

# *Parshas Va'eira*

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## *1. The Inherent Spiritual Capacity of the Jew*

The Torah tells us that Moshe was initially reticent about assuming the role as the Redeemer of the Jewish people when Hashem asked him to do so. The Torah states that Hashem said to Moshe, “**So shall you say to the Children of Yisroel, “Hashem the G-d of your forefathers, the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzchak, and the G-d of Yaakov has dispatched me to you. This is My Name forever, and this is My remembrance from generation to generation.”**”

Hashem told Moshe to communicate to the Jewish people “**My Name is forever (*le’olam*)...**” The word *le’olam* is stated in a deleted form, which means that the word is usually spelled with a “vav” before the “lamed”; however, in this instance the “vav” is deleted. Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the deleted version of *le’olam* can be read *le’aleim*, which means to conceal. The four-letter Name of G-d -***Yud Kay Vav Kay*** should not be pronounced as it is written, but rather as the Name of Hashem -*Adni* (which alludes to Hashem as “Master – *Adon*”). Thus, by not pronouncing it as it is written, the Name of Hashem is concealed. The difficulty is that Moshe was addressing the Jewish people, who were idol worshippers and very much removed from spirituality. So why was it important to tell them that he is representing the One whose Name should be concealed?

The Name ***Yud Kay Vav Kay*** signifies that Hashem is the Infinite G-d with no beginning and no end. G-d was, is, and will be (past, present, future). Initially when Moshe presented himself to Pharaoh as G-d’s agent, he referred to the Name of Hashem as ***Yud Kay Vav Kay*** and Pharaoh immediately rejected him. The concept of ***Yud Kay Vav Kay*** implied that there is a power that is boundless, exists outside of the realm of nature and is unrestricted by its laws – a Being who is unlimited. Pharaoh could not accept this. When he attempted to find the Name ***Yud Kay Vav Kay*** in his encyclopedia of deities, it was not to be found. All the deities that Pharaoh knew were limited, finite, and bound to physical existence.

Although the Jewish people were idolaters, like the Egyptians, Hashem commanded Moshe to tell them that the Being that is ***Yud Kay Vav Kay*** sent him to be their Redeemer. At the same time Moshe would tell them that the pronunciation of this Name is forbidden. Why is this communication also necessary at this moment?

Under normal circumstances when one wishes to impart a concept and impress a belief upon another, one would think that he would initially communicate it on a level that is within that individual’s grasp. However, in this particular context, Hashem wanted Moshe to communicate His Essence to the Jewish people through the Name ***Yud Kay Vav Kay***, although the infinite is something that is incomprehensible. Hashem was telling Moshe that when he communicates His incomprehensible Essence to the Jewish people, he must simultaneously inform them of this aspect of *le’aleim* (*concealment*). Although it is something that is beyond their grasp, they will indeed have the capacity to accept that Hashem is the omnipotent Being.

We see that Hashem’s initial introduction to the Klal Yisroel (Jewish People) had to be in a context of *le’aleim* - concealment. The Jewish people would accept Hashem’s existence at this level even though it was not within a human being’s capacity to comprehend. Similarly, at Sinai, when Hashem offered Klal Yisroel His Torah, they accepted it within an identical context of *le’aleim* “*Naaseh V’ Nishmah* – we will do and then we will listen.” Klal Yisroel accepted the Torah unequivocally, although at that moment they did not know or understand the extent of its obligation. In contrast, G-d first offered the Torah to the rest of the nations of the world and they

asked, “What is written in it?” This meant that they did not have the capacity to accept what is hidden. They did not have the trust and the faith necessary to become the Am Hashem (the Nation of G-d).

The angels were astounded that mere mortals achieved the level that was attained by the Jews. The Jewish people began their ascent because of *le'aleim*. Moshe represented himself as the agent of the Omnipotent Being who is *Yud Kay Vav Kay*. This was accepted in an unquestioned and unequivocal manner, which thereby established us as our Patriarchs (Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov) had done, i.e. that we have the capacity to accept what is beyond comprehension because that is the spiritual make-up of the Jew.

Every Jew has inherited a spirituality that can be awakened. Therefore, a Jew can be brought back to Judaism not necessarily through understanding, but through igniting the spark of spirituality that is inherent within him.

## 2. The Significance of a Name

The Torah tells us that Bas Pharaoh (the daughter of Pharaoh) gave the name “Moshe” to him. “Moshe” means “to draw out” as explained by Rashi in his commentary, it alludes to the event when he was “drawn out” of the water. The Midrash tells us that Moshe was given seven names (Tov, Tuvia, Tuvi, etc.) by his parents Amram and Yocheved. Amram was the leading Sage of his generation and a man who never sinned in his life. Yocheved, the daughter of Levi, was a woman who was recognized for her “fear of Hashem” and who risked her life for Hashem. The Kesav Sofer z'tl asks – given the greatness of Moshe’s parents, why would the Torah refer to Moshe by the name given by the daughter of Pharaoh and not by one of the names given to him by his parents?

The Kesav Sofer answers that the Torah refers to Moshe as the “most humble man who ever walked the face of the earth.” This is the all-encompassing characteristic, which epitomizes Moshe’s greatness. One could become humble in one of two ways: either through experiencing difficulties in life (where one is conditioned through circumstance to assume a posture of humility), or through recognizing G-d’s omnipotence. The Torah wants to give us an appreciation for Moshe’s greatness by referring to him by the name given to him by the princess, the daughter of Pharaoh. Moshe was the adopted grandchild of Pharaoh and was raised in the palace with all of its opulence and affluence. Despite his upbringing as royalty and being recognized as being part of the “upper echelon” of society, he was still the most humble man who ever lived. The name Moshe is a testament to the man, whose humility was one of a kind.

Sforno offers another interpretation of why the Torah refers to Moshe by the name given to him by Bas Pharaoh. He explains, “Bas Pharaoh called him Moshe” which means “to help others” because he has the innate ability to extricate others out of difficult situations. This is why it was deemed by G-d that Moshe be drawn out (saved) from the water and not drowned. According to Sforno’s interpretation, Moshe’s existence was for the purpose of saving others. This was proven to be the case because Moshe was chosen by Hashem to be the Redeemer of the Jewish people.

The Torah tells us that Shifrah (Yocheved) and Puah (Miriam) were the head Jewish midwives who supervised the delivery of all Jewish children. Yocheved was called Shifrah because her role was to cleanse and beautify the newborn children, while Miriam was called Puah because she was the one who calmed and quieted the newborns. The question is why is it so important for the Torah to identify Yocheved and Miriam by their specific roles as midwives? The Torah is revealing to us that the innate character of Yocheved was to beautify the Jewish children and that of Miriam was to calm them. One would think that when Pharaoh ordered Yocheved and Miriam to kill the newborn males on the birth stool the reason they defied his order

was that it was contrary to their nature. However, the Torah reveals to us that although each of them is identified by their inner characteristic – as we discussed - the reason they did not kill the newborn male children was their “fear of Hashem”. Yocheved and Miriam’s selfless sacrifice in saving the Jewish children was unrelated to their dedication as midwives, but because of their “fear of Hashem.”

The Torah tells us that when Hashem told Moshe to go to Pharaoh, he should tell him “Release my firstborn son, Yisroel.” The Jewish people are the children of Yaakov. If this is the case then why does Hashem refer to them here as the Children of Yisroel? Sforno explains that “Yisroel” connotes the eternal nature of the Jewish people. The Jewish people have the inherent ability to survive all circumstances, just as Yaakov survived both man (Esav) and angel (archangel of Esav) and thus became identified as “Yisroel.” Because we are the Children of Yaakov (Yisroel), we have that same characteristic of Yisroel. Therefore, when Moshe refers to the Jewish people Hashem told him that he must say, “My (Hashem’s) firstborn son, Yisroel.” They are no longer identified as Hebrews but as the eternal people “B’nai Yisroel.”

The name identifies the essence of the individual. The appellation “Yisroel” identifies the essence of the Jew. Regardless of the insurmountable conflicts throughout history, the Jewish people continue as the eternal people. Similarly, the name “Moshe” reveals his essence – the ability to save others from difficulty. The Torah refers to Yocheved and Miriam as Shifrah and Puah to demonstrate that despite the fact that their nature was to be caring for the Jewish children, they saved them only because they “feared Hashem.”

Even though as individuals we may be confronted with situations in which we give our lives in order to sanctify the Name of Hashem, nonetheless, the Jewish people as a whole are eternal because we are the B’nai Yisroel.

### ***3. How Does Torah Study Impact on Our Lives as Jews?***

The Torah says that Hashem told Moshe to inform the Jewish people that G-d was going to free them from their enslavement in Egypt. Using the four expressions of redemption Hashem said to Moshe, **“Say to the Children of Israel: ‘I am Hashem, and I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you from their service; I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I shall be a G-d to you...’”**

Moshe addressed the Klal Yisroel as he was commanded by Hashem,” **So Moshe spoke accordingly to the Children of Israel, but they did not listen to Moshe because of shortness of wind (*kotzer ruach*) and hard work.”** Despite the fact that Moshe had proven to the Jews that he was the Redeemer of Israel and the agent of G-d, the Jews had no capacity to absorb the significance of Moshe’s words because they were overwhelmed with their bondage. Although the *Bnai Yisroel* believed what Moshe had told them, they were incapable of processing and internalizing Moshe’s words.

The Ohr Ha’Chaim Ha’Kadosh explains the term *kotzer ruach* to mean “of limited spirit.” He explains that the Jews in Egypt did not study or adhere to Torah principles. They were pagans and idolaters as the Egyptians were. The Ohr Ha’Chaim suggests that the “limited spirit” means that the Jewish people did not have the capacity to put things into perspective because of the overwhelming bondage. He explains the reason they had such limitations was that they did not study Torah. If they had studied Torah, the Jews would have been able to internalize Moshe’s words, because Torah broadens the heart. This means that Torah gives a person the breadth and depth of understanding as well as the capacity to effectively deal with difficulties and issues.

If one does not study Torah, then his capacity for being able to cope with difficult situations is limited. Since the Jewish people were slaves and not involved in the study or observance of Torah, they had a limited capacity and depth of heart to be receptive to Moshe’s words.

The Gemara in *Tractate Taanis* states that if one sees a Torah sage becoming agitated (when the

Torah is being violated), it is the Torah that is “burning within him” that causes this agitation. As the verse states, “My (Hashem) words (Torah) are like fire.” In his commentary, Rashi explains that because of his Torah study, the Torah sage has a broadness of heart – and thus a depth of understanding and sensitivity to the wrong that is being committed. This causes him to react differently than the ordinary person. Therefore, one must give the benefit of the doubt to the Torah Sage if one sees him agitated because he processes reality differently than others.

Because the Talmud Chacham does not have a “limited spirit,” he has the capacity to deal with situations differently than others. There may be situations that seem to be hopeless and bleak yet the Torah sage may put it in a completely different perspective because of the broadness of heart that he has gained through Torah study. The Torah sage’s special perspective is not based solely on an intellectual understanding of reality, but rather, it is something that relates to the essence of who he is.

We conclude the Amidah (Silent Prayer), “May it be Your Will...that the Holy Temple be rebuilt, speedily in our days. Grant us our share in Your Torah, and may we serve You there with reverence as days of old...” Seemingly, the request should have been made that the Bais HaMikdash (Holy Temple) should be rebuilt so that we can serve Him there. However, we interject (before we conclude with the service) that Hashem should give us our portion in His Torah. Why does the receiving of our portion of Torah precede serving Hashem? The answer is that it is only through the Torah that one can have the broadness and depth of heart to be able to internalize Hashem and thus serve Him properly. His internalization of reality and spirituality is completely different from one who is not engaged in Torah. Therefore, after we have the portion of the Torah as requested, we will be able to serve Hashem as in “days of old.”

#### ***4. Why is it So Difficult to Have Clarity?***

The Torah tells us that Moshe and Aaron approached Pharaoh to request that he release the Jewish people. In order to communicate to Pharaoh that Hashem had sent them as His agents, Moshe and Aaron were told to perform a miracle. The Torah tells us that Aaron took his staff, threw it on the ground, and it was transformed into a serpent. In response to this, the sorcerers of Pharaoh also threw their staffs on the ground and were transformed into serpents. The Torah tells us that after Aaron’s staff reverted to its original state it devoured those of the sorcerers.

The Torah states, “**Pharaoh hardened his heart and he did not heed them...**” Seemingly, Pharaoh was not impressed with the miracle performed by Aaron because the Torah tells us “he did not heed them.” Pharaoh’s sorcerers were able to perform a similar miracle and therefore Aaron proved nothing. If Pharaoh dismissed Aaron’s miracle as sorcery, then why was it necessary to harden his heart? Evidently, Pharaoh recognized that there was a difference between Aaron’s action and that of his sorcerers, otherwise why was it necessary for him to enter a state of denial by hardening his heart.

We see that Aaron’s miracle was fundamentally different from the magic performed by the sorcerers. The sorcerers were only able to create an illusion in which the staff appeared to be a snake. However, after their staffs and Aaron’s staff reverted to the original state, Aaron’s staff swallowed theirs - which was not an illusion but reality. Thus, Pharaoh could not dismiss Aaron’s feat as sorcery. It was clearly a supernatural feat. Therefore, the only way Pharaoh was able to deal with this reality was to harden his heart and not heed them at all.

Witchcraft and sorcery have the ability to create visual illusions, which even take on some of the physical properties of what they are mimicking. However, the essence or the chemical composition does not change. For example, when Aaron struck the Nile with his staff and transformed all the water in Egypt into blood, it not only took on the physical appearance of blood but also its chemical composition; it was no longer H<sub>2</sub>O. This can be seen clearly from Moshe’s forewarning to Pharaoh “the Nile will turn to blood and the fish in the Nile will die.” If in fact sorcery could transform something in appearance and in chemical make-up, then why was it necessary for Moshe to say that the fish in the Nile will die? Since we know that fish cannot

survive in blood, it is clear from his statement that the survival of the fish – or not - would be the obvious discernment between sorcery and miracle.

The Torah tells us regarding the plague of blood, **“Pharaoh hardened his heart and he did not heed them.”** Evidently, the miracle of blood was also something difficult for Pharaoh to dismiss outright as sorcery. He needed to harden his heart to deny what was obvious.

Pharaoh believed that there was no Omnipotent and All-Encompassing Universal Being. He believed, as other pagans, that the various deities that exist are limited and can only function within the context of nature. The miracle of Aaron’s staff devouring those of the sorcerers, and the waters of the Nile being transformed into blood (and killing the fish) were clearly caused by a Power that dictates and determines existence. In order for Pharaoh to deny the existence of G-d – the Omnipotent Being - he needed to harden his heart.

The Mishna tells us that during the First Temple Period there were ten revealed miracles that occurred daily in the Bais HaMikdash (the Holy Temple). These miracles did not happen anywhere else in the world. Although they existed for a period of over 400 years, the vast majority of the Jewish people were idolaters. How do we understand this? How is it possible for someone to witness a revealed miracle that cannot be understood in any other context and still adhere to paganism?

The answer is when something is not continually seen and noticed, it can easily be dismissed. If something is obvious and happens persistently then one cannot escape its reality and simply dismiss it. Therefore, he needs to continually harden his heart against it. The Gemara in Tractate *Chagigah* tells us, “Poverty to the Jewish people is like the beautification of a white stallion with a red kerchief.” Meaning, if one is in an impoverished state, he cannot deny his reality and therefore is forced to recognize the Hand of Hashem in his life. Just as the red kerchief brings out the beauty of the stallion, poverty brings out the spirituality of the Jew.

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z’tl cites Chazal who explain that Pharaoh was not personally affected by the plague of blood. Reb Meir Simcha explains that the reason Pharaoh was spared this plague was that it was in the context of measure for measure. Pharaoh raised Moshe in his palace, as his adopted grandson and accommodated him with all his physical needs. Therefore, measure for measure, during the plague, Pharaoh was given water to accommodate his needs. Because of this, Pharaoh was able to dismiss the plague of blood with the mere hardening of his heart.

The Torah tells us in the Portion of the *Tochachah* (the Reproaches) that if one dismisses the sufferings brought upon them by Hashem as mere happenstance, they will only intensify and become more severe until they can no longer be ignored. The purpose of the persistent suffering is to bring a person to acknowledge that he has done wrong and must repent. If he chooses to be obstinate, he will be destroyed. We ask Hashem in our daily tefillah (prayer service) that he should “open our hearts with His Torah.” We request that our hearts be opened, not only for the moment, but also on a continuous basis. We are constantly denying many issues around us because of the cost of recognizing them i.e. our conflicts of interest. The only way one can overcome this natural state of denial is through the study of Torah.

## ***5. There is Nothing Inconsequential in the Eyes of G-d***

Regarding the plague of wild beasts, the Torah states, **“Hashem said to Moshe, ‘...you shall say to him (Pharaoh) So said Hashem: Send out My people...For if you do not send out My people, behold, I shall incite against you... the swarm of wild beasts...And on that day I shall set apart the land of Goshen upon which My people stands, that there shall be no swarm there; so that you will know that I am Hashem (YKVK) in the midst of the land’.**” This means that Pharaoh will understand through the plague of the wild beasts that Hashem (YKVK) is “in the midst of the land.” Seemingly, the significance of the plague should have been for Pharaoh to believe that there is an Omnipotent Being. Therefore, what is the significance of Pharaoh believing that Hashem is “in the midst of the land”?

Initially when Moshe addressed Pharaoh as Hashem commanded him. Moshe told him that he was sent by, **“Hashem (YKVK) the G-d of Yisroel. Send out My people so that they may celebrate for Me in the desert.”** Pharaoh responded, **“Who is Hashem (YKVK) that I should heed His voice...? I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Yisroel.”** Moshe and Aaron replied to Pharaoh, **“The G-d (Elokei) of the Hebrews happened upon us. Let us now go...”** It is understandable that after Pharaoh said, “I do not know Hashem (YKVK)” that Moshe responds with being the agent of Elokei (the Power). The question is why did Moshe need to change the manner in which he refers to the Jewish people from Yisroel to the Hebrews (Ivrim)? Moshe and Aaron changed the manner in which they referred to Hashem from YKVK (The Four Letter Name of G-d) to Elokei (the Power) because Pharaoh rejected the concept of YKVK, which connotes that Hashem is an Unlimited and Universal Being. Thus, they referred to G-d as “Elokei,” meaning “a Power,” since this would be acceptable to Pharaoh. However, why did Moshe and Aaron change the manner in which they referred to the Jewish people from “Yisroel” to “Ivrim”?

The appellation of “Yisroel,” which we inherited from our Patriarch Yaakov, identifies the Jewish people as the eternal and unlimited people. Our existence defies the natural order. The Jews throughout history survived the most untenable and insurmountable situations. The fundamental belief of Pharaoh and the Egyptian culture was that everything is bound to the natural order. They could not accept the fact that there is an Omnipotent Being. If the concept of Omnipotence did not exist for the Egyptians, then a nation such as “Yisroel” (which represents the unbound) cannot exist. Thus, when Moshe referred to Hashem as Elokei, he referred to the Jewish people as “Ivrim” because “Yisroel” is only an extension of YKVK.

Even if the Egyptian could accept the concept of YKVK, an Omnipotent Being, the belief that this Universal Being is associated with a limited existence is something that they could not accept. Therefore, Hashem says that through the plague of wild beasts, it will teach the Egyptians, “I am Hashem, although I am the Unlimited Being, I dictate and Am involved in the most limited situations.” This is the meaning of “I am Hashem in the midst of the land.”

The verse, “...so that you will know that I am Hashem in the midst of the land” is teaching us that despite the fact that Hashem (YKVK) is Unlimited, Unbound, and Universal, He is involved and concerned with every aspect of existence – even though it is limited and physical. Hashem is involved in the most miniscule and insignificant aspects of existence. This is the lesson taught by the plague of the wild beasts.

One of the Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith is that there is reward and punishment. All of our actions are considered significant and therefore we are deserving of the positive and liable for the negative. One may think, since Hashem is Unlimited and Omnipotent, that our actions would have no value or significance vis-à-vis existence and that since Existence is Willed by Hashem, it is unrelated to our actions. However, the reality of reward and punishment indicates the contrary. There is no such thing as an insignificant or inconsequential act. Therefore, there is liability or reward for every aspect of our behavior.

The Torah tells us that when Moshe was initially told by Hashem to build the Mishkan (Tabernacle) as it is stated, “Make for Me a Sanctuary, so that I may dwell in your midst” he was taken aback. Moshe could not understand how was it possible that G-d’s Presence be contained in such a limited location when the world itself is not sufficient to contain His Presence. Hashem responded to Moshe, “You do yours and I will do Mine.” Many aspects of Hashem are unfathomable because He is the Unlimited and Omnipotent Being. However, it is fundamental to our belief and reality that Hashem does concern Himself with our actions although they are limited and finite. This is clearly communicated through the verse **“I am Hashem (YKVK) in the midst of the land.”**