

9 – Va’era & Joshua 7 Outline

1. Illustrations of the work of the season
 - a. sinus infection – learning how to treat my body better
 - b. accidentally starting a rumor – learning how to treat the community more carefully
2. Review
 - a. early themes
 - b. winter themes
 - i. increased flowing outward of the spirit into the flesh and beyond, into community
 1. requires a whole “system upgrade” because the path through the soul, body, and community must be a purified path
 - ii. we can’t take these bodies lightly
 1. disease and illness can be a “messenger” that we’re not treating the body with balance
 - iii. bringing correction to the left eye (balance with the right)
 1. helping us to see the goodness in the body (strengthens the body)
 - a. challenge to see with the good eye in our groups this week
3. Va’era
 - a. summary
 - b. Exodus 6:3
 - i. “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shaddai, but by my name Y-H-V-H I did not make Myself known to them.”
 - ii. my reading will stem from the idea of development
 1. “El Shaddai” indicates an earlier stage of development
 2. Y-H-V-H indicates a later stage of development
 - iii. note that patriarchs knew the Tetragrammaton, but God had not revealed the essence of the Name to them
 - iv. El Shaddai
 1. “God Almighty” or “God the All-Sufficient One”
 2. “shadad” – “to deal with violently, to devastate, to ruin, to destroy, dead”
 3. “El Shaddai” is put in the category of names with “Elohim” that express God as seen in nature, the God Who imposes boundaries
 4. How is it that “El Shaddai” was revealed to the patriarchs
 - a. the patriarchs and matriarchs SUBMITTED, separated from their lands
 - b. they ended up in the narrow place of Egypt
 - v. Y-H-V-H
 1. thought to derive from past, present, and future of “to be”
 - a. infinity, boundless, unknowable, unreachable
 2. yet, beautifully, He comes to dwell in a tent among His people

- a. we have to think that this is His revelation of Y-H-V-H to the people
 - c. God is building a body
 - i. why reveal Himself so clearly to the people? why stand Pharaoh back up again to knock him down just so the people can see?
 - ii. He is creating a unified body by
 - 1. severing His people from the Egyptian nothing gods
 - 2. showing them that there is a real God Who actually has power
 - 3. drawing a circle of distinction around Israel
 - a. and giving them a shared story
 - d. The forging of the body is done before the great test of the body
 - i. the coming test for Israel: launch into the thirsty wilderness; leave the Nile behind
 - ii. we should also be expecting this kind of body test in the mold of Purim, which is coming up in the calendar
 - 1. we bring on such a test when we announce that we are in the body
 - 2. we made this announcement by putting our hanukkahs in our windows
 - 3. God wants to bless us for making that pronouncement, but it must be tested, and in the testing, He comes closer to us
- 4. Yeshua
 - a. 1st Coming more like El Shaddai
 - i. incognito, so it wasn't clear that God was among us
 - ii. bringing more boundaries (spirit of Torah)
 - iii. dividing with His words
 - iv. all leads to His death
 - b. 2nd Coming more like Y-H-V-H
 - i. we will know God is among us
 - ii. a deeper knowing of God's essence
 - iii. marked more by unity and bringing together, shalom, than by separation and death
- 5. Joshua 7
 - a. story of the loss at Ai and the stoning of Achan
 - b. clear connection to God treating a community as a single body – when there is sin in one part, the whole body suffers
 - i. we would do well to see our communities more in this light than we do
 - c. connection to “anger” in the month of Tevet
 - i. this is the month to turn anger inward at the yetzer harah
 - ii. R’Raskin quote:
 - https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/3840327/jewish/The-Zodiac-of-Tevet.htm (starting at 11:50)
 - iii. might look crazy to yell at ourselves, but we should do what it takes to flee from sin and not be disconnected from God

Transcript (not exact)

9 - Va'era and Joshua 7

Welcome everyone! Thanks for joining us for Spiritual Seasons Va'era and Joshua 7.

I want to start today with a couple of illustrations of the kind of work we're doing in this spiritual season, some illustrations taken from my last few miserable days of life. I've been sick for a few days now. I'm doing fine, praise the Lord, but I'm learning more and more how careful I have to be with my body, especially in the winter. You see, the winter is a TEST for the body. I recently looked up a quick chart showing illnesses per month, and the one I found was for Norovirus, and it showed a massive spike in outbreaks in the winter months, peaking in January. We all know people get sick in the winter, but I was shocked to see how different the rates were from say July to January – about 10X higher in January.

So, each time I go through this test in the winter, I realize something new about how I'm doing life that has to change - usually something about my eating habits. I play back my diet and habits leading up to getting sick and try to figure out where I got off track. Getting sick shouldn't be normal. Usually it means we're doing something in an imbalanced way that is putting a huge stress on the body. And as we get older, the body is less and less capable of dealing with that stress, that imbalance.

So, now I'm doing a little PRUNING of my behavior in response to having gotten sick. I realized I was getting a bit carried away with milk just before I got sick, for one thing. So now I'll be cutting back on the dairy to see if that helps my sinuses. So, that's a kind of pruning of my behavior.

If our individual bodies are being tested like this in the winter, we can assume that this testing extends to other scales, like our families and our congregations. Let me share a second example here of a kind of work God is doing in me now on the community level. The other day I had a conversation with someone here from Southeast church, and I simply misunderstood her. And my mind was off to the races wondering what it all meant. And before I knew it, I had told some people in the community what I had learned. Here's the problem. I had misunderstood. And so that brings confusion into the body. So what is God telling me through this incident at this time of year? Establish the facts firmly before you speak. This is a foundational rule for dealing with the community. Ok, noted. I purpose to do better in that way moving forward. Lord, help me with it.

Just keep those couple of illustrations in the back of your mind as we continue talking about how God is dealing with the body in this season.

Review

Before we turn to the Torah portion, let's take a minute to review. When we began the Torah cycle with parsha Noach, we spent a lot of time talking about themes of reconnection to God, marriage, and the new bride. The new bride spends some time embracing a work within her that awakens her passion for Torah and for the Groom Who gives her the Torah. This work in the lower parts of the soul – in the emotions and instincts – are FINAL INNER STEPS OF PREPARATION in the fall.

What marks the winter is the increased flowing outward of the spirit into the flesh and beyond, into the community, and beyond that too, into the world outside our communities, resulting eventually in the growth of the community. EACH TURN OF THE CYCLE BRINGS AN INCREASING FLOW OF THE SPIRIT OUTWARD THROUGH US, BUT THIS REQUIRES AN UPGRADE OF THE ENTIRE SYSTEM FROM THE INSIDE OUT! WE ARE TO BE STREAMS OF LIVING WATER, LIKE FOUNTAINS FOR A THIRSTY LAND. But the spirit needs a purified pathway to travel through. The spirit needs a purified soul and a purified body and purified actions and a purified community to flow through. So, once the soul work – and the soul is the middle bridge, which we often describe as the mind, will, and emotions – once the soul work is done for a cycle and our emotions are in line and fully engaged via the Torah on the gut and heart, the body and some of our behaviors and our interaction with community still have to come in line to be a fitting and holy vessel so that spirit can really flow through us, according to what God is opening up to us for healing in this cycle. We listen for Him to bring to us what changes we need to make all along the way, and now we're especially listening for corrections for our bodies and our ways of interacting with community. Usually, He will let us know where to focus by giving us some kind of problem, like a sinus infection.

We can't take these physical bodies lightly. They are a precious gift that we need to treat as holy. We know what is good for us and what isn't. And we know how to present our bodies in a holy way or in a common way. And God is faithful to bring along messengers to help us make adjustments so that the flow of the spirit is not hindered through us. So, be paying special attention now to what God is helping you to see that you can be doing differently with your bodies and your presentation of yourself. Don't allow a problem to pass by without learning from it.

Getting back to our review now, last week we talked about the month of Tevet being the month that we are especially being given the ability to bring a kind of correction to the evil eye, the critical eye. The critical eye is what comes natural to us. This is because the critical eye is focusing on the outer shell, focusing on the flesh only. In the month of Tevet, we are given a special ability to add to the left eye the right eye, which is able to see more deeply, able to see past the flesh.

This more balanced view is helping us not only see ourselves better but more importantly, it's helping the community come together more deeply as a community now as we see the good in each other. On the one hand, there is a pruning of the body happening – and I think that's a work that we largely leave to God and the Elders He puts over communities. It's not the responsibility of the sheep to go around pruning the flock. What we all can do is to use the

advantage of extra vision given to us in this month to open ourselves up more fully to the good we see down deep in each other. Let me give this to each of you as a challenge for your home fellowships this week: make a special effort to see the good in the members of your fellowship – from young to old. I’m not saying you have to make a public activity of this, but just try to have this kind of extra mindfulness this week, paying particular attention to that member who maybe most draws out a bit of negativity from you. Allow yourself to be drawn together into your community. Again, we don’t close our eyes to what isn’t kosher, but by the same token, we don’t focus only on the negative, either.

Va’era

As we turn now to portion Va’era, we’re going to see that the work we’re doing now in this month of the calendar leads eventually to a more balanced view of God, and a deeper knowing of Him. Right now we’re doing a kind of work that will strengthen our communities partly because a test is coming for the body, a test like Purim. God is gracious to bring this test because His goal is to show Himself to us more deeply through it, so these ideas will be our focus for the parsha.

Let’s start with a summary of the portion. Parsha Va’era begins with God giving a kind of introduction to what He is about to do. He’s about to reveal Himself in a new way; He’s going to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage; and He’s going to take them as His people and bring them into the Land. The people are unable to hear this, though, because of their broken spirit and the harshness of their slavery. But God has a plan for breaking through that tough shell. The narrative is interrupted with a genealogy that leads us to the births of Moses and Aaron. God then sends Moses and Aaron in to talk to Pharaoh again. Pharaoh is unconvinced by the staff becoming a snake. And we’re off to the races. Va’era contains the first seven plagues, the plagues of blood, frogs, lice, flies, cattle disease, boils, and hail. We can say that this portion, more than any other, is the portion of the plagues.

While there are many topics we could talk about in the portion, I want to try to stay close to the seasonal themes, themes about seeing and seeing the body, the forging of community before a testing, and the end goal of knowing God, deep echad with God.

And let’s start with that final goal of seeing and knowing God more deeply because we are given a picture of that right at the beginning of the Torah portion, in the second verse of Va’era. Exodus 6:3 reads: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shaddai, but by my name Y-H-V-H I did not make Myself known to them.” (Exodus 6:3) It is from this verse that Va’era gets its name, from the word “I appeared.” “Va’era” has to do with vision, with seeing. It means “And I appeared.”

So, there are many ideas for what this contrast is between El Shaddai and Y-H-V-H. Everyone is drawn to this unusual verse, but the interpretations are all over the map. So, I’m going to give a reading that assumes that there is a process of development going on within the Jewish people. In that process of growth, the patriarchs represent an early stage of development, and the

name El Shaddai is reflecting this early relationship with His people. Likewise, I'm going to assume that when God says He is going to make Himself known by the Name Y-H-V-H, this indicates a deeper relationship because the people are ready for that.

Many people point out that the Torah uses the Name Y-H-V-H all along the story, so the patriarchs seemed to know this Name for God. But it's one thing to know a name and its another thing to know the essence behind that name. God is saying here that He didn't owe the essence of Y-H-V-H to them, even if they did know that Name. They simply were not ready for that yet.

Let's talk about the name "El Shaddai." It's usually translated as "God Almighty," though I have also heard, "God the All-Sufficient One." I think both of these understandings work. But I'm going to focus on "God Almighty." When you dig for just a few minutes into the name "El Shaddai," you quickly see that the deeper color of the word brings in some apparently troubling associations. The word that is thought to be at the root of "Shaddai," "shadad," means "to deal with violently, to devastate, to ruin, to destroy" or even "dead." So, this is God showing Himself to the patriarchs as God Almighty by virtue of bringing devastation and death. Another way we could summarize this name of God is, "God the All-Powerful Death Bringer." "El Shaddai" is put in the same category as the name "Elohim," both being names that speak to God as He is expressed in nature, names that carry a sense of limitation to them, the God Who puts boundaries on things. El Shaddai is the God Who gives rules but Who remains on top of the mountain, lofty and so powerful that you can't risk getting too close or you may just end up dead.

So, let's ask how it is that God chiefly made His Shaddai character known to the patriarchs, God the Almighty Death Bringer. What comes to my mind with this question is that the generations of the patriarchs and matriarchs were asked to SUBMIT, to submit to death, to separate from the family and culture and world that they knew and to just follow Him into the unknown. Theirs were the generations that DIDN'T HAVE LAND – and that's huge. Because they left the lands of their ancestors, they DIDN'T HAVE A PLACE. They were sojourners in a land that eventually grew a bit crowded for them and kept pushing back at them. And before too long, they went down to the narrow place of Egypt. And I think we can include the years of slavery in this "El Shaddai" period because God says that He is only now going to make Himself known by another name, as the exodus is beginning. In other words, these early generations were asked to submit to God based upon some promises, and they did, and they sacrificed much, and they had faith that later generations would experience the full benefits that they wouldn't. If we're standing back and comparing those generations to later generations, in a sense they experienced the death of submission to God but not the fullness of the new life. God says to us, "Let it go; let go of the old life. Release it. And I'll give you a new one." And this does happen. The problem is that when He gives us the new life, it's like a seed that has to go through a whole long process to fully develop and bear fruit. And Isaac is called a "seed." It takes time.

Let's turn now to Y-H-V-H, the Tetragrammaton. This Name is thought to derive from the three verbs for "was, are, and will be." In other words, the Name carries past, present, and future in

it, eternity. Eternity lacks boundaries. So, in contrast to El Shaddai, the Tetragrammaton is connected to the God Who is outside of nature, above and beyond. It is not connected to God's character of placing limitations and bringing death but is instead connected to His compassion, His endless giving. It is a more transcendent Name of God that brings in the element of the infinite and unknowable and unreachable.

So, here now is the beauty of what God is saying here. We have the benefit of looking ahead in the text to see a bit more of what He means by allowing Himself to be known as Y-H-V-H. Again, we go to the final chapters of Exodus. There, we see the people of Israel working together as a strong, united community to build something together. They are building a house for God, the Tabernacle. And then on one immense day in history, it was a 1st of Nissan, God came and dwelled in a tent among people. He came down off the top of the mountain and lived among smelly, sweaty, jabbering people. The God Who set strict limitations that the people not go up on the mountain or else they would die is now the God Who stooped down to dwell in a tent made of human hands.

The irony here is that it is the vastly transcendent God Y-H-V-H, the unknowable God, Who is not bothered by the boundaries Who is willing to submit to this lowliness for the sake of relationship with His people. We'd have to say that this kind of living in the middle of people, this apex to the book of Exodus, is God revealing Himself to the people as Y-H-V-H. He might be the unknowable, infinite God, but that's not stopping Him from dwelling with His people and making Himself known to them to the degree that they can handle it.

So, there we have a picture of the goal for this season as seen through two names for God in the second verse of Va'era.

Let me just make a few other quick connections here. First, let's talk about why it might be that God is wanting to present Himself so clearly to the people, so extravagantly. God is making sure that Israel gets to see Him very clearly during the exodus and not just as Y-H-V-H but also as El Shaddai. El Shaddai comes first and Y-H-V-H second. The destruction of the plagues is all about El Shaddai, the Almighty God Who Brings Death. Y-H-V-H doesn't come forth until the community is able to work together as a holy community.

We can see how intent God is to show Himself to the people in how He treats Pharaoh, at one point hardening Pharaoh's heart. The text is clear that God does this so that His people will get to see more of His power. God wants to show the bully who holds himself up as a god getting flattened again and again. The bully takes a few punches and a few more, and finally he falls down and taps out. But God says, "Hang on, my people haven't quite seen everything they need to. You're out a bit early. I'm going to stand you back up." So God stands him back up and flattens him a few more times until Israel has seen what they need to.

Is God being cruel to Pharaoh, by the way, in using him this way? Well, we can be assured that Pharaoh is getting exactly what he deserved. This is the man who not only held himself up to be a god but who also decreed the killing of innocent babies and turned a deaf ear to the spirit-

breaking workload on the people. Anything he got, he deserved, and it was mercy to allow him to pay even somewhat for his crimes on this side of the grave.

So, back to our question. Why is God going to such lengths with Pharaoh and otherwise to show Himself to the people? I think a big part of the answer is that He is CREATING A UNIFIED BODY. Somehow in this process, a downtrodden slave people raised in Egypt becomes a distinct nation with a distinct identity. God is forging a nation by doing several things here.

First, He's severing the people from Egypt by standing up the Egyptian gods and challenging them, allowing them to do their best, which is nothing. They fall one by one, from the gods over the darkness to the gods over the light. So belief in the Egyptian system is being shown to be ridiculous. God is separating His people from that system and that king.

Second, He's showing them that there is a real God Who actually has real power.

And I think third, He's drawing a circle around Israel and saying, "You're different." He's helping Israel to see THEMSELVES in a new light. It becomes apparent that God and everyone else can see a fundamental difference in them. Don't bother pretending you're Egyptian, because you're not. He's forging a group of people with a strong identity and a shared experience. They not only see God making a distinction between them and the Egyptians, but they also end up with a bunch of shared experiences and stories to tell about the wonders they saw, one after the next, plague after plague. I'm sure they had endless bonding conversations about how they got water during the plague of blood, or what they did to fend off the frogs, or what they saw or heard during the plague of hail. We're seeing the creation of a nation, a body united through a drastic experience, and a body who, above all, is bonded together by the clear recognition of a common All-powerful King Who is far superior to the nothing gods of Egypt.

All of these means of making a nation are in line with one of our themes for this season – the vision that leads to a more unified body.

Lastly here, this forging of the body is being done before a great test for the body comes, a great test that ends with knowing God as Y-H-V-H. The test that is coming here for Israel in Exodus is, "Are you going to stay as a member of Israel and go out into that dry wilderness, or are you going to stay in this place with the dependable Nile?" Tradition says that there were some who stayed behind in Egypt, tragically. They're not out there long before they get thirsty. And God allows them to get thirsty on purpose. There are a series of tests they undergo in that first year. But before God brings them to that place of difficult testing, He does this strengthening as a body in Egypt.

We should be expecting that kind of testing coming up because Purim is not far away, and Purim is all about this testing of the body. If they are simply willing to say they are not Jewish, they could escape the evil decree and save their lives, no less. But they know the body they are in, and they stay true, and in the end, once they've come through, they end up knowing God better than before.

You see, we bring this body testing upon ourselves when we make a proclamation that we are in His body. This is something we do periodically. When we proclaim that we are in His body, He used that as a vehicle to bless us, and that involves testing us. I'd like to suggest that when we put our hanukkiyahs in the window at Hanukkah, this is when we are making this declaration for this season that we belong to God and His kingdom. It's not a small thing to do that. It's not just a pretty thing to look at in the window. No, it's a statement we are making. And God says, "Great! I see it. I hear it. Now, let's test that so that it can really mean something to you and so that you can get some fruit from that declaration. You draw close to Me, and I'll draw close to you." We come to the other side of the testing with a deeper relationship with Him.

Yeshua

Let's turn the discussion to Yeshua, now. One reason we do this each week is that we are studying something I call the "Salvation Pattern," and Yeshua is the origin of every bit of it. His Name means "Salvation."

I'm going to focus these few thoughts on how Yeshua shows us both El Shaddai and Y-H-V-H. Let me put forth that His first coming is more showing us El Shaddai, and His second Y-H-V-H.

As a reminder, El Shaddai is that side of God that deals with boundaries and even death. At Yeshua's first coming, although He is God dwelling among us, He is hidden. He is not recognized fully until AFTER HIS DEATH. His first coming is marked by the display of His power in the form of miracles. And as for His teaching, His words provided boundaries that even exceeded the letter of the law, driving deeper to the spirit of the law. So, in that way, He is a boundary-bringer, increasing the reach of the law. And His Words divided people. He used His tongue as a sword, a sword that would frequently split the crowds listening to Him. And too, His first coming is marked especially by His own death.

All of this is in contrast to His second coming. Now, we know that His second coming will begin with more death as He will lead a great battle on the earth. But that will be a blip in time compared to what will follow – centuries of Yeshua leading the world in peace. This peace is in contrast to division and death. And when He comes the second time, He will be recognized as God living among us like in the wilderness, but this time with the tent of a human body rather than the Tabernacle. We will get to know God's essence in a vastly deeper way. Imagine it. Imagine us knowing Who He is as He walks among us, and speaks to us and sits around our tables and eats the food we serve Him, and laughs with us and cries with us and celebrates family events with us. It's almost too much to even think about. But this is more like the revelation of Y-H-V-H, such a second coming.

Joshua 7

Lastly, let's turn to Joshua 7, the story of the stoning of Achan. After the great victory at Jericho, Israel stumbles when they go up against the much smaller town of Ai, and about 36 of them

even end up dying. The cause is found to be Achan, who stole some rich stuff from Jericho and hid it in his tent. When God reveals the perpetrator, under Joshua's leadership, all of Israel stones him and maybe even his family and burns his stuff. And the last verse of the chapter reads: "And they raised over him a great heap of stones that remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his burning anger. Therefore, to this day the name of that place is called the Valley of Achor." (Joshua 7:26)

There's a clear connection here in this story to the idea of just how profoundly God considers a community a single entity, a single body. The whole body suffers when there is sin in any of its members. God looks down and sees a single being made up of many parts. We see ourselves as separate pieces. His sight is better than ours. So if God sees a community this way, we must purpose to do so, too. We can do better.

But I'd like to make a different connection here because I think we can see here in Israel's stoning of Achan an example of an attribute of the month of Tevet I haven't mentioned yet. And that is anger. The sages connect the month of Tevet to anger. They say that this is the month to turn anger into a good thing by turning that burning judgment onto ourselves, onto our own evil inclination. This, too, is a rectification of the evil eye. Use that critical judgment against yourself! Use it for good! We read in the verse that God was angry, and His anger was appeased by what the people did. What did the people do? They turned their own anger inward on the sin that was within themselves. They expressed that anger that God had, and God's anger was appeased. So there's a lesson here. You don't want God to be angry with you? Get angry with yourself! And do something!

The sages say that this is the month to get mad at our evil inclination. Here is what R' Raskin says about this topic in a lesson about the attributes of the month of Tevet. Listen carefully to what he says, although he uses a few words I didn't look up, but he gives his own translations:

"Anger normally is a bad thing. The Gemara says one who is angry, one who acts in rage, is an idolater. However, when it comes to the yetzer harah,,,your evil inclination, the Alter Rebbe writes in Tanya chapter 29...that there is a time that a person has to use a raging voice and stormy indignation, that the animal soul has to be screamed upon, that the godly soul should scream upon the animal soul. In other words, when you find yourself in the situation that you have a very strong desire to do something which is not correct, you have a terrible temptation to do something which is wrong, what do you do? You have to scream! And you have to say to your yetzer harah, your evil inclination, "You should know you are ra and rashah, meshukah, metsuav and menuvo." You have to scream at your evil inclination and say to him, "I don't want to separate from God. Stop bothering me. You should know you're bad, you're wicked, you're detestable, you're loathsome, and you're an idiot!" And by screaming at the yetzer harah, the evil inclination, with this attribute of anger, one will have the ability to at least eskafia, to push away and curtail his evil desires."

I know we'll look a little crazy if we go around yelling at ourselves like this. But sometimes the slightly crazy-looking people are actually the most sane. Do whatever it takes to stop from

sinning and keep your connection to God, even if that means yelling at yourself now and then. At the very least, you're showing God that you care.

Well, I'm going to leave it there for today. Thanks again for listening. I will try to put an outline below the video. May God bless us with His revelation to us as both El Shaddai and especially Y-H-V-H. May we know Him deeply as the transcendent God Who yet chooses to dwell among us. And may He make us into the people He wants us to be. Shalom.