

Shaimot Part II - Names of God

- I. Introduction.** We continue our discussion of *shaimot* with a specific focus on the writing and reciting of references to the name of God.
- II. Writing B”H (*bet heh*) and BS”D (*bet samech daled*).** The Rama (*Yoreh Deah 276:10*) rules that in a case of need one may erase the double *yud* that is printed in most *siddurim* as a reference to God’s name. The clear implication is that absent some need, one may not erase these letters because, although they are not the name of God, they do refer to God. Thus, one should also be careful not to treat these letters with disrespect. This ruling would seem to logically extend to all common references to the name of God. Whether or not writing B”H on top of a paper is also prohibited is the subject of debate amongst leading contemporary authorities.
- A. Rav Yosef Rosen. Presumably based on the above mentioned Rama, Rabbi Yosef Rosen *zt”l* (Responsa *Tzofnas Paneach* 196) rules that one should not write B”H on the top of letters. Just as the double *yud* should not be erased because it is a reference to God, one may not write B”H because the *heh* is a reference to God.
- B. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (*Yechaveh Da’as* 3:78 based on *Chida Brit Olam* page 148a) disagrees with Rav Rosen’s assessment and rules that one may write B”H (*bet, heh*) on the top of his letters even though the letter “*heh*” is a clear reference to the name of God. Rav Yosef goes a step further in citing *Toldot Yitzchak (Parshat Metzora)* who strongly supports the custom to write “*bet, heh*” on the top of all letters as a constant reminder of God.
- C. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (*Iggerot Moshe Yoreh Deah* 2:38) rules that one may include the B”H header on his letters. He argues that there is very little chance that the letter will actually be erased, and it is also unlikely that the letter will be treated with disrespect because most excess paper is burnt rather than thrown in the trash.¹ Rav Moshe does point out, however, that there is no reason to encourage this custom because it has no basis in rabbinic literature. Furthermore, Rav Moshe cautions, one should not write B”H on top of a paper that includes idle chatter or *lashon hara* because it is inappropriate to associate God’s name with such writing. If one wanted to write BS”D (i.e. *besiyata dishmaya*) there would be no objection because there is no specific reference to the name of God.
- D. Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch. Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot V’hanhagot* 1:640), while agreeing with the conclusion of Rav Moshe’s *teshuva*, takes issue with the logic employed to arrive at that conclusion. Rav Shternbuch argues that even if our papers were commonly erased and thrown in the garbage there would be no problem with writing B”H on the paper. He cites the Brisker Rav who explained that there is a distinction to be drawn between the “double *yud*” that the Rama had prohibited and the writing and erasing of B”H. Whereas the “double *yud*” is meant as a substitute for

¹ This particular teshuva is undated, but, needless to say, Rav Moshe’s assumption about the normal method of disposal for paper in this country is no longer accurate.

the name of God, the B”H is not considered to be a true substitute for God’s name and is therefore not subject to the requirement of showing proper respect to the name of God. Rabbi Shternbuch also notes that the Brisker Rav would not hesitate to write B”H on a paper that would eventually be discarded. Interestingly, Rabbi Shternbuch points out that the Vilna Gaon did not have the custom of heading his letters with a B”H, and there are conflicting reports regarding the custom of Rav Chaim Mi’Volozhin.

- III. God in English.** In order to avoid any disrespect to the names of God many people are careful not to write the word God in English. The exact status of the name of God in any language other than Hebrew, and the permissibility of uttering these names, is the subject of a debate amongst leading *poskim*.
- A. Opinion of the *Mishnah Berurah*. The *Mishnah Berurah* (85:10) rules that there are no limitations placed on the writing of God’s name in languages other than Hebrew. Indeed, this lenient view is strongly supported by the *p’sak* of the *Shach* (*Yoreh Deah* 179:11) and *Achiezer* (3:32). Furthermore, a paper that says “God” may be thrown away in the normal fashion. However, the *Mishnah Berurah* writes that the word “God” should not be uttered in the bathroom or other areas that are unclean and mentioning the word “God” may be a violation of saying God’s name in vain.
- B. Opinion of Rav Chaim Ozer Grozinski and Rav Akiva Eiger. Not only may the printed word “God” be written and thrown away normally, but the recital of the word “God” does not pose any halachic problem. After all, the status of the written word should be no different than the status of the spoken word. Rav Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot V’hanhagot* 1:639) takes the analogy between the written and spoken word one step further. He argues that just as one may not treat the written word “God” with utter disrespect, one may also not mention the word “God” when engaged in idle chatter. In order to avoid violation of this prohibition, Rav Shternbuch claims, people began to use the word “Eibeshter” in place of “God” in the context of daily conversation.
- C. Opinion of Rav Yonasan Eibshutz. Rav Yonasan Eibshutz (*Tumim, Choshen Mishpat* 27) takes a stringent approach with the mention of the word “God” and extends this prohibition to other references to God such as “Eibeshter” because although they are not a formal name of God, they are a clear reference to God.
- IV. Shalom.** The gemara (*Shabbat* 10b) rules that one may not greet his friend with the word “Shalom” in the bathhouse because “Shalom” is one of the names of God. *Tosafot* (*Sota* 10a) rules that for this reason one may not erase the word “Shalom”. Although God is also called a “*Chanun V’rachum*” all agree that these words may be erased because they are descriptions of God rather than the formal name of God. *Rosh* (*Teshuvot Harash* 3:15) disagrees with *Tosafot* and maintains that one may erase the name “Shalom” just as one may erase “*Chanun V’rachum*”.
- A. Writing Shalom.

1. The stringent approach. *Rama (Yoreh Deah 276)* cites those who are careful not to write the entire word “Shalom”, and instead merely omit the letter “mem” when writing “Shalom” in Hebrew.
 2. The lenient approach. *Shach* (ibid. 16) notes that the general custom is to be lenient in this matter. (See also *Biur Hagra 276:29* and *Nekudot Hakesef* ibid.) Mishnah Berurah (85:10) takes the lenient approach and only requires that the word “Shalom” not be used in the bathroom in accordance with the ruling of the *gemara* in *Masechet Shabbat*.
 3. The compromise approaches. *Pitchei Teshuvah (276:28)* cites the *Radvaz (Responsa 202)* who writes that one should only be careful to refrain from using the name “Shalom” in the context of a greeting because the greeting is a blessing that one should be granted peace from “the One Who grants peace”. However, merely writing that there is “shalom” in the world or between two people is clearly permissible as it is obviously not a reference to God. Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Orach Chaim 4:40:3*), while acknowledging that the overwhelming majority of people are entirely lenient in this matter, limits the applicability of the leniency in a similar way to the *Radvaz*. Unlike the *Radvaz*, however, Rav Moshe distinguishes between different types of greetings. He says that whenever it is obvious from the context that the word “shalom” is being used to mean “peace” and not to mean the name of Hashem it is permissible to treat it as non-shaimos (e.g. *shalom aleichem, shalom u’bracha*). If, however, there is any ambiguity in the term, where it may be understood to mean peace or to mean the name of Hashem one must refrain from writing it in a regular letter. An example of this is when somebody write “*shalom imecha*” that can be translated either as “you should live in peace” or as “God should be with you.” When the word “shalom” is written independently at the beginning or end of a letter, Rav Moshe recommends that one be careful not to discard the letter because we may assume that the intention in writing this is to conspicuously begin a letter with the name of God.
- B. Somebody whose name is Shalom. Although we have mentioned that many people are careful to leave a letter out of the word “Shalom” when they write it, based on the previously mentioned sources relating to the writing of Shalom in other contexts it would seem that somebody whose name is Shalom is permitted to write his entire name without omitting any letters.
- C. Other names that contain letters from God’s name. On a similar note, one whose name contains within it letters that normally refer to God (the last two letters of “Aryeh”, “Michoel”, etc.) are not required to insert a line between the last two letters of their name. *Tashbetz (1:177)* and *Mishnah Halachot (3:9)* rule that when one writes his own name it is self evident

that there is no intention to refer to the name of God with those letters of his name.

V. Conclusion. We have provided a basic overview of the sources relating to saying and writing the various names of, and references to, God. In the next section, we discuss issues of *shaimot* that relate to modern technology (emails, tapes, etc.)