

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

by Rabbi Dovid Green

The second book of the Torah, The Book of Shemos (Exodus) begins by recounting the names of the Children of Israel who went down to Egypt. A separate more thorough count is related in The Book of Genesis (46:8-27). Nevertheless, the recount is related in this week's parsha as well.

Rashi, the medieval French commentary, notes the seeming redundancy of the recount, and he explains as follows: "Even though it (the Torah) counted them during their lives it recounts them in their deaths to convey their dearness (to G-d) as they are analogous to stars which G-d brings out and in by number and by name; as it states in the verse "(G-d) Who brings out their host by number, each He calls by name." (Isaiah 40:26)

We see from Rashi that the Children of Israel are recounted in order to convey love to them. They enter and leave by number and by name, similar to that of stars.

What is special about being counted and called by name? When something is counted it takes on a special individual significance. When the stars are brought out it is done by number (known to G-d), to give each one its place as an important part of the bigger picture - individually shining its own unique and intrinsic light - but contributing to the whole panorama of the heavens and its hosts. Each star "counts."

Each star is also called by name. By attributing names to stars G-d is declaring their essence and purpose. The word in Hebrew for name is "Shem." The word "there" is spelled exactly the same as the Hebrew word for "name." The two words are related. What is "there" in the essence of the thing named is its true name. That essence is the potential in the thing. One's name and his potential are one and the same. In this context realizing one's potential is living up to one's name. That is, utilizing one's latent talents actively, and not leaving them untapped.

By the same token when one does not use his abilities, and expose his potential talents it is called "shemama," "desolation," also related to the word "Shem," or name, except that in this case it is when one fails to tap the latent abilities.

One way that G-d conveys His love for us is by comparing us to stars and showing us that we count and have a unique and individual purpose.

The Book of Exodus begins by recounting our potential as a people. The book ends in our having realized that potential after the exodus from Egypt, and the building of the tabernacle, the sanctuary

housing G-d's exalted presence. We are a people who can host the Glory of G-d in our midst.

One story which illustrates this potential greatness is told about Rabbi Menachem Nachum Kaplan (19th cent.), known as "Reb Nachumke." Reb Nachumke was the sexton in a synagogue of learned men in Grodno in Lithuania. He was extremely kind and generous, and he became the self-appointed guardian of the poor, the needy, and the downtrodden. Once a week he would cover the city of Grodno making collections which he would use toward his many endeavors to help the needy.

Once he came to the home of a wealthy lawyer who failed to appreciate the value of Reb Nachumke's work. He spoke harshly with Reb Nachumke, basically accusing him of being a parasite, and then slammed the door in his face, nearly hitting him.

Unfortunately for the lawyer, his fortunes took a downturn. Being that the lawyer had many dealings with many corrupt government officials, suspicion was cast upon him in a particularly dirty deal, and he basically had to spend his fortunes on legal defense for himself. He was given three years in prison and he was forced to leave his wife and family with no means of support. As the man's wife made plans to sell her furniture and take a small apartment, there was a knock at the door. It was Reb Nachumke. He wanted to know how much she needed in order to manage on a monthly basis. She gave him the figures, and he left telling her that she should remain in her home and she would receive the funds she needed. For three years the woman received the amount she needed from Reb Nachumke to cover her expenses and care for her children. When her husband was released, he arrived at home surprised to see everything in order and everyone so well cared-for. When his wife related to him how it came to be that she was able to remain in the house and manage, the lawyer was filled with shame remembering how he had treated Reb Nachumke. He went running to Reb Nachumke, thanked him, and begged him for forgiveness. Subsequently, the man changed his ways, and learned to appreciate Reb Nachumke, Torah observance, and the beauty of being charitable.

Learning Torah and performing its commandments has the unique ability to challenge us to rise up and exercise our latent potential. Through becoming accustomed to behave as G-d commands us in His Torah, we become a refined, second edition of our real selves. We begin to realize how brightly we can shine, and how special we really are. Just as the stars are unique, exalted, and shining bright, so are we when we work toward getting in touch with, and living up to our name.

Good Shabbos!

Text Copyright © 2002 [Rabbi Dovid Green](#) and **Project Genesis, Inc.**

