

GEEOHDEE

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It has now become a requirement of Orthodoxy that wherever one writes the word made up of the letters GEE OH DEE in reference to the Holy Name, out of reverence one does not write the name in full but with a dash, to wit: G-D. Now my father always insisted that if we were writing English we ought to write English and not some bastardization of it. Just as when we used the Hebrew language we should be grammatically correct. For centuries, the name in English for the creator of the Universe has been GOD. Or as wags often like to joke, DOG backwards. Should we need to treat the Divine Name in a different language with respect? Should we bury dollar bills because they bear this name in English (or perhaps American)? Times change. My father's generation is long gone, and G-D has now swept all before it in the religious world, so has Alm-ghty, and doubtless soon so too will Div-ne, and perhaps Cre-tor as well.

The Ten Commandments stresses the importance of not taking the Divine Name in vain. In those days people took such things so much more seriously. Nowadays OMG turns up every second sentence spoken, and people make fun of religion all the time. Nothing is sacred anymore, and no one seems to bother about swear words, oaths, or the delicacies of speech; if the faithful were determined by the times the Divine Name is uttered in daily speech there would not be an atheist on earth.

The Bible uses various names for what we call God in Hebrew. There are seven altogether (Talmud, Shavuot 35a). Of these seven, one specifically is holier than all others—the so-called tetragrammaton, the letters Yod Hey Vav Hey, which is never vocalized. Only the High Priest was allowed to when he entered the Holy of Holies. We on the inside tend to laugh at non-Jewish attempts to discover how it should be pronounced—Jehovah, Yahweh—they're obviously way off beam. For everyone else, when reading the name in the text it is pronounced "Adonay". Even that is not used in common speech; then we simply say HaShem, The Name. These and the rest of the seven may not, according to Talmudic law, be obliterated, desecrated, or trashed, and must be buried if torn or worn. These are the extents to which Jewish law requires one to treat the Divine Names respectfully. Yet we go further. All of the seven names when pronounced outside of a sacred text or usage are indeed pronounced differently than the way they are written.

In the Code of Jewish Law, the great commentator known as the Shach, Shabtai ben Meir HaKohen (1621–1662), was asked if one had to treat the German name "Gott" with similar sanctity, and he said quite specifically that the laws only applied to the Hebrew names (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dea 276). And given the different ways "God" is used in other religions to refer to their various interpretations, it is not surprising that he thought that the Hebrew God was not at the same as "gott".

It was on this basis that my father thought of putting in a dash as frankly

silly. His disdain for dog English extended beyond the Divine Names into what we once called Yinglish and is now often referred to as Yeshiva Speak or Frumspeak—a mixture of English and Yiddish words or Yiddishisms that have infiltrated Orthodox speech such as “by us” or “to bring down”, well documented in Chaim Weiser’s cute book “Frumspeak: The first Dictionary of Yeshivish”, which is already 20 years old.

My father thought that if you wanted to express yourself in Yiddish you should use Yiddish and if English, use English correctly. We were drilled to use words correctly, to know the difference between uninterested and disinterested, between continuous and continual, obliged and obligated. He thought Americanisms were for American, not English. I still cringe every time I hear many Americans say Axe instead of Ask. He was punctilious about usage. In my youth “the likes of” was working-class or uneducated usage, but nowadays it peppers the pages of The Economist and The New York Times. He wasn’t consistent. He made great fun of the French desperately trying to keep the evil influence of English out of their pure language. Indeed, some Frenchmen do still try to avoid “le weekend” and “email” and “computer” and “tablet”. But we know that languages are fluid and usages and vocabularies constantly change.

So why, if it is clear that misspelling the Divine name in English by putting a dash instead of a letter is not required, has it become such a test of holiness? Why, was kosher once the standard, then it was Glatt, then Chasidish, and now Mehadrin? Of course we all like to play games of religious one-upmanship and show off. But this is more a matter of a social security blanket, belonging, wearing the same uniform, the same hat, the same head covering. It shows to others where you belong and who your friends are. It is a way of giving you some much needed security in a troubling, complex world, and signaling to likeminded others that you are “safe”. And of where you want to book your seats in the World to Come.

And I have no problem with that. Why shouldn’t people be able to choose their level of piety? So long as you don’t insist that I have to.