

Name or Essence of the Creator?

MN Part I, Chapter 63. G-d's name, Summary.¹

Parshas Shemos. For those who are wise, the order is:

1. *Prove* that G-d exists and is the cause and source of all other existence, *here and now*.
2. Then provide evidence that Moses is His faithful messenger (which would be confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt at the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai).

Moses asked G-d two questions when He sent him to Egypt to tell the Jewish people that G-d had sent him to redeem them.

First, he said, "And when they ask me what His name is, what shall I tell them?" (Ex.3.13).

Later, he again raised a reservation about the mission, "But behold, they will not believe me, for they will say, 'G-d has not appeared to you?'" (Ex. 4.1) Now, this second point is well-taken. It is to be expected that if someone claims to speak to the people with the authority of prophecy he should be met with skepticism. It is fully reasonable to expect that they should demand to see proof of this claim.

The first question, however, is problematic. Did Moses anticipate that he would be asked for G-d's name as a form of proof? Did he expect that the mere utterance of the correct divine name would authenticate his mission in the eyes of the people? That cannot be.²

Let us consider. Either the people already knew the particular name they were asking for or they did not know it. If they knew it, then Moses probably knew it as well. Where then would there be proof that he was a genuine messenger of G-d? And if they did not know the name, Moses

¹ Compiled with help from R. Yaakov Reinman et. al. *A Guide to the Guide*.

² See Ramban for an alternate explanation. Ramban quotes a Midrash supporting the explanation of Rambam. See Sforno in line with the Rambam.

could have told them anything. How could he prove that this was indeed the name of G-d? Where was the proof for his mission?

Furthermore, we find that after G-d made His name known to Moses, He said, "Go, assemble the *elders of Israel*... and they will heed your voice." (Ex. 3.16-18) Moses responded, "Behold, they will not believe me or heed my voice... And G-d said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' And he said, 'A staff' (Ex. 4.13)" Thus, G-d provided him with the means to present physical proof.

Now, if the mere utterance of the divine name was originally meant to be proof of his mission, and if G-d had assured him that the elders would heed his voice, how could Moses question G-d's explicit assurance?

Before we resolve these difficulties, we must first understand something about the pagan world. In those days, virtually all people were idol worshippers; they believed in spirits, in the ability of humans to manipulate the influences of the heavenly bodies, and they believed in amulets.

Those people who laid claim to positions of authority in society did so in one of two ways. A few were thinkers, like Abraham, who by **reasoning and proofs** arrived at the conclusion that there exists a Being who created and controls the universe. In this way, they gained the respect, admiration and loyalty of the populace. Others claimed to be in possession of some spiritual power conferred on them by a star, an angel or some other celestial entity.

In either case, these people never claimed to be bearers of prophetic messages to the people. Even though we find that G-d spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he never told them to convey messages to any populace. He just told the patriarchs how to become more perfect people, and He also foretold to them the destiny that awaited their own descendants. Abraham guided the people associated with him by argument and instruction, not by prophetic messages. (Gen. 12.5, "the souls they made in Haran") Moses was the first person who ever carried a prophetic message to the public. Before him, no one had ever claimed to do so.

When G-d sent him on his mission to carry a prophetic message from the Creator of the Universe to the Jewish people, Moses said, "And when they ask me what His name is, what shall I tell them?" He was concerned that they would not accept that there was indeed a Creator of the Universe.

The people of that time, with very few exceptions, were idolaters who believed in the limited deities who did not issue direct commands to the people. They had no conception of the existence of a transcendent God. Moses was, in effect, asking G-d how he could convince them of His existence.

The people were completely under the power of their physical senses and were not intellectually developed. See Sefer Yechezkiel for the low state of the Jews under Egyptian slavery at that time. Moses told G-d he was concerned that people would ask, "What is His name?" What he meant was that people would ask if such a transcendent G-d exists. [Pharaoh was unaware of the Creator as he asked, "who is Hashem?" The ten plagues were a vivid response to that arrogant question.]

However, in deference to G-d, Moses phrased it as them asking for a name [a name being the carrier of *essence*]. Moses deemed it disrespectful to say to G-d that there may be people who deny His existence. He preferred to present the Jewish people as potentially ignorant of G-d's name, not of His existence.

God replied, "Eh-yeh Asher Eh-yeh. *I shall exist that I shall exist.*" [And not as you created entities think of me as existing merely as you do, only contingently.]

The word of the subject (Eh-yeh) is repeated as a predicate (Asher Eh-yeh.). This divine name describes God as "the existing Being that is the necessary existing Being." It teaches that God's existence is unlike any other existence. It has no other cause but His own existence. It is absolute existence, that He was never without existence, nor would ever be without existence. He is Necessary existence itself, the cause and ground of all other existence.

In order to establish his credibility, Moses was to teach these ideas, radical in the intellectually backward pagan era, to the *elders of the Jewish people*, the wise men who could be shown philosophical proofs and could thereby be convinced of the truth of Moses' claims.

"They will heed your voice," God assured him. They will be enlightened by your proofs and arguments, and they will recognize the truth. And indeed, they did.

But then Moses raised another point. "They will not believe me or heed my voice". You have assured me that they will accept my proof and my arguments for Your existence, but will they believe that You sent me? Perhaps they will think I'm a good philosopher, but will they accept me as G-d's messenger? Perhaps they will suspect I'm not telling the truth. Philosophical arguments will not allay their suspicions. And God responded by giving him some supernatural signs.