

# Vaeira

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The opening sentence of this week's parshah is one of the most interesting, theologically speaking, in the whole of the Torah. God is trying to reassure Moshe after his initial attempt to get Pharaoh's attention fails. He says, "I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and my name, God, I had not made known to them." What does this mean? We have always assumed that Avraham had the ideal relationship with God. He was supposedly the first monotheist and the one for whom God engaged with mankind in general and the Jewish people specifically. There is no hint that there was something missing in Avraham's relationship.

But here the Torah is saying that hitherto there was something about God that they were not aware of. Traditionally, the explanation is that inherent in God's nature is the fact that he carries out His commitments. He had told Avraham that he would father vast numbers of children and that his children would be enslaved and then let free. But until that process had been completed, there was still an unfinished agenda. Now, says God, the promise would be kept.

However, the wording still implies that Avraham did not fully know God's name. The theological implication is that God is complex, and however close one gets there are still aspects that a human may be unaware of. Similarly, Moshe several times asks God for reassurance and clarification. So the way Avraham understood God was through his own experiences, and Yitzchak through his, Yaakov through his, and Moshe through his. And we through ours. God works through history, and it is through history that we see what happens to the Jewish people, for better or for worse. But parallel with that flow of history is our own personal history and it is this which defines our relationship with God.