

## Torah Thoughts Va'era

5778:

One of the things that separate Judaism from other religions is an almost unbelievable attention to the details of the words of the Torah. As the foundational text of our people, the Torah has been continually scrutinized over the centuries, not only in order to know how to behave as a Jew, but also to know how to think like a Jew. What does it mean to think like a Jew? Rashi, the preeminent commentator on the Torah, reads the first words of this week's parshah: "God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by my name YHVH," and notes that it is problematic. He writes that it seems like an introduction, but actually follows the first episode of Moses coming into God's presence. Why would God make such an introduction, after having already had a lengthy conversation convincing Moses to go to Egypt? Moreover, the name YHVH is not revealed here for the first time, as the text seems to imply.

Rashi first explains that these are not insurmountable questions, and then adds: "Interpreting a verse is like a hammer striking rock: it creates many sparks." In other words, there are answers to every question, and sometimes more than one answer to a given question. What is essential to the process of studying sacred texts is not finding 'the' answer but rather finding an answer that makes sense or creates meaning. In this particular case, Rashi and others teach that the phrase "I am the LORD" means that the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is about to be fulfilled.

Beyond supplying a solution to the particular problems of these verses, Rashi teaches us something crucial about how to approach a sacred text from a Jewish perspective. What it means to think as a Jew is to be open to multiple and sometimes conflicting truths, to be able to think deeply and search for meaning in our texts, in the words of our sages and in our own experiences, not limiting ourselves to a single, static understanding. Like the classical commentators, we get more out of Torah when we bring more knowledge, questions and critical thinking to it. Great literature deserves serious readers, and sacred literature deserves both serious readers and serious seekers.

Shabbat Shalom