Sermon for Parashat Va'era Living With "I Will Be"
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Do you remember the cartoon character Popeye?

You know with the massive forearms, corncob pipe, squinty eye, sailor cap and of course his hallmark catch phrase. "I'm strong to the finish 'cause I eats me spinach. I yam what I yam. I am what I am, and that's all that I am. That's all I can stands, 'cause I can't stands no more."

I always focused on the spinach part, but beyond his affection for "leafy greens" the second part actually says something important about how human beings

understand themselves. Yes I am about to explain God and the nature of human beings through the lens of a cartoon sailor.

When challenged or cornered, Popeye the Sailor man would straighten up and say, “I am what I am, and that's all that I am.”

It establishes solidity. This is who I am. This is where I stand. Nothing will move me. I cannot be anything else.

There are moments when that posture feels necessary. When life presses hard, fixed identity and

grounded certainty can feel like safety. And yet, that sentence also reveals something about how human beings respond when the ground shifts beneath them. We often tighten rather than open. We cling to what already exists because the unknown feels threatening.

Parashat Va’era opens with a radically different response.

Before the plagues, before liberation, before anything changes in the world around them, God speaks to Moses and reveals a name: *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*.

Hebrew places this phrase in the future tense. The most faithful translation is: “I will be who I will be.”

God introduces identity as something still unfolding, and the context could not be more unstable, than Popeye’s certainty.

When God says, “Call me *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. “I will be who I will be” the Israelites are still enslaved. Pharaoh’s power is intact. When Moses again and again brings God’s words to the people, the Torah tells us they cannot hear him because of *kotzer ruach*, crushed spirit and exhausting labor.

The Torah understands that uncertainty wears people down. It constricts imagination. It makes it difficult to believe that tomorrow could look different from today.

But God speaks the name anyway, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. “I will be who I will be”

The Torah places two visions of the world next to each other.

Popeye gives us the personal version of this instinct; Pharaoh gives us the political one. Popeye’s “I am

what I am” expresses a human desire for stability. Pharaoh embodies it fully. His authority depends on permanence. Reality must remain predictable. Many of us still hear Pharaoh’s voice through the actor Yul Brynner in The Ten Commandments: “So let it be written. So let it be done.”

Those words capture Pharaoh’s worldview perfectly. The present order must endure. The future should mirror what already exists.

This is how power protects itself. Fixed identities preserve systems. Certainty keeps things in place. “I

am what I am, you are what you are and neither will ever change, get used to it, accept it."

God's name introduces a different posture toward the future.

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh. "I will be who I will be" holds open what Pharoah, what others want to seal shut. It creates space for change, growth, and transformation. It refuses to let the present imprison the future.

Judaism returns to this idea again and again. Not just in this week's Torah portion but through the

Torah and throughout the history of Jewish philosophy and thought.

Abraham Heschel wrote, “faith is learned through living with questions rather than clinging to answers.”

Jewish life resists final conclusions.

The Talmud preserves arguments instead of resolving them.

Our tradition records minority opinions alongside majority rulings.

Our sacred texts remain open because the world they speak to remains open.

Living Jewishly has always meant learning how to live with uncertainty.

That skill has become indispensable in modern life.

We live in a world that generates information constantly, yet provides very little certainty. Medical tests leave people waiting between possibilities. Technology accelerates change faster than we can absorb it. Global crises overlap in ways that make clear answers elusive.

In the midst of the COVID pandemic I gave a sermon on Kol Nidrei. Don’t worry if you don’t remember it, there was a lot going on back then.

I spoke about how the hardest part of uncertainty is often not the outcome, but the waiting in between. People can endure bad news. They can endure hard work. What is most difficult is being stuck in the middle, without clarity, without control, without knowing what comes next.

Judaism never promises us certainty. It teaches us persistence.

Emunah, the Hebrew word for faith, is more accurately translated as trust. Trust in Jewish thought and practice means continuing forward even when the future remains unclear. We have emunah, faith/trust, not that it will all magically work out, but faith/trust that if we keep working at it, we can fix it, we can make it better. It will be what it will be, and we can direct the path. We navigate, adjust, change course and speed as necessary to arrive at a better destination. Nothing is pre-ordained, not us, not the outcome.

Nobel Prize winner, and former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres once explained that the Jewish people have contributed at least one great idea to humanity: the refusal to be satisfied.

Throughout our 3,500 years of history, our people were never satisfied, neither personally nor collectively. Not in Egypt, not as they marched through the desert, not even when they arrived in the Promised Land, and certainly not today as we have returned to once again inhabit it.

This ethos has been a source of pride, and at times a reason for resentment. When people become

satisfied, Peres suggested, they become fixed. They settle into the same problems and learn to live with them. Dissatisfaction, by contrast, keeps people searching, improving, imagining something better.

That idea aligns precisely with God's name in Va'era, and in stark contrast to Popeye's, "I am, what I am, and that's all that I am."

"I will be who I will be" expresses a holy dissatisfaction with the way things are. It refuses to accept slavery as permanent. It refuses to believe that the future must replicate the present.

Living with uncertainty becomes a moral stance. It keeps us open to change. It allows repentance, growth, and repair. It invites us to participate in shaping what comes next.

Pharaoh cannot live this way. His authority depends on fixedness. His imagination cannot stretch beyond the present order. That rigidity becomes his undoing.

The Israelites struggle with it too. Their spirits are crushed. They cannot yet hear a future-tense promise. That is in part why the generation that were slaves are not the generation that lives to inherit the land. Our people spent 40 years in the wilderness,

not because they lacked direction, but because their internal compass kept pointing back to where they had already been.

But Judaism insists on a different posture:

To live in what will be.

To refuse enslavement to what already is.

To remain open even when certainty feels safer.

“I will be who I will be” becomes more than God’s name. It becomes Jewish ethos, our way of standing in the world, back then in the desert and today in the public square.

Judaism asks us to resist premature closure.

It calls us to live faithfully without final answers.

It invites us to embrace a world still unfolding.

That work is demanding. It always has been.

And it remains deeply Jewish.

Shabbat shalom.