
Six Words

an introduction to the heart of Jewish wisdom



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First Word

Yisrael

Godwrestler

ישראל

The original Godwrestler was Jacob (Genesis 32:22-31). Fearing for their welfare, Jacob sent his family across Jabot's Ford and waited alone to confront his brother Esau. That night a stranger (an angel? God?) wrestled with him. Realizing that he could not defeat Jacob, the man dislocated Jacob's hip, and begged to be released. Jacob demanded a blessing in exchange for the other's freedom. The blessing was a new name representing a new status: *Yisrael*, "one who wrestles with the divine." To wrestle with God is to struggle with the great existential questions confronting humanity: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where do I go when I die? How should I live? Why? Judaism is an ancient and on-going confrontation with these questions yielding diverse rather than definitive answers.

HaShachar (dawn) and Shachair (seek)

The name *Yisrael* was bestowed upon Jacob at dawn. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) says this represents moments of seeking: moments when we wrestle the darkness of ignorance into the light of truth. In this way we are *Or la-goyyim*, a light unto the nations (Isaiah 49:6), and a blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3).

Embracing Esau

Immediately after the departure of the angel, Esau arrives. As far as Jacob/*Yisrael* knows his brother is still intent on killing him, yet when Esau sees him he runs to meet him, embraces him, falls upon his neck and kisses him, and they both cry, (Genesis 33:4). The image is a play on Jacob wrestling with the angel, and the result here as there is not defeat but mutual respect. The first act of *Yisrael* is to embrace Esau (his existential enemy) and to cry tears of love and reconciliation. This is the first of two characteristics of the authentic Godwrestler.

The Pace of Yisrael

The second speaks to the way the Godwrestler walks in the world. Esau invites Jacob to walk with him and his warriors, but Jacob refuses explaining to his brother that while Esau walks at the pace of the warrior, he, Jacob/*Yisrael*, walks at the pace of the nursing babies and lambs (Genesis 33:13-14). It is his wound that places *Yisrael* in the role of the nurturing protector. *Yisrael* is the suffering servant of God (Isaiah 53), whose suffering keeps *Yisrael* in touch with the suffering of others and hence devoted to compassion: *com* (shared) *passion* (suffering) and the justice needed to address it.

Second Word

Ehyeh

The I of All

אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֱהִיָּה

Elohim: God as the One

Elohim, “gods,” is the first name Torah uses to refer to God, and though the word itself is plural when referring to God it is always linked to a grammatically singular verb implying that though God’s names are many, God is one. *Elohim* is the creative aspect of God linked to nature (*Ha-teva*) through gematria (Hebrew numerology): both words equal 86.

Ehyeh: The I that is All

When Moses inquires after God’s name God replies, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, (Exodus 3:14), not the static “I am” or “I will be” of most English translations, but the linguistically awkward “*I am’ing* whatever *I am’ing*.” *Ehyeh* is the infinite “I” manifesting every finite I; the eternal subject manifesting every temporary object. *Ehyeh* is your truest I, your truest Self.

YHVH: God is a verb

Immediately after the revelation of *Ehyeh* God shifts from the first person *Ehyeh* to the third person YHVH. While *Elohim* is a noun both *Ehyeh* and YHVH are verbs, variations of the Hebrew verb “to be.” God is a process, the very *is’ing* of all reality. Just as an ocean waves every wave and is yet greater than them all, so God is and surpasses all things. When you know the wave as the ocean you are awake *to* YHVH. When you know the ocean as the wave you are awake *as Ehyeh*.

Adonai: God as object, noun, and male

Having outlawed the pronouncing of YHVH the rabbis found a substitute in *Adonai*, *Lord*. Where YHVH is a verb, *Adonai* is a noun; where YHVH implies no hierarchy, *Adonai* is all about hierarchy; where YHVH is grammatically masculine, *Adonai* is explicitly male.

HaMakom: God as source and substance of all reality

HaMakom, the Place, was another rabbinic name for YHVH. *HaMakom* imagines God as the infinite ocean in which and of which all waving happens. *HaMakom* eliminates the dualism of *Adonai*: where nothing is a part of *Adonai*, nothing is apart from *HaMakom*.

[One way to understand these four names of God is as follows: *Adonai* is the God of the traditional; YHVH is the God of the scientist; *HaMakom* is the God of the philosopher; *Ehyeh* is the God of the mystic.]

Third Word

Lech lecha

Walking inward to be a blessing outward

לך-לך

God's first words to Abram and Sarai are these: "*Lech lech* from your country, your tribe, and your parents' house to a place I will show you," (Genesis 12:1). If God had simply meant to send them from Aram to Canaan, God would have said *lech* rather than *lech lecha*. *Lech lecha* doesn't simply mean "walk" but "walk (*lech*) your own way (*lecha*)" or "walk toward your self." Abram, Sarai, and by extension each of us, is to walk in our own way to our truest self (*Ehyeh*) and in this way free ourselves from the conditioning of those narratives that prevent us from seeing the world as God intends us to see it: whole and holy.

Lech, Halach, Halacha: Judaism as a Journey

Judaism is not a religion (a fixed system of belief) but a way (a collection of mitzvot/ behaviors for being blessing to all there families of the earth). The way of Judaism is called *halacha* from the Hebrew word *halach*, "to walk." And the way we walk has to be *lecha*, uniquely your own. Wandering is not an accident of our history, but at the core of our DNA. Judaism is intrinsically iconoclastic: Godwresting and idol-smashing. We question everything to continually free ourselves from the idols of country, tribe, and family.

Blessing and Curse

Those who bless us are those who take up their own journey, and the blessing they receive is the liberation of heart, mind, and spirit. Those who curse us are those who seek to prevent people from walking their own path, and the curse they receive is the narrowing of heart, mind, and spirit. But regardless of what happens to others, our task is "to be a blessing to all the families of the earth," (Genesis 12:3).

Being a blessing to all the families of the earth

Being a blessing to *all* the families of the earth means living in service to life. This is the original mission of humanity revealed in Genesis 2:5: *No shrub had yet grown, and no plant had yet bloomed, for YHVH Elohim had not sent rain upon the earth, and there were no earthlings to cultivate the earth.* Humanity's task is to till the soil, to cultivate the earth, to midwife the creativity intrinsic to nature. Doing so is what it means to be a blessing. Doing so through the way of Judaism is what it means to be a Jew. Judaism is not an end in and of itself, Judaism is a means to an end: the fulfillment of life's promise.

Fourth Word

Kadosh

Being Holy as God is Holy



In Leviticus 19:2 YHVH commands us to be *kadosh*, holy, as God is *kadosh*. One way to understand this is to translate *kadosh* as “set apart.” Just as God is set apart from all other beings, so should the Jews set themselves apart from all other humans. If we understand *kadosh* in this way, however, how can we be a blessing to all the families of the earth?

Imitatio Dei

Our rabbis understood *be holy* to mean *be godly*: “Just as God clothes the naked, so you shall clothe the naked. Just as God visits the sick, so you shall visit the sick. Just as God comforted the grieving, so you shall comfort the grieving; just as God buried the dead, so you shall bury the dead,” (Talmud, Sota 14a). This is called *imitatio Dei*, imitating God.

Thirteen Attributes of Holiness

Asking to see God’s Face, Moses is shown God’s “back.” In other words asking to see *Ehyeh*, the eternal subject that cannot be made into an object and hence cannot be seen, God reveals to Moses the impact of *Ehyeh*, godliness, in what are called the Thirteen Attributes of Godliness:

Seeing God as all

Seeing all as God

Compassionate

Gracious

Patient

Abundantly Kind

Truthful

Preserving kindness (rather than holding grudges)

Forgiving deliberate evil, inadvertent sin, and accidental error, and

Cleansing (delusion) (34:6-7).

While you can no more see *Ehyeh* than you can hear your own ear, bite your own teeth, or smell your own nose, you can embody godliness. Finding your own way (*lech lecha*) to living these thirteen attributes of God is what Judaism is all about, but you need not reinvent the wheel when doing so. The *mitzvot* are means for achieving these thirteen ends.

Fifth Word

Tzedek

Justice, justice, you shall pursue (Deuteronomy 16:20)



If there is one word that speaks to the single overwhelming concern of Judaism as a way to be a blessing to all the families of the earth it is *tzedek*, justice.

Categories of Justice

Justice falls into four basic categories: distributive, procedural, restorative, and retributive:

Distributive Justice is about economic justice or fair share: *Don't harvest the corners of your fields, nor gather the gleanings of your field and the fallen fruit of your vineyard: these shall be for the poor and the powerless, (Leviticus 19:9–10). Don't oppress workers, neither Israelites nor aliens, but pay their daily wages at dusk, for they rely on these earnings..., (Deuteronomy 24:14). Lend money without interest... to the poor who are among you..., (Exodus 22:24).* An unpaid loan made to a fellow Jew [though not to a Gentile] is to be forgiven after seven years (Deuteronomy 15:1).

Procedural Justice is about legal justice or fair play: *Do not pervert justice in the courts by favoring the poor or being partial to the rich and powerful. Always judge people equally, (Leviticus 19:15). Cursed are those who pervert justice exploiting the alien, the orphan, and the widow, (Deuteronomy 27:19).* The rabbis make a just court system one of the seven Noachide laws to which all humans are obligated.

Restorative Justice is about putting things back as they should be: *You shall make the fiftieth year holy... It shall be a jubilee to you, (Leviticus 25: 10). The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as residents and aliens... If your finances force the sale of your property, your closest relative should purchase it [and leave it in your possession]... If you cannot afford to buy it back, the owner retains it until the Jubilee when it must be returned so that every family can return to their ancestral lands, (Leviticus 25:23-28).*

Retributive Justice is about punishment: *Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise, (Exodus 21: 23–25).* Torah mandates a sophisticated five-part monetary form of compensation, consisting of payment for damages, pain, medical expenses, incapacitation, and mental anguish.

Sixth Word

Elu v'elu

Argument as faith



Judaism is a text-based civilization. But the text, Torah, is not fixed or static. It is a living document meant to be continually turned: *Turn Her and turn Her for all things are in Her*, as Rabbi Ben Bag Bag famously taught (Pirke Avot 5:22).

Lo ba-Shamayim He

Torah is revealed through inquiry rather than through supernatural imposition:

It isn't in the heavens to be ignored by saying, "Who can fly up into the sky and bring it down to us that we might hear it and comply with it? Nor is it beyond the sea to be ignored by saying, "Who can cross the ocean and bring it to us that we might hear it and comply with it?" On the contrary, it is as near to you as your mouth and your heart that you may observe it, (Deuteronomy 30:12-14).

"In your mouth" means that the meaning of Torah is derived through conversation, debate, and argument. "In your heart" means that not all meanings are true, but only those that further compassion and justice for self and other. Hence Hillel defines "the whole of Torah" as the Golden Rule: *What is hateful to you do not do to another*, (Talmud, Shabbat 31a).

Aknai's Oven (Baba Metzia 59a-b)

"At last, at last! My children have defeated Me! My children have defeated Me!"

Elu v'elu divrei Elohim Chayim (Eruvin 13b)

"For three years the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued, each claiming "the halacha is according to us and not you." A Bat Kol spoke saying, "*Elu v'elu divrei Elohim Chayim*: the words of Hillel and the words of Shammai are equally the words of the living God, but the ruling always sides with the more lenient Hillel." This is the heart of Jewish pedagogy: there is no one right answer, only those that are more or less compassionate. While we are taught to hold and honor a multitude of often mutually exclusive arguments, we are also taught to align our behavior with those teachings that are the most just and kind.