

“And God Noticed”

D'var Torah for Shabbat Sh'mot January 8, 2021

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains, NY

If you are a Rambamist, a Maimonidean, then the final verses of Exodus chapter 2 are beyond absurd to your eyes and ears.

Vayishma Elohim – and God heard the Israelites' moaning – *vayizkor* – “and God remembered the divine covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – *vayar* – “and God looked upon the Israelites” – *vayeda Elohim* – “and God noticed them.”

For Maimonides, and let's admit it – for Aristotle before him - God is eternally who and what God is. Always has been. Always will be. God does not change. God does not listen, look, remember, or take note. Only people and animals do that.

This is possibly the secret of the name God gives Moses to use when presenting himself to Pharaoh. God is *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. God is who God is. It's not a mysterious name. It's a name void of all mystery, all doubt.

Nonetheless, the Torah wants us to know that after nearly four centuries of Israelite slavery and oppression in Egypt, God now looks up, listens up, and takes note, whatever all of that might mean.

Rashi says it means that God was saying, in effect, “I will turn my attention to them, and not hide my eyes.” Not what Rambam would say.

Ibn Ezra and others see these verses as something similar to what happens when we set a timer on our computer calendar. It comes on screen to warn us that the moment is nigh. In this case, the prophesied 400-year period of exile is drawing to a close, and now God returns to the scene to bring about the promised redemption.

Interesting, but still not close to the idea of a God who spans all time, space, change, and realms of reality.

We could try to understand this passage by saying that God not only listens and takes notice, but that God sometimes checks out. In our text, Moses “hides his

face” from the divine apparition, but in many of our Biblical scenes it is God who is characterized as “hiding the divine face.” Perhaps the Torah agrees with this troublesome theology. Here it wants us to know that God sometimes seems to go somewhere else, but that God returns in the nick of time, because God cares.

If we wish we could say that in the main God is eternal and unchanging, but that this particular moment was so pressing, so critical, so uniquely fraught with danger and peril, that God emerged from the state of eternity to intervene in history.

Thus, Moses is called from his own slumber, his own hiding from the affairs of the world. He is presented with a burning bush, but it is not hard to see that the bush is a sort of mirror by which he is forced to look at his own burning passion for truth and justice, as well as his own passivity and immobility.

Yes, Moses answers *hineni* when his name is called, but he also turns aside. As do we all when we know we must respond to events by getting involved, even as we quickly and skillfully look for ways to avoid involvement.

I prefer to think that God does not suddenly wake up and return to the action. I tend to believe that God is, as Rambam teaches, the eternal reality against which we act out our life course. I want to see the bush, the burning, the calling, the turning, the noticing, as part of that reality, that backdrop that is always present, always waiting for us to get to the point where we could start listening and remembering and noticing.

I prefer to understand these verses as saying that that aspect of God which plays out in the lives of human beings is on its own computer timer; that it does not go off until it's ready; but that when it does, it can make a huge difference for good in a world that desperately our help.

And if this is what the Torah is telling us, then I would hope to God-ness that our timers are going off right now. I would hope that if we have been passively pasturing our sheep far away from the madness, that we suddenly look up, see the bush burning, recognize ourselves in that flame, and take notice.

I would hope we would once and for all take a good look, get involved, and never turn aside and go back to sleep again.