

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

REFLECTIONS UPON DIVINE NAMES AND THE ATTRACTION OF GOD TO ISRAEL

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Although it has in some places become fashionable to consign distinctions of nomenclature to the realm of politically-correct quibbling, names, once upon a time, were of the greatest importance, especially in the Tanakh. Names in the Tanakh are never meaningless. Rather, there is a pronounced trend in biblical Hebrew to functional or objective eponymy – that is, the names of things or people are given to describe something about them. A name is an attempt to define the character of the named thing in essence. This is most readily apparent of places,¹ but is certainly present in the names of people also.²

As to Divine names, when God first appears to Moses at the Burning Bush, God introduces Himself three times: First, without a proper name: *'I am the God [Elohey] of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob . . .'* (Ex. 3:6). Then, when Moses asks for something more specific – a proper name to give in response to queries as to who has sent him – God provides a debatable answer: *And God said to Moses, 'Ehyeh asher Ehyeh. Thus shall you say to the people of Israel: Ehyeh . . . has sent me to you'*³ (3:14). But then, as if anticipating some issue or difficulty with this answer, God defines Himself a third time to Moses in the encounter at the Burning Bush using the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable four-letter name of God which will be represented henceforth as *HaShem*.

*And God said moreover to Moses, 'Thus shall you say to the people of Israel: HaShem the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: that is My Eternal Name, and so am I known from generation to generation'*⁵ (3:15).

This triple introduction is mirrored or book-ended at the beginning of Exodus 6, when God once again says to Moses *' . . . I am HaShem. And I appeared to*

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Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, by the name of El Shaddai, but by My name HaShem was I not known to them Therefore say to the people of Israel, I am HaShem . . . ' (6:2, 6:6).

We have now received, by God's own statement, the knowledge that different Divine Names have different significances, and perhaps also different levels of meaning. Indeed, according to Maimonides in *Guide to the Perplexed* (Part I, Chapter 61): "All the names of God occurring in Scripture are derived from His actions, except one, namely the Tetragrammaton which consists of the letters *Yud-He-Vav-Heh*." The Patriarchs, our foundational prophets, were permitted to know God only as *El Shaddai*, which is generally translated as God Almighty, and seems to be a name implying power or authority.⁶ We, the Israelite People, are to know God as *HaShem*, and, perhaps even more importantly, as *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. It seems clear from context that *HaShem* is not merely a more supernal name, but is a use-name, a sacred name which we are intended to use as God's "official" name. *HaShem*, as many others have noted, is a paradox: It represents the verb "to be" in all three tenses simultaneously. If names are descriptive of the essences of their subject, *HaShem* seems to be telling us numerous things about God: Eternality, paradox, perhaps something related to God's being the Source of Being.

Yet, *HaShem* is not the first name told to Moses; that name is *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. According to Maimonides in *Guide to the Perplexed* (Part I, Chapter 63),

when God appeared to Moses and commanded him to address the people, Moses replied that he may be asked to prove the existence of God. Then God taught Moses . . . by saying *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* a verb derived from the verb *hayah*, that is, the sense of existing. He is the "existing Being which is existing Being"; that is to say, the Being whose existence is absolute. Rashbam⁷ tells us, in his comments on Exodus 3:14, that '*that is My Eternal Name*' refers to *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, and that '*and so am I known from generation to generation . . . ' refers to HaShem. So it would seem that while Ehyeh asher Ehyeh is God's name per se [shem olami], HaShem is how God is known by people [zichri l'dor vador]. The former implies a name which describes something objectively innate in the nature of God, the latter implies either a byname – something which touches on qualities of the named individual, but*

is not necessarily a proper name – or a name which is a summary, perhaps even a metonymy, for the primary name. The implication seems to be that *HaShem*, despite all its inherent paradox, is somehow more comprehensible than *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. And yet, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is clearly God's name of choice, the name He feels best expresses Himself to us.

Why that name? What does *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* mean, that it should be the primary name by which God expects us to relate to Him – not necessarily in daily use, but in theological identity? It is by now widely known that the name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* has been grievously mistranslated as "I am that I am" – a ridiculously oblique phrase, which makes it clear why Christians have had such limited success understanding this name⁸ – and in fact, it ought to mean "I Will Be What I Will Be." And *Ehyeh . . .*, which I translate deliberately with an ellipsis, clearly is not merely an appellation, but is an expression of the same essence: "I Will Be . . ." with the ellipsis a key synecdoche for the ideas implicit in "I Will Be What I Will Be."

Ehyeh asher Ehyeh is not only a name, it is a *sine qua non* of functional eponymy. Implicit in "I Will Be What I Will Be" is the predicate clause ". . . and *only* what I will be, and *not* what anyone else wills Me to be." Implicit in the ellipsis of *Ehyeh . . .* is the idea of "anything." It is, in other words, the ultimate declaration of transcendent self-determination. What defines God as God, according to God, is that God alone, of all things extant, enjoys complete freedom and total experience of infinite possibilities. The name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* informs us that God alone of all things can be said to embody the quintessence of self-determination.

So it makes perfect sense that this is **the** name, the key name, the name by which we ought – if we can understand, if we can move past our stiff-necked intransigence – best to relate to God. This is the name by which Israel is to know their Beloved, because it is the name which most echoes the quality that is most desirable and most complementary to a nation of slaves: Freedom, self-determination, possibilities without limit or restraint. Only the God who embodies the essence of all these things is a fit God for the oppressed, a fit partner for those bereft of hope.

The love story of God and Israel begins with the God of Freedom giving us freedom, the God of Infinite Possibilities bringing us – in the actualization of things so unlikely as to seem impossible – across the Sea of Reeds and to

Mount Sinai. What happens there, with the Covenant entered into by both parties – a relationship as close to an agreement of equals as is possible with mortals and the Endless – is a matter of free people exercising free choice. Two independent parties agreeing to come together into a relationship of love, with an ultimate goal of *tikkun olam* [mending the world]; that is, perhaps, the ideal definition of marriage. Between God and Israel, this is only possible because of the complementary connection of *ha-Am ha-Nig'al* [the Redeemed People] and *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*.

Each and every human being has a minute, echo-fragment of this Divine quality of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. Humans are created *b'tzelem Elohim*,⁹ and the independence and self-determination of our Creator is His chief gift to us, from among all other creatures. Recognition of that sameness; comprehension of the deep importance of the Divine origin of that quality within us; connection to the Creator as the Provider of Freedom; conscious choice to enter into a partnership with God for the purposes of effecting *tikkun olam* – these things are what distinguish the Israelite/Jewish experience of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* from the glimpses of the Divine Nature seen by other peoples.

NOTES

1. For example, (a) *Bet El*, the place in which Jacob has his revelatory dream (Gen. 28:19); (b) *Gal-Ed*, also called *Yegar Sahaduta* [Cairn of Witness], that Jacob and Laban set up as witness to their treaty of non-aggression (Gen. 31:47); (3) *Giv'at Ha-Aralot* [Hill of Foreskins], where Joshua had all of the Israelite males entering into Canaan circumcised (Josh. 5:3). Biblical names are here given in transliteration of the Hebrew, rather than the conventional translation into English, because of the importance of relating to names as given and understood in the original contexts.
2. There are particular meanings to the names given to many figures of note in the Tanakh. For example: (a) Isaac, a wordplay on "laughter" (Gen. 21:6); (2) all the sons of Jacob (Gen. 29:32, 30:13, 17-20, 22-24, 35:16-18); (3) Moses from "drawn-forth," although probably a clever Hebraicization of the Egyptian *MSS* [beloved of a god] a common suffix in the names of royal Egyptians; (Ex. 1:10).
3. Although I adhere to the standard translation except as noted, I substitute *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, *Ehyeh . . .*, and *HaShem* for the usual "I AM WHO I AM, I AM," and The Lord, for reasons of clarity.
5. The standard translation's ending to this verse is "*that is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations*," which I do not believe to be the most accurate, relevant, or comprehensible translation. Thus I have emended with my own translation, above.
6. Everett Fox, in the notes to his translation of the Torah (E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*. New York: Schocken. 1996), opines that *Shaddai* may arise from *shadayim*, meaning "breasts," and that perhaps the title was originally for a goddess, or a female god-image; if so, it would

follow that the name would have connotations of maternity, nourishment, security. The notion is a fascinating innovation, which, due to the resultant complications, I will not discuss here.

7. Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, French commentator and halakhist of the Tosafist period.

8. Somehow "I am that I am" was the best the Jacobite translators felt they could do with the Vulgate's *Ego sum qui sum*, which more plainly means, "I am who I am" (still incorrect, but slightly less oblique), and ought to read *Ego fui qui fui*.

9. "In the image of God," cf. Genesis 1:26-7.



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