

PRAYING with *Fire*

PRAYER POINTS

The Names of God



by [Rabbi Noson Weisz](#)

Exploring the meaning of God's two most essential names: An excerpt from R. Weisz's new book [PrayerWorks](#).

One of the more bewildering aspects of praying from the Jewish prayer book is the number of names for God that you encounter. Why is there a need for all these names? Are they inserted simply at random or is there any relation between the context in which the name appears and the name selected? The following excerpt from Rabbi Weisz's new book, [PrayerWorks: How the Words of Prayer Move the World](#), examines part of this issue.

God's Names

What's in a name? Usually, a name contains encapsulates our knowledge of the person or entity being named. If you are well acquainted with "Jack," and he is a friendly, tall, redheaded man of about 30, then the name "Jack" conveys all that knowledge to you. When someone tells you, "I saw Jack today," the speaker does not have to describe him to you. The name carries within it the many traits you associate with Jack.

In our relationship with God, however, the Name is not the summary of all we know; rather, the Name is the source of all we know. God is so far removed from any frame of reference that we, as human beings, can relate to that at the end of the day, His nature is totally mysterious to us. Finite man cannot conceptualize the infinite, the eternal and incorporeal God.

We cannot fulfill our purpose on earth without establishing a relationship with God, and it is impossible to relate to a mystery. To solve this problem God gave us His names. None of these names are manmade; they are terms God uses to describe Himself in the Torah. And they are a user friendly interface that eliminates the mystery and allows us to relate to God in ways we are familiar with from our everyday relationships. Having said that, does this imply that in reality the names have nothing to do with God and they are given to us as a sort of substitute for the real thing?

A good metaphor for understanding this is to imagine a person meeting with the President. The visitor privileged to have such personal access will find himself actually sitting face-to-face with the President; and yet he will barely be able to grasp a wisp of his true personality. From his brief, well-choreographed encounter, he will not be able to determine if the President is kind or hard-hearted, charitable or stingy, insightful or benighted. The encounter would be too brief and controlled to render an accurate picture.

His names are His office – the place where we cross His path and glimpse a fleeting hint of His essence.

In the same way, when we interface with the Almighty through His names, it is really the Almighty Himself we are communicating with, but we can only meet Him in His office, as it were. His names are His office – the place where we cross His path and glimpse a fleeting hint of His essence.

The two most important of these names, taught to us by God in the Torah, are the names mentioned in the first verse of the *Shema* – *Elokim* and *YHVH*, or the *Shem*.

***Elokim*: The Name of Power**

When we call God “the Almighty,” it is the English translation of the name *Elokim*, says the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim*, 5). But we must put in a little work into what the name Almighty implies to benefit in relationship terms. Let us first state what we mean by Almighty and then proceed to explain it. Through this name, we acknowledge that God is not only the Creator, but the Master of all the power and energy in the universe.

What does this mean in plain English? In his book *Nefesh Hachaim*, Rav Chaim of Volozhin explains how to understand God’s power in relation to our own: Human beings can be creators. For instance, man can create a massive edifice. Once he finishes his creation, though, the creation can exist without its creator. The building – barring unusual circumstances – will stand long after its architects and construction crew have faded from the world. Even a child, once created and borne by his parents, can exist independent of them.

On the other hand, *Elokim* creates, but His creations have no independent existence outside of Him. He is the power that not only brings them into being, but also enables them to continue existing.

As an illustration of this idea, imagine a cup suspended in the air. If the force that keeps the cup in the air is withdrawn, the cup will crash and fall to earth, driven by gravity back to its natural state. The Almighty’s creation – the entire universe and everything in it – is exactly like this suspended cup. Without the Almighty’s hand constantly supporting the cup of existence, the reality He created would simply vanish, leaving the nothingness that preceded Creation.

In the Torah’s account of Creation (Genesis 1), the Almighty is referred to as the *Elokim* 32 times. In fact, no other holy name appears in the entire Chapter. The number 32 corresponds to the numerical

value of the Hebrew word for heart – *lev*. This correlation teaches that the role of *Elokim* in creation is like the role of the heart in a human being. The pulse of the *Elokim* power keeps creation in existence, just as the ceaseless beating of our hearts keeps us alive. In His persona as the author, planner and continuous power-source of all existence, God is named *Elokim*.

Tzelem Elokim: God's Image

Everyone is familiar with the idea that man was created in God's image. The Torah, however, is more specific, for it is not God in general whom man resembles, but rather, God in His role as *Elokim*. In other words, as "*tzelem Elokim*," we somehow share in providing the continuous flow of sustaining power that *Elokim* supplies to creation.

God has placed in human hands the control switch that regulates the flow of the *Elokim* power into the universe.

What role could man possibly play in the flow of this uniquely Divine power? Man is the *tzelem Elokim* because God has placed in human hands the control switch that regulates the flow of the *Elokim* power into the universe. While man cannot produce the power, he can influence its quantity, intensity and brightness. Through his influence, the world can be vibrant with Godly energy, or shrouded in a state of dreary darkness.

It is man's free-will decisions that regulate the flow of *Elokim* power into the world. The words we choose to utter, the actions we choose to perform, and the things we elect to think about all act to dim or intensify the force of the Almighty's sustaining power as it expresses itself in our world.

Electricity is a perfect metaphor to envision the process: When we turn the lights on or off, we are merely closing or opening the circuit that allows electrons to flow through the conductor. Nevertheless, we think of ourselves as creators of the current. In the same manner, we control the quality of existence throughout the universe through our actions.

The word *Elokim* and the Hebrew word *hateva*, meaning "nature," have the identical numerical value – 86. In Jewish thought, nature includes all the phenomena that were created in the seven days of creation described in Genesis 1, metaphysical as well as physical. The entire created universe and everything in it is powered by the name *Elokim*. The *Elokim* power that sustains the universe runs from the source, the Almighty, down to nature using man as the conduit. Man is the circuit breaker that allows the energy to flow.

The Shem: YHWH

But nature has fairly fixed rules. The laws of nature do not seem to be sufficient to account for the flexibility that prayer assumes. After all every prayer is a request to change the world just for me. To account for the assumptions about our relationship with God implied by prayer we have to learn to relate to God's other name YHVH.

In Jewish tradition, *YHVH* God's personal name, so to speak, as opposed to *Elokim* which refers to the Almighty more in terms of the presidential functions of His office. Descriptions of the Almighty's feelings, character traits and motivations are always associated with the name *YHVH*, never with the name *Elokim*. Literally, the *Shem* identifies the Almighty as independent of time and as the source of all existence. The *Shulchan Aruch* (ibid) translates this: "He was, is, and will be – the author of all being." He is the source of everything – past, present, and future.

Each tiny increment of being is separately produced by God.

What does this name teach us about the nature of the Almighty's connection to the universe? As we recall, all of existence is only a manifestation of the energy which is emitted by God constantly, from moment to moment. That energy has no momentum of its own. It is not like a ball that is thrown in one direction and keeps traveling that way until something stops it. There is no continuum from one moment to the next. Each tiny increment of being is separately produced by God. Each is a unique, discrete packet of existence, independent of whatever preceded it.

We perceive these increments as a flow along a linear time-line. We perceive cause and effect in the way God knits these moments together. However, in reality, the universe that we perceive as set and unchanging is actually more like a movie – a series of still pictures spliced together, moving past our vision too quickly for us to distinguish between the individual frames. In actuality, the Almighty is constantly renewing existence. One nano-second of being has no causal connection with the next.

For example, if a person reaches down to put on his shoes, completes the task, and then stands up wearing his shoes, we would perceive the reaching down and donning the shoes as the cause for him to be standing in his shoes. From God's perspective, however, each of those moves was a separate expression of His will, and the only reason the man is wearing shoes is that God willed it to happen at that moment.

In other words, nothing *has to* happen as a result of a previous occurrence. The man could have been combing his hair, and then appeared in his shoes. Had we witnessed this, we would conclude that the cause – hair-combing – leads to the effect – appearance of shoes on one's feet.

Just as a movie can be spliced together in many different ways according to the whim of its editor, so can reality be spliced together in many different ways by the Almighty. In the case of the movie, the audience perceives the flow arranged by the editor as the actual story. Likewise, no matter how the Great Editor arranges events, we see them as a continuous progression of the past into the future. Whatever we see, we interpret in terms of cause and effect.

The dimension that *YHVH* brings into our relationship with God arises from this transcendence of time. While *Elokim* represents a system of laws that remains relatively stable, providing us only with the ability to influence its intensity, *YHVH* is totally interactive with us from moment to moment. The Almighty splices together the moments of our existence as He sees fit, in whatever order or manner He chooses to arrange them. We, the observers, automatically assume that this proceeds according to the unchangeable laws of nature, cause and effect. But this assumption is only a means by which our minds grasp reality, not an accurate portrayal of reality itself.

The Need for a Screen

Imagine that your heart, rather than operating involuntarily, required someone else's active participation to work. From minute to minute, the operator had to deliberately make it pump. Were that the case, you would feel that your life hung by a thread at each moment, for if the operator should forget or fall asleep on the job, you would die. Under such circumstances, it would be impossible to function.

Hearts beat, lungs breathe, stomachs digest, brains run the body's circuitry, all without anyone's direct effort. To have someone else in charge of our physical survival from moment to moment would put unbearable stress upon us. In the spiritual world, the same is true. Were we conscious of the

moment-by-moment Divine will that directs our lives, we would feel like helpless puppets, constantly aware that our Master holds the strings. For us to function, we cannot constantly feel our vulnerability to God's control over our lives.

The natural world, represented by the name *Elokim*, provides a protective screen by which man can achieve the awareness of God.

This is why, according to the commentators, we cannot interface with the *YHVH* aspect of God directly. The awareness of His Presence on this level is too overwhelming. Under its intense light, we would lose the sense of ourselves as entities separate from God, for it would be clear to us that there is nothing other than Him. That would leave God's Creation empty of any intelligence that could appreciate it, thus defeating its purpose.

God desired that man successfully perceive his Creator without being overwhelmed and subsumed. The natural world, represented by the name *Elokim*, provides a protective screen by which man can achieve this awareness. Otherwise, we could not survive interfacing with the *Shem*.

King David declares (*Psalms 84:12*) "*YHVH Elokim is like the sun and a shield.*" The Tanya (Ch. 4) explains that, just as it is impossible to look directly at the sun without going blind, it is impossible to interface directly with the *Shem YHVH* and survive as separate entities from Him. In order to look at the sun, we must do it through a thick screen that shelters our eyes from ultraviolet rays. To accomplish that same protective purpose on a spiritual level, the Almighty inserted the reality described by the name *Elokim* between the *Shem* and ourselves.

This is a brief taste of the sort of ideas found in Rabbi Weisz's book, [PrayerWorks](#). The purpose is to give you a deeper understanding of the prayers. [Click here](#) to order a copy.

