

Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter

פרשת שמות
Parshas Shemos

T

HE SECOND BIBLICAL BOOK BEGINS: “These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt” (*Shemos* 1:1), and, in keeping with the custom of naming every *parshah* and book of the *Chumash* by reference to one of its opening words, this book is called *Shemos*, Names. In English, however, it carries a title that reflects the major theme of the *parshah* as a whole — Exodus, the Jews’ miraculous redemption from slavery and their departure from Egypt.

These two titles, though, are intimately linked in the Midrash. “Rabbi Huna said in the name of Bar Kapara: For four reasons Israel was redeemed from Egypt. First, because they did not change their names . . .” (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:28). The names Jewish parents gave their children — Jewish names and not Egyptian names — were a major factor in ultimately making possible the exodus. By keeping their Jewish names, the children of Israel preserved their identity and protected their destiny as God’s chosen nation.

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The story of that destiny begins with Moshe venturing out of the king's palace, the home of Pharaoh, where he grew up. The Torah describes how he "went out" into the world of his Jewish brethren, coming face to face for the first time with their tragic plight. "And he saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew, from his brothers. And he turned this way and that" — Moshe looked into his future, explains Rashi, and saw nothing worth saving — "and he struck the Egyptian," killing him (2:11-12).

"With what did he kill him?" asks the Midrash (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:29) and, in response, lists three opinions. "Rabbi Evyasar says, he hit him with his fist; others say, he took a clay tool and bludgeoned him; and the Rabbanan say, he invoked the Name [of God] against him and killed him."

This last scenario is the one incorporated by Rashi into his commentary: "He killed him with the *Shem Hameforash*," with God's secret, mystical, ineffable Name (2:14). According to this interpretation, it is apparent that Moshe was familiar with the *Shem Hameforash*.

With this in mind, it is odd that, several verses later, when confronted by God at the burning bush and ordered to return to Egypt to begin his historic mission, Moshe asks God, "When I will come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' — what shall I say to them?" (*Shemos* 3:13). If, as the Midrash and Rashi contend, Moshe knew the Name of God well enough to invoke its awesome power, what was the basis for his current question?

The *Sefas Emes* notes that God does not have only one Name but many Names. True, Moshe knew the *Shem* that can be used for destruction, which, when invoked, can kill someone, and he utilized it successfully. But a different *Shem* would need to be employed to bring about redemption, to elevate a people from the depths of slavery and spiritual poverty and deliver them to freedom and moral purpose. This was the *Shem* that Moshe sought at the burning bush. This was the *Shem* that Moshe needed to bring to the Benei Yisrael to impress upon them the imminence of the exodus. This *Shem* was unknown to Moshe and so He was compelled to ask God to share it with him.

This distinction between God's various Names reflects a powerful message. How often throughout human history has God's Name been

invoked for murder and destruction? How many Jews have been killed by non-Jews over the centuries — in the name of God. Religious extremists use violence to terrorize and kill people, including their fellow citizens — all in the name of God. Even within our own community, Jews attack, vilify, degrade and even kill other Jews — again in the name of God.

This Name of God — horribly misused and distorted — is very well known. But our task in life is, as Moshe's was, to learn the other Name of God, to learn the Name that unites us, the Name that brings peace and redemption. We must use God's Name for positive purposes, to grow, to build up ourselves and our nation.

My dear *chassan* and *kallah*, how fortunate you are that you and your families understand and appreciate the example of the positive *Shem Hameforash*. God has granted you great qualities and abilities — an appreciation for Torah and its study, a sensitivity to the need for charity and kindness, great intelligence which has allowed you to reach significant heights in your chosen fields of interest, and a sense of communal responsibility — all of which you both have learned from your respective parental homes. You know what it means to act positively and constructively for the benefit of the Jewish people, and to do so reflecting the Name of God.

May you build a genuine Jewish home that will sanctify God's Name and be a source of pride for yourselves, your family and all of *Klal Yisrael*.

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