

Fixing God's Name

B. Barry Levy

Abstract: The name of God has received untold amounts of interest and awe since ancient times, but the oral and written forms in which it is expressed continue to evolve. Antiquity witnessed a global substitution of *Adonai* for the tetragrammaton of earlier biblical times, but many of our contemporaries have adopted a position that prefers to use this latter substitute only in liturgical contexts and to substitute *Ha-Shem* or other circumlocutions for it. These changes have led to the point where one can question whether Jews actually share a common designation for the one God they all worship.

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In ancient times, the personal name of the God of Israel was routinely spelled with four Hebrew letters, *yod-heh-vav-heh*. This name served as a surrogate for the deity; at times, it was the object of worship. Unfathomable degrees of sanctity were associated with it, and in some contexts it was considered to possess untold amounts of power.

Other terms applied to God in the Bible—e.g., *El*, *Elohim*, and *Shaddai*—essentially mean “Almighty” or “Lord,” and some were routinely used for pagan deities as well. Occasionally we find shortened forms of the divine personal Name, as in the initial theophoric element of *Yochebed* (Moses’ mother) and the final one of *Yesha`yahu* (Isaiah); a different theophoric element appears at the end of *Yisra`el*. Sometimes such elements seem to have been interchangeable, as, indeed, appears on occasion to be the case with various terms for the divinity. Interpreters usually associate the meaning of the Name with the verb “to be”; in addition, numerous halakhic requirements relate directly to the Name.

Contemporary usage of the term “sanctification of the Name” (*qiddush Ha-Shem*) refers mostly to sacrifice and martyrdom rather than to treatment of the Name itself; but the literal meaning still appears in the *Kedushah* and in other prayers, which keeps it in the public eye. Our concern for sanctifying the Name itself is expressed largely through avoidance of using it in inappropriate places or

for frivolous purposes and in not erasing it, which is an important aspect of the laws about production and correction of Torah scrolls. Many *halakhot* are devoted to treatment of defaced passages containing the Name, errors that result from not writing it properly or writing it instead of *Yehudah* (which differs in only one letter), and the like.

The Torah speaks of a requirement to take oaths in God’s Name (Deut. 6:13) – but prohibits using the Name in vain (Ex. 20:7, Deut. 5:11). It also calls upon its adherents to destroy pagan idols and not to treat God likewise (Deut.12:4). These laws thus lead us to enhance the Name through its use, which means to use it properly and respectfully, and, in contrast, to avoid anything that disgraces or defaces it (since it would be impossible to destroy God literally). But frequent use of the Name increases the likelihood of its being used inappropriately, and these passages thus place us between two competing forces, one that prescribes sanctifying the Name through its use and another that proscribes its desecration through its abuse. Moving in any direction off the relatively narrow path toward fulfillment of each commandment is likely to lead to violation. These concerns deal, in essence, with treatment of the Name as written and as pronounced.

The tetragrammaton (as the Name is called because of its four letters) also appears, for example, in the inscription

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of Mesha, king of Moab (dated in the ninth century B.C.E.) and the Hebrew letters from Lachish (dated to the seventh). The usage in the Moabite stele indicates that this form of the divine Name was known and used in non-Israelite circles (though the geographic proximity of the Land of Moab to the Land of Israel is matched by Moabite's linguistic similarity to Hebrew). One may assume that the ancient pronunciation followed the spelling, and concrete evidence to that effect appears in the Lachish letters. There a one-word oath is spelled *het-yod-heb-vav-heb*; in the Bible (1 Sam. 20:3, 21, etc.), this same phrase appears as two words, *het-yod* plus the tetragrammaton. Since eliding them into one word assumes the two contiguous *yods* were pronounced similarly, it is reasonable to conclude that, at least in this time and place, the tetragrammaton was pronounced as written. Since the Lachish letters are brief, private documents written on potsherds and not in any sense sacred or even permanent texts, it is also reasonable to assume that writing the Name in full in such contexts was not considered to pose a problem. Of course, one also could assume that the writers were ignorant of or insensitive to the law, if one could demonstrate that a law proscribing writing the Name this way actually existed at that time, but this spelling does seem to offer important evidence about pronunciation. Appearance of the Name in other epigraphic texts can support either assumption, but the former one seems more cogent.

Divine names and titles received special treatment in some Dead Sea Scrolls. There one finds texts written out fully in square script (very much like that in our Torah scrolls), while these special words were sometimes written in paleo-Hebrew, the alphabet of most ancient Northwest Semitic texts (including the Moabite and Hebrew documents mentioned above). One opinion in the Talmud and the general consensus of modern scholars assume that the Torah was originally written in paleo-Hebrew (what the Talmud calls *ketav ivri*) and this script was replaced by the square rabbinic script (what the Talmud calls *ketav ashuri*) in ancient times. If so, preservation of the divine Name in the older script would seem to reflect a desire to retain the sanctity of the older form. Some later rabbinic

texts prohibit writing divine names in gold letters, which suggests that on occasion this was done or considered, perhaps in imitation of Christian practices. A few Greek Bible manuscripts recorded the tetragrammaton in paleo-Hebrew letters; others offer evidence that the name was written as P I P I. This undoubtedly results from copying into a line of Greek the four Hebrew letters, written from right to left in square form, which, when read from left to right, would look to a reader of Greek, very much like *pi-iota-pi-iota* (Sweete, pp. 38-40).

On the surface, all these cases, even the use of Hebrew letters in Greek texts, seem to reflect special treatment of the divine Name directly attributable to its great sanctity. But later rabbinic law suggests that Hebrew texts written in paleo-Hebrew are less holy than those written fully in square letters, and how one should understand the usage in at least these Dead Sea Scrolls and their potential relationship to the *halakhab* recorded later therefore remains a matter of speculation. The scrolls may have been written this way because they were less holy (in some sense analogous to the level of sanctity of a Torah scroll in which someone wrote *heb-shin-mem* instead of *yod-heb-vav-heb*) or because some ancient non-halakhic custom saw this as a way to increase their sanctity. In either case, later rabbinic standards avoided such practices.

By the second century C.E., the Mishnah counted among those who forfeit their place in the world to come “one who pronounces the Name according to its letters.” This suggests that some people (perhaps sectarian Jews, against whom the rest of the two lists of those who are to suffer the same fate seems to be directed) still pronounced the Name as in earlier times. In contrast, the rabbis preferred a consistent substitution or circumlocution that follows many biblical passages in the use of *alef-dalet-nun-yod*, a form of the word *adon*, “master,” in places where the tetragrammaton is expected. Presumably this was done to decrease the use of the divine Name in inappropriate contexts, and its widespread use in non-Jewish magical texts from around the Mediterranean world suggests one factor that perhaps contributed to the change. Whatever the motivation, this attitude is still very prominent. Indeed,

motivation, this attitude is still very prominent. Indeed, over the years the principle underlying it has been expanded enormously, perhaps far in excess of what the authors of the mishnaic statement ever imagined. The Koren Bible (mid-twentieth century) and some subsequent editions do not vocalize the divine Name, which highlights its status as a *qere perpetuum*, a routine change from the written form to the accepted pronunciation. But previously published Hebrew Bibles created a composite word that included the consonants *yod-heh-vav-heh* and the vowels of *adonai*, which led to the introduction in English Bibles of the bizarre Latinized and undoubtedly incorrect form “Jehovah.”

Hebrew recognizes two different words vocalized in English as *adonai*. If the last syllable contains a *patah*, the word means “my masters”; if a *qamets*, it is the substitute for the divine Name. Unvoweled texts are often ambiguous, and sometimes the midrashic or masoretic traditions of vocalization are divided as to the preferred vowel and interpretation, as a comparison of the first verses of Genesis 18 and 19 in their midrashic and masoretic forms reveals. A desire to avoid the ambiguity of using one pronunciation for both words underlies the recent tendency of some people who otherwise use *sefaradi* pronunciation of Hebrew to adopt the *ashkenazi* pronunciation of the Name in prayer and Torah reading. Note that the Yemenite tradition of pronouncing *qamets* resembles the *ashkenazi*, not the *sefaradi*.

As time marched on, mystical and magical assumptions about the divine Name mushroomed. A question to Rav Hai Gaon solicited information about a divine Name of 72 letters. In the introduction to his Torah commentary, Nahmanides noted that the entire Torah is a name of God. And a popular story about Maharal of Prague describes how, in the sixteenth century, he reportedly created an active *golem* by placing a divine Name under the tongue of a clay creature he had formed; subsequent removal of the Name caused the creature to return to his former, inert state. Medieval kabbalists devoted much attention to the individual letters of divine names and based many meditations and contemplative exercises on

permutations and combinations of their letters. They also inaugurated a change in the notation of Hebrew numbers. The Hebrew forms of 15 and 16 used to be spelled *yod-heh* (10+5) and *yod-vav* (10+6), as we see in many early manuscripts, but because in other contexts these appeared to be sacred names, *tet-vav* (9+6) and *tet-zayin* (9+7) were substituted.

Medieval and post-medieval times also saw the composition of numerous religious poems. Though most were never incorporated into public worship, some found a niche elsewhere, and often they included the divine Name. In the popular *Tsur mi-Shello Akhalnu*, to take one of many possible examples, the divine Name is paired with *emunai*. Clearly the rhyme calls for pronunciation of the Name as *Adonai* and not a surrogate like *Ha-Shem*, though one often hears the song sung this way today. Contemporary musical recordings demonstrate how singers often create their own innovative substitutions for the Name that do not violate the rhyme but do avoid the liturgically proper pronunciation. Today we see a hypersensitivity to pronouncing the accepted substitution of the divine Name in any context other than a formal religious service, though in many cases *halakhah* does not require such behavior; indeed, sometimes it actually opposes it.

The primary halakhic concern with pronouncing the divine Name in the *Adonai* form is the avoidance of any sense of impropriety, meaning that the word can be used not only in worship but in any context of sufficient *gravitas*. Reading biblical texts, for example, requires this pronunciation, even during practice. But *bar mitzvah* trainees who are taught for a year to say “*Ha-Shem*” in all their Bible texts not only do so unnecessarily; they often habituate the practice to the point of finding it impossible to change back during the formal reading in the synagogue. Such educational activities require the proper pronunciation. And when students in class read a verse from beginning to end, they are required to pronounce the Name correctly. Substituting “*Ha-Shem*” is actually improper, and everyone should get used to not interrupting someone who is reading properly. (See the three *responsa* listed

below, especially that of Rabbi Jacob Emden, which records the reaction of the Hakham Zvi.)

Writing the divine Name is perhaps more serious than pronouncing it, because the text becomes subject to subsequent error or misuse by others. For this reason, one normally sees some combination of letters substituted for the tetragrammaton. Medieval manuscripts contain various configurations of one or more *yods*, sometimes presented as a triangle of three, a diamond of four, or a line of from two to four abreast. I recall a Hebrew teacher saying not to copy the two *yods* regularly printed in the *siddur*. Instead we were told to use *heb*-apostrophe. A later teacher nixed that in favor of *dalet*-apostrophe. Early printers who were troubled by similar concerns often substituted a *dalet* for one of the *hebs* in the tetragrammaton. This change is so subtle that I have seen students use such texts for months without ever noticing the alteration.

Often Hebrew variations, like “*Adinoi*,” are substituted in liturgical settings for the correct pronunciation of the Name. Recent European practice notwithstanding, this is not the proper substitution for the name of the God of Israel, and insistence on such errors is inappropriate, to say the least. Yiddish substitutions—like the nominative form *Keviyokhl* (“the as-it-were”); the grammatically common *Der Eybeshter* (“the one above”), and the dative and accusative *zayn libm nomen* (“his beloved Name”)—further underscore the tradition of not using the divine Name, though medieval Yiddish manuscripts and modern Yiddish books do contain the fully spelled forms *Got* or *Gat*. The additional substitution, *dem vemens nomen me tor nisht dermonen di hent umgevashn*, “whose Name cannot be said with unwashed hands,” speaks for itself.

While the sanctity of the Name is obviously a major interest on both the halakhic and popular levels, these concerns are generally limited to the various forms of the

divine names and epithets in Hebrew, written in the square script we commonly use. Were the same level of sanctity attributed to the English “God” (and for the sake of argument I will assume the same deity is intended), it would be impossible to carry into the bathroom any American currency containing the slogan “In God We Trust.” While one should be careful not to destroy Hebrew citations from the Bible or to deface texts of religious importance, it is unnecessary to avoid using the word God in serious English publications. This is so, even if they are of only ephemeral use, though one should dispose of them in a dignified way and not use them as garbage can liners. Substituting *Ha-Shem*, *Hash-m*, or *G-d*, is unnecessary, and such practices often mislead people as much as they express devotion to the Name. Indeed, the use of spellings like “Hash-m” treats this universally acknowledged substitute as a real divine name, a situation that has become all too common. The following statement appeared in a recent synagogue bulletin, perhaps as a citation from a published work: “The Mishkan’s one hundred sockets together formed the foundation of the Mishkan. The Hebrew for “socket” is “adon,” which is related to the same term meaning “my master,” *Adonei* [sic] the name we use for *Ha-Shem*.” Which is the divine Name and which is the circumlocution?

In discussing the nature of acquisition, the Talmud employs the concept *shinui ha-shem qoneh*, which means that the change of something’s name, like an irreversible change in its physical makeup, may contribute to the transfer of ownership of a stolen object. I cannot help thinking that, for many of our fellow Jews, changing and personalizing the divine Name is a form of acquiring it, of building greater commitment to God and to halakhic observance, and perhaps of building barriers against Jews who use other names, substitutions, circumlocutions, or pronunciations. If we do not share at least one common designation for our deity, do we actually share a religion?

For Further Reading

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