Introduction to Parsha #14: Va’era

Torah: Exodus 6:2 – 9:35
Haftarah: Ezekiel 28:25 - 29:21
Brit Chadasha: Hebrews 3:1-6; Revelation 7-16

I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.
[Exodus 6:7(a)]

The Amidah Prayer Focus This Week is Petition No. 12: Sh’ma Koleinu [Hear our Cry]

Va'era el-Avraham el-Yitzchak v'el-Ya'akov b'El Shaddai - i.e. I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya’akov as El Shaddai . . . . Exodus 6:3a.

Welcome to the 14th parsha of Torah - the Parsha of the Holy One’s Appearing. Before we get too deep into the details, there are a couple of questions you may want to consider. First of all, what kind of – and how deep of – a relationship are you desirous of having with the Holy One? And second, what kind of – and how deep of – a relationship do you think the Holy One wants to have with you? You see, Beloved, the Holy One is about to push some boundaries. He is about to cross some lines. He is about to blast the status quo into a billion pieces.

The descriptive title of the 14th parsha is Va’era – which is a Hebrew phrase that means “and I appeared.” The name is derived from the text. Very early in the parsha, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth reaches out from His World into ours. He speaks to His newly commissioned servant Moshe, saying: Va’era - i.e. And I appeared . . . . el-Avraham to Avraham. Moshe is not the Creator’s first protégé. He is a just a link in a great chain. Before him were many others, like Yosef, Ya’akov/Yisrael, Yitzchak, and Avraham. Before Avraham were Chanoch and Metushelach. Before Chanoch and Metushelach was Shem. Before Shem was

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Noach. Before Noach were Kayin, Hevel, and Shet. Before Kayin, Hevel, and Shet was Adam. Nor will Moshe be the Holy One’s last protégé. After him will come Yehoshua, and a long chain of others including Devorah, Gideon, Shimshon, Eli, Sh’muel, Shaul of Binyamin, David, Sh’lomo, Eliyahu, Elishahu, Yeshayahu, Yirmayahu, Yechezkiel, Ezra, Nechemiah, Zerubbabel, Yehudah the Maccabee, Yochanan the Immerser, Yeshua, Shaul of Tarsus, Kefa the fisherman, Ya’akov the just, Yochanan the Revelator, Timotheus and Titus, and so on and so forth all the way down to you, Dear Reader, and to me. While the life of each human partner called by the Holy One consists of a finite number of years, moon cycles, sabbaths, and days, the Holy One Himself lives forever – and He will not, at any time in what men think of as ‘history’, ever be left without at least one intimate human friend who embraces the honor of serving as His Appointed Messenger to the people and nations – as well as the mountains, the valleys, the forests, and the fields - of this world.

Moshe, welcome to your most amazing, immaculate opportunity. And Dearest Reader, welcome to yours as well.

**The Glorious Mystery of Divine ‘Appearing’**

When you think about it, the words ‘. . . and [I] appeared’ are truly stunning, wonderful, and awe-inspiring. The words ‘. . . and [I] appeared’ mean that the Holy One does not simply want us to *intellectually acknowledge that He exists in some theoretical sense in some ethereal untouchable realm*; He instead wants us to KNOW HIM and INTERACT WITH HIM and HAVE A VIBRANT, ON-GOING RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM – and He wants it so badly that He will actually step out of eternity into time, out of infinity into time and space, and out of invisibility into our tangible, physical, temporal worlds and visit with us from time to time – **just to keep the lines of communication and fellowship open and flowing.**

Since the early days with Avraham man has discovered that appearing – i.e. **breaking the ‘finity barrier’, manifesting His Presence, and demonstrating His Essence** - is something the Omnipotent One can – and delights to - do at will. He is infinite, but in order to commune with us, He descends into and manifests His Essence in the finite realm that He Created for us. He is eternal, but He steps into and out of our temporal world whenever and however He sees fit. He is incorporeal, but He takes on physical form and/or audible Voice and/or shows His ‘Face’, His ‘Mighty Hand’, or His ‘Outstretched Arm’ – or whatever He deems it appropriate to reveal at the time – whenever He chooses, however He chooses, to whomever He chooses. One of the purposes of the study of Torah is to train us to learn to love – and long for - His ‘Appearing’.
What does it mean for the Holy One to ‘appear’? If you think about it the idea is totally outlandish and incomprehensible. The Holy One is at essence Spirit, and is therefore incorporeal and transcendent and by definition invisible to the human eye. How can such a Being ‘appear’? For the Transcendent One to ‘appear’ means He has to condescend for our sakes to take on physical attributes which human eyes can see, which human ears can hear, and which the human being can at least begin to know experientially. And when He appears – every single time he appears - He leaves behind a trail of Kingdom of Heaven breadcrumbs for all who are hungry to follow.

Thus far the Holy One has graced humanity with His Manifest Presence in multiple generations and contexts. He walked with and had conversations with the ancients. He took it a step further with the patriarchs and matriarchs, not only walking and speaking with them but actually appearing to them. See e.g. Genesis 12:7; 17:1, 18:1; 26:2 & 24; 35:7 & 9. In connection with each of these appearances to humanity the Holy One had to deliberately step out of His incorporeal, invisible, and timeless realm and enter ours. He had to – and willingly did, for the sake of relationship - take on aspect after another of physicality, of materiality, and of temporality. He walked with human beings. He talked with human beings. He took the opportunity of His Appearing to release both promises and blessings on human beings that they needed, for the sake of His Grand Redemptive Plan, to connect clearly and directly not only with Him theoretically but with His Appearing – i.e. His ‘advent’. When He appeared to the patriarchs He got very real and personal with them. He did not want them just to believe in His existence; He wanted them – us - to KNOW Him as a ‘very present help’. So He listened politely to Avram as He argued with Him over what should happen at Sodom. He listened to Rivkah’s complaints about the extreme discomforts of her pregnancy. He let Ya’akov try to negotiate a deal with Him. He cut covenant with them all. He assumed angelic form and ate a meal in Avraham’s tent. He touched human beings – even wrestled with one. He gave some human beings instructions as to where they should go and what they should do. He gave other instructions as to where they should not go and what they should not do. He downloaded prophetic dreams and visions and revelations into the minds of several others on various and sundry occasions. Whatever has been necessary to keep the connection between Himself and mankind alive – i.e. whatever ‘appearance’ He needed to make in what man thinks of as ‘real’ time and space - that is what the Holy One has always done. Whatever is necessary, whenever it is most advantageous, in whatever form and substance and quantity it is most effectively delivered - that is what He has committed all Heaven’s resources, all the strength of His Divine will, and all of His Holy passion to always do. He is constantly pursuing relationship with mortal men – and doing so with great passion, zeal, and delight. He has not allowed Himself to become
frustrated with human weakness or impatient with human timidity. He has refused to become disgusted with human reluctance to step out of a comfort zone. He has patiently endured our stubborn questioning of His Intentions, His Wisdom, and His Essential Goodness. He has kindly ignored our stubborn rejection of His overtures of love. He has refused to be repulsed at even the most heinous of human sin. With Him there is no shadow of turning. He does not flinch in His kindness. He is tireless in His pursuit. He is unrelenting in His love. He is un-wavering in His mercy. He is unshakable in His Covenant Commitment. He is virtually un-offendable. Should it therefore come as a surprise to anyone who has been watching this amazing pattern unfold that He would have no problem one day - if He deemed it necessary to perpetuate the relationship He desired to maintain with men - taking upon Himself the form of a human being all the way from the embryonic phase to the cadaver phase?

“And I appeared” is, you see, not merely the name of this week’s parsha – it is the fountain from which all spiritual revelation has ever flowed. Once the Holy One decided to ‘appear’ the first time He committed to never stop appearing until every single thing necessary for man’s salvation and Creation’s redemption was accomplished. “And I appeared” is therefore the essence of all the good news found not only in the Pentateuch but anywhere in the Bible. It is absolutely amazing, isn’t it? What is man, that You should exalt him, that You should set Your heart on him, that You should visit him every morning, and test him every moment? Iyov [Job] 7:17-18.

The Holy One is by no means through ‘appearing’ to mankind. He plans on bringing His Kingdom to earth using real people, who really know Him – far beyond the limitations of either their musings of pseudo-intellect or their matrix of religious culture conditioned responses/creed recitals. As Shaul of Tarsus wrote to his beloved protégé and chosen successor Timotheus:

There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Holy One, the righteous judge, will give me on that Day, and not to me only, but to all who have loved His appearing. [I Timothy 4:8]

If you are a true Friend of the Bridegroom-King, you see, you are never content leaving behind a trail of ‘good doctrine’; you leave behind a trail of tenderized hearts pulsating violently with love for His Appearing.
The Sounds of Silence

Last week in parsha Sh’mot the Holy One started appearing to a man named Moshe. As the appointed time for harvest approached, the Divine Persona stepped back into the realm of time and space, and began manifesting His Presence and demonstrating His Essence in a totally new way. This time He received in Himself the wounds of the thorns of humankind’s fallen condition. He appeared in a real form on a real mountain, to a real man, amidst real flames of real fire. He spoke real syllables of real, intelligible Hebrew words in the hearing of real human ears. He downloaded a vision of a Harvest to come, accompanied with a manual of ‘harvesting instructions’. He laid out the components of His harvest-time agenda. He committed to “… rescue [the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov] from the land of the Egyptians and to … bring them into … a land flowing with milk and honey ….” Exodus 3:8. HOW did He intend to do this? He stated matter-of-factly: “… I will stretch out My Hand and I will strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them.” Exodus 3:20(a). Finity barrier, watch out. Another form of ‘appearing’ is about to occur – and Moshe is going to be at the epicenter of it. Moshe is about to be drawn from a burning quiver, sent on a course to release carefully measured, but ultimately irresistible, pulses of Heavenly force. Despots of the world, prepare to experience the inexplicable phenomena of the Holy One’s Zerōa Netuyah – i.e. Outstretched Arm - and Yad Chazakah – i.e. Mighty Hand.

It is ‘on’. There is going to be a harvest – and there is going to be a glorious redemption about which men will speak in hushed tones of awe for as long as there are human beings on the planet.

Reconsidering the Essence of the Plague Narratives

As we begin our study of the great season of ‘wonders’ by which the Holy One brought our ancestors out of the ultimate prototypical state of bondage, it behooves us to consider what the essence of the narrative is at its core really all about. Is this captivating story at its essence just a ‘war’ story – God takes on Pharaoh? Is it just an epic saga of good triumphing over evil? Is it merely a tale of judgment of a holy God upon another depraved and dysfunctional element of human society? No, it is not any of those things. It is not a war story - because there is no war. It is not a story of good triumphing over evil - because the good guys are no better than the bad guys. It is not a story of the destruction of a morally depraved society because there is no destruction – only a series of well-timed, strategic ‘strikes’. So if it is none of the foregoing . . . what is it? What exactly is the Holy One really going to be doing with all the ‘sign and wonder’ stuff we are about to see? Consider the possibility that instead of being at essence a tale of war, or moral supremacy, or judgment, the plague narrative is at its essence a love story.
Consider the possibility that the essence of what the Holy One is doing in the course of the ‘plagues’ is not so much judging Egypt, or punishing Pharaoh, as it was introducing Himself to, showing His affection for, and trying to win the heart of the apple of His Eye.

By the end of the week, you see, the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov are all going to know the Holy One as a Real Persona – instead of just a vague concept. And they are going to see the world – and look at the purpose of their lives - in a radically new light. The plague narrative is not about crushing a Pharaoh’s will; it is about the Creator of the Universe courting a people’s hearts.

Welcome to the Courtship Phase of the Divine Romance

Courting is a time-honored process whereby a male courtier identifies and wins the heart of someone he believes is capable of becoming a compatible life-companion and effective co-laborer for him – i.e. his ezer kenegdo’. On the part of the Courtier, courtship involves a series of strategically timed and closely chaperoned interactions whereby the Courtier proves to the object of his pursuit, over an extended period of time, his seriousness as a Suitor, his goodness, his capability and trustworthiness as a provider and protector, and his desirability as a covenant partner.

The season of forbearance known to men as ‘courtship’ is designed to assure the relationship does not proceed either too fast or too slow, and that intimacy and vulnerability occur only after the establishment of both well-earned trust and well-documented commitment. Courtship proceeds according to understood protocols, the purpose of which is to allow the Courtier to demonstrate to the object of his attention, over an extended period of time, at arm’s length, the courtier’s honor, personal worth, faithfulness, perseverance, capacity and commitment to bring out the best in his beloved. In other words, courtship is about the courtier convincing the object of his affection that he is ‘marriage covenant material’. And that, I believe, is the essence of what the ‘plague narrative’ of Exodus 6-10 is all about. The Holy One is acting the Courtier, and the very young and immature but potentially glorious nation later to be known as ‘Yisrael’ is playing the role of the object of the Divine Courtier’s attention.

A series of impressive plagues were not necessary to make Pharaoh release Yisrael’s descendants. But ten demonstrations of His power, His love, and His devotion to them were necessary to win the hearts and minds of Yisrael’s descendants away from the Egyptian lifestyle.

2 Ezer kenegdo is the Hebrew phrase found in Genesis 2:19, and usually translated into English as ‘helpmeet’ [KJV] or ‘helper’ comparable’ [NKJV].
Pharaoh Was Never a Match For the Creator of the Universe

Have you ever wondered why the Holy One did not just rain down fire and brimstone like He had proven He could do at S’dom and G’morrah? Have you ever questioned why He did not just send in a couple of angels – or an army of 10,000 of them if He pleased – to rescue Ya’akov’s descendants from Egypt the way the angelic ‘special forces’ of Genesis 19 rescued Lot and his family? Has it ever crossed your mind to ask why the Holy One waited so long to release the one plague – the death of the Firstborn – that He knew would convince Pharaoh to let the people go? Have you ever considered that any time the Holy One wanted He could have, with one breath of His Mouth or wave of His Hand crushed Pharaoh into powder, destroyed Egypt, and run off with Israel as a ‘captive bride’?

Let’s face it - Pharaoh was no more a match for the Holy One than the King of S’dom had been. The magicians and wise men of Egypt had no more answer for the Holy One’s challenge than the town council of G’morrah had. The thriving economy of the Nile Valley and abundant wealth of Egypt were no less powerless to stop the Holy One than had been the economy of the Jordan Rift Valley and the vast, untold petroleum reserves that fueled the ‘cities of the plain’.

So why did the Holy One act so very slowly, so very deliberately, and so very even-handedly? Why did He keep giving Pharaoh, and his advisors, and the Egyptian people warning after warning and chance after chance to reconsider? Why did He so carefully measure each blow He struck so as to achieve maximum spiritual, emotional and psychological impact with a minimum of actual physical destruction? He did it because He was not out to destroy Egypt. He really wasn’t. And He didn’t. All He was out to do was to prove to His Beloved beyond a shadow of a doubt His Power, His Goodness and Trustworthiness.

But . . . Does the Creator of the Universe Really ‘Court’, Woo, and Marry?

There are two equally dangerous tendencies that men follow in their theological approaches to God. First of all, there is the tendency of some men to totally de-personalize God – i.e. to think of Him as some impersonal form of ‘higher power’ or ‘moral force’ or ‘karma recycler’ in the universe. In such a theological approach the Holy One has no emotions and no ‘persona’. In such a paradigm meaningful relationship with Him is impossible and one deals with God merely by obeying or disobeying His ‘commandments’. Those who hold to this approach are quick to say things like “Obedience yields reward; disobedience yields retribution”. This kind of legalist formulation – which ignore the Joyful Persona, the Merciful Character, the Glorious Redemptive Plan, and the Amazing Restorative Power of
the Holy One entirely - sometimes coincides appears to coincide with truth, but it totally misrepresents the essential message of the Holy One to mankind. It focuses only on what the Holy One demands of mankind – ignoring the pleasure that comes with His Companionship and the Garden of Delight that is found through walking in His Ways.

The opposite but equally dangerous tendency of modern-day theologians is to over-humanize God. Such people foolishly tend to consider the Creator of the Universe to be merely a kind of ‘super-powered’ human being – a lot like the members of the Greek, Egyptian, and/or Kena’ani pantheons, but of course a whole lot more powerful. When God is over-humanized, Divine favor is to be sought by dazzling God with acts of religious zeal. Human beings under this deception dream up ways to cater to what they imagine to be God’s fleshly tastes and appetites, and to please and impress him the way they would another human being. In such a paradigm obedience or disobedience to an objective set of commandments is really irrelevant, as long as one does enough religious ‘stuff’ [in whatever form one imagines will please him] to get on God’s imagined ‘good’ side as opposed to his imagined ‘bad’ side. In this view of God, you see, God’s words – like the words of a human being - are seen as just words, which can be rendered moot or obsolete by behavior that really ‘rings his bell’ on the one hand, or really ‘ticks him off’ on the other. Oy veh! What nonsense! He is the Creator of the Universe. He is the Holiest of all Holiness. He is omniscient, knowing our entire life story, with all its ups and downs, highs and lows, before we were ever born. There are no surprises. Our piety cannot impress Him, and our sin cannot repulse Him. We are powerless to do anything that will make Him love us more; and we are equally powerless to do anything that will make Him like us less.

Nevertheless, most human beings at one time or another succumb to some degree of one or both these errors. The truth about the Holy One lies somewhere in between the two theological approaches I have described. Though He is spirit, the Holy One is not a Vulcan like Star Trek’s intensely logical ‘Spock’ character. The Holy One has intense emotions and fascinating layers of personality. As a result He can soften His decrees of logic and justice by providing people and nations extended opportunities for t’shuvah [acts of repentance/return to covenant]. He also freely offers kippur [atonement for sin] in response to t’shuvah. On the other hand, He is much more than a mere human being with super-intellect and super-powers. He has eternal, unchanging standards, and makes eternal, unchanging commitments, such that every time He speaks His words are forever. Neither His covenant undertakings nor His instructions to human beings as to how they should live their lives and interact with Him, with Creation, and with each other will ever change - no matter how many amazing deeds we do in His Name on our best days
or how many disgusting perversions we immerse ourselves in on our worst days.

The concept of *Divine Betrothal/Marriage* – which the Holy One introduces into Scripture on several occasions – is diagnostic of both of the theological errors mentioned above. To those who see the Holy One in strict, impersonal, legalistic, terms, to speak of the Holy One becoming betrothed or married to a people group [i.e. Israel] is offensive because the imagery is considered just too intimate and personal. How such people ask could God betroth Himself to *an imperfect people, who do not always obey His commands*?

On the other hand, those who see the Holy One in mere human, emotional, terms get uncomfortable with the ‘eternal covenant’ aspect of the betrothal motif. How they wonder could God possibly *bind Himself and His people forever with covenant words* that hold greater weight than spontaneity and individual creativity – so-called ‘random acts of kindness’? If therefore the Divine ‘courtship/betrothal/marriage’ language makes the reader a little uncomfortable, do not be surprised. You will not be alone in your discomfort. But consider the possibility that the problem is not the language employed. Consider the possibility that the problem instead is the presence in the mind of the reader of one or the other of the two errors discussed above. Let the intimate – yet covenantal – language of the Divine betrothal motif *challenge* rather than offend you.

**True Love Waits**

Keep in mind as you begin reading parsha *Va’era* that although the Holy One could deliver His people in the “wink of an eye”, in His wisdom He knows He must not deliver them until *they* are ready - or they will just go back into bondage somewhere else. How will He make them ready? Welcome to the *Season of Divine Courtship*. He will make them ready by “courting” them. For you see, the Holy One is not just coming to *free a bunch of slaves* from bondage. He is not just out to help the underdog. He is coming to *claim a Bride*- People for Himself. The deliverance the Holy One desires to bring about for His Beloved is not just deliverance *from* the house of bondage – it is deliverance *to* His Bridal chamber and Throne Room. And since what He is after is a Bride and a Co-Regent, the Holy One does not want to merely capture the young nation of Yisrael as one captures a prisoner of war. What He intends to do is to *win her heart*. He will get no joy or honor from insisting that she obey and serve Him out of fear, or even out of gratitude. He wants her to be overcome with love for Him. He wants her to *choose Him* out of passion. He wants her to compare Him with all other possible suitors, choose Him with great zeal, and never look back to wonder what ‘might

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have been’. He wants her to joyfully, exuberantly *give her love and devotion* to Him as her ultimate dream Bridegroom. He wants her soul to pant after Him as the deer pants for the water brook. He wants her to come with gladness and rejoicing to His Bridal Chamber and Throne Room.

The Holy One imagined, created, carefully nurtured, and is about to call Yisrael forth for just such a relationship. So the Holy One begins to *reveal Himself* to His chosen Bride-Nation. Over the next few weeks He will *patiently spread out before her convincing evidences of His goodness, of His majesty, and of His awesome power*. And then, at the appointed time, He will invite whosoever will respond to His courtship advances to “*Arise, My Love, and Come Away With Me! For lo, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come.*”

**The Revelation Inherent in the Sh’mot**

*By Which the Creator Reveals Himself*

As we discussed in some detail last week, the ‘book’ of Torah we are reading is in the Hebrew tongue called ‘*Sh’mot*’ – meaning ‘names’. In Hebrew what we in the English language think of as ‘names’ are very, very important. They are not just convenient labels. They are *revelatory*. They describe the spiritual essence of their object – to the extent, at least, that such essence is ‘knowable’ to the one using the name.

As parsha *Va’era* begins the Holy One wants His people – and the world - to start to know Him in a new way by an additional title. He is, and always will be, the *Elohim* of the Creation Song. He has always been, and will always be, the Great *El Shaddai* of the patriarchs. He never stops functioning as *El Elyon*, as the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, or the Prince of Peace. But He is far more than any one title – or combination of titles – can describe. He therefore wants us to remember a generic, all encompassing, yet at the same time very personal ‘additional’ inspirational title/label. This moniker is not really new of course, having first surfaced in Genesis chapter 2, as the focus of Torah was shifting from the Creation to interactions between the Creator and men. At that point the writer of Torah began to refer to the Holy One by a name created by putting the Hebrew consonants *yod, hey, vav and hey* together in sequence. The

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4 See Song of Solomon 2:10-12(a)

5 The author of these studies has carefully reviewed and analyzed all theories and arguments about how the glorious Divinely revealed *Shem* made up of the consonants *Yod, Hey, Vav, Hey* was originally pronounced by the Almighty and has found such all such theories and arguments absolutely unconvincing. The evidence is woefully inconclusive. No one alive today really knows how the Holy One pronounced the Tetragrammaton – and this author, for one, strongly suspects that this state of affairs is
first time the Writer of Torah referred to the Creator as “yod, hey, vav, hey” was in Genesis 2:4. The context of that first usage was the institution of the Shabbat – the blessing of the Seventh Day. Immediately following that b’racha [i.e. after we are told that Elohim ‘blessed the seventh day and made it holy’] Torah tells us:

>This is the history of the generations of the heavens and of the eretz
>when they were created,
in the day that the Holy One (i.e. yod, hey, vav, hey)
>Elohim made eretz and the heavens.

Why did the Writer of Torah add the additional designation yod, hey, vav, hey to the name Elohim in that particular context? Ask a dozen Christian theologians and you will probably get a dozen answers. Ask a dozen rabbis and you will probably get two dozen answers. So I do not presume to ‘know’ in any real sense. But I do have a theory.

**A Theory**

Could it be that the reason the title/label YHVH [yod-hey-vav-hey] is introduced in connection with the institution of Shabbat is because the Shabbat is the subject matter of the very first covenant the Holy One made with His Creation? On the Seventh Day the Holy One did not just create something and empower it to develop on its own – i.e. the kind of stuff the Creator does in the merit of the title/label Elohim. On the Seventh Day the Creator actually pledged perpetual contact with and blessing to the Day. He made Himself more personally involved and intimate with His Creation. And now, as He is about to expand that personal commitment and intimacy to something even more important than the 7th Day - namely, to the creation known as man – He describes Himself by the very same shem that He used to describe Himself as He blessed, made holy, and rested on the Seventh Day.

To man it is not sufficient for the Holy One to be known and experienced merely as "Master of the Universe" and "Creator of Heaven and Earth" - though He is indeed both. According to the Holy One's Divine plan, the Holy One is to be known to those in Covenant with Him much more personally, more intimately - as yod, hey, vav, hey. It is not a ‘name’ or even a ‘title’ by which He is to be called,
however – it is a shem in the mystery of which with relationship with Him is to be passionately pursued. This four-letter designation is the shem that acknowledges the Holy One's predictable personal and intimate involvement in the lives of His people. Why do I say "predictable"? Because the Holy One’s interactions with men are based upon COVENANT, not upon chance, luck, whim, or personal merit. By using this shem to describe Himself, the Creator of the Universe reveals Himself as a covenant partner Who has proven Himself faithful and trustworthy, day in, day out, since the beginning of time.

The Creator of Heaven and Earth is not just a benevolent Supreme Power. He is the familiar stronger partner in an on-going covenant relationship Who we know very well from a vast reservoir of past experiences, both personal to us and as recorded in the annals of our forefathers, to be tenaciously committed to do whatever is necessary to promote not only our survival but our personal and national shalom.

**Putting It All In Context**

As we have previously read, Exodus 6:2 (the very first verse of this week’s parsha) informs us that the Holy One told Moshe "I am YHVH - although I was known by Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov as El Shaddai. The Holy One previously introduced Himself to Moshe as ehyeh asher ehyeh – the indescribable, eternal, transcendent, unchanging One. Exodus 3:14. The Holy One makes it a point in Va’era to begin His courtship of the slaves building Pharaoh’s store cities by introducing Himself to them by a NEW (to them) identity/persona. He wants to get a lot more personal and intimate – first with Moshe, and then with the descendants of Ya'akov. He does not want them just to believe in Him; He wants them to TRUST HIM and to FOLLOW HIM, and ultimately to CO-LABOR WITH HIM. So He is about to do for them after the pattern of what He did for the seventh day - to set them apart, make them holy, and "bless" them. Thus, by harking back to the first usage of the name yod, hey, vav, hey in Torah and grasping the prototypical and prophetic significance of that usage we can see the essence of what the Holy One is about to do with the rag-tag Hebrew slaves.

This understanding of the Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey shem will hopefully give much more meaning, depth, and dimension to our study of the Exodus narrative. The story of the Exodus is not primarily a story of judgment on Pharaoh and Egypt; it is a guidebook describing the relationship the Holy One desires to have with His people. He is the stronger partner in a very real covenant relationship; and we are His personal and intimate friends. We do not have to hope we impress Him. We do not have to work to please Him. We do not have to ‘earn’ His favor, much less His provision, protection or salvation. We have an eternal, unbreakable,
unshakeable Covenant. When we think of Him through the lens of the ‘yod-hey-vav-hey’ shem we understand that He sh’mas us not as a king sh’ma’s his subjects, but as a Bridegroom sh’m’a’s his bride or a father sh’m’a’s his sons and daughters. Much more will be said on that later in the week. First however let us step back a little, and as is our custom in these studies, view a brief ‘parsha Va’era travelogue’ to get our bearings.

A Parsha Va’era Travelogue

As our parsha begins it “appears” that Pharaoh is in control and that all hope is lost. Moshe and Aharon have done what the Holy One told them to do but Pharaoh laughed at them - and added the task of gathering straw to the people’s already impossible workload. Things clearly seem to have gotten worse instead of better. But that is not how the story is going to end. No, not by a long shot. Watch what happens, Pharaoh, and people of faith . . . when the Holy One ‘appears’!

A. The Holy Spirit Visits the Broken and Contrite

This week’s parsha thus begins with the Holy One “appearing” to a disillusioned, dejected, and angry Moshe, consoling and reassuring him. This is the Holy One’s way, as Yeshayahu quotes the Holy One:

This is what the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, Whose Name is Holy, says:

I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

[Isaiah 57:15]

In the course of this appearing to Moshe the Holy One will declare in even more detail His intentions.

B. The Great Courtship Proposition

The Holy One will make what is in essence a ‘courtship proposition’. The seven essential elements of the proposition are set forth as follows:

1. He promises to bring Israel forth from forced labor in Egypt

2. He promises to set Israel free from slavery;

3. He promises to liberate [redeem] Israel with a demonstration of power;

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6 The term we translate into English as ‘forced labor’ in this verse is the Hebrew word sivlot, [pronounced seeve-lote] the plural form of siv’lah, samech, veit, lamed, hey, Strong’s Hebrew word #5450. Strong’s defines this word as “burden, forced labor, compulsory service, or burden bearing”. This is a noun derived from the Hebrew verb root saval, samech, veit, lamed, Strong’s Hebrew word #5447, pronounced saw-vawl’, which pictures someone laying a heavy burden or yoke upon someone else.
4. He promises to ‘take Israel’ to Himself as a nation;

5. He promises to be Israel’s God;

6. He promises to bring Israel to the land He promised to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Ya’akov; and

7. He promises to give that land to Israel as an inheritance, forever.

All these promises will be kept. Promise #s 1-2 will both be fulfilled before Israel ever leaves Egypt. Promise #3 will be fulfilled at the Sea of Reeds. Promise #s 4 and 5 will be fulfilled at Har Sinai. Promise #6 will be fulfilled in the book of Y’hoshua. Promise #7 is being fulfilled even as this shiur is being written.

C. Phase I of the Courtship Process

Then we will begin reading about the ‘plagues’. In Tuesday’s Study we will read about the ‘plague of the Nile’, when the water turned to blood. In Wednesday’s Study we will read about the plagues of swamp creatures [frogs, etc.] and of lice. In Thursday’s Study we will cover the plague of wild beasts and the great livestock epidemic. In Friday’s Study we will investigate the plague of boils and the great hailstorm of fire and ice.

How is this descriptive of a Divine ‘courtship’, you ask? Because through these ‘plagues’ the Holy One will make Himself and His intentions known - not only to Pharaoh and the people of Egypt, but also to the people whose affections He is courting. We will hear the Deeds of the Holy One on everyone’s lips. We will see both reverence for and trust in His goodness grow with every new ‘plague’. We will see covenant relationship with the Holy One come to be acknowledged as the most important asset any person or nation could have. And plague-by-plague we will witness a courted people fall deeper and deeper in love with – and be more and more prepared to give their heart and commit their troth to - their Divine Courtier.

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The very fact that the Creator of Heaven and Earth says something will happen means that it has already happened in the spiritual realm. To our human minds it seems that when the Holy One says something will happen He means that it will happen in the future. But if we understand the nature and character of the Holy One at all we know that He is not bound by time or by space, and that He not only knows the end from the beginning, but also has the ability to see and experience the reality of the future event, Hence just because an event that forms a part of eternal reality – i.e. has been a ‘done deal’ in the spiritual realm since before the Creation of the world - has not manifested physically to our senses does not mean that it is any less real.
In this week’s Haftarah the prophet Yechezkiel [Ezekiel] prophesies of a day when the Holy One will revisit Israel with a second round of Divine Deliverance, and will revisit Egypt with a second round of Divine Judgment. Note the promise to Israel with which the haftarah begins:

**Koh amar Adonai Elohim b’qabetzi et-beit Yisra’el**

Thus said the Holy One, God: When I have gathered the house of Israel

**min ha-amim ashertotnu**

from the peoples among whom they are scattered,

**v’am v’nikdashti vam l’eynei ha-goyim**

and have revealed My holiness through them in the sight of the nations

**v’yashvu al-admatam asher natati l’avdi l’Ya’akov**

then they will dwell in their own land that I gave to My servant Ya’akov.

**Veyasheivu aleiha lavetach uvanu vatim venate’u cheramim**

They will dwell securely in it, and build houses and plant vineyards.

**yasheivu lavetach ba’asoti sh’fatim**

They will dwell securely after I have executed judgments

**b’chol ha-shatim otam misevivotam**

upon all those who treated them with disdain;

**v’yade’u ki ani YHVH Eloheihem**

and they will know that I am the Holy One their God.

Just as in this week’s parsha of Torah the Holy One begins with a promise to Israel, then proceeds to release a series of carefully measured judgments upon Pharaoh for the oppression and murder of generation after generation of Ya’akov’s descendants while they were in his care, so in this week’s haftarah the Holy One declares He will judge the Pharaoh of a later day for being ‘a staff of reed’ for the House of Israel which ‘splintered and tore open their shoulders’ when they sought his protection, and which broke and ‘wrenched their backs’ when they tried to lean on him for support in a time of weakness.

In Ezekiel 29:2-3 the Holy One will tell His prophet:

**Ben-adam sim paneicha al-par'oh melech Mitzrayim**

Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt.

**V’hinave alav v'al-Mitzrayim kulah**

Prophesy against him and against all Egypt:
hineni alecha par'oh melech Mitzrayim
Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh, King of Egypt,

Ha-tanim ha-gadol ha-rovitz, betoch yeorav
the great dragon lying in the midst of his rivers . . .

The end state of Israel in the second time of deliverance will, we will find, be much greater than was its end state at the time of the first deliverance. And the end of Pharaoh in this second time of judgment will be much worse than was his judgment at the time of the events recorded in Exodus.

Worthy of More Glory than Moshe!
Brit Chadasha Va’era: Hebrews 3:1-6

Kefa [known to most of us by the English name ‘Peter’ – a name he would not have recognized at all] knew Moshe very well. Kefa was a devout Jewish man. As devout Jews do he had studied the Torah from the earliest day so his youth. He had also like every other Jewish child of a devout family ‘personally experienced the events of the Exodus’ every single year of his life in connection with the annual celebration of the Biblical festivals of Pesach [i.e. Passover] and Shavuot [i.e. Pentecost]. Kefa had also seen amazing things on the Mount of Transfiguration – including Moshe and Eliyahu in resurrection glory. In response to this latter vision, perhaps in preparation for the celebration of Chag Sukkot [i.e. the Feast of Tabernacles], Kefa wanted to build three sukkot - one for Moshe, one for Eliyahu, and one for Yeshua. Matthew 17:4. Kefa was in no wise being disrespectful of Moshe. But something had happened on the Mount of Transfiguration that, while it did not in the least diminish Kefa’s respect for Moshe – or, of course, for the Torah that came to earth through the mediation of Moshe - certainly re-arranged his priorities. Do you remember the voice that spoke from a bright cloud [the same cloud, no doubt, we will read about in Exodus beginning in parsha Bo, next week]? The Voice said to Kefa: This [meaning Yeshua] is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Sh’ma Him. Matthew 17:5.

It was not that Kefa should no longer sh’ma Moshe or Eliyahu. He should – and so should we. It was not that the Holy One was not well pleased with those men. He was. Indeed, the very presence of those men on that mountain with Yeshua in that moment speaks volumes of the Holy One’s abiding affection for both of them and His validation of the message each revealed to the world. But when that Voice spoke from Heaven Kefa suddenly realized that as wonderful as Moshe and Eliyahu were, Yeshua was in a class by Himself.

Keep all that in mind as you study this week’s Brit Chadasha reading from the book of Hebrews. Yeshua is not in competition with Moshe – for obedience or
honor or anything else. Yeshua is the embodiment of all Moshe foresaw and proclaimed – from the ‘seed of woman’ who crushes the serpent’s heel to the Shiloh Who comes from Y’hudah. Or as the writer of Hebrews puts it:

Yeshua . . . was faithful to him who appointed him, as also was Moshe in all his house.
For he has been counted worthy of more glory than Moshe,
inasmuch as he who built the house has more honor than the house.

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Moshe indeed was faithful in all his house as a servant,
for a testimony of those things which were afterward to be spoken,
but Messiah is faithful as a Son over his house;
whose house we are if we hold fast our confidence
and the glorying of our hope firm to the end.

Those of us who have met Messiah, and have, through our relationship with Him been restored to the Ancient Paths of Torah, have received a precious - truly costly – gift. Our message is not Torah for the sake of Torah. Our message is, instead, Torah for the sake of the Holy One – yod, hey, vav, hey – as revealed to us in the life and teaching of Yeshua.

Know the Holy One, Beloved.
And Hold fast that to Him who is faithful as a Stronger Covenant Partner.

The Rabbi’s son

Amidah Prayer Focus for the Week
Petition No. 12: Sh’ma Koleinu [Hear our Cry]

Sh’ma koleinu Adonai Eloheinu
Be attentive to our cry, O Lord our God

Chus v’rachem aleinu
Show compassion and mercy to us.

V’kabel b’rachamim v’b’ratzon et t’filateinu
Accept our prayers gently and lovingly.

Ki el shomea t’filot v’tachnunim atah
For You are a God who listens to prayers and supplications

V’mil’feneichah malkeinu rekom al-t’shiveinu
From your face, our King, let us not turn away empty.

Ki atah shomea t’filot amecha Yisrael b’rachamim
For You are attentive to the prayers of Your people Israel with compassion

Baruch Atah Adonai shomea t’filah
Blessed are You, Oh Holy One Who hears prayers.