

Tekiah

May 2008

Dear Friends,

It is difficult to translate one language into another, so it is not surprising that there are multiple translations of the Torah, each one based on a particular set of standards and biases. These translations change as the world changes. Our view of the world affects how we interpret various names for the Divine.

One such example is the translation of *El Shaddai*. In older texts it is usually translated *El*=God, *Shaddai*=Almighty. In some modern texts it is not translated at all, leaving it as *El Shaddai* in the English. I would suggest two possible translations. The first is based on looking at *Shaddai* as *She-dai*. On Passover we say “Dai-aynu,” it would have been enough. Using this reasoning, *El Shaddai* is *God who is sufficient*, that is to say that if one has *El Shaddai*, one’s life is complete

A second way of interpreting *El Shaddai* comes from the translation of *Shaddai* as breast. The image that this interpretation brings to mind is that of the nursing mother. There is nothing more comforting to a baby than being nursed. This act not only feeds the baby physically but also emotionally. This creates quite a different picture than *God Almighty*, which, to me, brings to mind the image of an almost Zeus-like god. *El Shaddai*, however, does not often appear in the Torah or prayer book.

You probably noticed that in the above paragraphs, I spelled God with the “o” instead of with a dash. Many people prefer to change the “o” to a dash because of what is written in Exodus 20:7, which we usually translate, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...” There is an interesting problem raised by this substitution. Although the dash is often substituted in *God*, the same is not done for *Lord*. The Hebrew for *Lord* is *Adonai*, which is how we pronounce the Hebrew letters *Yud Hay Vav Hay*, the holiest name for God. One would then expect that the “o” in *Lord* would also be replaced with a dash.

More relevant is the translation of *Adonai* as *Lord*. We say *Adonai* when we read the letters *Yud Hay Vav Hay* or *Yud Yud* (an abbreviation for *Yud Hay Vav Hay*). We do this because we do not know how to pronounce *Yud Hay Vav Hay*. Even if we did know how to pronounce it, we would still say *Adonai* because of Exodus 20:7, which we usually translate, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...” Although it is true that the translation of *Adonai* is *Lord*, what we should actually be translating is *Yud Hay Vav Hay*. *Yud Hay Vav Hay* is a combination of the Hebrew words for Was (*Hay Yud Hay*), Is (*Hay Vav Hay*), and Will Be (*Yud Hay Yud Hay*). The result is that a much better translation for *Adonai* (*Yud Hay Vav Hay*) is *The Eternal*.

There is another reason that I prefer to translated *Adonai* as *The Eternal*. When one hears the words God or Lord, certain images come to mind that limit our concepts of God. This is problematic because in Judaism, God is limitless and any image of God which we can conceive, is by definition, not God.

In Exodus (3:14), when God is telling Moses that Moses will lead the Children of Israel out of ancient Egypt, Moses asks God what should he tell the people God’s name is. God’s answer is *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, I Will Be What I Will Be*. This “name” for God is not really a name but is permission to conceive of God as we need to at different times in our lives and under changing circumstances. It opens up the theological possibilities. *The Eternal* is a shorter version of *I Will Be What I Will Be* while retaining its openness.

With this explanation in mind, I will be attempting to substitute *The Eternal* when the siddur says *The Lord*. I invite you to also make the change; however, please do not feel that you must. Also, for those who are comfortable making the switch, please do not feel badly if you at times say *The Lord*. We have been using *The Lord* for many years. It will probably feel strange to say *The Eternal* at first, and even after we become accustomed to the change, we will probably revert back at times.

I invite anyone who would like to discuss the change to come talk with me. Consider this an experiment rather than law commanded by The Eternal. I hope this change will enrich our davening.

Shalom uv'racha,
Rabbi David Kaplan