

The Sacred Name A Study in Three Parts

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Part 1

“The name of Adonai is a strong tower; The righteous runs into it and is safe” (Proverbs 18:10). So the Wisdom literature of the Tanakh teaches us. But what exactly does this mean? How is the Name a strong tower? Does the very speaking of the Name have some kind of innate power? If one knows how to pronounce the Name, does one have a spiritual weapon which those ignorant of the Name lack?

In this and coming issues of *Chadashot*, I want to begin a series of articles which will delve into the whole matter of the “sacred Name.” Here is what I hope to offer: I want to start by giving a brief background so that important questions can be formulated. I want to overview current trends in the “Sacred Name” movement, and point out what might be some pitfalls. Then I want to look at specific texts of Scripture to determine what G-d desires of us regarding the use of His Names. And finally, I hope to suggest how all of this should be incorporated in our worship and life together as a Torah community. I’m not sure how many installments this study will take, but I intend to keep the articles brief and to the point, yet with sufficient data to challenge us in understanding what G-d intends for us in this area.

Some Background

G-d has revealed Himself to His people in a number of ways, one of which is through making known His Name. The Names of God specifically reveal His character or attributes. This is why God does not have just one name, but identifies Himself by many names. Some of God’s names are a single word, while others are compound names. We are familiar with אֱלֹהִים, “G-d” and אֲדֹנָי, “master” or “Lord.” We are also familiar with אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי, El Shaddai, and אֱלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן, *El Elyon*, “G-d Most High.” But the Name most often used in the Tanakh is the Four Letter Name (which is what the technical word ‘Tetragrammaton’ means), יהוה, found 6828 times. It is the Name by which G-d has said He wants to be remembered (Ex 20:24), and the Name by which He is identified to Israel as the One making a covenant with them. Of all the names of G-d revealed in the Tanakh, the Tetragrammaton is the primary and unique Name of the G-d. It is, in ones sense, His Name.

In the Ten Words (Ten Commandments), the 3rd Word relates to the Name: “You shall not take the name of the L-RD your G-d in vain, for the L-RD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Ex 20:7, cf. Dt 5:11). The word translated “leave unpunished” is the verb נָקָה, used some 44 times in the Tanakh, and often rendered “free” or “free from guilt/punishment.” The Sages understood the meaning of the 3rd Word to apply particularly to oaths. One is not to trivialize the Name (שָׁוְאָה) by using it to affirm a false oath. Such an oath could be one of two kinds (emphasized by the fact that the word “vain” (שָׁוְאָה) is used twice): where one swears an oath of something that is obvious, i.e., which does not need to be solemnized by an oath, and the other, where a falsehood is affirmed to be true by taking an oath (cf. *b.Shavuot* 29a). In either case, the use of the Name in such oaths, according to the Sages, incurs the penalty that “HaShem will not absolve” that person, since to swear to something trivial or false as though equal to the existence of HaShem was to likewise trivialize Him or call Him false—this amounted to a denial that He is the One true G-d, and such a denial, in the minds of the Sages, was unforgivable.

This awesome reality of the 3rd Word moved the Sages to adopt the halakah of not pronouncing the Name. Their reasoning (given their interpretation) is valid: if G-d will never absolve the misuse of His Name, it is better not to use it! As a result, it became the halakah of the Sages to substitute a word or name whenever the Tetragrammaton was encountered. Substitutions (called circumlocutions) which became common were Shammaim (“Heaven”), HaShem (“the Name”), Adonai (L-rd), and HaMakom, (“the Place”), among others. The need for these circumlocutions was not so prevalent in the early history of Israel, but became so after the exile of Israel, and particularly after the destruction of the 2nd Temple. The reason was that the Hebrew language fell out of common use, and was found primarily in the synagogue, at the reading of the Torah. Since readers often did not fully understand the Hebrew they were reading, it was feared that the Name would inadvertently be pronounced, not with understanding, but in a trivial manner, and that the reader would therefore incur guilt for which there was no absolution. In order to avoid this, the scribes (Masoretes) who marked the scrolls with vowels so that the non-Hebrew speakers could pronounce the words, put the vowels of the circumlocution with the consonants of the Tetragrammaton to remind the reader what he was to say at that point. The fact that modern translators were unaware of this Jewish practice gave rise to the hybrid “Jehovah,” which combine the consonants of the Tetragrammaton with the vowels of “Adonai.” To this day, it has become tradition to substitute HaShem or Adonai whenever the Tetragrammaton is encountered, and even to write any reference to the Name with a “dash” or some reminder to be careful with its use. Only when the Scriptures are quoted or G-d’s Names are encountered in prayers are they fully written—all except the Tetragrammaton, which is never pronounced but always substituted.

The Talmudic tradition informs us that the Name was, in fact, pronounced in ancient times. Each year at Yom Kippur the High Priest, while executing his duties on this solemn day, would pronounce the Name over the people ten times (b.Yoma 39a). The tradition informs us that immediately after the Name was pronounced, the pronunciation was forgotten. This was a display of G-d's mercy, in that it rendered the people unable to misuse the Name. As the Talmudic tradition goes, one High Priest would pass the pronunciation of the Name to the next High Priest, and so on, until the time of the 1st Century CE, when the High Priesthood had become so corrupt that it was no longer passed down. It was from this point on that the pronunciation of the Name was forgotten and lost to antiquity. According to the Sages, it is not until the coming of Elijah and the Messiah that the correct pronunciation of the Name will be restored, and its use by the High Priest as a blessing upon the people of Israel reinstated.

We know that the use of a substitute word for the Name was something that Yeshua Himself used as well as His followers. For instance, Yeshua is recorded as using the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, etc.) where "Heaven" is obviously one of the common circumlocutions for "G-d," thus, "Kingdom of Heaven" is equal to "Kingdom of G-d." It is very possible as well that Paul's use of "King eternal" is a circumlocution for the Name (1Tim 1:17). We know that the use of *κύριος*, *kurios* ("L-rd") in the Lxx for the Tetragrammaton was motivated by the common circumlocution Adonai (L-rd), yet we find no Apostolic writer changing the use of *κύριος*, "L-rd" when quoting the Lxx, nor is there any discussion in the Apostolic Writings decrying the use of this circumlocution. Whether we *should* use circumlocutions will be a topic of another installment of this article, but that we *may* use them seems clear from Yeshua's example.

Because of the long tradition of substituting other words for the Tetragrammaton, most English translations have adopted this schema for translating the Name: normally the Name is translated by "LORD," using all capitals. When Hebrew "Adonai" is encountered, this is translated by "Lord," initial capital with the rest lower case. In the times where the combination יהוה ירדני is found (which, if consistent, would be translated "Lord LORD") it is translated "Lord GOD," using all capitals for "God" to show it translates, in this case, the Tetragrammaton.

The Sacred Name, Part 2

In this second essay on the "Sacred Name" and the so-called "sacred name phenomenon" which we see rising within some Messianic Congregations, I want to investigate the biblical terminology associated with the Name of G-d. The whole issue of the Sacred Name movement within Messianic circles these days is based upon the idea that unless one verbally pronounces the Sacred Name, one is not fulfilling Scripture as he should. But do the Scriptures teach this? Are we neglecting, or even worse disobeying the direct command of Scripture if we're not pronouncing the Sacred Name in our prayers and worship?

Such a perspective is at the heart a hermeneutical issue. For instance, when the Scriptures enjoin us to "call upon the Name of the L-rd," exactly what does this entail? We find this expression first in the narrative describing Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Ba'al:

"Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of Adonai, and the G-d who answers by fire, He is G-d." And all the people answered and said, "That is a good idea." 1Kings 18:24

What exactly does it mean to "call upon (on) the Name of the L-rd?" The phrase is found a number of times, but always the Hebrew is similar: □ לקרא בְּשֵׁם. Elsewhere where the word קרא (*kara'*, to call) is found followed by ב (on) it can mean to "give a name," as in the naming of a child (Gen 4:26, etc.), to read aloud (Ex 24:7; Dt 17:19), to make a proclamation (as announcing the Moedim, Lev 23:4; Jgs 7:3), and to name a city (Num 32:38, 42).

But in the context of worship and service, "to call upon the Name of the L-rd" means to proclaim one's trust in Him and to praise His revealed character. This becomes evident when the phrase is encountered in the Psalms:

Oh give thanks to the LORD,
call upon His name;
Make known His deeds among the peoples. Ps 105:1

Here the parallel structure of the stanza alerts us to the fact the "call upon His name," is being paralleled and amplified by the next line, "make known His deeds among the peoples." In this way the Psalmist is telling us that "calling upon His name" means "making His deeds known among the peoples." Thus, calling upon the Name of the L-rd does not mean simply pronouncing His name, but it means making known His character. This, of course, is the whole point of the Name from a Hebrew perspective, namely, that the various names by which God reveals Himself help us to know His true character. It is His character, known by His actions, which are encapsulated in His Name. Thus, for the Psalms, the Name of Adonai forms the central core of Israel's beliefs or theology.

In the Psalms the "Name of יהוה" expresses all the mystery and wonder of revelation, the object of all prayer, praise and reflection (cf. 7:17; 20:7; 103:1; 113:1-3; 116:4, 13, 17; 118:10-12; 122:4; 124:8; 129:8;

135:1; 148:5, 13). Note 76:1, "In Judah G-d is known, his Name is great in Israel." At Sinai G-d reveals Himself as יהוה (cf. 50:7; 81:10). His Name has been entrusted to Israel: she knows it, meaning she has covenant relationship in the context of the Name (9:10), she fears it (86:11; 102:15), loves it (5:11; 69:6; 119:132) and trusts in it (32:21). His Name is called on (75:1 79:6; 80:18; 99:6; 105:1; 116:4, 13, 17). People sing (זמר, *zamar*) the Name, praise (הלל, רב, ברוך) the Name; people exult over it, rejoice in it, break into shouts of joy over it. No one can make use of this Name (though G-d is "called" by it) or control it; it is "holy and terrible." It is "majestic" (8:1, 9), characterized by glory (כבוד). A frequent Tanakh expression says that when a person or a people dies, his or her Name or its Name is 'remembered no more' (83:4; 109:13). In contrast, the Name of יהוה endures forever and His memory or renown lasts through all ages (135:13). It is to be celebrated throughout all generations (45:17). His Name provides protection and salvation (118:10, 11, 12; 54:1). All of life must be lived with the glory of G-d's Name in mind (למען שמי, "for your Name sake" 23:3; 25:11; 31:3; 106:8; 109:21; 148:5, 13).

It is not difficult to see, even from the "Name theology" of the Psalms, that *to proclaim the Name of Adonai means to make known His person and works. The phrase has nothing whatsoever to do with the pronunciation of the Name itself.* In fact, the Name is a way of referring to Adonai Himself, for it is Adonai Who performs all of the wonders, yet this is attributed to His Name. Thus, the Name of Adonai simply means *Adonai as He has revealed Himself to His people.*

This is confirmed in the famous text from Exodus 33:19ff. Here, after Moses requests to see the glory of Adonai, He informs Moses that He will "proclaim His Name" to him. We are to understand that the proclamation of the Name is equivalent with the revelation of His glory. Yet when we listen for the promised proclamation, what we hear are the Names of G-d defined as the revelation of His attributes:

Then Adonai passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "Adonai, Adonai G-d, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." (Exodus 34:6-7)

Rather than simply hearing the Name pronounced (as the Sacred Name movement would teach), to "proclaim the Name," here modeled by HaShem Himself, means to make His glorious deeds known. The same may be said of the Aaronic Benediction in which the Priests are commanded to "place the Name upon the people" (Num 6:27). Here, in the proclamation of the Name, once again His attributes are what is pronounced or spoken, not merely the saying the Name.

A final proof that by "calling upon the Name" the writers of Scripture meant "to proclaim or confess one's faith in and praise of the self-revealed G-d of Israel" is the quote from Joel 2:32[Heb 3:5] in Romans 10:13. Paul is describing how one comes into a righteous standing before HaShem, and he emphasizes that this is by faith. As proof of his position, he quotes from Joel: "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Here, the phrase "call upon the Name of the L-rd" is used by Paul to mean "confess one's faith in the Messiah Yeshua." It is ludicrous to interpret this as meaning that if one correctly pronounces the Sacred Name he will be saved!

It can be seen, then, that "calling on the Name of the L-rd" does not mean to "pronounce the Name" but to confess and praise the character of G-d which all the names of G-d reveal. The whole impetus, then, of the Sacred Name movement and their attempts to discover the proper pronunciation of the Sacred Name is ill-directed. What is more, in some cases the desire to find the "accurate" pronunciation of the Name verges on (or actually partakes of) magic, something strictly forbidden by Torah. It is to this subject that we will turn in the next Chadashot.

The Sacred Name, Part 3

(Throughout this article the Name of God is fully written. Please treat it accordingly)

After considering some background of the Tetragrammaton, and noting what the Scriptures mean when they enjoin upon us "to call upon the Name of the L-rd," the next issue to investigate is the function of the Name—what is it we are to understand from this Name? What does the Name of God tell us about God? And in what way does it function as a Name rather than a Title?

Titles were well known in the Semitic cultures. An obvious example is the word מֶלֶךְ, "king" and the combination "king David" (מֶלֶךְ דָּוִד, *melech David*). Note 2Samuel 3:31:

Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, 'Tear your clothes and gird on sackcloth and lament before Abner. ' And King David (הַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד) walked behind the bier.

The use of the article (the word "the") before *melech* (in the Hebrew though it is not translated in the English) would indicate "king" to be a title. The word "the" is not used before proper names. It would grammatically be incorrect to say "the David." So the use of the article before a title usually identifies it as a title, while the lack of the article with designations might indicate a name.

אֱלֹהִים, *Elohim* (G-d) is often found with the article in the Tanach (376 times) as is the shorter אֵל, *El* (21 times). אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*), however, is usually found without the article (2226 times). The same is true of אֵל (225 times). So frequent is the use of *Elohim* without the article that some have considered that it functions as a name in many places. Interestingly, יהוה is found once with the article, Jeremiah 8:19 (though it could be repointed as an interrogative). Yet the Masoretes apparently had no problem pointing it as the Tetragrammaton with the article, functioning in this case as a title. However, some divine designations never appear with the article: אֵל שָׁדַי (*El Shaddai*), אֲדֹנָי (*Adonai*), יה, (*Yah*), for example. What are we to make of this? Should these be considered as Names or Titles?

Another question we could ask is “are there any divine designation other than the Tetragrammaton that are specifically designated by the Hebrew שֵׁם, *shem*, ‘name?’” Does the sacred text ever identify another designation than the Tetragrammaton as the “name” of God?

The Tetragrammaton is most often used directly with the Hebrew word for “name” (שֵׁם-יהוה, *shem YHVH*), 87 times. But the exact same construction is found with אֱלֹהִים, *Elohim* 14 times (Ex 23:13; Lev 18:21; 19:12; 21:6; Deut 18:20; Josh 23:7; 1Ki 18:24; Mic 4:5; Ps 20:2, 6; 44:21; 69:31; Prov 30:9). What is more, in one instance the divine designation Jealous (קָנָא, *kana*) is said to be God’s Name:

for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. (Ex 34:14)

What might we surmise from these data? First, while יהוה is the most common divine designation for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it cannot be sustained that this and this alone is His Name. Similar grammatical constructions embrace other divine designations. Secondly, if the use of the article (“the”) identifies a title, what are we to think of the Masoretic tradition of יהוה as title in Jeremiah 8:19? Apparently the Masoretes did not consider it a problem to portray יהוה as a title. What is more, three other divine designations never occur with the article (“the”). If we are taking the use of the article as indicative of what is a name and what is a title, these three would surely qualify as names Thirdly, to the statements of Scripture that directly state יהוה, *YHVH*, to be God’s Name (e.g., Ex 15:3) must be added Exodus 3:14 where Jealous is stated to be His Name as well. We may thus conclude that while יהוה, *YHVH*, is surely the most prolific divine designation in the Tanach, and the one used most often in antiquity, there are no grounds for conclusively stating that it and it alone is God’s Name. Other divine designations may in fact be understood as Names, while some no doubt function as Titles. To differentiate these, however, is difficult at best because the distinction between titles and names is often blurred.

One of the reasons for this is that a title tends, in the course of history, to take on the status of name. A retired Captain, for instance, may be called “Cap” or “Captain” as a name without direct reference to his former occupation. While it is obvious that divine designations like *El* were used by Semitic cultures throughout the Ancient Near East as a general divine title, its use in the Tanach may have eventually moved the title to function more in the manner of a name. Descriptions such as “the Everlasting God” (אֵל עוֹלָם, *El ‘olam*) in Genesis 21:33 may indicate the generic *El* being used as a name designation for the God of Abraham. Indeed, the frequent use of the *Elohim* in direct parallel with יהוה shows this same phenomenon:

As for me, I shall call upon God (אֱלֹהִים), And the LORD (יהוה) will save me. (Ps. 55:16[17])

It is also curious how שֵׁם, (*shem*, “name”) is used with the Tetragrammaton. For instance, in only one text (and its parallels) does the Tanach use the expression to “call upon the LORD” without the intervening use of “name” or a preposition:

I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised . . . Psalms 18:3 (cf. v. 7 as well, and parallel to 2Samuel 22))

Here, the construction is קָרָאתִי יְהוָה (*kara’ti YHVH*) without any intervening preposition nor the use of “name” encountered so frequently in the “call” motif (“I called upon the name of the LORD”). The English translations feel the need to supply the preposition “upon” in Psalm 18:3 but in the Hebrew we have in this single instance (it is paralleled in 2Sam 22 as well) what we would expect if *YHVH* is functioning as a proper name: “I called, “YHVH.” Yet in the Tanach everywhere else this “call” motif incorporates the phrase “to call upon the Name of the LORD.” If I call for someone to help me, I say “I called upon Bob to give me a hand.” I do not say “I called upon the name of Bob to give me a hand.” So why is this the common way of describing man’s approach to God?

The general answer to this question is that the Name encapsulates God’s character, and thus to “call upon the Name of God” means “to pray to Him with His attributes in mind.” That is, the foundation for approach to God is the realization of His revealed character (faithful, merciful, honest, just, loving, etc.). But I would like to propose an additional explanation for the common use of “call upon the Name of the LORD.” I would like to suggest that the concept of “name” functions as an intermediary, for one recognizes the unapproachable nature of God’s holiness. Thus, in recognition of God’s transcendent holiness and His unapproachable grandeur, petition to Him is done through

His Name: the Name functions as a mediator between God and the petitioner.

Indeed, the “Name” of God is personified in the Tanach. The “Name” of the Lord dwells in the sanctuary:

then it shall come about that the place in which the LORD your God will choose for His name to dwell, there you shall bring all that I command you . . .
. . . Deut. 12:11

We understand this to mean that God Himself dwells in the sanctuary, yet the text states that it is His Name that dwells there.

The Name also protects God’s people:

May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!
May the name of the God of Jacob set you *securely* on high! Psa. 20:1

The Name jealously guards God’s reputation:

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. “I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD,” declares the Lord GOD, “when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. Ezek. 36:22-23

And the same is true in worship language: while it is clear in the Tanach that God’s people worship Him, often the language employed is that they worship the Name. They praise the Name (Joel 2:26), love the Name (Ps 5:11), fear the Name (Mal 4:2), and walk in the Name (Mic 4:5). Obviously, in these cases the Name acts as a substitute for the very person of God and is personified as God Himself. In this way the Name acts as a mediator between the unapproachable God and man, revealing to man the true character of God and thus allowing man to believe in the God he otherwise would never know. Man is able to draw close to God in petition via the Name, for the Name reveals the essential attributes of God and thus provides the link needed for faith. To believe in the Name of the Lord is therefore to believe in the Lord Himself.

Who is among you that fears the LORD,
That obeys the voice of His servant,
That walks in darkness and has no light?
Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God (יִבְטַח בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁעֵן)
(בְּאֵלֵהוּ) Isaiah 50:10

Thus, the Name of God functions as an incarnation—a dwelling of God with man. God makes His presence to dwell among men by placing His Name in their midst. It becomes all too obvious that the Name is a concept that foreshadows the Messiah. For the Messiah is the revelation of God.

We see this in the מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה, *mal’ach YHVH*, the “Angel of the LORD.”

Be on your guard before him (the angel of the LORD) and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him. Ex. 23:21

The fact that the Name resides within the Angel of the LORD is Hebraic thought for the very presence of God dwelling manifest in the mediatorial figure of the Angel of the LORD. The invisible and unapproachable God comes close to man in the Angel of the Lord because He embodies the Name.

This concept is spoken of explicitly by Paul:

For in Him (Yeshua) all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, Col. 2:9

Thus, the use of the phrase “name of the LORD” throughout the Tanach sets the stage for the coming Messiah. Through the use of this phrase, the people of Israel came to understand that in order to approach the ineffable One there was need for mediatorial revelation—a making known of God to mortal man. This was accomplished in the Name, and ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah.

It is this concept Paul has in mind when he writes:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant,

and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Yeshua EVERY KNEE WILL BOW (Isaiah 45:23), of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Yeshua HaMashiach is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5-10)

Yeshua has the Name, and Yeshua is the Name. Even as in the Tanach to praise the Name is to praise God; to trust in the Name is to trust in God; to worship the Name is to worship God, so the relationship of Yeshua to the Father is as the Name. This is the point God wishes us to see in the Name, and the use of the Name of God throughout the Scriptures. Here is the emphasis God desires for us to see and to receive.