

**Shabbat Parashat Shemot – January 20, 2006**

Sermon Congregation B'nai Israel

Amarillo, Texas

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*“ Moses said to God, ‘when I come to the Israelites and say to them, The God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is his name?’ What shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses: **Ehyeh asher Ehyeh**....This shall be My name forever, this My appellation for all eternity.”(Exodus 3:13,15)*

So what’s in a name? Why are we called what we are called? Do different people address us differently? Does it matter to us who calls us what? To the world, the perennially 39-year old violin-playing comedian was “Jack Benny”. To his mother and the members of his Temple he was Meir Kubelsky. ( I know this, because he grew up in my husband’s congregation when it was in Waukegan, Illinois. Really!) No doubt many a First Lady had an endearing nickname by which she called her husband, the President. But for us to use these terms to address our head-of-state (assuming we even knew them), would be patently absurd, not to mention rude or inappropriate.

How does each of us address God? If I ask you what names you know for God from our Jewish tradition, which ones can you share? Off the top of my head I can think of: *Adonai, Elohim, Ruler of the world, Redeemer, Lord of hosts, Merciful One*, to mention but a few. Many of these God-names are

familiar to us, and trip comfortably off our tongue as we recite liturgy, or offer a spontaneous prayer.

This week's Torah portion, the first in the Book of Exodus, is appropriately called "names" in the Hebrew. It is so-titled because the book opens with a list of the names of Israelites who went down to Egypt—all members of Jacob's family. The book tells, among other things, of Moses' birth, how he was raised in Pharaoh's court and about his call to prophecy. You know the story—after having committed a crime of passion—killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave, Moses fled to Midian, marrying the daughter of Jethro, the Midianite priest. He began a life of relative anonymity as a shepherd tending his father-in-law's flock. One day he walked off the beaten path in pursuit of an errant sheep (losing a sheep had serious financial ramifications—no pun intended!), and he stopped to stare at the sight of a bush that burned but was not consumed by the fire. As he approached it to see it more clearly, the voice of God addressed him from out of the bush. God introduced Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, telling Moses to speak to the Israelites on His behalf. Moses replies to God, "when they ask me, who is the God of your ancestors, whom shall I say is calling?" God replies, "*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*" (*that's almost as challenging as Schwartz Harari*), but you can call me just

*Ehyeh.*” This enigmatic name consists of two repetitions of the state-of-being verb, which could be interpreted as perfect tense or imperfect tense. It can be rendered as, “I am whatever I choose to be”, “I am more than you can choose to comprehend”, “I am in the process of becoming, as are you human beings.”

The question is, if all God’s other epithets are so familiar to us, why in this circumstance did He invoke this strange epithet *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*? The editors of the Etz Hayim Torah Commentary say about this name of God, “*It is significant that this name of God is not a noun but a verb. The essence of Jewish theology is not the nature of God (what God is) but the actions of God (what God does). What, then, does God’s name mean? It may mean any of the following: God exists, God is more than we can comprehend, God, or our understanding of God is constantly growing, God is present in our lives.*”

God revealing Himself to Moses from out of the burning bush recognized that the situation called for something radically different from those familiar names with which we have addressed God. This obscure name gives us a window into the import of the moment, its mystery and how significant it will be for the Israelite people.