

Parashat Va'era: For Those Who Don't Despair

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Dear Friends, Shabbat Shalom,

Many people confuse Parasha Va'era, which we read this Shabbat, with Parashat Vayera, which we read in the fall.

As a People who take the Hebrew language seriously – given that the world was called into being in Hebrew, according to ancient Israelite tradition – we have to wonder, is it a coincidence that the names of the two parashot are so similar. Those less familiar with the art of Jewish interpretation will no doubt say: "Nu, coincidence!" But the guiding premise of those who love the Torah – be they Jewishly observant, secular or anywhere in between – is that there is no coincidence in the Torah. The deeper we delve into the inner chambers of the Torah the more we see the point made by the Sages, that the Torah is the model for the entire universe. So no, coincidence cannot explain the similarities.

Both parashot – Vayera and Va'era – tell us something about sight, but what??

Parashat Vayera is the fourth in Bereishit, but it is the second to deal with Avraham's life. Parashat Va'era is the second in Sh'mot, and the second to deal with Moshe's life.

In both cases, the first parasha in the lives of each of these great figures – "Lech Lecha" in Avraham's case, and "Sh'mot" in Moshe's – we learn of their first, formative encounter with the Creator. In the second parashot, we read of the great challenges that colored their entire lives. In the first parasha - Avraham's Lech Lecha and Moshe's Sh'mot - they experience a moment of enlightenment and discovery, in the second - Avraham's Vayera and Moshe's Va'era - we, and they, understand the consequence of their newly discovered mission. Hence, the second parasha is so much more difficult.

In Lech Lecha Avraham sets out on his formative journey from a place of painful infertility and a fierce longing for a child, escorted by a voice telling him "Go, Go! Because if you do, it will happen, you will see!"

In Sh'mot Moshe sets out on the journey of his life, motivated by a tremendous longing for uncompromising (almost violent) justice in the world, and a voice telling him to take that longing and redeem his brethren.

Avraham follows the calling, but nothing happens! He and Sarah do not have a son.

Moshe follows the calling, but nothing happens there either! Pharaoh ridicules him and Bnei Yisrael do not listen to him. Both are moments of great crisis. From a tremendous high brought on by a Heavenly promise, to the depths of unfulfilled reality.

Very few are driven in life by a guiding vision, but those open enough, or fortunate enough to have a moment of great clarity will also have to bear the let-down that is likely to follow. Anyone who expects quick and easy solutions has arrived in the wrong universe. In this one of ours, one's journey has stages.

But then, from the depths of disappointment comes the second stage – Parashat Vayera and Parashat Va'era.

In Vayera Avraham sits at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day recovering from the circumcision he underwent at the age of 100, and he sees Divine messengers coming towards him. No one before him ever heard the message or saw the messengers. A year later Yitzchak is born, and the great promise to become "as abundant as sand on the shore" begins to come true.

"The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground... They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he replied, "There, in the tent."... Then one said, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" (Bereishit 18:1-10)

In Parashat Va'era Moshe stands in front of God, confused and in despair. And then God reveals Himself to Moshe as a new, revolutionary quality, and He gives Moshe the key to freedom: Y.H.V.H! This is the Divine quality, we are told in the parasha, which no one had ever witnessed. Immediately following this, the Ten Plagues begin, leading to the eternal Exodus.

"God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD [Y.H.V.H]. I **appeared to** Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name Adonai יהוה... Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am Y.H.V.H. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, Adonai, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I Adonai." (Sh'mot 6:2-8)

Every journey begins with great enthusiasm. There is a vision, there is a general sense of promise, and the future looks bright. But we are guaranteed that a crash landing into reality will follow. If there is no crash and no disappointment, perhaps the journey was

not significant or revolutionary enough. At first, clarity is partial; there is mostly a strong sense of mission, of a path, a direction. But when great difficulty arises, most people stop their journey. They give up. The initial disappointment is so great and the sense of despair can be paralyzing.

If we have not despaired and if we remain determined and remember the formative message that set us on our journey, the second stage will come. A deeper vision, broader insight, and a higher clarity that shows us the way!

It is at this stage that the initial vision crystallizes, and the next stage of the journey can begin.

I hear many voices of despair – political despair, national despair...

This is good, I am sure, because it must be the harbinger of the next stage. Spring and hope are right around the corner!

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha