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Getting Your Prayers Answered

Have you ever had a prayer answered? Stop for a moment and consider the implications.

You live in a small town in the Midwest. There is an extremely large and unsightly pothole in front of your house. For the last four months the local municipality has ignored your persistent requests to have it fixed. Finally, in an act of frustration, you call the White House and ask for the president. (Hey, it's worth a try.)

To your utter amazement, the president himself gets on the phone. You quickly explain your problem. The president listens for a minute, takes down your address, and then hangs up. You don't really expect anything to be done about it.

The next morning you look out your window and, lo and behold, an army corps of engineers is busy at work fixing your road. The president of the United States took your request

seriously and sent in the troops to fix the pothole.

This is what it means to get your prayer answered.

Now, we all know this isn't happening to a regular Joe. But who is the one person who can always get through to the president?

His child, of course.

God is our Father and we are His child. Just as a parent fulfills a child's request, so, too, God answers our prayers. But in order to have God answer your prayer, you need to know He is willing and able to do so. And you have to be honest, sincere and responsible about what you pray for, as King David wrote, "God is close to all those who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him sincerely" (*Psalms* 145:18). Prayer requires accessing your inner core and being real with God. Where are you, and what do you really want? It means dropping all pretenses and communicating your genuine thoughts and needs, in the reality of God's presence.

Why Do We Need To Pray?

God already knows our needs. He certainly does not need us to remind Him of them. So why do we need to pray? Why doesn't God just give us what we need without our having to ask?

God does not need our prayers - we do.

God does not need our prayers - we do. Prayer is a reflection of our desires and an extension of our power of free choice. It helps us refine and affirm what it is we want out of life. If a billionaire father handed his child unlimited cash on a silver platter, the child would grow up terribly spoiled and irresponsible. Similarly, if God gave us everything automatically, we

would never be forced to work out what it is we really want in life. Life would be comfortable, but we would remain shallow and undeveloped. It is through the challenges we face and the efforts we make as a result of those challenges that we learn to appreciate the value of what we want.

God has our best interests at heart. He wants us to earn our growth because that is how we retain our independence and become real about what it is we want to accomplish.

Five Aspects to Being Real with Prayer

#1: Get Clear on Your Bottom Line: Is What You Want Good for You?

To get our prayers answered, we have to know that what we seek is in our best interests. Will the fulfillment of this request bring us closer to God or push us further away? We can only expect God to answer our prayer if its attainment will bring us closer to reality, not escapism.

When I was eight years old, the World's Fair came to New York. My entire class decided to play hooky one day and go to the World's Fair. But there was one condition: Everyone had to bring a dollar. If you did not have a dollar, you could not come.

When I was a child the only way I could get a dollar from my father was to learn a chapter of Mishnah by heart. But there was no way I could memorize a whole chapter on such short notice. So I figured I might as well go to school that day. I would be the only one there – a hero!

I started walking to school when it suddenly occurred to me: Keep your eyes on the pavement, Noah, maybe you'll find a dollar!

I started looking. One block. No dollar. Two blocks. No dollar. I started to pray, "God, a dollar bill... You have them lying around the street sometimes. Just this one time, let me find a dollar bill."

Two more blocks, no dollar. I thought maybe God wants something from me. So I started making all kinds of promises. "Hashem, I'll take out the garbage. And I won't fight with my sister."

Still no dollar.

I upped the ante. "God, if You give me a dollar, I'll learn a chapter of Mishnah and I *won't* take the dollar from my father. You can trust me. It's a loan. Okay?"

No dollar.

Finally, I rounded the corner and the school was in sight. It was time to pull out all the stops. "God, give me one dollar, and I'll never do anything wrong again for the rest of my life!"

And then I caught myself. "Noah, who are you kidding? If you find the dollar, you're going to play hooky!"

We cannot expect God to give us a dollar so that we can do the wrong thing. To avoid this mistake, we need to do the work of clarifying our desires. We need to ask ourselves: Why do we want this? Does the Almighty want us to have this? God's answer – whether yes or no – always tells us something important about ourselves or will likely give us insight into the validity of what we are seeking.

Before you ask, make sure what you are praying for is good for you.

#2: Be Responsible, Make an Effort

Prayer is not an escape from personal effort and responsibility. It is a tool to help us refine our understanding of what we want and to realize that God is the true source of all that we accomplish.

Prayer focuses us on reality. If we are serious about what we are praying for, then we first need to be responsible and put in our best efforts to make it happen. Prayer is not a wish; it is predicated on working hard and taking responsibility.

Ask yourself: Do I really want to accomplish this? Am I willing to take responsibility to do what I can to attain it? How much am I prepared to sacrifice for it?

#3: Expect the Good

Being real about prayer means we realize we are praying to our Father in Heaven Who wants only our good and has the power to do anything. Therefore, we should anticipate that God wants to help us. Anything we ask for is infinitesimally less than what God has already given to us.

If we do not expect that God will answer our prayer, God will not invade our space and shock us with success. He wants us to earn the realization that He is our Father in Heaven and that we can always count on Him.

By turning our prayer down, God is telling us that we have a problem that needs addressing; we need to realign.

To illustrate, imagine a 22-year-old driving through Manhattan during rush hour in the middle of July. Red lights, gridlock, honking, summer heat... *aggravation*.

If his father was in charge of all the traffic lights in New York City and was able to track his location at any given time, he'd have it made. His father would arrange one green light after another, all the way across town!

The Almighty can arrange it for him. He created the universe. Traffic in Manhattan is not overly taxing for Him.

So here goes our driver. Green light, green light, green light, green light. He says to himself, *This is too good to be true. I don't deserve this.*

Red light.

If you don't anticipate God's help, then you have lost sight of God as your Father. So God breaks the flow in order to realign your focus.

Focus on the fact that the Almighty wants everything to be good for you. When you do that, He'll move mountains to answer a prayer that is good for you.

#4: Be Shocked if You Don't Get It

Nothing God does is an accident. If things do not go smoothly for you, your first reaction should be one of shock. "What's going on? Why is God doing this? What message does He want me to get?"¹

An uncle wrote letters to his nephew at college to find out how he was doing and keep up the relationship. After six months and numerous letters, the nephew hadn't written back once.

The next time, the uncle wrote his standard letter, but this time, he added a P.S.: "I've enclosed a hundred dollar check for you." Then he deliberately mailed the letter without the check.

The nephew received the letter and could not find the check. As expected, the uncle immediately got a letter in return: "College is great... I like my dorm room... I'm taking physics. By the way, you forgot to enclose the check. Love, your favorite nephew."

The Almighty knows how to get our attention. When we forget that He loves us, He sends a red light to refocus us.

But there's one big difference between the uncle and God: God is not hurt when we ignore Him. We are. God has no needs and doesn't need a relationship with us. It is we who need a relationship with Him. Our greatest pleasure is being in touch with God. That's why He arranges small mishaps to get our attention. It is all for our own benefit.

#5: Listen to God's Lessons

If you are serious about a relationship with God, then you understand that God is always teaching you, even when He does not answer your prayer in the affirmative.

When life is suddenly full of inconveniences, stop and ask: *Why is He trying to get my attention?* In some ways this is the most demanding aspect, because it requires us to hold onto the perception that God is our Father in Heaven and that everything He does is for our good, even when we are feeling pain. Saying with clarity and conviction, "*Gam zu l'tovah*, this too is for the good," with no resentment and bitterness, demonstrates the deepest realization that God is our loving Father.

If we are unable to say "*Gam zu l'tovah*" with a full heart, then it is almost impossible for us to properly hear what God is saying to us. God is very articulate, but if we lose sight of the fact that He is our Father in Heaven, then our relationship is off kilter and any lesson we derive will necessarily be distorted. With the awareness that Hashem loves us, we can take stock of this area of our life and try to understand what the Almighty is telling us.

In Summary

Prayer takes real work. It requires getting into

your bones that the Almighty is your Father in Heaven Who loves you.

Know what you want and why you want it, and ensure that what you are seeking is in fact good for you. Take responsibility and put in your effort. Expect the good and be shocked if things do not go smoothly. Ask yourself, why is the Almighty trying to get my attention? And lastly, strive to understand the lesson the Almighty is sending you. Ask yourself: What is He teaching me?

Applying these tools to the daily prayers will transform your relationship with God.

Adapted from [Wisdom for Living](#): Rabbi Noah Weinberg on the parasha. [Click here to order](#).

1. The Gemara (*Berachos* 34a) explains that the structure of Shemoneh Esrei mirrors a servant's interaction with his master. The servant first praises the master, then asks the master for what he needs, and finally thanks the master for fulfilling his requests. (Maharsha ad loc.) The implication is that immediately after asking God for our needs, we are so confident that they are "in the bag," we can already thank Him for fulfilling them. (cf. *Beis Elokim Tefillah* 2, s.v. *U'kemo*, *Vezehu*)



Do You Hear What I'm Saying?

Oftentimes in conversation, someone will remark, "Do you hear what I'm saying?" This actually means, "Have my words been heard and understood?" or, more plainly, "Do you get me?" Truly hearing another means being fully present in the moment and totally focused on the person speaking. There's no wiggle room for checking emails or taking a

phone call. That's tantamount to turning a deaf ear.

The ability to hear connects us to the world around us and to each other. Hearing enables effective and informed communication that none of our other senses can achieve. The famed deaf and blind activist, Helen Keller, once said, "Blindness cuts us off from things, but deafness cuts us off from people."

So indispensable is the sense of hearing that Jewish law rules that one who is responsible for another's deafness is obligated to compensate him the complete value of his life. It's as if he robbed another of all his faculties. By contrast, if someone is found guilty of causing another to become blind, Jewish law states that he must compensate him for the loss of his eye only.²¹⁶ This reflects the prominence with which the Torah regards the sense of hearing.

Obviously, there is passive and active hearing. The contrast is significant and highlights how much we fail to truly hear. This leads to the question: How attentively do we "hear" God? Do we really "hear" what God is telling us?

This week's Torah portion includes the first paragraph of Judaism's main affirmation of belief: the *Shema*. The word *shema* means "hear," but it refers to a type of inner hearing that's beyond the mere physical. *Shema* expresses a deeper dimension of spiritual hearing that integrates itself within one's entire being. The *Shema* is a Divine call to the soul to perceive God's oneness. A Jew is to be fully engaged in the moment three times daily when reciting this prayer of faith. It's a mitzvah—an opportunity to connect with God and to build a stronger relationship with Him.

When the Torah was given at Har Sinai, all of Israel proclaimed in unison, "We will do [*naaseh*], and we will hear [*v'nishma*]." What does it really mean to hear? Human consciousness functions in such a way that we deeply understand something only after we've

actually experienced it. (Just ask a first-time mother after giving birth to explain this.) Before that, our understanding is just abstract or theoretical.

When reciting the *Shema*, we "hear" in order to deeply understand and integrate the meaning of the words within us. Thereby, we both "do" and "hear" (understand), perpetually connecting ourselves to the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The experience is ongoing and renewed daily. It counteracts the natural tendency we have to take things for granted. Daily renewal is spiritually and mentally rejuvenating. It's the antidote to an attitude of same old, same old dullness.

At Mount Sinai, the giving of the Ten Commandments was accompanied by both natural and metaphysical phenomena. The Torah describes that "all the people saw the sounds of the thunder and the lightning." *Rashi* explains that the people actually saw that which was usually heard. The last Hebrew letter of the word *shema* is an *ayin*, which means "eye." The word *shema* can be understood to integrate both hearing and seeing into one expansive sense. It connects us to the heightened consciousness we experienced witnessing the revelation of the Torah at Sinai. The juxtaposition of the *Shema* with the Ten Commandments in this parashah suggests an inner connection.

As Jews, we believe that, ultimately, all of humanity will come to acknowledge the oneness of God. This process of ever-increasing awareness expands outward from the epicenter of Israel to the rest of the world. The *Shema* implies this in the transition between the words "*Elokeinu*—our God" and "*Hashem echad*—Hashem is One."

Sometimes, a letter in the Torah will be written larger or smaller than is normal. This so-called anomaly is to call our attention to a deeper underlying idea or teaching. In the *Shema*, both the *ayin* in the word *shema*, hear (שמע),

and the *dalet* in the word *echad*, one (אחד), are enlarged. This is the only occurrence within the entire Torah where two enlarged letters appear in a single verse. These two letters spell the Hebrew word *eid*, which means “a witness.” From this we learn that the mission of the Jewish People is to serve as witnesses to the existence of one God. As the prophet Yeshayah stated, speaking on behalf of God: “You are My witnesses.” Our mission began with Avraham and will continue into the future until the world fully recognizes the one true reality.

Furthermore, when the letters *ayin* and *dalet* are reversed, they spell the word *da*, which means “know.” The *Shema* merges faith with knowledge. These eternally relevant words have empowered the Jewish People in every generation. The *Shema* is our ultimate hearing aid.

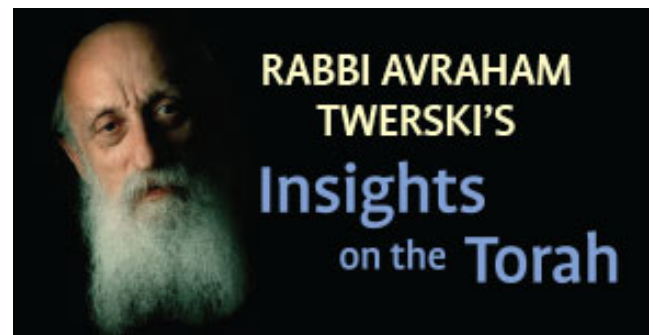
When saying the *Shema*, try to be mindful of the privilege and responsibility of bearing witness to the truth of the one unifying Creator. Let the awareness permeate to the depths of your mind and soul. Focus on your unique, personal relationship with God, recognizing His ongoing providence in your personal life. Be especially mindful of your hearing, as your spiritual inner ear will absorb and integrate what you’re saying. Contemplate the meaning of the words *shema*, hear, and *echad*, one. This will transform your experience from abstract to real. It will become a revelation from within you. This is actually hearing yourself. Afterward, you should feel energized and acknowledged. And then you will know that you’ve been heard.

Making It Relevant

1. Make concerted efforts to hear yourself and others attentively. Be fully present.
2. Practice mindfulness in order to increasing your “inner hearing.”
3. Recognize daily how God’s

expansiveness permeates everything.

4. Recite the *Shema* daily while recognizing that you are bearing witness to the truth of the one unifying Creator.



One Day at a Time

In my work treating alcoholics, I have found that the greatest success for sustained abstinence from alcohol is through participation in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. One of the fundamentals of this program is taking “one day at a time.” The addicted alcoholic cannot conceive never again being able to drink. Inasmuch as he has relied on alcohol to feel good, he sees a lifetime of sobriety as being completely unrealistic. There is no point in even trying to do the impossible.

Therefore, he is taught a new philosophy, “Take one day at a time. There is nothing that you can do today about tomorrow’s drinking, so there is no point in thinking about it. It is not impossible for you to stay sober just for today. That is certainly within your ability. So stay sober today, and when tomorrow comes, you can deal with its challenges then.”

One of my friends would write down each day how many days he had been sober. When he died at age 83, it was found that the night before he had written the number 16,472. He had been sober for 46 years because he took one day at a time.

The concept of taking one day at a time was promoted by Alcoholics Anonymous, which originated in the mid 1930's. More than 150 years ago, Rabbi Moshe Sofer (Chasam Sofer) cited the above verse as teaching this concept.

The Talmud quotes ben Sira, "Do not agonize about tomorrow's problems, because you have no way of predicting tomorrow" (Sanhedrin 100b). The Chasam Sofer says that this is the way one can vanquish the *yetzer hara*, the lower self. If a person thinks that he must resist the *yetzer hara*'s temptations throughout his entire lifetime, he might consider it impossible and may give up without trying. Therefore, Chasam Sofer says, think about resisting the *yetzer hara* only today. That is certainly within everyone's abilities.

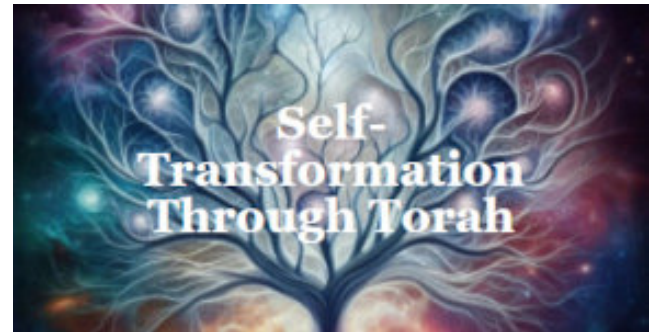
This is what Moses told the Israelites. "You can cleave unto God and observe all His mitzvot if you think only about living this day. Don't take on tomorrow's challenges today."

I am indebted to one of my alcoholic patients who called me, citing the verse in the Torah which says that Jacob love Rachel so intensely, that the seven years he had to wait for her seemed to him like just a few days (Genesis 29:20). He noted that some commentaries say that this is contrary to nature. Separation from someone you love makes each day seem endless, rather than the reverse.

"But if you look closely at the words in the Torah," my patient said, "the answer is obvious. The Torah says that the seven years were *yamim achadim*, which means single days. Jacob was able to tolerate the long separation because each day he thought, 'I only have to deal with today,' and that was doable."

It is standard operating procedure for people to make "New Year resolutions," and it is common knowledge that they invariably fail. The reason is that "I will not smoke this entire year," or "I will not eat excessively this entire

year" is too great an undertaking, and one fails because one cannot conceive of succeeding. The correct thing to do is, as Chasam Sofer says, to tackle only today's problem today. Breaking a resolution down to bite-size pieces makes it feasible to keep.



The Shema: The Profound Meaning of Our National Anthem

Machine guns crackled. Bodies tumbled into the pit. As his line approached the edge of death, just before the bullets began to fly, a Holocaust survivor heard his grandfather cry at the top of his lungs: "*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad!*" Others joined, calling out those holy words as bullets ripped their bodies apart.

I listened to this testimony during my 2016 Birthright trip to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem.¹ Though not yet religious, I felt something deep in my soul connect to the heroism and nobility of the Jewish people. At the brink of death, facing hatred and murder, they shouted our anthem—the Shema: "Hear Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!"

The words those Jews cried out trace back to this week's Torah portion, where Moses first taught the Shema to our ancestors. To connect with this timeless prayer that so many Jews lived and died by, we must understand the

true meaning and depth of these six holy words:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד
"Hear, o Israel, Adonai is our God,
Adonai is One!"

The Symphony of Life

Let's begin our exploration by examining the first two words - Shema Yisrael - "Hear, o Israel." Why are we commanded to hear and not see? Furthermore, why do we cover our eyes when we recite the Shema?

Consider how differently your eyes and ears process the world. Sight captures instantly—one glance, complete picture—just like a photograph. In contrast, sound builds meaning through continuity. Try saying: "Mo.... no.... syl.... lab.... ic." Incomprehensible. Similarly, imagine trying to appreciate a concert through a one second sound bite. Impossible!

Unlike seeing, hearing demands stringing together a continuum of inputs to form one cohesive harmony of experience. We don't enjoy a moment of a song or a word of a speech in isolation. Listening requires wholeness. We grasp the full beauty and meaning only when we listen from start to finish.

The same principle applies to God's presence. We don't perceive God's presence at a glance—it flows as the background music to our lives—something we experience only when we embrace the greater continuum. That's why the Shema begins, "Hear, o Israel!" Cover your eyes and listen! When you look back at the whole symphony of your life, of Jewish history, of mankind, can you hear the Divine orchestration?

Decoding the Divine Names

But what exactly are we listening for? The next words of the Shema—'Adonai Eloheinu'—reveal the specific melody we seek to hear. But why does the text say 'God, our God'? What do these words mean?

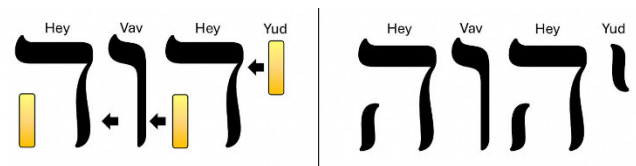
The apparent repetition, "the Lord, our God", carries deep meaning. God appears twice, but each name represents a different divine aspect.² The first name, the Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey, past for words Hebrew the contains, (יהוה) present, and future being—*haya, hove, yihiye*—revealing God as the eternal 'I Am' who transcends time—His highest aspect and true nature. Our sages teach that this name represents God's eternal mercy and love.³ Kabbalistic texts⁴ reveal that by examining the letters of this name, we can see the process of giving in action:

Yud: *Picture the yud as a small coin—a gift.*

Hey: *The gift enters a hand (the hey represents a hand holding the small yud—the coin).⁵*

Vav: *The hand extends outward (The vav represents connection—the Hebrew prefix meaning "and").*

Hey: *The other's hand receives the gift; the giving reaches completion.*



(Note: if you print this, please do not throw it away - a paper with God's name is holy and must be kept in good condition or buried properly)

Whereas God's name YHWH (Adonai) represents His aspect of mercy and love, the name *Eloheinu* represents His aspect of divine justice and universal power - cause and effect, natural phenomena.⁶ Therefore, when we say "YHWH is *Eloheinu*", we declare that God's aspect of mercy and love drives the cause and effect and natural power of the universe.

Ultimate Unity

This brings us to the Shema's crescendo: "Adonai Echad." When we declare that God is one, we affirm that God's aspect of mercy and love stands behind everything. It's all one. It's all love.

That's our national anthem. Listen Israel! Piece together all the disparate fragments of life and perceive how they all comprise a beautiful, harmonic, symphonic melody—how everything in the expanse of time and space and beyond collectively expresses God's eternal love.

Now that we understand the magnificent meaning of our national anthem, we can appreciate the courage and faith of so many Jews who, over the millennia, proclaimed "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad" on the verge of death. After starvation, torture, beatings, watching family and friends murdered, and facing imminent death, can you imagine what it takes to say "It's all from God, it's all one, and it's all love"? That's a greatness we hope we'll never need to put to the test, but one that we believe lies deep and latent within all of us.

Your Personal Symphony

This week, I challenge you to transform the Shema from ancient words into lived experience.

If you don't yet recite the Shema: Start small. Choose one evening each week—Friday night works beautifully—to speak these six words with intention. Before you begin, spend a moment reflecting on the week's events. Can you detect the underlying melody connecting seemingly random moments?

If you already say Shema daily: Take your practice deeper. Before your bedtime Shema, pause for sixty seconds. Review your day—the frustrations, victories, unexpected encounters,

quiet moments. Ask yourself: How might these scattered notes comprise part of a larger divine composition?

For everyone: This week, when facing a difficult situation, remember the Holocaust survivors who proclaimed "It's all one, it's all love" even in hell's depths. Can you find that same faith in your smaller struggles? Sometimes hearing God's symphony requires covering our eyes to the immediate chaos and listening for the deeper harmony beneath.

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

Inspired by the classes of Rabbi Akiva Tatz and Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld

1. How did he survive? The bullets missed him. When he fell into the pit, the corpses were piled so high that he didn't fall more than a few feet. He was buried under the next layer of corpses where the bullets couldn't reach him. When night fell and the Nazis left, he clawed his way out from amidst the mass of bodies, escaping through the forest to safety
2. Important clarification: different names don't represent different Gods, heaven forbid. They mean different ways that the one God interacts with the world.
3. Source: *Jewish Meditation* by Aryeh Kaplan
4. The Hey also has a numeric value of 5, representing the 5 fingers of a hand
5. Rashi on Genesis 8:1 - ויזכור אלהים - זה השם מדת הדין הוא - Commenting on "And **Elokim** remembered Noah..." Rashi notes: "This name [**Elokim**] is the Attribute of **Din**"
6. See Rabeinu Bachya on Genesis 2:4
ביום עשות ה' אלוקים ארץ ושמים - G-d Lord the day the earth and heaven was created. G-d's Ineffable Name (YHWH) had not been mentioned up until now during all the events of the first six days. From a purely textual point of view, the name אלוקים is appropriate for matters connected with laws of nature, (the numerical value of the word =86, the same as the Hebrew word for nature, הַטֶּבַע), and it testifies to G-d introducing some new element, whereas the Ineffable Name alludes to the fact that G-d is eternal and had never been preceded by any phenomenon. The Torah did not mention this name of G-d as it wanted to concentrate on the fact that new phenomena came into existence during the six days of creation. Had it been the intention of the Torah to inform us first and foremost on the fact that G-d preceded any phenomenon, it should have introduced G-d's Ineffable Name as a reminder that He is the "Eternal." Inasmuch as the Torah was primarily concerned with revealing that which G-d chose to reveal, it used only the name אלוקים during that stage of its report.
The Midrash sees in the fact that the Torah chose to use only the name אלוקים during that part of its narrative, proof that originally G-d had planned to involve only His attribute of Justice, i.e. the מדת הדין, in the creation of

the universe. When man was created and G-d realised that he could not survive if only the attribute of Justice were active in the world, G-d co-opted the attribute of mercy.