

WHAT'S IN A NAME

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bamidbar

What's In A Name?

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #858, Ms. Cohen for a Pidyon Habein.

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In this week's parsha, The Torah lists [Chapter 2] the names of the various princes of the Tribes of

Israel. There are two names in the list that are rather curious. "The prince of the children of Asher is Pagiel son of Ochron" [2:27] The word "ocher" implies one who perverts, who makes trouble. Ochron is a strange name to give a child. Then we find "and the prince of the tribe of Naphtali is Achira the son of Enan" [2:28]. Achi-ra means the bad brother. Again here we can ask why such a name was given to an eight day old child at his bris. What is the meaning of these names?

Rabbeinu Ephraim, who was one of the Baalei haTosfos, offers a very interesting idea. The camp of Israel was arranged such that there was a "Degel" [banner] consisting of 3 Tribes in each of the four directions. Asher and Naftali were under the banner of the Tribe of Dan. When they left Metzraim, the Tribe of Dan took out an idol with them. This idol accompanied them through the wilderness. It crossed the Jordan with them. When they came into the Land of Israel, the Tribe of Dan had an active House of Idolatry in their midst in which this idol was worshipped! This idol, which is known in the Book of Judges as "Pesel Michah", was a cause of trouble.

The Tribes of Asher and Naftali were upset that they were stuck traveling with the wicked people from the Tribe of Dan who were idol worshippers. Rabbeinu Ephraim writes that Pagiel ben Ochron was not his given name at birth. It was a name he created for himself later in life. It meant "Pagah be Kel". (The Almighty has given me a punishment.) What was the punishment? He stuck me with the Tribe of Dan. His assumed name Ochron [sinner] did not allude to his father, it referred to his travel companions - the Tribe of Dan. Similarly, Naftali's prince assumed the name Achira. Now the name fits beautifully: My brother is evil - it refers to the brother of Naftali - Dan and his clan. The name Enan is also not the actual father of the prince of Naftali, but it is an assumed name to allude to the fact that the Cloud (anan) pushed aside the Tribe of Dan, since they traveled together with an idol.

Why did they do this? Why did they take such names? They did it for a very good reason. A person is invariably influenced by his society, by those around him. Asher and Naftali knew that they had a very hard road to hoe. Their first reaction when they found out they would have to be travelling with Dan was "Oy this is going to be terrible! What are we going to do! What are we going to do?" But what happens to people -- and this is both the biggest blessing and the biggest curse at the same time -- is that we get used to everything. In the beginning, they were appalled. They knew that with the passage of time they would get used to it. Avodah Zarah? Yeah, that's just the way it is.

When Jews first came to America from Europe at the turn of the last century, there were some Jews who fainted when they saw the rampant Sabbath desecration that took place here within the Jewish community. We no longer faint when we see Jews driving down the street on Shabbos. We take it in stride - "There are observant Jews and there are non-observant Jews. That's the way it is."

These princes asked themselves: How are we going to ensure that we do not make peace with the idols in our midst? How are we going to make sure that we don't get used to it? The plan was to change their name, to give themselves names that described the revulsion they originally felt when they realized that this was their lot (to be travel companions of idolaters). Just as a person's name

remains with them forever, they wanted this feeling of revulsion towards idolatry to remain with them forever.

This can be a valuable lesson to us. Sometimes we find ourselves in environments that are not to our standards and not to our liking and we have no choice in the matter. We need to try to quantify our original feelings and make sure that those feelings do not dissipate.

Silence Is Golden

The name of the Prince from the Tribe of Gad is originally referred to in the Parsha as Elyasaf ben De-uel [Bamidbar 1:14]. Later when this same prince is listed, his name is given as Elyasaf ben Re-uel [Bamidbar 2:14]. What happened? Why the change of name?

The Chida says something very interesting. Moshe Rabbeinu was buried in the portion of Gad. Why did this happen? According to the Chida, this was a reward to the Tribe of Gad for not complaining when Moshe Rabbeinu made Dan a Tribe which would have one of the 4 banners (representing the 4 directions in which the tribes were encamped) and passed over the Tribe of Gad. Both Dan and Gad were "first born" from their respective mothers. Only one of them could have the honor of leading a "banner". The honor went to Dan, not to Gad. Since Gad kept quiet about this and did not complain, their tribe was given the honor of hosting the burial spot of Moshe Rabbeinu - the "friend of G-d" (Reah shel kEl). For this reason, the prince of their tribe, which was really Elyasaf ben De-uel, was called Elyasaf ben Re-uel - indicating that in their portion lay the REah of kEl.

This was the reward for keeping quiet. Even when someone has have a valid claim "I have never found anything better for the body than silence."

I would like to relate a famous story from which we can see the reward for silence.

There is a 10 volume set of Sefarim called the Sedai Chemed. It is literally an encyclopedia which contains virtually every topic in halacha. Usually, when someone publishes an encyclopedia, it is not one person writing it, but a whole team of scholars. The Sedai Chemed was authored by a single individual [Chaim Hezekiah Medini (1833-1904)]. This was well before computers. He must have been a genius!

Nevertheless, the Sedai Chemed writes that when he began learning, he did not have a phenomenal memory. His intelligence was nothing out of the ordinary. However, a certain incident occurred that changed his whole life and enabled him to become a walking encyclopedia. He was learning in a Kollel. Someone else in that Kollel, who was supposedly his friend, was jealous of him. This "friend" did a disgusting thing. There was an Arab girl who was hired to come in regularly to clean the Beis Medrash [study hall]. This "friend" went to the Arab girl and offered her a lot of money to start a

rumor that the Sedei Chemed was acting inappropriately with her. This was a poor girl who was making meager wages sweeping the Beis Medrash. She went ahead and started the rumor.

The rumor spread and it started a whole tumult in the community. People said the Sedei Chemed is a faker, he pretends to be pious, but he fools around with Arab girls behind the scenes. The Sedei Chemed was so embarrassed by this libel that he had to run away.

A couple of months later, the money that was given to the Arab cleaning lady ran out. The "friend" stopped paying her and she had lost her job sweeping the study hall. She was destitute. She went to the Sedei Chemed and told him of her desperate situation. She wanted to make a deal with him: "I will announce publicly that I made up the whole story and that I was bribed to speak falsely, as long as you go to the administration of the Kolel and help get me my job back as the cleaning lady of the Yeshiva."

At first, the Sedei Chemed thought to himself, "This is my opportunity. I have a way of clearing my name." But then he had second thoughts. He told the Arab woman: "I will go to the employer and tell him that he should re-hire you. But I cannot tell him the whole circumstances of what happened."

The Sedei Chemed reasoned: There has already been one terrible Desecration of G-d's Name as a result of the original slander which claimed that I acted inappropriately with you. "So what should I do," he thought, "let the word out that there is a scoundrel in the Yeshiva who out of jealousy and malice would hire you to slander me with a total fabrication? - That is a greater Chilul Hashem! One Chilul Hashem is enough." He told her he would try to get her the job back, but he would not elaborate on the circumstances of her slander.

The Sedei Chemed writes that after this incident, his mind opened up and he became a different person. He became so gifted with Siyata D'Shmaya [Help from Heaven] that he was able to write the Sedei Chemed.

This is the story behind the Sedei Chemed. The lesson is: "I have never found anything superior for the body than silence." Sometimes keeping quiet is the best advice.

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