

## The “Real Name” of God: The Vowels of the Wordless Song

Again this week, in teaching Torah-reading to a Bar-Mitzvah student, I had to explain about the Tetragrammaton; that is, the four Hebrew letters Yod-He-Vav-He which spell the “Ineffable (or unutterable) Name of God.” Often in their lessons with me the students encounter it for the first time. They have sometimes seen the Yod-Yod replacement, or the “He” replacement, and many have heard the terms “Adonai” or “Ado-Shem” or “HaShem.” But often their studies with me are their first exposure to actual Bible texts, and in these they will encounter the Tetragrammaton regularly. Even with more advanced students, there are a lot of niceties of how teamim and prefixes attach, which leads to discussing the matter in depth. I often first have to stop them from trying to sound out the Tetragrammaton phonetically. I tell them that we commonly substitute pronouncing something else, and they may know we say “Adonai” instead. I explain that the *sheva* (really it ought to be a *hataf-patah*, I tell them), *qamatz*, *holam*, and *qamatz* often written as vowels come from the vowels for “Adonai.”

They usually follow up by asking something like “Isn’t ‘Adonai’ the Name of God in Judaism?” The more religious students have heard that we substitute other things even for “Adonai,” so the idea that “Adonai” itself is a substitution seems strange to them. I explain that “Adonai” really means “My Lord” or “My Master” or “My Sir” (or “My Lords” even more literally, using ‘Royal We’ plural form), and that’s why standard English translations substitute the term “Lord.” I commonly digress into a bit of Harry Potter discussion, pointing out that J.K. Rowling was quite aware of the Hebrew tradition of certain names which might be deemed too powerful to be spoken or regularly invoked and therefore must remain ineffable to those who fear their power. That is why those who revere “Voldemort” similarly substitute “The Dark Lord” or “He Who Must Not Be Named.” Our HaShem refers to just “The Name.” I point out that the tradition doesn’t always substitute “Adonai,” that here and there the student will encounter textual instructions to substitute “Elohim,” the more generic term for “God” or “gods.” However, if Adonai or the others are substitutes, then why write the Tetragrammaton? It must mean something, or else why doesn’t the Bible just write ‘Adonai’?

I end up discussing our Parasha’s explanation that God’s Proper Name is something like “I Am Who I Am” (or, perhaps “I Will Be Who I Will Be”) or “I Am” for short. The letters of the Tetragrammaton are not actually the same exact letters for “I Am,” but they stem from a common root meaning “Being” or “Existence.” Indeed, a common reading mistake is to read the Tetragrammaton as “yihyeh,” meaning “He will Be.” “Whoever He Is” is as close to a “proper name” as God gets! So even God’s “proper name” is not a real “name:” God is Indefinable. Then I usually get into philosophical discussions, but it’s in the follow-up question of whether there is or was any time the Tetragrammaton was actually pronounced that we reach some resolution. I explain that yes, at one time, the True Name was pronounced at length once a year for the people to hear on Yom Kippur in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. But now we don’t know how it was pronounced anymore. “Couldn’t we figure it out, like any other Hebrew word written without vowels?”

I explain that scholars have suggested ways the Tetragrammaton might have been pronounced in an early period, but first of all, out of reverence we don’t speculate or guess. Furthermore, I add, the pronunciation of the Name is actually not so simple to reconstruct. The letters Yod-He-Waw-He are really semi-vowel consonants and breathing sounds. They are “consonants” which are used often to indicate vowels. So, as my teacher, Ethnomusicologist Dr. Johanna Spector, used to say about Samaritan Torah-chanting, there could have been a lot of ya-ye-hah-he-hee-oh-oo-we-we-ha-hee thrown-in there. That is why Tradition refers to the Tetragrammaton as morphing into a so-called “Name of Fifty-Two” Letters! Even the four consonants we have written, or those even for “I Am” are consonants that are nearly undefinable as consonants: being almost vowels, they would have depended upon the vowels used for their pronunciation. And the vowels used would have depended upon the music and intonation used in pronouncing them, which would have depended, in turn, upon the breath or the spirit. The Proper Name of Israel’s God, then, is the Breath of Life, Pure Spirit, chanting the Vowels of the Undefined, Wordless Song, the Being Who is Ever Becoming Whatever He Will Be.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL  
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

## Shabbat Shemot

December 24-25, 2021

### SCHEDULE

*While our choir takes a break this Shabbat,  
together let’s fill the sanctuary with music and prayer*

**Candle Lighting** | 4:15 pm

**Friday Evening Services** | 4:15 pm

**Zemirot** | 8:30 am

**Shahrit** | 9:00 am

**Jr. Congregation** | 10:30 am | Levy | Led by teen leaders and Mrs. Lisa Rohde

**Outdoor Kiddush** | *Sponsored by Aviva Miller and family, in memory of Milton Miller MD z”l*

**NO Shabbat Afternoon Class this week.**

**Shabbat Afternoon Services** | 4:15 pm

**Habdala** | 5:00 pm

**No Virtual Habdala Service this week.**

### Weekday Service Times

#### Morning Services

Sunday & Friday (Legal Holiday): 8:05 am

Monday-Thursday: 7:05 am

#### Evening Services

Sunday-Thursday (Minha/Arbit): 4:15 pm

*Reminder: MASKS REQUIRED FOR ALL INDOORS. If you choose not to wear a mask when permissible, you represent & warrant that you’re fully vaccinated. If requested, you must wear a well-fitted mask wherever & whenever required.*

***We urge you to get vaccinated & boosted. Many upcoming activities will require proof of UP-TO-DATE vaccination & boosters. Please send UPDATED vaccination proof to [info@shearithisrael.org](mailto:info@shearithisrael.org).***

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## THIS SHABBAT

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### Let's Fill the Sanctuary with OUR Voices!

While our choir takes a break this Shabbat, together let's fill the sanctuary with music and prayer.

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### WE'RE HIRING YOUTH LEADERS!

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Want to help make Shabbat and Holiday mornings special for kids aged 5 -12, or know someone who does?

#### **We're hiring youth leaders!**

College students and beyond welcome to apply.

Check out our emails or our Facebook page to view the job description and apply now - or share this opportunity with your friends.

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### MAKE YOUR YEAR-END GIFT TODAY

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Now is the time to support Shearith Israel, our societies, and special funds (e.g. rabbi's discretionary fund, Sisterhood, Hebra, etc.) with an end of year gift. These gifts are a crucial part of our budget and enable Shearith Israel to maintain the high standard to which we are all accustomed.

*Refer to our emails for instructions on how to submit your gift and to select any and all funds you wish to support.*

If you have any outstanding balances, now is also a good time to take care of those.

**Members**, remember that you can pre-pay your 2022-2023 dues now at this year's rates - until January 15, 2022.

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## KIDDUSH

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### Sponsor a Hot Outdoor Kiddush!

Enjoying our new outdoor kiddush? We could use a couple of sponsors each week to help maintain the warmth of our community!

*To sponsor, visit [shearithisrael.org/outdoor-kiddush](http://shearithisrael.org/outdoor-kiddush).*

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## COMING UP

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### Parent-Child Learning - with S'mores!

Next session: Saturday Night, January 8 | 6:15 pm

This session will be led by Rafe Sasson

*For elementary school children and their parents or grandparents*

To register, visit [shearithisrael.org/csiyouth5782](http://shearithisrael.org/csiyouth5782).

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### Youth Trip to the Tenement Museum: *At Home in 1911*

Sunday, January 16 | 10:30 am | Meets at the Museum: 97 Orchard Street

**Full vaccination required - bring proof!**

*This tour is limited to 12 participants. In the event that we are oversubscribed, we will start a waitlist and keep you informed. Members will be given priority.*

Our youth are invited on a special tour of the recreated 1910s apartment of an Eastern European Jewish family earning a living in the garment trade. Step into their home and experience what daily life was like for an immigrant family in 1911 – balancing work, family, community, and an evolving cultural identity.

To register, visit [shearithisrael.org/csiyouth5782](http://shearithisrael.org/csiyouth5782).

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*The Sisterhood Presents:*

### The History of Jewish Comedy

Saturday Night, January 8 | 8:00 pm | Virtual

*Details coming soon!*

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## COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you to all those who participated in this week's Blood Drive.

The New York Blood Center thanked Shearith Israel and its donors "for an overwhelmingly successful blood drive at this critical time." At our blood drive, 22 successful blood donations were made, which will help save 66 lives!

Mazal tob to **Debra & Steven Sasson** upon the birth of a baby girl, Matilda (Berakha Toba). Congratulations as well to her grandmother, **Deena Aboodi**, and the entire Sasson and Aboodi families.

Condolences to the Powell family, upon the passing of Connie Lu Powell.

In compliance with NYS Governor Hochul's order, **Shearith Israel continues to require masks for all indoor activities**, regardless of vaccination status.