



# A God By Many Names

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## **The Tisch: Degel Maḥaneh Efrayim #3**

When Moshe is asked to go to Egypt and redeem his people, he is hesitant, to put it mildly. Moshe's reluctance stems from two concerns: he feels that he is inadequate to the job and he thinks that *Benei Yisrael* will reject him and not believe in him. In a deep sense, these two concerns are really one: because Moshe does not believe in himself, he assumes that the people will not believe in him either. They will think that he is a strange, stammering man, totally unqualified for leadership, speaking on behalf of a distant God whom they have not heard from in far too long.

However, the Degel Maḥaneh Efrayim revises this picture slightly. He does think that Moshe's apprehension about the people is based on or connected to his own self-perception, but he does not think that Moshe's apprehension about the people is inaccurate. They might be quite justified in rejecting Moshe, not because of who he is, but because of who they are, what they have experienced which Moshe simply does not and cannot truly understand. They have been immersed in the darkness of Egypt and have lost much of their spiritual integrity. They feel that God has abandoned them. Moshe escaped Egypt and Moshe has been talking to God directly at the burning bush. They're experiences couldn't be more distant.



Moshe reveals his concern about the people's propensity to believe him when he asks God what to answer when the people ask for God's name. According to the Degel Maḥaneh Efrayim, this question is a very specific challenge to Moshe's right to speak for God. According to him, this question is based on the people's assumption that they themselves **do** know God and they are trying to suss out whether Moshe knows God too, as well as they do, whether Moshe himself knows God's name. And Moshe feels inadequate to answer this question on his own, in part, perhaps because he doesn't know God the way that they do. How is he supposed to redeem these people from the depths of their suffering?! How can he come and presume to speak to and on behalf of a people who are in the spiritual state that the Jewish people are at this moment?! He doesn't relate to them. They don't relate to him.

There is so much richness behind this interpretation of the Degel Maḥaneh Efrayim. First, Moshe's response teaches us to be humble in our approach to helping others. Moshe knows that coming in to save the people is a complicated process. The people aren't going to just jump at the opportunity to have him interfere, despite their suffering. Moshe knows that he needs to approach them with sensitivity and awareness to their spiritual condition. Secondly, Moshe is also aware that he doesn't fully understand their experience. He recognizes that in order to make himself a plausible candidate to them, he needs to be able to respond to that critique. Although it is somewhat arrogant, in a certain sense they are right to test him and Moshe wants to approach them as equipped as he can possibly be.

This is also a theologically laden reading. The God that *Benei Yisrael* are crying out to in their distress goes by a specific name that perhaps only they know. They see God in a different way than Moshe does and *Benei Yisrael* can't even be sure that they're in the same conversation when Moshe refers to the God that he knows, the God that he has a relationship with. If God is the presence that is with us in our suffering and with us in our joy, if God is a force that we resent or God is a force that we love, then God looks differently to each and every one of us based on our experience. God is One, but we are many. When we speak about God or talk



about God, we need to do so with the awareness that in some sense, none of us has the same God. God is as vast as our experience of Him.

I also appreciate the hope in this reading. Moshe doesn't decide that the gap is unbridgeable and that communication is impossible. He knows that he will be challenged and God gives him the tools that he needs to express to the people that ultimately, despite how different each person and each community experiences God, there is a oneness, there is a commonality which we can reach.

| Degel Mahaneh Efrayim - Shemot                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | דגל מחנה אפרים - שמות                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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| <p><b>When they will say to me, “What is His name?” what should I say to them?</b> One can say in a manner of extrapolation that [Moshe] was afraid of them because they had sunk into the depths of the “husks” when they were in Egypt [and now exhibited] the traits of self-aggrandizement and arrogance. And that's why he said, <b>they will say to me</b> specifically <b>What His name is</b>—that is that they will say to me what the Holy Blessed One's name is, since they know it better than I do. What should I say to them? How can I attempt to again open my mouth to speak to them in Your great name, to redeem them from the depths?!</p> | <p><b>ואמרו לי מה שמו מה אומר אליהם.</b> י"ל בזה ע"ד הלצה שירא מהם מחמת שנטבעו במצרים בעמקי הקליפות ובמדת גדלות והתפארות. והוא שאמר <b>ואמרו לי</b> דייקא <b>מה שמו</b> היינו שהם יאמרו לי שמו של הקב"ה שיודעים אותו יותר ממני מה אומר אליהם איך אוכל שוב לפתוח פי לדבר אליהם בשמך הגדול לגאול אותם ממעמקים:</p> |

