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THE THEOLOGY OF THE ISRAELITES

What's in a name? Not very much, suggested William Shakespeare, who responded to that question with the classic comment: "That which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet" (Romeo and Juliet II, ii, 33).

The struggle to assign a name for God that fully portrays God's supernatural attributes is a difficult task because Jews do not countenance physical depictions of God. Nevertheless, the need to sharply define God led a terrified Moses empowered by an ambiguous, illusive, unseen God that the Israelites might not believe in to inquire: "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" (Exodus 3:13)?

- "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?" (Exodus 3:13) God's puzzling response, "Tell them that *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*—"I am what I am" sent me to you." God is a verb and not a noun, meant to focus on relationships.

- Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries  
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning Aurora Leigh (bk VII, l. 820).

- The whole earth is a thurible\* heaped with incense, afire with the divine, yet not consumed. This is the most spiritual of earth's joys—too subtle for analysis, mysteriously connected with light and with

whiteness, for white flowers are the sweetest—yet it penetrates the physical being to its depths. Here is a symbol of the material value of spiritual things. If we washed our souls in these healing perfumes as often as we wash our hands, our lives would be infinitely more wholesome (Mary Webb, *Poems and the Joy of Spring*).

\*thurible (thur-a-bul) from the Latin for incense, a thurible is a metal censer suspended from chains for the burning of incense burned during worship services.

• The Encounter—Stephen Kunitz Pearce

TELL them, I am.

What? Tell them what?

Now look Moses,

You know who I am.

I am. That's enough!

Tell them, I am.

Just plain, I am.

Tell them I am what I am.

Perhaps they'll understand

That My glory fills heaven and earth

Founded upon the seas

Established upon the floods.

I have made the mountains sing for joy,

And the hills skip like rams.

But if they do not understand,

And many will not,

Say I was what I was.

The God who laid the foundation of the earth

And set the cornerstone thereof.

I was with Abraham and Isaac, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah.

I was, when there was not.

**Perhaps they will be incredulous,  
Looking in disbelief and despair.  
Searching  
Hoping for a glimpse, a glimmer,  
A hint of what I am!**

**Then tell them I am becoming.  
I will be what I will be.  
To every generation something new, renewed.  
Tell them I am working for your becoming,  
I who am  
Becoming. (*The Jewish Spectator*)**

**The tension between drawing too close and being too far from the divine is exquisitely demonstrated by Schopenhauer (*Parerga und Paralipomena*, vol. 2, XXXI, section 396) what he called porcupines in winter in response to the question: what do porcupines do in the bitter cold? If they huddle too close, they injure one another with their spines, but if they keep too much distance from one another, they freeze. May this tension be applied to drawing too close to God?**

- **"So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning 'I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life was preserved'" (Gen 32:31).**
- **"Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look at God" (Exodus 3:6).**
- **"God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am Adonai. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name Yahweh'" (Ex. 6:2-3).**
- **"Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai....On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the**

horn; and the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently," \*Ex 19:11, 16-18).

- "Moses, Aaron, and the seventy elders who "saw the God of Israel: (and) under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity" (Exodus 24:10).
- "The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as an individual would speak to a friend" (Ex 33:11).
- "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!" And He answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But, He said, "you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live." And the Lord said, "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen" (Ex 33:18-34).
- "Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people" (Lev 9:23).
- "When a prophet of the Lord arises among You, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord.... "(Num 12: 6–8).

- **"...you (Moses) saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire..." (Deuteronomy 4:15).**
- **"Face to face the Lord spoke to you (Moses) at that time to convey the Lord's words to you..." (Deut 5:4).**
- **"Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord singled out, face to face..." (Deut 34:10).**

**"The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice (Deut 4:12)."**

- **"With him [Moses] I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord (Numbers 12:8)."**
- **The prophets are those who hear and speak the words of God. Heinrich Graetz notes the difference between seeing and hearing: "To the pagan, the divine appears within nature as something observable to the eye. He becomes conscious of it as something seen. In contrast, to the Jew who knows that the divine exists beyond, outside of, and prior to nature, God reveals Himself through a demonstration of His will, through the medium of the ear. The human subject becomes conscious of the divine through hearing and obeying. Paganism sees its god, Judaism hears Him; that is, it hears the commandments of His will."—**

• **"The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of the words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice....since you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on the earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole**

heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to other peoples every were under the heaven, but you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace to be His very own people, as is now the case (Deut 4:12, 15-20).

- "Our wish is to see our King, for hearing is not the same as seeing." Again God defers to them, instructing Moses to tell them: "Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down in sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai (19:11)." Ismar Schorsch comments: "Still, I would argue that in chapter 19 of Exodus the prevailing sensory image is one of sound. "On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a very loud blast of the horn Fire and smoke engulfed the mountain as the blare of the horn grew ever louder, signifying God's presence. But the people kept their distance. To see God would be to perish. (19:16; Mechilta, ed. by H.S. Horovitz, pp. 210-11))." CK

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple (Isa 6:11)."

- When the Holy One spoke, each and every person in Israel could say, "The Divine Word is addressing me." Rabbi Yosi ben Hanina said, "Do not be surprised by this idea, for when manna came down to feed Israel, each person tasted it according to his capacity. For infants, it was like mother's milk, for the young, it was like bread with oil and honey, and for the old, it was like a honey cracker. What is true about the manna is also true about the Divine Word. Therefore, the Holy One said, "Do not be misled if you hear many voices. Know that I am the One God for each of you" (Medieval commentary, *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* 12:25).

- **The Talmud records that as the Temple was being destroyed, Titus, the Roman general who led the assault, forced his way into the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber of the Temple, thought to be the place that the High Priest had access to God. He thought that there he could see the impalpable God of the Jews. When all he found was an empty room, he declared the God of the Jews to be impotent (Gittin 55b).**