

Honoring the Name

Why We Use Hashem

An entry point for anyone learning to walk with the G-d of Israel.

In Hebrew, **Hashem** means *The Name*. When we say it, we are not avoiding G-d. We are honoring Him. We are saying His Name is not a word to throw around. It carries weight. This guide explains what the Name is, what the Hebrew word *shem* actually means, why we treat it the way we do, and how you can start honoring it this week.

1. A name is more than a label

Start with the Hebrew. In English, a name is just a tag we use to tell one person from another. *Shem* carries far more. Strong's lists its range of meaning as an appellation, a mark, a memorial of individuality, honor, authority, and character. Take those one at a time.

- **Appellation.** What He is called. The word itself.
- **A mark.** An identifier. A distinguishing sign that sets one apart from another.
- **A memorial of individuality.** The memory. The legacy that the name carries forward.
- **Honor.** The reputation and the renown attached to the name.
- **Authority.** Influence and ownership. To act in a name is to act with that authority.
- **Character.** Identity. The essence. The inner nature of the one named.

Put it together. A *shem* is the entire identity. The appearance, the distinction, the legacy, the reputation, the authority, the inner essence. So when the Torah guards G-d's Name, it is guarding everything He is. To honor the Name is to honor Him.

2. The Name He revealed

G-d did not stay hidden. He revealed His Name so we could know Him. At the burning bush, Moses asks what to tell Israel, and G-d answers with His Name.

Exodus 3:14 *And G-d said to Moses, I will be what I will be. And He said, This is what you shall say to the children of Israel: I will be has sent me to you.*

The four-letter Name that follows, written **Yod-He-Vav-He**, comes from the Hebrew verb “to be.” It points to the One who simply is, who was, and who will be. The very next verse calls it His Name forever.

Exodus 3:15 *This is My Name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations.*

Because a Torah scroll is written without vowel points, the word for “forever” (*l'olam*) can be read with a second set of vowels, “to be concealed” (*l'alem*). The Name is to be remembered in every generation, and it is also to be guarded. (*Kiddushin 71a; Pesachim 50a*)

Both are true. We carry the Name, and we cover it.

3. Why we do not pronounce it

In the time of the Temple, the four-letter Name was spoken in sacred service, but never casually. The Mishnah says that in the Temple the priests pronounced the Name during the priestly blessing, while outside the Temple they used the substitute Name. (*Sotah* 7:6, *Tamid* 7:2) On Yom Kippur, the High Priest also pronounced the explicit Name during the service, and when the priests and people heard it, they bowed and fell on their faces. (*Yoma* 6:2)

After the Temple was destroyed, that sacred setting was gone, and the guarded pronunciation passed out of ordinary use. So a practice grew that protects the Name in everyday life:

- In prayer and when reading Scripture aloud, we say **Adonai** (“My Lord”) wherever the four-letter Name appears.
- In ordinary speech and study, we say **Hashem**, “The Name,” so we do not handle even the substitute carelessly.
- In writing, we write **G-d** and **Hashem**, and we do not print the four-letter Name on things that get thrown away.

Some today try to reconstruct the original sound of the four-letter Name and pronounce it. The problem is that it cannot be done with any confidence. Ancient Hebrew was written with consonants. The vowels lived in the mouths of those who read the text, not on the page. The true pronunciation of the Name was guarded so closely that once it left common use, no reliable record of how it sounded survived.

The vowel marks printed on the Name in our texts are not its own. They were added later as a cue to say the substitute aloud. Read those marks as if they spelled the Name and you get a form that never existed. So every attempt to revive the pronunciation rests on guesswork, and the guesses do not agree with each other. We will not build worship on a guess. We honor the Name by keeping the tradition we received, not by gambling on a sound no one can verify.

This is not superstition. It is reverence with a reason behind it. The Torah gives the reason directly.

4. What the Torah commands

The Torah returns to the Name again and again. These verses shape how we treat it.

Exodus 20:7 *You shall not take the Name of Adonai your G-d in vain, for Adonai will not hold guiltless anyone who takes His Name in vain.*

Do not empty the Name out. Do not make it cheap or use it for nothing. (See also Deuteronomy 5:11.)

Deuteronomy 28:58 *If you will not observe to do all the words of this Torah written in this book, to fear this glorious and awesome Name, Adonai your Elohim ...*

Transliteration: *l'yirah et ha-Shem ha-nichbad v'ha-nora ha-zeh, et Adonai Elohecha*

Word by word. *l'yirah*, to fear. *et ha-Shem*, the Name. *ha-nichbad*, the glorious. *v'ha-nora*, and the awesome. *ha-zeh*, this. *et Adonai Elohecha*, Adonai your Elohim.

Read it straight through. To fear **Hashem**, the glorious and the awesome, this one, Adonai your Elohim. The verse names the Name, then tells you who it is. Adonai and Elohim, His two central Names, stand here as one. Adonai is Elohim. One Name. One G-d.

When you say **Hashem**, the Torah has already told you who you mean. Fearing this Name is not separate from keeping the Torah. It sits at the center of it.

Leviticus 22:32 *You shall not profane My holy Name, and I will be sanctified among the children of Israel.*

Two sides of one coin. Do not profane the Name (*chillul Hashem*). Sanctify it (*kiddush Hashem*). How we live and speak either honors His Name in front of the nations or drags it down.

Leviticus 24:11 *And the son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name and cursed, and they brought him to Moses ...*

Here the Torah uses that word again. It says he blasphemed *ha-Shem*, the Name. Twice now, in two different books, the Torah calls the four-letter Name simply “the Name.” That is exactly the word we still use today when we say **Hashem**. The penalty in this case was severe.

Leviticus 24:16 *And one who blasphemes the Name of Adonai shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall surely stone him.*

You do not need to fear a death penalty to take the point. The gravity of the punishment tells you the weight of the Name.

Deuteronomy 12:3–4 *You shall tear down their altars and destroy the names of their gods from that place. You shall not do so to Adonai your G-d.*

We erase the names of idols. We do not erase His. This is the root of why we write G-d with care and do not toss His Name in the trash.

5. Doesn't Scripture tell us to use the Name?

A committed reader may push back here, and the pushback is fair. Scripture tells us to call on the Name (Joel 2:32), to make His Name known among the peoples (Psalm 105:1), and to declare His Name through all the earth (Exodus 9:16). Jeremiah also warns against prophets who make His people forget His Name (Jeremiah 23:27). So is saying Adonai or Hashem a way of hiding the Name?

Start with what calling on the Name means in the Torah itself. When Abraham called on the Name of Adonai, he built an altar and worshiped (Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33). He was not trying to perfect a pronunciation. To call on the Name is to turn to Him, trust Him, worship Him, and live before Him. So when Joel says everyone who calls on the Name will be delivered, the one delivered is the one who turns to Him, not the one who masters four syllables.

Joel 2:32 *And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of Adonai shall be delivered.*

The same is true when Scripture tells us to make His Name known. Psalm 105:1 explains itself: “Call on His Name” and “make known His deeds among the peoples.” The two lines belong together. To declare His Name is to declare who He is, what He has done, His power, His faithfulness, and His character. Egypt learned His Name through the plagues, not because Pharaoh was taught Hebrew vowels, but because Hashem showed who He is. Making the Name known means spreading His renown, not His vowels.

Psalm 105:1 *Give thanks to Adonai, call on His name, make known His deeds among the peoples.*

Jeremiah cuts the other way too. The false prophets made Israel forget the Name just as their fathers forgot it for Baal (Jeremiah 23:27). That is not about losing a sound. It is about trading the true G-d for idols. A person could pronounce the letters and still forget Him. Guarding the Name in reverence is the opposite of forgetting it.

And nothing has been hidden. The Name still stands in every Torah scroll, the four letters intact, exactly as given. What grew up around it is a reverent way of reading it aloud. The written Word is whole. More than that, the same Torah commands us to fear this glorious and awesome Name (Deuteronomy 28:58), not to profane it (Leviticus 22:32), and not to lift it up for nothing (Exodus 20:7). Guarding the Name obeys the Word. It does not hide it.

Here is the heart of the answer. Calling on the Name was never about merely vocalizing four letters. It is about living in covenant with the One who bears it. The one who guards the Name is not hiding it. He is honoring it. Know Him. Trust Him. Proclaim what He has done. Carry His Name with reverence.

6. The heart of it: honor and relationship

Here is the part that lands at home. Think about how you use a person's name. You call your friends and peers by their first name, because they are your equals. You do not walk up to a judge, a police officer, or a high-ranking officer and call them by name. You use their title. You honor the position.

Children learn this slowly. A small child learns a parent's first name and wants to use it. It is sweet. "Your name is Matthew," and they giggle, proud that they know it. A good parent corrects it gently. "Yes, that is my name. Very good. But you do not get to call me that."

This is not only manners. The tradition makes it a rule. A child does not call a parent by name. Rambam states it plainly. A son must not call his father by name, in his life or after it, but says "my father, my teacher." (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mamrim 6:3; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 240:2, from Kiddushin 31b*) Notice the logic. The same reasoning the tradition uses to guard the honor of a parent is the reasoning we use to guard the Name. You honor the relationship by not reaching for the bare name. If that holds for a mother or father, how much more for the One who made them.

Here is the real danger, and it is not that you think you are G-d's equal. It is that casual, familiar use wears reverence down. Say anything often enough and lightly enough and it goes common in your mouth. That is how the holy gets treated like the ordinary. The nations handle their gods lightly. We are called to something else. We have even turned His set-apart Name into a logo. People sell socks, soap, and bumper stickers stamped with the four-letter Name. We made common what He set apart. That is exactly what Leviticus 22:32 warns against, profaning the Name instead of sanctifying it.

Saying **Hashem** is one small way to keep the honor where it belongs. It is not about distance. It is about relationship. You can be close to someone and still honor them. In fact, real closeness includes honor.

Honor is not only about how you speak. It is about how you live. His Name is honored or profaned by the way His people carry themselves in front of the nations. When Israel broke covenant and was scattered, the nations looked on and His Name took the damage.

Ezekiel 36:22–23 *I do this not for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy Name, which you profaned among the nations. And I will sanctify My great Name, and the nations shall know that I am Adonai, when I am sanctified in you before their eyes.*

Read what drives the promise. He gathers and restores His people for the sake of His Name. The same lives that profaned it among the nations are meant to sanctify it among the nations. That is the honor that matters most. Not only the word you use, but the life that backs it. For the scattered of Israel returning to Him, this is the calling. Carry the Name well, and the nations will see who He is.

7. The Names and what they reveal

Hashem is not the only Name. Each Name G-d reveals shows a different part of who He is. We do not treat them as separate gods. Taken together they paint one picture of the One we love.

Name	Means	What it reveals
Hashem	<i>"The Name"</i>	The everyday word we use in speech and study, out of reverence for the Name itself.
Adonai	<i>"My Lord, Master"</i>	Spoken in prayer and Scripture reading in place of the written four-letter Name. He is Master.
Yod-He-Vav-He	<i>"He who is"</i>	The personal covenant Name from the verb to be. The eternal One. Not pronounced. (Exodus 3:14–15)
Elohim	<i>"G-d, Power"</i>	The Name tied to creation, justice, and the order of nature. (Genesis 1:1)
El Shaddai	<i>"G-d Almighty"</i>	The Name the patriarchs knew Him by. The G-d who is enough. (Exodus 6:3)
El Elyon	"G-d Most High"	The sovereign above all. The Name by which Melchizedek knew G-d. (Genesis 14:18-20)
El Kanna	"Jealous G-d"	The Torah says outright, His Name is Jealous. He does not share His people with other gods. (Exodus 34:14)
Tzevaot	<i>"Hosts, Armies"</i>	The One who commands the hosts of heaven. (1 Samuel 1:3)
13 Attributes	<i>His mercy</i>	Not a Name in the same way as the others, but how He describes His own character: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger. (Exodus 34:6–7)

8. How this is handled in practice

1. Say **Hashem** in conversation and study when you refer to G-d's Name.
2. Say **Adonai** when you pray and when you read Scripture out loud and reach the four-letter Name.
3. Write **G-d** and **Hashem**. Do not print the four-letter Name on things that get worn out, trampled, or thrown away.
4. Do not erase or trash a paper that has the Name written out. Set such pages aside.
5. When people around you use the Name lightly, do not join in. You do not have to lecture. Just keep your own speech honorable.
6. Pay attention to your habits this week. You will be surprised how often the Name slips out as filler. That noticing is the start.

9. For discussion

1. The Hebrew *shem* means the whole identity, not just a label. How does that change what the command “do not take the Name in vain” is really protecting?
2. You would not call a judge or a parent by their first name. Where have you treated G-d's Name more casually than you would treat a person you respect?
3. Look at the table of Names. Which one do you most need to know right now, and why?
4. Name one concrete way you will honor Hashem this week.

One stick in His hand. Ezekiel 37:19