

Va'era – 5768
Names

Shabbat Shalom.

Over vacation, I read an interesting book – *Freakanomics*. All right, full disclosure: It actually wasn't over this vacation, but last summer.

This wonderful book of statistics contains fascinating insights about names. For example, there is a strong correlation between the name one gives one's child and his or her future success in life. For example, a name like Latisha reduces a child's chances for success. A name like Aviva, however, predicts the opposite.

Now this is at first a little bit of a mystery. Why would one's name lead a child to do better? Then we see that the names are not causative, but they are correlative. One's name usually indicates one's socio-economic standing and perhaps the community in which one already lives. It reveals a lot about one's parents, and that's a link to one's future.

It was fascinating to read this study and see that Hebrew names often correlate highly with future success. Think about it: Jews are a tiny percentage of the general American population, but we generally have a strong academic focus and a high socio-economic background.

There is great power to giving something a name. Think about the beginning of the Torah. God *calls* the light, day “yom” and the darkness, night “lie-lah.” The first verses of the Torah have God creating through speech and then naming. Adam follows God by naming the animals and the birds that God brings before him in the second chapter of the Torah.

Names shape how we see ourselves and how we see each other.

In the Jewish tradition, we give a name for a boy on the eighth day at the *brit milah* (covenant of circumcision ceremony) and for a girl often around the same time or shortly thereafter at a *brit bat*, (covenant of a daughter ceremony) or in shul at the Torah. In the Ashkenazi Jewish tradition, names are often given to honor deceased relatives and in the Sephardic tradition to honor living relatives. This is a way to connect a new child with the life of previous generations.

Having named three children of my own, I know that it is difficult to find the right name. How can one balance out personal taste, eternal values, the Jewish tradition, and at the same time recall, at least in Sharon's family and mine, our beloved grandparents who are no longer with us. This was not easy; in fact it was quite tricky. Beyond honoring our grandparents, we had a number of goals:

not to alienate members of our families, to find names that resonated with us, and names that worked in both English and Hebrew so our children would have an integrated identity.

I myself went through a name change. I was named by my parents Dahveed, the Hebrew form of David, although they did not spell it Dahveed, as my mother told me she had wanted to. They spelled it David. Throughout my childhood, I was known as Dahveed.

Inevitably, even though I went to Jewish day schools, on the first day of school I would have to correct my teachers who would read the class list and say “David Lerner.” I would say, “My name isn’t David, it’s Dahveed.” My math teacher would then reply, “Well, Dahveed is very nice for a class in Hebrew or Torah, but in math class we use our English names.” And then I would have to explain that Dahveed is my English name and that I pronounce it that way in all situations. Sometimes we would get into a little argument and it was very unsettling. After a number of years of that, in ninth grade I had enough and I changed my name to David.

It is fascinating to see how anyone who knows me through my parents or from before ninth grade, or who is unfamiliar with this name change, calls me Dahveed, and anyone who has met me since calls me David. Just so that everyone here is clear, I am comfortable with either.

Of course, one can change one’s name for convenience and to simplify one’s identity as a Jew and an American as I did, or one can also change one’s name at a difficult time in one’s life. There is a custom in our tradition to change our name when we are ill. This connects to a superstition that the angel of death will no longer be able to find us since we have changed our name. At first this may seem a bit far-fetched, but I have learned from working with people who are seriously ill that changing one’s name responds to a deep spiritual and emotional need.

In this week’s Torah reading, Parashat Va’era, we have a name change of sorts. It is God who seems to change or perhaps to clarify God’s name right at the beginning our Torah reading. As the text states:

“God spoke to Moshe and said to him, ‘I am Adonai. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by my name Adonai, (the Hebrew letters – Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh.) I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage and I have remembered my covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelite people, ‘I am Adonai - YHVH. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements,

and I will take you to be my people and I will be your God, and you shall know that I, Adonai YHVH, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for possession. I am Adonai YHVH.” (Exodus Chapters 6:2-9)

In this dramatic scene, God claims that God's name YHVH, which we pronounce Adonai, was not known to Moshe's ancestors, but is this true? Was God's name YHVH not known? Surely this name is mentioned throughout the book of Genesis, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were familiar with that name of God.

Let's look back at last week's Torah reading. When Moshe is at the burning bush, given the mission of freeing the Israelites from Pharaoh, he asks God, "What is your name?" And God replies in a most elusive and curious way. God says: "Aheyeh asher aheyeh -- I will be what I will be." What does that mean? I am? I will be? I am becoming? I am existence?

A strange name for God. In this week's portion, God says that this name was not known to Moshe's ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What is God telling Moshe here? What is God telling us?

Our rabbinic tradition teaches us that each of the names of God represents a different aspect of the divine. The name Elohim connotes God's attribute of justice. The name YHVH represents God's attribute of mercy. In other words, what God is telling Moshe is that, "While I made known to the patriarchs my attribute of justice, I have not yet shown them my attribute of mercy. Now I will demonstrate that attribute by rescuing the Israelites from bondage."

As Rashi explains, "I am now keeping faith, which is what is implied in my name. I Adonai am faithful to authenticate my words since I made them a promise and I have not yet fulfilled it."

Another commentator, the Klei Yakar, Rabbi Efrayim Luntzisher, an 18th century commentator from Poland, offers the following explanation. God was saying to Moshe that he had made many compassionate promises to the patriarchs, but had not yet fulfilled them. In other words, God had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would become fathers of a mighty nation, that their descendants would live in the land of Israel, but each one of them died with that promise unfulfilled. Now God will demonstrate God's true compassion by redeeming the children of Israel from slavery and taking them to the land of Israel.

It is interesting to see that God did not state that God is redeeming the Israelites because they are worthy, but rather because God hears their groaning,

their suffering, understands their misery under Egyptian slavery, and remembers the covenant. We should learn that God redeems the Jewish people because of God's own empathy and compassion.

But God acts to fulfill the promise of God's name only after Moshe, as the Torah states, "sees the suffering of the Israelites." God is responding to the compassionate empathy demonstrated by Moshe. In last week's reading, we read that Moshe, who was raised in a luxurious palace, went out to his people and identified with their pain. The pampered adopted grandson of Pharaoh began to have compassion for the people that his adopted father oppressed. Moshe empathized with their plight and, as a result, he initiated God's compassion and in the process became the greatest prophet in all history.

It is fascinating to see that human compassion and empathy are what unlocked God's true nature and God's true power, and that allowed God's true name to come into this world. God's name was changed, if you will, when Moshe's empathy opened up God's empathy, and from that the process of redemption began.

What a wonderful teaching. Once we start these acts of hesed, of loving kindness, even the smallest act of generosity – a smile, a handshake, a loving gesture, a phone call – brings new openness and new light into the world, and that brings God's true nature into the world.

Moshe initiated and God responded, and through that the greatest process of redemption, the Exodus, began. That is why God's true name is YHVH. It is what is becoming. It is the potential for making the world better. When we start and God reciprocates, it brings more love, more divine energy into the world. That is God's true name, which is revealed through acts of love.

While we all have many different names, it is what we do that really gives us our names. The midrash said this beautifully. "Every person has three names. One that is given at birth by one's parents. A second name, a nickname, that others call one. But then there is the third name - the name that one is called in the book of his creation."

What does the midrash mean here, sefer bryato, the book of one's creation? It means, did you fulfill the promise of your creation? How did you live your life? If you are able to bring in hesed and you are able to access that compassionate empathy towards others, then you are given the keter shem tov, the crown of a good name.

The Talmud offers this blessing, and I offer it to you. Happy are those of us who grow up with a good name and leave this world with a good name.

There are many names that we are given, there are names that we give others, but the most powerful names are the names that we have not yet become.

Shabbat Shalom.