

# THE NAMES OF GOD

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*In memory of Rabbi Josiah Derby, dear friend and colleague.*

Philosophers and theologians emphasize that there are innumerable concepts of God. Some would go so far as to assert that each person has his own individual concept of the Deity. What is not so often recognized, however, is the multiplicity and variety of the *names* of God to be found in Jewish classic literature and in Jewish practice. This article will deal with some of the many ways in which God is named or referred to in our tradition.

Moses questions God: *"When I come to the Israelites and say to them "The God of your fathers has sent me to you" and they ask me "What is His name?" what shall I say to them?"* (Ex. 3:13) The enigmatic response he receives is: *". . . Thus shall you say to the Israelites "Ehyeh sent me to you."*

The Rashbam identifies the name "*Ehyeh*" [I will be] with the Tetragrammaton (henceforth "*Hashem*"). To do so, he must explain how the initial "*aleph*" changes to the "*yod*" and how the third letter, *yod*, changes to a "*vav*." The *aleph-yod* exchange he explains quite simply; that when God refers to Himself he would say *Ehyeh*, while we speaking in third person would say "*Yihyeh* [He will be]." Likewise, the *yod-vav* exchange is equally understandable, as the two letters are frequently exchangeable. For example, in Ecclesiastes 2:22 we find the word "*hoveh*" where we would expect "*hayah* [to happen]."

The name of God that occurs most frequently in Scripture (6828 times) is, of course, the Tetragrammaton, *Hashem*, the distinctive Personal Name of the God of Israel. Judah Halevi (along with the Rambam and others) emphasizes that *Hashem* is the *only* proper name of God. All other names are attributive description (*Kuzari* 2:2).

However, anyone even slightly versed in Scripture or rabbinic literature is aware that there are a multiplicity of Divine Names throughout our religious classics. In addition to *Hashem*, there are six Names that require special care on the part of the Torah scribe and that once written may not be erased: *El*, *Elohim*, *Adonai*, *Ehyeh-asher-Ehyeh*, *Shaddai*, and *Zeba'ot*. The Talmud (Kid. 71a) makes mention of a 12-lettered Name and also of a 42-lettered

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Name but does not reveal the Names. Rashi states that these Names have been lost. Concealing certain Names is justified by noting that in God's statement '*zeh shmee l'olam* [*This shall be My Name forever*], the word "*l'olam*" is written defective (without a "vav") and therefore the word *l'olam* [forever] could be read "*l'alaim* [to be concealed]."

Due to the reverence for the Name (and perhaps also because of the Third Commandment) the Name is used sparingly, very often indirectly, and sometimes in code. The gematria (the numerical value of the letters) also frequently comes into play.

The simple and obvious gematria for the Divine Name *Hashem* is 26. In Scripture we find Psalm 136, known as *Hallel HaGadol* [the Great Hallel] in which the refrain *His steadfast love is eternal* is repeated 26 times. In the Targumim, *Hashem* is expressed with two *yods* and an elongated *vav* above them to indicate a numerical value of 26.

Similarly, we introduce our Shabbat Kiddush with "*yom hashishi* [the sixth day], two words which are entirely out of place since they constitute the conclusion of a previous verse (we may even say a previous chapter) with no grammatical connection with what follows. Why do we do this? In order that the first four words uttered aloud bear the initials that spell *Hashem* [*Yom Hashishi Vaychulu Hashamayim*].

Likewise, the hymn *Y'did Nefesh* which is sung in many synagogues before ushering in the Shabbat consists of four paragraphs whose initial letters spell *Hashem*. On the reverse side of the mezuzah we inscribe "כזוז במוכסז כזוז" [kozu bmoksz kozu] – an expression where each letter represents the previous letter of the alphabet, producing a coded declaration of "*Hashem Eloheinu Hashem*."

In fashioning the fringes of the *tzitzit* we have five sets of knots and between them the following number of windings: 7, 8, 11, 13. The first three numbers add up to the gematria of *Hashem* and the fourth number is the gematria of "*e'had* [one]." Thus we have the *tzitzit* proclaiming (in numbers instead of words) *Hashem echad* [*The Lord is one*], the key words of the Shema.

Among the kabbalists there seems to be no limit to the number of Divine Names. The above-mentioned 42-lettered Name found in the Talmud is associated by them with the initials of the 42 words of the *Anna B'koah* prayer

[recited before *L'ha Dodi* on Friday evening]. It should also be noted that the first benediction of the *Amidah* consists of 42 words. Additionally, the opening letter is a "beth" and the closing letter is a "mem"; the numerical value of the letters adds up to 42.

On the basis of *mah shmo* [what is His Name]? in Proverbs 30:4, they derive a 45-lettered Name ("mah" in gematria is 45). They then express this in the following equation:  $yod + heh + vav + heh = 45$  [יוד + הא + ו + הא = 45].

Most interesting is their derivation of the 72-lettered Name. For this, they had to locate not merely one 72-lettered verse but *three consecutive* verses each comprised of 72 letters! The Names are derived by taking one letter from each verse. In the case of the first Name, we take from Verse One letter No. 1; then from Verse Two we take letter No. 72; and from Verse Three we take letter No. 1. And thus we continue: letter No. 2, letter No. 71, letter No. 2. Then letter No. 3, letter No. 70, letter No. 3, and so on.

The verses are Exodus 14:19-21 as follows:

19. ויסע מלאך האל-הים ההלך לפני מחנה ישראל וילך מאחריהם ויסע עמוד הענן מפניהם ויעמד מאחריהם.  
 20. ויבא בין מחנה מצרים ובין מחנה ישראל ויהי הענן והחשך ויאר את הלילה ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה.  
 21. ויט משה את ידו על הים ויולך ה' את הים ברוח קדים עזה כל הלילה וישם את הים לחרבה ויבקעו המים.

והו	ילי	פיט	עלם	מהש	ללה	אבא	כהת
הזי	אלד	לאו	ההע	יזל	מבה	הרי	הקם
לאו	בלי	לוו	פהל	נלך	י	מלה	ההו
נתה	האא	ירת	שאה	ריי	אום	לבב	דשר
יתו	להח	בוק	מנד	אני	העם	רהע	יין
ההה	מיב	וול	ילה	סאל	ערי	עשל	מיה
והו	דני	החש	עמם	ננא	נית	מבה	פוי
נמם	ייל	הרח	מצר	ומב	יהה	ענו	מחי
דמב	מנק	איע	הבו	ראה	יבס	היי	מום

### אני והו הושיעה נא.

Each of the 72 Names consists of three letters, the first and third verses in the regular order and the middle verse in reverse order. The two circled Names

## THE NAMES OF GOD

are to be found in the Sukkot and Hoshana Rabba liturgy interspersed with *ana Hashem* which equals it in gematria (See Rashi on Sukkah 45a). A combination of the 72 letters appears on the Urim and Thummim consisting of the names of the Patriarchs (13), the twelve tribes (50), and the words *shivtei yisrael* [*Tribes of Israel*] (9).

Ibn Ezra (on Exodus 14:19) derives 72 from the following calculation:

$$\begin{aligned} yod &= 10 \\ yod + heh &= 15 \\ yod + heh + vav &= 21 \\ yod + heh + vav + heh &= \underline{26} \\ &72 \end{aligned}$$

The manipulation of the sacred letters forming the Divine Names was the means used to create the world (Sefer Yetzirah IX). There are traditions telling of the use of Divine Names to perform miracles, as when talmudists are credited with having created living animals (Sanh. 65b, 67b) and many legends from medieval times to the 18th century regarding sages who through the use of Divine Names were able to create a golem.

Returning to our original theme regarding the number of Divine Names, the ultimate statement is that of the Ramban. In the introduction to his Torah Commentary he writes of a tradition that the *whole* Torah is made up of Divine Names.