

YHVH: What does it mean? And how is to be pronounced, if at all?

By Rabbi Haim Levi

It is well known that Hebrew is an ancient language void of vowels. It is classified as a consonantal language, mankind's original language, used by Adam, the first man, and by all succeeding generations. This includes well beyond the Great Flood and up the Tower of Babel where God confounded the use of it by all nations, dividing it into approximately 70 different languages. The only exception was that the Hebrew Language was kept and taught by the sons of Shem. Aramaic branched and remains a relative of Hebrew, which is still used today by the peoples known as the Arameans.

Centuries later during the Middle Ages in Europe, vowels points and subscripts were added to the language, in order to facilitate its reading. During the classical times, as far back as the Second Temple period, only the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) could pronounce the YHVH. This acronym is the Name of God and can only be mentioned once a year during Yom Kippur as He entered the Holy of Holies bringing the blood of the atonement. YHVH is the symbol of all universal existence translated from Hebrew as follows:

HYH (Hayah) means **was**.

HVH (Hoveh) means **is**.

YHY (Yehiyeh) means **will be**.

The combinations of these words convey the meaning of past, present, and future, which make up the four-letter Name of God. This is the Name by which in the Torah He has been known to us.

The rabbis of old have taught us that YHVH was not a simple illusion, He is still today, and will be unto eternity.

When I was in college I briefly studied Einstein's Theory of Relativity. This theory taught that time in itself is not absolute; it is merely another dimension analogous or similar to height, width, and depth. God is then YHVH because all three tenses are part of His own existence, or spiritual oneness. He is the creator of time and unaffected by it. He is above all limitation found in the word "before" as well as the word "after."

He is YHVH. He fills all time at the same time simultaneously, even as He fills all space. Melo khol ha-aretz kevodo, as we read in all our Shabbat Torah services during our Kedushah portion of the Amidah, when we repeat in Hebrew:

"Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, YHVH tzvaot melo kol haaretz kevodo"

"Holy, Holy, Holy, YHVH the whole universe is filled with his glory."

The letters YHVH is also a number or series of numbers as follows:

Yod = 10

He = 5

Vav = 6

He = 5

All these numbers are equal to twenty-six, which for one thing represents also the number of twits used by the Sephardim when tying their tzitzit for their tallit. There are also ten generations from Adam to Noah; another ten from Noah to Abraham; and six from Abraham to the Sinai generation.

In Exodus 3:13 Moses says to God, "Behold when I come to the children of Israel and say to them: 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?"

In verse 14 HaShem answered Moses, "'I shall be as I shall be' and so shall you say to the children of Israel, 'HaShem the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you.'"