

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

slaves' commitment to their inimitable history. The book begins:

...ואלה שמות בני ישראל הבאים מצרימה...
And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt...

Taking the first letter of each of the second through the fifth words of the verse leaves the reader with the term, "ש.ב.ג.ה." — *sheviya* — meaning "captivity." And for the *Baal Haturim*, the correlation of that term with words that speak about the names of Israelites in Egypt — irrespective of the lateral context — can indicate only one thing:

...שאפילו כשהיו בשביה...לא שינו שמותם...
Even in the midst of their captivity... they did not change their names...

So, for him and many others, it was our ancestors' devotion to their nominative legacy — their loyalty to their Hebrew names — as a concrete repudiation of the allure of assimilation, that secured heaven's attention and intervention and led to their eventual redemption.

Read this way, names serve as a signal of public allegiance; they indicate one's nativity and illustrate one's commitment to a creed and cultural milieu. Read this way, the slaves could have eased their pain by adopting Egyptian names and reducing the dissonance between them and their host nation — but they refused. They understood that even though their alien names would serve as a perpetual bait to an army of imperious thugs, their faith required them to remain distinct from their neighbors — specifically in name — as a way to preserve their cultural independence and divine calling. In his commentary to the *Haggadah* Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it thus:

Jews are called...to have the courage to stand out from their

surroundings... To be a Jew is to be willing...to swim against the tide.

And the significance given to this nominal distinction is seen, by many, as the deeper reason for the Hebrew title of our tale to be *Shemot*. Unlike "Exodus," which merely describes the trajectory or vector of a congregation, "Names" emphasizes the power of a captive nation to resist tyranny, transmit faith, and stand tall in the face of evil.

And beyond our history with Egypt, this notion that Hebrew names operate as a measure of our collective commitment to Jewish destiny weaves its way into Jewish law as well. Responsa literature is peppered with questions about the use of non-Hebraic names in court documents, communal donations, and everyday life — with figures like the 19th-century Rabbi Moshe Schick stressing that he sees it as a transgression of biblical proportions,¹ and his contemporary, Rabbi Sholom Mordechai Schwadron, suggesting that it is not only sinful but actively defers redemption.²

An Obsolete or Incomplete Emblem

But here lies the problem: we all know deeply pious people in possession of non-Hebraic names, and this reality is not simply a recent trend. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein notes that many Ashkenzic Jews had Germanic names and numerous Sephardic Jews had Spanish names — including the 14th-century author of the *Maggid Mishna* ("Vidal" — Portuguese for "life") and the Rambam's father ("Maimon" — Arabic for "luck"). Are we to assume that they and their parents were contravening Jewish law and impeding

messianic redemption?

To this question, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein — though admitting a preference for parents choosing Hebraic names — dismisses the idea that not doing so entails a transgression.³ For him, the import of Hebraic names is specific to the pre-revelation era:

והנה יש מקום לומר דזה ששיבחו חז"ל ויק"ר ל"ב בגלות מצרים שלא שינו את שמותן הוא לקודם מתן תורה שלא היה היכר גדול... אבל אחר מתן תורה אין לנו חיוב מדינא וגם לא מעניני זהירות ומוסר אלא מה שנצטוינו התרי"ג מצות.

Perhaps the sages praise the slaves of Egypt for not changing their names because it was prior to the giving of the Torah — and thus there was no real mode of cultural differentiation... but after revelation we have no strict legal or moral obligation beyond the 613 commandments...

In his bid for a generous perspective, Rabbi Feinstein submits that Hebraic names no longer serve as signals of our national distinction or as testaments to our commitment to fulfilling our particular mission — so in at least that way, they have become obsolete and been superseded by the legal, ritual, social, spiritual, and moral matrix that defines our lives.

Others have turned their attention to this question as well — with Rabbi Ovadia Yosef⁴ suggesting that the use of non-Hebraic names is only illicit if concurrent with an intention to assimilate, and Rabbi Asher Weiss⁵ arguing that the abandonment of Hebraic names is only criminal if in conjunction with the embrace of foreign dress and a non-Jewish vernacular as well.

But while these responsa all resolve the tension between the slaves'

heroism and our reality, they all, in one way or other, deepen the distance between us and them. Each of these readings diminishes the role of names in our age and consign the title of the tale that we will retell in the coming days to history. For these giants of Jewish law, this ancient lore serves as no more than a tribute to a bygone form of devotion and has relatively little bearing on the norms of today.

But there is another way to see the title of our tale and the valor of the slaves, which has purchase that extends beyond revelation and reaches past our particular story to a longing at the core of the human condition — and to unearth this possibility we turn to another tale, this time from the Talmud.

Human Dignity and Identity

Once a group of students turned to their mentor and asked him to explain his longevity — “*Ba-meh ha’arachta Yamim*” “How have you lived for so long?”⁶ And in response the sage offers a list of his reflections on a life well lived. Contending that his conduct had contributed toward his material durability, he points to his equanimity at home and his reverence for greatness, his commitment to study and ritual and sages, but last, he notes that he never referred to anyone by anything other than their name: “*lo karati la-chaveiri be-hachinato*,” “I never called a colleague using an epithet.”

And while this rabbinic episode may seem entirely exhortative, its final principle is recorded in the great codes of medieval Jewish law,⁷ which discourage the use not only of cruel labels or insulting monikers but any diminutive. The common

instincts of the commentators seem to sense something subversive in the shortening of names — and the 18th-century Rabbi Jacob Emden explains this principle and its underlying predisposition. For him, addressing another in a code of any kind is — as the etymology of “diminutive” implies — diminishing to the addressee. In his words:

הטעם שאין לכנות חבריו בשם, אפילו שאינו של גנאי, משום שבכך מראה שאינו מחשיבו...⁸

The reason that one should not refer to another with a nickname, even an inoffensive one, is because it gives the impression that one does not regard them as having value...

Proper names are, in many ways, essential to our identity — they are what the philosopher Saul Kripke, in his seminal *Naming and Necessity*, calls “rigid designators.” Unlike almost any other title, our proper names offer us each a discrete individuality, an inimitable dignity, and serve as the basis for our humanity.

In his compelling and tragic account of his experiences during the *Shoah*, Primo Levi describes undergoing what he calls “the demolition of man.” Writing of how he was left bereft of everything he says:

Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen they will not understand. ***They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.***⁹

To be stripped of a name and be given a number, claims Primo Levi, is to be robbed of one’s humanity — for it is

more than a reference, it is a basis for our sense of self — and to hold on to one’s humanity in the face of those who seek to crush it takes immense strength and more than a measure of hope.

So, perhaps when our sages see the slaves of ancient Egypt refusing to change their names, they are not referring to the refined courage that it takes to use Hebraic as opposed to Egyptian names. Perhaps they see people in such pain that merely using each other’s names was an act of valor; perhaps holding fast to those rigid designators displayed a level of faith and hope and attention that it made the difference between life and death.

אפילו כשהיו בשביה...לא שינו שמותם...
Even in bondage... they did not change their names...

Perhaps the choice to refuse to change their names should not be read simply as a shield against assimilation, but as a buffer against becoming beasts. That our ancestors, in the face of two centuries of horror, did not devolve into inarticulate grunts and unintelligible groans, attests to their resolve and their devotion to each other’s humanity. Though they were robbed of their freedom, they refused to surrender their dignity — a choice that loses nothing of its profundity as we read the book of *Names* today.

The title of our tale, seen this way, has not become obsolete — for while Hebraic names may have lost a measure of their cultural force, it remains the case that to speak a name is to endow a human face with meaning. With the mere modulation of breath, we have the power to invest others with dignity and consequence; every time that we address another by name, we re-confer their identity and confirm their worth.

The saga of unparalleled drama that we will rediscover over dinner in the coming days has been called *Exodus, The Prince of Egypt, The Ten Commandments*, and more. But while we will celebrate our release, revere the power of our first teacher, and hail the creed that was revealed to us at Sinai, when we share this story we understand that the path to freedom and our humanity lies in a small gift that every person reading this has the power to bestow: *Names*.

Endnotes

1. *Teshuvot Maharam Schick, YD 169*.
2. *Teshuvot Maharsham 6:10*.
3. *Teshuvot Igrot Moshe, OC 4:66*.
4. *Teshuvot Yabia Omer, YD 3:9*.
5. *Minchat Asher, Shemot no. 1*.
6. *Ta'anit 20b*.
7. Rambam, *Hilkhos Teshuva 3:14*.
8. Commentary on *Megillah 27b*.
9. Emphasis added.

The Metzuyanim Challenge of Too Much Acculturation

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Leil Haseder is the primary time for *chinuch*. It is the time when there is a *mitzva doraisa* (Biblical commandment) to transmit the values of Torah to the next generation and thereby guarantee continuation of the *mesora* (tradition). One of the core values that is often addressed at the Seder is the method by which Jewish identity can be maintained in an alien land. How can we as Jews maintain

our distinctiveness and not culturally assimilate into our surrounding society?

Often this conversation centers on the line in the Hagada, *she-hayu Yisrael metzuyanim sham* — the Jewish people were distinguished there. The frequently cited midrash in this context is that we were redeemed in this merit *lo shinu es sh'mam leshonam umalbusham* — we did not alter our names, our language, or our way of dress. These seemingly minor efforts actually maintained our distinctive identity and were the cause of our freedom. This theme is addressed time and time again at Pesach Sedarim the world over.

Yet, there are many problems in using this midrash as a template for how to avoid cultural assimilation in the year 2022, notwithstanding that this midrash as it is often quoted does not exist.¹ On a more fundamental level, the lessons of this midrash do not speak to our reality. A very large number of us have names that may be classified as non-Jewish. Nearly all of us speak the vernacular rather than Hebrew, and I would venture to guess, every reader of this *Torah To-Go* issue dresses in standard Western garb. Our clothing is cut from the same cloth and tailored in the same way as the clothing worn by our non-Jewish neighbors.

This is not only true in the United States in the 21st century. Already in the times of the Rishonim, as Rav Moshe Feinstein notes, we encounter Baalei HaTosafos with non-Jewish names. One of the Baalei HaTosafos was Rabbenu Peter (Peter is not by any stretch a Jewish name). While Hebrew was spoken by the Rishonim as a religious tongue, they conducted business in the vernacular.² We must

ask, what did *melamed she-hayu Yisrael metzuyanim sham* mean for the Rishonim and what does it mean for us? How can we maintain our unique identity and not melt into a large homogenous pot of Americana?

In a celebrated teshuva³ Rav Moshe Feinstein writes that distinctiveness in dress language and names was only necessary before the Torah was given. After *matan Torah* our distinctiveness comes through observance of Torah and performance of *mitzvos*. If so, the question of how to maintain our distinctiveness does not loom so large. Keep Torah, pure and simple. Adherence to Torah and *mitzvos* is the antidote to cultural assimilation.

Assimilation or Acculturation?

A point must be made regarding the terminology we are using. We often speak of assimilation. In fact, most of the conversation about the dilution of Jewish identity in 20th and 21st century America, the conversation that often comes in tandem with the rising rate of intermarriage and the consequent fear that Jewish identity as an independent group will become extinct, speaks of assimilation. However, assimilation is the wrong term for our conversation.

Sociologists distinguish between assimilation and acculturation. Assimilation refers to the conscious adoption of the values, mores, and norms of the surrounding society. It often has a very negative connotation and refers to the radical abandonment of core Jewish values. In contrast, acculturation is most often unconscious. It is far less radical, but from a religious perspective may still be problematic.⁴