

This week in Torah *Shemot*

We know the second book of the Torah's name in English—Exodus; it is the major theme of the narrative. But in Hebrew, the book is referred to as *Shemot* [names] which is the first major word to start the book. Interestingly, in chapter 3—God tells Moses to let the people know God's name as *Aheiye asher aheiye*, roughly translated as “I am what I am.” Moses knows God thru the lineage of his ancestors and he is told that God's name is *El Shadai* [God of the breast], *Elohim* [plural of *El*] and as *Adonai* [my Lord]; but the people enslaved in Egypt are only told that God is only “I am what I am.” Why is that?

Part of it rests in the people's capacity to comprehend the Divine. Trapped in slavery, the Israelites might have difficulty “sussing” the true nature of God. They would be tempted to seek only the divinity that will emancipate them from their current *tsuris* [sorrows]. Rather than God “unbosoming” the divine nature to a people incapable of appreciating, the Divine self would unfold before them over the course of the experiences. [Rabbinic prerogative: I deliberately used two words here that should have you scratching your head but further exploration can show you a deeper meaning to what I am trying to convey!]

Rabbinic commentators over the centuries also wrestled with that phrase “*Aheiye asher aheiye*” as they sought a better even if a “recondite” knowledge that is harder to glean from the surface. RaSHI's grandson, the 12th century French scholar known as RaSHBaM, wrote that this phrasing gives God as a sense of eternity that Egyptian deities did not seem to possess; this God is God of the past, present and the future. Such sentiment is echoed by Kabbalists who call God “*Ein Sof*”—no end, no beginning. 15th century Italian Rabbi known as Sforno parallels that structure of this name to that found in Ezekiel to indicate that God's name is rooted in justice. Similarly, 11th/12th century Spanish Rabbi Ibn Ezra uses the grammatical structure of Zechariah 12:8 to show that this is the God who will liberate and redeem the people.

Eternal God. Just God. Liberating God—adjectives to describe Divine attributes. *Aheiye asher aheiye*.

11th century French Rabbi, RaSHI, turns the name into a source of personal strength. *Aheiye asher aheiye* is the name of God when we turn in sorrow and anguish. Not only in the past but in the present and future as well. Citing a midrashic text, RaSHI noted that while God's name is *Aheiye asher aheiye* in one verse, the next verse is just *Aheiye*. Why? Because the people might turn away from God if they hear that there will be sorrows in the future. It would be easier for them to comprehend if God focused on past and present. Great message—reveal the divine self only to what people are capable to understand and they won't be scared off. After all, isn't that the scenario in the book of Numbers when the spies come back from Israel with reports of walled cities and giants living in the land?

19th century Polish Rabbi Ya'akov Yitzhak builds on this personal notion of God. According to the "Holy Yehudi", *Aheiye asher aheiye* shows that the name teaches something about turning inward for self-betterment, like repentance. If a person does this with sincerity, God will vow to be with them to encourage and strengthen them.

The intimacy of God strengthens individual resolve-- *Aheiye asher aheiye*

For us, the sages show us that the names we choose for God reflects our inner needs and our outside circumstances. *Aheiye asher aheiye*... I am what I am... I am what you need me to be... I am what the world seeks—in wholeness, in justice and in peace.