

'God Language' in Jewish Texts

Jews have always referred to God by a myriad of terms, even before our people were collectively known as 'Jews'. The oldest of these, *EL*, comes from Canaanite tradition, preceding the existence of the Bible itself. We find it used (as *El Elyon*) when Abram encounters Melchizedek in Genesis Chapter 14:

יח ומלכי־צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם הוֹצִיא לָחֶם וַיֵּין וְהוּא כֹהֵן לְאֵל עֵלְיוֹן: וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר
בְּרוּךְ אַבְרָם לְאֵל עֵלְיוֹן קִנְהַ שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ: וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶל עֵלְיוֹן אֲשֶׁר־מִגֵּן צָרֶיךָ בְּיַדְךָ
וַיִּתֶן־לוֹ מֵעֵשֶׂר מִכָּל:

18. And Melchizedek king of Shalem brought forth bread and wine; and he was the priest of **the most high God**.

19. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of **the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth**;

20. And blessed be **God the Most High**, who has delivered your enemies into your hand. And he gave him a tenth of all.

The very first verse in the Bible uses the variant form *Elohim*. This means something like "Great Power":

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

Yet by the time we reach the second chapter of Genesis, a new term is introduced in conjunction with *Elohim*, the name 'yud-hey-vav-hey,' generally referred to as 'the tetragrammaton' by scholars.

אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם:

Modern critical scholarship argues that the use of particular names for God in the Bible is a good indication of the provenance for the original text. Most of you will know that the Bible is a composite book, woven together from many sources. Different sources favour different epithets for God. The Priestly source with which the Bible opens, tends to use the name *Elohim* for God. Although the noun is grammatically plural, the verbs used with it are invariably in the singular, as in the famous "Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim v'et ha-arets. God has always been One, and only one, in the Jewish faith. We might perceive different aspects of God, but God is only singular and immutable. A second source, one that was probably based in the Northern Kingdom, also uses Elohim. We call it the E source, for Elohist.

Perhaps the most famous source in our day is the J source, sometimes called the Yahwist. The source in question was labelled J by the early German scholars, for this is how they transcribed the Hebrew letter *yud*. The distinguishing feature of the source is that it generally favours the name yud-hey-vav-hey, a conflated form of the verb 'to be', for which Jews have traditionally substituted the word "Adonai," which literally translates as, "My Lord." The article that follows explains:

God's Name is a Four-Letter Word January 11, 2012 By Rabbi Paul Kipnes

What is God's Name?

According to Torah, God is a four-letter word. According to Jewish tradition, these four Hebrew letters - Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey -represent the proper name of God. Just as my father is an accountant whose name is Ken, so too God is a God, whose name is Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey or, in Hebrew, יהוה.

We have lost the correct pronunciation of this name. Originally, because our ancestors worried about taking God's name in vain, they decreed that this name would be recited only on Yom Kippur, when the Kohen Gadol, or High Priest, entered the inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem. Passed down from Kohen Gadol to Kohen Gadol, generation after generation, the correct pronunciation was lost when the priesthood collapsed with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

Adonai is a Euphemism

Today we pronounce Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey - - as "Adonai," but this is a euphemism. "Adonai" means "Lord," and to the ancient Israelites, God was the regal being who benevolently lorded over us, as the landed Lords of the British Empire lorded over their subjects. One religious group combined the vowels of Adonai with the letters YHVH to invent Yehovah or Jehovah, while scholars and other groups merely sounded out the letters, creating Yahweh. Each of these misses the essence.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, the Reform Jewish scholar-mystic, writes, "...in truth [these four letters] are unutterable. Not because of the holiness they evoke, but because they are all vowels and you cannot pronounce all the vowels at once without risking respiratory injury. The word is the sound of breathing. The holiest name in the world, the Name of the Creator, is the sound of your own breathing."

Rabbi Kushner continues, "that these letters are unpronounceable is no accident."

Is / Was / Will Be

Think about the letters. The last three - Hey-Vav-Hey, or -combine to form the word "hoveh," which means "present tense." Hebrew, as a language, lacks the word "is." Whereas in English we say "He is wise," in Hebrew, we say "Hu chacham," two words without a third, because Hebrew as a language lacks the word "is." So part of these four letters refers to "is," or the present.

Now in Hebrew, the vowel "Vav" can be interchangeable with the vowel "yud." Thus Hey-Vav-Hey may be read Hey-Yud-Hey -- to form the word "haya." "Haya" is the past tense, meaning "was."

You know where this is going. In Hebrew, when you place the letter "yud" before a verb, the tense changes from past to future. "Haya" becomes "yihiyeh" -, "was" becomes "will be."

So Who or What is God?

From an unutterable four-letter word -- comes a multi-layered understanding of God. God is that which simultaneously is, was and will be.

"God's Name," to quote Rabbi Kushner, "is the Name of Existence itself." Or more clearly, God is Existence. ...

It is not only to avoid the gender problem that the Liberal Jewish movement prefers "The Eternal One" to "the Lord" for both study and prayer. "The Lord" also has hierarchical overtones that are not always helpful, especially in prayer. But this, too, is a secondary issue. Literally, the best translation of yud-hey-vav-hey would be "the IS-WAS-WILL BE," as Rabbi Kipnes explains. Yet, as you can imagine, this would result in some dreadfully inelegant prose, so on aesthetic grounds alone, we ruled this out. Orthodox Jews will sometimes refer to God as "HaShem" - the name, and some progressive Jews follow this practice to remind themselves of the impossibility of naming God.

What follows is but a small selection of the names of God used by the rabbis, from: A Marmorstein, The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God, Vol. I. There are many, many others, most of which name qualities or actions understood to be Divine in nature.

The Names and Attributes of God

Father of the World	אב לכל העולם
	One אחד
Friend / Companion of the World	אלופו של אולם
	Truth אמת
Searcher of Hearts	בדך לבבות
Examiner of Hearts	חוקר לבבות
	Creator בורא
	The Chosen One בחור
Eye[ball] of the World	גלגל עינו של עולם
	Beloved דוד
Life of the Worlds	חי העולמים
	Friend ידיד
The Unique [One] of the World	יחודו של עולם
The One Who Spoke and the World Was	מי שאמר והיה האולם
	Abode מאון
	Place מקום
	Witness עד
	Shepherd רועה
	The Merciful רחמנא
	Divine Presence שכינה
	Almighty שדי
Peace of the Worlds	שלום העולמים
	The Name השם