nations shall descend from you, Kings shall issue from your loins.

In other words, this is a God who, working through the natural order, bestows fertility and abundance upon human beings. It is a God who is manifest through people having children in the ordinary manner, and through other events of ordinary human existence. God does not bring about startling miracles for the Patriarchs; their experience is not interrupted by the intrusion of the supernatural. By contrast, according to some of the commentators, the Tetragrammaton that we pronounce ‘Adonai’ represents God who fulfils His promises through miracles that openly violate the natural order. That would be the experience of Moses and Aaron and the Israelite people, beginning with the magic show that Aaron performs before Pharaoh’s court, changing his rod into a snake, continuing with the plagues, and culminating with the parting of the Red Sea. This is a very different manifestation of divine power, one which the Patriarchs did not experience.

Does that mean that the Patriarchs were on a lower level than the generation of Exodus, unworthy of the open miracles which God performed at a later date? No, quite the contrary. The Patriarchs revealed a simple, pure faith: God addresses them, instructs them and they do what they are told, without hesitation, without questioning. The paradigm, of course, is Abraham taking his son to be sacrificed on the mountain.

Moses is a far more complex figure. Despite his greatness, he seems at times to be filled with hesitation, vacillation, insecurity, scepticism, and doubt. In our parashah last week he encounters the divine presence in the burning bush with clear instructions to return to Egypt and deliver his suffering people. But remember the protracted dialogue that follows: I’m not sure that I’m the right person for this; after all, I don’t speak very well; can’t you find another person? How do I know that Pharaoh will listen? What makes you think that the people will follow me? When they ask me your name, what should I tell them? Moses needs to be convinced with reassuring evidence, through miracles.

And this is even more so for the Israelites themselves. When God instructs Abraham to leave his home and go to “the land that I will show you,” he is given no description of the land, no assessment of its attractions. He simply picks up and goes. Contrast the Israelites. God sings the praises of Eretz Yisrael: It is “a good land, and a large one, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8). And in Deuteronomy this is expanded even further by Moses: “God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill, a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey . . . a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper” (8:7-9). It’s as if God and Moses are in Public Relations; the people need to be convinced, and God has to “sell” the land to a sceptical, hesitant, wavering people.

The masses of Israelites seem in this narrative to be by nature extremely conservative and risk averse. Moses comes to them with the magnificent promises of God that we read from the Torah: to end their slavery, rescue them from bondage, bring them out of Egypt, enter into a unique relationship, and give them the land of Israel. How do they respond? Not with cheers, not by rallying to the side of the liberator. They don’t even bother arguing with him, or asking pertinent questions. Instead we have one of the most discouraging verses in the Bible (Hebrew, v. 9)

וידבר משה כן לבני ישראל ולא שמעו אל משה מקצר רוח ומעבודה קשה

“But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.”

In short, the Bible describes a people unwilling to accept a God who works through the normal patterns of nature, the God who was responsible for their increase and abundance in Egypt. Now they will be convinced only by a God who works miracles. And the ensuing plagues seem to function to persuade not only Pharaoh, but the Israelites themselves.

In many ways, we seem to be like those Israelites in Egypt. We could probably be convinced by a God who pulled off tricks like those described in this part of the Bible – the 10 plagues, the parting of the sea. Some of you might remember the movie “Oh God,” with George Burns playing God. He reveals himself to an ordinary man, played by John Denver, who is convinced only when Burns creates a small cloud and a miniature rain shower inside Denver’s car while the sun is shining outside. A person is in a terrible automobile collision or an airplane crash, the other people are killed, he walks out with only minor injuries – such a person is likely to become a “true believer”. Our general attitude seems to be to sit back and not take chances with faith: “I wait to be convinced; show me something that can’t be explained by science, then I’ll consider God.”

If leaders come with a radical message, equivalent to that of Moses:

- that the oppressed of our society deserve to be liberated from their economic bondage,
- that prisoners held in faraway cells without formal charges or legal procedures have human rights that must be honoured,
- that military force, though necessary in some instances, cannot replace the building of bridges of human contact and communication,
- that the world in which we live is given us as a trust for future generations and must be preserved even at the cost of modifying patterns of our lives -

if leaders come with this kind of radical message, we all too often fail to listen, not because our spirits are crushed by cruel bondage, but because our sensitivity is deadened by overabundance and complacency.

We need to cultivate the more mature belief of the Patriarchs – willing to stake their lives on a belief not obvious to anyone else – without rivers turning to blood, or a sea parting,

able to find God in the natural cycles of the seasons, in seeds turning into plants and food,

In people getting sick and then recovering and returning to health,  
In a child learning to walk, and talk, to think and to question ,

Prepared to accept a liberation that comes not through sudden, dramatic transformations but slowly, painfully, after effort and sacrifice.

We need to open our minds and hearts to the “hidden miracles,” discovered every day around us (even when others deny them),

To continue undertaking the hard, unrewarding tasks that will advance God's cause in the world (even when no one else appears to take notice).

That was the unique faith of the Patriarchs. Let us strive to make it ours as well.  
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