What's in a Name? Sometimes, quite a lot!

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Thoughts on Parashat Va-et-hanan

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Different groups of Orthodox Jews go by different names. The term "Hareidim" has been adopted by right-wing Orthodoxy as a badge of religious honor. The word "Hareidim" literally means "tremblers" i.e. those who tremble before the Lord. (The word can also be accurately translated as quakers or shakers!) The term "Hassidim" has been adopted by sects within Orthodoxy who follow particular Rebbes. While the word "hassidim" literally means those who are pious and kind, it has come to mean those who follow a particular Hassidic Rebbe.

While each of these terms reflects some positive elements, neither is really satisfactory for describing the ideal relationship with the Almighty. In experiencing God, the highest feeling should not be fear and trembling--but love and harmony. In our desire to come close to God, we should not be seeking spiritual intermediaries like Rebbes, but should be coming directly to God on our own.

This week's Torah portion gives us a better word to describe the ideal relationship with God. "And you are those who cling to the Lord your God". The Hebrew word is Deveikim.

Deveikim implies clinging to God on two levels. First, it refers to the profound spirituality of feeling God's presence always, at every moment; it refers to the spiritual longing to cling to the infinite God and to transcend our mundane lives. Second, it implies a practical means of coming closer to God. Our rabbis ask: is it really possible to cling to an intangible, eternal Being? They answer: yes, by emulating God's qualities of compassion. Just as God is compassionate, so we must be compassionate. Just as God cares for the poor and downtrodden, so we must care for the poor and downtrodden.

The word Deveikim, then, is a grand word to describe ideal religiosity. It teaches us to experience God's presence directly and constantly; it teaches us to live our lives by the principles of love and compassion.

So perhaps it is time for religious Jews to adopt a new name: Deveikim. Even if this doesn't catch on, each one of us can internalize this word as our own way of coming closer to God and the ways of God. What's in a name? Actually, quite a lot.