



Rabbi Mark Sameth of the Pleasantville Community Synagogue explores in his article "Who is He? He is She: The Secret Four-Letter Name of God" the meaning of the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter, unpronounceable name of God handed down by the ancient Israelites. (Seth Harrison/The Journal News)

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Rabbi unveils a secret of God

BY GARY STERN
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The tradition-bound Western image of a he-man, masculine God may already be thousands of years out of date, says a Westchester rabbi who believes he has unlocked the secret to God's name and androgynous nature.

Rabbi Mark Sameth contends in a soon-to-be-published article that the four-letter Hebrew name for God - held by Jewish tradition to be unpronounceable since the year 70 - should actually be read in reverse. When the four letters are flipped, he says, the new name makes the sounds of the Hebrew words for "he" and "she."

God thus becomes a dual-gendered deity, bringing together all the male and female energy in the universe, the yin and the yang that have divided the sexes from Adam and Eve to Homer and Marge.

"This is the kind of God I believe in, the kind of God that makes sense to me, in a language that speaks very, very deeply to human aspirations and striving," Sameth said. "How could God be male and not female?"

Sameth, 54, the spiritual leader of Pleasantville Community Synagogue, first hit on his theory more than a decade ago when he was a rabbinical student. Since then, he has quietly pieced together clues and supporting evidence from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament and the vast body of rabbinic literature.

His article "Who is He? He is She: The Secret Four-Letter Name of God" will appear in the summer issue of the CCAR Journal, published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, an association of Reform rabbis.

Sameth's theory is not as outlandish as it might seem to the uninitiated. For one thing, Jewish mystical traditions have long found levels of meaning in the Hebrew Bible beyond those that come from a literal or metaphorical reading. For another, there is a deep tradition in Jewish prayer and thinking, particularly among the so-called mystics, of seeking to reconcile the male and female elements in the universe.

Sameth's article includes this: "What the mystics called 'the secret of one' is the inner unification of the sometimes competing, sometimes complementing masculine and feminine energies that reside within each of us, regardless whether we are male or female."

The notion that God is what Sameth calls a "hermaphroditic deity" could energize the growing movement in many religious traditions to present God in gender-neutral terms, particularly in Scripture.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, a revered scholar among liberal Jews who has written extensively on Jewish mysticism and spirituality, called Sameth's article "delicious, thought-provoking and wise." Kushner is among a small group of scholars and friends with whom Sameth has shared his article in recent weeks.

"I think most people assume the God of the Hebrew Bible is masculine, but Mark, through some sound and clever research, suggests that God may have always been androgynous," Kushner said. "This can affect the way we consider holiness and the divine, and invites us to reconsider our own gender identities, which is kind of a bombshell."

The Hebrew name of God that is known as the Tetragrammaton - the four letters Yud-Hay-Vov-Hay - appears 6,823 times in the Hebrew Bible. Since early Hebrew script included no vowels, the pronunciation of the name was known by those who heard it.

According to Sameth's footnotes, the name was said only by priests after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the name was no longer said and the pronunciation lost.

Jewish tradition has long held that the name was too sacred to articulate. Jews have generally used Adonai, "the Lord," in place of the Tetragrammaton. Various Christian groups have pronounced the name as "Yahweh" or "Jehovah."

Sameth has no intention of speaking the "reversed" name of God that he has uncovered, preferring to focus on its meaning.

"I still won't pronounce it, intentionally, as God's name," he said. "I'm not suggesting that anyone pronounce the name."

Sameth became fascinated with Jewish mysticism while a rabbinical student in Jerusalem during the early 1990s. He studied with Moshe Idel, a pre-eminent scholar on mysticism, and learned how medieval Spanish Kabbalists and others uncovered mystical meanings from the Torah that had been shrouded in patterns of words and letters.

Once back in New York, at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform seminary, Sameth was studying the biblical story of the prophet Nathan reprimanding King David for murder, which becomes a turning point for David. Sameth realized that the Hebrew forms of both names, Nathan and David, are palindromes, words with spellings that can be reversed.

It was, as they say, a revelation.

"It's about reversibility," Sameth said. "King David is changing the direction of his life, and the two key characters, their names are palindromes. What are the chances of that?"

A new zeal for biblical reversibility led Sameth to flip the four Hebrew letters of the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton. In his head, he heard the Hebrew words hu and hi. That's "he/she" in English.

And he felt connected to a long line of Jewish mystics who have mused about the male and female coming together.

"I really believed that I had found something significant," Sameth said. "Then I did 10 years of study to see if I could find support for it."

Much of his article consists of weaving together clues and examples from Jewish Scripture and wisdom that offer historical context for his thesis. For example, Sameth contends that the Zohar - a medieval, mystical Torah commentary - was referring to God's dual-gender "when it suggested that the sin of Adam was that he ruined the marriage between the feminine and masculine halves of God by divorcing himself from the feminine."

He also writes: "We realize now that the secret was almost revealed by the 13th-century Torah commentator Rabbeinu Bachya, who makes note of every four-word cluster in the Torah whose rashei teivot, or initial letters, spell out the Tetragrammaton in reverse."

Rabbi Jonathan Stein, editor of the CCAR Journal, was on vacation and not available for comment.

Sameth has been the only rabbi at the decade-old Pleasantville Community Synagogue, a self-described "trans-denominational" congregation that includes elements of Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism. Congregants come from many backgrounds and communities to the synagogue, which has become known for hearty singing and dancing during services.

Talking recently about his years of study to grasp the meaning of God's name, Sameth had to stop, swallow hard

and take a breath when describing what it's like to receive sparks of insight from the great Jewish thinkers of long ago.

"It is a form of transcendence to be connected in that way," he said.

Sameth doesn't believe that he has stumbled on a previously unknown understanding of God's name, but that he has been able to connect the dots in a fresh way.

Those who find meaning in his work, he said, may encounter a different understanding of God that is comforting to feminists and those on many spiritual journeys. They may also read the Torah differently.

"If this interpretation is correct, it says that the Torah is a mystical or esoteric text," he said. "The mystics have been saying all these years that the text conceals more than it reveals. It is structured with different levels of meaning and reveals itself over time. We're talking about one tradition that goes all the way back."

Katherine Kurs, a religion scholar who teaches at New School University and is an associate minister at West-Park (Presbyterian) Church in Manhattan, said that the image of God presented by Sameth will have great appeal to many people who are searching for spiritual meaning.

"Mark's unveiling is part of a mystic lineage that presents a prismatic experience of God, that says there are ways of experiencing God that contain and explode categories simultaneously," said Kurs, who has known Sameth since they studied together almost 20 years ago. "This God is not a male or even a female but a male-female or female-male, a God that holds tension and paradox, a full-spectrum bandwidth God."

Sameth has shared his image of a dual-gendered God with the seventh- and eighth-graders he teaches at his synagogue. He said they've been very receptive, which isn't surprising because they are growing up in a post-modern age.

"As post-moderns, we've been conditioned to a different relationship with language," he said. "That's why there is all this interest now in Jewish mysticism."

He wonders how, 2,000 years from now, people will understand the final chapter of "Ulysses," which includes no punctuation. Will they try to add punctuation, believing that it's been lost? Or will they grasp that James Joyce knew what he was doing?

"Joyce was playing with language, using language to play with the medium," Sameth said. "And the Torah isn't just about Noah taking the animals, twosies by twosies. If that's what the Torah was all about, how could it have captivated Western civilization for 3,000 years? There had to be more."

