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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYISHLACH

In Memory of Tsirelé bass Moché whose *yahrtzeit* is 11 Kislev

In Loving Memory of Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and
Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z”l

In Memory of Tovah Bodek Rosenfeld on her *yahrtzeit*

“I Am God Almighty” – How God Introduces Himself

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From time to time in our daily lives we are faced with the situation of introducing ourselves. This usually happens when we come into initial contact with people who did not know us previously. We make their "acquaintance," which is meant to pave the way for the development of a relationship in the future. The content of the information provided in these cases is usually brief. But it is precisely because of this brevity that it must be on the mark regarding the nature of the relationship that we seek to develop with the party before us.

The wording of the Ten Commandments attests to the importance of this matter. Inasmuch as these are His first words addressed directly to the people of Israel, God sees fit to introduce Himself:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slaves. (*Shemot* 20:2)

The content of the information through which God sought to become known to His people drew the attention of our Sages:

R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, may he rest in peace, asked me: Why did [God] say: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," rather than, "who made heaven and earth, and I made you"?¹ (Ibn Ezra, ad loc., in his long commentary)

The Ibn Ezra offers his own answer. R. Yehuda Ha-Levi himself notes the importance of this point:

The Rabbi replied: I believe in the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the wilderness and gave them the land... who sent Moshe with His law... Our belief is comprised in the Torah – a very large domain.

The Kuzari said: ...Now should you, O Jew, not have said that you believe in the Creator of the world, its Governor and Guide, and in Him who created and keeps you, and such attributes which serve as evidence for every believer?...

The Rabbi: ...Moshe spoke in the same way to Pharaoh, when he told him, "The God of the Hebrews sent me to you," that is, the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. For Avraham was well known to the nations, who also knew that the Divine spirit was in contact with the patriarchs, cared for them, and performed miracles for them. He did not say, "The God of heaven and earth," nor "my Creator and yours sent me." **In the same way, God commenced His speech to the assembled people of Israel: "I am the God whom you worship, who has led you out of the land of Egypt," but He did not say: "I am the Creator of the world and your Creator."** Now in the same style I spoke to you, a Prince of the Khazars, when you asked me about my creed. I answered you as was fitting, and is fitting for the whole of Israel **who knew these things, first from personal experience, and afterwards through uninterrupted tradition, which is equal to the former.**

In this *shiur*, we will examine the various occasions, across the book of *Bereishit*, at which God introduces Himself to the patriarchs, one such occasion being found in our *parasha*.

“I Am the Lord Who Brought You Out of Ur Kasdim”

With regard to Avraham, we encounter this phenomenon in two places:

1. God introduces Himself at the Covenant of the Pieces (15:1-7): "After these things, the word of the Lord came to Avram in a vision, saying, 'Fear not, Avram; I am your shield, your reward shall be exceeding great.' And Avram said, 'O Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go hence childless, and he that shall be possessor of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'This man shall not be your heir; but he that shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir.' And He brought him forth outside, and said, 'Look now toward heaven and count the stars, if you be able to count them'; and He said to him, 'So shall your seed be.' And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness. **And He said to him, 'I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur Kasdim, to give you this land to inherit it.'**

The most striking point is that God introduces Himself late. One might have expected that just as God introduces Himself in His opening words to the people of Israel, He would similarly introduce Himself in his first words to Avraham. But there, in fact, He does not bother to introduce Himself:

Now the Lord said to Avram, "Get you out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and be you a blessing. And I will bless them that bless you, and him that curses you will I curse; and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (12:1-3)

In addition to this point, which requires explanation in and of itself, we must relate to the way in which, despite the lateness, God in fact introduces Himself. God identifies Himself as the one who brought Avraham out of Ur Kasdim. This characterization seems to derive from the context of the continuation of the verse:

¹ We can ask further: Why did He not say, "I am the Lord the God of your fathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov"?

He said to him, "I am the Lord that brought you out of Ur Kasdim, **to give you this land to inherit it.**"

God mentions His having uprooted Avraham from Ur Kasdim in order to demonstrate His commitment to end the process that He had begun and give Avraham the land to which he is destined.

Now let us move on to the second time that God "introduces" Himself to Avraham:

2. In His command to perform circumcision (17:1-2): "And when Avram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Avram, and said to him, '**I am E-I Sha-ddai (God Almighty); walk before Me, and be you wholehearted. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.**'"

It seems that here God presents himself independently.² This assertion as well follows from the context of the verse. Since God wants to make a covenant with Avraham, He identifies Himself, being one of the parties. This understanding brings us back to the previous time that God introduced Himself. From a broad perspective, it seems that this identification as well was made for the purpose of making the covenant between Him and Avram that is described in the continuation, i.e., in the Covenant of the Pieces:

And He said to him, "I am the Lord that brought you out of Ur Kasdim, to give you this land to inherit it." And he said, "O Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" And He said to him, "Take Me a heifer of three years old, and a she-goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon." And he took him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each half over against the other; but the birds he did not divide... And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down and there was thick darkness, behold a smoking furnace and a flaming torch that passed between these pieces. On that day **the Lord made a covenant with Avram**, saying, "To your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." (15:7-21)

We can summarize that God identifies Himself to Avraham for the purpose of making a covenant, which requires a clarification of the identity of the parties. But the question of the timing remains open.

"I Am the God of Avraham Your Father"

God introduces Himself to Yitzchak only once, at a surprising and almost marginal time. In the course of the conflict surrounding the digging of the wells, we read:

3. And he removed from there and dug another well; and for that they strove not. And he called the name of it Rechovot; and he said, "For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." And he went up from there to Be'er-Sheva. **And the Lord**

² Regarding the meaning of the name, see the various commentaries (ad loc.). God Himself states later that this is the manner in which He identified Himself during the period of the patriarchs: "And God spoke to Moshe, and said to him, I am the Lord; and I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, as *E-I Sha-ddai*, but by My name the Lord (Y-H-V-H) I made Me not known to them" (*Shemot* 4:2-3). The commentators on the verse in *Shemot* struggled with the difficulty posed by this verse, since over the course of the book of *Bereishit*, God did not always identify Himself with that name.

appeared to him the same night, and said, "I am the God of Avraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you, and multiply your seed for My servant Avraham's sake." And he built an altar there, and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there; and there Yitzchak's servants dug a well. (26:22-25)

Here, too, we find that God introduces Himself late, and not immediately after Avraham's death, at which point He contented Himself with a blessing:

And it came to pass after the death of Avraham, that God blessed Yitzchak his son; and Yitzchak dwelt by Be'er-Lachai-Ro'i. (25:11)

Here, too, let us set this fact aside, and try to understand the nature of God's identification here as "the God of Avraham your father." If we take a broad view of the context, it is easy to find the meaning of this identification. Yitzchak arrives in Gerar at God's command:

And there was a famine in the land... And the Lord appeared to him, and said, "Go not down to Egypt; **dwelt in the land which I shall tell you of.** Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your seed I will give all these lands, **and I will establish the oath which I swore to Avraham your father;** and I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these lands... because Avraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." **And Yitzchak dwelt in Gerar.** (26:1-6)

Yitzchak was, however, expelled from there at the king's command, and he was then forced to build his life anew:

And Avimelech said to Yitzchak, "Go from us; for you are much mightier than we." And Yitzchak departed from there and encamped in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there. **And Yitzchak dug again the wells of water, which they had dug in the days of Avraham his father;** for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Avraham; **and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them.** And Yitzchak's servants dug in the valley, and found there a well of living water. And the herdsmen of Gerar strove with Yitzchak's herdsmen, saying, "The water is ours." And he called the name of the well Esek, because they contended with him. And they dug another well, and they strove for that also. And he called the name of it Sitna. And he removed from there and dug another well; and for that they strove not. And he called the name of it Rechovot; and he said, "For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." (26:16-22)

It is evident that God relates to Yitzchak as Avraham's successor; even Yitzchak himself seeks to repeat his father's actions, but reality gets in his way. In the end, he finds a little peace in the form of a well that he digs and that remains undisputed. At this point, God wishes to give him a reassuring message. He identifies himself as the "God of Avraham," in order to emphasize His commitment to the promises that He had made to Avraham, even though Yitzchak has difficulty realizing them.

"I Am the Lord God of Avraham Your Father and God of Yitzchak"

In relation to Yaakov, we find the greatest number and variety of such phenomena:

4. When Yaakov leaves for Charan: "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood beside him, and said, '**I am the Lord, the God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak.** The land whereon you lie, to you will I give it and to your seed. And your seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. And in you and in your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back into this land; for I will not leave you, until I have done that which I have spoken to you of'" (28:12-15).
5. While he is in Charan: "And the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Yaakov'; and I said, 'Here am I.' And He said, 'Lift up now your eyes, and see, all the he-goats which leap upon the flock are streaked, speckled, and grizzled; for I have seen all that Lavan does to you. **I am the God of Bet-El**, where you did anoint a pillar, where you did vow a vow to Me. Now arise, get you out from this land, and return to the land of your nativity'" (31:11-13).
6. Upon his return from Charan: "And God appeared to Yaakov again, when he came from Padan-Aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, 'Your name is Yaakov: your name shall not be called any more Yaakov, but Israel shall be your name'; and He called his name Israel. And God said to him, '**I am God Almighty.** Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of you, and kings shall come out of your loins; and the land which I gave to Avraham and Yitzchak, to you I will give it, and to your seed after you will I give the land.' And God went up from him in the place where He spoke with him" (35:9-13).
7. On the eve of his descent to Egypt: "And Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Be'er-Sheva, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Yitzchak. And God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, 'Yaakov, Yaakov.' And he said, 'Here am I.' **And He said, 'I am God, the God of your father;** fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation. I will go down with you into Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Yosef shall put his hand upon your eyes'" (46:1-4).

For the first time in the annals of the patriarchs, God introduces Himself in the manner that would be expected on such an occasion – the first time that He communicates directly with Yaakov. But it is not only in this respect that Yaakov is different than his ancestors. We see that these opportunities repeat themselves in regard to him much more often, and God introduces Himself with different identities.

It is easy to see that these opportunities always occur in circumstances of travel and movement – when he leaves for Charan, when he returns from there to Canaan, and when he is about to go back to Egypt. The exception to this rule is God's introducing Himself during Yaakov's stay in Charan, though there too it relates to a journey, for in that framework God commands Yaakov to return to Canaan.

After having focused on the details, let us try to understand the implications of the overall picture.

"And The Lord Said To Avram"

Over the generations, our Sages have noted an interesting fact. In contrast to Noach, whom the Torah introduces as "a righteous and whole-hearted man," the Torah does not explain why Avraham was chosen. It skips this stage, and informs us of a fait accompli – that God has already turned to him and commanded him to leave the land of his forefathers.³ Based on the data that we have pointed to in this study, we wish to propose the following:

While it is true that God's word is directed immediately to Avraham, this does not mean that the Torah skipped the reason for his having been selected, but rather the opposite. When God commands him to leave his country, Avraham is indeed a candidate for selection, but he has certainly not yet been chosen! He must still prove himself through his actions in order for his selection to be approved. In such a situation, God does not see fit to introduce himself to Avraham in a formal and orderly manner, since the nature of their future relationship is still unclear. Over the course of time, Avraham proves through his actions his faith in God's promises when he left his country. He repeats his demonstration of faith in the promise of the seed even after he has already arrived in the land of Canaan, while the promises remained unfulfilled. Only then is it decided that he is worthy of establishing the chosen race, as he will teach his seed after his righteousness and justice. At this stage, Avraham's election becomes final, and therefore God introduces Himself to him:

After these things, the word of the Lord came unto Avram in a vision, saying, "Fear not, Avram, I am your shield, your reward shall be exceeding great." And Avram said, "O Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go hence childless, and he that shall be possessor of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Avram said, "Behold, to me You have given no seed, and, lo, one born in my house is to be mine heir." And, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This man shall not be your heir; but he that shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir." And He brought him forth outside, and said, "Look now toward heaven and count the stars, if you be able to count them"; and He said to him, "So shall your seed be." And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness. And He said to him, "**I am the Lord that brought you out of Ur Kasdim, to give you this land to inherit it.**" (15:1-7)

Now God introduces Himself as the God who took him out of Ur Kasdim in order to give him the land of Canaan. Only now, after the process has been successfully completed, does God see fit to formally introduce Himself to Avraham, presenting Himself as the one who accompanied the process from the very beginning.⁴

³ See Ramban (*Bereishit* 12:2). It is commonly understood that this matter is subject to a dispute. The Maharal (*Netzach Yisrael*, chap. 11) proves that Avraham's selection was Divine, and not based on his actions, whereas the Ramchal (*Derekh Hashem*, II, 84:3) argues that Avraham was also chosen because of his actions.

⁴ From here it would appear that the ten tests experienced by Avraham (*Avot* 5:4) were not all of equal significance. The first ones were tests in the real sense – was he worthy of being chosen? – whereas the later ones were aimed at strengthening his faith after he had already been chosen (see the various commentators to *Bereishit* 22:1).

Later, when God initiates a covenant between Himself and Avraham, He identifies Himself for the purpose of the covenant with the name that He had chosen for Himself during the period of the patriarchs:

And when Avram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Avram, and said to him, **"I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be you wholehearted. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."** (17:1-2)

"I Am the God of Avraham Your Father"

We have already seen that Yitzchak made great efforts to follow in his father's path. It is precisely for this reason that it occurred to him to go down to Egypt during the famine, but God prevented him from doing so, and so he arrived in Gerar:

And there was a famine in the land... And the Lord appeared to him, and said, **"Go not down to Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell you of. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you, and to your seed, I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to Avraham your father; and I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these lands"...** **And Yitzchak dwelt in Gerar.** (26:1-6)

However, when he encounters difficulties as he is following in his father's footsteps, God appears to him as "the God of his father" in order to reassure him that he would overcome the difficulties and to confirm his path as following the path of his father. It is precisely because Yitzchak identifies himself in his actions as his father's successor that there is no need for a re-introduction on the part of God, or for a new covenant. This will become clearer below, as we relate to such phenomena in relation to Yaakov.

"And Yaakov Went Out From Be'er Sheva and Went Toward Charan."

We noted that Yaakov was the first of the patriarchs to whom God introduces Himself immediately at the beginning when He first speaks with him, as is the customary practice among people. Now let us try to understand the meaning of the fact that the behavior that would be expected in such situations became, in our case, the exception. In addition, we noted that the multiple instances in which God introduces himself to Yaakov occurs in the context of his journeys. We will now see that these two points are intertwined.

It seems that the change in God's conduct in relation to Yaakov is precisely because he dared to "go wild" and abandon the land that had been promised to the descendants of Avraham and Yitzchak, his forefathers. God did not explicitly instruct Yaakov not to leave the land, but it was evident from the command that He had given his father that God was pleased that the patriarchs remained in the land promised to them, since they came to it at His command. Now, when Yaakov abandons it and even takes the opposite route, from Canaan to Charan, he, as it were, violates the covenant and resets the connection between God and his forefathers.

In order to refute this possibility, God appears to him immediately as he leaves the land, since it is necessary to renew the connection that in certain respects has been severed. Yaakov asked his father for permission to set out to Charan, but he did not seek permission from the God of his father, and so it seems that the traditional connection of our forefathers to the Promised

Land according to God's command is cut off. To re-create it, God reveals Himself as "the God of Avraham and Yitzchak" and confirms His move. However, Yaakov understands the special need to reestablish relations in light of the exceptional significance of his action, which undermined the actions of his forefathers, which established their natural place in the Promised Land. To this end, he needs a vow to strengthen the connection between him and his God. God accompanies him, but not "for free." He remembers and reminds him of his obligation to prove his devotion to the path of his ancestors and to fulfill his vow. This proves to us that although the vow was ostensibly Yaakov's initiative, it was not created in a vacuum, but was expected by the fact that God revealed Himself to him, thereby "commenting" to him about the exceptional nature of the course of action that he had undertaken. Accordingly, God takes care to bring it to completion, identifying himself as the one who approved the process, and thereby enjoins its conclusion:

And the angel of God said to me in the dream, "Yaakov"; and I said: "Here am I... For I have seen all that Lavan does to you. **I am the God of Bet-El**, where you did anoint a pillar... Now arise, get you out from this land, and return to the land of your nativity." (31:11-13)

"I Am God Almighty"

Upon his return to the land of Canaan, matters return to the way they had been, and Yaakov once again fills his role as heir to his forefathers in the Promised Land. Now, as God seeks to re-establish a permanent relationship with him directed toward the future, a new chapter opens in their relationship, and He identifies Himself with His own name, as He had revealed Himself to Avraham in their "official introduction ceremony." It is easy to discern the similarity between the two events, which indicates that the second is but a repeat of the first. Regarding Avraham it is stated:

And when Avram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Avram, and said to him, **"I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be you wholehearted. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."** And Avram fell on his face; and God talked with him, saying, "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. **Neither shall your name any more be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham;** for the father of a multitude of nations have I made you. **And I will make you exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you."** (17:1-6)

In the case of Yaakov, the renewal of the "acquaintance" between them takes place in an amazingly similar manner:

And God appeared to Yaakov again, when he came from Padan-Aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, **"Your name is Yaakov: your name shall not be called any more Yaakov, but Israel shall be your name";** and He called his name Israel. And God said to him, **"I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of you, and kings shall come out of your loins;** and the land which I gave to Avraham and Yitzchak, to you I will give it, and to your seed after you will I give the land." (33: 9-12)

"Fear Not To Go Down Into Egypt"

In light of the close accompaniment that Yaakov experienced the last time he dared to leave the country, we

completely understand his fears as he makes his way to Egypt. Precisely because of the significance of leaving the country as a "breach of the covenant" or as an expression of slackness in the belief in its realization, a clarification of the relationship between God and Yaakov is necessary:

And God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, "Yaakov, Yaakov." And he said, "Here am I." And He said, "I am God, the God of your father; fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation. **I will go down with you into Egypt; and I will also surely bring you up again;** and Yosef shall put his hand upon your eyes." (46:2-4)

The meaning of this is as follows: Since the Covenant of the Pieces when God first introduced His people, a decree has been hovering over the heads of Avraham's descendants:

Your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs... And afterward shall they come out with great substance... And in the fourth generation they shall come back here...(15:13-16)

The last time Yaakov left the country on his own initiative, and he had to make a vow and strengthen his connection to God while he would be in a foreign land. What is needed now is a revelation that will regulate the relationship, but this time its content is that in truth it is not really necessary. God wants to clarify that this time there is no exception; he is still "the God of your father," since this is a deliberate Divine decree, and the course was determined from the outset.

Our comprehensive examination of the "introduction ceremonies" that from time to time God conducted with the patriarchs emphasizes the strong connection that God sought to create with them, and the covenant that He made with them in giving them the land. Whenever this connection underwent a jolt, a new introduction was conducted, sometimes to declare God's commitment to His promise, and sometimes to point to the patriarchs' commitment to it.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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