



God as "El Shaddai"

Further thoughts on Parashat Lekha

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In this week's Torah (**Lekh Lekha**), the LORD described Himself using the Divine Name *El Shaddai* (אל שדי), often mistranslated as "God Almighty." In Genesis 17:1, YHVH said to Abram: "I am *El Shaddai*. Walk before me and be perfect." But why did the LORD choose to reveal Himself using this distinctive name to Abram?

Most English translations render *El Shaddai* as "God Almighty," probably because the translators of the Septuagint (i.e., the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) thought *Shaddai* came from a root verb (*shadad*: שדד) that means "to overpower" or "to destroy." The Latin Vulgate likewise translated *Shaddai* as "Omnipotens" (from which we get our English word *omnipotent*). In other words, the translators regarded this term to suggest that God is so overpowering that He is considered "Almighty."

According to the Jewish sages, however, *Shaddai* is a contraction of the phrase, "I said to the world, *dai* (enough)" (as in the famous word used in the Passover Haggadah, *Dayeinu* -- "it would have been sufficient"). God created the world but "stopped" at a certain point. He left creation "unfinished" because He wanted us to complete the job by means of exercising *chesed* (love) in repair of the world (*tikkun olam*).

Jacob's blessing given in Genesis 49:25, however, indicates that Shaddai might be related to the word for breasts (*shadaim*), indicating *sufficiency and nourishment* (i.e., "blessings of the breasts and of the womb" (**בְּרִכַּת שָׂדַיִם וְרֵחִים**)). In this case, the Name might derive from the contraction of *sha* ("who") and *dai* ("enough") to indicate God's complete sufficiency to nurture the fledgling nation into fruitfulness. Indeed, God first uses this Name when He refers to multiplying Abraham's offspring (Gen. 17:2).



Understood in this light, the name *Ei Shaddai* provides a picture of God's nurturing love for our lives... God sustains us and loves us, like a mother loves her newborn child...

Ei Shaddai is used almost exclusively in reference to the three great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and (according to Exodus 6:2-3) was the primary name by which God was known to the founders of Israel (the name *YHVH* given to Moses suggests God's absolute self-sufficiency, whereas the name *Elohim* suggests God's sovereign power). The word "Shaddai" (by itself) was used later by the prophets (e.g., Num. 24:4; Isa. 13:6, Ezek. 1:24) as well as in the books of Job, Ruth, and in the Psalms. In modern Judaism, Shaddai is also thought to be an acronym for the phrase *Shomer daitot Yisrael* - "Guardian of the doors of Israel" - abbreviated as the letter Shin on most mezuzot:



Note: While the name *Ei Shaddai* presents a "feminine image" of the LORD, this is assuredly appropriate, since God created *both* genders as a reflection of His image, as it is written: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female (**זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה**) he created them (Gen. 1:27). However, some people have made the dubious suggestion that *Ei Shaddai* should further be translated as "the many breasted One," even though such language suggests the abominable practices and idols common in various ancient fertility cults - customs that were later subject to the most severe judgment of God upon the seven Canaanite nations. It should be clear, in light of the overall context of the revelation given in the Torah, that the name *Ei Shaddai* is directly connected with the sanctity of the promise given to Abraham regarding the future growth of his family, and ultimately of the coming of the promised Seed, the Messiah...

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