

ROSH HASHANA  
NAMES ARE US  
SEPTEMBER 2018  
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Rabbi Berel Wein tells the story of his friend, Irving Bunim, who attended a Brit Milah. When the Rabbi asked the father for the name of the boy, the father responded: “Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Joseph.” The Rabbi was astounded and asked the father: “Why such a string of names?” The father replied: “Rabbi, I am a poor man whose child will not have much of an inheritance. If he looks like my side of the family, he is not going to be too handsome. If he resembles my wife’s side of the family he probably won’t be that smart either. So, I decided, let him at least have a good name.”

Our names tell a great deal about us, our identity, our heritage, and our personal history. Sometimes, the names actually identify who we are and what is our character. In the Bible when King David meets Abigail she tells him: “Please, my lord, pay no attention to that wretched fellow Nabal. For, he is just what his name says: *Kishmo Ken Hu*, “his name means ‘boor’, and he is a boor.” Our names can tell a great deal about the very essence of our lives.

Lewis Carroll in his book *Alice in Wonderland* describes the scene where Humpty Dumpty meets Alice for the first time, and asks her name. When Alice tells him, he says: “It’s a stupid enough name. What does it mean?” “Must the name mean something?” Alice asked. “Of course it must,” Humpty Dumpty replies. “My name means the shape I am – and a good handsome shape, too. With a name like yours, you might be anything, almost.”

Naming in Jewish tradition is a very serious matter. However, the Talmud and the Codes of Jewish Law provide few, if any, rules on how to choose a name for a child. It is, instead, based on custom. Most Ashkenazim name their children after deceased relatives to honor their memory and to carry on their heritage. Many Sephardim name their children after living relatives for exactly the same purpose. Is one right, and one wrong? They are simply different customs and both can be considered correct.

Naming is one of the great privileges given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. According to one Midrash, Rosh Hashana is the day on which Adam was placed in that garden eventually deciding upon the names of all the animals that were placed before him, and his wife Eve, as well. It showed the power he had to define the world in his terms and to label his reality. In addition, the Torah reading and Haftora of the first day of Rosh Hashana is all about naming – Yitzchak and Shmuel.

To bestow a name and identity is a kind of symbolic contract between society and the individual. According to H. Edward Deluzain, “Seen from one side of the contract, by giving a name the society confirms an individual’s existence and acknowledges its responsibilities towards that person. The name differentiates the child from others; thus, the society will be able to treat and deal with the child as someone with needs and feelings different from those of other people.

Through the name, the individual becomes part of the history of the society, and, because of the name, his or her deeds will exist separate from the deeds of others.”

Every parent takes the naming of their children very seriously. Ultimately, the naming of a child shows ownership, responsibility, and commitment to the child’s welfare. It allows that child to carry on the heritage of those who have preceded him and it remains part of his or her identity from that day forward, unless they change their name later in life. However, sometimes, the naming of a child involves controversy as well.

Aharon Megged was born in 1920 in Poland and in 1926 immigrated with his parents to Palestine. He joined a Zionist pioneering youth movement and spent most of his life on a Kibbutz. He was a literary editor, author, and playwright. He lived in both worlds, the old world of Eastern Europe and the new world of the future State of Israel. He wrote a story entitled *The Name*. In Hebrew it is known as *Yad VaShem* which means a memorial, or a monument to the living. The story is about an elderly man named Zisskind who lost loved ones in the Holocaust. He was close to his daughter Rachel and his granddaughter Raya who lived near him in Israel. Raya was married to Yehuda and they were soon expecting a child. The granddaughter visited Zisskind quite often and each time she visited he would take out a letter and read it to them. Zisskind lost his grandson Mendele who was 12 years old and his only son Ossip, who was a chief engineer in a chemical factory, in the Holocaust. He always mentioned that there was not a trace of anyone who was killed, not even a tombstone.

When Zisskind learned that Raya and Yehuda were expecting a child he visited their home to talk. His one wish was that if it was a boy he wanted it to be named after his grandson, Mendele. Raya and Yehuda refused. They didn’t want to hate their child and didn’t want their child unhappy. They had already picked names. If it was a boy, it would be Ehud, a good Biblical name. Zisskind returned to visit his grandchildren a number of times and continued to tell them the story of Mendele and how giving this child that name would be a memorial to him. Eventually the baby boy was born and the parents do not accede to the grandfather’s wishes.

When the baby was a month old they brought the baby to meet his great grandfather. Zisskind didn’t even acknowledge that the baby was there until he started to cry. When he got up to get the letter and tell them once more of the story of Mendele, Raya, Yehuda, and Ehud left. That is where Megged ends the story.

As the story is told, it represents a confrontation between the past and the future, between the old world and the new Zionist dream, between an old grandfather and his young grandchildren. What does it mean to name the child Mendele in Israel where the common language is Hebrew? Does their choice mean that they wanted to disassociate themselves from the murdered young boy and instead give him the name of one of the judges of our people? Will the young Ehud ever know about Mendele and even have a relationship with Zisskind, his great grandfather?

Naming a child is not an easy task. There are many sentiments that are brought to bear and I have been present when there have been discussions and even some controversy as names were chosen. It reminds me of a story of a woman who gave birth to her first born son. Both she and

her husband wrangled over what name he should be given. She wanted the child to be named after her father; he wanted the name to perpetuate his father's memory. They came to the Rabbi to settle the issue. The wife said, "Rabbi, my father was a pious man, my husband's father, on the other hand, was a plain ordinary thief. How can I name him after a thief? "What was his name?" inquired the Rabbi. "Nathan," she responded. "And your father?" he asked the husband. "Nathan," he answered. "Well," said the Rabbi, "I think you should name him Nathan. If he turns out to be a pious Jew, then he was named after his maternal grandfather; if he becomes a thief, then he was named after his father's father." What signals does your name send and what does it imply?

Our names signify a great deal about our personal identity and, in fact, very often our destiny. According to the Midrash Pesikta de Rav Kahana, one of the reasons that Israel was redeemed from Egypt is that they did not change their names. "They went down to Egypt as Reuven and Shimon and came up as Reuven and Shimon." In other words, they maintained their identity. Even under the most difficult of situations, in this case slavery and bondage, their names suggested that they kept their Israelite character, their value system, and the heritage of their forefathers. In the short story, *The Woman Who Lost Her Names*, Nessa Rapport has the mother tell her daughter who she calls Sarele, "Remember who you are and you'll have yourself." Know who you are and be true to yourself, she tells her daughter. The story is told that during an impasse in Middle East negotiations Dr. Henry Kissinger said to Prime Minister Golda Meir, "Golda, you must remember that first I am an American, second I am Secretary of State and third I am a Jew." Golda Meir responded, "Henry you forget that in Israel we read from right to left." Never forget who are and who you represent.

We do know that the changing of names did occur in the Bible. Avram was changed to Abraham, and his wife Sari was changed to Sarah. It also occurred in the New Testament. When Saul began to engage the Gentile world rather than the Jewish one, he changed his name from Saul to Paul. We also know that in our modern Jewish world names were changed as well.

An author, Kristen Fermaglich, suggests in a book which will be out in a few weeks entitled *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name – A History of Jewish Name Changing in America* – different theories for the changing of names. In an article in advance of the publication of the book Fermaglich tells the well-worn joke in American Jewish culture of a Jewish immigrant who landed at Ellis Island in New York. The procedures were confusing, and he was overwhelmed by the commotion. He had been told in the old country to tell the immigration officials that his name was Joe Smith. When one of the officials asked him: "What is your name?" He replied: "*Shayn Fergessen*," which, of course, in Yiddish means "I've already forgotten." The official then recorded his name as Sean Ferguson. Many of our names, at least our family names, may have been changed at Ellis Island and people continue to use genealogical research to find out what their original names may have been.

However, the real story may be more complex. Examining previous unexplored name change petitions, Fermaglich also reveals that in 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City, Jewish name changing was broad-based and a voluntary behavior: thousands of ordinary Jewish men, women, and children legally changed their names in order to respond to an upsurge of anti-Semitism. Rather than trying to escape their heritage or "pass" as non-Jewish, most name-changers remained

active members of the community. Fermaglich writes in the article, “the Sean Ferguson joke is much more than a simple joke. It illustrates the ways that Jewish people have struggled, and continue to struggle, with their identity in America. It shows how hard it is to grapple with the past, and also how important that grappling is.”

I believe it is very important to know your Hebrew name, after whom you are named, and the background of your heritage. When you lose that information it is not only the loss of your personal identity, but a significant part of Jewish history. I think of this issue because of the “March of the Living” trip I led, joining almost 40 congregants towards the end of April. We travelled for a week in Poland and on Yom HaShoah walked from Auschwitz to Birkenau along with 13,000 other people. We visited Warsaw, Lodz, Lublin, and Krakow. We stood in silence not only at those places but also at Treblinka and Majdanek. Each of us who was on the trip had their moment when the reality of the loss and the destruction of entire communities was felt. For me, it occurred in Warsaw at the Umschlagplatz, the collection point where Jews were sent out to the East. Somewhere between 254,000 to 265,000 were sent to their deaths in Treblinka from that train station.

Today, it is a memorial in the central part of the city. The memorial itself portrays the names of those individuals who were on those trains and who were eradicated from the face of the earth. One of those names caught my attention. The name was Hadass. I do not know who this one girl or one woman was. I know nothing about her life, but I am almost sure her life ended in the death camps of the Nazis. I immediately thought of my daughter Hadassa, named after my father’s sister, Esther, who passed away at a relatively young age. We named our daughter Hadassa following Megillat Esther, which informs us that “Mordecai was foster father to Hadassah – that is, Esther - his uncle’s daughter for she had neither father nor mother.” We wanted to use the Hebrew name, not the name Esther, which comes from the Middle Eastern goddess, Astarte, or Astoreth.

As I stood there staring at the memorial and the name Hadass I could not help but think of the difference between that person and my daughter. As I spoke to the group, I told them this portrayed modern Jewish history. I don’t know this Hadass and have no idea of her surname, but I can only surmise that her life was taken in the Shoah. My daughter Hadassa lived in the lands of freedom. She was educated here in Chicago at Akiba Schechter Jewish Day School, Solomon Schechter Day School, and Ida Crown Jewish Academy. She attended Camp Ramah in Wisconsin and was active in BEANS USY. She went to college and then made Aliyah. In Israel she met Haim and today they have four Sabra children, our grandchildren, living in the State of Israel. Out of my mourning for this person known as Hadass, I sensed the rebirth of the Jewish people. My Hadassa carries not only her great aunt Esther’s name, but also Hadass’ name, as well, who stood at the Umschlagplatz on her way to her death.

Elie Wiesel, in his book *Legends of our Times*, tells the story of “The Testament of a Jew from Saragossa.” Wiesel writes that he made a trip to Saragossa in Spain in the 1990s. Before 1492 there was a thriving Jewish community, today there are no longer any Jews there. At the cathedral a man approached him and offered to be his guide. When they started talking it was obvious that Wiesel was Jewish and knew Hebrew so the man said to him: “There have been no

Jews here for almost 500 years, I have been waiting to meet one” and told Wiesel there is something that he wanted to show him in his home.

The two of them went to his place. He took out a piece of yellowed parchment and showed it to Wiesel. Wiesel recognized that it was in Hebrew and translated it for the man: “I, Moses, son of Abraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and theirs, in order that when Israel will be able to walk again, its head held high under the sun without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie.” It was written on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av in 1492. Wiesel then explained its importance to the young man.

A few years later, Wiesel was walking down a street in Jerusalem when a man ran up to him and said: “Shalom, shalom, do you remember me? Saragossa, Saragossa?” He was speaking Hebrew. He took Wiesel by the hand, brought him up to his apartment in Jerusalem and showed him the same parchment, this time reading it in Hebrew.

Wiesel said to him: “Please forgive me, I am so embarrassed, I didn’t recognize you.” As Wiesel was about to leave the man said, “You forgot to ask my name. I want you to know my name. My name is Moshe ben Avraham. He is alive after 500 years.” Names are not only part of our present history, they are part of our common Jewish past and we are asked to carry that name with pride establishing an identity not only for ourselves, but for the Jewish world as well.

The Midrash teaches us that each of us has three names: “one our parents give us, one others call us, and one we acquire for ourselves.” It is that last one which tells a great deal about us for as the Talmud tells us: “Blessed is one who lives with a good name and dies with a good name.” It is not only our identity, it is our legacy.

One of my favorite poems was written by Zelda, an Israeli poet who was born in Ukraine and whose family settled in Jerusalem in 1926. She was descended from the Lubavitcher Rebbe on her father’s side and was a descendent of a distinguished Sephardic family on her mother’s side. Her poem is entitled *Lechol Ish Yesh Shem*, “Each of Us Has a Name.” A few of its lines read: “Each of us has a name/given by G-d/ and given by our parents... Each of us has a name/given by our celebrations/ and given by our work/Each of us has a name/given by the seasons/and given by our blindness/Each of us has a name/given by the sea/and given by our death.”

Don’t ever forget your name for it defines you. It can give you pride in your heritage, the story of your past and your future. Victor Frankl in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* tells his story of being a prisoner in the concentration camps for three years. He informs us that when he and his fellow prisoners first entered the camp all their possessions, clothes and every hair on their bodies were taken from them. All that remained was their naked existence. In addition, each prisoner was assigned a number and dehumanized even more. No longer were they known by names, they were known by numbers. This was the ultimate degradation. He had to fight to make sense of his existence and to survive the camp experience.

Our names tell our stories, past, present, and future. We can only pray that the types of lives we live may be exemplified in the saying: “For we are just what our names say.”

We have to earn our names and be proud of who we are and what we represent. And when, finally, our day comes to leave this earth we hope and pray that we leave behind a *Keter Shem Tov* – a crown of a good name. That is our challenge not only on Rosh Hashana 5779, but every day that we live on the face of this earth.

May we accept it, live by it, and make the most of it.