

## 8 Names of God: Inspiring Divine Explorations with Students

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*Imagine a portal to open students' eyes to deeper layers of meaning and new ways of thinking about God. Names and descriptions of God abound in Tanakh and many more were added in Rabbinic writing. God's infinite existence cannot be captured by a single word, but our experience with sacred texts shines a light on the many different paths for our relationship with the Divine.*

### **Y-H-V-H יהוה**

**Y-H-V-H reflects a deep, boundaryless love we each can experience with the Divine. Stemming from the root H.Y.H., meaning “to be,” this name reflects the totality of reality and existence. We exist as extensions of God through our souls.**

Y-H-V-H was pronounced using its letters as part of the service in the Temple in Jerusalem when people fell on their faces, genuflecting before the Name. Due to this deep reverence, the fear of mispronouncing the Name or using it inappropriately led to the Name being written without vowels and ultimately being pronounced as Ado-nai, as we do today. It frames moments of closeness with God such as: revealing miracles, feeling God's empathy and mercy, participating in korbanot (sacrifices: the act of becoming close to the Divine) and demonstrating a return to God through teshuvah (repentance). This name emerges prominently in the section of the Torah (Shmot Ch. 34) where God forgives Bnai Yisrael for the Golden Calf. Appearing in the Tanakh over 6,000 times, this name cannot occur in the possessive as it stands alone in its reflection of each of our relationships with God.

### **E-I א-ל**

**The name E-I means a being of power and authority. When used alone, E-I evokes the Deity with dominion over all in Creation and the muscle to enforce God's will in obvious ways. When God is referred to as E-I Rachum V'Chanun, a God of compassion and graciousness, it means the true show of Divine power is kindness and empathy, not petty control and destruction.**

Often this name comes before another word like E-I Elyon (Powerful God on High) or E-I Ro'i (Powerful God of Seeing All) in order to be more specific. E-I refers to God being a strong ally or mentor when it is combined with another word to make a name like Eliyahu (E-I is my God), Daniel (E-I is my Judge), Shmuel (His name is E-I), or Yisrael (Struggled with E-I). Making it plural into the word Elilim signifies false gods, since only the One could be seen as a true being of power and authority.

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### E-lohim א-להים

While the name E-lohim sometimes denotes a separation of “otherness” to the point of judgment, it typically depicts the Creator as a robust force inventing the world for people’s benefit. This name also reflects clear boundaries between each individual and a divine Other in terms of shared respect and admiration.

E-lohim is a grammatical oddity in that it is a plural name and, yet, uses singular verb forms when referring to God. In contrast, plural verbs are used for the homonyms including “judges,” “spirits,” or “foreign gods.” The word E-lohim is not used in the New Testament and is always translated as the singular Theos in the Septuagint, which led to its mistranslation as “Lord” in Old English and modern translations. This translation detracts from the actual grandeur and multidimensionality of Biblical Hebrew plural nouns, which represent transcendent ideas like panim (a person’s face), shamayim (heavens), and rachamim (mercy). Rather, E-lohim means that through the vastness of the universe and its hidden powers, there is unity in God. Often the text uses E-lohim’s word stem to indicate ownership like E-lohekha, your God, or to create a compound phrase like E-lohai Yisrael, God of Israel.

### E-I Sha-dai א-ל ש-ד י

God appears to Avram (before his name change) as E-I Sha-dai (Shin-Dalet-Yod). The combination of these names is the self-reliant E-I (God) that conquers all of Creation in favor of those who cling to God. That elucidates why in Shmot 6:3 God explains that the forefathers only knew God as E-I Sha-dai—for those who cleave to God—and not Y-H-V-H.

All sages embrace E-I as the initiating concept of a Powerful God, but they deviate in the grammatical explanations of the word, Sha-dai, and its root letters—Shin, Dalet and Yod. Rashi explains the name to mean a Powerful God who is sufficient for the assembly. Rambam explains the name to mean a Powerful God who is self-reliant. Ibn Ezra explains the name to mean a Powerful God who vanquishes all. The sum of those explanations points to the definition of this complete name as a God who makes the world bend explicitly toward those who connect to God. The use of E-I Sha-dai makes sense with the forefathers, since they lived lives where nature bent in their paths. This was obvious to all the other Biblical characters who commented that these people were blessed, protected, and assisted by a higher power.

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### E-heyeh Asher E-heyeh א-היה אשר א-היה

This name denotes the ultimate form of hope and optimism for the future. We see this when Moshe asks in Shmot 3:13 “when Bnai Yisrael ask me who sent me, what shall I respond?” God says “E-heyeh Asher E-heyeh/I will be what I will be.” E-heyeh derives from the root Hey-Yod-Hey meaning “to exist.”

Kabbalistic sources state that this name precedes Creation, since the name itself expects a bright future. When Bnai Yisrael were in slavery, this name meant that not only was God with them at that time, but God would remain with them in the future. Divine love is hopeful and beautiful. It rejects the pain and suffering of the present and puts in motion a plan of great meaning and obvious closeness to God. Love rebuffs those things that make existence difficult such as violence, pettiness, and cruelty. This name promises hope for a better tomorrow because God will not leave Bnai Yisrael to suffer alone today or tomorrow.

### Tziva-ot צב-אות

The name Tziva-ot means “armies” and conjures a picture of God ruling a vast collection of soldiers as the Commander and Strategist. The name connects to God’s partner, Bnai Yisrael, as they began after Mount Sinai a journey to serve as a Mamlechet Kohanim (a nation of priests), bringing the rest of the world closer to God. This is why the name Tziva-ot is first used when Chanah prays at the Mishkan/Tabernacle in Shiloh to pray to bear a child (Shmuel), who ultimately would establish the Kingship in Israel, a nation of priests.

The name Tziva-ot occurs after the word Y-H-V-H or the words Y-H-V-H E-lohai. The name is related to Bnai Yisrael’s maturity on their journey to establish the nation in the Land of Israel. As individuals or tribes before the Exodus, the people had not yet agreed to partner with God as a nation. From Mount Sinai through the conquering of the Land and the time period of the Judges, Bnai Yisrael were missing unity, the Land, or a single leader. Chanah began the journey of reversing the horrors of the tribal civil war in the Land. Through her selflessness, Chanah bore a son who would bring piety and God’s law back to the Land and would anoint a king over Israel. That new level of partnership through the spiritual growth of Bnai Yisrael merits the name Y-H-V-H Tziva-ot, used as a descriptor of God as a leader of a unified nation dedicated to good, represented both in Heaven and Earth.

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Y-H-V-H/ E-lohim    י-ה-ו-ה א-להים

The use of these two names together articulates a synergy of opposing ideas into a powerful, complete source. When written sequentially, Y-H-V-H and E-lohim represent the unity of closeness and otherness. Creating a deep connection with the Divine closes the gap between the hierarchical position of E-lohim and individuals being an extension of Y-H-V-H.

As explained previously, the name Y-H-V-H expresses a closeness to God that blurs boundaries with intense love and belonging. The name E-lohim expresses an otherness, a feeling of separation that sets boundaries with intense respect and admiration for our relationship with God. The act of deep connection with the Divine causes this gap between the hierarchical placement of E-lohim and being an extension of Y-H-V-H to disappear. We experience the wholeness of both perceived separate forces of outer space and inner space as one consciousness.

Shalom    שלום

This name of God stems from the root Shin-Lamed-Mem meaning “complete and peaceful.” The Talmud declares this a name of God and therefore one may not greet another with this word in the bathhouse for fear of disparaging the name. Based on the story of Gideon (Shoftim 6:23-24), Shalom—peace and wholeness—is the name of God for those who feel broken, alone, and disconcerted.

That may come as a surprise since Shalom in Tanakh is mostly used to mean peace or a greeting. However, in the story of Gideon, the hero begins as a character feeling beaten, deserted, and disturbed. Through a communication with an angel, Gideon matures and creates a monument to his epiphany, an altar called Y-H-V-H Shalom. The Talmud points to this moment to suggest that Shalom must be a name of God. It demonstrates God’s role in our journey from fragmented to whole, from alone to accompanied, and from upset to serene.

Let's continue to explore ways to inspire students' relationship with God so they can create enduring meaning from Jewish values, literacy, practice, and belief to sustain the Jewish people.

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