

Torah Table Talk

What is God's Name?

Parshat Va-era Exodus 6:2- 7:13

At the end of last week's Parshah Moses is discouraged by his failed attempt to convince Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to take a brief holiday to worship the Lord. Not only does Pharaoh reject Moses' request, but he increases the work load which the Israelites must bear. Faced with Moses' demands, Pharaoh asks, "Who is the Lord that I should heed him and let Israel go?" As this week's Parshah opens, God brings a message of hope to Moses and an answer to Pharaoh's question.

God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai but I did not make Myself known to them by my name, 'YHVH...'"

Exodus 6:3

YHVH is an attempt to capture the four letter name of God spelled Yud-hay-vav-hay, God's formal name. We usually pronounce it Adonai or Hashem. We no longer have a tradition of how this name was originally pronounced.

The opening section of this Parshah has a great deal to say about the names of God. At first glance it would appear that Moses is learning something that the Patriarch's did not know. Yet the four letter name of God is used frequently in the earlier chapters of the Bible. So what has God revealed to Moses by telling him that his name is YHVH that the Patriarchs did not know?

'I did not make myself known' is not written here but 'I was not known;' (God says:) I was not recognized by the Patriarchs by My attribute of Faithfulness because of which my name is called YHVH denoting faithful to fulfill my words for I have made promises to them and I have not yet fulfilled them.

Rashi Exodus 6:3

What, then, does the phrase "I did not make Myself known" mean? In the ancient world names in general, and the name of god in particular, possessed dynamic quality and served to express character, attributes, and power. The names of gods were identified with their nature, status and function. Thus to say, "I did not make Myself known to them by My name," is to state that the Patriarchs did not experience the specific power that is associated with the name YHVH. That power - to be displayed in the coming power of redemption - belongs to the future.

Etz Hayim Commentary on Exodus 6:3, Page 352

1. What does Rashi mean when he speaks of God's attribute of faithfulness?
2. How do the names of God express our beliefs and ideas about God?
3. How is the God of Genesis different from the God of Exodus?

There are dozens of different names for God in the Bible and the later Jewish tradition. Here are just a few of the many names which we find in our literature and prayers.

- **Elohaynu v'elohay avotaynu** – Our God and God of our ancestors
- **HaKadosh Baruch Hu** – The Holy One blessed be He
- **HaRachaman** – The Merciful One
- **Aveenu Shebashamayim** – Our Father in Heaven
- **Oseh Shalom Bimormav** – The One who makes peace in the heavens
- **Hashem** – literally “The Name” The name used for God by many traditional Jews in order to avoid taking God’s name in vain.
- **Tzur Yisrael** – Rock of Israel
- **Adon Olam** – Master of the Universe or Master of the World or Eternal Master (depending on how you translate it.)
- **Roi** – My Shepherd
- **Shechina** - The Indwelling Presence of God; in Jewish Mysticism this name is used to describe the ‘feminine’ aspect of God in contrast to the ‘Holy One blessed be He,’ the masculine aspect of God.

1. What do you think each of these names says to us about God?
2. Which of these names appeals to you? Why? Do they reflect your personal beliefs about God?
3. Should the names of God be masculine or feminine? How should a translator of the prayer book deal with this problem today?
4. If you were writing your own prayer what would you call God?

Glossary

Rashi -- Rabbi Shimon Yitzhaki, (1040-1105 CE) considered the greatest of the commentators on the Bible in the Middle Ages.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*