

BAAL SHEM TOV INSIGHTS

Issue 33: Vaeira

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson • Exclusive for Members

ARE YOU IN THE KNOW? To Live a Knowing Life

SUMMARY

Do you ever feel that despite all we know, there is something we are missing? A nagging sense that even as things seem to be functioning, there is something beyond us that remains elusive?

Some of us feel that we “know what is going on.” But do we really know?

We all exist. Every creature on earth exists. That much we know. But do we know anything more about life than the fact that we exist?

Animals only exist; they do not concern themselves with anything beyond surviving, breeding, feeding, protecting their young and ensuring the perpetuation of their species. They live out their lives faithfully fulfilling their duties to the tee - without giving it a second thought. They never waver from their clockwork routines, do not suffer from anxiety, are in no need for therapy. Animal bliss. Sounds delightful.

We humans, by contrast, think, agonize, procrastinate and are involved in a whole slew of activities that often overwhelm us, and at times even drive us mad. We are not satisfied with just living and existing. We want to know. We want to understand. We are not content with

routines. We question, challenge, rebel - sometimes ad nauseam to the point of self destruction. We cannot just rest and be.

Where does this curiosity and thirst for knowledge come from? If ignorance is bliss and the more knowledge the more pain, is it worth pursuing knowledge? How can we use our knowledge to grow and not drive ourselves crazy?

The Torah chapter of this week opens up with G-d telling Moses: “I am G-d (Y-H-V-H). I revealed Myself to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, by the name of E-l Sha-dai, but by My name, Y-H-V-H, I did not make Myself known to them.”

What is the significance of this revelation? What relevance does it have to us today?

In this week’s insight, the Baal Shem Tov teaches us about the remarkable gift given to us by G-d in this Torah portion - the gift of knowledge, true knowledge: the gift of knowing G-d! The blessing that we not only exist, but that we can perceive the Divine in every fiber of our existence and every detail of our lives.

That we have the power to live not just a meaningful life, but a knowing life.

Beyond Survival

Do you ever feel that despite all we know, there is something we are missing? A nagging sense that even as things seem to be functioning, there is something beyond us that remains elusive?

Some of us feel that we “know what is going on.” But do we really know?

We all exist. Every creature on earth exists. That much we know. But do we know anything more about life than the fact that we exist?

Animals only exist; they do not concern themselves with anything beyond surviving, breeding, feeding, protecting their young and ensuring the perpetuation of their species. They live out their lives faithfully fulfilling their duties to the tee - without giving it a second thought. They never waver from their clockwork routines, do not suffer from anxiety, are in no need for therapy. Animal bliss. Sounds delightful.

We humans, by contrast, think, agonize, procrastinate and are involved in a whole slew of activities that often overwhelm us, and at times even drive us mad. We are not satisfied with just living and existing. We want to know. We want to understand. We are not content with routines. We question, challenge, rebel - sometimes ad nauseam to the point of self destruction. We cannot just rest and be.

The blessing that we not only exist, but that we can perceive the Divine in every fiber of our existence and every detail of our lives.

Where does this curiosity and thirst for knowledge come from? If ignorance is bliss and the more knowledge the more pain, is it worth pursuing knowledge? How can we use our knowledge to grow and not drive ourselves crazy?

G-d's Reveals His Name

This week's Torah chapter opens up with G-d's words to Moses:

“I am G-d (Y-H-V-H). I revealed Myself to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, by the name of E-I Sha-dai, but by My name, Y-H-V-H (Havaya), I did not make Myself known to them.”¹

But to you, Moses, G-d continues, I will reveal and make Myself known by the name Y-H-V-H: “Therefore say to the Israelites, 'I am Y-H-V-H. I will take you out from your forced labor in Egypt and free you from their slavery... You will know that I am Y-H-V-H your Lord, the One who is bringing you out from under the Egyptian subjugation.’”²

What is the significance of this revelation of Y-H-V-H? What relevance does it have to us today?

In this week's insight, the Baal Shem Tov teaches us about the remarkable gift given to us by G-d in this Torah portion - the gift of knowledge, true knowledge: the gift of knowing G-d! The blessing

that we not only exist, but that we can perceive the Divine in every fiber of our existence and every detail of our lives.

That we have the power to live not just a meaningful life, but a knowing life.

Two Names of G-d

What is the difference between “E-I Sha-dai” and “Y-H-V-H”?

“E-I Sha-dai” is the way the Divine manifests in existence. “Y-H-V-H” is the Divine that transcends existence; G-d’s “quintessential truth” (in the words of Rashi). G-d is telling Moses that the Patriarchs experienced the Divine only as it is clothed in the defined structure of the natural universe: The “six edges” (or sides) of existence, rooted in the six emotions (chesed, gevurah, tiferet, netzach, hod and yesod), but not the level of knowledge (da’as) that precedes these six emotional faculties.

But now the time has come, G-d tells Moses, for Me to make Myself known to you and the Jewish people by My quintessential name, Y-H-V-H - the one that reveals the Divine essence.

Explains the Baal Shem Tov: At that point G-d imbued us with the ability to “know Him in all your ways.”³ This, writes Reb Yaakov Yosef of Polnoyah (the great disciple of the Baal Shem

Tov), is “something remarkable, as I heard for my master specific details how knowledge (da’as) was given even to every physical object, in order to elevate, bind and connect it together, making it one” - all part of the Divine unity.

Perceiving the Divine in Life’s Details

In simple terms: By making Himself known with His name Havaya, G-d gave us all the power to perceive and know the Divine - “know G-d your Father”⁴ - in every detail of our personal experiences as well as in all world events.

On our own, we can go through life dealing with our daily routines and responsibilities, even succeeding and thriving, but unaware of deeper dimensions and a higher presence in our everyday experiences.

When G-d revealed Himself with His quintessential name and told us that “you will know that I am Havaya” - each one of us was given the ability to perceive the Divine in every detail of our lives - every step we take and every activity, even mundane matters like eating and business.

The Patriarchs were able to reach this level through their own efforts, but they were only able to perceive the Divine as it manifests in the structure of existence (*E-I Sha-dai*); not the Divine that transcends existence (*Havaya*), which was

...Knowledge (da’as) was given even to every physical object, in order to elevate, bind and connect it together, making it one” - all part of the Divine unity.

revealed to free the Jewish people from the Egyptian oppression.⁵

Two Stages in Life

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, the Baal HaToldos, presents an elegant psychological model based on these two stages in history - the revelation to the Patriarchs with the name E-l Sha-dai, and then the revelation of Havaya to Moses and the Jewish people in Egypt:

In microcosm, we each go through these two stages in life. Pre-Sinai is symbolic of childhood, and post-Sinai of adulthood.

As children, we primarily exist. We do not yet have the maturity of knowledge (da'as).⁶ Our relationship with G-d is with the name of E-l Sha-dai - how G-d manifests in the structure of nature, providing a child all his or her needs. Even then, we also have a relationship with G-d, through love (Abraham), discipline (Isaac) and the middle path (Jacob), but at this formative stage the connection with G-d is through E-l Sha-dai. But "by My name Havaya, I did not make Myself known to them."

Then, when we reach maturity we get to know G-d as Havaya, which allows us to know and experience transcendence. As adults we are able to rise above the structure of existence and perceive the

Divine - Havaya - in every part of existence.

As long as we are part of - and defined by - existence, we are bound by its laws and parameters. Havaya allows us to transcend these boundaries and introduce a force from beyond existence, and thereby transform existence as we know it into a channel and "home" for G-d.

Transformation

This revelation is nothing less than revolutionary.

It would seem quite an achievement to say that we mortals can connect to the immortal G-d by following His laws and commandments. On our own we pursue impermanent things. What more

can you expect living in a transient world. Comes the Torah and tells us, no: By living a life that follows G-d's commandments, we cleave to the Divine and thereby elevate our lives to a G-dly plane.

That is a significant accomplishment. And indeed, many would define this to be the gift and blessing of Torah and Judaism: To raise humans from being mere creatures of habit and routine, surviving and existing like all animals of this earth, to becoming Divine subjects, whose lives fulfill G-d's will and plan.

**By living a life that
follows G-d's
commandments, we
cleave to the Divine and
thereby elevate our lives
to a G-dly plane.**

Divine Limbs

Comes the Baal Shem Tov and declares that there is much more to the story: By revealing Himself and making Himself known to us by the name Y-H-V-H, G-d enabled us to become not just Divine subjects but Divine *beings*, each of us a “limb” of the Divine cosmic organism (the *Shechinah*), whose lives - even our simple mundane activities - are saturated and expressions of “knowing G-d.” All of our life experiences- and all the word events - combined re-construct the full structure of the Divine organism.

For example: When good things happen to us, we perceive and know that this is a manifestation of Divine love and kindness (*chesed*). When we encounter challenges and difficulties, we perceive this as an embodiment of Divine discipline (*gevurah*). The same with all our individual and collective experiences - each one reflecting another one of the Divine attributes.

Know G-d Your Father

This is the personal lesson in this week’s verse: “Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘I am Y-H-V-H. I will take you out from your forced labor in Egypt and free you from their slavery... You will know that I am Y-H-V-H your Lord, the One who is

bringing you out from under the Egyptian subjugation.”

G-d is telling Moses to say to the people in all generations: “I am Y-H-V-H... You will *know* that I am Y-H-V-H your Lord, the One who is bringing you out from under the Egyptian subjugation:” You will know G-d in all your ways - in every detail of your life.

In every a step you take and every breath you make know G-d your Father.

...true knowledge is not technical knowledge, but knowing the inner workings of our lives and of existence.

True Maturity

Whether we like it or not we all age. From little enchanted children who explore the world with free abandon, we turn into adults, calculated, protective, inhibited, cautious, fearful, and all the adjectives you wish to fill in.

But growing up is not just a biological or chronological reality. Indeed, we may be ripe in years but immature psychologically and emotionally. The only difference often being, that as adults our pride and social etiquette demands that we learn to conceal our feelings and not wear our emotions on our sleeves, like children do. Inside we may be seething like a young child, but we have learned the art of duplicity and deception (and sometimes that veneer is also gone).

Are You in the Know?

True maturity, according to the Baal Shem Tov, is “*gadlus ha’mochin*,” expanded consciousness - a state of knowing. And true knowledge is not technical knowledge, but knowing the inner workings of our lives and of existence. We begin our lives existing. Being. Then we progress and become knowing individuals: Knowing G-d in all your ways.

So look around. What do you see? Do you see a material world, or do you perceive - do you know - the inner force that is energizing every detail of your life?

We like to believe that we are knowing people, living in an age of knowledge. But there is to know and there is to KNOW.

Some of us go through our lives thinking we are “already there,” and with that knowing wink, as if we were insiders, feel that we “know what is going on” - when in fact we are clueless.

But do we really know?

Sources: Toldos Yaakov Yosev Parshas Vaeira. Cited in Keser Shem Tov section 102. Degel Machne Efraim Parshas Vaeira. Parshas Va’etchanan.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Vaeira 6:3.

² 6:6-7.

³ Mishlei 3:6.

⁴ Divrei Hayomim I 28:9.

⁵ Obviously the Patriarchs were far greater than any of us. They were the “merkavah” - virtual “channels” for the Divine on this earth. Yet, this was the status of their own personal being, not in their ability to affect the physical universe. Before Sinai, a fundamental schism existed between heaven and earth; they therefore did not have the ability to transform the actual material universe into Divine energy. At Sinai, this schism was eliminated and a new unprecedented Divine dimension was revealed, allowing the fusion of matter and spirit, heaven and earth. Additionally, the work of the Patriarchs pre-Sinai was due to their own effort, whereas our post-Sinai power was given to us from above. Now the revelation at Sinai began and was made possible by the oppressive Egyptian exile, which was when G-d revealed and made Himself known with the name Havaya.

⁶ See Yevomos 99b.