Shemot: What’s in a Name?

Rabbi David Ely Grundland

Ironically, the first two chapters of the book of Shemot ("Names") omit many names. In some passages, it seems the Torah specifically avoids using names. On the other hand, there are some exceptions, where names are used. Why does the Torah leave out many of the names, what ties the exceptions together, and why do the names eventually return?

Leaving Out Names

After beginning by listing the names of Yaakov and his sons, the Torah turns to the more amorphous, "The Children of Israel grew... and the land was filled with them." (Shemot 1:7) While the Israelites were populating the land of Egypt, they ceased being called by individual names.

A name is a word by which a person, place or thing is known; it expresses relationships with self and others. Perhaps when we were in Egypt, we lost our sense of self entirely and were known only by our past; we were "Children of Israel" and nothing more. The Israelites in Egypt had one purpose: to grow into a nation, to fulfill Hashem's promise to Yaakov as he descended to Egypt: "I will make you into a great nation there." (Bereishit 46:2) Any individual pursuits and identities that did not relate to the goal of proper values and behaviour. Nonetheless, the Torah symbolically hid these names when their national focus was on growth and not their personal relationship with G-d and realization of G-d's eternal and unique nature (see Ramban to 3:14).

The exceptions

A few exceptional individuals are named, despite the many omissions. Two of the most striking examples are the midwives, Shifrah and Puah. Commanded by the king of Egypt to murder the Israelite children as they were born, they did not do so because "the midwives feared G-d." (Shemot 1:17) Perhaps they deserved to be named because they were motivated not only by impersonal national growth, but by a commitment to do G-d's will.

Another exception is Moshe Rabbeinu, who is named by the daughter of Pharaoh. Moshe, from our first encounter with him, is seen as guided by his commitment to the eternal values of the Jewish people, standing up for what is right even to his own peril. Moshe's family members are also mentioned by name: his wife Tzipporah and his son, Gershom. Gershom's naming is accompanied by the explanation, "for I was a stranger [ger] in a foreign land." This name represents a sense that he has a different set of values than do those around him. (Shemot 2:21-22, and Alshich on 2:22.)

Thus, one merits a personal name when one strives to fulfill the Divine Will and keep Torah values, and does not focus purely on growing the nation.

Names Return

Following the birth of Gershom, the Torah records the death of the king of Egypt and the subsequent national outcry that reaches G-d. "And G-d heard their cries and G-d remembered His covenant, with Avraham, with Yitzchak, and with Yaakov." (2:24, and see Rashi) At this point, the Torah starts using names again, including a Name denoting G-d's eternal and unique nature.

It seems that when the king of Egypt died, and the enslavement continued unchecked, the Israelites reconnected with their individual "names". Perhaps their pain drove them to bring Hashem into their personal lives through prayer and teshuvah, remembering the values they had inherited from their forefathers, and ultimately bringing about the same remembrance in G-d. (Ramban to 3:25, Sefer haBahir 76)

A well-known midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 32) explains that a reason for Israel's redemption was that they did not change their names. Perhaps this signifies that the Israelites always knew that Hashem was involved in their lives and that they had inherited a tradition of proper values and behaviour. Nonetheless, the Torah symbolically hid these names when their national focus was on growth and not their personal relationship with G-d and realization of G-d's commands. Only once they implemented their values, called out to Hashem, and began to incorporate a relationship with G-d into their everyday lives, did they merit their names and redemption. May we merit to do the same, and bring redemption soon!

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Not in G-d’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence
Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
Schocken Books, 2015

Who is the author?
Rabbi Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth and currently a Professor of Jewish Thought at Yeshiva University, has built himself a global reputation as a leading authority in ethics and theology, both within the Jewish world and outside it. With twenty-five books already in print, his most recent publication, dealing with religiously inspired violence, is a must read for anyone interested in the topic. As Rabbi Sacks himself argues, any person, of any religion, living in the contemporary world should be deeply interested – and bothered – by it.

What is the main argument of the book?
While summarizing this rich book, which brilliantly analyzes Bereishit by drawing on examples from history, literature and poetry, is impossible in this venue, a short description of the main argument is necessary.

Rabbi Sacks claims that violence based on monotheism is, in essence, a profound misinterpretation of the monotheistic idea. He argues that we all have a deep-seated instinct to seek identity and meaning in a group of peers. This instinct, in its essence, is not evil, but pure. It is what enables us to love, as love is only meaningful when it is limited; if one loves all the women in the world as he loves his wife, one could hardly say he loves his wife. However, sometimes our love and commitment to our own group blinds us to the most fundamental truth: that in essence we are all created by one Creator and are part of one creation.

When love of one’s own group overrides our obligations of justice towards others, religious violence occurs.

Rabbi Sacks demonstrate this thesis as it plays out in the book of Bereishit, emphasizing that while a process of choice and separation (love) did take place, the “rejected” – Yishmael and Esav - were never wiped out, but received their share as part of G-d’s creation (justice).

In the last part of the book, Rabbi Sacks deals with “other key challenges to Abrahamic monotheism in the global age”, such as relating to “hard texts” and the ability of religion to relinquish its political power. These issues are, essentially, implications of the fundamentals discussed in the first part.

How can the project be continued?
This book is highly inspiring. Like Yosef in his time, Rabbi Sacks analyzes the problems we face, and suggests a clever solution. But the book, as it is, was written to appeal to both Jewish and non-Jewish (mainly, Christian and Islamic) audiences. To do this, it ignores anything after the end of Bereishit; neither the stories nor the halachah of the later biblical books are thoroughly discussed. For a Jew who sees himself as continuing a sacred tradition of thousand years, this gap must be filled. How are we to read the commandment to eradicate Amalek, according to the view of Rabbi Sacks? Did Moshe Rabbeinu demonstrate tolerance towards the calf worshippers? What about Pinchas when he killed Zimri and Kozbi? The list of such examples is long, and a vague statement declaring that “The word, given in love, invites its interpretation in love” is not enough to resolve the problem. Rabbi Sacks, we are sorely in need of a second volume.

613 Mitzvot
Mitzvah 483-484: Working and Shearing

The Torah prohibits eating from a burnt offering, saying, “You may not eat... the korbanot you vow” (Devarim 12:17).

As we have already seen (Toronto Torah 6:39), the ambit of this prohibition includes a range of prohibited types of benefit from the flesh of this korban. (Sefer haMitzvot, Lo Taaseh 146) This biblical verse also teaches that we may not use flesh from lower-level korbanot, before their rituals are completed. According to Sefer haChinuch, these are the Torah’s 447th and 448th mitzvot. Inappropriate benefit is called meilah, and it is punished with various penalties, as noted in Sefer haChinuch 127. (Toronto Torah 3:17)

In addition to the laws of meilah which prohibit use of the flesh of sacred property, we are also limited in use of consecrated animals while they live. As the Torah says, “You shall not work the firstborn of your oxen, and you shall not shear the firstborn of your sheep.” (Devarim 15:19) Sefer haChinuch counts these as two separate mitzvot: not working the animal (#483) and not shearing it (#484). Even though the Torah specifies not to work oxen and not to shear sheep, these prohibitions would also include working sheep and shearing oxen. (Chullin 137a)

The prohibitions against working and shearing apply to animals that have been dedicated as korbanot, as well as animals that have had their financial value dedicated to the Beit haMikdash. However, these two categories have different rules after they have been redeemed:

- An animal which has been dedicated as a korban may be neither sheared nor worked even if it develops a defect and is redeemed.
- An animal which has had its value consecrated, and which is then redeemed, may be sheared and worked. (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Meilah 1:9, 12)

What is the status of wool which falls from a sheep on its own, such as where the animal snags itself on thorns? The sages made a psychological observation: People value financial gain over spiritual gain, but not over atonement for their sins. Therefore:

- One may not use wool which falls from a first-born animal or an animal which has been dedicated as a tithe, lest he delay bringing this offering in order to collect more wool;
- One may use wool which falls from an animal which has been dedicated as a sin-offering, since people crave atonement and they will not delay in bringing such an offering. (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Meilah 1:10)

Rabbi Baruch Weintraub
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Rabbi Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz was taught by his father, primarily. He spent some time in the yeshiva in Brisk, but left after two years; accounts of why he left vary. Rabbi Karelitz devoted himself to energetic study in his youth. He wrote that he preferred to be silent, speaking only to convey a fully formed idea.

At the age of 27, Rabbi Karelitz married Basha. After the shidduch was arranged, it became clear that Basha’s family had been less than forthright regarding their financial circumstances and Basha’s age – she was significantly older than Rabbi Karelitz – and some of Rabbi Karelitz’s family members wished to cancel the shidduch. Rabbi Karelitz insisted on going ahead, lest Basha be embarrassed.

Basha supported the couple by running a store in the various places where they lived. Rabbi Karelitz continued to grow in scholarship, and he was counseled by the great Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski. With the help of Rabbi Grodzinski and Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, Rabbi Karelitz moved to then-Palestine in 1933, settling in Bnei Brak.

Rabbi Karelitz did not hold any official rabbinic position in Bnei Brak, but by this time he was recognized as a leading scholar. Scholars from around the world approached him for advice, and he ruled on practical issues like use of greenhouses during shemitah, automated milking on Shabbat, and voting in Israeli elections. Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion met with Rabbi Karelitz regarding drafting women and yeshiva students, and his student Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht formed the Hesder program, blending army service and yeshiva study, under his guidance.

This space is far too brief to sum up the life and impact of Rabbi Karelitz, who passed away in 1953 but whose life continues to influence the direction of the State of Israel. It would be worth reading Pe‘er haDor, Maaseh Ish, and the recently published Chazon Ish.

Bribery is unique. Taking a bribe is among the absolutely degraded actions which the Torah declares abhorrent; a result of the bribe, in the secret of spiritual powers, is to blind the eyes of sages and to warp judgment. Since the Sages have said that G-d looked in the Torah and created His world, the Torah itself required that a bribe have the power to blind and warp, and warned people to flee from it.

In addition to the [normal] power of personal interest, which is the way of the world and human nature, an impure power is assigned to the bribe, to obstruct the heart and dull wisdom to sleep, to make finding merit for his briber pleasant in the judge’s mouth. And since the Torah disqualifies this judge from deciding between his briber and another, the shelter of wisdom – under which he can be perpetually confident that he will not stumble in sin and guilt – is also removed from him, if he will transgress the Torah’s prohibition and sit upon the seat of judgment, against the Torah’s command.

The warning against bribery is not rational law, but engraved statute, for the Torah did not prohibit issuing a halachic ruling for one’s self. One may examine the kashrut of his own slaughter, even if he is indigent and his entire life depends on it. He can rule regarding chametz that was owned during Pesach, even regarding large assets. And when he rules leniently, and one of the quarrelers doubts him, saying that loss of his assets swayed him, he is among those who doubt their mentors and do not trust the sages who are elevated above such deficiencies. Such suspicion will be found only in those of small mind, lacking understanding, who do not understand the insightful soul.
**This Week in Israeli History: 24 Tevet 5709 (1949)**

**The First Knesset**

On 24 Tevet 5709 (January 25, 1949), the first Parliament of Israel was elected into office. At first it was called the “Constituent Assembly”, but the Transition Law adopted in February renamed it the Knesset, as the permanent name of the Israeli parliament. This body elected Chaim Weitzman as the first President of the State of Israel, and it was the ruling body when David Ben-Gurion formed the first government. Following the model of the rabbinic Great Assembly, Knesset HaGedolah, of the pre-Mishnaic period, the Israeli Parliament adopted the name of that body as well its number of members: 120.

The current Knesset is the twentieth since Israel’s founding. A party receives seats in proportion to its percentage of votes cast, if it passes the threshold for the minimum number of votes. The threshold is currently 3.25%. Due to this low number (which has historically been as low as 1%), each Knesset is made of many parties, usually more than 10. No party has ever won a majority. Thus, governments are always formed as coalitions. In recent years, this has led to instability in the government as small parties wield more and more power. For this reason, many of the politicians who ran in the most recent election promised electoral reform to enable the Knesset to function more smoothly. As of yet, however, despite Prime Minister Netanyahu’s commitment to electoral reform, no bill has been proposed.

__Rabbi Jonathan Ziring__

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### Weekly Highlights: Jan. 2 — Jan. 8 / 21 Tevet — 27 Tevet

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<td>Gemara Avodah Zarah: In the Umbra of Idola-Tree</td>
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<td>6:30 PM</td>
<td>R’ David Ely Grundland</td>
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<td>Shaarei Shomayim</td>
<td>Not this week</td>
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<td><strong>Sun. Jan. 3</strong></td>
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<td>8:45 AM</td>
<td>R’ Josh Gutenberg</td>
<td>Contemporary Halachah</td>
<td>BAYT</td>
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<td>8:45 AM</td>
<td>R’ Jonathan Ziring</td>
<td>Hosheia</td>
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<td>Hebrew</td>
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<td>9:15 AM</td>
<td>R’ Shalom Krell</td>
<td>The Book of Shmuel</td>
<td>Associated (North)</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
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<td>9:30 AM</td>
<td>Mrs. Ora Ziring</td>
<td>Women’s Beit Midrash</td>
<td>Ulpanat Orot</td>
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<td>7:30 PM</td>
<td>R’ Jonathan Ziring</td>
<td>Israel &amp; the Hebrew Calendar</td>
<td>Yeshivat Or Chaim</td>
<td>Beit Midrash Night</td>
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<td>7:30 PM</td>
<td>R’ David Ely Grundland R’ Mordechai Torczyner</td>
<td>Daf Highlights Practical Medical Halachah</td>
<td>Shaarei Shomayim</td>
<td>Beit Midrash Night</td>
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<td>10:00 AM</td>
<td>Mrs. Ora Ziring</td>
<td>Women’s Beit Midrash</td>
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<td>1:30 PM</td>
<td>R’ Mordechai Torczyner</td>
<td>Iyov, Chapter 28 Where is Wisdom?</td>
<td>Shaarei Shomayim</td>
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<td>6:15 AM</td>
<td>R’ David Ely Grundland</td>
<td>Gemara Pesachim</td>
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<td>8:00 PM</td>
<td>Yisroel Meir Rosenzweig</td>
<td>Contemporary Halachah: Mesirah: Incriminating a Jew</td>
<td>Shaarei Tefillah</td>
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<td>1:30 PM</td>
<td>R’ Mordechai Torczyner</td>
<td>Yehoshua: Cities of Levi</td>
<td>49 Michael Ct.</td>
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<td><strong>Fri. Jan. 8</strong></td>
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<td>10:30 AM</td>
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<td>Eruvin</td>
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<td>Advanced</td>
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**Coming Sunday January 10: What do we pray for, when we pray for the sick? Mrs. Ora Ziring, 7:30 PM at Yeshivat Or Chaim**