



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Va'era*

Exodus 6:2 – 9:35

Rosh Hodesh Shevat, 5767

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In times of crisis, how might we find God? Perhaps Moses' early encounter with God will give us insight to this question.

In the Jewish tradition, Moses had the most intimate relationship possible with God. By the end of the Torah, at the conclusion of the Book of Deuteronomy, we are told that God knew Moses face-to-face, as one person to another. But this relationship took time to grow in closeness and trust.

Moses first encounters God at the burning bush. My student Minna Schmidt points out the uniqueness of this encounter for Moses. She asks: What does Moses know of God? After all, he has grown up in Pharaoh's court, aware that he is an Israelite yet under the powerful influence of the Egyptian culture and religious system. Then, after fleeing Egypt, he marries the daughter of a priest in the pagan country of Midian. Moses' entire life has been spent outside of the Israelite culture and religion.

When Moses turns aside in curiosity to see the bush that burns but is not consumed, God calls to him, saying "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses' response is to hide his face in fear. Who can blame him for being startled, afraid, perhaps even doubtful during this unexpected first encounter?

Moses finally agrees to be God's messenger in freeing the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. But Pharaoh responds to Moses' demand to let the Israelites go by adding to the already back-breaking work of the slaves. The Torah portion for last week ends with Moses' cry of despair to God, accusing God of bringing harm to the very people God wishes to save.

God's response is indirect, as we read at the beginning of this week's portion. Rather than address Moses' cry of despair, God replies in an unexpected way: by giving Moses a new way to name God. "I am Adonai. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by my name Adonai."

The Hebrew name that we render "Adonai" is the most intimate Jewish name for God. Perhaps God chooses this moment to reveal this name so that Moses will have a deeper sense of confidence and trust in the God in whose hands Moses has placed his life and the welfare of his people.

We now return to the initial question: In times of crisis, how might we find God? We might not be as privileged as Moses to have a direct, miraculous encounter with God, but we can be instructed by Moses' experience. The Torah shows us that God has many identities and appears in many forms. "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" tells us that just as our ancestors had a unique relationship with God, so too do we. Just as our ancestors had different names for God and different understandings of God's place in their life, so too do we.

During a time of crisis perhaps we are like the young Moses, not yet aware of God's presence. Or we find that the relationship we thought we had with God is not supporting us now, and we need a new "name" for God. Like Moses we can look around us for signs of God's presence. We are not likely to see a burning bush, but we might see a ray of sunlight on a vase of flowers, a reminder of the awesome beauty of the natural world. We might notice a gentle touch or a kind smile, and recognize it as God's way of bringing comfort through human beings. During moments of despair, rather than looking for a miracle, we can turn to God as an intimate presence accompanying us and our caretakers during the journey of our illness.

As we open ourselves to new ways God can appear to us during times of crisis, may we grow in closeness and trust to the God of our ancestors, and draw comfort from our own personal connection to the Holy One.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Helen Cohn of Congregation Chaverim in Tuscon, Arizona. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging.

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