

“Knowing the Unknowable God”: A Source for Y-H-V-H

Some religious communities still use *Jehovah*, and others the more scholarly *Yahweh* or *Yahveh*. The four Hebrew letters which the Book of Exodus proclaims to be the Divine Name: *yud*, *hey*, *vov*, and *hey* (Y-H-V-H) have been something of a stumbling block for Bible translators, commentators and preachers. Jewish tradition maintains a reluctance to even attempt a pronunciation, and uses any number of name-replacements whenever *YHVH* appears in the prayerbook or Scripture. Most commonly, *YHVH* is verbally replaced with *Adonai*, a Hebrew variant of “my Lord”. Thus many English Bibles render *YHVH* as “LORD” in their translations, often capitalizing the whole word. I doubt however that those four letters were originally meant to be understood as the Divine Name, for as I read the relevant verses from Exodus, *YHVH* is descriptive rather than denominative.

In chapter three of the Book of Exodus, Moses stands before the burning bush and is told that he is to return to Egypt, and appearing before Pharaoh he is to demand the release of the Israelites [Exodus 3:10]. Moses responds “Who am I, that I should go...!?” The voice from the bush reassures Moses that he will not have to go alone: “I will be with you.” Still reluctant, Moses pleads “When I say that the God of your fathers has sent me to you, they will ask me ‘What is His name!’ and what shall I tell them?” Moses wants credentials when he appears before Pharaoh and the Israelites. He knows that since gods have names, he will need the authentic authority of the Divine Name in order to convince both king and slave. The response in the text therefore, is most unexpected, because here in Exodus 3:14 Moses is given not a name, but a description: *Eh-heh-yeh asher eh-heh-yeh*, “I will be that/which/who I will be.” Or, the voice continues, you can just tell them *Eh-heh-yeh/I will be*” has sent you!

So what does it mean to “know one’s name?” A person or a thing’s name is the ultimate definitive explication of its substance. Thus I have a great many ‘designations’: man, father, husband, son, rabbi, and baseball fan to name but a few. I also have applied to me an equally large number of different ‘descriptions’: left-handed, baby-boomer, impatient, stubborn, methodical. But any or all of these designations and descriptions can only delineate a small part of my whole. It is only my name, however, that can encompass every aspect of my person, being and character. To know a person’s ‘name’ then is a recognition that all of that person is potentially knowable. Because our individual names carry in them the ultimate and complete essence of our personal being, and because, in a very real way, we prosper or are destroyed by what is done with or to our names, we endow them with a sense of sanctity. What then are we to say about the Divine Name?

Jewish tradition understands the Infinite Creator to be, by definition, beyond the human capacity of knowledge. We cannot grasp the infinite with the finite abilities we possess. The closest we might come is to use the finite designations and descriptions familiar to us, and understand that each is only a limited piece of the infinite whole that is the Divine.

Knowing that we cannot “name” Deity does not deter us from wanting to! Each of us, like Moses at the bush, struggles to define-to-know the authentic and authoritative Infinite Creator. I thus read into this Exodus account this same desire on Moses’ part to know the unknowable. He wants to know The Name...but the voice responds with the descriptive “I will be that which I will be”, or “I will be” for short!

There is power in that descriptive phrase. It is to say that the Infinite Creator will always be what It was, is and will be! Regardless of what we do or say, understand or believe, the Infinite Creator will ‘always be’. The single most important idea or value that emanates from that phrase is the infinite nature, and therefore unknowable nature, of The Divine. Humanity, however, wants to identify the Infinite, and so we are given the closest possible identification: “I will be”.

Moses is then instructed to use this ‘name’ when he goes down into Egypt, when he approaches Pharaoh and the Israelites. I wonder what his exact words would have been? Would he have stood before them and declared that the God of Abraham had sent him, the God who is called “I will be”? Surely he would not have used the first-person pronoun “I”. After seeing how self-effacing he was at the bush, Moses would never have stated “I”. He would have announced the ‘name’ of the God of Abraham to be “He will be that which He will be”, or even “He will be” for short.

In Hebrew “he will be” is the word *Yeh-heh-yeh*, and spelled *yud-hey-yud-heh*. But that very commonly spoken form of the verb ‘to be’ would have to have been distinguished from the unique Name of the Divine. In English we would make that designation by capitalizing the ‘H’, or even the whole word to read “HE will be.” Hebrew does not allow for that distinction, and so I assume that it chose a different way to mark the difference. Perhaps Hebrew tradition simply extended the third letter *yud* into a *vov*. The result was a ‘word’ that was not a word, but an easily recognizable reminder that ‘he’ was really ‘HE’. It is reasonable that the *yud-hey-vov-hey* proclaimed as “My name” in Exodus 6:3 is the last stage in the Israelite development of assigning a ‘name’ to the un-nameable and un-knowable Deity.

These four letters of *YHVH* were meant to be, I believe, a finite reminder of the infinite nature of the Divine Creator. Our modern desire to vocalize it as an actual name is an indication of our own human need to quantify and qualify Deity. But because finite knowing cannot encompass infinite knowledge, Jewish tradition reminds us that when we attempt to vocalize The Name, we are violating the original intent of *YHVH*. The lesson for us found in the Book of Exodus is that any definitive search for the Divine is really a more accurate description of our own human limits. It must be enough for us to know, for it is all that we can comprehend: “He will be that which He will be”.

Rabbi Joe Klein
www.rabbiklein.com
rabbi@rabbiklein.com