I AM WHAT I AM
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Temple Sholom - Vancouver BC

Do you remember the cartoon character Popeye?

The massive forearms, the corncob pipe, the squinty eye, the sailor cap, and of course his hallmark lines:
“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.”

As a kid, I focused on the spinach. But as an adult, I hear something else going on there. Beyond his affection for leafy greens, Popeye is making a serious claim about identity.

When challenged or cornered, Popeye straightens up and declares, “I am what I am, and that’s all that I am.”

It is a comforting sentence. It establishes solidity. This is who I am. This is where I stand. Nothing will move me.

There are moments when that posture feels necessary. When life presses hard, fixed identity can feel like safety. In an uncertain world, clarity can feel like relief.

And yet, that sentence also reveals something about how human beings respond to uncertainty. When the ground shifts beneath us, we often tighten rather than open. We cling to what already exists because the unknown feels threatening.

Parashat Va’era opens with a very different response to uncertainty.

Before the plagues, before liberation, before anything changes on the ground, 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 presents identity as unfolding.

That matters because the moment could not be more unstable. The Israelites remain enslaved. Pharaoh’s power is intact. When Moses 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 what uncertainty does to people. It constricts imagination. It makes it difficult to believe that tomorrow could look different from today.

God speaks the name anyway.

The Torah places two visions of the world side by side.

Popeye gives us the personal version of fixed identity. Pharaoh gives us the political one.

His authority depends on permanence. Reality must remain predictable. Many of us still hear Pharaoh's voice through Yul Brynner in The Ten Commandments: "So let it be written. So let it be done."

The line captures Pharaoh's worldview perfectly. The present order must endure. The future should resemble what already exists.

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

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

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh.
"I will be who I will be."

The phrase holds open what Pharaoh wants sealed shut. It creates space for change, growth, and transformation. It refuses to allow the present to define the limits of what is possible.

Judaism returns to this idea again and again.

Abraham Heschel wrote that 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. Minority opinions sit 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 produces endless information and 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 resist simple explanations or clear timelines.

During the COVID pandemic, I gave a sermon about uncertainty. I spoke about how the hardest part 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 certainty. It teaches persistence.

Emunah, the Hebrew word we translate as faith, is better understood as trust. Trust in Jewish life means continuing forward even when the future remains unclear. Not faith that everything will magically work out, but trust that through effort, responsibility, and moral commitment, we can make things better.

Nothing is preordained. Not who we are. Not how things turn out.

Shimon Peres once described this as one of the Jewish people's great contributions to humanity. He called it "the refusal to be satisfied."

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

That idea aligns precisely with God's name in Va'era and stands in sharp contrast to Popeye's declaration.

"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 as well. Their spirits are crushed. They cannot yet hear a future-tense promise.

That struggle helps explain why the generation that leaves Egypt does not enter the land. The forty years in the wilderness reflect more than geography. They reveal how long it takes to unlearn the habits of bondage. Freedom requires learning how to live without the certainties of slavery.

Judaism insists on that posture anyway.

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 a Jewish ethos, a way of standing in the world, then and now.

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.