

Torah Portion: **Shemot** (Book of Exodus)

What is more trying on one's patience than sitting through a "thank you" speech listing names of people you don't know, nor for that matter really care about?

The very first verse in the book of Exodus is a list of the sons of Jacob who came down to Egypt with him at the end of the book of Genesis. While these names are moderately familiar to the casual reader of the Hebrew bible, there are several other longer genealogical lists in the Torah containing names unfamiliar to even the avid student of bible. The ancient *midrash* (Jewish legend) *Shemot Rabbah* suggests these lists "add new praise for the souls who are mentioned, indicating that all of them were righteous." To this, Rabbi Brad Artson states, "Lists matter only if those listed matter."

Among the most notable features of the modern synagogue are endless numbers of plaques: Remembering loved ones who passed away, honoring those whose dedication to Jewish life make the synagogue possible, showing gratitude to those whose example shaped lives. To the occasional visitor the sight of plaques in a religious institution may appear gratuitous, but to those who knew them it becomes a powerful remembrance of love given, lives changed, and inspiration to move forward.

Rabbi Artson explains, "Those names teach us that more people are involved in our lives than we choose to acknowledge, that we are more deeply embedded in our society than we will ever know." In a subliminal way, by listing lengthy genealogies the Torah is asking each of us what lists do we appear on? Who, in whatever manner, is giving honor to our name for something we have done to influence lives?

For most of my years as a rabbi I was suspect of those who felt it necessary to clutter a house of worship with plaques of dedication, gratification, and thanks. Wasn't it enough just to know we did something honorable or memorable? Was it really necessary to memorialize an event or action? Was this why we did it, to receive a mention in a speech or a plaque on the wall? Then I came to realize every plaque can be a teaching moment for both those who knew the person and those whose curiosity might cause them to want to learn about the individual. Each of us has a list of people whose impact at different points in life have shaped who we are or hope to be. Others may not know them yet, or maybe never will, but we do, and we want to honor that memory.

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