

**What's in a name?**  
***Parashat Emor***  
**May 5, 2018**  
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Just the other day, I spent about an hour with a couple helping them figure out what name to give to their child. It didn't take them long to come up with the child's English name; figuring out the Hebrew name took a lot longer. It was important to them that the name reflected the person after whom they were naming their child, and it was important that it sounded nice, too.

Pirkei Avot teaches us that the most precious thing we can have is a "*shem tov*," a good name:

"Rabbi Shimon would say: There are three crowns—the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of sovereignty—but the crown of a good name surmounts them all. (Pirkei Avot 4:13)

But what if, instead of a *shem tov*, a good name, you have a *shem rah*, a bad name?

What then?

The father of a friend of mine, who was born and raised in Germany and later immigrated to the United States, had a first name that was perfectly respectable when he was growing up. It was Adolf. By the end of World War II, he had changed it.

Indeed, before the 1930s in this country, even the name "Hitler" wasn't a source of shame. Apparently, in the New York City phone book back then several dozen "Hitler's" could be found. By the end of the war, there weren't any.



Why? Did all those Hitlers move away? Did they die?

Obviously, that name disappeared because it became unbearable.

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There's a name that is familiar to many of us who either grew up here in Boston or who have lived here for a time. The name is **Tom Yawkey**. Tom Yawkey was the owner of the Boston Red Sox for 43 years -- longer than any other person who has ever owned any other major league team -- from 1933 until his death in 1976.

Yawkey was many things. He was a smart businessperson. (Compare what he paid for the Boston Red Sox when he bought the team with what it was worth at his death.) He was a philanthropist. The Foundation he set up has contributed many millions of dollars to the City of Boston. It was instrumental in supporting the Jimmy Fund.

But Tom Yawkey was also someone who was staunchly opposed to integrating his team. The Boston Red Sox were the last major league team to admit African-Americans. As Jackie Robinson, the first African-American major league baseball player put it, Tom Yawkey was "one of the most bigoted guys in baseball."

Now, Tom Yawkey was no Hitler, but over the past few years, particularly as it's become clear that racism hasn't disappeared from America, nor from the fan base of the Boston Red Sox, the team has rightly wanted to distance itself from the legacy of Tom Yawkey -- or, at least, this aspect of his legacy.

And so, it petitioned the city of Boston to change the name of Yawkey Way to its original name, Jersey Way.

About a week or so ago, remarkably rapidly, the city decided to do that.

Another story: We (the voters of Massachusetts, that is) introduced casinos into our state a few years ago. A casino offer by a casino developer named Wynn Resorts, run at the time by Steve Wynn, was approved for Everett. It was to be

called the Wynn Casino of Everett. It then became clear that Steve Wynn had been accused, multiple times, of sexual misconduct. In the wake of the furor, the company decided to change the name of the casino to “The Encore Boston Harbor Casino.”

I’m aware that there are many Canadians among us this morning. I apologize if the events I’m describing sound too local or parochial.

But in case anyone thinks that this is just a problem here in the United States, consider the case of **Sir John Macdonald**, Canada’s first Prime Minister. His name is ubiquitous in Ottawa. Ottawa's airport, a major bridge, a parkway, and several government buildings are all named for him. A portrait of him is on the Canadian \$10 bill.

But there is a movement afoot to strip his name from the structures and objects that honor him. Why? He’s accused of harboring racist views toward Canada’s native people.

What do you do in situations like this?

This is a struggle. When someone’s name is associated with attitudes considered so offensive today that you just can’t imagine honoring it (*today*, that is): what do you do with it having been honored *once upon a time*?

Let me give you another example: **The Devotion School** in Brookline is named for Edward Devotion. Edward Devotion was a generous person. He willed his property to the town of Brookline. But, lo and behold, that property included one slave. Edward Devotion was a slaveholder. What do you do? Do you change the name of the Devotion School?

By the way, what do we do with **Washington Street**? Do you know how many streets in New England are named after George Washington? Think about it! What do we do with that name? What about the Brown family after whom **Brown University** is named? They owned lots of slaves. (A friend of mine lived in

Quincy for many years. She was telling me that one nice thing about living there is that the Adams family didn't own slaves.)

What do we do with a name that, *today*, is neither entirely good nor entirely bad?

Maybe the name doesn't matter, or *shouldn't* matter. Maybe it's something we can and should ignore.

I remember, in 1968 -- fifty years ago -- going to see the new Franco Zeffirelli film of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

There's that great scene in Act II where Juliet tells us that names don't matter:

*O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?  
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;  
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.*

In other words -- Juliet is imagining -- either Romeo should change *his* name or she will change *hers*.

Their names, it is clear to Juliet, are, well, arbitrary. Romeo happens to be from the Montague family, so he just happens to have that name. And she happens to be a Capulet. But that shouldn't stop her from loving him, right????

She goes on to muse out loud again about him changing his name, so that it needn't be an impediment to their loving one another:

*'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!  
What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;*

*So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title. **Romeo, doff thy name,  
And for that name which is no part of thee  
Take all myself.***

(If you want to see and hear those romantic words spoken by the young Olivia Hussey playing Juliet, go here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZLVlajiihI>

Of course, what makes that scene so poignant is that all of us -- even Juliet herself, perhaps -- realize that names *do* matter. The fact that Romeo is a Montague is indeed a problem, because the Montagues are sworn enemies of the Capulets, Juliet's family.

Even though you could say that Romeo and Juliet is just a work of fiction, just a love story, the play reminds us that this is serious. The hostility symbolized by the names of these two warring families is a matter of life and death.

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Racism in America wasn't and isn't just expressing a preference. It's targeting a group of people.

It's the same with sexual abuse.

By the way, when the Red Sox proposed changing the name of Yawkey Way, not everyone was in favor of that change. Among the voices that were raised in opposition during the debate were those of the prominent African-American minister, the Reverend Ray Hammond, and the philanthropist and business leader, Jack Connolly.

Jack Connolly said: "Let's be reasonable" -- meaning, "Let's not change the name."

The Reverend Hammond pointed out that, as significant as this matter is, “there are many other things we should be worrying about and dealing with.”

Mayor Walsh was not as strongly opposed to the name change, but he suggested that even if the name were not changed, it could be used as a teaching opportunity.

Jeff Jacoby wrote an article about this recently. (It can be accessed [here](#)). Previously, he had written that the Confederate statues dotting the cities of the South should be removed. But when it came to changing the names of streets like Yawkey Way, he took a different position. He argued that the nature of the recognition that names like Yawkey and Washington and Brown have in our society is different from the recognition given on a Confederate monument.

He suggests a two part test:

- 1) Was the person after whom a street or public place is named honored for his/her unworthy or indecent beliefs?
- 2) Was that person known primarily for his/her unworthy or indecent beliefs?

If the answers to both of these questions is “Yes,” then the name should be removed.

To me, this is a reasonable test.

I don’t know where all of this is going to lead. It’s complicated. Each case should, I think, be considered individually.

But one thing is clear: Those who are (or would have been) the victims of the invidious discrimination associated with these public figures must have the right to state their case. How they feel about honoring those who would have discriminated against them had they been alive then, must be explored and must be considered seriously and thoughtfully.

This is by no means a silly or an insignificant issue. For just as every generation has its values, every generation has its heroes -- and its villains.

Shabbat shalom.