



Speaking Directly to a God Who Sees Us

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Parashat Shelah 5783

In our prayers, we speak directly to God, calling God “אתה - You.” Why is this so, and what is the significance of addressing God in this way?

In Parashat Shelah, Moshe prays on behalf of the Israelites following the betrayal of the spies. God proposes to wipe out the entire people and start anew with Moshe. But Moshe refuses, arguing instead that God’s reputation among the nations will be tarnished if God destroys Israel. In making this argument, Moshe addresses God three times in one verse with the word אתה (Numbers 14:14).¹

Note how daring this move on Moshe’s part is.² He could have addressed God in a more removed manner, matching the style of how one speaks to a king. When Yosef speaks to Pharaoh, Yosef addresses him in the third person, using his title Pharaoh, even as Pharaoh speaks to Yosef directly with the word “You.”³ And throughout the Bible, people blessing God

¹ The use of the word “You” recalls the other time Moshe argued on behalf of the Israelites, at the sin of the Golden Calf, where Moshe also addresses God by saying “You” three times in one verse (Exodus 33:12).

² In R. Elazar’s view, Moshe is seen as daring—or even impudent—in speaking to God in other moments as well. See Bavli Berakhot 32a.

³ See the dialogue between Yosef and Pharaoh in Genesis 41. In verses 16-35, Yosef refers to the king in the third person (“Pharaoh”) even though he is speaking directly to Pharaoh. By contrast, Pharaoh calls Yosef “you” in response (v. 40).



generally do so without a direct address, saying “Blessed is YHVH” instead of “Blessed are You, YHVH.”⁴ But Moshe instead chooses to cut through the formalities and speak to God directly, as one would speak to a peer or an intimate partner.

In our prayers, we follow Moshe’s model, speaking to God with the word “You.” But the decision to speak to God in this direct manner, by using the word **אתה**, was not a given. In fact, the question of whether one needs to include the direct address word **אתה** in the blessing formula was still being debated in the talmudic period:

Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:3; 12d

תלמוד ירושלמי ברכות טג דף יב טור ד

Rav said: One needs to say “You” [in the blessing formula]

רב אמר צריך לומר "אתה".

But Shmuel said: One does not need to say “You”.

ושמואל אמר אינו צריך לומר "אתה".

Shmuel does not require one to say **אתה** in the blessing formula, presumably following the general biblical precedent.⁵ But Rav states that one needs to say **אתה**—to speak directly to God.⁶ Rav believes that talking **about** God simply won’t do. According to Rav, the act of prayer is an act of speaking directly **to** God, without any mediation. What might have

⁴ Heinemann points out through more than a dozen examples that the standard way people say *barukh* in the Bible is when talking **about** God, not when talking **to** God. See Joseph Heinemann, *Ha-Tefillah Bi-Tkufat Ha-Tannaim Ve-Ha-Amoraim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1966), p. 55, n. 9. The move from third person to second person address can be seen in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls: 4Q408, where **אתה** is added to the formula **ברוך יקוק**. See Daniel Falk, *Daily, Sabbath and Festival Prayers in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 96f. Joseph Baumgarten has noted that this substitution “may serve as testimony... for... the standardization of the liturgical blessing into the form with direct address of the deity which also became fixed in rabbinic Judaism.” Joseph M. Baumgarten, “Some Notes on 4Q408,” *Revue de Qumran* vol. 18 no. 1 (1997), pp. 143-144, here p. 144.

⁵ There are only two examples of **ברוך אתה ה'** in the Bible: I Chronicles 29:10 and Psalm 119:12.

⁶ Shibbolei Ha-Leket #165 (ed. Buber, p. 66a) claims that the blessing formula that starts in second person (**ברוך אתה**) and then moves to third person (**אשר קדשנו**) is a compromise position to include both Rav and Shmuel’s position. Note that the third person section of the blessing formula does not appear in the Amidah at all, rendering it entirely a direct address. In fact, R. Binyamin (the brother of the author of Shibbolei Ha-Leket) knows of practices to change all the third person instances of God in the Amidah to second person direct addresses (**המברך עמך ישראל בשלום** and **המחזיר שכינתך**)—see the same place in Shibbolei Ha-Leket. In the ancient Eretz Yisrael tradition of the Amidah, there is no example of God being referred to in the third person.



motivated Rav to endorse this unusual position? The use of **אתה** brings us closer to God. In the words of one comment on Rav's position:

Arugat Ha-Bosem, ed. Urbach, vol. 1, p. 127

ערוגת הבשם עמוד 127

Therefore it was established (to say) in blessings: "Blessed are **על כן הוק[ב]ע בברכות 'ברוך אתה';**
You," as if one is speaking mouth to mouth with the listener.⁷ **כאילו מדבר פה לפה לשומע.**

When we speak to God in prayer, we are indicating our closeness to God. It is as if we are standing face to face, and connecting directly.⁸ In my own prayer life, when I say the word **אתה**, I feel privileged that our prayers are orienting me to a direct address of God. The word "You" feels intimate to me, and I even linger on the word sometimes, concentrating on the experience of reaching out directly to God.

Moshe is the one in the Torah who addresses God as **אתה** most often.⁹ In fact, there is only one other person who addresses God as "You": Hagar, Avraham's Egyptian concubine, and the mother of his first child Yishmael. When does she call God **אתה**? Following a near-death experience. Hagar has just been banished by Sarai to the desert and seems destined to die. But God provides her with water and promises that she will have a child. After this encounter, Hagar names God:

⁷ Arugat Ha-Bosem introduces this as a quote from the Yerushalmi. It does not appear in our version of the Yerushalmi. See Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshutah*, vol. 1, p. 60, n. 10.

⁸ In the words of Max Kadushin: "...[The Rabbis] address God as 'Thou' in Berakot and prayers.... [Berakot] illustrate that the relationship to God is felt as to someone who is near, who listens, whom you can face directly. It is a warm, personal relationship, so intimate and direct as to allow one to use such words as 'thou,' 'thee,' 'thy.'" Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 209-210; 266. See also Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns*, trans. Richard Sarason (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), p. 89.

⁹ In addition to the examples cited in note 1, see Exodus 19:23; Numbers 11:21; Deuteronomy 3:24.



Genesis 16:13

בראשית טז:יג

And she [Hagar] called the name of YHWH who had spoken to her “**You are the God who sees me.**”

וַתִּקְרָא שֵׁם־יְהוָה הַדֹּבֵר אֵלֶיהָ אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי רֹאִי

Often, the name of God used by Hagar is given as El Ro'i, best translated as “the God Who Sees Me.”¹⁰ But actually, the full name Hagar uses is “**You Are** the God Who Sees Me.” The word אתה is, from Hagar’s experience, a central component of Who God is. It is not just that we address God by the term “You,” but also that God’s **name** includes the word “You.” In other words, an essential element of God’s nature is seeing those in distress, and allowing them to address God directly.

This is encapsulated in a *midrash* of R. Aibo:

Bereishit Rabbah 45:10, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 457

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) מה:י

“You are the God who sees me” (Genesis 16:13)—R. Aibo said:
You are the one who sees the sufferings of those who suffer.¹¹

אתה אל ראי אמר ר' אייבו אתה הרואה
בעלבון העלובים.

R. Aibo connects Hagar’s experience with the name she chooses to call God: God is the one who sees the downtrodden, reminding them that they are not alone. The “You” of God’s name reminds us that God sees our distress as well.

The choice to say the word “You” in our blessing formula was meant to emphasize the necessity of connecting directly to God. Hagar innovates this approach in her naming of God, and Moshe extends it in his heightened use of the direct address, when praying for the Israelites. We follow both of their examples when we recite אתה in our prayers. Like Hagar, in

¹⁰ See, for instance, Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2019), p. 53.

¹¹ In *Midrash Aggadah*, ed. Buber, p. 36, the text reads: “You see the sufferings of humanity - אתה רואה עלבונות בני אדם.”

our vulnerable moments, we call out to God directly, indicating that God sees us in our distress. And like Moshe, in our moments of asking for forgiveness, we speak intimately to God, attempting to draw closer following sin. Calling God “You,” right as we start our prayer, orients us toward a deeper connection, without barriers.

