

## **And these are the names of Bnei Yisrael who were coming to Egypt. (1:1)**

The second book of *Chamishah Chumshei Torah* is known as *Sefer Shemos* --- Names. This is how it begins, with a list of the families that arrived in Egypt. Their descendants are the ones who, after acculturating into the Egyptian lifestyle, ultimately became slaves to an oppressive despotic leader and nation. They were eventually liberated, received the Torah and built the *Mishkan*. This is the essence of *Sefer Shemos*. Where does “names” fit in? Furthermore, in translation, the second book is called, “Exodus,” which refers to departure or redemption. Once again, where does “names” fit in? The English and Hebrew titles seem to be disconnected. Exodus refers to the historical event that preceded nationhood at *Har Sinai*— the exodus from bondage. “Names,” however, refers to something subtle, the simple fact of names. Indeed, why should a sefer which chronicles the slavery, subsequent liberation and birth of the nation, the Giving of the Torah, and building of the *Mishkan* be entitled “Names”?

Perhaps, the title “Names” comes as a response to a pressing question: How did a nation of acculturated Jews, who had fallen prey to Egyptian paganism, who attempted in every way possible to be accepted by the Egyptian pagan community as a part of their community, be liberated after 210 years of oppression, and a mere seven weeks later stand at *Har Sinai* to receive the Torah amid the greatest Revelation in history? *Chazal* teach that the nation had descended to the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity, yet remained worthy of redemption, because they did not change their names, language and distinctive dress. At first glance, could these (what seem to be) superficial details about the Jewish lifestyle truly counterbalance the deep spiritual decay which infected the nation?

The answer lies in the meaning and significance of these names. *Sforno* writes, “Each (of the *Shevatim*) was worthy of his name, which indicates and reflects the nature and character of that particular man. These men were a beacon of light throughout their lifetime, so that their generation did not become degraded.” When our *Imahos*, Matriarchs, named their children, the Torah records each name with great care. These names were not merely labels, but revelations of each child’s (*Shevet*’s) essence, his mission, his destiny as one of the builders of *Klal Yisrael*. These names were confirmed by Hashem, as if declaring: “The name you were given defines who you are. This is your path to *nitzchiyus*, eternal chain, of *Klal Yisrael*.

Thus, when the Torah introduces the redemption narrative with, *V’eileh Shemos Bnei Yisrael*, it is not simply listing genealogy, but rather, it is affirming identity. Even in Egypt, in the depths of misery, spiritual ambiguity and acculturation, the Jew never forgot who he was – because he still bore his Jewish name and understood its source and what it represented. Each tribe was unique; each of the descendants shared in that singular character. It was all in the name. A Jew may, at times, falter; he may stumble; he may even sin egregiously --- but his core identity remains. Deep within, every Jew in Egypt remembered his identity; he knew who he was and, as a result, what his

destiny was.

As a result of their attachment to their identity, they maintained their language and distinctive mode of dress. They clung by (in some instances) a thin string to the reminder of who they were. As long as a Jew remembers his *shem kadosh*, holy name, which represents his true self, his *neshamah*, his purpose in life – he can always find his way back – if he is willing to look. Thus, the second sefer of *Chamishah Chumshei Torah* is not called *Sefer Ha'Geulah*, *Sefer Ha'Cheirus*, but *Sefer Shemos*, for Redemption begins when a Jew reclaims his name, his identity, which represents his eternal role in the fabric of *Klal Yisrael*.

The following story is well-known, but, like some stories, it is a classic well worth repeating. During the dark years of the Holocaust, a small group of Jewish children were hidden in a French monastery. The priests tried to erase every vestige of their Jewish identity – changing their clothing, their language, even their names. Little Yaakov became “Jean”, Rivkah became “Marie.” Day after day, they were drilled in Christian prayers until their past was nearly forgotten. After the war, *Horav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, zl*, the *Ponovezher Rav*, traveled throughout Europe searching for Jewish orphans. He would enter monasteries and orphanages and beg the directors to release the children. Often, the priests insisted that these were no longer Jewish children; they were “theirs” now.

In one such monastery, the *Rav* was told flatly that none of the children was Jewish. “They are all baptized,” said the priest. The *Rav* refused to give up. He walked into the dining hall, where dozens of children were seated. He looked at their innocent faces and, in a trembling voice, he called out: “*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*.”

Suddenly, one child began to cry. Another covered his eyes instinctively. A third whispered the holy words that his mother had taught him as she put him to sleep years earlier. The names “Jean” and “Marie” fell away in that instant, and Yaakov and Rivkah emerged. The children had forgotten so much, but they had not lost their essence. Their *shemos*, their eternal Jewish names and souls, was still there, waiting to be awakened.

This is the lesson of *Shemos*. A Jew may plummet to the lowest depths, as our ancestors did in Egypt. He may even take on foreign trappings, foreign habits, foreign sins. Yet, so long as his *shem* – his inner Jewish identity – remains, he can be redeemed.

The next story is one that I heard. Unfortunately, I am unable to corroborate its veracity. So why write it? I do so because I am certain that this story and so many more like it have happened numerous times. We are a unique people, with a unique history and a singular destiny. We have a *neshamah* that is a *chelek Eloki Mi'Maal*, that has a deep connection with Hashem in the Heavenly sphere. Therefore, nothing concerning our people and their return “home” is beyond belief.

A young Israeli named Daniel grew up in a completely secular home in Tel Aviv. His parents had named him after his grandfather, but, to him, it was just a name – no deeper meaning attached. He lived as most of his peers did, with little connection to Torah or tradition.

After finishing his army service, Daniel traveled to South America, searching for adventure and meaning. One evening, in a small hostel in Peru, he struck up a conversation with another Israeli backpacker who had recently become more observant. The young man asked him, “What’s your name?” “Daniel,” he replied casually.

His new friend smiled, “Do you know what Daniel means? *Dan – Kel*. It means, ‘Hashem is my Judge.’ In the Book of Daniel, your namesake was a prophet who stood proudly as a Jew in the court of Babylon. He refused to eat forbidden food, even when it was dangerous to refrain from eating. He risked his life in the lions’ den, rather than bow to idols. Your name carries the strength of Jewish faithfulness through exile.”

Daniel was taken aback. No one had ever told him that before. He had worn his name his whole life, but he had never thought about what it meant. That night, lying in his bunk, he repeated it to himself: Daniel... Hashem is my Judge. For the first time, he felt that maybe his life had a direction – that he was part of a story bigger than himself.

That small spark became the beginning of his journey back to Torah. Years later, Daniel would say: “It all started when someone reminded me of my *shem*. I realized I wasn’t just another Israeli kid wandering the world. I was Daniel, with a mission that my name carried for me since birth.”