

Parashat Va-Era: I appeared
Exodus 6:2-9:35
January 17, 2015

Introduction

This is the first time I have wrestled with this portion, and have relied on reading the Zohar and the Sefat Emet. Their focus on the opening paragraph of the portion is enough. Here, according to our sources, a new relationship is being forged between God and Moses and His people. Within this first paragraph of the portion, God appears as both Justice and Mercy for the first time, creating a new, fuller presence with Moses, and therefore with the people. The possibility of Mercy and Understanding exposes a series of disconnects. There is a depletion of spirit in the enslaved people. The word of God and the people's capacity to hear is unavailable. The indwelling presence of the Divine is completely hidden. Of course, the enslaved are also us. And there is a way out of that narrow place, a way out of exile.

Since this is the first time I have worked with this portion, there are too many words in this contemplation, so please just hear what you need to hear and assume the words you don't hear are not for you. As we form a community in this next hour and a half, it is my hope that the words and the silence steep within us, and give rise to a new understanding.

This portion continues the story of Moses and Pharaoh and the plagues. At the end of the last portion, Moses was complaining to God that he tried to communicate with Pharaoh, but the ruler would not heed his message from the Lord, and everything was getting worse for the people as a result. The Pharaoh's decrees became still harsher.

Here is the opening paragraph of Va-era, "I appeared":

² God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the Lord. ³ I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name YHVH. ⁴ I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. ⁵ I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. ⁶ Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. ⁷ And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. ⁸ I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the Lord." ⁹ But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage. (Exodus 6:2-9)

Niggun

Part I: To Unite Judgment and Mercy

Zohar opens this portion:

“Trust in YHVH forever and ever, for Yah YHVH is an eternal rock (Isaiah 26:4)....

a person’s strength should be in the place that is sustenance and nexus of all, called [forever and ever, eternity].”

(D. Matt, Zohar, Vol IV, p. 70)

We cannot know the place from which worlds emerged and were formed, but we can contemplate eternity.

“Whoever places his strength in the Holy Name endures in the world. Why? Because the world is sustained by the Holy Name....”

(Zohar, p. 72)

This is the Holy Name that Moses was given at this moment.

“This World was created by Justice and endures through justice, as is written: *In the beginning Elohim created* (Genesis 1:). Why? So that human beings would conduct themselves according to justice and not deviate from the path.”

(Zohar, p. 73)

But now there is something new.

This portion begins with Moses challenging God, telling God that he did what he was told to do, but things have gotten worse for his people.

From the Zohar:

“Come and see: *Elohim spoke to Moses* (Exodus 6:2)—decree of Judgment looming over him. What is written above? *Moses returned to YHVH, and said, Adonai, My Lord. See the boldness of Moses! At the beginning of his prophesying he was dissatisfied with this place and said, Adonai, why have You done evil [to this people? Why did You send me?] Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name [he has done evil to this people, and You surely have not rescued Your people! Who would speak like this? But Moses knew that another, higher rung awaited him.*

(Zohar, p. 73)

“another rung, of Compassion. Here, all is linked as one: Judgment and Compassion as is written: *He said to him, ‘I am YHVH.’*”

(Zohar, p. 74)

The Patriarchs never knew directly the fulfillment of God’s compassion.

“Therefore, *I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by My name YHVH I was not known to them*—speaking with them on the rung I have spoken with you!”

(Zohar, p. 76)

In the symbolic language of the Zohar, God’s indwelling presence in the world is represented by His feminine aspect, the *Shekhinah*. In this telling of the story, this noble woman is in silenced and in exile with God’s people, as slaves in Egypt. In this moment, it is as though Moses has become her spouse. God has given His daughter to Moses.

“Similarly, *‘I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai—when She was in my My house, not yet married. They did not speak with Me face-to-face, as I have done with you. Yet you, at the beginning of your words, have spoken to My daughter in My presence with such words as these!’*”

(Zohar, p. 76)

She is no longer completely hidden.

“Who are *the enlightened*? The wise one who contemplates, on his own, things that human beings cannot utter.”

(Zohar, p. 79)

Zohar continues:

“...*Of David. A psalm. The earth and her fullness are YHVH’s...Psalms 24:1*)—Holy Land of Israel, poised to be watered by Him, blessed by Him first, afterward, from Her the whole world is watered.”

(Zohar, p. 76)

The waters of compassion and mercy begin to flow.

Niggun

Silence

Part II: The disconnect between spirit, and word, and the indwelling presence

On the constriction of spirit, the constriction of breath, of *ruah*

From the Zohar:

“Come and see: Through all four supernal sides [fire, water wind, dust] that we have mentioned are interlinked, all of them sustaining above and below, what sustains the world most is *ruah*, for thereby all exists. Soul exists only through *ruah*, for if *ruah* were lacking for even a moment, soul could not endure.

[*ruah* means wind, air, spirit]

(Zohar, p. 88)

“Moses spoke thus to the Children of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses out of shortness of breath and harsh bondage (Exodus 6:9). What does this mean: out of shortness of (ruah) breath?”

Rabbi Yehudah said, “That they could not relax or take a deep breath. Rabbi Shim’on said, “*Out of shortness of ruah, spirit—...[the Divine Mother] had not yet released soul, and ...[Shekhinah] did not yet prevail...so there was a constriction of spirit.*”

(Zohar, p. 90)

The people were in a contracted state, unable to hear anything new. No words. The most they could do was to moan. The beginning of arousal, of consciousness.

On Hearing

The Sefat Emet:

Moses complains, “Indeed, the children of Israel have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh listen, since I am a man of uncircumcised lips?” (Ex. 6:12)...it is because Israel refused to listen that he has these “uncircumcised lips.” The prophet prophesies by the power of those who listen....”hear, my people, and I will speak: [Ps. 50:7] The rabbis teach that a witness must be one who can hear.

This is what delayed the giving of the Ten Commandments. Speech was in exile as long as those who were to receive Torah had not yet readied themselves to hear the word of God...

Hearing requires being empty of everything...This is the essence of exile today as well: our inability to empty ourselves to forget this world’s vanities so that we empty the heart to hear God’s word without any distracting thought...

Now Torah has already been given to Israel by ‘a great voice that did not cease’ (Deut. 5:19) It has never stopped. Each day we say: “hear, O Israel YHVH our God, YHVH is One”; it has never stopped. But we have to prepare ourselves to truly hear the *Shema*’ without any distracting thought.

(Sefat Emet, translated by Arthur Green, p. 90)

On speaking

The Zohar:

“Come and see: Look, the Children of Israel did not listen to me, and how will Pharaoh listen to me, and I am uncircumcised of lips? (Exodus 6:12). But it is previously written: No man of words am I...for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue (ibid 4:10)), and the blessed Holy One replied to him, Who gives a mouth to a human being? Who makes him mute...? (ibid, 11), and He said, I Myself will be with your mouth (ibid, 12). Would you imagine that it was not so? Yet now he says, I am uncircumcised of lips! If so, where is the word that the blessed Holy One promised him previously?”

“However, it is a mystery. Moses is voice, and speech, which is his word, was in exile; so he was uncircumcised’—obstructed from expressing words. He said ‘*How will Pharaoh listen to me, when my word is in exile? For I have no word! I am voice; word will be lacking, for She is in exile.*’ Consequently, the blessed Holy One made Aaron his partner.”

(Zohar, p. 91)

“Come and see: As long as speech was in exile, voice withdrew from it, and the word was obstructed, voiceless. When Moses appeared, voice appeared. Moses was voice without word, which was in exile, as long as speech was in exile, Moses proceeded as speechless voice. And so it continued until they approached Mount Sinai and the Torah was given, whereupon voice united with speech, and then the word spoke, as it is written: *Elohim spoke all these words* (Exodus 20:1). Then Moses became complete with the word fittingly—voice and speech as one in consummation.”

(Zohar, p. 92)

The listener creates the act of speech. The prophet can speak because of the listening of his people. As long as there is no one to listen to God’s word, language stutters....”

The word is in exile. There is stuttering instead of clear speech, and it falls on the deaf ears of a generation.

(Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, p. 84)

Not being able to breathe and not being able to hear are linked. The distress links them. And if they can’t breathe and they can’t hear, there is no solace; there is no opportunity for change. They may yearn to hear, but they are imprisoned by the ‘exile of language.’ They yearn for release. At most they can moan. And that is enough for now. The arousal from above can begin.

(Zornberg, pp. 110-11)

“Come and see: Of arousal below—when Israel aroused toward the blessed Holy One, crying out before Him—what is written? *I have remembered My covenant* (Exodus 6:5)—for in covenant is remembering. Then, desire for all to join in a single bond. As soon as this covenant arouses, joining of all arouses....”

(Zohar, p. 96)

YHVH, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise.

Niggun

Silence

Part III: The path out of exile, toward union

“Come and see: *Take to your heart*—[with a double vet in the word heart]...Moses said, ‘If you wish to understand this to know that YHVH is *Elohim*, take to your heart, then you will know [the double vet] is the the good impulse and the evil impulse, interwoven, one. Therefore, *Take to your heart, to know the matter.*”

([Zohar](#), p. 100)

“...one should serve God not only with the good impulse but even with the evil impulse—by [redirecting] and channeling one’s passions into virtuous action, thereby contributing the raw power of the evil impulse to the good.

“The pair of impulses within the human heart correspond to Love and Justice or Judgment, to YHVH and *Elohim*. Thus, by contemplating the interplay and ideal unity of the impulses in one’s own heart, (*take to your heart*), a person can know...*that YHVH is Elohim*—that divine Love, or Compassion and Justice are inseparable.”

([Zohar](#), p. 100, footnote 108)

“By surrendering to their evil impulse, rather than mastering, [redirecting] and integrating it into the good, the wicked ruin the harmony above....”

([Zohar](#), p. 100, footnote 109)

“Rabbi Abba opened, saying “*you shall love YHVH your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might* (Deuteronomy 6:5). Similarly here, holy unification is intimated—an admonition that one should unite the Holy Name fittingly with supernal love. *With all your heart*—right and left, called good impulse and evil impulse. *With all your soul*—soul of David, placed between them. *And with all your excess*—enveloping them above in a place that is boundless. Here is complete unification, loving the blessed Holy One fittingly.”

([Zohar](#), p. 103)

He opened saying, “*Her ways are ways of delightfulness, and all her paths are peace* (Proverbs 3:17). *Her ways are ways of delightfulness*—ways of Torah, for whoever follows the ways of Torah is showered by the blessed Holy One with the delight of Shekhinah, never departing from him. *And all her paths are peace*—for all paths of Torah are entirely peaceful, providing him peace above, peace below, peace in this world, peace in the world that is coming.”

([Zohar](#), p. 129)

“The world that is coming already exists, occupying another dimension...The wise call it the world that is coming, not because it does not exist now, but for us, today, in this world, it is still to come. The world to come does not succeed this world in time, but exists from eternity...outside and above time, to which the soul ascends...the world that is coming is the continuous source of emanation...the world that is coming, constantly coming, never ceasing.”

([Zohar](#), p. 130, from footnote 223)

How can we come to know this?

The Zohar goes back to the first lesson.

“Come and see: Through arousal below, there is arousal above. Until there is arousal below, nothing is aroused above to rest upon him. What is written of Abraham? ...Once they aroused first, the blessed Holy One said to them, *Lekh lekha, Go you forth!* (Genesis 12:1)

The passage from Genesis reads:

"Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

Rabbi Shim'on said, *Lekh lekha, Go for yourself*, to refine yourself, and to yourself,

From your land (ibid.)—from your birth.

From your father's house (ibid.)—examining their root.

To the land I will show you (ibid.)—there what you desire will be revealed to you: the power appointed over it, deep and concealed.

Immediately, *Abram went...* (ibid., 4). As for us, we should go from here, to discover a mystery of wisdom.”

([Zohar](#), p. 134)

“Every person must search and discover the root of his soul, so that he can fulfill it and restore it to its source, its essence.”

([Zohar](#), p. 134, footnote 235)

“*For then I will purify the language of the peoples, that all of them may call upon the name of YHVH and serve Him shoulder to shoulder. (Zephaniah 3:9) And it is written: YHVH will be king over all the earth; on that day YHVH will be one and His name One (Zehariah 14:9)*”

([Zohar](#), p. 135)

Niggun

Silence

bell

Prepared by Rhonda Karlton Rosen

Source material:

Daniel Matt, translator, [Zohar, VI](#)

Arthur Green, translator, [Sefat Emet](#)

Aviva Zornberg, [Particulars of Rapture](#)