

Parshat Shemot 5778

WHAT'S IN A NAME: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." William Shakespeare. "A person's name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language" Dale Carnegie. So, what's in a name?

Sefer Shemot starts with a list of thirteen names of the members of Ya'akov's family: וְאֵלֶּה, שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, הַבָּאִים, מִצְרָיִם *"And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt ... (Shemot 1:1)"*. But why repeat these names when they are already known to us from the end of Sefer Bereshit?

Sefer Shemot in English is known as the Book of Exodus and is very different from Sefer Bereshit that precedes it. Bereshit is about individuals and families, whereas Shemot is about the building of a nation – Bnei Yisrael. Rabbi Moshe Krasnanski asks "Why call a book 'names' without any reference to the great miracle of the exodus? Whilst the Jewish people were in Egypt they kept three things. (1) Jewish names (2) Hebrew language and (3) Hebrew dress. Even though many had lost faith in G-d - they worshipped idols, had lost the traditions such as brit milah and had no semblance of being Jewish, they somehow managed to form a Jewish nation that could be taken out of Egypt."

Rabbi Berel Wein concludes that in Sefer Shemot, "Before embarking on the narrative of Israel in Egypt, the Torah first gives us an understanding of Jewish survival, through our names. The tribes had good names, each one representing loyalty to Hashem. In the long night of Egyptian exile, it would be the fact that they remembered their names – their ancestors, their traditions and their vision of the future – that kept alive their spark of hope for redemption. As long as they remembered their names they were part of the Jewish people and bound to the eternal covenant of being G-d's people.....There is truly a great deal in our names. For that will be the key to the eventual redemption and exodus of Israel from Egyptian slavery."

We have unfortunately, seen in the very recent past how taking away names and replacing them with numbers can dehumanise a nation. By keeping their Hebrew names during the period of enslavement in Egypt, the Jewish people prevented their total assimilation into Egyptian culture. Rabbi Peter Tarlow adds that "We often speak of our friends with specific names and generalise the names of our enemies. Perhaps this understanding of the importance of names can be seen in one of the text's first verses וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ, עַל-מִצְרָיִם, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע, אֶת-יוֹסֵף *(There arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Yosef)"*. Rabbi Tarlow notes the interplay here, "the Pharaoh did not

know (of) Yosef, and we do not know who the Pharaoh is. Might the text be indicating that dehumanisation begins when we cease to know our enemy's name, when our enemy is reduced to a concept or a generalisation instead of a human being?"

The significance of names in the Torah is apparent from the beginning. *"G-d had formed out of the ground every wild beast and every bird of heaven. He [now] brought them to the man to see what he would name each one, and whatever the man called each living thing was indeed its name."* Bereshit 2:19

There is a quote in Midrash Rabba 17:4 to this verse. "When the Holy One, blessed be He, was about to create humankind, He consulted with His ministering angels, saying, "Let us make Adam." The angels responded, "What's so wonderful about this Adam?" So He brought each creature before the angels and asked them, "This creature, what is its name?" But they did not know. Then He brought the creatures before Adam and asked him, "This creature, what is its name?" To which Adam responded, "This is *shor* [Hebrew for ox], this is *chamor* [donkey]..." Adam was able to analyse and understand the essence and nature of every creature and could therefore name it accordingly. In so doing he also realised that none of the creatures would be a fitting helpmate for him.

Rabbi Benjamin Blech feels that "Names represent our identity not simply because they are a convenient way to allow us to be distinguished one from another.... The names we are given capture our essence. They are the key to our souls. The Hebrew word for soul is neshamah. Central to that word, the middle two letters, shin and mem, make the word shem, the Hebrew for name.

In the aptly named "A Rose by Any Other Name: Would it Smell as Sweet?" Jelena Djordjevic and colleagues at McGill University and the Montreal Neurological Institute "examined whether presenting an odour with a positive, neutral, or negative name would influence how people perceive it." They took fifteen odours from unpleasant, to neutral, to pleasant and presented them to subjects with names that were positive – "carrot juice," neutral – a two-digit number and negative – "mouldy vegetable." Regardless of the odour – unpleasant, neutral or pleasant – it was rated more pleasant when presented with a positive name, and less pleasant when presented with a negative name A positive name left them sniffing for more.

Shakespeare implied that a name means very little, what matters is what something is, not what it is called. Perhaps Sefer Shemot provides us with the counter-balance to Shakespeare's ideas.