

**Everyone Has a Name – Parashat Shmot**  
**Rav Hanan Schlesinger**

Everyone has a name. Our names identify us, they describe who we are. In the ancient world, it was thought that the name given to a person is somehow connected to their essence, and may even play a role in determining their fate. And even today, people's names certainly facilitate the establishment of a relationship with them and serve as our first portal of entry towards a soul connection.

This week we begin reading the Book of Exodus. In Hebrew, the book – as well as its first weekly portion – is called *Sefer Shmot*, the Book of Names, for it commences with a list of the names of all the sons of Jacob who went down to Egypt.

Yes, everyone has a name – with one exception! God has no name, at least no name revealed to us. This week's Torah portion recounts the encounter of Moses with God at the burning bush. God requests of him to accept the mantle of leadership over the Israelites and to serve as God's emissary to take them out of Egyptian bondage. After initial refusal and much hesitation, Moses acquiesces, but he explains to God that in order to gain the confidence of the people and to indeed convince them that a Divine being has sent him, he must be able to tell them something about God, he must be able identify the Being in Whose name he is speaking. Moses half challenges, half pleads with God: "When they ask me what is His name, what shall I say to them?" And God's amazing answer is "I am what I am". That's all! God is not willing to give Himself a name, or not willing to reveal to human beings His name – even at the price of torpedoing the whole mission of the exodus from Egypt. All that can be said about God is that He is, but no further description can be provided. God remains nameless, and such is the case throughout the whole Torah. The unpronounced "name" of God written in the Torah is nothing but a form of the verb meaning "be". God is, but beyond that, all is hidden.

Just think about it. The Torah opens with the story of creation, how God did this, and fashioned that, and molded this, and transformed yet something else. But God never

Schultz Rosenberg Campus, 12324 Merit Drive, Dallas TX, 75251

Phone: 214-295-3525

Fax: 214-295-3526

Email: [kollofdallas@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kollelofdallas@sbcglobal.net)

Web site: [www.kollelofdallas.org](http://www.kollelofdallas.org)



introduces himself. The Hebrew word denoting a Divine Force is employed with no explanation at all of what this force is or what its character is. God creates, but we are not told what or who God is. You would think that before telling what God does, we would be given some background as to the nature or essence of this Prime Mover. But there is nothing. No name and no description.

And the Five Books of the Torah are consistent on this point. From beginning to end, the Torah is about what God does, but never about what God is. God pulls the strings of nature and of history and makes things happen, but like the marionette operator behind the curtain, remains himself completely unknown to the audience. You might catch a fleeting glimpse of the doe darting off in the distance, but when you approach all you see are the tracks in the snow. God's footprints as it were are manifest throughout the Torah, but He himself remains unrevealed.

Think if you will of Greek mythology. The gods have names, they have pedigrees and backgrounds. You can know something about them. Think of Greek and Islamic theology, which have brought us such descriptions of God's essence as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. These big words try to capture something of what God is. But in our Torah you won't find such things. The Torah is not at all concerned with introducing us to an understanding of what God is. Rather it is all about God's actions, His behavior in nature and history: Not what He is but what He does.

The Torah itself clearly articulates the practical significance of all this: Man's task is not to know God – He's unknowable – but rather to act like God. You don't have to study philosophy or understand theology or believe any dogma or recite a catechism, rather what is incumbent upon us is to walk in God's way, to follow in His footsteps. We must act compassionately as He did in creating this world, we must pick up where He left off and improve the world. Just as He has endowed his creatures with the means to live and to breathe and to eat, so we must fight disease and provide food to those in need. The Torah says very little about what you should believe about God, while saying an awful lot about what we must do and how we must act. It all about God's behavior and it is all

Schultz Rosenberg Campus, 12324 Merit Drive, Dallas TX, 75251

Phone: 214-295-3525

Fax: 214-295-3526

Email: [kollelofdallas@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kollelofdallas@sbcglobal.net)

Web site: [www.kollelofdallas.org](http://www.kollelofdallas.org)



about human behavior. The precepts of the Torah don't command our minds or our hearts to believe, as much as they place a burden of responsibility upon our bodies and our limbs.

God's name and truth indeed are hidden. The path He set out for us to follow in our lives is not.



Schultz Rosenberg Campus, 12324 Merit Drive, Dallas TX, 75251

Phone: 214-295-3525

Fax: 214-295-3526

Email: [kollelofdallas@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kollelofdallas@sbcglobal.net)

Web site: [www.kollelofdallas.org](http://www.kollelofdallas.org)



The Community Kollel of Dallas is an affiliate of the Center for the Jewish Future of Yeshiva University