

AND HE CALLED BY THE NAME OF THE LORD

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Upon his arrival in the Promised Land, Abraham built an altar and *he invoked the name of the Lord* (using the ineffable tetragrammaton; Gen. 12:8, JPS translation). He later returned to this altar and again *invoked there the name of the Lord* (Gen. 13:4). The Bible does not report that a sacrifice was offered at the altar, only that the name of the Lord was invoked. A third time, Abraham *planted a tamarisk at Beer-sheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord* (Gen. 21:33). The Hebrew phrase used here is *va-yikra be-shem*, which can also be translated as "called by the name of the Lord" or "called in the name of the Lord." What does this phrase mean? What did Abraham do at the altar and the tamarisk?

Abraham burst on the stage of history at the age of 75. Very little is recorded about him in the Bible prior to his Divine summons to move to a land that *I will show you* (Gen. 12:1). It is, however, inconceivable that Abraham would be chosen to be the father of a new, revolutionary monotheistic faith and the father of a nation unless he had proven himself worthy of this status.

The Midrash fills this vacuum by portraying Abraham as an iconoclast and as a man willing to give up his life for preaching a faith that brought him into conflict with the authorities in Ur of the Chaldeans.¹ Maimonides, in his monumental work *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 1:3), elaborates:

After this mighty man was weaned, he began to explore and think. Although he was a child, he began to think [incessantly] throughout the day and night, wondering: How is it possible for the sphere to continue revolving without having anyone to control it? Who is causing it to revolve? Surely it does not cause itself to revolve.

He had no teacher, nor was there anyone to inform him. Rather, he was mired in Ur Kasdim among the foolish idolaters. His father, mother, and all the people [around him] were idol worshipers, and he would worship with them. [However,] his heart was exploring and [gaining] understanding.

Ultimately, he appreciated the way of truth and understood the path of righteousness through his accurate comprehension. He realized that there was one God who controlled the sphere, that He created everything, and that there is no other God among all the other entities.

Indeed, the rabbis of the Midrash understood that Abraham's radical new faith had already crystallized prior to his arrival in Canaan. His efforts to convert idol worshippers to his faith, even prior to his sojourn to Canaan, were deduced from the verse, *Abraham took . . . the persons they had acquired in Haran* (Gen. 12:5), which is interpreted to mean "those he had brought under the wings of the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence)."²

Abraham's faith subsequently finds expression in the encounter with Melchizedek, where the latter proclaims, *Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth* (Gen. 14:19); in Abraham's confrontation with God at Sodom, when he declares, *Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?* (Gen. 18:25); and in his reference to the Lord as *the Everlasting God* (Gen. 21:33). We see here the core elements of Abraham's theology – an eternal God, Creator of the world, a moral God who acts in a just manner.

The idea that Abraham had a fully formed theology enables us to understand what is meant by *he invoked the name of the Lord*. This phrase first appears in the Bible regarding the time of Enosh, grandson of Adam: *It was then that men began to invoke the Lord by name* (Gen. 4:26). Sforno, commenting on this verse, explains that the term here means: "Then the righteous of the generation began publicly teaching the name of the Lord to the masses. . . to contradict the approach of the idolaters who arose then."³ The term *invoke the Lord by name* denotes a public proclamation of the proper understanding of God.

Similarly, with regard to Abraham invoking the name of the Lord, classical commentators interpret it to mean that he proselytized and taught people how to worship the Lord. Ramban, in his commentary to Genesis 12:8, explains: "He would call out in a loud voice before the altar and inform people of the name of God and His Divinity." The altar and the tamarisk were places where Abraham publicly taught his new theology to the masses. Isaac later did the same (Gen. 26:25), yet Jacob is never reported to *invoke the name of the Lord*. Ramban points out that Jacob had many children and his own *kehillah*

gedolah, a large community. This was enough to make their view of God known among other people, so outwardly directed teaching was no longer thought necessary.

The term *shem*, normally translated as "name", can have other meanings in the Bible. Thus, in *yad va-shem* (Isa. 56:5), it signifies "memorial"; in *karati ve-shimkha* (Isa. 43:1) it is best translated as "I have chosen you"; and in *ve-ta'aseh lekha shem* (Jer. 32:20) it means "renown." Similarly, *karati ve-shem* ("I have singled out") is the term used when God appoints Bezalel: *I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to make designs for work in gold, silver and copper . . .* (Ex. 31:2-4). All of these contexts denote some sort of public announcement, as we have seen in the case of Abraham.

Va-yikra ve-shem thus combines proclaiming (*va-yikra*/invoking) the Divine Name and indicating its significance (*ve-shem*/by the name). When God tells Moses, *I have singled you out by name* (Ex. 33:17), Moses requests, *Let me behold Your Presence* (Ex. 33:18). What follows is a revelation of God's thirteen ethical attributes: *The Lord! The Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast kindness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of fathers upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generation* (Ex. 34:6-7). Note that this is preceded by the phrase *va-yikra ve-shem Adonai* (Ex. 34:5). The traditional commentaries explain that it is God who called out "in His name", proclaiming and explaining what His own attributes are.⁴

When Abraham the trailblazer invoked (or called by) the name of the Lord, he converted idolaters, bade them walk in the ways of God, and taught them that God is One, the Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and Eternal.

NOTES

1. *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:13.

2. *Bereshit Rabbah* 39:14.

3. Traditionally, idolatry began in the days of Enosh. According to the Midrash (*Bereshit Rabbah* 23:10), the term *huh'al* in Genesis 4:26 (usually translated as "began") signifies *mered* (rebellion), and according to Rashi "profaned." This era is thus understood by the Midrash to be when idolatry came into existence.

4. See for example, Saadia Gaon, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Sforno on Exodus 34:5.