THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMES IN JUDAISM

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week we will begin to read the book of Shmot in the synagogue on Shabat. The book begins with a recording of the names of the tribes of Israel that now came to live in Egypt. What is the reason that the Torah bothers again to repeat the names of the children of Yakov? After all, we all aware of their names from the previous prashiyot of the Torah that we read at the conclusion of the book of Bereshith. Apparently, the Torah wishes to stress to us the importance of names in Jewish life and tradition. In fact, we will find throughout the balance of the Torah readings of the year, the names of the tribes of Israel repeated many times. So, what is in a name?

Irving Bunim, of blessed memory, would tell a story about a brit milah that he attended. When the rabbi asked the father for the name of the boy, the father responded: "Avraham, Yitzchok, Yakov, David, Shlomo, Yosef." The rabbi was astounded and asked the father: "why such a string of names?" The father replied: "Rabbi, I am a poor man so the child won't 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!" The tribes of Israel had good names, each one representing loyalty to God and to Jewish greatness. In the long night of Egyptian exile it would be the fact that they remembered their names - their ancestors, their traditions, their vision of the future - that kept alive their spark of hope for redemption. As long as they remembered their names they were part of the Jewish people and bound to the eternal covenant of being God's people.

There is a Jewish tradition attributed to the kabalistic masters that one should recite a verse containing one's name or the first and last letters of one's name before stepping back at the conclusion of the silent Amidah. This is to allow one to remember one's name even in the hereafter - apparently even there, remembering our name is important. For in our name lies our soul and self. That is why Jews always placed great emphasis on naming a child, for in that name there lay the history and past of the family and the hopes and blessings for the newborn's success - Jewish success - in life. I know of nothing that so deeply touches a family's nerve system as the naming of a child. Therefore, before embarking on the narrative of Israel in Egypt, the Torah first gives us an understanding of Jewish survival - through our names. There is truly a great deal in our names. For that will be the key to the eventual redemption and exodus of Israel from Egyptian slavery.

Shabat shalom.
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