

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Va'era

What a great tradition we have. You know the joke: if you have five Jews, you get fourteen opinions? Did you ever wonder where it came from? Well, we get a clue this week. The Torah portion begins with God telling Moses that God has aliases. "I am God (Y-H-V-H). I made Myself seen to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, by the name of El Sha-dai, but by My name, Y-H-V-H, I did not make Myself known to them." We can't ever answer a question straight on. One God, multiple names - five Jews ... at least we are authentic. In fact, the diversity of opinion is something that we celebrate. The Talmud teaches that anyone claiming to have a literal translation of the Torah has blasphemed. It also teaches "Aelu v'aelu divrae Elohim khayim - These words and these words are both the words of the living God." No wonder it was Einstein, the Jewish scientist, who developed the scientific maxim that he appropriately called the theory of "relativity." For us, everything is relative, well, most of the time.

Such is the tradition on these opening words of this portion. Some sources understand these words as a rebuke of Moses. I, on the other hand (and I am not alone) see it otherwise. We ended last week's portion witnessing a conversation between God and Moses. As bad as things were for the Israelites in Egypt, when Moses came before Pharaoh demanding that Israel go free, things got even worse. Moses was unhappy that God would have sent him to make things worse. God continues that conversation here, reminiscing about the faith of the patriarchs. They had a blind faith in God (according to the Talmud). From the Talmud we read, "Many times I revealed Myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; they did not question My ways, nor did they say to me, 'What is Your name?' You, on the other hand, asked from the start, 'What is Your name?' and now you are saying to Me, 'You have not saved Your people!' RASHI (medieval commentator) evens posits God saying, "Even when I instructed Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering to me, he did not question, but you Moses, question everything." Knowing only part of God's truth, the patriarchs accepted God with blind faith. Moses, who got to see "all of God's splendor" took God to task at every turn. More modern commentators see these as a rebuke of Moses. And, thus, it seems as though our tradition teaches that God was not happy with Moses, and that Moses had a lot to learn about how God works in the world.

I am not sure I agree with modernity on this one. I think modern commentators have forgotten that four fifths of the Torah is about this "Questioner," Moses and the work and teaching Moses accomplished as God's messenger / partner with the people. The Torah's text ends reminding us that we had never before and never will see another man such as Moses ... who has seen God face to face. Our tradition refers to Moses as "Moshe Rabbaenu – Moses, our teacher." I also know that we are a people who question. Tevya is the paradigmatic Jew who argues with God while performing daily tasks, in an ongoing and very regular conversation. This is what we do, and we learned it from the paradigm of Moses. Perhaps God figured out that a real conversation could not take place with the Patriarchs, because they did not know God well enough. Perhaps God is celebrating the relationship with Moses, because he had the courage and standing to converse and not just obey. It is kind of like the moment when your child really first carries on an adult conversation with you. All conversations with our children are meaningful, but when they become our partners in the adult world, they ascend to a whole new level. Personally, I think the text and its traditional commentaries profoundly tell us that God celebrates

our partnership because God needed Moses to do God's work of building a community and healing a people.

I think the sages knew that the greatest test of faith is represented not by Abraham who was willing to kill his own son, by Isaac who chose between his sons, or Jacob who bargained faith with God, lied to his father and subjugated most of his children to his love for Joseph and Benjamin. No, Moses is our paradigm. Perhaps not understanding this notion is the root of so many problems in this world wherein we blindly follow governments and authorities when we know their actions to be wrong; when they ignore the very real traumas that people face in this world. We know full well that where everyone around us falters, we cannot survive. We must ask questions where we do not understand. Moses asked who was sending him to Pharaoh. I think he had a right – an obligation to know, before setting forth on that task. The task can only have value if the actor knows why he is acting. For, in truth it is only through knowing and understanding that anything we do has value. Commit to asking more and better questions. Be intentional in how you live in this world. Help make it make sense for others, as well. Shabbat Shalom.