

# **YHWH: God's Name Is a Breath of Life**

**Yom Kippur Eve**

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I received my first lesson in Jewish theology from my grandmother. When I was a child growing up in Maplewood, I distinctly remember asking my nanny, "what did God look like?" Nanny promised to go to S. Klein's department store in downtown Newark and buy me a picture of God. I guess a month went by and there was no picture from S. Klein's department store. I asked my grandmother when she was going to bring me that picture. She finally admitted she could not buy me a picture of God because there was no such thing.

I received my second lesson in Jewish theology studying the Torah and prayerbook during my high school years. I learned what I thought was the Jewish view of God. God is a supernatural being with human personality and human qualities. God loves and cares, God teaches and commands. From our High Holy Days liturgy, I learned that God is *avinu malkeinu*, God is both a father and a king.

I received my third lesson in Jewish theology majoring in Judaic studies at Penn and at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, the Rabbinic Seminary of our reform movement. I learned there is no such thing as the Jewish view of God. In fact, there are many Jewish concepts of God ranging from the biblical, Rabbinic, medieval and mystical, to the modern and post-modern.

While at seminary, I encountered Moses Maimonides. No, Maimonides was not one of my professors. Maimonides was perhaps the most brilliant Jewish theologian of the middle ages. By day he served as court physician to the sultan in Egypt. At night he wrote tremendous tomes on Jewish law and theology. I guess you could say Maimonides was a typical Jewish overachiever.

Maimonides taught the intelligentsia of his day that the principle of God's oneness demands that God must be utterly unique and truly incomparable. Maimonides argued that God must not be thought of as human-like or compared to a human being in any way. God cannot possibly possess personality or resemble anything we know from human experience, especially nothing so finite and so material as a human being. Maimonides taught that it was just too limiting of God, perhaps even insulting to God, to think of God as a human-like person in any way.

Thus, as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Maimonides taught that all the anthropomorphic pictures of God in the Torah and prayerbook – God as father, king, warrior, judge, shepherd -- are metaphors for God, not definitions of God. While these images point us in God's direction, they are not to be taken literally. Just as a picture of God is impossible, so all our images of God are inadequate to capture the full truth of God's complexity.

Now many of us, by the time we earned our college degrees, perhaps even before, had given up believing in an all-powerful God who does miracles and regularly intervenes in human affairs. And we assumed our rejection of an “almighty God sitting on His heavenly throne” was new, modern, and maybe irreverently unjewish.

Well, sorry to disappoint you, but you’ve been in good Jewish company for centuries. Now you know that there is more than one authentically Jewish belief about God, including beliefs that are very different from those of the Bible and the prayerbook.

Having rejected most of the traditional Jewish claims about God, many of us concluded that we were atheists or agnostics. But now you know that you never really let go of God. What you let go of were the ancient metaphors, images, and names of God that no longer seemed honest, truthful, or adequate for our time.

But God is still there. And now the really intriguing question is which images, which metaphors, which names of God make sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What definition of God could I believe in?

Tonight I want to explore with you God’s Hebrew name and what new and different images that name teaches us about God.

What is God’s personal name? God’s name is not “Adonai.” Adonai” means “my lord” and is the primary euphemism for God’s name that we use in the context of prayer. Outside of prayer, traditional Jews refer to God as Hashem, literally “the Name.”

So what’s God’s name? As revealed to us in the Torah, God’s name is the tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew consonants, *yod heh vav heh*. We read in exodus chapter six, verses 2-3, “God spoke to Moses and said to him, I am *yhvh*. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, but I did not make myself known to them by my name *yhvh*.” The name *yod heh vav heh* is a verbal form of the Hebrew root “to be” (*hayah*). God’s name can be translated in many ways including “the one who causes to be”, “the one who brings into existence,” “ground of all being,” “source of all life.”

Needless to say, God’s Hebrew name suggests a very different image of God from the one we have been taught in the Bible and prayerbook. God’s Hebrew name suggests God is not a person but a process. God is not a noun but a verb. God is not a being but all being itself, the whole kazoo. God is the name we give to the process that animates all life. God is the energy that powers the universe and its ongoing evolution. God is not the creator of the big bang. God is the big bang. God is not the creator of evolution. God is evolution.

Now how do we pronounce God’s name, *yod heh vav heh*? What does God’s name sound like? Some biblical scholars teach that God’s name was regularly pronounced with its proper vowels at least until the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE. By the third century BCE, it was pronounced only by the high priest and even by him only once a year on Yom Kippur. After the destruction of the second Temple and the demise of the office of the high priesthood in 70 CE, it was deemed improper to pronounce God’s name.

No one knows for sure how to pronounce God's Hebrew name. However, since we do know that a shorter form of God's name is *yah*, just as in the familiar Hebrew word *halleluyah* which means "praise *yah*," the consensus of biblical scholarship is that God's name was pronounced as yahweh.

What we also know, teaches Rabbi Arthur Waskow, is that all four letters of God's Hebrew name are soft consonants. If you try to pronounce them without any vowels, the sound that emerges is just like that of taking a breath. Yah.....weh.... God's name is a breath of life. We exist, we live, we are, solely because we breathe. How amazing, how wondrous then, that every single time you and I breathe, we are pronouncing the name of God.

How amazing, how wondrous, that God's name, rather than dividing one human being from another, brings us all together. For every human being breathes. God's name is not owned by any one particular religious tradition. The name of God is universal and known to everyone. *Yah...*

How amazing, how wondrous, that God's true name, rather than dividing us from nature, brings nature and us together. For it is not only we who breathe. Animals breathe. Trees and plants breathe. The earth breathes. God's name teaches us that all life forms on this planet are interrelated and interdependent. *Yah...*

By asking my grandmother for a picture of God when I was a little boy, what I really wanted was to see God. This is what all of us want. Seeing is believing. And we want a visible manifestation of God to know with certainty that God is really there.

God's Hebrew name teaches us a better way to know that God is present in our lives. Focus on your breath. As every runner, meditator, yoga practitioner, and Jewish Buddhist knows, breathing is what takes us simultaneously to a higher and deeper place.

With every breath, we feel "the continuous flow of the universe, the never-ending flow of creation, of life, of being" (Dosick). With every inhalation and exhalation, we feel that God flows in us and through us. By breathing, we discover that God is not far way, up in the heavens, but close by, closer than we ever realized before.

In retrospect, my grandmother actually did me a great favor by offering and failing to buy me a picture of God. She helped me understand that I was looking for God in the wrong place.

If I could talk to my grandmother now I would say, "Nanny, it's been fifty or so years since we last had this conversation. Now I know how to bring God into my life. Guess what, Nanny? All you have to do is breathe."