

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Bamidbar

This week's *parashah* opens with the taking of a census. The Jewish people have experienced the exodus, the receiving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, the sin of the Golden Calf, and the building of the *mishkan*, the portable Temple. Now they are ready to be on the move to the Promised Land and so a census was taken for defensive military purposes and to have a better idea of how to plan for the needs of the people.

The census must have been very healing for this group of ex-slaves. The Torah tells us again and again that they counted *b'mispar sheymot*, "according to the number of the names," i.e., everyone was counted and all names were listed. Imagine the power of having your name recorded, when up until now you were merely a slave, just a number. Imagine the dignity bestowed on each of them as he stood and proudly said his name and his family's name to have it recorded.

Names can tell us a great deal about a person. Of course, in our time, many names have been shortened, translated, or simply substituted for others. All kinds of name changes took place at Ellis Island, as many of our grandparents and great-grandparents came to America. Some had their names changed by the immigration officials; others have Americanized their own names.

Most names have a history behind them. Our tradition tells us that one's Jewish name contains a clue to one's destiny, no matter how it was conferred.

When God created the world, He created with names. When the Torah says, "God created..." it doesn't suggest that He worked or that He fashioned through labor, but merely that He **said** – and the very words describing the object made it come into being. God said "Let there be 'Or' (light) and there was light." But how did light know what it ought to be made of? What gave it its properties? What determined its essence? God merely gave it a name, and the very letters – the *Kabbalah* teaches – defined its atomic structure.

The Hebrew word for "name" is *sheym*, spelled *shin mem*. These two letters are at the core of the word *neshama*—"eternal soul." We believe that the soul, or essence, of any human being is contained in his/her name.

Kabbalah teaches that at death, a person is asked his/her name. Why? Because your name is your mission! What we are really being asked is whether we lived up to the

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ideals and potentials given to us at birth. As the Bible says (Samuel I 25:25), “*Kishmo keyn hu* – as his name, so is he.” Does that mean then that we are predestined to play out roles handed to us by our parents when they named us as infants? Is our free will limited by our names?

Rabbi Benjamin Blech explains in his book, *Your Name is Your Blessing*:

It is not our name that forces us to be what we are. It is what we are that transmits itself in a profoundly prophetic manner to those entrusted with the holy task of choosing our names. Every parent is a prophet at the time of naming a child. It is a remarkable gift from God.

Let me give a few examples from today’s Torah reading. The Torah lists the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel with their names and the names of their fathers, defining the nature of their relationship to God.

The head of the tribe of Reuven, for example, was *Elitzur* “God is my Rock”;
the head of the tribe of Ephraim was *Elishama*, “God heard (my prayer)”;
the head of Menasheh was *Gamliel*, “God has rewarded me”;
the head of Dan was *Achiezer*, “Great Brother is my help,” *ben Amishadai*, the son of “the people of *Shadai*”;
the head of Shimon was *Shlumiel* “my peace is God,” *ben Tzurishadai*, the son of “*Shadai* is my Rock.”

(excerpted from Leo Abrami Torah fax Bamid268)

As you can see, these are not ordinary names; they all contain a statement of the person’s faith.

The Midrash (*Tanchuma Vayakeyl*:1) teaches: *A person is known by three names: the one that his father and mother call him; the one he is called by others; and the one he earns for himself – good or bad... We know this from Betzalel of whom the Torah (Ex. 35:30) says: “See, God has called by name Betzalel,”* which means, “In the shadow of God.” It was a special name that he earned.

King Solomon taught in the Book of Proverbs, “*Tov sheym mishemen tov* – a good name is better than precious oil.” That’s all we really have in life – a good name. Bernie Madoff, or the like, may take away all that we have, but no one can take away our good name. And when we leave this world, all that we can take with us is our good name. May we live our lives so that we fulfill the holy potential in our given names as we earn for ourselves a *sheym tov*, a good name in this world!

Shabbat Shalom!

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