

Shemot January 18<sup>th</sup> 2025

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The Jewish tradition of naming a book of the Torah by its first significant word sometimes works well – Bereshit ‘In the beginning’ and Bamidbar ‘In the wilderness’ are good one word summaries, but Shemot ‘Names’ isn’t a great summary. The Greek name, Exodus, is much more descriptive. Today’s sedrah has to set out the immediate back story of that exodus, and introduce the main players, Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh, but does not do a great job with their names.

First we are introduced in Chapter 2 to Moses, the son of an anonymous Levitical family. Having established the importance of names given by God or by parents in the 1st book of the Torah, we learn that Moses was actually a name given by a non-Jew, Pharaoh’s daughter. We don’t find out the names of his parents until next week’s sedrah, when the names of the heads of the tribes at the time of the Exodus are first provided. And the name of his sister Miriam isn’t revealed until Chapter 15, even though she had saved Moses’ life back in chapter 2. Aaron is first introduced in Chapter 4 where God angrily tells Moses “Is there Aharon, your brother the Levite? Which could imply that Aaron is a fellow Levite, not a sibling; it is interesting that when Miriam is named, it is as Aaron’s sister, not Moses’ sister. The Pharaoh’s names are never revealed – neither the first who enslaved the children of Israel, or his successor who is Moses’ and Aaron’s adversary. For a book called Names, the naming of the principal characters is very disorganised.

But the one Name that does get some attention in today’s Sedrah is God’s name. At the burning bush, God first says *Elohei Avichah* ‘I am the god of your forefathers. In my research I watched the Hollywood version of the story, and it is Charlton Heston’s Moses who first raises the question of why God isn’t helping the Hebrew slaves, but in the original script that we have just read, God himself says unprompted that he is going to come down and deliver them from the hands of the cruel Egyptians. And then Moses asks God **‘When I say to them that the God of your fathers, *elohei avotechem*, has sent me to you, and they say to me ‘What is his name’ what shall I say to them?’**

Robert Alter analyses this question – The name of course implies identity, a distinctive essence, and in the case of someone giving orders, it implies official authorisation. God of your fathers, is a description, not a name.

Shakespeare may have asked ‘What’s in a name?’ and dismissed it as unimportant, but the implications of the choice of a name are huge – parents worry over it, and in Bereshit almost every name is imbued with meaning by God or the parents. Names change the way something is understood

Studies suggest the existence of a sort of linguistic Heisenberg principle: as soon as you label something, you change how it’s perceived. In one study a psychologist Wolfgang Köhler showed the subjects two line drawings – one was a sort of round, pillow like object, the other an angular shape made of triangles. He asked the subjects which one was the Maluma and which was the Takete. As you might have guessed, most thought the soft pillow like object was the Maluma, and the sharp angular one the Takete. Even though these were just 2 made up words, at least in English they are suggestive of certain shapes.

Words convey symbolic ideas beyond their meaning.

So what Word or words does God choose for itself, and what would we understand by those names.

Back to Moses' question – when they ask me 'What is his name' what shall I say to them?. Robert Alter says 'Gods Response to his request gave Moses more than he bargained for'.

1. *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* translated as ***I will be who I will be***, or also ***I am who I am*** or ***I am that I am*** –.

Alter notes that this is 'An ontological divine mystery of the most daunting character'.  
(Ontology – the nature of being)

2. God then says that Moses should say to the children of Israel: 'Ehyeh has sent me to you.

3. Then God says that Moses should say to the children of Israel יהוה- *Elohei Avotechem* Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitzchak, Elohei Yaakov has sent me (Moses) unto you, This is my name forever.

4 And finally there is a little poetic insert in the text in v15

וְהִשְׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְגוֹה זְכָרִי לְדָרֶךְ:  
That is my name forever  
and thus I am invoked in all ages

Is the name of God Ehyey, or Ehyeh asher Ehyeh, or יהוה Elohim, or just יהוה, and what does this mean?

Firstly, Ehyeh and the yad hay vav hay are really the same name- where אהיה is in the first person and in the third person it becomes יהוה

So what meanings does this name have – what would it have told the children of Israel about this god who has returned into their lives after 430 years.

Hizkuni was a French rabbi of the 13th century. He wrote:

Explaining אהיה אשר אהיה, the first word אהיה is the name of G-d; the second is an explanation of why God is called אהיה. In other words: the reason why My name is אהיה is because I am eternal, immutable. I am therefore a most reliable God, in the sense of dependable helper and saviour, as I will always be around.

RASHBAM in the 12<sup>th</sup> century said:

ויאמר אלוקים אל משה, if you do not know My name, I will tell you that I am the Eternal. This means that I can fulfill any promise I make. Now that I have told you that My name is "the Eternal." You Moses shall say to the Children of Israel, "the One Who is the Eternal has sent me to you."

J Sacks more recently wrote

But the fundamental point is: *My name is the future*. "I am what will be." God is in the call from the future to the present, from the destination to us who are still on the journey. What

distinguishes Judaism from Christianity is that in answer to the question “Has the Messiah come?” the Jewish answer is always: Not yet

But our literature has a whole dictionary of names for God. For example, one list is in the Mishna in Shevuot 35a which is talking about names of God one uses for an oath, lists as well as the יהוה name, Adonai, Shaddai, Adonai Tzevaot, and there are others like Makom, , which is used for God, Shechinah, and Ein Sof, which is a kabbalistic term for God.

But of all of these the 4-letter name yad hey vav hey seems to be the most important – just as we read in the sedrah,

That is my name forever  
and thus I am invoked in all ages

In tractate Kiddushin we read about the mysterious pronunciation of this 4 letter name of God:

**Rabba bar bar Ḥana says that Rabbi Yoḥanan says: The Sages transmit the correct pronunciation of the four-letter name of God to their students once every seven years, and some say twice every seven years. Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak says: It stands to reason in that they transmit it once every seven years, as it is written: “This is My name forever [*le’olam*]” (Exodus 3:15), which is written so that it can be read *le’alem*, to hide. This indicates that the Divine Name must remain hidden, and so we must be careful with the pronunciation.**

But there is also a 12 letter name of God

**The Sages taught: Initially, the Sages would transmit the twelve-letter name of God to any person. When the uninhibited ones who used the name disrespectfully increased, they would transmit it only to discreet members of the priesthood, and the discreet members of the priesthood would pronounce the name during the Priestly Benediction. They would conceal it by saying it during the sweet (נְעִימָה) melody of their priestly brothers, so that it would not become publicly known**

**Rashi says about this term** "Conceal it in the melody" - The Hebrew word 'neima' is equivalent to the sweet voice known [in the Provencal language] as 'trobar'.which is possibly the origin of the word we use for the melody of our blessings, TROPE

But if a 12 letter name isnt enough

**Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: There is a forty-two-letter name of God which may be transmitted only to one who is discreet, and humble, and stands at at least half his life, and does not get angry, and does not get drunk, and does not insist upon his rights but is willing to yield.**

Needless to say, we have no actual idea of the 42 letter name. Maybe the list of qualities needed by the person who was to transmit this name was so impossible to attain in any one individual in each generation that the name disappeared.

But of course, the number 42 is the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything. It would be lovely if we could say that Douglas Adams chose the number 42 as representing the unknown, unpronounceable 42 letter name of God, but that is unlikely

When Douglas Adams book was published in 1980, the number 42 had a special status for mathematicians. There was a mathematical problem called the “sum of three cubes” problem. Mathematicians had solved this equation for all numbers between 1 and 100, except for 42. 42 was more troublesome than all the other numbers below 100. Solving the puzzle for the number 42 was the ultimate question

But it’s just as unlikely that Douglas Adams was thinking of the three cubes problem as he was the unknown 42 letter word of God.

But maybe the rabbis who imagined that God also has a 12 or a 42 letter name were thinking again of possible meanings a name can convey about God. If Ehyeh implies the eternal - “I am what will be.” – and we have been inspired by that name for a God into which we can read so many ideas, ideas that remain meaningful over millenia, wouldn’t it be fascinating to know what these other names that might have existed could have told us about the unknowable God.

Shabbat Shalom