

## **Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh**

By Howard Zilber

During his encounter at the burning bush, Moses asks God for a name he can offer the people when they ask about the God he met. God answers, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh." There is not complete agreement about how this should be translated. Sometimes this is rendered: I am what I am. Sometimes this is rendered: I will be what I will be.

When my daughter was very small she went through a phase where she got cranky before going to sleep every night. She expressed this through a formula:

"It's not fair. Nobody's nice to me. I want to do, what I want to do."

She did not wish to be constrained; she wanted to do what she wanted to do. Perhaps God was taking a similar tone on a cosmically grander scale. It is not for you to know who I am. I created the heavens and the earth. Do you really think you can understand me? I am what I am. I will be what I will be. You must relate to me on my terms.

This is not an unreasonable interpretation. It captures something terrifyingly deep about God's august grandeur contrasted to our frail mortal finitude. Let philosophers offer their definitions of God. They will not capture God. They will not contain or constrain God. God will be what God will be.

But, perhaps, we can learn other lessons from this enigmatic phrase especially when the emphasis is on what God will be. After all, who is God to the enslaved Israelites? There has not yet been the revelation at Sinai. These poor folks have not heard the thunder, nor seen the fire. They have not experienced the divine voice. Perhaps, they recall a few stories about their ancestors, and the promises God made to them.

But for four hundred years, at least as far as we know, God has been silent. Maybe Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob, perhaps Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah communed with a force infinitely grander than Pharaoh, but we have only known the whip, the grueling making of bricks and the whip.

But God doesn't want to be understood only by what God has done in the past. God is who God will be. And God will be the liberator of the Israelites. This can be an extremely valuable perspective, to understand something not merely in terms of what it is, but in terms of what it will be, in terms of its potential.

When we come across some of the harsh passages in the Torah, we can understand why those outside of the tradition sometimes speak about the cruel "Old Testament" God. From the numerous infractions that the Torah says demand the death penalty, we could easily conclude that God desires the death of sinners.

Well, if God is only what God is in the Torah, that may be, but if God is what God will be, that is not the case. When we get to the prophets a different story is told. Consider Ezekiel 18:23:

“Is it my desire that a wicked person shall die? - ... It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live.”

In a similar vein, a casual reading of Torah might suggest a God who loves and requires sacrifice, perhaps even a God for whom sacrifice is food. If God is what God seems to be in Torah, that might well be the case. But Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh, God is what God will be. And what God will be, and thus what God really is, is again revealed in the prophets.

This is made perfectly clear in Hosea 6:6, “I desire goodness, not sacrifice.”

No, sacrifice isn't required. But something deeper and more meaningful is:

“God has told you what is good,  
what the Lord requires of you:  
Only to do justice  
and to love goodness,

and to walk modestly with your God. (Mic. 6:8)

Those, of course, are the beautiful and compelling words of Micah.

The sacrificial system is as detailed and ornate as a setting of royal gems in a diadem. It is surely as complex as the meticulous construction of the Mishkan in which the sacrifices occurred. But Micah has offered something easy to understand and yet incredibly rich, if one takes it seriously as a requirement.

If God is what God seems to be in Torah, God is a hyper-demanding stickler. But what God will be is a God who only wants goodness, justice, and humble companionship.

This notion of potentiality can also be useful when trying to understand our own lives. Some of us have had moments of deep spiritual crisis leading to a radical reevaluation. Perhaps someone was drunk on Yom Kippur, or a thief, or as lazy as a mountain. That is who they were, but not necessarily who they will be. There is the possibility of teshuvah. Though I am caught in a web of sin, feeling like a fly in a spider's web, I am not fly. And with work I can detach myself from the web that holds me. As Rambam puts it, “In truth, everyone is capable of being as righteous as Moses...”<sup>1</sup>

And with that what has been lurking becomes explicit; what allows for teshuvah, what allows for meaningful change is freedom. God can be what God will become because God is free. We can be what we will become because we are free.

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<sup>1</sup> Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah, Chapter 5, verse 2.

It is appropriate that the phrase Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh gets us thinking about freedom. After all this is parashah Shemot, the beginning of the telling of our exodus from Egypt. Later in the sidra will occur those immortal inspiring words: Let my people go. We are beginning a process that culminates in celebrating Passover in the spring. But to believe we are capable of teshuvah, that we are capable of improving ourselves means more than just not being slaves, more than just having political freedom. It means that we must have, at least to some degree, metaphysical freedom, or what is usually called free will.

To fully argue the merits of free will versus determinism would take us too deep into philosophy and science. But a slight wading onto those waters might be helpful. The French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher, Pierre-Simon Laplace, intoxicated by the power of Newtonian physics, asserted that if we knew the position of every particle, and all the laws that govern the motion of those particles, we could exactly describe the physical world as it had been at any point in the past, and as it will be at any point in the future. Well, quantum mechanics and chaos theory has complicated the picture, but the basic ambition remains. The physical world will be completely understood by discovering the laws of physics. And we, of course, are part of the physical world.

It may seem that we thought, and researched, and even agonized before making a choice like where to live, but the real action is at the level of matter, of particles.<sup>2</sup> We will wind up in Brooklyn rather than Brookline because underlying material causation brought us there. The internal thought aspects are no more relevant than if a wave were thinking now I will crest, now I will reach the shore, now I will recede back into the sea. It doesn't matter what a wave may think, gravity and the properties of water will determine the tide.

That is determinism; the world operates by physical laws not thoughts or intentions. I don't see how determinism is compatible with teshuvah. It's as if we're on a train from Boston to New York. There will be stops in Providence and New Haven, in that order, and then the train will reach Penn Station. The end is implicit in the beginning. But if we are free, we can get off the train at New Haven and fly to Los Angeles or even Jerusalem. We are not completely constrained by what has already happened.

I will not attempt to thoroughly refute determinism. It is a useful assumption when doing science. But perhaps when confronting a French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher, what is needed is another French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher. I am thinking of Pascal.

You may be familiar with Pascal's wager. If I believe in God and God doesn't exist, what have I lost? But if I disbelieve and God does exist, I have lost a great deal. Well,

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<sup>2</sup> If I were being more rigorous it would be better to distinguish among determinism, materialism, and reductionism. But in this context I think any conflation is innocuous.

I have a very different notion of God than Pascal. And in Judaism it isn't belief that makes for salvation. But I think Pascal has offered an extremely valuable intellectual template. There are areas where it doesn't much matter what we believe, but other areas where a mistaken belief can be catastrophic.

If determinism is true and we believe we're free, what have we lost? Nothing. Indeed, we are only believing in freedom because that is what all past events have forced us to believe.

But if there truly is some small degree of freedom and we accept the determinist position, we undermine personal responsibility and lose a tool that can help us improve ourselves and the world. Indeed there is empirical evidence for this. I could cite several experiments that demonstrate that believing in determinism can sap motivation and lead to unethical behavior –I encourage you to seek them out- but that would take us too far afield, so I think one example will do.

In an experiment carried out by Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler, “participants read either a text that encouraged a belief in determinism (i.e., that portrayed behavior as the consequence of environmental and genetic factors) or neutral text. Exposure to the deterministic message increased cheating in a math test that followed.”<sup>3</sup>

So on pragmatic grounds we are better people if we believe we are free. And a belief in freedom is one of the greatest gifts of the tradition. From this place I stand, I can choose to be a righteous as Moses. Surely that is thrilling. That is the power of freedom. That is the power of teshuvah.

Resh Lakish said: “Great is penitence, because it reduces one's deliberate sins to mere errors.” (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma, 86 b)

And Resh Lakish would know something about repentance; before he was a sage he was a bandit and a gladiator.

Imagine that: I was drunk on Yom Kippur, I was a thief, I was as lazy as a mountain, but now those things are just youthful errors.

Resh Lakish went even further. He said: Great is penitence, because it transforms one's deliberate sins into merits.” (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma, 86 b)

That is even more amazing. My Yom Kippur drunkenness might even count to my credit. This is truly astounding, and the basis for the belief that a baal teshuvah can stand in a higher place than one who was always righteous.

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<sup>3</sup> The Value of Believing in Free Will, Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler, Psychological Science, <https://assets.csom.umn.edu/assets/91974.pdf>

Some people even think that teshuvah can *literally* change the past, a seeming impossibility. But I think I can see how this could be so, though *perhaps* only metaphorically. When Lakish was a bandit and a gladiator, he was on a certain path, let's call it the road to Gehenna. But after he repented and became a sage he was on a different path, let's call it the road to Jerusalem. Still, if my life leads me to Jerusalem, that is where I was always going, even though the way may have been circuitous, even though at times I seemed to be heading elsewhere.

We are not to remind a baal teshuvah of past misdeeds. They are no longer who they were. Well, maybe we should also be gentle with those still caught in a web of error. Who knows what they may yet become? Who knows what any of us may become?

I am not just who I am. I am made in the image of Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh. I will be what I will be.

