

of mitzvos is *letzarefes habriyos*, shouldn't they automatically refine those who perform them?

The answer seems to be that we stand between two dialectical poles. On the one hand, we have the transformative and cosmic experience of mitzvah observance. On the other hand, we must constantly contend with our natural impulses that are often not refined, along with the basic reality of *mitzvos anashim melumadah* (Yeshayahu 29:13) — which means that all behaviors can become rote and devoid of meaning. A meaningful act can often shrink in the face of habit, drudgery and just basic *middos gruos* (negative character traits).

Are mitzvos transformative? Absolutely. Do we affirm the fundamental tenet that the commandments are effective in being *l'tzarefes habriyos*? Also absolutely. What is clear, though, is that those realities do not suffice by themselves. Mitzvah observance needs to come with a certain intentionality and mindfulness so that the acts are purposeful and transformative and not simply hollow. That is the connotation of being an *eved Hashem* — the recognition that this life that we have the privilege of living requires genuine work. The deeds themselves require effort and just as significant is the intentionality and framework that informs those deeds.

This leads back to our original question. While the issues and tensions that I alluded to before are not perfected by being in a yeshiva environment, the halls of a beis medrash or a seminary theoretically create an environment that emphasizes intentionality, *kavanah* and purpose of actions. A person, if so inclined, can find a minyan in which

time and energy are brought to one's tefillos. The messages of the study hall and the emphasis on personal growth bring attention to these most important issues. Just recently in the beis medrash at Yeshiva, we started an initiative in which the students (and Rebbeim) would be conscious of all of their behavior around food. How one walks to the dining room, the speed with which one eats, the mindfulness of where the food originated from, the concentration on the blessing that comes out of our mouths are all points of emphasis in a place in which personal growth is the *raison d'être* of the institution.

That intentionality simply is far more difficult and somewhat elusive when a person is just going and running and often simply trying to get by. There is an incredible and highly impressive level of effort to get up in the morning, get to minyan, spend a long day at work, try to get some learning in, be involved in the community, all while trying to be a present and attentive parent and spouse. It is an accomplishment to just fulfill all or part of the above list. The question is: are we also able to spiritually thrive in environments that are not always conducive to such? Are we able to bring intentionality and mindfulness to the actions that in and of themselves are impressive and meaningful? Are we able to not just perform mitzvos but to have them continue to transform every act, thought, word and feeling? To some degree it is that capacity to bring intentionality to our lives that allows us to be a redeemed and elevated people no matter where life's journeys take us. In a way, the capacity to carve out this type of space is the highest and most exalted level of freedom.

Where Everybody Has a Name

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We begin Sefer Shemot with a list of names that are highly familiar to readers. It is these names that give the entire book its name: “These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher” (Ex. 1:1-4). It is odd to include information that is patently obvious to any reader of the previous Biblical book. The narrative continues its curious introduction: “The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation” (Ex. 1:5-6). We introduce this family only to inform us that none of its members are still alive.

The introduction then makes an abrupt and unexpected shift: “But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them” (Ex. 1:7). We suddenly go from 70, a large-ish family, to a nation beyond count that becomes so large it is perceived as a fifth column by Pharaoh. The blessing to be fertile and increase from Genesis 1 only begins to actualize in earnest in Exodus 1. Later, in Deuteronomy 1, the blessing will finally achieve Abrahamic proportions, as we read, “Your God has multiplied you until you are today as numerous as the stars in the sky” (1:10).

The words in Exodus 1:7 are both similar to this Genesis blessing and different from it:

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמֵאֵד
מֵאֵד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם.

But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

Intermingled in this *pasuk* that is read every year in the Haggadah are two other verbs to describe the population increase: *va-yishretzu* and *va-ya'atzmu*. Two passages of gemara note the population explosion evident in this verse: BT *Brakhot* 7a and BT *Hullin* 92a. But a close reading of the words reveals something more troubling. *Va-yishretzu* is another word with strong Genesis 1 associations, ones that recall the creation of creeping, crawling reptiles, as noted by R. Avraham ibn Ezra. These new, intermingled verbs, unlike the others that reflect a sense of blessing, suggest what Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg has called a reptilian-like population growth. It is fast. It is difficult to control. It is menacing.

I would like to suggest that the gnomic nature of this verse cleverly reflects two ways to perceive any sudden population growth: as an insider and as an outsider. To us, the burst from 70 to this inexplicable fullness is the achievement of a long-held and often frustrated aspiration. After generations of infertility struggles in Genesis, we open Exodus as a nation that is finally expanding in a land not our own. We perceive this as a sign of success and blessing. But to others, especially the ruling class, the same population rise creates suspicions that a minority group will have too much power or influence. This same anxiety persists today and is responsible for global

xenophobia toward immigrants.

This is exactly what happened next in our chapter: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us (Ex. 1:8-9).’” The anxiety of how to control this population by the host country leads to the next, tragic saga of persecution and oppression. Ironically, it did not stop the growth but accelerated it. “But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites” (Ex. 1:12).

This is such a problem that, astonishingly, Pharaoh himself confronted the Hebrew midwives: “The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah” (Ex. 1:15). One wonders that with the governance of such a mighty and powerful presence in the Near East as Egypt, Pharaoh had time to engage in such conversations. But no matter. The children kept coming. It is the Jewish way to respond to persecution: to continue.

Professor Nahum Sarna, in *Exploring Exodus*, writes that this new development and stage in our becoming a people large enough to reckon with, marks an important transition between the Biblical books: “The narratives in Genesis focus upon individuals and the fortunes of a single family; they center upon the divine promises of peoplehood and national territory that are vouchsafed to them. In the Book of Exodus, the process of fulfilling those promises is set in motion.”

But with this change of size came another, less welcome change. The individual names that open Exodus

disappear into an almost nameless book moving forward. Moses’ parents are not named in Exodus 2, nor is his sister. Moses is not named upon his birth, and only given a name several verses later by Pharaoh’s daughter, who is also not named. Yet these are lead actors in the story of our redemption.

Perhaps the narrative is obliquely suggesting that there is always a danger in becoming too large. Names cease to matter. As Judy Klitsner observes in *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, “...all traces of leaders, heroes, or outstanding figures are entirely absent” from this chapter in Exodus, to suggest “the loss of individual identity” that accompanies enslavement. We know more people by name from the small family in Genesis than we will ever know of the tens of thousands who populate Sefer Shemot, making this, in some ways, the most ironic name given to any Biblical book. This is the cost of rapid growth and the blight of slavery. As a people you matter, but as individuals, you cease to matter. It is also the cost of the diaspora. We mattered greatly to one Pharaoh, but mattered not at all to the next.

This need to matter may have also been internal. In a well-known word play based on the *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael* 13,19:3 on Exodus 13:18, Rashi claims that only one in five Jews left Egypt when given the opportunity. This means that 80 percent of the Israelites who had the opportunity for redemption rejected it. We cannot help to wonder if they felt they no longer mattered to God or to their fellow co-religionists, given their immense suffering. If they did not evacuate with the throngs who left Egypt on that fateful night of God’s

watching, who would have noticed?

This is the challenge of all growth for them and for us, still today.

When families grow larger, when our organizations expand, and when schools get a registration boost, we still need to maintain the feeling of a *mishpacha*. This requires intention and vigilance. How many times have we stood in our own shuls and realized how many people we don't know by name? And we even believe this is normative. Now we're not even embarrassed or ashamed enough to ask. We just assume we will never know.

COVID has made this problem of mattering even harder because we were virtually faceless for years. We did not invite guests. The mitzva of *hachnasat orkhim* became a thing of the past, just when we need it now more than ever. We spend so much time trying to fill spaces, but we lose people when we can't remember their names or worse, when we cease to care that we don't know them. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, said that the question he was asked most often was, "Do you remember me?" In essence, the question each person was asking is, "Do I matter to you?"

Shemot, as a name, is both an aspiration and a warning as we become a nation. To be a Jew is to matter — each and every single person — by name. The challenge of Sefer Shemot and our majestic Exodus story is not only to grow as we did in Exodus, but also to retain the Genesis-like quality of family that begins our book. As we emerge from the scourge of COVID, our challenge is to rebuild our lives in community and in our institutions one name at a time. We all want to matter.

Names and Slavery

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There is a tale told of a brother sold as a slave who went on to shape and ultimately save a nation that would, in turn, incarcerate and brutalize his kin — and that tale ends with the breaking of chains, the birth of our civilization, and a revelation that revolutionized the human spirit and the moral imagination. It is a tale of a people's pain and redemption, a story of a prince's strength and a prophet's ascension, it is a saga of incomparable drama that illuminates the evils of abuse and the value of true liberty — and since its first telling it has swept across the globe, giving solace and stoking hope deep in the hearts of those who seek freedom. But what to call such a story?

The most well-known English title remains *Exodus*, based on the Greek translation of the Hebrew text, but some have been more specific. The 17th-century English poet Michael Drayton titled his epic on the topic, *Moses in a Map of His Miracles*.

The 19th-century Italian composer Gioachino Rossini named his four-part opera *Mosè in Egitto*—*Moses in Egypt*. The 20th-century Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg called his three-part unfinished libretto *Moses und Aron*. And of course, the three big blockbusters of the last century that have brought this story to the screen have been called *The Ten Commandments*, *The Prince of Egypt*, and *Gods and Kings*.

Jewish tradition, however, has given us a different title entirely. It is true that,

as the Netziv notes in his introduction to *Exodus*, Nachmanides called the second installment of the five books of Moses *Sefer Geulah* (*the Book of Redemption*), and the author of the legal compendium *Halakhot Gedolot* implies that it cannot be understood without Genesis, referring to it simply as *Chumash Sheni* (*The Second Fifth*). However, the earliest and most prevalent title for this sacred tale is *Shemot*, meaning "Names." And our question is why?

It is of course the case that the second word of the book's first verse is *Shemot*, and like every other volume of the Chumash this seems to be a reasonable and convenient way to designate the text. But for centuries now, commentators have applied exegetical pressure to this appellation and suggested that more than mere expedience is at play — for them this title pierces to the core of the story and reveals the key to the slaves' unlikely survival.

And there are two views as to the truth contained in the title "Names" that I would like to share with you.

Jewish Destiny & Distinction

Starting with the sages of the midrash, and resurfacing in the glosses of the medieval mystics, is the idea that one of the principal reasons for the slaves' collective survival was that, despite their suffering, they refused to change their names.

One example of this exegetical tendency can be found in the commentary of the 13th-century Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, author of the *Ba'al HaTurim*. Seeing the first letter of four of the first five words of the book as an acronym, he decrypts what he sees as an early hint as to the