Vaera jan 2019

Moses has just been telling god of the hard times that have come to them because of following god’s orders: 5:22: Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people.”

6:1 Then the LORD said to Moses, “You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land.”

At this critical juncture, when the fight between Pharaoh and God, to see who is greater, is set to begin, there is a fork in the narrative, as if the 7 lines that follow are interpolated. Is it something new, set into an already complete story, or is the interpolation really the main issue. The interpolation is followed by the lines: 10The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 11"Come, speak to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and he will let the children of Israel out of his land."

Clearly this resumes the story. the question of why an interpolation at this junction arises. Here are the interpolated lines:

6: 2 God spoke to Moses, and He said to him, "*I am the Lord*. (Ani Adonai)

3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob with [the name] Almighty God (El Shaddai), but [with] *My name YHWH (Adonai*), I did not become known to them.

4 And also, I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned.

5 And also, I heard the moans of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians are holding in bondage, and I remembered My covenant.

6 Therefore, say to the children of Israel, *'I am the Lord*, and I will take you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will save you from their labor, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

7 And I will take you to Me as a people, and *I will be a God* to you, and you will know that *I am the Lord your God*, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

8 I will bring you to the land, concerning which I raised My hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as a heritage; *I am the Lord.*' "

[ask what meaning people give to the lines, ani Adonai]

There are moments in the torah where we get essential statements that appear central to Judaism and ourselves as jews. It is true that I am claiming this is the case here, with this set of interpolated lines, but also for us now. A hundred years later we might find it is irrelevant, as irrelevant as the medieval commentaries of those jewish thinkers of the past whose interpretations now strike some of us as being of interest only because of what it demonstrates about medieval thinkers. What I am indicating by choosing this passage will no doubt leave a similar impression for people in the future. We stand now at the crossroads between that past and that future, and at this moment I take this interpolation into the text as a central dictum. What would rashi have said?

Rashi comments on the powerful short line, 6:2 “I am the Lord” are: “I am] faithful to recompense all those who walk before Me. I did not send you [to Pharaoh] except to fulfill My words, which I spoke to the early fathers. In this sense, we find that it אִנִי ה is interpreted in many places [in Scripture] as “I am the Lord,” [meaning that I am] faithful to exact retribution. [It has this meaning] when it is stated in conjunction with [an act warranting] punishment, e.g., “or you will profane the name of your God; I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:12). When it is stated in conjunction with the fulfillment of commandments, e.g., “And you shall keep My commandments and perform them; I am the Lord” (Lev. 22:31), [it means: I am] faithful to give reward.” https://www.chabad.org/parshah/torahreading.asp?tdate=1/5/2019&p=complete#showrashi=true&lt=primary

The words, I am the lord, have their power because the focus on the name forces us to come to terms with “Adonai.” We largely skip that issue in our reconstructionist mode because we want to avoid the masculinism and rename god without using a male term; instead of Lord, which suggests male power and hierarchy, we remove those qualities by substituting as names universal attributes like The Eternal. Avoiding calling god by a name like Lord is done by saying Hashem for the orthodox or conservatives who avoiding directly saying the two names repeated over and over in the torah, Adonai and eloheynu. The lord our god. The possessive, our, makes god a god of the jews, and in the united states in 2019 that would risk alienating Christians, the dominant and often militant religious group in our country. In Europe that would risk alienating increasingly secular modernists for whom religious fanaticism is considered the great evil trait of our times. In muslim countries, that “our” might not totally alienate those who accept the conventional notion that jews and Christians are people of the book, and therefor merit special consideration. But for fundamentalist muslims, any jewish identity is conflated with Israel and merits punishment or death,

Our god. The reconstructionist want something closer to a Christian appeal to god as a god of all people. So the line above—the line I consider central to the passage, which is “7And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be a God to you, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians”—is anathema since it makes us god’s people, a special, holy, unique people. It makes us better than anyone else. Now, in 1950, jewish parents might well have embraced that interpretation, as my parents and family most certainly did. But in 2019 it doesn’t wash, and instead we progressive jews become happy when our children marry outside the faith and expand our mishpacha to include others. My father would not have understood my son marrying a Gujerati woman, giving the children Turkish names, and raising them without a religion, even though our family was basically non-practising as well.

So what did rashi say? Ani Adonai means I will keep my word, will keep the covenant, make you, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a holy people and give you the holy land.

That’s a mouthful for a simple statement, I am the lord. For rashi, being the lord means, I will punish you if you disobey me. He interprets lines 3 and 4-- “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob with [the name] Almighty God, but [with] My name YHWH, I did not become known to them.

4And also, I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned”--

Rashi interprets the text thus:

|  |
| --- |
| “with [the name] Almighty God: I made promises to them, in all of which I said to them, “I am the Almighty God.” |
| but [with] My name YHWH, I did not become known to them: It is not written here לֹא הוֹדַעְתִּי, “but My Name YHWH I did not make known to them,” but לֹא נוֹדַעְתִּי, “I did not become known.” [I.e.,] I was not recognized by them with My attribute of keeping faith, by dint of which My name is called YHWH, [which means that I am] faithful to verify My words, for I made promises to them, but I did not fulfill [them while they were alive].” |

As for the key line for us now, (signifying that we are the holy people, the special people of god, or those whom hitler called vermin), 7 ‘And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be a God to you, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians,…” Rashi has not a word to say, not a word.

The holocaust has come and gone; Israel is now there, a powerful nation. We live in the diaspora as a well-established, strongly placed minority in a country we, mostly, consider our own, under a pharaoh we mostly believe it is our duty to oppose. Some of us manage the dual identity of being both jewish and American, feel no contradiction in believing Israel is in some sense our country even though the United States is our country of citizenship.

When I read the opening lines of the manifesto above, when god re-introduces himself to moses and says,

I am the lord (ani Adonai), and then:

וָאֵרָ֗א אֶל־אַבְרָהָ֛ם אֶל־יִצְחָ֥ק וְאֶֽל־יַעֲקֹ֖ב בְּאֵ֣ל שַׁדָּ֑י וּשְׁמִ֣י יְהוָ֔ה לֹ֥א נוֹדַ֖עְתִּי לָהֶ׃

I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name יהוה

all my attention is focus on this act of god naming himself, giving the precision of an earlier name, al Shaddai, which is rarely used, and returning with precision to the name yud hey vav hey, which we pronounce as adonai. God goes on to tell moses to say to the Israelite people, on lines 2,3, 6, 7, and 8 above, ani Adonai, I am the lord, I am your god—the word for god that we use, Adonai, and then dodge with words like hashem or the eternal, the merciful, etc—the 99 attributes or names of god, as the muslims like to say—all this is for me, here and now, what is most compelling. Not for questions of belief or spiritual theology, certainly not for linguistic historical reasons, but because if I were to be asked to interpret the lines, to interpret this text, to give a dvar on this parshah, this is where I would have to begin. I want to end, then, by asking you, what do you make of this declaration in this passage and in the whole parshah, ani Adonai. I am the lord. In my last dvar I asked, who is joseph, here I am asking the same kind of question, how can we interpret this statement of identity, I am Adonai—ani Adonai.