

Elohim, El Shaddai, El Elyon: God is known by quite a few different names in the Torah, which have varying shades of meaning and emphasis on the Divine qualities. Generally, people didn't try to get creative with these names on their own; you'll recall Moses rather famously politely asking God what he should say God's name is. This week's Torah portion however features the only instance in the Tanakh in which a person had the nerve/bravery/presumption, call it what you like, to give God a name, following a divine encounter. It's an insightful name, one that can be comforting in what it tells us about God, while also just maybe being a bit of a double-edged sword.

The person in question here is Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Abraham and Sarah, used by Abraham to produce an heir when he and Sarah doubt they can have a child together. Fleeing from harsh treatment resulting from Sarah's jealousy and Abraham's indifference, the text tells us that she is stopped by a messenger of God, who tells her to go back and that her descendants will be numerous, for God sees her in her suffering. Hagar then names God, *El Roi* [**el row-ee**], "God who sees me".

Hagar was feeling isolated and alone even in the midst of the people who make up her world. Maybe you've felt that way yourself and can identify. When we feel unseen and unvalued, maybe by other people in general, or maybe in a given moment by someone specific who means something special to us, it is painful. It hurts. We feel alone.

And not to try to diminish this sort of hurt, because humans are social animals and we need each other's attention, to be in each other's seeing, but Hagar's exclamation here I think points out that we're never actually completely alone. While our great commentators Rashi and Ibn Ezra logically connected being seen by God with feeling humiliated or afflicted when writing on this passage, elsewhere it is clear that we are always being seen by God, El Roi, and in the most complete and compassionate possible way.

Psalms 139 expresses this reality:

[2] *You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You discern my thoughts from afar.*

[3] *You scrutinize my walking and my resting; You are familiar with all my ways.*

[4] *Before ever a word is on my tongue, You, Lord, know it all.*

[7] *Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?*

[8] *If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.*

[9] *If I take the wings of the dawn, and dwell at the sea's furthest end,*

[10] *even there Your hand will be guiding me, Your right hand will be holding me fast.*

[11] *Then I realized, even in the darkness He sees me; even in the night there is light all around me.*

Knowing that God always sees us so clearly is also help for a more constant, existential kind of loneliness, the kind described by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his classic text *The Lonely Man of Faith*.

Soloveitchik draws a contrast between the Adam of Genesis 1, who is all action and ambitious achievement, charged to go forth and subdue the earth, and who only requires a superficial level of communication to achieve these ends, and the Adam of Genesis 2, who is charged to cultivate and care for the Garden of Eden. This “second Adam” comprehends himself as an “I” who just has to **be**, rather than an “I” who is ceaselessly **doing**, and in this comprehension, he understands that there can be no other human in existence who can experience what it is like to be “I”, who can fully understand his own “I” experience. Second Adam is therefore lonely except insofar as he comes together with God in a covenantal relationship in a faith community. Here he sees that he is fully seen and known by his maker - who Hagar has justly named El Roi. We humans are, of course, both Adam 1 and Adam 2.

So far being seen so clearly by God seems an unalloyed happiness, and indeed it is a great joy. But we have to admit that it can also frighten us. In Hebrew the word *yirah* is translated to mean fear or awe, as in the phrase “fear of God”. It is connected to the verb *raah*, “to see”. As Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi explains in his book *Davening: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer*, “The Hebrew root of *yirah* is yud-resch-aleph. The root of words meaning sight or to see is resh-aleph-hey. *Yirah* arises from the state of being seen for what we really are... we’re talking about a seeing and being seen that goes beyond the visual.”

Moses experienced *yirah* when God spoke to him at the burning bush. The Torah says that Moses hid his face *ki yare mehabit el-ha’Elohim*, “for he was afraid to look at God”. He was being seen by God, no doubt about it, he could not imagine otherwise. He reacted with that blend of fear, awe and reverence that is meant by *yirah*, when there is no question that we are being seen by God.

Now, it’s not like we’re Moses at the burning bush, Hagar in the wilderness, or the Israelites wandering in the desert accompanied by pillars of cloud and fire, evidence of God’s presence irrefutable. We can escape an awareness of God knowing our every thought and action and being right here with us if we like; we can question, doubt, deny, or just put it out of mind in the course of our day-to-day existence. Maybe this is to some degree even healthy and necessary. You might imagine finding such a constant awareness oppressive, being unable to tolerate a constant piercing of our imagined independent selfhood. Perhaps God even agrees - after all, we don’t have pillars of cloud and fire accompanying us on our daily travels these days.

But I would guess that maintaining this awareness can not only help us feel less alone, but can also aid us in our *kavanah*, our intention to act authentically and purposefully in line with our values in order to be our best and truest selves.

This goal in fact can be one interpretation of the name of our parsha this week, *Lech Lecha*, when we translate the meaning of those words as “go to yourself”. God sees us completely, but we are taught that we are still free to act, or not act, as we choose. So God tells us, *lech lecha*, go be your true, righteous self.

You may have heard the story about Rabbi Zusha, it appears in Martin Buber’s great collected work of Hasidic tales, among other places. The story goes that Reb Zusha was on his deathbed and was worried. His students said, what are you worried about, you have done so many mitzvahs, your reward will be

great. He told them, “I am not afraid that God will ask me, Zusha, why were you not more like Moses? I am afraid that God will ask me, Zusha, why were you not more like Zusha?”

So let the words of this week’s portion remind us that El Roi sees us, and wants us to be our truest selves.