

Sufficient Meaning?

The Torah's written words are not sufficient. It is the **reading** of the word and not the word alone that produces meaning. Meaning appears when timely experiences enter into conversation with the timeless text.

Rashi, the great commentator, gives an example of meaning beyond the evidence of the words themselves. He understands God to be nostalgic, if not exasperated, when saying to Moses: *I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name, YHVH, I was not known to them* (Exodus 6:3).

In his commentary, the Torah's meaning overflows the banks of its words when God speaks them to Moses with the following emotional inflection:

What a pity concerning those who are lost and no longer here! I have good reason to mourn the death of the patriarchs. Many times I revealed myself to them as El Shaddai and they never asked beyond that: What is your name? But you, Moses, said from the very beginning: Look, when I come to the people of Israel and say to them, the God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask, what is his name, what shall I tell them? (Exodus 3:13)

Ancient sages often explained the name *Shaddai* as meaning *enough, sufficient—dai*, as in the Passover hymn, *Dai-einu/It would have been enough for us*. In Rashi's reading, *El Shaddai* was a name sufficient for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the sufficiency of that name lies the virtue of the patriarchs and also the admiration of God nostalgic for the days when that name sufficed. Now, much to God's chagrin, Moses anticipates that the people will want more.

The name not known to the patriarchs—*YHVH*—is the opposite of sufficient. It is a name of possibility composed of letters that look like a form of the verb, "to be." These letters are sometimes consonants, sometimes vowels. Sometimes their mere presence indicates a shade of meaning while they remain silent, unpronounced. This name is fluid, unpronounceable—the guardian of all future names.

The following poem by the Israeli poet, Rivka Miriam, suggests a reading of the Exodus verse in which God is eager for new names:

*Midnight. At the Rabbi's door
the Creator listens intently
to know
which of His names he will call out tonight.*

Rivka's God might say: My name, *El Shaddai*, was a name sufficient for its time. But I listen eagerly to be called and challenged by the new names necessary for new revolutions and revelations.