

Geulas Yisrael # 108

Pinchas

Jewish Names

Each of the five books of the Torah is designated with a nickname, designed by chazal to condense its essence. For example, Shemot is nicknamed as "Sefer Hageulah" or ספר הגאולה, as it narrates our redemption from Egyptian slavery. Likewise, Devarim, the final sefer of the Torah, is coined as "Mishneh Torah" or משנה תורה, since it summarizes and reviews fundamental religious principles and mitzvot.

The book of Bamidbar is nicknamed "Chumash HaPekudim" or the book of population surveys, since this sefer is bracketed by two censuses, one described in parshat Bamidbar and one documented in Pinchas. As the two surveys were conducted 38 years apart, and under very different circumstances, they were executed in very different fashions.

The original "Bamidbar census", preparing us for entry into Israel, zoned the population into four districts. Mapping the Jewish camp into four quadrants, the first census tabulated the overall numbers of each of the four clusters of three tribes. This "zoning census" prepared us for our march into Israel, and for the battles which inevitably lay ahead of us. Sadly, we squandered this redemptive potential and were condemned to wait an additional 38 years for our next redemptive opportunity.

After a long desert hiatus, history was rebooted and, we were, once again counted. At this stage though, the census tabulated the various families of each tribe rather than combining them into larger groups. Family names form the crux of the second census, while they were completely ignored in the first survey.

Divine Names

In listing the families, the Torah brackets each family name with a one-letter prefix and a one-letter suffix. Each family name is preceded by the letter "heh" (ה), and each name concludes with the letter "yud" (י). For example, the family of Reuven named Chanoch (חנוך), is listed as "Ha-Chanochi" or החנוכי. Likewise the family of Reuven named Paluh (פלוא) is referred to as Ha-Palu'i (הפלואי).

Rashi asserts that this poetic branding signals an important message. By adding the two letters of His name – yud and heh - to each family name, Hashem effectively certified the pedigree of each family. Hashem's endorsement debunked any suspicions about compromised family pedigree in Egypt. Though subjected to the chaos of slavery, we tenaciously preserved our family purity. Hashem added His letters, verified our family pedigree, and, as a result, each Jewish family now carried Hashem's name.

This naming revolution was, actually, a throwback to an earlier renaming. Avraham's name transformation was slight, as he received one additional letter denoting his new international mission. Yaakov's renaming was far more dramatic, as his original "ordinary" name was replaced with a name which incorporated the name of Hashem. Ya'akov's new name, a conjugation of the word "yisra" and the name "el" (one of the names of Hashem) reflected his surpassing relationship with Hashem and his attaining a superior level of comfort with Hashem.

Similar to Ya'akov, the Jewish families in Pinchas, by assimilating Hashem's name into their own names, upgraded their relationship with Hashem. This new generation didn't carry the theological baggage of the previous one. During the initial desert journey, they were young teenagers, who didn't rebel against Hashem and didn't scorn His country.

At this stage they were optimistic about their future, and they celebrated Hashem's love through a populist version of Az Yashir, which wasn't orchestrated from above by Moshe but erupted spontaneously from the general population. For this new generation Hashem wasn't a punitive G-d, but a loving Father who enveloped them with His care and wrapped His name around theirs. The new naming scheme was a perfect fit for a new age and a new generation which wore the name of Hashem with pride and confidence.

Modern Naming

Thousands of years later, amidst our return to Israel, we are experiencing a similar naming revolution. Traditionally, Jewish first names were borrowed from past generations. By recycling our names, we preserved the value of our past, and the significance of our traditions. Ashkenazi

cultures opted to name after the deceased, while Sephardi cultures preferred to name after the living. Either way, names were reprocessed, legacies were perpetuated, and loyalty to our masorah was reinforced.

Carrying the name of an ancestor establishes historical continuity and, additionally, creates moral and religious expectations. A Jew is never born into a vacuum, but joins an intergenerational community of past and future. Names leap out from our past and soar into the future. Our names extend beyond our lives and, hopefully, our lives extend beyond our years.

New Reservoirs

With our return to Israel, new “reservoirs of names” have been created. Highlighting our renewed relationship with the actual land of Israel, many names are now adopted from the actual landscapes, topographies, and cities of Israel. Our relationship with the land, which for thousands of years was purely theoretical, has now become vivid and geographical. Many draw deep spiritual meaning from tiyulim, archaeology, and agriculture. New religious horizons have emerged, and names which echo with agricultural or topographical resonance strengthen this new relationship with our Motherland.

Names are also being borrowed from lesser-known figures in Tanach. As we have returned to History, the book of Jewish history and of Jewish homeland has become more compelling. Studying the entire corpus of Tanach rather than just skimming its Haftorah highlights, has generated an entire new roster of potential names. As we search for new religious expressions, we craft new names which lend voice to our eternal religious longing and to our renewed hopes and dreams.

Together With Hashem

Among all this name-shifting the model of conjugating Hashem’s name has also been revived. Most of these conjugations couple the term "el" with a term of endearment, faith or pride. Some of the popular conjugated names include Shirel (song of G-d), Matanel (gift of G-d), Li'el (my G-d), Aviel (G-d, my Father) and Da'el (to know G-d). With our return to history, our relationship with Hashem has shifted, much the same way it shifted when the second desert generation came of age. The redemptive shift is inspiring us with greater comfort and greater

optimism in our relationship with Hashem and divinely conjugated names reflect our burgeoning confidence.

Juggling Past and Future

This naming phenomenon is a microcosm of the inner tension of religious life in Israel. The historical transition to a new era has shifted our collective focus to the future, which will undoubtedly be very different from the present. The redemptive "tomorrow" will certainly be vastly different from "today". Most dramatically Hashem's presence will be more evident and less shrouded in mystery. Assimilating His name into ours bravely announces the new texture of our relationship. We are so close with Him that we carry His name in our own.

Yet religious identity is based upon "belonging" to our past and exhibiting loyalty to our past traditions. Without recycling traditional names it is more challenging to feel aligned with our past. This is what makes religious life in Israel so complex: it is very difficult to look forward and backward at the same time.

Life outside of Israel is far more one-dimensional, as looks primarily to the past for identity and for inspiration. Life in modern Israel is, potentially, more layered since it attempts to stitches past to the future. However, it is a harder juggling act. Names from the past anchor us to tradition, while new names, including names conjugated with Hashem's name capture the new spirit of redemption.

Can we distill both? Can we thread the past with the future? It is much easier said than done.