

Door, photo, Cetta Kenney



Embracing the Many Names of the One

a multifaith
journey to
wholeness

CHARLES BURACK

LIFE CHANGING NAMES

According to a tradition in my synagogue, a new name of God comes through to the congregation each year during the Jewish High Holidays. That divine name becomes a special focus for prayer, meditation and service throughout the New Year. Some of us also believe that a new name of God comes through for each and every person.¹ Over the last decade, a new divine name has been gifted to me during this holy time. Each name has its own distinctive energy and its own transformative power. Though I was raised in the Jewish tradition, I have also immersed myself in other religions and for many years have considered myself to be interfaith or integral in my spiritual orientation. In the last few years, divine names from other traditions have come to me during the Jewish High Holidays. These names have changed my life.

I first learned of the tradition of the new names of God in the early 1990s when I began attending services at a Jewish Renewal congregation in the San Francisco Bay Area. Jewish Renewal blends the best of Jewish mysticism with the best of modern progressive thought.

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Since then, during the long and majestic Rosh HaShanah service that celebrates the Jewish New Year, I have put out my prayer to be gifted with a new divine name that will be central to the New Year, and each year a name has been given, either during Rosh HaShanah or at least by Yom Kippur. That 10-day period from the New Year to the Day of Atonement is called “The Ten Days of Return” – returning to the Source of Life and aligning our lives with that infinite Wellspring of goodness.

DODI, MY BELOVED

Until a few years ago, all of the names I received were Hebrew names of God. One of the first names I received was *Dodi*, “my Beloved”. This name of God is often associated with the Song of Songs, where the lover is traditionally understood to be the soul or the People, and the Beloved is the Creator. For an entire year I used this name in my prayers and blessings and even in my diary. How delicious, how enrapturing and how satisfying to relate to the divine as the Beloved, as my Beloved!

In my youth and early adulthood I had sometimes struggled with the divine names describing God as Lord and Father and King. These names, because of their explicit references to power, sometimes distanced me from divinity or made me feel that the relationship was basically one of Master and servant. How liberating to concentrate for a whole year on the

experience of the Creator as my supreme Beloved! In the midst of periods of loneliness and grief – and sometimes of despair – I would remind myself that the divine is my ultimate love, my supreme companion and mate, and I would then start praying to Dodi, my Beloved. This divine name has stuck with me ever since – I have never let it go! It is still one of my most precious names for the Source of All.

RACHAMANA, COMPASSIONATE GODDESS

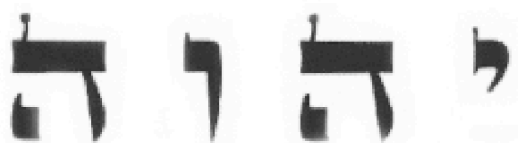
Another year I received the Hebrew name *Rachmana* – “Compassionate One”. This name has a feminine form, and its root letters also give rise to the word *rechem* – “womb”. Rachamana emphasizes the feminine compassion of divinity. It is the womb consciousness of God/dess. This emphasis on the feminine quality of divinity was powerfully transformational for me. The name is prominently featured in a special High Holiday prayer that beseeches the feminine Compassionate One to answer the supplicant’s prayers.

Most of the widely used Hebrew names for God are gendered masculine. I grew up with the sense of God being a masculine energy. The holiest name of God, YHVH, which traditional Jews never pronounce but which scholars transcribe as “Yahweh” and which Christians transliterate as “Jehovah”, was treated by most traditional Jews as a masculine name and was associated with the divine quality of compassion. In my teens, this emphasis on divine masculinity began to trouble me. Why should the Source of all existence be masculine or male? Why would the Creator be gendered at all?

And if the Birther of the universe had to be gendered, wouldn't it make more sense to call that birther "Mother"?

It is true that on the Sabbath eve the feminine presence of divinity is welcomed. She is called the Sabbath Queen, the Sabbath Bride, the Beloved, the *Shekhinah* (Indwelling Feminine Presence). But even though I welcomed the Shekhinah each Friday night, I still had the overall sense that the tradition treated God as a He. After all, the prayers mostly used names like Lord (*Adonai*), King (*Melekh*), Father (*Av*, *Aba*) and God (*El*, *Elohim*).

It made a great difference to me to use the name Rachamana on a daily basis for a whole year. Rather than limiting a sense of divine feminine presence to one day a week, I had the wonderful opportunity to experience and relate to the divine feminine compassion every



YHWH, the unpronounceable name

day of the week. I began to appreciate in deeper and more subtle ways the feminine energies that shape this universe and that also transcend it.

Relating to divinity as the feminine Compassionate One increased my identification with women and their experience of themselves and of divinity. I could understand at a more visceral level why some women had chosen to reject God and worship Goddess.

For most of my life I have had feminist sympathies, and for all of my adult life I have had feminist commitments,

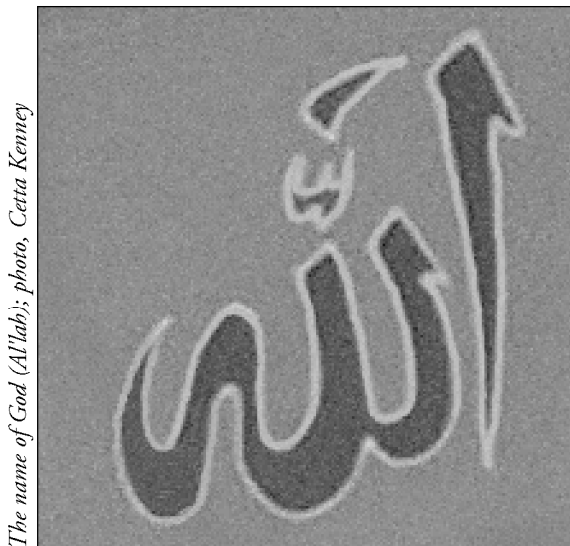
but it was something new and special and powerful to worship the Creator as the feminine Compassionate One. It helped me to more fully claim and value my own "feminine" energies. In the past, my "feminine" passion for the arts, psychology and spirituality had sometimes been a source of difficulty. I can remember being teased for having these "feminine" interests when I worked at a government agency in Chicago. A few of the finance guys who ate lunch with me would sometimes poke fun at the fact that I preferred literature to sports. Throughout my life, I have struggled to affirm and integrate my "feminine" interests and sensibilities, and as I write this, I am realizing that praying to Rachamana has been particularly important in helping me to deepen that process of affirmation and integration. Indeed, why should I feel shy or awkward about possessing qualities and energies that went into making the universe – and that continue to suffuse and sustain the universe?

I still feel some resistance, even aversion, to gendering divinity at all. In my heart of hearts I know that the Supreme Source of It All is beyond gender, beyond humanity, beyond all human ascriptions and names. And yet I recognize too that the All-Encompassing One must also embrace gender and humanity. In Jewish mysticism, half of the divine creative powers (*sephirot*) are gendered masculine, and the other half are gendered feminine. Nevertheless, I believe that gender and humanity are relatively negligible aspects of the Infinite One. Yet we are humans, after all, and many of us may need to emphasize the human-like qualities of the Creator. Some of us may also need to gender human qualities

like compassion and strength, though I, for one, resist this tendency, seeing all human spiritual and psychological qualities as equally available to men and women, though perhaps somewhat differently expressed.

AL'LAH, THE GOD

A few years ago, the name “Al’lah” came to me during Rosh HaShanah. This was a bit of a shock! Because of my Jewish upbringing, there was a



The name of God (Al'lah); photo, Cetta Kenney

part of me that associated the name Al’lah with Muslim aggression toward nonbelievers and with Arab aggression toward the state of Israel. And because of the rise of terrorism, a part of me also associated the name with suicide bombs and calls for holy war (*jihad*). Though I considered myself religiously pluralistic and inclusive, I was also aware of those parts of myself that still felt uneasy with the name Al’lah. Yet I believe that the way was paved for receiving this new name by an experience I had two years before.

In the spring of 1999 I had been seriously ill with pneumonia and had almost died of dehydration. Six weeks after becoming sick, I was still very weak and depleted. In a conversation with a friend, I learned about a wonderful spiritual healer. Though somewhat skeptical about the power of spiritual healing, I decided I had nothing to lose. It so happens that the man was a Jew who had converted to Islam. His Sufi method of healing was prayer – asking Al’lah to heal

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me. The effect of his prayer was so profound that I felt an instantaneous surge in my vital energies. That night I slept wonderfully and came back for a second healing. That healing catalyzed a powerful infusion of divine love that literally knocked me off my feet.

Those two healings were certainly decisive in helping me overcome my resistance to the name Al’lah, but it was praying to Al’lah for a year that completely transformed my relation to the name – and to Sufis, Muslims and Arabs. Before that year, I had been liberal in my views of Islam, and of Muslim and Arabic societies. I believed, in principle, that all peoples and all religions are basically equal though distinctive. But it is one thing to hold a conscious belief about religious pluralism, and another thing to pray with the divine name of another religion.

For a year, I was praying to Al'lah. For a year, I was chanting "Al'lah" and "*Le illehe il Al'lah*" ("There is no God but Al'lah" or, as some Sufis say, and I prefer, "There is nothing but Al'lah"). I also combined Al'lah with the short form of YHVH (YaH) and created the chant "YaH Al'lah", which has the same sound as the Sufi chant "Ya Al'lah." Though I felt resistance at first to the name "Al'lah", it began to melt away as I let myself be immersed in the sounds of the name. I discovered that "Al'lah" is one of the most beautifully resonant and transformative names of divinity I have ever experienced. It carries the breath in such a lovely and relaxing – yet strong and energizing – way. Praying to Al'lah deepened my identification with Muslims, Sufis and Arabs. Knowing that my Muslim brothers and sisters were also praying to Al'lah everyday helped me to root out the lingering prejudices, fears and resentments that were corroding my soul. The name Al'lah has also stuck with me. It is too beautiful, too powerful, to let go of. I continue to use it in my prayers, chants and meditations. It creates a wonderful harmony with the other divine names that also transform my life.

BRAHMAN, SOURCE OF BEING AND NON-BEING

This Rosh HaShanah I received the divine name "Brahman" – the Hindu name for the Infinite Ground of Being and Non-Being. This was also a surprise. For many years I have had resistance to Hinduism because of its polytheism. Though fascinated by India and impressed by the many great spiritual ideas, practices and persons

that have been birthed there, I have felt uneasy about worshipping many gods, especially gods with humanlike virtues and vices. My Jewish upbringing was staunchly monotheistic. Even as a boy, I was taught that the Talmud says it is better to die than to become a murderer, an adulterer or an idolater. The second of the Ten Commandments forbids the worshipping of other gods and the making of graven images of divinity, and throughout the Hebrew Bible, God severely chastises or kills idol worship-

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pers. Of course, the God of the Bible, like the gods of India, also seems to have humanlike virtues and vices, but I learned early on not to take those qualities literally – plus the Jewish God is not portrayed in such lavishly human ways as are Indian gods and goddesses like Shiva and Vishnu, Paravati and Kali. And while I am a lover of beauty, I tend to be noniconic in my approach to worship mostly because I find that images often limit my experience of divinity. In short, I have a lot of old conditioning as well as current convictions that incline me against worshipping anything other than the Single Source of existence.

Still, I believe that my reception of the name Brahman was prepared by earlier experiences. About seven years ago, I discovered the Hindu Advaita Vedanta tradition. Vedanta de-emphasizes the worship of personal deities and espouses

a nondualistic theology that understands Brahman as the source and substance of the universe. A few years later, I attended a number of wonderful Hindu kirtans (chanting services). When I chanted “*Sita Ram Ram Ram*” or “*Om nama Shivaya*” I simply allowed myself to be transported by the rhythmic power of the words and refrained from short-circuiting the experience by questioning

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whether I believed in the actuality of the myths associated with the particular gods. I was so filled with wild joy that at times I felt my body rising off the floor. Did it matter if I agreed or not with the biographical details linked to a particular divine name? What I discovered was that the name, when chanted with holy intention, created some of the most ecstatic experiences in my life.

In 2004, during my 6-week honeymoon in India, I was impressed by the deep devotion of many of the Indians I met and began to understand their forms of worships as not so fundamentally different from mine. The essence of worship for me is to communicate and align with the Source of Being and to allow that communication and alignment to transform my life. Praise and thanksgiving, confession and petition, can be found in every prayer tradition, but in India the life of prayer

is particularly potent. At a Sikh temple in Delhi, I had such a powerful experience of prayer that I wept for many minutes and felt moved to make an offering to the temple. My wife is a profound lover of India and is passionately connected to Indian philosophy, culture and art. She has also helped me to understand and esteem Hindu devotional worship.

My experience of the name *Brahman* is still new since I only received it a few months ago. But already I can feel it transforming my relationship to the Ground of Being. I also experience a real hunger to connect more deeply with the lands and peoples of India and to learn more about India’s religions, philosophies and literatures. Two years ago, when studying the Upanishads, I learned that OM is another name for Brahman. In recent months, OM has become a central chant for me, and I have also combined it with other divine names, like “YaH” (the short form of YHVH). Chanting “OM YaH” has given me a new experience of the transcendence and immanence of divinity, and I sense that it is infusing me with new energy to unify the diverse and sometimes conflicted aspects of my being as well as to bring new unifying energy to this diverse and often conflicted world.

EMBRACING THE MANY NAMES OF THE ONE

Living with and praying with divine names from diverse spiritual traditions have profoundly changed my life. I now feel a deeper kinship, a more embodied sense of unity, not only with Muslims and Hindus but with all

Om; photo, Cetta Kenney



Why not chant “Om” and “Shalom” in the same breath?

peoples. I am more profoundly aware – in mind, body, heart, and spirit – that all of us are equally and uniquely holy children of the One. And I now know in the depths of my being that the diverse names all bring us to the One and that each name transports us in unique ways. Every name has its own energies and so is a unique doorway to divine consciousness and connection. All of the names are precious embodiments and particular inflections of the divine Word.

I believe that much healing and connecting and understanding would come from sharing these names as well as sharing other traditions and transformative practices. Surely, many individuals and communities would be deeply affected as they grew to appreciate, even love and revere, the divine names and sacred practices of other traditions. Why should only Jews chant “Dodi” and “Rachamana”? Why should only

Muslims chant “Al’lah”? Why should only Hindus and Buddhists chant “Om”? Why should only Christians chant “Pater Noster”? Why not share the rich spiritual heritages we’ve been given by the One?

In my Kabbalah classes, I now make a point of bringing in one or two divine names from other traditions. Why not chant “Adonai” and “Al’lah” together? Why not chant “Om” and “Shalom” in the same breath?

NOTES

¹Our synagogue’s tradition was influenced by the Chasidic tradition that links a Biblical verse or verses to the numerical value of the New Year. Each year is represented by a different combination of Hebrew letters. The letters are treated as acronyms for Biblical verses, which are thought to reveal insights into the spiritual nature of the year.