

Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael, according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names. (1:2)

What is the significance of the counting of the people by their names? *Ramban* explains this practically. It was a great honor to be presented before Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Aharon *HaKohen* and state one's name as a form of introduction. In his commentary to *Sefer Shemos* 1:1, **Sforno** explains the delineation of the individual names of each of the sons of Yaakov *Avinu*, while the names of the rest of the seventy members of the family which descended to Egypt are not detailed. Those who are mentioned were worthy to be named, for each one was worthy of his name, which reflects the stature and character of the individual. These men, the *Shivtei Kah*, Tribes of Hashem, were a beacon of light throughout their lifetime, assuring that their generation did not become degraded. After their demise, however, even those among their children who were righteous were not equally as important and worthy in the eyes of G-d and man.

Sforno underscores the significance of a man's name, as the indicator of his stature, an index to his very essence and character. This is reflected in the fact that the Torah considers him worthy of honorable mention in the Torah. Only certain names were carried by Aharon or recorded on his vestments. Those who were elevated above their brethren were considered worthy to have their names recorded for posterity. At this point in history, a person's name was Divinely inspired to indicate his personal virtues. Thirty-nine years later, when the nation crossed the Jordan River on their way into the Promised Land, their names were not recorded. The situation had changed. The Divine component in each name was no longer significant.

Perhaps we can take this idea a bit further. When Yaakov descended to Egypt with his family of seventy souls, the Torah listed their names. Now, as *Sefer Shemos* begins, these seventy souls are no longer the same distinguished family that had come to the land. The Patriarchal family of yesterday has been transformed into the Jewish slaves of today. If one were to search for the descendants of this noble family, he would be hard put to locate them amidst the hierarchy of Egyptian nobility. Today they were menial slaves, subject to cruel persecution and brutal affliction. Only one thing had not changed: their names. They still considered themselves the *Shivtei Kah*. Perhaps in the eyes of the Egyptian masses they might have been viewed as downtrodden slaves. In their eyes, they retained the "names" of nobility. A person is not made into a slave. He does it to himself. A master can refer to his worker as his slave, but, if in the mind of the worker, he is not a slave – then he is not a slave.

A prisoner becomes a prisoner when his mind becomes incarcerated. They can lock up one's body, but his mind can soar in the heavens. What has maintained our people throughout thousands of years of degradation, suffering and persecution has been our ability to maintain our names. We are *Yehudim*, a term which represents our aspirations. We are *Bnei Yisrael*, a name which denotes strength. We are *Bnei Avraham*, *Yitzchak*, *Yaakov*, names which conjure up images of spiritual

commitment to the point of self-sacrifice. The world out there might call us by other names. The only name which really matters is the name by which we call ourselves.

Horav Aryeh Levin, zl, was a Torah scholar, teacher and *tzaddik*, a wholly righteous person. Yet, he distinguished himself in his lifetime as “the father of the prisoners,” as well as the primary address for the downtrodden and the needy. He did not have to do this. He could have easily devoted his life to teaching Torah and earning himself a reputation as a distinguished Torah scholar. He chose this “name” for himself, because he was a man filled with exceptional humility and extraordinary love for all Jews. His *raison d’être* was to alleviate the pain and suffering of a fellow Jew. He had the uncanny ability to relate to the entire spectrum of the social and religious gamut of the Jewish people, regardless of religious orientation. A Jew felt comfortable with Rav Aryeh. He knew how to penetrate the inner chambers of their hearts, and he was able to reach beneath the many levels of dross which covered their souls. He took an interest in their lives and, by doing this, gave them the courage to overcome their challenges.

A man chooses his own name. The goals and objectives he sets for himself in life determine how he will be identified. Will it be Mr., Rabbi, *Rav*, *Horav*, *HaGaon*, *Hatzaddik*? All of these titles depend on the course that he chooses for himself. These are the names by which he perceives himself. They are important, but not nearly as significant as the name/title by which people perceive him.

In a *Tzaddik in our Time*, the biography of Rav Aryeh Levin, the author makes what I feel is a profound and telling statement. He writes: “This was ‘*Reb Aryeh*.’ No other titles were necessary. In Yerushalayim, when you mentioned ‘*Reb Aryeh*,’ everyone knew you meant the man of kindly piety, *Rav Aryeh Levin*.” I feel this is the greatest accolade one can earn: to be recognized by his own name.

Let us look back in history at our greatest *gedolim*, Torah giants. It was not necessary to preface their names with a long list of honorary titles. When the name *Rav Aharon* was mentioned, one immediately knew this was the *Rosh Yeshivah* par excellence; *Rav Moshe* was the *posek hador*, the generation’s *halachic* decisor; *Rav Yaakov* was the *chacham*, wise man, of the generation; and the list goes on. Great people are acknowledged by their accomplishments, which, in turn, becomes the essence of their names. How fortunate is one to be known simply by his name.

As in all good things, there is always a flipside. A name symbolizes an aspiration – the parent’s hope that his child will *vaks ois*, grow up, into something special. For some people, this can be a heavy yoke, a weight around their neck, whose demands are too hard to meet. I say this as a result of a poignant episode I recently read. It was part of an exceptionally moving, beautifully crafted tribute which was written by *Horav Aharon Lopiansky, Shlita*, to his father. Amongst the many vignettes and insights into his father’s exceptional character, the author relates an incident which took place when he was a young boy, and his father’s reaction to the incident.

Rav Lopiansky's father was a *talmid*, student, of the famous *Slabodka Yeshivah*, a *yeshivah* which aside from focusing on academic excellence, underscored *gadlus ha'adam*, the greatness of man. His father was more than a student. He reflected Slabodka in his every demeanor. Slabodka coursed through his veins, as we shall see from the following episode.

They were a lively group of ten year old boys, who attended *shul* with their fathers. *Davening* was very long, so the children searched for "other" things to do. One of their favorite pastimes was chasing a wretched, homeless man who used the *shul*'s furnace room as his "apartment." Like many others like him, his clothing smelled, he was slightly unhinged and he survived on the handouts that kind people gave him. The children would delight in rousing his ire and running away as he hurled epitaphs after them.

One day, Rav Lopiansky's father noticed this, and he called his son over. No angry yelling, no loud rebuke – just soft and gentle words. "You see that man?" his father asked. "He was born a cute little baby whose mother stroked him lovingly. She cooed to him and delighted when he cooed back and smiled at her. His father secretly hoped that he would achieve a position and stature in life which he himself, regrettably did not. He himself began dreaming and fantasizing about what he would be one day. He had brothers and sisters who played and fought with him as all siblings do.

"And now look at what has become of him. Is it not a tragedy? Should not one be moved to tears at what happened to him? And you are compounding the tragedy by taking a *tzelem Elokim*, a person who was created in Hashem's Image, and making 'dirt' out of him." With these words his father softly concluded his rebuke.

I do not know how anyone can read this account and not be moved by this new perspective on perceiving people. Parents give a name filled with aspirations. It does not always work out. We have met all the "glitches" in the system. Every community is graced with them. Perhaps now, for a change, we will view them in a different light.