

**This Week in Torah *Shemot***  
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Our Torah narrative this week is from a new book, Exodus or in Hebrew- *Shemot* [names—the first key word of the opening line]. We pick up roughly 400 years after Joseph, with a Pharaoh who didn't remember what Joseph the Hebrew/Israelite did for the region to ward off a devastating famine. Worse, his descendants have been enslaved to build the stone cities of Pithom and Ramses. But what kind of slavery was this? Was it like the slavery which is a stain in American history where Blacks were chained, beaten, and dehumanized as property? Or was it corvee labor where the Israelites had to provide hours of work per day for Pharaoh's regime and then go back to their homes and care for their own land and well-being? Or was it a type of spiritual servitude where faith in God was whittled away and with that, any sense of hope for the future dissolved?

Standing on the coast of Ghana eight years ago, I caught a glimpse of the inhuman brutality of the slavery whose legacy plagues our country since the first Africans arrived in chains in 1619. Although that slavery ended in 1865, its legacy continues thru the Jim Crow era to segregation to the racist practices and attitudes today. In the slave castles, you see the physical remnants of the trade—dungeons where slaves were kept as they waited for transport, courtyards for Black women to be viewed as a market place for White men's sexual gratification. Stripped of dignity and identity, they lost a sense of self by the labels others placed on them. Gone was their freedom. Gone was their national identity. Gone was the rights which are so basic to being human.

As Jews, we too have had the sense of self stripped away. While our ancestors' servitude to Pharaoh was quite different, Jewish history recalls the shackles that prevented us from being what we sought to be. There were times of brutal persecution and pogroms and forced exile and moments of hatred that showed the true vile nature of anti-Semitism. Then there was the Holocaust—hatred, degradation, and inhumanity run-a-mock as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was turned on its head and we as Jews were a sub-species of humanity which had no right to exist in the eyes of the Nazis. Yet—there's a glimmer of hope. Look at physician, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankel who wrote in [Man In Search Of Meaning](#): "The last of human freedom to disappear is the ability to choose one's attitude in any circumstances, to choose one's own way." The inner spirit of an individual is something that can be broken, but it is solely the individual's thing to possess.

Look now at the opening lines of this week's *parasha*: *Eleh shemot*...These are the names...

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the Bostonian Rebbe who died in 1993, wrote: "What is the significance of the name *shemot*? A name indicates individuality. The Torah wishes to emphasize that God concluded the covenant not with a nation but with an individual. The covenant was initially made with Abraham alone. Although the community through its sins may lose its rights to exist, God is willing to deal with but one person. A name signifies uniqueness. The Ten Commandments were addressed not in the plural but in the singular, to emphasize that God relates not only to the collective but to the individual as well. That is why in *Shemot*, the names of Jacob's children are repeated and emphasized."

In terms of slavery—stripping one of his/her name, removes their individuality. Lessens the sense of self in the eyes of others, but not in the eyes of God. The Kotzker Rebbe who died in 1859 wrote that there is a hint of prophecy in a name that can rekindle a lost soul's reconnection to his/her own identity and

reclaiming an inherent prophetic hope for the future. That, the Rebbe said, is the true definition of faith; a soul is never lost in the eyes of God.

This is a very important theme for us to remember. There can easily be a sense of servitude to a Pharaoh in our lives. We can fall prey to a slavery of the mind and the spirit when we become shackled to other peoples' definition of who we should be. Maybe not brutalized like other recorded slaveries, but we can find ourselves stripped of the sense of self by deifying our culture and the pursuit of economic success in which we truly lose the sense of self, our rootedness, and spiritual essence. But, dear friends, do not despair. Within us, there is the redemptive model that can liberate our sense of self. Like Viktor Frankel's message, we too have authority on how to kindle the divine spark within us—through transcending time to embrace the sacred and leaving the profane behind for just a wee bit of time [that is the power of Shabbat], through studying the sanctity of age-old wisdom of our tradition [that is reassurance that those who lived before struggled and succeeded to overcome similar obstacles], and through the ability to pray [that is our faith in what tomorrow can bring, a hope and a trust that instills a confidence for the future].

*Eleh Shemot...* these are the names... what is YOUR name? Let it unlock the prophetic calling you to be fully alive in the image of God!