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D'var Torah on Shemot

What's in a name?

(In honor of the naming of my first grandson, Ethan Aryeh Mizrahi, last Wednesday, three days ago.)

This week's Torah portion is *Shemot*, meaning "Names". It begins by listing the names of all the people who went down to Egypt with Jacob. This is not the first time the Torah gives us a long list of names, and not the last. One wonders why the names were so important to our ancestors. The centrality of the names is made even more clear later in this week's portion, when Moses hears God at the burning bush and is charged with the mission of rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. What do you think one of the first questions Moses asked God in this encounter was? Yes, you guessed it: He asked God "What is Your name?" Let's hear him:

> And Moses said to God, "Behold I come to the children of Israel, and I say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?', what shall I say to them?"
> God said to Moses, "Ehyeh asher ehyeh (I Am That I Am)," and He said, "So shall you say to the children of Israel, 'Ehyeh (I Am) has sent me to you.'"
> And God said further to Moses, "So shall you say to the children of Israel, 'The Lord God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is how I should be mentioned in every generation." [Ex. 3:13-15]

Names are of paramount importance in the Jewish tradition. In biblical times, your name represented your very essence. The Talmud tells us that the name given to a child affects his future [Berakhot 3b-4a]. Jewish law requires that you be extremely careful in spelling out people's names on official documents. The documents are void if you make a mistake. The Talmud also tells us that one of four ways to avoid something bad happening to you is to change your name [Rosh Hashana 16b]. This gave rise to the custom of changing the name of a very sick person to fool the Angel of Death, the *mal'ach ha-mavet*.

My own name is Maurice Mizrahi. In Hebrew, Moshe Mizrahi. I like my name. Moshe is the Hebrew name of Moses our Teacher. In fact, he and I

hail from the same neck of the woods: Egypt. So does another Moshe, Moses Maimonides, the great 12th-century Jewish philosopher and commentator. So I grew up feeling a certain kinship to my namesakes. Both were Jewish teachers from Egypt, and so am I. I always loved to teach. I taught children in Religious School. I taught adults. Even my career was a form of teaching: Giving briefings to high government officials – explaining complicated technical issues to them so they could make an informed decision.

Moshe means "drawn from the water", because baby Moses was rescued from the wrath of Pharaoh by being drawn from the Nile. I, too, was rescued from the wrath of Pharaoh. My last name, Mizrahi, believe it or not, is the third most common Jewish name in the world, after Cohen and Levi. It means "Eastern", or "from the East". So I stand before you today as "The man from the East, drawn from the water".

When something is extremely important to you, you call it by many different names. People living in the far north have different names for snow, because snow is central to their culture. Arabs, among whom I grew up, have several names for camel or desert. And I don't have to tell you that we Americans have a lot of names for large self-propelled vehicles: Cars, trucks, vans, minivans, roadsters, sedans, SUVs, station-wagons, compacts, subcompacts, convertibles, sports cars, not to mention the brand names that became generic names: A Ford, a Chevy, a Toyota, etc. When you were little, and maybe even now, your relatives and friends probably called you by all kinds of funny pet names. This wasn't to make fun of you, it was because they cared about you.

So it is not surprising that we Jews have many names for God -- more than seventy, to be specific.

The first name of God mentioned in the Torah is Elohim, which literally means God in the royal plural. The Torah begins with:

> *Bereshit bara Elohim et ha-shamayim ve-et haaretz*
> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. [Gen. 1:1]

Note in passing that there are no long and complicated proofs of the existence of God in the Torah. God the Creator is there at the very beginning, and that's all there is to say.

Later in the Torah we encounter another name of God, spelled yod-heh-vav-heh. That's the Tetragrammaton, which is so holy Jews must not pronounce it. Only the High Priest was allowed to pronounce it in biblical times, and only on Yom Kippur, and only in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Temple was destroyed in the year 70, the correct pronunciation was lost. However, we are told that a few saintly rabbis over the centuries possessed the secret of the correct pronunciation. The Baal Shem Tov, who founded Hasidism in the 18th century, was said to possess this secret. He used to cure the sick by laying his hands on them and pronouncing the Holy Name. In fact, that's what his name means: "Baal Shem Tov" means "Master of the Good Name". Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague was said to be able to take a shapeless lump of clay and give it life by pronouncing the name of God, creating the Golem, who would go out and defend the Jews against their enemies.

Now, when we encounter the yod-heh-vav-heh in the Torah, we say "Adonai", which literally means "My Lords" -- again the royal plural. But in time even Adonai was deemed too holy to be used in conversation, and its use was confined only to times when we are praying or saying blessings. People started saying "Adoshem" in conversation. Adoshem is a hybrid term, which begins as Adonai but ends in Shem, meaning Name. Hebrew school students learned about "Adoshem elokenu", not "Adonai elohenu", to avoid pronouncing holy names in secular settings. Sephardim used Amonai. In time, even Adoshem was deemed too holy for ordinary conversation or study, and people started saying "HaShem" when talking about God. HaShem simply means "The Name". This is where we are today. A common Hebrew expression is "Baruch HaShem", which means "God be praised". In time, maybe even HaShem will be deemed too holy for use in conversation, and will be replaced by something else -- perhaps a respectful pause in the sentence?

I understand the feeling behind reserving some names only for holy settings. When I was visiting Israel, I was slightly shocked at hearing people address me as "Adon Mizrahi". "Adon" just means "Mister" in modern Hebrew, but to my ears it sounded too close to "Adonai", or to "Adon Olam", which means "Lord of the Universe", as God is referred to in the concluding song. I remember wondering at the time if Israelis referred to Mr Universe, the muscleman, as "Adon Olam".

Even pieces of the Tetragrammaton are used to refer to the Divine. The yod in yod-heh-vav-heh is itself a name for God. God's name in the prayerbook is frequently spelled "yod-yod". The word "halleluyah" just means "Praise God": "Hallelu" means "praise" and "yah" refers to God.

The letter "heh" itself, which appears twice in the Tetragrammaton "yod-heh-vav-heh", early on acquired a tradition of being holy by itself. When Abraham heard God for the first time he was only Avram. Later, God added the holy heh to his name, and he became AvraHam. His wife Sarai became SaraH, by adding the holy heh at the end of her name. Likewise, Yonatan can become Yehonatan and Yoram Yehoram. The holy "heh" can be added to the name, to inject a bit of the essence of God in the person.

Some Jews will say "God" in English, but will not write it down in full. They write "G dash D" (G-d) instead, because they fear the holy name will be carelessly discarded in a trash can. They also write "L dash RD" (L-rd) instead of "Lord" for the same reason. Others say that this practice should apply only when the names are in Hebrew, the Holy Tongue, not in other languages.

Tradition tells us that, of the two main names of God in the Torah, Elohim refers to the fact that God is just, and yod-heh-vav-heh refers to the fact that God is merciful. But God has other names in the Torah:
-One of them is "El Shaddai", which means God of the mountains, or God of might. The mezuzah on the doorposts of our houses has a big "shin" near the top. That big shin refers to God's name "El Shaddai".
-We just read that when Moses asked God for His name at the burning bush, God said, "Ehyeh asher ehyeh" -- I Am That I Am. That came to be another name for God. God was telling Moses: There are no appropriate names to describe Me -- all you can say about me is that I am.

The Talmud and the Midrash brought us their own crop of names for God.
-Malchei hamlachim -- The King of Kings.
-Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu -- The Holy One Blessed be He.
-The mysterious "HaMakom", which just means "The Place".
-Tzur Yisrael -- The Rock of Israel".
The Talmud also brought us the only feminine name of God, the "Shechinah" or "Divine Presence". English-speaking feminists have made a lot out of this fact, but in reality, in most languages other than English, all nouns have a gender, and this gender appears to be arbitrary. For

example, in French, knife is masculine but fork is feminine, carpet is masculine but table is feminine. And the word "presence" also happens to be feminine -- arbitrarily.

The rabbinic period added new names for God:

-Boreh, meaning Creator
-Noten ha-Torah, or Giver of Torah, in the blessing before the Torah reading
-Go-el, meaning Redeemer
-Dayyan, meaning Judge, as God referred to in death announcements
-Ribbono Shel 'Olam, or Master of the Universe, the favorite name of God in Eastern European shtetls and in Yiddish literature.

The prayerbook brought us many names that we are most familiar with. The Avot, in the 'Amidah, says:

Baruch atta Adonai Elohenu, velohei avotenu, elohei Avraham, elohei Yitzhaq, velohei Yaakov
Blessed are You, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob

Note the repetition of the word "God". It does not say: "God of our fathers and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", but "God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob". The repetition teaches us that God is a little different for each one of us, even though God is really One. Each of us perceives God from a slightly different angle, and sees something slightly different, even though it is the same entity.

The prayer continues with a proliferation of names for God:

-Ha-el ha-gadol, ha-gibor, veha-nora – God the great, the strong, the awesome
-El elyon -- The supreme God
-Gomel chassadim tovim -- The One who bestows beneficial kindnesses
-Ve-koneh ha-kol -- Creator of everything
-Ve-zocher chasdei avot -- The One who recalls the kindness of the patriarchs
-Umevi goel livnei v'nehem -- The One who brings a redeemer to their children's children

And the line concludes:

-Lemaan shemo, be'ahava -- For His Name's sake, with love.

For his NAME's sake. Always "the name".

The prayerbook continues, with names such as

-Ha-el hakkadosh -- The Holy God
-Av harrachaman -- Father of Mercies
-Avinu Malkenu -- Our Father, our King
-Magen Avraham -- The Shield of Abraham
-Ro'i -- My Shepherd

-Shomeya' T'fillah -- The One who listens to prayers; and
-M'chayyeh ha-metim -- The One who brings the dead to life.

Note in passing that all these Jewish names for God only tell us only what God DOES, never what God IS. In fact, Maimonides developed a negative theology. He said you can talk about what God IS NOT, but never about what God IS. We don't have the words for it, and would be limiting God by using our words.

Jewish mysticism brought its own names for God. The most important one is *Ein Sof* -- The Endless One. Mystics teach that when we perform the mitzvot, we help restore the world to its original perfection; we effect "tikkun 'olam" -- the repair of the world.

All these names certainly show our awe of God, our love of God, our reverence for God. But our relationship with God has never been so simple, so one-dimensional. Jews also talk to God irreverently. We argue, we struggle with God. Our very collective name, Israel, means "He who struggles with God". Because Jacob struggled all night with the angel until his name was changed to Israel -- until he was deemed worthy of being chosen.

Abraham negotiated with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. Noah was berated for NOT pleading with God on behalf of the world. Moses frequently tried to appease God's anger, on behalf of the Israelites, with such arguments as: "What will the nations say if you act like that?" [Ex. 32:11-14, Deut. 9:28]. In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye talks nonstop to God almost as an equal, jokes with him, shakes his fist at him. In the death camps of the Holocaust rabbinical courts tried God for crimes against humanity.

Pirkei Avot, or Chapters of the Fathers, the best-known section of the Talmud, begins with these words:

> Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly" [Avot 1:1].

Now, this opening sentence is supposed to establish the legitimacy of the Jewish Tradition. But where is God? It says: "Moses received the Torah *from Sinai* and transmitted it to Joshua." Now, I just gave you a lot of names for God, but Sinai was not one of them.

Later in the same Talmud [Bava Metzia 59b] the rabbis are discussing a fine point of Jewish law, when they hear a Voice from Above. And the Voice sides with the interpretation of one of the rabbis. The rabbis promptly dismiss God's opinion. "The Torah is not in heaven", they say, citing the Torah itself [Deut. 30:12]. In plain language: "You stay out, we will settle this matter among ourselves." And the Talmud reports that when God heard this He laughed and said, "My children have bested Me! My children have bested Me!" Apparently, God *wants* us to assert our independence.

So it's in this independent and iconoclastic spirit that many alternative Jewish approaches to God have sprung up in modern times. They are all anathema and heresy to traditionalists.

We hear that God is nature; that God and the universe are one; that just by learning about nature we learn about God himself. This is the pantheism of Spinoza.

We hear that God is limited, that God is not all-powerful, and that that's why evil exists. This is the view espoused by Milton Steinberg, and by Rabbi Kushner, who wrote the best-selling book *_When Bad Things Happen to Good People_*.

We hear that God is a symbol, an abstract idea, a goal, the name by which we call our highest potential, the most desirable good; but that God is not a reality in itself. This is the humanism of Erich Fromm.

We hear that God is a process, that God is the totality of those forces in the world that make life worthwhile. This is the naturalism of Mordecai Kaplan.

We hear that God is "The Eternal Thou", always waiting patiently for us to relate to Him; that God is an eternal presence that cannot be defined, described, or proven, but can only be experienced. This is the dialogue of Martin Buber.

And finally, we hear a most daring statement: That God is in need of us human beings. When we keep our part of the covenant, we not only affirm God's existence, we *allow* God's existence. Incredibly, some ancient traditional sources bear this out. An early Midrash from Talmudic days, Sifre Devarim, says:

> Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai taught: It is written: "This is my God and I will glorify Him" [Ex. 15:2]. This means: When I acknowledge Him, He is glorified, but when I do not acknowledge Him, He is glorified only in name. It is written, "You are my witnesses, said the Lord… and I am God" [Isaiah 43:10]. That means: If you testify to God's existence, He exists; if you do not, it is as if God does not exist. Similarly, it is written, 'Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You, my enthroned One in the heavens' [Ps. 123:1]. This means: 'If not for me, You would not be sitting in the heavens.'' [Sifre Devarim 346]

Thus, if we do not bear witness, God vanishes into unreality. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls that passage "one of the most powerful statements found in rabbinic literature".

Modern physics has been making very similar statements in the past hundred years or so. Theories such as quantum mechanics and relativity tell us that the observer is of primary importance in determining reality. These are the most successful theories ever devised in terms of how well they predict the behavior of nature, so we can't dismiss them out of hand. Well, quantum mechanics tells us that before something is observed, there are only nebulous possibilities out there, each with its own probability of being realized. By the act of observation, human beings bring one of these possibilities into existence, and all other possibilities vanish into nothingness. Does witnessing bring God into reality? Could alternative witnessing bring less attractive divine possibilities into reality? Our tradition seems to be saying: There is definitely a synergy between human beings and God.

The Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein wrote:

Without Jews there is no Jewish God
If we leave this world
The light will go out in your tent
Since Abraham knew you in a cloud
You have burned in every Jewish face
You have glowed in every Jewish eye
And we made you in our image

["Without Jews"; trans. Nathan Halper, in A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, 1969, Holt, Rinehart and Winston]

The Torah frequently calls us Jews a "stiff-necked people – 'am k'sheh 'oref ". I sometimes wonder if this is not also meant as a compliment. Perhaps God was looking for someone with the stubbornness, the staying power, the endurance, the chutzpah, the iconoclasm, the irreverence for

authority, that we Jews have exhibited in our long history, and which allowed us to prevail against all odds, to repair the world, to improve the world, to affirm God, and to uphold the Torah in the four corners of the world.

> *Ki mi-Tziyyon tetze Torah, ud'var HaShem mirushalayim*
> For out of Zion will come forth the Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem.

Shabbat shalom.