

Devar Torah (Sermon) for Va'era
"Experiencing God Through Human Kindness"
January 24, 2009 - כ"ח טבת תשס"ט

Today's torah reading begins with God's enigmatic statement to Moshe (Moses), that, although God had appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God had not revealed a particular name of God to our ancestors.

The name that we are told was not revealed to our ancestors is one that Jewish law does not permit us to pronounce. The name is written with a yud, a hay, a vav, and then a hay. We actually don't know how to pronounce it correctly, but you've heard the word most often in the name of those "J's Witnesses" who come knocking at your door from time to time. It is that word starting with the letter "J" that we don't pronounce.

This "J" name would be pronounced sometimes in the Temple in Jerusalem - you may remember that when this name was pronounced on Yom Kippur, the Kohanim (Priests) and the congregation would bow and prostrate - a scene that we recreate during the Avodah service on Yom Kippur.

Instead of pronouncing the "J" name, we use a substitute. Usually, the name is pronounced as "A-donay," although sometimes - particularly when the "J" name comes immediately after the word "A-donay," we will pronounce the "J" name as "E-lohim."

An interesting question is, of course, what does it mean that our ancestors did not know this name of God? After all, there are countless times when they use this name in the book of Genesis. Most answers revolve around the idea that "knowing a name" in the Bible has to do with understanding the true essence or nature of that object, and that the essence of God that is expressed through the "J" name was something that our ancestors had not experienced.

This is not surprising . . . God is without limits and it is impossible for us to conceive entirely of God's nature. Psalms 106:2, which we recite at the end of *Anim Zemirot*, tells us this: "Who can speak of God's greatness and make heard all god's praises?"

In fact, since all of the universe emanates from God, every moment and every object in this world speaks to us of god's nature. Everything we see and experience in this world lets us understand a little bit more about God.

In speaking to moses, God tells Moses that people experience God differently. No doubt, one key element of how a person experiences God is determined by the behaviors of God's most significant creation - humanity. In the past weeks, we have had some special opportunities to experience the nature of God's creation. Like moses in this week's torah portion, we have come to understand God a little bit more, particularly, as we have learned a little bit more about humanity.

Humanity, as it turns out, is capable of evolving, of learning, and of changing. The same country that allowed segregation a mere 60 years ago, this week inaugurated an African-American man as President. Humanity is also capable of a great deal of caring and heroism - for instance a pilot whose years of training and whose wisdom cultivated through those years of training and experience saved not only hundreds of people in the air, but potentially even more who could have been killed on the ground. Through these examples, we learn about the greatness of God by learning about the great potential of humanity. And so we are quite right to speak of the developments in society, or the heroism of a pilot as miracles.

Yet we also experience a God whose nature is one that allows humanity its free will, its capability for violence and destruction. There is genocide in Darfur. There is poverty in developing nations as well as right here in America. There is violence and tyranny throughout the globe. And so, we know that we are capable of experiencing more of God's grace if we insist on a different course for humanity.

This *Shabbat*, we pray that that just as God continued to reveal godself to Moses, that God will help us make ourselves witnesses to more miracles and to more expressions of humanity's capability to rise above and to solve problems. We pray that we, ourselves, will live our lives in ways that express the divinity in our lives - performing acts of charity, advocating for those in need, and caring for those around us. We pray that our actions, and the actions of others, become the greatest expression of God's dominion on this earth. And let us say, amen.