

# PARSHAS LECH LECHA - MASTERING THE NAMES

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

## Mastering the Names<sup>1</sup>

*My Master Elokim - how shall I know that I will inherit it?*

Time after time, we see that names of people in Tanach are not arbitrary. A name says something important about its bearer. It may describe an essential quality of the person, or the times in which he lived.

All the more so are Names of G-d important. Each Name says something different about Him. We never understand the intent of a pasuk without accounting for the particular Name or Names of HKBH employed by the text.

We are often comfortable with the more common Names used by the Torah. Most of the time we can satisfactorily account for the use of "Hashem" and "Elokim." Since they are used so frequently, we think we understand how they are used. We don't fare as well with less commonly used Names. One of those appears in our pasuk, as Avraham calls G-d Adon - "my Master. Chazal credit Avraham for innovating this usage in this pasuk. "From the time that HKBH created the world, no one called HKBH Adon until Avraham came and called Him Adon."

This is indeed a worthwhile accomplishment, and deserves to be understood. A problem immediately comes to mind. The attribution does not seem to be correct! Avraham is the right person, but the wrong pasuk is credited. Avraham first addressed Hashem as Adon six pesukim previously!

We can get past this obstacle by realizing that the word Adon in reference to Hashem has two very different usages. Ordinarily, it means "Master" in the sense of absolute power over everything. It is especially compelling in the context of some miraculous event that demonstrates Hashem's ability to trifle with the laws of Nature when it suits Him. Alternatively, His mastery of all things and forces comes into sharp focus when He acts in some other wondrous way that compels observers to concede His presence and power. Thus Avraham referred to G-d as Adon when he blessed the king of Sodom. Avraham's victory had been so dramatic that all participants and observers had to acknowledge the role of Hashem. Similarly, Avimelech's pleads with Hashem ("Adon - Will You kill an innocent people?" ) after Hashem manifests Himself to him in a dream. Avimelech addresses

Hashem as Adon because He left no room to doubt His presence or His ability to do what He pleases with His world and His subjects.

When the Torah instructs us to appear before Hashem three times a year at Pesach, Shavuos and Sukkos, it again makes use of the Name Adon (i.e. el penai ha-Adon Hashem. ) Yet here Adon cannot be understood in the same way as the previous examples. Standing with his korban in the courtyard of the Beis ha-Mikdosh, the pilgrim does not seek to celebrate some recent miracle that brings him to Hashem's designated Sanctuary. Rather, he comes at the beginning of a season of Divine blessing to seek success in the weeks ahead. On Pesach, he looks for Hashem's beracha for grain; on Shavuos, for fruit; on Sukkos, he prays that the coming growing season be accompanied by ample rains.

The pilgrim does not ask for miracles, in the sense of unexpected events that defy prediction. To the contrary, he asks that the laws of Nature treat him kindly. He uses the Name Adon very differently - to speak of the close, personal relationship between master and his loyal, trusted servant. The pilgrim asks that Hashem, as it were, take a personal interest in his well-being, and see to it that his needs are met within the parameters of Nature.

The two usages manifest two different ways in which G-d's Adnus, His mastery of the world is perceived. Most people sense Him the most when He radically ignores the laws of Nature, and seems to act contrary to them. Those closest to Him approach Him differently. They understand that, like any important human ruler, much of His activity is "delegated" to His servants. The laws of Nature are among those servants, and they ensure that the world functions steadily and more or less predictably according to fixed protocols and channels. In the human sphere, a worker in a large company detecting a problem with his paycheck will go to Human Resources or Accounting for help - not to the CEO. A very close friend of the CEO, however, might very well make the office at the top his first stop, knowing that the CEO will see to it that the appropriate offices respond quickly and efficiently. Similarly, the tzadik is not content to receive even abundant blessing through the channels of the "offices" created by Hashem to translate His Will into action. The tzadik refuses to acknowledge the importance of any "underling" to Hashem, even though He Himself created them. In his closeness to Hashem, he wishes that all his needs be attended to through His direct providential concern.

When Avraham earlier used the Name Adon, he had been informed by Hashem that He was going to grant him great reward. Avraham responded, "Ado-oy Elokim" - G-d my Master, what could You possibly give me that would be of any value to me?" Avraham may have been making more of a request than asking a question. "I lack only one thing in my life, and that is a son. It would take a miracle in my circumstances to grant me one. As the Adon, the Master of the world, You can provide me with one in a way that will call attention to Your presence and power."

In our pasuk, Avraham seeks assurance regarding Hashem's promise to him of the Land of Israel.

"Please let me know more about it. What are its special qualities and gifts? How can I (and my children) utilize them most effectively? How can we ensure that we will not lose it?" Avraham does not ask for miraculous intervention, but for "insider tips." Because of his closeness to Hashem, he asks that Hashem concern himself with his well-being, and provide him with the tools he needs. Chazal understood that our pasuk was not making use of the Name Adon in the more typical way of using it in regard to miraculous and wondrous actions. Rather, Avraham was the first to refer to a different kind of adnus - to the close supervision of a beloved servant's needs.

Tosafos explain that the phrase "Elokei Avraham" is an expression of malchus, because Avraham in our pasuk calls Hashem "Adon." ( Malchus, kingship, is simply a form of adnus, of mastery.) This is puzzling. In all of our berachos, we insist on explicitly referring to Hashem as King of the Universe. If invoking the concept of adnus suffices as an expression of malchus, why would we need to? We effectively begin every beracha with the formula "Blessed are you, our Master." Although the written text uses the Tetragramaton, the four-letter Name of havaya, we pronounce it as if it were the Name of adnus. If mastery is equivalent to kingship, why wouldn't the Name that we pronounce obviate the need to go on to mention Hashem as King?

Our approach fully explains why. When we utilize the Name of havaya, we focus on His absolute ability, which transcends all limitations, just as He combines past, present and future, making the restrictions of time completely irrelevant to Him. We do not mean Master in the sense that Avraham uses it in our pasuk. We must therefore supplement the Name of havaya with a reference to Hashem as King, providentially providing for the needs of all His subjects.

Why do we not pronounce the four-letter Name the way it is written, instead substituting the seemingly unrelated Name of Adnus? As a rule, we do not praise Hashem in our davening and our berachos with concepts that we cannot really understand. We can - and must - intellectually assert truths about Hashem, even if we cannot fully fathom them. Prayer comes from a different place. It does not come from the mind alone, but the mind and heart together. We stop to think about Him, and we are unable to contain our enthusiasm. The words flow, expressing the intensity of the way we feel about Him. We cannot do that in relationship to deep concepts that we incorporate like mathematical formulas. Praise must come from having too many words well up inside, not too few. Therefore, when the Name of havaya is used, we must find another word with which we can better relate. Not unexpectedly, that word is Adon - used in the more typical sense, although not as it is used in our pasuk. We have little trouble recognizing Hashem for all the miracles and wondrous deeds that He has performed.

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1. Based on Harchev Davar, Bereishis 15:8

2. Berachos 7B

3. Bereishis 15:2 ("My Master Elokim - what can you give me, as I go childless?") Tosafos ibid. s.v. lo

ask the question. To answer it, they assume that the pesukim are out of chronological order in the text, as happens elsewhere. Netziv would prefer not to have to dismiss the order of pesukim in front of us

4. Bereishis 20:4

5. Shemos 23:17

6. Berachos 49A s.v. baruch

7. See Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 5:1

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