



# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

*Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong*

## SHABBAT SHALOM

15 – 16 January, 2010

1 Shevat 5770

Parashat Va'eira  
(Exodus 6:2-9:35)

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## From the Rabbi's desk

Our parasha for this week begins with the words: "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My Name." The standard translation, while accurately conveying the sense of this passage, masks the fact that God specifies what is meant by "My Name." The Name is the Tetragrammaton, the four letter "personal" name of God. Because of the special sanctity of the Name, we do not attempt to pronounce it, but instead say "Adonai," which by convention is translated as "LORD". For convenience sake I will label this name YHVH, a transliteration of the Hebrew letters.

Before we examine the Torah's contention that the Patriarchs did not know God as YHVH, let's reflect a moment on the name El Shaddai.

Because of the great antiquity of the Hebrew Bible, we sometimes fail to appreciate that within the Canon itself there are centuries of literary development. There are expressions and concepts within the TaNaKH that an ancient reader would have experienced as "old". El Shaddai is apparently such an expression. According to Nahum Sarna, the author of the JPS Commentary on Genesis, El Shaddai is an archaic term, appearing most frequently in Biblical poetry, which tends to preserve ancient usages. El Shaddai is used in Biblical narrative, but almost exclusively in Genesis. It is a name for God from the time of the Patriarchs and seems to be an echo of the Mesopotamian roots of the Israelite tradition. El Shaddai is a name of God that we outgrew. As Sarna says, "the divine name Shaddai lost its vitality in Israel with the advent of Moses and was preserved only as a literary relic."

Now to the issue of God's assertion "I did not make Myself known to them by My Name YHVH." This statement is problematic as it is seemingly contradicted by Genesis 15:7: "Then He said to him [Abraham], 'I am YHVH who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession.'"

A close reading of the Exodus passage solves this interpretive puzzle. The text does not say that God never told the Patriarchs God's Name. Rather the text says "lo nodati lahem" -- I did not make it known to them. This nuance gives Biblical commentators the opening to assert that the meaning of the Exodus passage is that the import, the depth of the mysterious name YHVH was not previously understood.

YHVH is a much more subtle name than El Shaddai. As Rabbi Arthur Green teaches us, God's own true Name is constructed from the root of the verb "to be" and is best understood as "Is-Was-Will Be". No one really knows what "El Shaddai" means. "El" is a generic word for God (including a chief Canaanite deity). Shaddai is often translated as "Almighty," but this is just a guess, albeit an ancient one as it goes back to the Greek translation of the TaNaKH. What we see in the passage from our parasha is a stage of theological evolution. In the patriarchal age, God is El Shaddai, a tribal God, the divine patron of one particular family. The name YHVH bears within it the seeds of a much deeper understanding. A name like this implies that this God, Is-Was-Will Be, permeates existence. In time, God thought of in this way will come to be understood as an universal God, the source of all that is.

In our lives, we are meant to recapitulate this theological evolution. Children understand God more as El Shaddai than YHVH. God is part of the family. He watches over us and keeps us safe. God is a person writ large. Ideally, as we mature our conceptions of the Divine mature with us. The life of an adult is more complex, more nuanced than the life of a child. YHVH, Is-Was-Will Be, is the God of adulthood. The Name points to the impenetrable mystery at the heart of existence. The Name is not a static label as other names are, but a window to a reality that transcends all that we know. We reach out for this God, we yearn for this God, but we will never encompass this God. YHVH is continually being made known to us, but is never known by us. Yet, through the myriad experiences of life, God says "ei'ra'eh"-- I appear.

All Blessings,  
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