

GOD'S HIDDEN NAME REVEALED

The secret that's been hiding in plain sight for almost two thousand years — by Mark Sameth

As God begins to create the first human being—the *Adam*—he says, “Let *us* make the earth-creature in *our* own image.” The text goes on: “Then God created it in God’s own image. Male and female God created *them*” (Genesis 1:26–27).

The text seems to be saying (and the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash understood it this way) that *Adam* was created by God as male *and* female. The rabbis spoke openly about this, and even composed elaborate speculative stories about the separation of this hermaphroditic creature into the male and female characters that we know as Adam and Eve. What the rabbis were less willing to openly discuss was the extent to which this earth creature was created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the dual-gendered image of God.

But if we read the text as a mystic might, paying extremely close attention and assuming that the biblical text conceals more than it reveals, we may find hints regarding God’s androgynous nature. Consider, for example, that the Torah:

- identifies Moses as a nursing father (Numbers 11:12)
- tells us that Adam named his wife Eve *ki hu hay'tah eim* “because he was the mother of all the living” (Genesis 3:20)
- recounts that Abraham instructed his servant to be on the lookout for a woman who will offer to water the camels because *hu ha'ishah*, “he is the woman” for my son (Genesis 24:44)
- And the list goes on.

Why is the Torah repeatedly conflating the genders of its main characters? What is the Torah hinting at?

I believe these are not mistakes/scribal errors, but the very key to unlocking one of the Torah’s most enduring mysteries.

But first a note about the many strange occurrences in the Torah regarding names. Our patriarch Jacob’s name is twice changed to Israel. Pharaoh is not a name. And Moses is not a name. Moses, in Egyptian, means “born of”—as in the name Tutmosis (Born of Tut).

Consider: if the name of our great leader Moses is not really a name, might it mean something else? Interestingly, if we spell Moses’ name in Hebrew backwards, *Moshe* becomes *HaShem*, which literally means “The Name,” one of the ways some Jews refer to God.

Then consider: if Moses' name spelled backwards becomes *HaShem*, reflecting the Godly nature of the human being, might not God's name spelled backward similarly reflect something essential about humankind? Indeed it does.

Look at *Yud–Hay–Vov–Hay*, the ineffable Name of God. Known as the Tetragrammaton, the Name was permitted for everyday greetings until at least 586 B.C.E., when the First Temple was destroyed (*Mishnah Berakhot* 9:5). In time its pronunciation was permitted only to the priests (*Mishnah Sotah* 7:6), who would pronounce it in their public blessing of the people. After the death of the High Priest Shimon HaTzaddik around 300 B.C.E. (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Yoma* 39b) the name was pronounced only by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur (*Mishnah Sotah* 7:6; *Mishnah Tamid* 7:2). The sages then passed on the pronunciation of the Name to their disciples only once (some say twice) every seven years (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin* 71a). Finally, upon the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the Name was no longer pronounced at all.

Later, some speculated that the Name had been pronounced “Jehovah,” or possibly “Yahweh,” but scholars did not agree. No one knew for a certainty how to pronounce the ineffable Name of God.

But what if *Yud–Hay–Vov–Hay* has long been unpronounceable for the simple reason that it is written in reverse?

Reversed, the Name of God becomes *Hay Vov Hay Yud*. And these two syllables, *Hay Vov* and *Hay Yud*, can be vocalized as the sound equivalents of the Hebrew pronouns *hu* and *hi*, which are rendered in English as he and she respectively. Combining them together, *Hay Vov* and *Hay Yud* become He-She.

He-She, I believe, is the long-unpronounceable Name of God! This secret has been hiding in plain sight for all these years, for it explicitly states in the Torah: God created the earth-creature in God's own image, male and female.

Needless to say, the notion of an androgynous God creating essentially androgynous human beings has profound implications. Long ago the *Zohar*, the book of Jewish mysticism par excellence, declared, “It is incumbent on a man to ever be male and female”—a strange statement especially in the 13th century. But recently our society has begun to show signs of being able to understand, and willing to accept, this message.

Dr. James Garbarino, one of our generation's most influential child development experts, observes that so-called “traditional girls who have only ‘feminine’ characteristics are at a disadvantage when it comes to coping” and so-called traditional boys are also disadvantaged. “Combining traditionally feminine traits with masculine traits,” Garbarino wrote in *See Jane Hit*, “makes for greater resilience.”

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, author of *Searching for My Brothers*, notes that Jewish and Western cultures have long held very different perspectives on the issue of androgyny. While Western culture says “be a man,” he explains, the message of Jewish culture has always been “be a *mensch*.” *Menschlichkeit*, which he defines as “mature manhood,” is “a combination of both masculine and feminine traits.”

In her landmark book, *Deborah, Golda, and Me*, the Jewish feminist Letty Cottin Pogrebin challenged Jews “to enlarge men’s capacity for emotional expression and family care-giving, and to expand children’s options regardless of their gender. Is it possible,” she asked rhetorically, “that greater opportunities for children, more loving men, and more competent, confident women could *not* be good for the Jews?”

Discussing patriarchy in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (URJ Press), Rachel Adler comments that the world “cries out for mending”—not only for women’s sake, but for the sake of men as well. The work of Reform Judaism—indeed the work of all the world’s progressive, egalitarian, religious communities—requires an ever deepening commitment to this mending. This means striving for wholeness in ourselves; with our loved ones; in the relationship between self and community; and in the relationship among individual communities and the world at large. It means doing whatever we do, in the words of our ancient mystics, *l’shem yichud*, ultimately for the sake of God’s unification.

Now, grounded in this new understanding of God as He-She, it is time for us to jettison the stereotypical conception of God as an old man with a long white beard sitting in the clouds. Thinking of God as He-She allows us the freedom to see the Divinity as the totality of all male and female energy.

It is time for us to consider changing our most sacred prayers, in particular those which refer to God as Lord. The early rabbis employed the word “Lord” (*Adonai* in Hebrew) as a respectful substitute for the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton, and recently some Reform Jews—including the editors of *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*—have chosen not to use it. With this new cognition of the Tetragrammaton, we can confidently revisit our faithful declaration: “*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*—Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4) and affirm instead: “*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*—Hear O Israel: He-She is Our God, He-She is One.”

It is time for us to affirm that Reform Judaism’s tradition of gender equality—which has empowered women to become rabbis, cantors, and congregational lay leaders—is not a modern and somehow less authentic invention, but emblematic of Judaism’s most ancient conception of God.

And it is time for us to rethink how we choose to pass on our heritage to the next generation. If you’ve ever tried to teach God to a class of precocious Hebrew school

students, you've likely heard that *sotto voce* from the back of the room: "yeah, sure." Well, recently I took a chance and taught my post bar/bat mitzvah class my idea of God's secret name and its meaning. We then discussed what it might imply about our relationships to each other and to God. When we were done, one of the young people turned to the others sitting around the table and said the words rabbis live for: "Judaism," she exclaimed, "is so cool!"

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