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Reflections on the Asymmetry of the Tetragrammaton

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Reflections on the asymmetry of the Tetragrammaton

The Tetragrammaton are the four Hebrew letters for the word God, yud hey vahv hey, that God used to reveal himself to Moses. The name is commonly translated as *He brings into existence whatever exists*. People do not know how the name was pronounced. When the Temple existed, it was pronounced by the High Priest once during the high during the High Holidays each year. The name was probably once ubiquitous in the Tanak but was largely replaced by the Masoretes between the 6th and 10th C AD

The word, like the universe, is asymmetrical. It is said that just after the big bang there was almost exactly as much antimatter as there was matter, but there was just one one-billionth more matter than antimatter. The matter united with the antimatter and became nothing. If it had not been for that very slight asymmetry, matter would not exist in anything like the way matter exists now. The planets and the stars and the galaxies would not exist. We too would not exist.

People and animals are asymmetrical. The poet William Blake looks at a metal tiger hot off a blacksmith's anvil and asks, "what immortal hand or eye/ could frame thy fearful symmetry?" Blake is scared of a god that would create a symmetrical being. Likewise when one looks at a display of one's self that has been cut in half and one half replicated to make a whole symmetrical being (i.e. two left or right halves joined into one), one is often frightened by the image because one either looks too strong or too weak. Ironically looking either way, one feels imbalanced as though balance lies not in symmetry but in asymmetry.

In symmetry there is perfect balance. In perfect balance there is perfect stasis. In perfect stasis there is no movement, no life, no growth. Perfect balance is perfectly paralyzing. No transformations occur. If we were completely symmetrical beings, either we would be constantly torn and unable to move or completely of one accord and unable to distinguish differences because we would be of such complete unity. We would be unable to reach away from ourselves and out towards others because we would have no strengths and weaknesses. All would be of the same strength. Empathy demands weaknesses even if those weaknesses are

different from other's weaknesses. From our own strengths and weaknesses we can extrapolate what other people feel like even though their weaknesses and strengths differ from our own.

The name of god (yud hey vav hey) is split into two diametrics. The god of the Tanak too is broken into two, or perhaps more, pieces. There is an empathetic, loving, nurturing part of god and there is a part of god who constantly wants to test the faith of people. This part of god who is an adversarial god (Satan), likes to scare people. Between the aspects there is nothing. The breath must pause between the two syllables. Likewise we must pause between the two aspects of god. There can be no ruach (spirit/breath) between the two aspects of god.

In the book of Job, it is the adversary who controls Job's life until from the center of the whirlwind comes god's voice. The centers of whirlwinds are vacuums. They are nothing. They are still. Around the center, winds swirl in all directions. Whirlwinds, like whirlpools, form around nothing. If one were to experience a whirlwind one would first hear what is called the train, this sounds a little like a train only much louder, like a train with a cargo of thunder. Next, fierce winds pushing in one direction. In the eye of the tornado, one would feel a calm gentleness and it would be very difficult to breathe because the air would be at very low pressures. Then one would feel another fierce wind pushing in the opposite direction.

It is in the moment at the center of the whirlwind when Job has been pushed by the fierce winds, when the breath is literally being sucked out of Job so Job needs to pause in his speech that god speaks to Job. It is during the moment of splendid calm, in the eye of the whirlwind, when God speaks to Job. The moment that God talks to Job is a neutral moment. It is a moment when Job must be broken. When Job is broken god flows into the cracks (or nothingness) of his brokenness. Job comes to see and accept his place in the cosmos. Job's paradigm has had one too many anomalies not to be destroyed and into the neutral empty space of nothingness flows god.

Theodore Roethke says:

A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.¹

It is said that prayer is talking to god and meditation is listening to God. Meditation is a pause, a silence, a neutral zone. It is a moment when we experience God's creation rather than trying to create ourselves. It is a mini Sabbath.

Once a friend read me a poem he had written about a radical theologian sitting in a car during a thunderstorm and listening for God. The friend told me that the character in the poem didn't believe that God existed. I replied that the act of listening required faith that one was listening for something—that listening was an active process that required the listener to believe that something was being listened for as opposed to hearing which was a process without filters. In the noisy mind, one hears the cacophony of the chaos of endless empty scenarios of remembered the pasts or imagined futures that never happen. With the quiet mind one listens to the song of the universe.

In the middle of the Tetragrammaton the mind and the breath must pause. In that moment lies the song of the universe. In God's center and in the center of God's name there is the place where we exist. It is in between the god of fear and the god of love that we tread our fine path. The god who nurtures us and the god that tests us. It is in the moment of nothingness, the moment of neutrality, that moment of freedom, the moment of decision, the moment of now that we live our lives. And meditation reminds us that that moment is always now. Into the nothing between the two diametrics pours the existence of god. Between the two perfectly imbalanced halves lies the moment of the now, when we can choose which half we want to side with, the half of fear or the half of love.

¹ These are the final lines of Roethke's poem, "In A Dark Time."