

# **The Ban on the Divine Name**

by Nehemia Gordon

One of the maladies of modern Judaism is the strict prohibition against uttering the name of the Creator. The modern Rabbinic law code *Mishnah Berurah* explains:

It is forbidden to read the glorious and terrible name as it is written, as the sages said "He that pronounces the name as it is written has no portion in the world to come". Therefore it must be read as if it were written *Adonai*. (*Mishnah Berurah* 5:2)

This is hardly a modern innovation. It appears already in the early 3rd century CE in the Mishnah tractate of Sanhedrin:

"The following have no portion in the world to come: ... Abba Saul says: Also one who pronounces the divine name as it is written." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1)

It would be a mistake to assume this absolute prohibition concerning the name goes back to Biblical times. The Talmud itself reports how the *ban* started:

"The [Seleucid] Greeks decreed that the name of God may not be spoken aloud; but when the Hasmoneans grew in strength and defeated them they decreed that the name of God be used even in contracts... when the Rabbis heard about this they said, 'Tomorrow this person will pay his debt and the contract will be thrown on a garbage heap' so they forbade its use in contracts." (*Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashannah* 18b)

We see that the prohibition to use the name of YHWH began as one of the anti-Torah decrees enacted by the Seleucid Greek tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168 BCE. This was part of Antiochus IV's policy of Hellenizing the Jews, that is, turning them into Greeks. The same decree included a ban on circumcision and Sabbath and a requirement that every Jew partake in the pig-sacrifices to Zeus and Apollo. The Hasmoneans, under the leadership Judah Maccabee, eventually defeated the Greeks

and re-dedicated the Temple on the first Chanukah in 165 BCE. According to the Talmud, the Hasmoneans annulled the anti-Torah decrees of the Greeks. Not only did the Hasmoneans restore the use of the name of YHWH, but they enacted a law of their own requiring the use of the name of YHWH in contracts so that every Jew would regain the habit of using the divine name. But the Rabbis were opposed to this Hasmoneans decree and banned the use of the name in contracts.

This was not the first time the Rabbis opposed the Hasmoneans. After Judah the Maccabee died the Hasmoneans continued to rule Judea until 37 BCE serving as both kings and high priests. The early Hasmonean rulers were all Sadducees and therefore the Rabbis opposed them.<sup>1</sup> The Sadducees are best known for their denial of the *Resurrection* but this was only the opinion of one faction of Sadducees who gained predominance in late Second Temple times. The main difference between the early Sadducees and the Pharisees was concerning the question of the Oral Torah. Josephus reports:

"What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them, and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers." (Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.10.6 [Whiston Translation]).

The Hasmonean Sadducees, loyal to written Scripture, used the name of YHWH and as we have already seen they even required the name to be used in every contract in order to erase any trace of the Greek ban on the name. But the Pharisees opposed the Sadducees at every turn and banned the use of the name in contracts.

The Pharisees were not the only ones to ban the use of the name. The Historian Josephus Flavius, who lived at the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, reports that there were three main groups in Second Temple Judaism: the Pharisees,


---

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.10.6; *Babylonian Talmud*, *Kiddushin* 66a.

the Sadducees and the Essenes. The Essenes were the group that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the area of Qumran. The Essenes had a rigid community which has often been compared to a modern monastic order. To become an Essene required going through various stages of initiation which lasted several years. Violation of Essene law could result in temporary or permanent banishment from the community depending on the severity of the crime. The central document of the Essene community was a book called "Rule of the Community" and as its name implies it defines the various stages of initiation and rules of the members of different ranks. The *Rule of the Community* includes a prohibition against using the name of YHWH:

Anyone who speaks aloud the M[ost] Holy Name of God, [whether in... ] or in cursing or as a blurt in time of trial or for any other reason, or while he is reading a book or praying, is to be expelled, never again to return to the body of the community. (1QS 6:27-7:2)

Like many of the Dead Sea Scrolls, part of the scroll has been damaged and some of the passage cannot be read. But it is clear that this is a prohibition forbidding the use of the name, whether in normal speech or even in prayer. The punishment for using the name of YHWH was the most severe the Essenes could administer: permanent expulsion from the Essene community.

The Essene prohibition against using the name of YHWH explains why the name is written different than all the other words in some of their scrolls. This was a feature which long puzzled scholars. The scrolls themselves are written in the square Hebrew script, similar to the Hebrew script used today. However, in some of the scrolls the name YHWH is written in Paleo-Hebrew script. So instead of the name being written יהוה using the same characters as the rest of the document the name suddenly appears in the Paleo-Hebrew script as .<sup>2</sup> It appears that the name was not written in this script to glorify it, but rather to prevent the average reader from pronouncing it. The average Jew in late Second Temple times could not read the Paleo-Hebrew script which had gone out of use in the 3rd century BCE. So to prevent their congregants

---

<sup>2</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls that use the Paleo-Hebrew script for the name include: 4QPs<sup>a</sup>, 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, 1QpHab, 1QpZeph, and 1Q11.

from accidentally reading the name YHWH out loud, the Essenes wrote the name in a script which few people could read. Some of the Essene scrolls go even further and write the name as four black dots thus, ••••.<sup>3</sup> This was intended to prevent the name from being pronounced by even those that knew how to read the Paleo-Hebrew script.

Of the Second Temple groups we have seen that the Sadducees required the use of the name, even in contracts, the Pharisees used the name but forbade its use in contracts, and the Essenes completely forbade the name. At what point the Rabbinic ban expanded from the use of the name in contracts to the blanket statement that anyone who uses the name has no portion in the world to come is unclear. But the Talmud records a Rabbinic teaching which seems to be from this transitional phase:

“What is meant by the verse, ‘And upon those that fear My name shall (the sun of righteousness) shine’ (Mal 3:20)? — This refers to those people who fear to utter the Divine name without good reason (לבטלה).” (*Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 8b*)<sup>4</sup>

This Talmudic teaching reflects a transitional stage in which there was a partial ban against using the name. The name could be used when necessary but not "without good reason". Later this partial ban was replaced by the absolute ban of Abba Saul (c.150 CE).

### **Taking the Name in Vain**

The partial ban of the Talmud which only prohibits the use of the name "without good reason" is undoubtedly based on the 3rd Commandment which states:

"You shall not take the name of YHWH your God in vain, for YHWH will not forgive whoever takes His name in vain." (Ex 20:7; Dt 5:11)

---

<sup>3</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls that write the name as four dots include: 4QSam<sup>c</sup>, 1QS, and 4Q170.

<sup>4</sup> "מאי דכתיב 'וזרחח לכם יראי שמי' (מלאכי ג: כא)? אלו בני אדם שהן יראין להוציא שם שמים לבטלה." (בבלי נדרים ח, ב)

The Talmud seems to understand the word "vain" as "without good reason". This is the explanation offered by the 13th Century Rabbanite exegete Nachmanides who writes:

“The plain meaning [of the verse] is that it is also forbidden to speak the honorable name for no reason (חנם) ... in truth this is also forbidden and the sages called this ‘He that speaks the name of God without good reason (לבטלה)’.” (Ramban on Ex 20:7)

The Hebrew word in the 3rd Commandment translated as "vain" is *shav'* שָׁוְא. Nachmanides and the Talmud are correct in that the word *shav'* can mean "vain" in the sense of "without purpose" as in the verse,

"In vain (*shav'*) have I smitten your sons, they have not received instruction."  
(Jer 2:30)

However, to *speak shav'* means to speak falsehood, as in the verse,

"Whose mouth speaks vanity (*shav'*), and their right hand is a right hand of falsehood." (Psalms 144:8).

We can see from the parallelism of the verse that vanity and falsehood are used synonymously. So to speak vanity means to speak falsehood. This is also the use of the term vanity (*shav'*) in numerous biblical passages. For example,

"Have you not seen a *vain (shav')* vision, and have you not spoken a false divination, saying 'Thus says YHWH', although I have not spoken." (Ezekiel 13:7)

Again the parallelism makes it clear that "vain speech = false speech". The equation of the terms vanity and falsehood is perhaps clearest in the 9th Commandment which states:

"Do not testify against your fellow as a *false (shaker)* witness" (Ex 20:16)

The 10 Commandments are paraphrased by Moses in Dt 5:20 and in the paraphrase we read:

"Do not testify against your fellow as a *vain (shav')* witness"

So to be a "vain witness" means to be a "false witness" because to speak vanity means to speak falsehood.

### **Taking the Name**

We have seen that vain speech is false speech. In Biblical Hebrew to "take" words means to speak them. For example the prophecies of Bil'am begin:

"And he took up his parable, and said..." (Nu 23:8; 24:3, 15, etc.)

To take up a parable is to speak it. The Hebrew word translated "to take up", (אָשַׁב) is the same word used in the 3rd commandment when it says not to "take the name... in vain". The precise phrase "to take... in vain" is used in Ex 23:1 which says,

"You shall not *take up* a false (*shav'*) rumor, you shall not place your hand with an evildoer to be a violent witness."

This commandment uses both the verb אָשַׁב "to take (up)" and the word "vain, false" and in fact this verse is nearly identical to the 3rd commandment, the only difference being that one prohibits speaking the name (*shem* שֵׁם) falsely while the other prohibits speaking a false rumor (*shema'* שְׂמָעָה). It is instructive to note that many English translations render the word *shav'* as "false" in Ex 23:1 and Dt 5:20 but render the same exact word as "in vain" in Ex 20:7 and Dt 5:11 even though all four passages deal with vain/ false speech.<sup>5</sup>

### **Swearing by the Name**

What does it mean to speak the name of YHWH falsely? In Biblical times people made oaths by *swearing in the name of* a god or king. We are commanded twice in Deuteronomy to swear in the name of YHWH.

---

<sup>5</sup> e.g. KJV and RSV. NIV and NRSV replace "in vain" with "misuse" although they still translate the other verses as "false".

“YHWH your God you shall fear and Him shall you serve and in His name shall you make oaths” (Dt 6:13)

“YHWH your God you shall fear and Him you shall serve, to Him you shall cling, and in His name shall you make oaths” (Dt 10:20)

Similarly, the Prophet Jeremiah implores the Gentiles to learn from Israel how to swear in the name of YHWH:

"And it will be if they learn the ways of my people to swear in My name '**As YHWH lives**', in the way that they taught my people to swear by Ba'al, they shall be built up in the midst of my people." (Jer 12:16)

To understand this verse we have to look at the formulation of ancient vows. In Biblical times a vow consisted of making the statement "As X lives" (where X is the name of a god or king) followed by the content of that which is being promised or attested to. We see such a vow made by Joseph in the name of Pharaoh (Gen 42:15) when he promised his brothers:

"...as Pharaoh lives, you shall not get out of this unless your younger brother comes here!"

In modern terms this vow would mean:

*"I swear to you that you shall not get out of this unless your younger brother comes here".*

So when we read in the Book of Jeremiah that the way of Israel is "to swear in My name '**As YHWH lives**'" what is meant is to say the words "As YHWH lives" followed by the contents of the vow. In fact, we find many examples of such vows in the Hebrew Bible. For example, when Saul heard his son's plea to leave David in peace, he swore in the name of YHWH that he would not harm David:

"And Saul listened to Jonathan and Saul swore '**As YHWH lives**, he will not be put to death!'" (1Sam 19:6).

Similarly, in Prov 30:8-9 the wiseman (Prov 30:8) prays to God:

"Distance me from vanity [*shav'*] and lies, give me neither poverty nor riches... lest I become poor and steal and seize hold of the name of my God [KJV adds: 'in vain!']".

The wise man asks YHWH to distance him from '*vanity* [=falsehood] *and lies*' by not making him overly rich or overly poor. Should he become exceedingly poor, reasons the wise man, he will be forced to steal to survive and ultimately be compelled to make a (false) oath ("seize hold of the name of my God"). Of course, this false oath will be to the judges after he is caught stealing (compare Ex 22:11). We see here that being distanced from *vanity* [i.e. falsehood] and lies means staying away from theft *and false oaths!*

Calling on YHWH's name was not the only way of making a vow in Biblical times. We read in Psalms 24:3-4:

"Who shall ascend to the Mountain of YHWH and who shall stand in His holy place? The clean of hands and pure of heart, *he who has not taken 'my soul' in vain and has not sworn deceitfully.*"

This verse makes little sense until we remember that in Biblical times a person making a vow often swore by someone's "soul". When Jonathan makes a vow to David he says: "As YHWH lives and as your soul lives..." Similarly, when Avner swears to David he says: "As your soul lives, I do not know!" Thus to "take *my soul* in vain" means to make a false vow by someone's soul!<sup>6</sup> We see in this verse that *taking a soul in vain* (i.e. vowing falsely) is equivalent to *swearing deceitfully* ("and has not sworn deceitfully")! So to speak the name of YHWH falsely means to swear falsely by His name or say anything false in His name.

It is worth noting that despite the Rabbanite ban on the name, most Rabbanite exegetes correctly understood the 3rd Commandment as a prohibition to swear falsely

---

<sup>6</sup> KJV incorrectly renders "his soul" for *Nafshi* "my soul" (see BHS and note there)! It is unclear by whose "soul" the vow is being made in Ps 24,4, whether that of the person taking the vow or of YHWH. *New JPS Translation (Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures)* renders "who has not taken a false oath by **My** life" as if the oath was being taken by YHWH's "soul".



by the name. The Rabbanite translation prepared by the Jewish Publication Society renders the verse:

"You shall not *swear falsely* by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name." (Ex 20:7 [JPS])

This modern Rabbanite explanation is based on the interpretations of the medieval Rabbanite exegetes.<sup>7</sup> Of course, the 3rd Commandment refers to any false speech in the name of YHWH, not just to false vows. The Rabbanite exegetes limit this to false vows, probably because they know of the Talmudic teaching that it is forbidden to use the name "without good reason". So the only time it might be permitted is in the context of a vow.

### **Karaites and the Name**

We have seen that the Rabbis brought the 3rd Commandment to try and support their ban on the name of YHWH. However, the Rabbis were not the only ones to ban the use of the name. In the Middle Ages the Karaites were split into two camps: those that required using the name and those that forbade using the name. The 10th Century Karaite historian Jacob al-Kirkisani writes:

"Some of the Karaites of Khorasan ignore "ketiv and qere" and read only what is written. Some of them do so in the case of the Name which is written Yod He [i.e. YHWH], and maintain that he who reads it as Aleph Daleth [i.e. Adonai] is an unbeliever."

Kirkisani is telling us that some of the Karaites read the name as YHWH and accused those that read it as Adonai with heresy. Apparently this view was not limited to the major Karaite center in Khorasan. The 9th century Karaite sage Daniel al-Kumisi devotes much space in his writings to the question of the pronunciation of the name and it is clear from his famous *Epistle to the Dispersion* that many of his disciples

---

<sup>7</sup> See Rashi and Ibn Ezra on Ex 20:7. Even Nachmanides admits of this interpretation alongside the explanation that it means "without good reason".

throughout the Diaspora used the name of YHWH.<sup>8</sup> Kumisi himself was against the use of the name although he did not base this on the 3rd Commandment. Instead Kumisi cited Lev 24:16 which states:

But if he specifically states (נִקְבֶּה) the name YHWH he shall surely die, the entire congregation shall stone him...

Kumisi points out that the word *nokev* נִקְבֶּה means "to specifically call out or state a name" as in the verse "And Moses and Aaron took these men who were called out by name" (Nu 1:17). This verse by itself seems to say that it is forbidden to utter the name of YHWH. However, to correctly understand this verse we must look at the context in which it was given. This commandment was given in the wake of the incident with the "Son of the Israelite Woman" who cursed the name of YHWH, as we read:

"(10) A son of an Israelite woman who was the son of an Egyptian man went forth in the midst of the children of Israel; and the son of the Israelite woman strove with an Israelite man. (11) And the son of the Israelite woman specifically stated the name and cursed. And they brought him to Moses... (12) And they placed him under guard to receive instruction from the mouth of YHWH. (13) And YHWH spoke to Moses saying, (14) Bring out the one who cursed outside the camp, and all those that heard shall place their hands on his head and the entire congregation shall stone him. (15) And to the children of Israel speak saying, Any man who curses his God, shall bear his sin. (16) But if he specifically states the name of YHWH he shall surely die, the entire congregation shall stone him..." (Lev 24:10-16)

We see that when the "Son of the Israelite Woman" cursed the name of YHWH, Moses did not know what the proper judgment was. So he consulted YHWH directly for an explanation of the matter. YHWH's instruction was that the "Son of the Israelite Woman" be executed for his crime. YHWH then defined under what circumstances a person is executed for cursing God. If a person curses "his God", that

---

<sup>8</sup> Daniel al-Kumisi, *Epistle to the Dispersion* (Nemoy ed.) pp.60-63

is, he says the words “cursed be Elohim” he then “bears his sin”, which means his punishment comes through divine retribution. But, if he curses God specifically calling out the name of YHWH, he is publicly executed, just like the “Son of the Israelite Woman” who uttered the name of YHWH and cursed Him. So when Lev 24:15 says “But if he specifically states the name of YHWH” this is in the context of the different modes of cursing God. Clearly this is not a prohibition to say the name of YHWH.

After his long discourse attempting to prove that the name should not be used, Kumisi concludes:

"What I had in mind concerning the Lord's name, that have I written down for you. As for you, investigate the matter according to your own wisdom, lest you should do according to my wisdom in reliance upon my opinion. For he who relies upon one of the teachers of the exile, without investigating thoroughly according to his own wisdom, is the same as if he engaged in idolatry. For anyone who follows a commandment of men learned by rote, and not the Lord's Torah, is like one engaged in idolatry."<sup>9</sup>

### **Use of the Name in Worship**

It is clear that there is no prohibition to say the name of YHWH. On the contrary, in some contexts we are required to utter the name. For example, we are required to read the Torah out loud in a public reading every seventh year before the entire congregation of Israel (Dt 31:11). The Torah itself contains the name of YHWH some 1820 times. How could we fulfill the commandment to read the Torah in a public reading if it is forbidden to utter the name?

Another context in which we are required to use the name of YHWH is in the “First fruits Confession”. The First fruits Confession is a declaration made at the Temple upon the presentation of the first fruits offering. This confession follows a set formula

---

<sup>9</sup> Daniel al-Kumisi, *Epistle to the Dispersion* (Nemoy ed.) pp.62-63

laid down in Dt 26:3-10. The first fruits confession contains the name of YHWH *six* times and every Israelite farmer is required to recite this formula once a year.

We have already seen that we are required to make oaths in the name of YHWH. Similarly, in Leviticus we are forbidden to swear falsely in the name of YHWH:

“You shall not make oaths falsely in my name” (Lev 19:20).

The fact that there is a prohibition to swear falsely in His name, assumes it is permitted to swear *truthfully* in His name.

### **Ancient Use of the Name**

If it were forbidden to use the name we would expect that the righteous men of ancient Israel whose deeds are recorded in the Tanach would refrain from using it. Yet we find the name used repeatedly by the ancient Israelites. As already mentioned the ancient Israelites are praised for using the name in vows. But the name is even used in what can be described as “casual” contexts. Thus Boaz and the Judahites of his day used the name of YHWH as a greeting, as we read in Ruth 2:4,

Now Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to those harvesting, "May YHWH be with you!" And they answered him, "May YHWH bless you!"

So the ancient Judahite greeting was “YHWH be with you” to which the proper response was “YHWH bless you!”. This is clearly a formulaic greeting similar to the modern “How are you?” to which the proper response is “Fine” (even if things are not fine). However, unlike the modern greeting, the ancient Israelite greeting consisted of a blessing in the name of YHWH. We also find such a greeting in Ps 118:26, “Blessed be those that come, in the name of YHWH”. The Levites would stand at the entrance of the Temple and bless those arriving on their pilgrimage “in the name of YHWH”.

### **Requirement to Use the Name**

Clearly there is no prohibition to use the name YHWH. The only prohibition is to curse the name or to speak falsely in the name. But are we required to use the name? When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and told him to go to the Israelites

and tell them they would be liberated from bondage, Moses asked the Almighty who he should tell the Israelites had sent him. God replied:

"Thus shall you say to the Children of Israel: YHWH the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you, this is my name forever, this is my mention for every generation" (Ex 3:15)

The eternal name of God is YHWH. The last part of the verse is usually translated "this is my memorial unto all generations" translating the word *zikri* זִכְרִי as "my memorial". Yet it is unclear how a name can be a "memorial". This translation is based on the fact that the root ZKR זכר in the qal conjugation means "to remember". However, the same root in the *hif'il* conjugation means "to mention" and this is clearly the meaning in Ex 3:15. So YHWH's name is not YHWH's "memorial" it is His "mention", i.e. the name we use to mention Him, to call upon his name. By the same token we are forbidden to call upon the name of other gods, as it is written,

"and the names of other gods you shall not mention (תִּזְכְּרוּ, hif'il of ZKR) nor shall they be heard upon your lips" (Ex 23:13)

Similarly, Joshua teaches us,

"and the names of their gods you shall not mention (תִּזְכְּרוּ, hif'il of ZKR) nor shall you swear by them nor shall you serve them nor shall you bow down to them." (Josh 23:7)

So we are required to mention the name the name of YHWH for all eternity and in every generation but forbidden to mention the names of the false gods.

### **The Name in the Redemption**

The name of YHWH fulfills a central role in the whole scheme of the ultimate Redemption. We have already seen that the nations are promised to become part of the chosen people if they learn to swear by the name YHWH. Zechariah tells us that the sign of YHWH's dominion is that all mankind will call him by the name YHWH:

And it will come to pass that YHWH will be king over the who earth and on that day YHWH will be one and His name will be one. (Zech 14:9)

What this means is that in the era of exile the divine name is obscured and instead YHWH is called by many names. But in the end-time all mankind will call Him by the one true name YHWH and recognize that He is one.

Clearly we are not only allowed to use the name of YHWH but required to do so for the redemption to come. Joel teaches us that in the end-time, those that call upon the name will be save from the judgments that will befall that generation, as it is written:

"And it will come to pass that all who call upon the name of YHWH shall be saved"  
(Joel 3:5 [2:32])