

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Va'era)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*  
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

*Imagine coming home at the end of a long day. Your wife and children are all home, and you call them into the living room to announce something. Curious, they all sit down on the sofa, waiting to hear what is so important. Perhaps this is your response to some deep, long conversation you had with one of them earlier in the week?*

*What if you simply smiled, introduced yourself to them by name, and walked out of the room? They would probably be calling up the psychiatrist before you could sit down.*

There are certain things in life we take for granted, and chief among them are the relationships we have built over a lifetime. So one wonders exactly what Hashem is saying at the beginning of this week's portion.

*"And G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him 'I am G-d'." (Exodus 6:2)*

Why is G-d introducing Himself to Moshe? Especially considering the point we are at in the story:

After seventy-nine years, G-d, in last week's portion, finally introduces Himself to Moshe, at the Burning Bush, and after much discussion, Moshe accepts the mission to go back to Egypt and facilitate the redemption of the Jewish people from slavery. Moshe arrives back in Egypt and things seem to be off to a good start: he enlists Aaron's help, convenes the Jewish Elders, and the entire People, seeing the miracles Moshe & Aaron perform, as well as hearing the promise Moshe brings from G-d, believe that redemption is at hand. One can sense, from between the verses, the euphoria that must have gripped the nation. After over two hundred years of slavery, a leader has arisen who will take them home, at last, to the land they have dreamed of. Moshe even gets an audience with the Pharaoh himself, and it seems redemption is finally at hand. Imagine a Jew arriving in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942, turning Nazi rifles into wildflowers and tanks into beautiful balloon ... the Jews must have been packing their bags.

But something goes terribly wrong, and overnight the dream becomes a nightmare. Not only are the Jews not free, they are more enslaved than ever. In response to Moshe & Aaron's request for freedom, Pharaoh has doubled the already impossible workload, and the Jews bend under the terrible burden. Moshe, in response to the people's bitter challenge, calls out to the G-d who has promised redemption, asking:

*"Why have you sent me?" (5; 22); Where is the redemption You promised us is at hand?*

And it is at *this* juncture that G-d decides to 'introduce' Himself!? What can this mean? Further, G-d seems to continue with a short history lesson:

*"And I appeared unto Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... but my name I did not reveal to them" (6:3).*

Was G-d, throughout the entire book of Genesis, speaking to the forefathers anonymously? What does all this mean?

And G-d's narrative continues with an even stranger topic:

*"And I have also fulfilled my covenant to give them the land of Canaan that they once lived in." (6:4)*

Huh? What covenant, exactly, has G-d fulfilled? They are still slaves in the land of Egypt, and their oppression is worse than ever!

Indeed, it seems G-d then contradicts Himself; by promising (6:5) He will now remember the covenant, which of course means he has not yet fulfilled it! So what is going on?

Why is G-d introducing Himself to Moshe, and for that matter, to the Jewish People, and what exactly is the nature of this covenant?

*Deep in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem, lies a broad wall, covered with moss, seeped with history. Most tourists don't seem to get that far, bypassing the corner street that leads to it, in search of better-known historical sites. Almost as though this wall comes to those who earn it.*

*2,700 years ago, the big bully on the block was the empire of Assyria. Ashur, as it was called in the Bible, had mustered the largest army the world had ever seen: 185,000 men. And this army, commanded by Saragon, the great Assyrian general, had been waging a campaign of terror and destruction over the entire Middle East. In the Talmud, Saragon is called Sancheirev, from the language of Churban, destruction; Sancheirev was the destroyer. After destroying the ten northern Tribes in a brutally violent military campaign, Sancheirev set his sights on the pearl of the Middle East: Jerusalem.*

*The southern Kingdom of Judea was not much to speak of, 2,700 years ago. Encompassing some twenty or thirty square miles around Jerusalem, with little in the way of a standing army, and no natural barriers to rely on, the Jews who managed to stay ahead of the advancing Assyrian army, escaped into the Old City walls of Jerusalem.*

*Soon the city was overflowing with 30,000 Jews, desperate to survive the coming onslaught. The King at the time was Chizkiahu (Hezekiah), who was also a prophet, and The Book of Kings tells how he set about fortifying the walls of the city, which had fallen into disrepair. The verses point out how he built a broad wall to encompass all the homes that had sprouted up in the northwestern corner of the city outside the walls. Indeed, in their haste to build this wall ahead of the advancing Assyrians, they built up two outer walls, throwing stone and mud inside to achieve a wide, broad wall against the Assyrian battering rams, and they built it up in some places on top of some of the homes to save time. One has the sense the last stones were in place just in time.*

*What must it have felt like, to see 185,000 men bent on your destruction coming up through the valley and surrounding your home?*

*There were 30,000 Jews trapped inside the city, and things soon went from bad to worse. There was no food; the Jews were starving to death. One night, as Chizkiahu was out walking the ramparts to inspect the walls, he came across two women arguing over a bundle. When he came closer he saw it was a dead baby, and discovered they were arguing over dinner. The Jews, he realized, had sunken to their nadir. They could not run, nor did they have an army with which to fight, and not for the first time and certainly not for the last, they were not given the option of surrender. So he did what Jews have been doing ever since: he called the entire city together in prayer.*

*Understand that these 30,000 Jews represented the entire Jewish People; there was no one else left. The northern Tribes had been completely wiped out, and there were as yet no Jews living in the Diaspora. And 185,000 men surrounded them: the mightiest army the world had ever known, who had never been defeated. **2,700 years ago, we were on the verge of the final solution to the Jewish problem.***

*So Chizkiahu called the entire Jewish people together in prayer. Any time the entire Jewish people will get together to do anything, is a moment of enormous promise. In fact, this is the secret of Yom Kippur.*

*So the people pray, and Hashem performs a miracle. In the middle of the night, the entire Assyrian army falls dead before the angel of the Lord.*

*(Amazingly, this story which is told partly in the 19th chapter of the second Book of Kings) is also described in the ancient writings of Herodotus, the historian of Alexander the great, who says the 200,000 strong army of Assyria mysteriously die of bubonic plague outside the walls of Jerusalem.)*

*Today, you can see this wall, discovered courtesy of Jordanian mortar fire in the Six-Day War. You can see how the wall is built as a broad wall, rising on top of ancient homes and built exactly as the Bible describes. Carbon dated along with the Assyrian arrowheads found below it in the valley, it sits quietly triumphant, at long last rediscovered, having waited so long for her children to come home.*

*In 2002, after sitting with 3000 Birthright Israel participants who came to Israel for the first time and listening to Prime Minister Sharon describe to them how they are part of the fulfillment of a 2,000 year old dream, I took our 80 students to that wall. There are no words to describe what it feels like to stand above such a wall, listening to the wind howling through the alleys of Jerusalem. It is almost too much to take in. So you look at one stone, and you wonder where these Jews, so long ago, found the faith to build such a wall and still believe they would survive...*

So what is this covenant G-d speaks of to Moshe? A thousand years earlier, this was the covenant G-d made with Abraham. Abraham, seeing himself childless at nearly one hundred years old, is promised by G-d that he will have a son who will inherit his dream. Abraham (Genesis 15:4-6) trusts in G-d and believes in this promise. But then Abraham asks an amazing question (15: 8):

*“Ba’meh edah ki irashena?”*

*‘How do I know my descendants will really inherit this land?’*

Incredibly, Abraham, who has no problem believing he and Sarah will have a child though Sarah is ninety years old, does not believe G-d will give the land to the descendants of that child?

G-d’s response is even stranger: He commands Abraham to cut calves and sheep into pieces, laying them on either side of the path which Abraham then walks through. vultures descend and pick at the pieces of the carcasses. And then Abraham falls into a heavy sleep and darkness and fear descend upon him. And at this point, the Torah tells us, G-d makes a covenant with Abraham, promising him that his children will one day be strangers in a strange land, and they will suffer there, but that they will eventually come home. Abraham awakens, the sun comes out, and G-d makes a covenant promising Abraham that He will give this land, the land of Israel, to his children.

Rav Soleveitchik, one of the great rabbis of the last generation, explains this puzzling sequence of events. You see, Abraham misunderstood the nature of our relationship with G-d. Abraham assumed our relationship as one of contract, or *chozeh*. G-d teaches Abraham that our relationship with Him is really one of *Brit*, or covenant.

A contract is an agreement whereby both parties agree to a list of mutual conditions, which bind them to certain commitments. But if one side violates the conditions, the agreement is no longer binding on the other side. This is how Abraham understood our relationship with Hashem. As long as we do our bit, Hashem will do his. But if we violate our end of the bargain, then Hashem need no longer be committed to his. Abraham was confident that he could keep his end of the bargain, but how could he guarantee his descendants would do the same? And when they would violate their end of the bargain, how could Hashem promise they’d still deserve the land of Israel?

Hashem explains to Abraham, however, that our relationship with G-d is not one of contract. We are bound by a covenant. And a covenant, unlike a contract, can *never* be broken. Kind of like the ‘agreement’ we enter into when we have children. You can divorce a wife, but never a child. They will always be your children. Even when it seems the Jewish people are being cut to pieces, and the vultures,

symbolizing the nations of the world, descend upon them, the Jewish people will somehow walk through all this, and some day they will come back into the sunlight.

Hashem promises that *no matter what* happens, one day we will come home. That is our covenant; our promise.

This is precisely what Moshe and the Jewish people needed to hear, specifically at the point when things seemed so dark. Bending under the backbreaking labor, enslaved for over two hundred years, without even straw to make bricks, laughed at by Pharaoh and the Egyptians, Moshe and the Jewish people are reminded in their darkest moment of that same covenant.

In fact, this is what the name that G-d 'introduces' Himself with really means: the same letters that form the root of *Hayah*, *Hoveh*, and *Yehiyeh*, Hashem was, is, and will be. This is the name of G-d that represents the fact that Hashem transcends time and nature. We need to remember when things seem so challenging, Hashem promised so long ago that just because things don't make sense, indeed may *never* make sense from our perspective in this world, it is all a part of our journey begun so long ago. And that one day, somehow, Hashem will bring us home.

This is the meaning of the mention of Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov, as well as the lineage of the sons of Yaakov, seemingly out of nowhere, detailed in 6:14. Why here, and now, does Hashem have to list all the families and descendants of the people of Israel up to that point?

Because while there is a promise from G-d that one day we as a people will come home, there is no guarantee that each of us, as individuals, will be part of that promise. That depends on us. And the secret to being part of this incredible journey begins with remembering from where I come, because remembering where I am from is a part of discovering who I am.

The Jewish people after two hundred years of darkness in Egypt were so lost. Hashem tells Moshe: you have to remind them of who they are, and of all they can be.

*Right above this ancient broad wall, sits a playground, where the Jewish children of the Old City of Jerusalem come to play and laugh in the sunshine.*

*2,500 years ago, amidst the flames of the destruction of the Temple, the prophet Zechariah (8:4-5) issues an amazing prophesy:*

*"There will come a time, so says the Lord of Hosts, when the old will yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem, leaning on their walking sticks from length of days, and the city streets of Jerusalem will be filled with the sounds of the children, playing in her alleyways."*

*These children, playing in that playground, above that wall, are the fulfillment of a twenty five hundred year old dream. The Jewish dream has never been about armies marching in; our dream has been that one day the children will come back to play.*

*After two thousand years of wandering, we are home. And despite everything, thousands of students on El Al planes came back to see it all, and to become a part of this journey begun so long ago in the depths of Egyptian bondage.*

*And if you come and walk through the alleys of Jerusalem, you can see it too, this incredible 2,700 year old wall, waiting for so long for all of her children to come home to play...*

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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