

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Shemot
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פרשת שמות
כ"ז בטבת תשע"ט

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 1:1-6:1

In this *parasha*, Bnei Yisrael become slaves to Paro; Paro's daughter saves Moshe from the Nile and, after killing an Egyptian taskmaster, Moshe flees to Midian where he marries and has children; Hashem instructs Moshe to liberate the people; Moshe returns to Egypt, and Moshe and Aharon approach Paro, who refuses their request for liberation.

When Moshe encounters God for the first time at the burning bush, he asks Hashem (3:13), "מָה אֶמַר אֲלֵהֶם – When they [Bnei Yisrael] say to me, 'What is His Name?' what should I say to them?" God replies, "אֶ-הָיָה אֲשֶׁר אֶ-הָיָה; וַיֹּאמֶר, כֹּה – 'I Am that which I Am,' and [Hashem] said, 'Thus you shall say to Bnei Yisrael, 'I Am has sent me to you.'"

The Rabbis in the Talmud considered the name *Eh-yeh Asher Eh-yeh* (I Am that which I Am) to be one of God's holy names that cannot be erased once written. Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Shevuot* 35a contains the following discussion:

יש שמות שנמחקין, ויש שמות שאין נמחקין; אלו הן שמות שאין נמחקין: כגון א-ל, א-להיך, א-להים, א-להיכם, א-היה אשר א-היה, אלף דלת, ויוד הי, ש-די, צב-אות - הרי אלו אין נמחקין; אבל הגדול, הגבור, הנורא, האדיר, והחזק, והאמיץ, העוז, חנון ורחום, ארץ אפים, ורב חסד - הרי אלו נמחקין!

There are Names which may be erased; and there are Names which may not be erased. These are the Names which may not be erased, such as: 'E-I', 'E-loha', 'E-lohim', 'your E-lohim', I Am that I Am, 'Alef Dalet', 'Yod Hai', 'Shaddai', 'Tze-vaot' – these may not be erased; but the Great, the Mighty, the Revered, the Majestic, the Strong, the Powerful, the Potent, the Merciful and Gracious, the Long Suffering, the One Abounding in Kindness, these may be erased!

The difference between the names that may be erased and those that may not is that the former are actual names of God, whereas the latter are simply descriptions of traits of God. The rabbis in the Talmud were referring to names of God written in Hebrew. [Hence, I put dashes between the letters of these names above, so that if this Torah Talk is printed out, it can be recycled or disposed of easily.]

There is a debate about whether one can erase names of God written in any vernacular other than Hebrew. The *Shulchan Aruch* (Rabbi Yosef Karo – 16th Century Tzfat) maintains that God’s name written in any language must be considered holy and may not be erased. However, the *Aruch HaShulchan* (Rabbi Yechiel Epstein – 19th Century Lithuania) says that only names written in Hebrew characters apply, and therefore names written in any other language may be erased.

One additional note: The Creator has many names in multiple languages. However, the English term “God” may not really be one of Hashem’s names. Merriam-Webster defines “god/God” as follows:

1. A being having superhuman powers and control over a particular part of life or the world [in some belief systems, natural forces like the wind and the sea are *gods*]
2. The being worshipped as the creator and ruler of the universe [as in, let us give thanks to *God*]
3. A person who is the object of extreme or uncritical devotion [in the eyes of many film critics, Alfred Hitchcock is one of the undisputed *gods* of cinema]

Based on the above citation, it seems fine to write out the name “God.” It is, of course, perfectly acceptable to write G-d, but probably not necessary to preserve the holiness of the names of the Divine.

Shabbat Shalom, Happy New Year, and God bless.

For Discussion:

- Why does Hashem need multiple names?
- What do you think each of the Divine Names signifies?
- Why did Hashem tell Moshe to say to Bnei Yisrael that “I Am has sent me to you?”