

An Understanding of God in the Hebrew Bible - Part 1

I. Introduction -

II. The Emerging Sense of God in Torah

A.1. It's remarkable how quickly we move at the beginning of Genesis past the cosmology to ask instead what is God's purpose/intention in the creation. What's that?

I believe the text is driving us to consider God's creation of humankind and God's relationship with us, our lives, and, more particularly, our lives with God.

2. An important way to understand this is to see the transition in the words used to identify God. In Genesis 1:1, it is Elohim. This is the One God, the force of forces, the Author of nature, the Creator, the God of judgment. This was a remarkable advance in thinking from pagan or polytheist cultures to this concept of the One. How?

(Discussion)

3. Now, look at what happens quickly. In Genesis 2:8, we see God called AdonaiElohim. What is Adonai? Or, in another word, HaShem. So, there is a different sense of the Divine. It's now a mixture of the sense of Elohim, as we discussed it, plus this new Name. What's this, and why does the name change here?

(Discussion)

Now look at Genesis 4:1. Oddly, after Adam and the woman are banished from the Garden, and after Adam names Eve (as the mother of all living), after God provides skins and clothes them, and after Eve bears a child, God is simply Adonai. What does that word mean, and why is it used here?

(Discussion)

B. We now turn to God's First Call to Moses - Exodus 3

1. Once called to help God rescue the people from Egypt, Moses asks: "who am I to do this?" He wonders how he could he accomplish this and for what purpose. God says the Divine will be with him and the redemption has a purpose, to bring the people to serve God.

When asked the name of the one who spoke to Moses, God says: ehyehasherehyeh. What translations do you have? I Shall Be What I Shall Be. What does that mean? And why does God further tell him to tell them "I Shall Be" said it? Is this just obscure, or does it reveal important insights? Genesis 3:13-17

(Discussion)

C. The God of Redemption - Exodus 6:1-13.

1. How interesting: Here Elohim says to Moses that he is HaShem! So, the God of the Universe says the One-Who-Shall-Be-What-He-Shall-Be is to be, at least here, the God of mercy. What can this mean? And how do we square it with the name that was introduced to Moses in the last portion - I Shall Be What I Shall Be?

(Discussion)

2. How do we explain 3 –“I am HaShem; I made myself known to the patriarchs but not as HaShem”? This does not seem true at least on the surface. The patriarchs had a sense of HaShem. Plus, if the people here were beginning to experience a God that had not known before, they likely wouldn't find meaning or truth in it. What is being said here?

(Discussion)

D. The Call to Sacrifice Isaac

Let's go back to the story of God's telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This is a story that causes many to think the God of the Bible is cruel and even perhaps arbitrary. Our emerging understanding of the trajectory of thought in the Torah creates a completely different and inspiring possibility.

Read Genesis 22:1-14.

Discuss the fact that the God who called for the sacrifice was Elohim and that the Lord whose angel halted the proceeding was HaShem.

What does that mean?

(Discussion)

E. The Divine Attributes

After we set the stage in this amazing story, let's read Exodus 34:6-7. This is an account of the 13 Attributes of God:

6"And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

Now let's look at the prayer that is based on the verses and read on multiple occasions during worship, including the High Holidays:

"Adonai, Adonai, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon"

1. Do you notice a difference? What is it?

2. Let's briefly see what these words are generally thought by the tradition to mean.

(Discussion)

F. As to humankind, here's the way the Torah begins and ends.

"The Lord made clothing of skins for Adam and his wife, and he clothed them." Genesis 3:20

"And He buried Moses there in the valley."
Deuteronomy 34:6

What do these verses teach?

(Discussion)

III. Conclusion - wrap up today's discussion and set the stage for next week

