



The Meaning of God's Holiest Name

R. Elie Kaunfer – kaunfer@hadar.org

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In our prayers, we do not shy away from calling God directly by name, using the most holy four-letter name of God (although we don't pronounce it explicitly).¹ What might this name mean, and what might it mean in the context of prayer?

This week's *parashah* offers us a clue to understanding God's name, spelled yod-heh-vav-heh (we will refer to it as "YHWH"). After 20 years of living with Lavan without any contact from God,² Ya'akov finally hears the voice of God directly again:

Genesis 31:3

בראשית לא:ג

YHWH said to Ya'akov: Return to the land of your ancestors, and to your birth place, and I will be (אהיה) with you. וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹוֹק אֶל-יַעֲקֹב שׁוּב אֶל-אֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ וְלִמְוֹלַדְתֶּךָ וְאֵהְיָה עִמָּךְ

God speaks to Ya'akov and promises to be with Ya'akov on the journey back to Canaan. This is

¹ Mishnah Sotah 7:6, Mishnah Tamid 7:2; Bavli Kiddushin 11a; Tosefta Berakhot 6:23; Bavli Kiddushin 71a. The word Adonai (אדני) was developed as a substitute for the pronunciation. See Bavli Pesahim 50a; Bavli Kiddushin 71a; Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:1 (28b).

² See Tanhuma VaYeitzei 10; Tanhuma (Buber) VaYeitzei 21, p. 80a; Zohar 3:55b, ed. Pritzker, vol. 7, p. 352.



only the second use of the word אֱהִיָּה in the Torah. Previously, God had said to Yitzhak to dwell in Canaan, and I will be with you (אֱהִיָּה עִמָּךְ, Genesis 26:3).

A *midrash* points out that Ya'akov had been wondering where God's presence was in his life:

Tanhuma Buber Vayetze 21, p. 80a, Roma ms. (note 146)

Ya'akov had doubts and thought, "Perhaps the Holy Blessed One has abandoned me."

מדרש תנחומא (בובר) פרשת ויצא כא

והיה יעקב מהרהר ואומר שמא הנחני
הקדוש ברוך הוא

But now God returns and declares: "I will be with you." Imagine how Ya'akov must have felt, having God's presence back in his life.

Notice the phrase אֱהִיָּה עִמָּךְ, which uses a word very similar to God's special name, YHVH. Now, YHVH is famously inscrutable, and we can't know for sure what it means. But there is one aspect of the name that seems clear: it is connected to the word אֱהִיָּה (which we could transcribe as AHYH). This has important implications for our understanding of God's name and our use of that name in prayer.

Later, when God introduces Godself to Moshe in Exodus 3:13, Moshe asks, "What is the name I shall tell the people?" This is not really a request for information, but a request to know God intimately. In other words, Moshe is asking what God **is**, in essence. God responds (Exodus 3:14): "אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה," a name clearly etymologically connected to YHVH, most likely a first person conjugation of that word.³ What does this phrase אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה mean? This is also

³ See Hizkuni to Exodus 3:13. David Noel Freedman, "The Name of the God of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960), p. 152: "The form 'aehyaeh is to be understood as the first person equivalent of the Tetragrammaton...."



famously difficult to translate.⁴ But I want to offer a contextually-based translation, which stems from the fact that every time the word **אהיה** is used in the Torah, it is always said by God, and always connected with the idea of God **being with** people.⁵ Except in God's announcing God's name (twice) in Exodus 3:14, all other uses involve the relational preposition "עם - with." In fact, two verses before God announces God's name as **אהיה**, in response to Moshe's objection ("Who am I to go to Pharaoh?"), God says to Moshe, "**כי אהיה** - **עמך** - I will be with you." In the dialogue following God's revelation of God's name as **אהיה**, God says (Exodus 4:12 and again in 4:15), "**אהיה עם פִּיךָ** - I will be with your mouth" (the part of his body Moshe is nervous about). By contrast, people never say: **אהיה**; it is a divine expression only.

This relational understanding of the word **אהיה** is picked up in the rabbinic *midrash* on this name of God:

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 9b

תלמוד בבלי ברכות ט:

"Ehyeh asher Ehyeh" (Exodus 3:14)—the Holy Blessed One said to Moshe, "Go tell Israel: 'I was with you in this enslavement [in Egypt], and I will be with you in the [later] enslavement by [other] kingdoms.'"

"א-היה אשר א-היה." אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: לך אמור להם לישראל: אני הייתי עמכם בשעבוד זה ואני אהיה עמכם בשעבוד מלכיות.

From the *midrash*, we see that this stance of "being with" is not limited to the Exodus from Egypt. The repetition of the word **אהיה** is significant: it indicates a constancy. There is something eternal about God's "being with" us in every exile.⁶ Perhaps that is why God uses

⁴ Terrence Fretheim, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 63, sums up scholarly research including: "I am who I am," "I will be what (who) I will be," "I will cause to be what I will cause to be," "I will be who I am / I am who I will be." I thank R. Shai Held for this reference.

⁵ Genesis 26:3; Exodus 3:12; 4:12; Deuteronomy 31:23. See also Alshikh to Genesis 31:3, in which he reads **אהיה עמך** as indicating God's name **אהיה** will be with Ya'akov.

⁶ Mekhila Mesekhta De-Pasha 14, ed. Horowitz-Rabin, p. 51-52; Bavli Megillah 29a.



the phrase **אִהְיָ עִמָּךְ** with Ya'akov as well: God will be with Ya'akov as he sojourns in the exile of Lavan's home, on his way home.

Now if **אִהְיָ** is God's first-person conjugation of the four-letter name, then that name of God also must be understood to have an aspect of "being with." And perhaps that is the reason this name is used in our blessing formula, to the exclusion of all other names of God.⁷

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 40b

תלמוד בבלי ברכות מ:

Rav said: Any *berakhah* without mentioning of the **אִהְיָ** - אינה ברכה. Name (YHVH) is not a *berakhah*.

Rav tells us that we must use the name YHVH in our liturgy. Why? When we address God, or say a blessing, and use the name YHVH, we are subtly invoking the presence of God that is **with us**, wherever we are.

And if we have gone a while—perhaps years—without feeling that presence of God directly, perhaps we can also take comfort in the example of Ya'akov. Ya'akov went decades without feeling this presence, even though God had promised to be with Ya'akov back when he started his journey to Lavan's house (see Genesis 28:15). And yet, eventually, God returned.

The name YHVH is therefore a critical part of the blessing formula, and not a random choice of a name of God. It is a name that in its very essence implies God being with us. And it also offers hope that even when we don't experience God directly, God eventually returns to us.

⁷ Other blessing formulas found in Second Temple-era texts which used the opening **אִהְיָ** chose a different name of God: **אֱלֹהֵינוּ** or **אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**, more generic names of God. Rabbinic sources explicitly rejected these alternatives. See Tosefta Berakhot 6:20 (ed. Lieberman, p. 39) and Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:1 (12d).

