

I AM THAT I AM

Dvar Torah For Parshat Shmot 5779

School nights in my parents' home were rather strictly supervised when I was a kid. Recall that this was the 1970's, that era before kids were expected to fill their every waking hour and boggle their minds with extracurricular programming. Back in my day, you got home from school, maybe had a snack, maybe not, you did your homework, and only then if you had time, did you play outside with your friends. By around 6:30 or 7, your mom called you in for dinner, you took a bath or a shower afterwards, and it was lights out at the latest by 9 PM. Weekends were another thing altogether, but weeknights were an endless round of boot camp style regimentation without the boots.

There was only one time I can recall when my parents' rules were relaxed on a weeknight: the annual showing of Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 epic film, the Ten Commandments, starring Charleton Heston, Yvonne DeCarlo, and Eddie G. Robinson among other great lights of the silver screen. One of the big three networks always showed the film, all four hours of it, on a weeknight near Passover, and it was next to impossible to find the film scheduled on TV the rest of the year. As Jewish day school students, my friends and I were tasked each year on that night with watching the film; this was done on the not so sturdy

assumption that we would take notes, point out the errors in the film that didn't conform to the Torah's narrative about the Exodus, and be ready to discuss the movie in class the next day. Mostly, my friends and I just enjoyed staying up late and watching what we thought was a really cool movie whose lines and scenes are etched deep into my memory.

One of those scenes is Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, the story told in Exodus, chapter three. The entire scene in the film earns the dubious description of being both cheesy and campy: Heston's performance as Moses is hyper-theatrical, and the special effects used to make the burning bush burn look more like a cheap night light about to flicker out than a miraculous shrub on fire at the hand of God. The campiest and cheesiest part of that scene is also my favorite: God, whose voice-over was done by Demille and Heston then played very slowly like an old 16 speed record, calls to Moses in a way that only a man living in the 1950's could have imagined: (Say it with me, slow, droning and baritone):

MOSES!

Following the text of Exodus rather faithfully in the film, Moses asks God what he should say to the people when they ask for the name of this Deity who

intends to redeem them from Egypt. God's reply? (Again, say it with me, slow, droning and baritone):

I AM THAT I AM!

"I am that I am", or *ehyeh asher ehyeh* in Hebrew, is far from the easiest phrase of the Torah to translate. Rashi echoes an earlier midrashic teaching to explain it: "I was with you the Israelites during past sufferings and I'll be with you during future sufferings and crises as well." Nachmanides adds to this another interpretation borrowed from Maimonides' Guide For The Perplexed: "God is the existing Being which is the existing Being," that is, "God's existence is absolute." Rabbi Isaac Abohab's 14th century moralistic work, *Menorat Ha-Maor* puts an interesting twist on these enigmatic words: "God is saying to the people, 'Just as you engage with Me, I engage with you. You are charged with engaging in acts of justice and righteousness. If you perform justice and righteousness by helping the poor, I will sustain the world. If you do not, I will destroy the world.'"

Moving into the realm of the modern commentators, we find them just as perplexed about how to translate and explain *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. The Jewish Publication Society translation that we use doesn't even try to translate the phrase, preferring to consign three possible renderings to the notes at the bottom

of the page: “I am That I am,” I am Who I am,” and “I will be What I will be.” Everett Fox’s creative translation renders God’s name as “I will be-there howsoever I will be-there.” The rule of thumb in scholarly explorations such as translation is that if each translator comes up with a different translation, the reason is that no one really knows what the words in the original Hebrew mean.

This is actually a good thing. Looking at this name, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, Hebrew speakers recognize quickly that the actual words, on their surface, are quite simple, when considered in isolation. In contemporary Hebrew, *ehyeh*, based upon the verb root, *havvah*, “to be”, is the conjugated form in the future first person singular: “I will be.” *Asher* is one of those strange Hebrew participles that links related words and phrases with each other, and which probably means something like: “such as,” or “that which.” Put together as *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, these words take on a mysterious life of multiple possible meanings, precisely because it is mystery that God seems to be conveying to Moses and the Israelite slaves. It is almost as if God is telling Moses to tell the people: “The fact that I’m the God of your ancestors isn’t good enough for you to convince you to follow Me and have faith in Me and Moses?” OK, the authority of tradition and the past doesn’t work sufficiently for you. So, let Me tell you My name, My essence, right now in the present and for the future. *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*-- I am the mystery of

Being, existence, life itself—I am that I am. Going forward, out of the past, out of slavery, out of Egypt, you rightly fear that you might encounter death. Perhaps you're thinking that life in Egypt is better for you: it may be horrible and oppressive, but at least it's what you've always known in the past, so why rock the boat and strike out for the sake of something unknown? But your thinking is dangerously wrong. Egypt and slavery might be predictable but they are not about life, they are death itself. Without freedom, without dignity, without rights or recourse to justice, you might physically exist but you are not really alive. My name, My divine mystery, *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, is not subject to interpretation, at least not one easy interpretation. That is because I, your God, am not subject to clear interpretation, nor do you need Me to be. You need Me to be the One who inspires you to take that first step out of the living death of Egypt that you know into the mysterious, as-yet-unknowable, open-handed potential of life: a free life, a real life, whose possibilities you cannot yet know. I am That/Who/What I am, and you good people, can be that/who/what you will be...if only you would let Me help you step into that mystery." shsh