

Parashah Forty-Seven

Exodus 3:1–4:13; Isaiah 40:11–19; Acts 10:9–28

notes by Tim Hegg

The Name (HaShem)

The Torah section before us today contains the story of Moses' face-to-face encounter with the *Shekinah* in the form of a burning bush. The profound revelation of God's person through the giving and explanation of The Name was to impact not only Moses, but the entire nation of Israel from this point on through her history. Indeed, the sanctification of the Name remains the central focus in all true worship and life from a Torah perspective.

We may dismiss the humanistic discussions which attempt to explain the burning bush event as some natural phenomenon (spontaneous combustion of dry leaves in the desert; brightly "painted" leaves of a certain species of bush, which, from a distance, appear to be ablaze [St. Elmo's fire]; volcanic gases; etc., *ad infinitum, ad nauseam*). This is the Torah, and the experience of Moshe Rabbinu—it happened as it is recorded.

But what did happen? Let us look closer. Moses is tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Yitro. He comes to Mt. Choreb (another name for Mt. Sinai, cf. 17:6; 33:6) which was quite a distance from Midian (he was doing his best to find grazing for the flock, having been entrusted with the family's primary economic source). When he encounters the burning bush, he "turns aside" to get a closer look at what was, to him, an obvious miracle—the bush burned but was not consumed.

1 The God Who Separates Holy and Profane

The first utterance of God is to instruct Moses about the proper manner in which mankind would approach the Holy God: "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (v. 5).

The lesson is obvious. Moses' sandals represent walking in a fallen world, a place where the rebellion of mankind abounds. Moses himself was exiled from his enslaved people with a bounty on his head. If the Egyptians could not strike directly at God, they would do all in their power to subdue and humiliate His people. Our "walking" in this world is proof that we are in need of "foot washing." Even as Yeshua, in one of His final acts, washed the feet of the disciples, so Moses needed to understand that his feet were "dirty" by the evil world in which he lived.

Such unholy aspects have no place in the presence of God. If a person would have communion with the Creator, then he must first divest himself of that which is profane. We must never think that God will accept our filth in His presence. Here, once again, the need for atonement is obvious. The uncleanness we bear is the result of sin, a characteristic of our own fallen nature and of the world in which we dwell, an uncleanness that can only be taken away through the death of an innocent life. From the symbol let us recognize the reality. Yeshua is our only means for approaching God whose holiness is a consuming fire. And only in the changed heart of redemption are we enabled to purify our conscience and serve Him as we should. Or to say it another way: the sandals must be removed, they cannot simply be cleaned up. Redemption is not reformation; it is accomplished through death of the old and creation of the new.

2 God Keeps His Promises

God next introduces Himself to Moses—He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, i.e., the God Who has entered into covenant with His chosen people and intends to keep His word (vv. 6-9). As in the *Amidah*, the Name “God” is repeated with each name of the Patriarchs to whom the covenant was established: “The God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” The emphasis is upon the personal, one-to-one relationship that God has with His chosen ones. Isaac’s relationship in covenant with God was not via Abraham as father—it was directly with God, and so with Jacob and now with Moses and the nation as a whole.

This is what distinguishes the true and living God from all of man’s fabrications (idols). The God of our fathers takes the initiative to come and be with His chosen ones—God met Moses in the wilderness, where he was. And this is the glory of it all—God moves to love mankind *first*, not *vice versa*. Moses did not go in search of God. God, as in the garden, comes looking for Moses. “We love Him because He first loved us.”

But why? Why does God go “looking” for sinful man in order to enter into fellowship and covenant with him? The only answer to this question is God’s own sovereign desire. It was His purpose to seek out those whom He would save. God acts in accordance with His sovereign plan to accomplish His eternal will—this and this alone is the motivation for His interaction with mankind. And He never fails to keep His promises. To suggest otherwise is in every way to deny the very essence of The Name.

God, in His own sovereign and free love, chose Abraham and His seed. As such, He promised blessing to them, and protection. Now that the Egyptians were treating His chosen people with contempt, He moves to fulfill His word to them—to come to their aid and to rescue them. His promises are no less certain today, for He never changes. And His relationship in these promises is no less personal. Our names are inscribed upon the breastplate and worn over the heart of our great High Priest.

3 God Has Chosen to Accomplish His Will through People

God is not dependent upon people. He can get His work done without the help of anyone. But He, more often than not, chooses to use people to accomplish His purposes. This, of course, is a supreme blessing, to be used by God to accomplish His purposes. It is for this reason that the *mitzvot* are a blessing, for *mitzvot* are the instructions of the King to those He has chosen as His servants.

God first informs Moses of the situation and that He (obviously) is aware of it. Then He informs Moses that he would be the divinely sent messenger—the one through whom God would accomplish His grand plan of the exodus.

Moses wasn’t so sure. At first this appears as a healthy expression of humility, but it ends in a show of apparent faithlessness. Note the three questions Moses asks:

1. Who am I? (v. 11)
2. What is His name? (v. 13)
3. What if they will not believe me? (4:1)

Then note God’s answers:

1. Certainly I will be with you. (v. 12) [It really doesn’t matter what strengths or weaknesses you have as long as I’m there].

2. I AM WHO I AM (v. 14) [My character is the basis of your trust].
3. I will give you power (4:1-5) so they will believe. [Their responses are My concern, not yours].

How often do we have the same questions as Moses as we face the events of life? We consider ourselves and recognize our insufficiencies. God promises to be with us (which ought always to be enough!). We lack an accurate understanding of who God really is (we're not as diligent as we should be in the study of the Scriptures). God graciously reveals to us more and more as we seek to "know His Name." We list all of the ways that we're quite sure we cannot succeed, and God counters with all of the ways He intends to make us successful! But through this dialog He asks us to be faithful, to demonstrate our faith in Him, to trust that His presence and power will accomplish His designed plan in us.

4 The God Who Is

What is the meaning of the four-letter name that God reveals to Moses? This, of course, is the long-standing question, and one that has given rise to a great many debates. I doubt that we will settle the dispute here! But knowing some of the data might help.

- a. The four-letter Name is called the "Tetragrammaton" which is Latin meaning "four letters."
- b. It is this Name that Jews and those worshipping with them from ancient times refused to pronounce, substituting circumlocutions such as "heaven," "Adonai," "HaMakom" (הַמָּקוֹם, "the place"), "HaShem" (הַשֵּׁם, "the Name"), etc.
- c. The four letters are ה - ו - ה - י, *yod, hey, vav, hey*. Each of these letters, at certain times in the history of the Hebrew language, functioned both as consonants as well as marking vowel sounds. Yod = long i, hey=short a, vav = long u or long o. Thus, the four letters by themselves do give a single pronunciation, but could be pronounced a number of ways.
- d. In the MT of the Hebrew Bible, the Masoretes indicated a *qere-ketiv* (what is read instead of what is written) whenever the Name appears. They would write the vowels of the word that should be substituted for the Name. Thus, when Adonai was to be read instead of the Tetragrammaton, they would write YeHoVaH (יְהוָה or יְהוֹה). Not realizing this, later translators manufactured "Jehovah" as God's Name, but of course this is the consonants of the Tetragrammaton with the vowels of Adonai—a genuine misnomer! In certain instances, where YHVH is coupled with Adonai (e.g., Gen 15:2), it became the tradition to substitute Elohim for the Tetragrammaton, and thus the Name is written יְהוָה or יְהוֹה in the MT.

e. Many scholars have taken the position that the Name is somehow tied to, or based upon, the Hebrew verb הָיָה, the verb "to be." Of course, in the Hebrew verb system there is no form that corresponds to our present tense verb "am," thus to write "I am" in Hebrew is impossible. Instead, the simple pronoun אָנֹכִי, *ani*, "I," is understood to represent "I am" when the context demands it. The verb to be (הָיָה) shows up in the Tanach either in the Perfect ("was") and imperfect ("will be"), and only twice as a participle (Ex 9:3, Qal f. sing.; Prov 13:19, Nif f. sing.). The Qal m. sing. participle form, הַיֹּהֵב is not found in the Tanach.

f. The significant line of 3:14, אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה is usually translated "I am who I am" though a more precise translation of the Hebrew would yield "I will be what I will be" since the verb "to be" is, in both cases, in the imperfect aspect. Indeed, the Stone Chumash translates it "I shall be as I shall be." Interestingly, the Lxx translates the phrase ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν, "I am the one being" or

“I am the one who is.” The Rabbinic commentaries offer this perspective: (note *b.Berachot* 9b for example),

I am that I am. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, Go and say to Israel: I was with you in this servitude, and I shall be with you in the servitude of the [other] kingdoms. He said to Him, Lord of the Universe, sufficient is the evil in the time thereof! Thereupon the Holy One, blessed by He, said to him, Go and tell them I AM has sent me unto you. (Rashi’s comments are a repeat of this).

But the point that must be made here, and one that is quite significant in my estimation, is that the Christian commentators (following a Greek ontology) read the Lxx “I am the one being” or “I am who I am” as a statement of essential being, while the Hebrew text emphasizes essential character revealed through doing. What the text stresses, then, is that just as God has fulfilled His promises to Israel in the past (and particularly in His faithfulness to preserve Jacob, his family, and the nation while under the rule of the Egyptians) so He will act in the future to fulfill His word and to be with Israel. God’s character is therefore not affirmed primarily on philosophical terms (eternality, omnipotence, etc.) but by His actions on behalf of His people. God’s character is known through His actions.

With these data in mind, how should we understand the meaning of the Name, based as it is upon Ex 3:14? The Name signifies the One Who has made a covenant and Who designs human history in order to fulfill that covenant. The God of Israel, by His very name (the Tetragrammaton) is the God not merely Who breaks into history, but Who ordains history to bring about His appointed purposes. He is the One through Whom, and by Whom, and to Whom all things exist. This is the revelation of the Name.

But most significant for our study is that the Name as revealed to Moses, “I will be what I will be” is best seen in the repeated use of אֶהְיֶה, “I will be” in the phrase “I will be with you” or “I will be with your mouth” (Ex 3:12; 4:12, 15). The very essence of God’s character is seen in His promise to “be with” His chosen people. Indeed, the whole theme of Exodus can be summed up in the dwelling of God among His people, represented most clearly in the Tabernacle and the service of the Tabernacle. In short, the Name of God reveals His purpose to dwell with His people, and in His dwelling, to secure their destiny within the realm of His covenant promises.

5 “I AM” and Yeshua

The attempts, then, to find in the words of Yeshua the “I AM” of Exodus 3 are somewhat off the mark. Please do not misunderstand what I am saying: I affirm the absolute unity of Yeshua and the Father, including the fact that Yeshua performed the same acts as the Almighty (creation, the exodus, etc.), and therefore is one with Adonai, being fully divine. This is not the issue. My emphasis is simply that the Greek ἐγώ εἰμι (“I Am”) found, for instance, in John 8:58, is not so much the point of connection with the Tetragrammaton as it is the affirmation of His equality with the Father throughout eternity. It is not that Yeshua somehow speaks the same words as Exodus 3:14 and by speaking these words affirms that He is Adonai. Rather, His language here simply proclaims that He existed before Abraham, and by that affirmation He categorically states His equality with the Almighty. It was this that caused the reaction of those He confronted.

But I also want to emphasize that the similarity in language between the Lxx and the Gospel

sayings of Yeshua as they were put into Greek was very instrumental in the emerging Christian Church for their view of Yeshua as Messiah. Since the Bible was being read entirely in Greek by Greeks and Romans, the philosophical categories of ontology (“ground of being”) were no doubt the first hermeneutical referent suggested when “I AM” passages were read. This, in turn, gave rise to the need for Creeds that would define the “essential nature” (in philosophical terms) of Yeshua and His relationship to the Father and the Spirit. This may have been seen as necessary to answer the philosophical questions of the day, but it led to a dogmatic theology that could not find its primary foundation in Scripture. And this led eventually to errant theology, and the demise of the testimony of Yeshua.

6 The Practical Ramifications of Knowing God’s Name

How should we apply these things? First, the Sacred Name of God emphasizes that He always does what He says He will do, and He never goes back on His promises. To suggest that God has not kept His word (e.g., in teaching that the covenant made with Israel has now been abandoned, or that the eternal nature of the Torah has now been changed) is in essence to besmirch the Name—to drag it down to a level comparable with man himself. Moreover, to live as though the eternal word of God has somehow fallen out of importance, or that the commands which He revealed as eternal have now been put aside, is likewise to disregard the very meaning of His Name. It is an egregious error that so many people who confess a true faith in God and His Messiah Yeshua can, at the same time, dismiss parts of His eternal word as though somehow they are temporal and currently inapplicable. Is God with us now? And does He remain the eternal, unchanging God Who was likewise with Moses and ancient Israel? Then how could it be suggested that the word of the Eternal One has somehow become irrelevant and no longer in need of being obeyed? Rather, encapsulated in the very Name of God, the revelation of His eternal nature and being, is the promise that He will always be with His people, and that therefore His unchanging word is likewise the possession and guiding light for all of those who are part of His family through the miracle of His grace. “For I, YHVH, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal 3:6).

Secondly, then, we sanctify the Name by living out the reality of its meaning—we live on the basis that what He has said is true. We keep the *mitzvot* and we live a life of faith based upon what He has said He will do. If we live as though what He has said is actually irrelevant, then we have lived in a way that defames the Name and fails to sanctify it.

Thirdly, our life of faith has as its focus His Name, and Yeshua is the revealer of His Name, for it is by Yeshua that the covenant is ultimately realized for Israel and for all attached to her. No one can truly sanctify the Name apart from a full acceptance of God’s Messiah Who has come to reveal the Name. The oft repeated verse (Ps 118:25) in connection with Yeshua’s role as Messiah is, “Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of YHVH.” To “come in the Name of YHVH” means to come with the mission of revealing the Name and accomplishing those things that only God can do. Therefore, to disregard Yeshua, or to discount His role as the bearer of the Name, is likewise to disregard the One Who sent Him. Note these statements of Yeshua in John’s Gospel: “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me” (John 6:45); “...if you knew Me, you would know My Father also” (John 8:19); “...If God were your Father, you would love Me” (John 8:42); “...He who hates Me hates My Father also” (John 15:23); “I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your Name,

the Name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are” (John 17:11). Yeshua is the incarnation of the Name, and thus a sanctification of the Name is equally a reception of, and submission to, the Messiah Who is the revelation of the Name incarnate.

The mystery of the Divine nature is therefore found in the singular “Name” found in the commission of Yeshua to His disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit...” (Matt 28:19). The text does not say “in the names” but “in the Name” (singular). The mystery of the oneness of God is therefore expressed in the fact that Father, Son and Spirit equally bear “the Name” yet function as a plurality within the eternal oneness of God. This is not presented as an ontological or philosophical axiom, but rather as the reality of God with us, Immanuel. For Yeshua goes on to promise “...and look, I AM WITH YOU always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 29:20). In the phrase “I am with you,” He reiterates the essence of אֶהְיֶה (“I will be what I will be”) in our Torah *parashah*. In the same manner, Yeshua promised His disciples that the Spirit would abide with them: “...the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you” (John 14:17).

The proof that God never changes is found in the reality that He remains eternally with His people. It is the abiding and unchanging presence of God with His people that secures their salvation. And it is God’s desire to dwell with His people that reveals the very essence of His nature.