

5 Ways to name God

in ancient traditions

How does one address God, our Creator and Liberator? Judaism has many names for God, and pronouncing and writing them can be a sensitive issue. Many Jews will write 'G-d' instead of 'God' out of concern that the page may be destroyed and therefore the name of God defaced. Reflect on your own practice of addressing God. Here are five traditional expressions:



El Shaddai. According to Ex. 6:3, this is the name by which God is revealed to the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. El Shaddai is commonly rendered 'God Almighty.'



YHWH. In Exodus 6:2 the unutterable name of God is revealed in four Hebrew letters which are related to the Hebrew verb 'to be.' Associating God with existence, with life itself, has ancient roots.



Lord. Adonai. In place of the unutterable YHWH, the title 'LORD' ('Adonai' in Hebrew) has traditionally been used. The addition of vowels to form 'Yahweh' is considered unacceptable.



Hashem. *Hashem* ('the Name') appears in early rabbinic works and is often used today as an alternative to 'Lord/Adonai' in Jewish speech and prayer.



Abba. In Mark 14:36 Jesus addresses God as 'Abba Father.' How interesting that the Aramaic title (*abba*) is retained in the original Greek text. Some suggest that 'abba' is a term of endearment, like 'daddy' in English.

This *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes encourages parishioners to be attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2010. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.lightoftorah.net; www.batkol.info and www.etz-hayim.com.



Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Last week we began reading the book of Exodus. Our journey with the Israelites, their passage from slavery to freedom, will continue week by week in our *Light of Torah* series as we explore the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, with the help of stories and insights from Jewish biblical tradition.

Gradually we will become aware of one of the central themes of Exodus: namely, "I am the Lord." No matter what trials await the Israelites, no matter their loss of confidence in their leadership, no matter the ravages of desert thirst and marauding enemies, the repetition of this assurance will be ever-present: "I am the Lord."

And this pilgrimage narrative is ours every bit as much as it is that of our ancestors in the faith. The Torah, as God's Word, immerses us in the story of God's people. Through baptism, we are part of that people. The book of Exodus is *my* story. Exodus is the story of our Church; for "*the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage*" [Nostra Aetate, 4].

But how can we understand the deep roots of our peoplehood, of our sacred story, of our Church unless we draw nourishment from the soil of Judaism in which Christianity is planted? This *Light of Torah* series seeks to awaken Catholics to the riches of the Old Testament, and to their historical and spiritual links with the Jewish people.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 6:2–9:35

Our Torah portion presents a sequence of encounters between Pharaoh and the two Hebrew brothers, Moses and Aaron. The encounters have a larger stage too, for this is really a dramatic confrontation between the egomaniacal powers of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, versus the Lord God, King of the universe (of whom Moses and Aaron are agents). Today we will focus especially on Ex. 6:1-13 in which God's name is revealed and the Covenant reaffirmed. We will also recall some of the narrative from the previous Torah portion in chapter 5.

(1) Bialik & Ravnitzky, 64-65.

Sources: Bialik & Ravnitzky (eds.) *The Book of Legends* (NY, 1992); Leibolditz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996). Scripture quotations: JPS.

Tasting Torah

In the unfolding Exodus story, Pharaoh and God lock horns:

Pharaoh to Moses: *“Who is the LORD that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go”* (5:2).

The Lord to Moses: *I am the LORD. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage”* (6:6).

Pharaoh poses a question. The Lord provides an answer. And both boldly declare their intentions. Imaginatively and prayerfully ponder these two statements. Read the verses around them. What do you notice? How does the text speak to you? Creatively envisage the scenes, the tone of the speakers, the electricity of each moment.

Touching Torah

In the *midrash* (ancient Jewish storytelling traditions), an imaginative and insightful story is woven around these verses. According to this *midrash*, after asking, “Who is the LORD?” Pharaoh says, “I will search my records.”

And he went into his archives and brought out a list of divinities... “The god of Moab, the god of Ammon, the god of Zidon”... Finally he decreed, “You see, I looked for the name of your God in my archives, and did not find it.”

Moses and Aaron said to Pharaoh, “Utter fool that you are! Are the living to be sought among the dead? The divinities in your records are dead. But our God is a living God, the King of the universe.” (1)

Depthing Torah

Pharaoh is ignorant, but does he really want to learn the truth? How difficult it can be to embrace a new idea when it threatens our powerbase or takes us beyond our comfort zone. Pharaoh's resistance helps us to appreciate the great leap that Moses, himself raised as an Egyptian prince, took in embracing the revelation of the divine name.

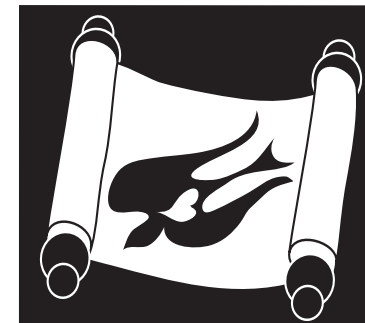
Pharaoh's refusal to free the Israelites is bad enough, but Moses also has to contend with rejection from their own people. *“They would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage”* (6:9). A devastating story forms the backdrop to this verse (pause to revisit it in chapter 5 of Exodus) where Moses' efforts actually lead to greater suffering for his kinsfolk.

Have you ever been in a circumstance where your best efforts not only were unsuccessful, but it seemed that you actually made the situation worse? Here the sacred text is magnificent: *“I am the Lord. I have heard the cries of my people. I have remembered my covenant. I will redeem them with an outstretched arm. They will be my people and I will be their God”* (6:5-8).

Can you taste the power of divine reassurance in this dark moment? Can you allow it to resonate within a dark moment of your own life?

Doing Torah

At some point in this day, pause to savor the divine name, to call out to God and to remember God's promise in Ex.6:5-8. Make an act of trust in the Living God who promises to free you.



Faith & life

I was showing my three year old grandson, Michael, around the garden. The agapanthas were just budding and I told him, ‘Next time you come to my house you will see flowers.’ Well, the next weekend, as he arrived for his visit, Michael couldn't contain his excitement. He raced out into the garden to check the agapanthas which, sure enough, were in full bloom. “Look, Grandpa! Look! They're blue!”

The wonder of a child discovering the mystery of creation and the promise of new life is truly a beautiful image of God's presence and promises. My prayer is that I can be just as hope-filled and trusting, just as attentive to the signs of new life with which God wants to gift me.