EHYEH-ASHER-EHYEH

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Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh is the ambiguous and even contradictory answer Moses receives when he asks God to tell him His Name (Ex. 3:14). All the classical commentators related to this question, and a recent paper in this journal dealt with it in a different context.[1] This paper aims to take a fresh look at the scene. To this end, it reviews Moses' background, tries to explain his attitude, and then expands on the subject proper.

This is not the first time God speaks with man. Indeed, from the very start He addresses His creatures. It is always He who takes a straightaway initiative, and from Adam through Abraham none seems surprised or hesitant; they listen and eventually reply. But with Moses, it was not straightaway. First, Moses' curiosity is provoked, and not until he is drawn to the Burning Bush is communication established. Moses at first tries to evade the mission put upon him, and before going on from that he poses a fundamental question: Who is calling to him?

Why is Moses the first to ask this? In regard to this, we recall his special circumstances; he had been raised at the court of the principal power of the time, and in that ancient time a name was much more than just a means to identify a person. As to his own background, according to Exodus 2:11-14 he must have known his origins. But we do not know what this meant to him. We do not know how much of Hebrew tradition endured after several hundred years of the sojourn in Egypt, how many stories of the Patriarchs and their meetings with God were recalled in his family, and whether Moses, separated from his parents from earliest childhood, would have learned them.

We may assume that at the Egyptian court he learned all the worldly arts and sciences of the time, and was trained to make critical evaluation of the kinds of situations and challenges he would meet as a member of the governing class. He was also familiar with the god-like status of the reigning Pharaoh he was to serve. Taking this into account, Moses' cautious reaction is understandable.

But why does he ask for the name? It is now little more than a formality for a person to introduce himself by name. The name by itself does not express

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anything. Traditional Jewish parents may still honor a deceased forebear by bestowing the name on a descendant, but even then the meaning of the name has nothing to do with the personality of its bearer. Besides this, most people select a first name for a child that goes well with the last name, or according to what is in vogue, to the extent that sometimes you can even guess the approximate age of a person by his or her first name.

In antiquity, each person had but one name, and its meaning had much to do with its bearer. It carried something of a characterization, or a pattern for the forthcoming life, as is often noted in the Book of Genesis. Also, it was believed that the name of a demon, spirit, or deity conveyed its essence, strengths and weaknesses. Pronouncing it could make it appear and was thus dangerous. (A reminder of this belief stands behind the Third Commandment, prohibiting the thoughtless use of God's name, and the later prohibition of pronouncing it at all.) Therefore, when Moses asks the name of the Unknown who introduces Himself as the God of his Patriarchs, he needs this information as part of the message he is to transmit to Pharaoh, but he also seeks firm ground for himself when dealing with the pantheon of Egyptian deities with which he is familiar. And the answer he receives is terrific, authentic, and impressive: *"Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh."*

To comprehend the significance of this, it is necessary to know that Hebrew verbs, unlike verbs in the Indo-European languages, have no present, past, and future tenses. There is a gerund form for an ongoing action of undetermined duration, and two other forms which in modern usage apply to "past" and "future," but essentially indicate only whether an action has or has not been concluded. If the letter or word which represents the personal preposition stands before the verbal root, the action has not yet concluded; if it stands after the verbal root, the action has been concluded.

In this instance, the personal preposition letter of *ehyeh* is an *aleph* that stands for the first person singular pronoun. The other three letters come from the root *h-y-h* that connotes "to be." Hence, "*ehyeh*" signifies an action not yet concluded and can mean likewise "I am" or "I shall be." So, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* can be understood in four very different ways of self-definition:

1. *'I AM WHO I AM'* – referring to an eternally unchanging Being. Such understanding corresponds to a "static" philosophy, the idea that since the

World was created everything remains unchanged as it came from the Hand of God.

2. *'I AM WHO I SHALL BE'* – standing for a fundamental constancy regardless of variations. Such a conception of the Eternal does not ignore the evident changes that occur in nature in the course of time, but considers them of secondary importance without affecting the eternally unchanging essence of God.

3. *'I SHALL BE WHO I AM'* – is the idea that evolution is inherent to the essence of God. It is in agreement with present scientific knowledge of the universe, the formation of the galaxies, the evolution of living creatures on earth, and particularly to the possibilities of the genetic techniques with its crossings and "new models" of plants and animals. In line with this interpretation, the contemporary Jewish naturalist Lutz Zwillenberg wrote, "The purpose of the Universe is the realization of all the possibilities inherent in it."

4. *'I SHALL BE WHO I SHALL BE'* – can have two meanings: "To every one I am something else," or "each person has a different idea of Me," as masterfully expressed by the author of *Shir ha-kavod*, a well-known synagogue hymn, or to a theistic thinker it could read as if God continuously realizes Himself.

These four interpretations are not only different but also mutually exclusive. Contradictory possibilities are anchored in this marvelous *Ehyeh*, which He presents as being His true name. Its form is different according to who is speaking: When God presents Himself he says "I" (beginning with *aleph*). When man speaks of Him he says "He" (beginning with *yod*). Therefore, His name from His side is written *aleph-hei-yod-hei* and from our side *yod-hei-vav-hei.* (*Yod* and *vav* are similar in form and sometimes interchanged in biblical Hebrew.)

Thereafter Moses demands *Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness* (Ex. 7:16). Worship Whom? The Absolute beyond our comprehension, the dimensionless and timeless *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*.

NOTES
1. Jeffrey Cohen, "How God introduced Himself to the patriarchs," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* (Vol. 37 (April – June 2009) pp.118-120.