**Parashat Sh’mot: Names. Indeed Names!**

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Dear Friends,

What's in a name?

Well, everything!

Sh’mot means names. Parashat Sh'mot, which opens the second book in the Torah, suggests that if we know how to give something its correct name, we can actually be redeemed!

This drasha is inspired by the interpretation of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch of Parashat Sh'mot.

The radical idea that we find the essence of something in its name is first introduced in the story of creation that opens the book of Bereshit. This week, at the beginning of Exodus, the Torah takes this notion a step further: the name also contains the potential for freedom. Hence, the essence of Genesis and of Exodus is beautifully intertwined.

In the story of Creation it says: ”And out of the earth the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever Adam would call every living creature, that was to be the name thereof.” (Genesis 2, 19)

This week, one book later, at the beginning Exodus, we read: "These are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob, every man came with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zevulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls; and Joseph was in Egypt already." (Exodus 1, 1-5)

We see here that all is well as long as each person knows his name, because by knowing one’s name, the essence and the nature of his being is known too. But as Jacob lay dying, he was concerned that this would not always be so. When one's name, essence, and nature are not known, or forgotten, slavery takes over: **8** "Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph."

I would like to suggest, that the story is not about an ungrateful Egyptian king who does not remember how Joseph, the Hebrew, saved his country from starvation. In fact, it is not about a political person at all. Loyal to the Hassidic methodology, a king always represents an inner force. It is the force that rules over our lives. A new king arose. The generous and benevolent king is gone. A narrow-minded, fearful, and oppressive king took over. Such a powerful force can only take hold when a person forgets who he really is, in the deepest possible sense.

Yet, by remembering or recalling one's name, the path to redemption may be revealed. Three courageous women who knew their names, knew their essence, and knew what they were sent to do, begin turning the wheels of identity and redemption. "And the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the NAME of the one was Shifra, and the NAME of the other Pu'ah" (Sh'mot 1, 15). To Pharaoh they were nameless, but not to them. They knew their names, and in that knowing they birthed a new era: Pu'ah, which means "bubbling up" like a well of water; and Shifra, which means “she who makes things better”.

So now, finally, remembering begins.

But it gets even better. The parasha continues: "And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bore a son; and when she saw him that he was a GOODLY child…" (Sh'mot 2, 1-2) A goodly child! This rings a familiar bell: "and He saw that it (*Creation*) was good." (Genesis 1, 3). The newborn is good, suggesting that indeed, a new era, in fact, a whole new creation is underway.

Yet, another woman will give this goodly child its name, thus setting the new creation into motion.

"And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river… and she saw the ark among the flags, and sent her handmaid to fetch it.  And she opened it, and saw it, and behold, in it lay a boy that wept. And she had compassion on him, and said: 'This is one of the Hebrews' children.' … and he became her son. And she called his name Moshe, and said: 'Because I drew him ("mashiti") out of the water.'” (Sh'mot 2, 5-10). Unknowingly, she gave Moshe both his name and his essence. Following her logic, he should have been called Mashui, or at least Mashiti. But no, it will be Moshe - he who draws (them) out of the water.

Since names are so important, even though we don’t care for the king’s name, our Sages gave Pharaoh's daughter a name - Batya, daughter of God. What an honor.

Later in the parasha, Moshe names his son: **22** "And she bore a son, and he called his name Gershom; for he said: 'I have been a stranger in a strange land.'" (Genesis 2)

So now we have names for people and for names for animals. But the Source of power and redemption is still nameless!

"Now Moses was keeping the flock of Yitro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, to Horev. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed… And Moses said to God: 'Behold, when I come to the children of Israel, and say to them: The God of your fathers has sent me to you; and they shall say to me: What is His NAME? What shall I say to them?'  And God said to Moses: 'I AM THAT I AM' (*Eheye Asher Eheye*); and He said: 'Thus shall you say to the children of Israel: I AM has sent me to you... The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you; this now will be My name for ever, and this is My memorial for all generations.' "(Sh'mot 3, 1-14)

Here it is, the NAME of the redeeming Power, the Power that delivers, the Power that frees from slavery: Eheye Asher Eheye. I will be that which I will be. There is nothing I can't be, nothing that binds me. Everything has been created by Me, because that is my essence. This is the formula of freedom, and freedom is my designation.

But God is telling us something else as well. We, who are created in His image, are commanded this week to rise to the occasion. God birthed creation and gave it its being-ness; it is our task now to give all that we encounter its name and thus give it its essence. I would humbly suggest that nothing has an inherent and objective essence, just as there is no inherent good or evil; everything is entirely neutral. Everything is possible. God tells us to give meaning to our world by naming things, because that is where freedom lies. Freedom is created through the meaning we attribute to all of Creation.

This is also why we call the God of Israel "Hashem", the Name.

"You shall … proclaim liberty throughout the land to all of its inhabitants;" (Leviticus 25, 10) - If you truly proclaim liberty – decisively, with intention - and if you know my name - Eheye Asher Eheye - it will be so.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha