

This Week In Torah *B'Shelach*

Who is like You, יהוה, among the celestials;
Who is like You, majestic in holiness,
Awesome in splendor, working wonders!

Exodus 15:11

We Jews have many different names for God--- they reflect various attributes of the Holy, but there is one name that cannot be pronounced which might be deemed as the “official” name of God. We use *Adonai* for it but in truth, it is unpronounceable. The tetragrammaton is represented by 4 letters—*yod-hay-vav-hay*. It was supposed to be used only by the High Priest [the *Kohan HaGadol*] on specific circumstances, primarily on Yom Kippur when he entered the Holy of Holy to petition God for forgiveness. Since the year 70 CE when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, the name ceased to be uttered and the ability to pronounce it was lost. Historians think it was something like Yahweh or in the German, Jehovah. But *Adonai* seems to suit us just fine.

This week's *sedra* is the Exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the liturgical poem known as the Song of the Sea [*shirat HaYam*]. Rabbi Dr. David Sperling teaches that our *parasha* shows that the Hebrew slaves who left Egypt may not have been completely monotheistic. They might have prayed to other deities, since they had lived about polytheistic Egyptians for centuries. Thus, when the text reads “Who is like You, *Adonai*, among the gods who are worshipped”, it implies that people may of encountered a teachable moment; a chance to learn of the awesomeness of the one true God and the inability of other deities [if there are any!] to deliver them. The crossing of the Red Sea is a definitive moment in Jewish history and Jewish theology.

If there is only one God, why do we have so many names for God? Shouldn't *Adonai* be sufficient? 9th/10th Century Rabbi Saadia Gaon commented on the opening verse of our *parasha* 2 weeks ago. The Torah reads in Exodus 6:3—“I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name יהוה.”

Rav Saadia taught that we should not read this as El Shadai—the God of the breast/heart/chest, but as God that is [*sh*] enough [*dey*]. According to this Rav, Abraham/Isaac/Jacob did not need to know God completely; the grandeur and nuances of the Divine presence was not essential to their faith. Rather how God revealed the Divine-self to each of them was satisfying and fulfilling to each of them. Yet, Rav Saadia noted, the Hebrew slaves needed something greater—knowledge of God as the One who supersedes the laws of nature and whose power can cause plagues, seas to split and bring about Redemption.

That is the majesty and the mystery of our verse for this week. Each of us is unique. We each have the “need”/”desire” to encounter God in our own way. We seek that presence of God that Rav Saadia defined as “God that is [*sh*] enough [*dey*]” Witnessing the Presence, experience such an encounter, and probing for such a faith are what the mystery of deliverance/redemption is all about. That is why we recite these words each time we pray. That is how we bond with our history as we transcend the rationality of being transported back to that moment as if we were there on the far banks of the Red Sea.

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