

STRANGE NAMES

WILLIAM PLEVAN

Princeton University

Daniel Weiss' claim that God should only, or ideally, be addressed in prayer as an unparalleled "you" no doubt reminds us of Martin Buber's notion of God as the "Eternal You." Indeed, Weiss and Buber both insist that the only proper way to address God is as a You who is unlike any other finite being. In Buber's terms, God is the eternal You who by nature cannot become an It. Weiss and Buber also share a concern that the names and attributes used for God in prayer can interfere with the you-saying that should characterize true prayer. Weiss argues that the use of "empirical specifying features" to describe God is in principle unnecessary and that including such descriptions in one's prayer might be tantamount to idolatry. For Buber, any of one of our images or descriptions of God risks becoming part of our It-world language, at which point we are no longer discussing God at all.

However, Weiss and Buber ultimately take very different stances towards the standard rabbinic liturgy. Buber, on the one hand, is well-known for having rejected the authority of Jewish law generally, and the strict rabbinic standardization of liturgical expression in particular stood for Buber as a primary example of how rabbinic Judaism is incompatible with genuine religious expression. For Weiss, on the other hand, the names and descriptions found in the standard liturgy, while remaining

problematic for his monotheism, can be interpreted in ways that are more conducive to the ethical practice of you-saying that he thinks must be central to the prayer experience. For Weiss, the standardization of liturgical description actually serves to strengthen this religious sensibility by making one cautious about trying to develop “better” descriptions for God.¹ One significant factor in this difference between Buber’s and Weiss’ attitude toward the rabbinic liturgy, I think, is their interpretation of the Hebrew Bible’s special name for God, the Tetragrammaton. One of the spiritually deadening qualities of the rabbinic liturgy, in Buber’s view, is the way it has obscured the meaning of the Tetragrammaton. In what follows, I will examine Buber’s interpretation of the divine name and how it relates to his own critique of rabbinic prayer. I will also argue that Buber’s interpretation of the divine name may suggest ways of seeing the positive religious value in the names and descriptions for God found in the rabbinic liturgy.

For Buber, divine names found in a variety of human cultures are an integral part of the human religious experience, but only when uttered with the proper understanding of their meaning. In fact, on Buber’s view, once a divine name is used, it never really loses its power:

Men have addressed their eternal You by many names. When they sang of what they had thus named, they still meant You: the first myths were hymns of praise. Then the names entered into the It-language; men felt impelled more and more to think of and to talk about their eternal You as an It. But all names of God remain hallowed – because they have been used not only to speak *of* God, but also to speak *to* him.²

When people cease to use names for God as a form of direct address but as a referential tool, then the divine name has lost its power to reach God. But the potential power of a divine name remains even when it is used as

¹ This was exactly how Maimonides found roots for his own concern about descriptions for God in the rabbinic corpus, when he approvingly cites Rabi Haninah’s rebuke of a prayer leader’s addition of divine attributes to a the second *berakha* of the *amidah*. Cf. *Guide for the Perplexed* I:59 and Bavli Berakhot 33b.

² *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970), p. 123.

a form of It-language because that name retains its history as a form of direct address to God in a given cultural context.

On Buber's account, the chief reason why a religion loses its spiritual power is that it loses its ability to directly address God in prayer. At the end of *I and Thou*, Buber argues that formal religious rituals, or "cult," are created by human first to give concrete form to the immediacy of the divine-human encounter, or "faith," but then come to interfere with that encounter by squashing spontaneous expression:

The cult, too, originally supplements the act of relation, by fitting the living prayer, the immediate You-saying into a special context of great plastic power and connecting it with the life of the senses. And the cult, too, gradually becomes a substitute, as the personal prayer is no longer supported but rather pushed aside by communal prayer; and as the essential deed simply does not permit any rules, it is supplanted by devotions that follow rules.³

What concerned Buber about this kind of standardization was that it obscured the true nature of the divine calling for humanity. In the absence of direct encounter with God, the human tendency, as with all things, is to deal with God as an It by creating descriptions and names for God that become substitutes for a direct encounter. Buber associates this kind of God-language with what he calls "attending to God," a mode of religious life in which a person focuses their spiritual energies on what God is and serving what they perceive to be God's needs by maintaining the cult, rather than trying to discern what task God demands of them in the world. One can attend to God, and speak *of* God, without encountering God, which requires speaking *to* God.

Buber's view is that a "cult," meaning an organized form of worship, can support faith if it supports a person's ability to truly pray, that is, to address God directly:

In true prayer, cult and faith are unified and purified into living relation. That true prayer lives in religions testifies to their true life; as long as it

³ *I and Thou*, p. 162.

lives in them, they live. Degeneration of religions means degeneration of the prayer in them: the relational power in them is buried more and more by objecthood; they find it ever more difficult to say You with their whole undivided being.⁴

If the very health of a religious tradition depends on its ability to pray, then the task of rehabilitating religious traditions in the modern West must include a retrieval of the original meanings of the divine names of that tradition. Unlocking the original meaning of a divine name of a particular religious tradition would allow that tradition to return to the original meaning of the divine-human encounter that gave that tradition its spiritual power.

Something like this concern is at the heart of Buber's interpretation of the God's revelation of the Tetragrammaton to Moses in Exodus 3 in his book *Moses*. Buber begins his interpretation of the name by dealing with a basic problem in the Biblical text. Although God tells Moses that the divine name YHWH has not been revealed before to his ancestors, the book of Genesis contains several instances when God clearly reveals some name to Abraham, who uses it frequently in his naming of altars in Canaan.⁵ Modern Biblical scholars explain the contradiction by resorting to the documentary hypothesis, but Buber is skeptical that the author of the burning bush story would be unaware or would ignore textual traditions regarding the use of the of the Tetragrammaton by the patriarchs. Buber explains that Moses' request for the divine name is not for the actual word or its pronunciation, which had been known by prior generations, but for the meaning behind the name. For ancient peoples, Buber argues, the name is not just a word, but rather the very character of the being named. What has been lost in the degradation of Israelite slavery is not the word or its pronunciation, but an understanding of the true nature of God's character. And what Moses wants to know, and to be able to tell Israel, is what God's character truly is.

⁴ *I and Thou*, p. 167.

⁵ Genesis 15:7; *Moses* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988), p. 49.

The meaning the of name of God given to Moses, *eheyeh asher eheyeh*, I am that I am, is not, according to Buber, that God is “eternal being” but rather that God is a being who is always present to human beings, and particularly to Israel, even in their degradation and suffering.⁶ As Buber notes, the imperfect tense of the verb “to be” has a dynamic quality to it that suggests “happening, coming into being, being there, being present, being thus and thus: but not being in an abstract sense.”⁷ What God tells Moses to tell Israel is that God is with them. God’s presentness and availability cannot be magically invoked as the Egyptian priests do. The meaning of the divine name is not that God cannot be described, but that God’s presentness cannot be magically manipulated or controlled. Likewise, the Tetragrammaton suggests not that God is radically transcendent, but that God is radically present.

Weiss worries that the use of divine names suggests that God’s limited availability to a particular historical group. But Buber’s interpretation of the divine name as divine presentness nicely parallels his general claim *I and Thou* about the continuing power of a variety of divine names across cultures. God’s various names are signs of direct human contact with the divine, but even when their true meaning is lost the very presence of the name indicates the possibility of a divine presence. All divine names teach God’s presence in human history and have the potential to be you-sayings, as long as their true meaning is understood and they are used in direct address. As Buber explains, the re-pronouncement of the divine name for the Israelites rekindles the spiritual power of the divine human relationship:

Since the true name phoneticises the character of the object, the essential thing in the last resort is that the speaker shall recognize this essential being in the name, and direct his full attention upon it. Where that happens, where the magical requires an aiming of the soul at the being meant, that is, when the ‘person’ aimed at is a god or a demon, the fuel is provided into which the lightning of a religious experience can fall. Then

⁶ Cf. Rashi on Ex. 3:14.

⁷ *Moses*, p. 52.

the magical compulsion becomes the intimacy of prayer, the bundle of utilisable forces bearing a personal name becomes a Thou, and the demagisation of existence takes place.⁸

In short, the divine name reveals the divine character, and knowing the meaning of the divine name makes a divine-human encounter possible because it carries with it the knowledge of God's true character as being present. But once this name becomes stale and routine, its spiritual power, its ability to express a true you-saying, is lost. And this is precisely what Buber believed happened when pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton became taboo in later generations, a taboo of that was of course maintained by the rabbis in their standardization of the liturgy.

The maintenance of this taboo is just one way in which, according to Buber, rabbinic Judaism went down a path of spiritual degeneration. Buber's chief criticism of rabbinic Judaism is that it replaced the immediate relationship with God with a system of rules that limit what we can say about what God is and what God commands. In the case prayer in particular, rules that determine the parameters for prayer, no matter their original spirit, will ultimately hinder a direct relationship with God. God could only be real to people, Buber believed, if God could speak directly to them in the concrete situation of their lives. Therefore the possibility of divine-human encounter in history depends on people being able to reconsider the meaning of God's mission or command to them. And being limited in what one can say about God would limit how one could understand the divine mission anew.

⁸ *Moses*, p. 51. Whatever problems there are with theories of religion that generalize a distinction between magic and religion to all human cultures, Buber is certainly correct in seeing this distinction at work in the Hebrew Bible's polemical characterization of Egyptian worship.

One of the central rules in rabbinic prayer is the halakhic requirement that a *berakha*, the basic formula of rabbinic liturgy, contain the mention of the divine name (*shem*).⁹ The divine name is thus not only ubiquitous in rabbinic prayer, it is the *sine qua non* of the liturgical structure and the prayer experience. However, because the pronunciation of the name is replaced with *adonai*, meaning lord, which has no semantic connection to the divine name, and if anything depersonalizes the name, the actual recitation of a *berakha* requires no cognizance of the divine name's true meaning. Thus for Buber, I would argue, the problem with rabbinic prayer is not, as it is for Weiss, the presence of a particular divine name historically associated with a particular people, but the effective absence of that name.

Buber's point here may help explain what Weiss means by the strange deixis of rabbinic prayer. The word that indicates the identity of the "you" in the *berakha* formula is not a predicate but God's name. However, it has been a long time since that word functioned like a name in any linguistic context. Thus the standard translation of the phrase, *adonai eloheinu*, "Lord our God," seems to say nothing at all. It is not at all clear who is being addressed. And yet, the name remains there in the *berakha*, and it is a proper name that does in fact indicate who is supposed to be addressed in prayer. The fascination with divine names found in Kabbalah suggests that for centuries the power of the divine name was at the heart of Jewish spiritual life. Buber's textual analysis is meant in large part to counter the long tradition of mystical and philosophical interpretations of the divine name as having something to do with eternal existence, as opposed to divine presence.

Buber did not seem to think that his interpretation of the divine could restore the spiritual power of the rabbinic liturgy, although it certainly could for those who appreciate the advantages of a standard liturgy in ways Buber did not. To note perhaps the most significant example, the first *berakha* of the *amidah* begins by identifying God as "our God, and God

⁹ Cf. Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), pp. 94ff for a discussion of this requirement.

of our ancestors, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob.” The listing of the patriarchs is clearly an allusion to God’s address to Moses immediately after the revelation of the name in Exodus 3:14. The point of departure for rabbinic prayer is not so much the memory of a patriarchal past but rather God’s continuing presence to all the generations of Israel, even when they are suffering enslavement and degradation. Buber would certainly have us add that the God addressed in prayer is also a God whose presence is available to all people in all times, no matter what name they use, and long it is a name that means You.