

Shabbat Parashat Va'era
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Much has been written about the opening statement of God to Moses at the beginning of parashat Va'era. What could it mean, that God did not tell the patriarchs and matriarchs his name of yud-hey-vav-hey, but only as El Shaddai? Factually the claim is mysterious, but spiritually and to an extent programmatically it makes a lot of sense.

First the facts: did the patriarchs and matriarchs know God by His name El Shaddai? Yes: Just before Abram's name is changed to Abraham, God explicitly says "I am El Shaddai." But the name of yud-hey-vav-hey appears many times in the book of Genesis. I thought for a moment that maybe God knew His name was adonai, but that they didn't know. How? Well, just before God makes a promise to Abram about his future, the Torah says, 'Some time later, the word of Y-H-W-H came to Abram in a vision' – so Abram doesn't hear God's name here as Adonai. But it doesn't hold up.

Then I thought, maybe the patriarchs and matriarchs knew God's name as Adonai but God had never explicitly told them this name – making the verse from our parashah of 'I did not make myself known to them by My name Adonai' a bit more realistic. There is evidence of this approach as well. At least by the Torah's account, there is no introductory announcement of this name of God to Abraham or Sarah, but somehow they know it – Abram builds an altar and invokes Adonai by name just after he is called by God, and after his experience with Abimelekh he planted a tree and invoked there the name of Adonai El Olam. But indeed, as far as I could tell, from the Abraham narrative at least, God never refers to himself as Y-H-W-H.

So is that what God means when He tells Moses 'I didn't tell them my name'? Even though they knew it anyway? More than likely the Torah is teaching something else – not whether a name was known factually, but whether the attribute of God associated with that name was demonstrated. This line of thinking goes in two reasonably connected directions, and you could probably think of them. What attribute of God was demonstrated to Moses – and his generation – that was not demonstrated to the generation of the patriarchs? First, and most obviously, redemption. Second, and less obviously, this was a God of the nation, and not only of the individual or family.

There are many categories through which we think about, and even act upon, our Jewish ideals. Few are more compelling than the notion of "me" connected to the notion of "us". How does one's own individuality connect to a sense of the collective? How does one become part of a community – which necessarily entails the sacrifice of some individuality? How does one develop one's individual strength and depth of spirit without detracting from the ability of others to do the same?

Before he became Chancellor of JTS, Arnie Eisen, with Steven Cohen, wrote a book that describes the generation of Jews who make up the majority of American Jewry, but what they have to say about Baby Boomer Jews also applies to those of us quite a bit younger. Unless you are very tuned into the academic study of the American Jewish community,

you probably have not heard of it. It is called “The Jew Within” and it describes the current generation of Jews as made up, in a nutshell, of individual seekers who decide on instinct whether or not a piece of so-called organized Jewish living works for them. If it does – they come back. If it doesn’t – they look elsewhere. This is a classic conundrum of Jewish community and it is being taken to the extreme. Can a community effectively be composed of those who will opt out when something doesn’t ‘work’ for them? In another generation – the time it will take for this concept, and its effects, to become fully settled – we will know if such communities have staying power.

On the one hand – they might. After all, a community of “opters” (opt-in/opt-out) seeks community that is responsive to their individual needs, and if these needs are met, what better way is there to draw out and from creativity and energy than those who are present out of their sense of self-fulfillment? On the other: a sense of communal obligation, to those aspects of Judaism which ‘work’ and which ‘don’t work’ for me – as long as they work on the grander community scale – has been part and parcel of Jewish continuity for a long time, and this is a kind of sea change.

So this idea of the God of the patriarchs being, loosely, the God of the individual and the attribute of God that was not known to them – that God is the God of a nation, of the community at large, is still being played out in Jewish community. Jewish community has no staying power without a sense of obligation. But staying power is also depleted if Jewish activities and application of values and practices don’t speak to those who are either part of the community already, or those who might be most amenable to being invited into the conversation and activities of the community.

Where, in our community, does this question become central? Liturgy, certainly – the prayers we say. The tunes we sing them to. The boundaries of the programming we offer – should we be broader in our offerings – or narrower? Our use of pop-culture references in teaching Jewish values – less or more? Investment in the lives of individual members of the community – should rabbis and others be dedicated to spiritual counseling and development, or because that is done on an individual level is that misplaced dedication, or are we here to provide the best group/community experience possible? Can new leadership be attracted within an environment that is dedicated to individual spiritual growth – or might the possibility of individual spiritual growth as a responsibility of leadership be an attractive element of serving?

Both individual expression and needs and responsibility for one’s place in the community are important. Which one is more vital and irreplaceable? One book of the Torah centers on the God of the individual, or the individual family. Four books of the Torah depend on Y-H-W-H as the God of the nation. You do the math.