

## What's in a Name?

One of the most challenging moments of a new parent's life can be coming up with the name for their new child. Will the child be a boy or a girl? Who should the child be named after, and should the same name be used or just the first letters? There are parents who choose names based on the attributes they see in the child and those who've picked out the names of their children long before they're ready to start a family. As Jews we sometimes have an even bigger decision to make, giving our children both an English and Hebrew name. And, as we grow, sometimes our names change.

The Torah tells us the importance of names as Avram becomes Avraham and Sarai becomes Sarah when the letter "hey" is added to their names in an expression of Godliness. So too, our names represent our relationship to the divine, to the outside world, to our family and to our community.

Our names are important; they become our identity. While we gain other titles like Mom, Dad, Doctor, or Rabbi, our first and last names tie us to who we are in life and where we've come from. For instance, I kept my maiden name, Posen, because my sister and I are the last of our family line, so I wanted to honor my family. What's really special to me is that my maternal grandmother was able to trace her family back to Spain in 1492, when their name was changed to Auslander, meaning outsider.

This week, we read *parshat Shemot*, the first portion in the second book of the Torah. It's named Shemot (names) because the text begins: "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Ya'acov, each with his household: Reuven, Shimon, Levi and Yehudah, Issachar, Zevulun and Binyamin, Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher. All the descendants of Ya'acov were seventy persons; and Yosef was already in Egypt." Many commentators question why the text begins by telling us not only that the sons of Jacob went to Egypt, but that it lists each name individually. Why is this necessary?

Leviticus Rabbah, a Midrashic commentary, teaches "Rav Huna said in the name of Bar Kapara: Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of four things- that they did not change their names, nor their language; that they did not say slanderous things; and that not one of them committed sexual immorality." That they did not change their names means they went down as Reuven and Shimon and they came out as Reuven and Shimon. They did not call Reuven "Rupa," or Yehudah "Lulyani," nor Benyamin "Alexander." This teaches us that while the children of Israel may have gone into a new society, and it would have been much easier on them to have names that fit in, they remained true to their own culture and identity.

When the text teaches that Joseph was already in Egypt, it is reminding us that Joseph was still himself while in Egypt. The dreamer who interpreted dreams to get himself stuck in Egypt remained the dreamer and interpreter that saved a people. Joseph and his brothers remained true to their inner identities, no matter their circumstances. For us, "Egypt" can be anywhere, but whatever "Egypt" you end up in, you're the same person inside.

While our environment changes and we find ourselves mixed in with new groups of people where we might stand out among different customs, the Torah reminds us that we have an identity in and beyond our names. We carry within each of us the truth about who we are, and that truth is what allows us to

remain our own person even as circumstances change. It can be easy to change to fit every situation, but you lose a piece of yourself when that happens. The message behind our “Be the Change Club” isn't about changing ourselves. It's about staying true to ourselves in order to see real change in the world.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** The midwives, Shifrah and Puah take a stance against Pharaoh. While he may have been the leader and law maker of the time, they saw the error in his rulings and acted in accord with their own conscience. As we look at the world around us, we can take our cues from Shifra and Puah and stand up to injustice in the world, what greater lesson is there for us to teach our children than to maintain our on dignity with every action.

לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** Jewish living is living in connection to God. Chapter 4, verse 25 of our *parshah* reminds us of the importance of this connection with the covenant of circumcision. While this covenant is made at 8 days old and remains forever, it is always good to renew our covenant. This week, think about what connection you and your family wish to have with Judaism and God. How will you maintain this relationship?