Shemot 3 :14

וַיֹּ֤אמֶר אֱלֹהִים֙ אֶל־מֹשֶׁ֔ה אֶֽהְיֶ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֣ר אֶֽהְיֶ֑ה וַיֹּ֗אמֶר כֹּ֤ה תֹאמַר֙ לִבְנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל אֶֽהְיֶ֖ה שְׁלָחַ֥נִי אֲלֵיכֶֽם׃

And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’”

There is no context to guide us in determining whether Ehyeh means I am or I will be. Jack Love said that in ancient hebrew we have states, not tenses. The state could be perfect, i.e. fixed at a moment, or imperfect, that is over a span of time.

Perfect here would be I was, I am, I will be

Imperfect would be, I was being, I am being, I will continue to be.

Perfect fixes the action at a precise moment: yesterday I ate the apple at lunchtime; today, I eat at 12:30; tomorrow, I will eat at noon. As opposed to, I was eating, I am eating, I will be eating etc.

To get the time frame and the correct tense you need a context, which makes it obvious when the action is taking place, words like yesterday or tomorrow.

When Moses says to god, tell me you name, so I can tell the people who you are. God says, I am the god of your fathers, abraham, issac, jacob, but when push comes to shove, finally says, Ehyeh asher ehyeh. I am that I am.

There are two things I prefer not to do. One is to cite all the commentary, which doesn’t help my struggle to make sense of this passage, but rather imposes on it some reason to translate it as present or future tense so as to rationalize some issue about god’s nature or action, like god will be there for you. You can make it serve any reading that way, no help for me. secondly, my own preference is to opt for I am that I am since it lends itself better, for me, to reflections on dealing with that answer, and on time.

Here is the fuller passage:

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| 9And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression that the Egyptians are oppressing them. |
| 10So now come, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and take My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." |
| 11But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should take the children of Israel out of Egypt?" |
| 12And He said, "For I will be with you, and this is the sign for you that it was I Who sent you. When you take the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." |
| 13And Moses said to God, "Behold I come to the children of Israel, and I say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" |
| 14God said to Moses, "Ehyeh asher ehyeh (I am that I am)," and He said, "So shall you say to the children of Israel, 'Ehyeh (I am) has sent me to you.'" |
| 15And God said further to Moses, "So shall you say to the children of Israel, 'The Lord God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is how I should be mentioned in every generation. |

On line twelve above Ehyeh is employed as god says, I will be with you: וַיֹּ֙אמֶר֙ כִּֽי־אֶֽהְיֶ֣ה עִמָּ֔ךְ וְזֶה־לְּךָ֣ הָא֔וֹת כִּ֥י אָנֹכִ֖י שְׁלַחְתִּ֑יךָ בְּהוֹצִֽיאֲךָ֤ אֶת־הָעָם֙ מִמִּצְרַ֔יִם תַּֽעַבְדוּן֙ אֶת־הָ֣אֱלֹהִ֔ים עַ֖ל הָהָ֥ר הַזֶּֽה׃

And He said, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you.

Maybe we can make a bridge across the tenses, from I am to I will be with you. I will be with you settles Moses’s state in this key moment as he is receiving the charge to become the one to lead the children of israel out of their pain in egypt to the promised land. Moses expresses his uncertainty, especially in doing it by himself, or even in speaking to pharaoh on his own. But god reassures him repeatedly, saying, tell the people I am the god of your fathers. He says, say to them, I am the god of your fathers; not, to moses, I am the god of your fathers. Likewise, when moses says, who are you, it is couched in the passage not as who are you, but what will I say when the people ask who sent you. The answer is, the god of your fathers, abraham, isaac, jacob. That’s on line six. Only after that point is made, does moses come back to the question, and god repeat, I am that I am, and adds, additionally say, I am the god of your fathers, abraham, isaac, jacob.

There are thus two answers. The one, I am the god of your ancestors, i.e., your own god, just as you are the people who are the descendants of abraham, isaac, and jacob, and therefore the b’nai israel who are the people who worship, adonai elohenu, the god of those ancesters. That is not an answer which is then to be followed by, what’s your name?

Moses says, when I tell them the god of their fathers has come to tell me to come to you, etc., he then says, they will ask, what is his name, and what am I supposed to say to that.

No one asks him, later in the Tanakh, what is god’s name, nor does anyone ever say, his name is Ehyeh; yet god tells him, not only that his name is Ehyeh asher Ehyeh, but that when they ask, tell them Ehyeh sent me to you.

So there are two thoughts, at least, this prompts. What are we to make of this name, Ehyeh asher Ehyeh, I am that I am. And what are we to make of an answer that says, tell them Ehyeh sent you to them.

I’ll take both seriously for a second, then ask you to do the same. What can we make of a name that is I am that I am. I want to discount the notion that it is a meaningless name, based on the notion that god has infinite attributes and therefore language is inadequate to convey it. That would make god sneaky, and in this context, that seems unreasonable. God seems to give this answer seriously, so at a minimum we might take it seriously as well.

That leads to the key component, for me, Ehyeh, I am. The base of this name is being, or maybe Being, as in existence. Being that exists, that is. God does say to Moses, tell them that my name is “I am that I am,” but that in answer to who sent you, say “Ehyeh” sent you, “I am” sent you, Being sent you, Being, but placed linguistically in the first person location, thus I am, not simply Am sent you.

Being is located here by itself, not in relation to an attribute, like goodness or infinitude; and not as Being through a relationship with Abraham etc. Abraham encountered god as Being; Moses does as well, through the burning bush, through the interpellation, when god calls his name and Moses responds, and now as his interlocutor whose identity can be given only as a statement of Being.

We might want to say, what is Being, and get no more answer than, the god of your ancestors. But that answer is really an answer to the question, who are you, not what are you. We might say that the answer Moses receives is as much of an answer as Abraham received, or Isaac when he encountered god at Bethel. At all these encounters, we have a man, an ancestor, a test that man undergoes, a call—as in god just having called moses by the name, and the familiar response, hinaini, I am here. The response to god as a who, as a person, might be Here I am. But that is not the same as the response to god as a what, that is as a presence, and not as all those names Reconstructionism gives, the infinite, the merciful, whatever. Being calls you; you respond, I am here. At one moment you open yourself to question, what are you, can I see you, and god answers, you can’t live and see me or touch me or hear me or find me or have me or reconstruct an image of me. In response to the call to Moses, all you can say is, I am here; and at that moment, when you are attempting to come closer to understanding, all you can receive as answer is, I am.

If I were you, and just heard this dvar, I would find it difficult to respond, since the direction my logic goes is, there is nothing more than “I am” to be had when asking god who he is. My dvar is saying, it isn’t a “who” as much as a “what,” and the answer to what can be Being, whereas the answer to who cannot be Being.

That leads to the last question, what is Being. At least once in the Torah, this passage is the answer to the question, and perhaps as it is situated within the context of Exodus at a time when the b’nai israel are enslaved and struggling under pharaoh, and soon are to be liberated from that by moses at the behest of god, it might be useful to reflect on why this question of Being, of what is Being, or who is Being, has come at this moment.