



## 5 Ways to refer to God

Judaism recognizes a variety of Names for God. The most important is that revealed in Exodus 6:2, represented by four Hebrew letters: Yod-Hei-Vav-Hei. This name, unpronounced, is known as the Unutterable or Ineffable Name of God. In scripture it is often associated with the divine attributes of loving kindness and mercy. Linguistically it is related to the Hebrew verb ‘to be’ and therefore suggests eternal existence. The association of God with existence, with life itself, has ancient roots.

**1. Adonai. LORD.** In place of the Ineffable Name, the title Adonai (‘LORD’) is traditionally used.

**2. Hashem.** *Hashem* (‘the Name’) appears in early rabbinic works. It is used today in general speech by Orthodox Jews as an alternative to ‘Adonai,’ the latter reserved for prayer and Torah study.

**3. Elohim.** This is the first name for God used in scripture and it is often used to imply the divine attributes of justice, sovereignty, might. Variations: *El, Eloha, Elohai* (my God), *Elohaynu* (our God).

**4. El Shaddai.** According to Exodus 6:3, this is the name by which God is revealed to the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. *El Shaddai* is commonly rendered ‘God Almighty’ but its meaning is not entirely clear.

**5. Tzva’ot.** When the Ineffable Name is followed by *Tzva’ot*, it is usually translated as “Lord of Hosts” (‘hosts’ as in an organized military grouping) and relates to divine leadership. It appears in the prophetic books of the bible and the psalms, but not in the Torah (first five books).

See: [jewishencyclopedia.com](http://jewishencyclopedia.com) (Names of God); [jewfaq.org](http://jewfaq.org) (Names).



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 6:2—9:35

*Vaera:*  
‘I appeared’

## Why reflect on Torah?

Last week we began reading the book of Exodus. Our journey with the Israelites, their passage from slavery to freedom, will continue week by week in our *Light of Torah* series as we explore the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, with the help of stories and insights from Jewish tradition.

Gradually we will become aware of one of the central themes of Exodus: namely, “*I am the Lord.*” No matter what trials await the Israelites, no matter their loss of confidence in their leadership, no matter the ravages of desert thirst and marauding enemies, the repetition of this assurance will be ever-present: “*I am the Lord.*”

This pilgrimage narrative of our ancestors in the faith is our story too. The Torah, as God’s Word, immerses us in the story of God’s people. But how can we understand the deep roots of our peoplehood, of our Church, of our sacred narrative, unless we listen deeply to the story of the Jewish people, ‘elected’ and ‘beloved’ of God according to a divine calling which is ‘irrevocable’ (Romans 11:28-29). *Light of Torah* seeks to awaken Christians to the beauty of Torah, and to their profound links with Judaism.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Exodus 6:2–9:35

This Torah portion presents a sequence of encounters between Pharaoh and the two Hebrew brothers, Moses and Aaron. The encounters have a larger stage too, for this is really a dramatic confrontation between the egomaniacal powers of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, versus the Lord God, King of the universe (of whom Moses and Aaron are agents). Today we will focus especially on Exodus 6:1-13 in which God's name is revealed and the Covenant reaffirmed. We will also recall some of the narrative from the previous Torah portion in chapter 5.

## Tasting Torah

In the unfolding Exodus story, Pharaoh and God lock horns:

Pharaoh to Moses: *“Who is the LORD that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go”* (5:2).

The LORD to Moses: *I am the LORD. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage”* (6:6).

Pharaoh poses a question. The Lord provides an answer. And both boldly declare their intentions. Imaginatively and prayerfully ponder these statements. Read the verses around them. What do you notice? How does the text speak to you? Creatively envisage the scenes, the tone of the speakers, the electricity of each moment.

## Touching Torah

In the midrash (ancient Jewish storytelling traditions), an imaginative and insightful story is woven around these verses. According to this midrash, after asking “Who is the LORD?” Pharaoh says, “I will search my records.”

*And he went into his archives and brought out a list of divinities... “The god of Moab, the god of Ammon, the god of Zidon”... Finally he decreed, “You see, I looked for the name of your God in my archives, and did not find it.”*

*Moses and Aaron said to Pharaoh, “Utter fool that you are! Are the living to be sought among the dead? The divinities in your records are dead. But our God is a living God, the King of the universe.”*<sup>1</sup>

## Depthing Torah

Pharaoh is ignorant, but does he really want to learn the truth? How difficult it can be to embrace a new idea when it threatens our powerbase or takes us beyond our comfort zone. Pharaoh's resistance helps us to appreciate the great leap taken by Moses, himself raised as an Egyptian prince, in embracing the revelation of the divine name.

Pharaoh's refusal to free the Israelites is bad enough, but Moses also has to contend with rejection from his own people. *“They would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage”* (6:9). A devastating story forms the backdrop to this verse (pause to revisit it in chapter 5 of Exodus) where Moses' efforts actually lead to greater suffering for his kinsfolk.

Have you ever been in a circumstance where your best efforts were not only unsuccessful, but seemed to make the situation worse? Here the sacred text is magnificent: *“I am the Lord. I have heard the cries of my people. I have remembered my covenant. I will redeem them with an outstretched arm. They will be my people and I will be their God”* (6:5-8).

Can you taste the power of divine reassurance in this dark moment? Can you allow it to touch a dark moment of your own life?

## Doing Torah

Today, create a prayerful pause... call out to God and remember God's promise in Exodus 6:5-8. Make an act of trust in the Living God, the God of our liberation and salvation.



## Faith & life

*A grandparent shares:*

I was showing my three year old grandson, Michael, around the garden. The agapanthas were just budding and I told him, ‘Next time you come to my house you will see flowers.’ Well, the next weekend, Michael couldn't contain his excitement. He raced out into the garden to check the agapanthas which, sure enough, were in full bloom. “Look, Grandpa! Look! They're blue!”

The wonder of a child discovering the mystery of creation... such a beautiful reminder of the Living God whose lifegiving presence envelops us each day.

1. *The Book of Legends*, 64-65.

Bibliography: Bialik & Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (NY, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996). Scripture: JPS.