

“WHAT IS EL SHADDAI?”

When God enters into a covenant with Abraham, the name God uses is El Shaddai (Gen. 17:1). Since the word “dai” means “enough” (as in dayyenu on Passover) some interpreters have seen this name as denoting a setting of boundaries.

The Torah Temimah comments on the rabbinic traditions that explain that God set limits to the creation of the world. God did not make the world perfect. Rather at a certain point, God said “Enough! In order to allow human beings to be partners I will now stop creating and give people the power to improve the world.” This interpretation understands “El Shaddai” as marking the limits set by God.

Rabbi S.R. Hirsch asks us to consider the other side. All of Judaism, he says, is about the right way to draw boundaries and practice restraint -- a “dai” training. We have appetites, but must elevate them, dreams, but must direct them, powerful emotions, but must retrain and channel them. From the beginning of the covenant God was teaching us to know that life is not only energy, life is limitation, and the painting cannot exist without the frame. El Shaddai is the God who teaches us to live with limits.