

What is the Meaning of God's Name?

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Our traditional names for God were coined in the first century. But we live in the twenty - first century, and those names don't work for many of us. In a post-Holocaust world, it doesn't make sense to speak of God as a parent, a father. In a world where our scientific and technological capabilities have become so advanced, it doesn't ring true to speak of God as the King of Kings. Renaming God is a good thing. It makes it possible for us to think of God in ways that are honest, truthful, and adequate for our time

Let's learn Torah together. Last week we began the reading of the Book of Exodus, the second of the Torah's five books. The Hebrew name for this second book of Torah is *Sefer Shemot*, the Book of Names. In the Book of Names, we are introduced to some very important names. One very important name is the name of God.

In prayer tonight, we have referred to God as "Adonai." But Adonai is not God's name. "Adonai" means "my lord" and is the primary euphemism that Jews use in the context of prayer. Outside of prayer, traditional Jews always refer to God as Hashem, literally "The Name."

So what's God's name? In Exodus, chapter 6, verses 2-3, we read, "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 Book of Names gives God a new name. God's new name is the four hebrew consonants, *yod heh vav heh* or *yhvh*, referred to as the tetragrammaton.

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."

This new name for God suggests a very different image of God from the ones we have been taught in our Bible and prayer book, where we think of God as father, parent, king, judge, lord.

This new name for God suggests that God is not a person but a process. The process that animates all life. God is the energy that powers the universe and its ongoing evolution. God is not a noun but a verb. God is not a being but all being itself. This is a very different way of thinking about God and, I believe, a very important one. First of all, feminism has pointed out that the traditional names for God are overwhelmingly masculine and patriarchal. They suggest that God is created in the image of men. The traditional names for God exclude women and women's experience of the world.

Secondly, our traditional names for God were coined in the first century. But we live in the twenty-first century and most of those names don't seem to work for many of us. In a post-holocaust world, it doesn't make sense to speak of God as a parent, a father. In a world where our scientific and technological capabilities have become so advanced, it doesn't ring true to speak of God as the King of Kings.

Renaming God is a good thing. It makes it possible for us to think of God in ways that are honest, truthful, and adequate for our time.

Now how do we pronounce God's name, *yod heh vav heh*? What does God's name sound like? God's name was pronounced in ancient Israel 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, God's name was no longer pronounced. Biblical scholars are pretty sure they know how God's name was and is to be pronounced. While I have no problem with speaking God's name in a scholarly setting, it would not be proper for me to pronounce God's name in a worship setting. I am no High Priest.

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. Yahhhhh.

That's God's name - God's name is a breath. 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 then, 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.

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.

With every breath, we feel "the continuous flow of the universe, the never-ending flow of creation, of life, of being" (Rabbi Wayne 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.