

THE CONCEPT OF PRESERVING JEWISH NAMES

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "These are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob; each man and his household came" (Shemot 1:1).

This verse seems to require an explanation. Why does it begin with, "These are the names"? If Scripture wanted to enumerate them, it should have said: "These are the sons of Israel who came into Egypt." Why the insistence on names, especially since in Hebrew the entire book is called Shemot ("Names")? Whoever reads the Chumash can only be surprised by this, for where are "the names" that is the main point of this book? Would it not have been better for this book to be called "Exodus from Egypt," or something along these lines? Why call it Shemot?

Our Sages have examined this question in the Midrash: "Rav Huna said in the name of Bar Kaparah, 'For four merits the Israelites were delivered from Egypt: Because they did not change their names, because they did not change their language, because they did not inform against one another, and because none of them was depraved'" (Shir HaShirim Rabba 4:25). Hence this is what Scripture stresses by stating, "These are the names of the sons of Israel," namely that preserving these names is what caused them to be delivered from Egypt.

Yet this is precisely where the difficulty lies: Is the importance of a name so great that having preserved their names is what earned them deliverance?

This teaches us that it is not without reason that the Creator "placed names in the land" (Berachot 7b on Tehillim 46:9), for the names of the Children of Israel – Jewish names – have deeply sanctified roots. As the Sages explain in regards to the names of the twelve tribes (Berachot 7b), and as the commentators explain on this Gemara (see the Maharsha and others), although Leah was not a prophetess, prophesy came upon her when she named her children. We also know from our holy books that a certain degree of prophesy is involved when we name our children, for a person's character traits are alluded to in his or her name, and there is no name that does not have a meaning.

Furthermore, in explaining this verse according to Kabbalah, the Arizal reveals that it deals with this world and the world of souls. He writes: "These are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt – these are the names of holiness that came down into this world, which is called Mitzraim [Egypt]; with Jacob; each man and his household came – all names are accompanied by the holy Patriarchs, whose names originate from Torah secrets, which accompany the Children of Israel when they descend into this world."

Still on the subject of the greatness of a name given

to a person at birth, as we know, when the soul arrives in Heaven after 120 years on earth, it is asked for its name. At that point, a special segula is required for it to remember its name and to say it. This is why we usually recite, at the end of the Amidah, a verse that begins with the first letter of our name and ends with the last letter. This contains profound secrets.

We now understand that this is precisely the case in this week's parsha. The greatness of the Children of Israel stemmed from the fact that they did not change their names. That is what protected them, and that is why they did not perish, nor did any of them assimilate in Egypt. The "names" of the Children of Israel were the spiritual foundations with which they descended into Egypt, accompanied by their father Jacob, names that remained with them and protected their identity.

This is how Jews have conducted themselves in every generation, and a Jewish custom is from Torah. They have always named their children in connection to the parsha of the week or some event, the basis of all this being to bring down the sanctity connected to the person mentioned in the parshiot, such as Moshe, Aaron, Miriam, and so on.

We need to carefully examine the verse in question: "These are the names of the sons of Israel, who came into Egypt with Jacob; each man and his household came" (Shemot 1:1). This seems to contain a mistake, for the term *habaim Mitzrayma* (literally, "coming into Egypt") is in the present tense, whereas "each man and his household came" is in the past tense. Why the present and past tense in the same verse?

This teaches us that these names, which we currently give to our children, are names that have already come into the world, names whose origins lay in the heights of sanctity.

However we have not fully resolved the question. Was all this something mystical, the fact that their names protected them? Perhaps there was something more to it?

Before explaining this, let us think a little about the enslavement of the Children of Israel in Egypt from a spiritual point of view. When they descended into Egypt, they numbered 70 people, a single family. They were closely united and fulfilled all the mitzvot of the Torah, the easiest as well as the hardest. At the time, Egypt was known as a country immersed in immorality, "whose issue is like that of horses" (Ezekiel 23:20). Although Egypt was filled with depravity and sorcery, the Children of Israel were stronger than this harmful influence. Following Joseph's advice, they went to live in Goshen, where they formed a kind of Jewish enclave within the heart of Egypt itself, which was filled with idolatry and perversion. In a short time, these 70 people greatly multiplied, and the more numerous they become, the more they "filled



Publication of
HEVRAT PINTO

Under the Direction of
**Rabbi David Hanania
Pinto Shlita**

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the land.” That entire generation passed away, Jacob and his children, as well as those who came after them. Thus a new king arose, one who had not known Joseph, and years of enslavement and suffering ensued, years of forced labor. Egypt, immoral and idolatrous, had become an empire – an empire of sorcery and magic – which constituted its strength and glory. Tremendous spiritual blindness reigned in Egypt, and little by little the Children of Israel were also influenced by it. Hence they began to frequent places of entertainment and to celebrate popular holidays, as the Midrash states. The Children of Israel therefore “descended” – their descent into Egypt was a frightening descent – and little by little the outward Jewish identity of the Children of Israel began to disappear.

The Words of the Sages

Remove Your Shoes From Your Feet

The town of Troki, near Vilna, was a center for the Karaites, who lived in Lithuania and Poland. From time to time, their “sages” would write booklets that were filled with venom and hatred for rabbis who were faithful to the traditions of Israel and the oral Torah. One day, King Stanislaw Poniatowski received a letter from the Karaites denouncing the rabbis, accusing them of being disloyal to the king. The Karaites underlined that they alone were authentic Jews who had received the Torah from Moshe on Mount Sinai, and that all other Jews were a kind of *erev rav* (“mixed multitude”) that twisted Moshe’s Torah.

They also stated that they would agree to a public debate before the King with the “Talmudic Jews,” at which point they would openly prove that they were the only true Jews.

King Stanislaw accepted their suggestion, and informed the leading Jews of Vilna that they should appoint a representative to come before the king for a public debate with the Karaites.

On the advice of the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Meitus of Pinsk was chosen to represent Jews in the debate with the Karaites before the king. Besides the fact that Rabbi Yehudah Leib was a great scholar, he was also known for his extremely sharp mind. Even the Polish aristocracy respected him for his great wisdom and deep understanding of the Polish language.

Rabbi Yehudah Leib arrived in Vilna and went to see the Vilna Gaon. The latter warmly welcomed him and gave him his blessing that Hashem would grant him success and be with him to prove to the king just who were authentic and faithful Jews.

Leaving the Vilna Gaon with a tranquil heart, he departed for Warsaw, the residence of the Polish king, where the public debate with the Karaites was to take place.

The day of the debate was set for a certain Shabbat in the year 5536. That Shabbat morning, Rabbi Yehudah Leib arose at dawn and poured out his soul in reading the entire book of Tehillim. After the morning prayer and Shabbat meal, he headed towards the royal palace in a serene and confident mood, certain that Hashem would grant him success.

In the waiting room at the royal palace, he discovered that Karaite “sages” from Troki were already there. Finally, the king’s representative came and announced that they were to present themselves before the king. In that time, commoners would have to take off their shoes and leave them in the waiting room before presenting themselves before Polish kings. The Karaites removed their shoes and left them outside, whereas Rabbi Yehudah Leib, after removing his shoes, took them in hand and entered the king’s presence.

The king was seated on his throne, and sitting around him were his nobles. On the table before the king was the letter sent to him by the Karaites. The king raised his eyes towards their “sages” and said, “In your letter, you write that you could prove beyond a doubt that Talmudic Jews

in fact it reached such a point that when they left Egypt, the ministering angels sought to understand how the Children of Israel differed from the Egyptians, saying: “These are idolaters, and those are idolaters.”

The desire to resemble the Egyptians, as well as the burden of forced labor and complete enslavement to Pharaoh and his henchmen, made them lose their heads and prevented them from maintaining their own identity. In fact when Moshe first addressed them, they did not listen to him at all due to “shortness of spirit and hard labor” (Shemot 6:9). Yet during all that time, they preserved their names, they did not inform on one another, and none of them was depraved. How did they do this?

There is only one answer: Through Jewish pride.

have twisted the Law of Moses, and that you are true Jews who received the Law of Moses your teacher on Mount Sinai. Therefore present your proofs.”

“Your Majesty,” answered the leader of the Karaites, “the insolence of Talmudic Jews testifies against them. They have appointed someone to debate with us, and here he is, holding his shoes in his hands as he stands before Your Majesty! Besides his insolence towards Your Majesty, by doing this he is also arousing suspicions about Your Majesty’s servants, as if to imply that they are thieves. That is why he is afraid of leaving his shoes outside, and that is why he brought them here, into this chamber, before Your Majesty!”

When the king saw the Jew standing before him with his shoes in hand, he was absolutely furious. He looked at Rabbi Yehudah Leib with daggers in his eyes, demanding an explanation.

Rabbi Yehudah Leib bowed before the king and said in a beseeching voice, “Sire, Sovereign full with mercy, do not view me as a scoundrel. It never even entered my mind to scorn the honor of my king. Likewise, it never entered my mind to suspect that the king’s servants could be thieves.

“With the permission of Your Majesty, I will explain what I did: We have a tradition which states that when the glory of the L-RD revealed itself to our teacher Moses for the first time at the burning bush, He said to him: ‘Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place upon which you are standing is holy ground.’ Moses did what G-d told him, taking off his shoes to greet the King of kings. Yet afterwards, when he returned to his flock, he searched for his shoes but could not find them.

“Does Your Majesty know why? It is because they were stolen by the Karaites who were there at the time! Sire, ever since then, whenever we meet Karaites in a royal reception and we are obligated to take off our shoes, we keep them in hand because of these thieves.”

The king turned to the Karaites and asked them, “Are the words of this Jew true: Were your ancestors thieves?”

“Your Majesty, filled with kindness,” said the “sage” of the Karaites, “this crude accusation has been invented by these Jews.”

“How can you prove it?” asked the king.

The “sage” replied, “Karaites have only existed for 1,000 years at the most, so how can we be accused of having stolen Moses’ shoes at the burning bush? That incident happened some 3,000 years ago!”

The king burst into laughter and told the spokesman of the Karaites, “Your ears should hear what your mouth has spoken! You yourself have just admitted that your sect was founded only 1,000 years ago, whereas what happened at Mount Sinai happened long before then. How can you claim that you are authentic Jews who received the Law of Moses on Sinai? This crafty Jew has defeated you in this debate.”

The king then raised his hand to indicate that the debate was over, and Jews rejoiced.

The Four Crowns of Jacob

It is written, “From the loins of Jacob” (Shemot 1:5).

Why does it say “the loins of Jacob,” rather than “the loins of Israel?”

It is in order to allude to the four crowns that the Jewish people will fashion for G-d over the course of their history.

In fact by looking at the numerical value of each letter comprising the name Jacob [Yaakov], we see that the letter yud (numerical value: ten) refers to the Ten Commandments; the letter ayin (numerical value: 70) refers to the 70 elders of the Sanhedrin; the letter koph (numerical value: 100) refers to the Temple which they built for their Creator, which measured 100 cubits long; and the letter beit (numerical value: two) evokes the Two Tablets of the law. It was by Jacob’s merit that they left Egypt, and it was also by his merit that the world stands, as it is written: “He established it for Jacob as a statute” (Tehillim 105:10). – Midrash Aggadah

The Disgust of the Multitude

It is written, “The more they multiplied, the more they spread” (Shemot 1:12).

To what point did they spread?

Rabbi Shimon ben Levi said, “To the point that ‘they [the Egyptians] became disgusted because of the Children of Israel’ [Shemot 1:12].”

When an Egyptian wanted to meet his friend, he found himself among a thousand Israelites, such that he could no longer see this friend. He eventually hid his face, no longer having a desire for life, saying: “I am powerless before such a nation, so numerous they are!”

This is what Hashem said to Ezekiel: “I made you as numerous as the plants of the field” (Ezekiel 16:7).

Healing and Life

It is written, “The daughter of Pharaoh went down to bathe by the river” (Shemot 2:5).

Everything is foreseen by G-d. Batya, the daughter of Pharaoh, was afflicted by serious skin lesions that could not be cleansed with hot water. She therefore went down to bathe by the river, and there she heard a baby crying. When she stretched out her hand and brought the basket towards her, these lesions disappeared! She concluded, “This child is righteous,” and decided to keep it alive.

Whoever saves the life of a Jew is considered as if he has saved the entire world. Likewise, whoever kills a Jew is considered to have killed the entire world. We now understand why Pharaoh’s daughter was found worthy to dwell beneath the wings of the Divine Presence, and why she was called Batya (“daughter of G-d”). – Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer

A Faithful and Humble Shepherd

It is written, “Behold, a weeping boy” (Shemot 2:6).

She spoke prophetically, for the word for “boy” in Hebrew is na’ar, which is an acronym for the following: Nun – ne’eman (“faithful”), as it is written: “He is the faithful one in My entire house” (Bamidbar 12:7); Ayin – anav (“humble”), as it is written: “Moshe was exceedingly humble” (Bamidbar 12:3); Resh – ro’eh (“shepherd”), as it is written: “Moshe was a shepherd” (Shemot 3:1). Midrash Aggadah

The Final Level

It is written, “She called his name Moshe” (Shemot 2:10).

Why is the name Moshe written without a vav throughout the Torah?

It is to suggest that Moshe lacked a certain level of wisdom, as it is written: “However You made him slightly less than Divine beings” (Tehillim

8:6). Forty-nine levels of wisdom were given to him on Sinai, and he lacked but one. Which one? The one to complete the Torah.

We find proof for this in the Midrash (Mishlei 14): Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani recounts that before Moshe’s death, the Children of Israel asked him to teach them the last part of the Torah. At that point he forgot all that he had yet to transmit, and he could not respond. He then prostrated himself and said, “Sovereign of the universe, my death is better than my life!”

– Midrash Chaserot VeYeterot

My Name is Found Within Me

It is written, “G-d said to Moshe, ‘I Will Be As I Will Be’ ” (Shemot 3:14).

G-d said to Moshe, “Moshe, you will tell the Children of Israel that My Name is: Ehyeh asher Ehyeh.” In reality, this is an acronym: The term Ehyeh (aleph-hei-yud-hei) are the initials of (ani) adon hakol yatzarti hakol (“I am Master of all and I created all”). Furthermore, the reverse expression, hakol yatzarti hakol adon (ani), corresponds to the letters hei-yud-hei-aleph, meaning: “I created all and I am Master of all.”

In the Light of the Parsha

The Power and Reward of Sincere Faith

It is written, “The people believed, and they heard that Hashem had remembered the Children of Israel and that He saw their affliction, and they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves” (Shemot 4:31).

The Rambam writes, “The Jews did not believe in Moshe Rabbeinu because of the wonders that he performed. Whenever anyone’s belief is based on wonders, his heart has shortcomings, for it is possible to perform a wonder through magic or sorcery. All the wonders performed by Moshe in the desert were not intended to serve as proof of his prophecy, but rather were performed for a purpose” (Yesodei HaTorah 8:1).

This is why G-d did not ask Moshe to first perform these signs before Pharaoh. As such, this evildoer would be unable to say: “This nation does not truly believe in its G-d. It only trusts in Moshe and Aaron because of the wonders that they performed before me. As a result, the merit of their faith in G-d belongs to me.”

Furthermore, in order to prevent Pharaoh from making this assertion, Hashem commanded Moshe: “First perform the signs before the Children of Israel, not to arouse their faith in Me, but because you must perform them before Pharaoh, and I do not want him to be able to claim: ‘Israel only believes in G-d because of miracles, and these miracles occurred through me. I will therefore be rewarded.’ ”

The Rambam’s claim is proven in the very text of the Torah. In fact the Torah states, “The people believed, and they heard that Hashem had remembered the Children of Israel.” Note that it does not say, “The people believed in the signs.” From here we learn that it was actually in G-d that they placed their faith, and furthermore it was this faith that delivered them from Egypt. In the Midrash our Sages say, “The Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt only as a reward for their faith, as it is said: ‘The people believed’ ” (Mechilta, Beshalach 6).

Although the Children of Israel had numerous other merits to their credit (since they did not change their names or their language, they did not speak Lashon Harah, and none of them was depraved), they were only delivered by the merit of their faith. Nevertheless, if they had not been careful in these four areas, they would have been unable to preserve their identity, meaning that they would have assimilated among the Egyptians. In that case, they would never have had another opportunity to believe in G-d! Because they were vigilant in these four areas, they remained separate from non-Jews and were delivered by the merit of their faith.

When the tzaddik Rabbi Israel Meir Hacoheh, the author of Chafetz Chaim, started becoming known around the world, people flocked to his home to receive his blessing. Surprised by this, he would often say: “Is it possible that in the very residence of the king, people make requests of his servant? Hashem in all His splendor resides among you, and you can address all your requests to Him! Why turn to a simple and insignificant man such as myself, who can offer you no help?”

One time, as the Chafetz Chaim was visiting a certain community, a crowd of people gathered around him and asked him to pray for them. The Chafetz Chaim then said with emotion, “My dear friends! You know very well that no father wants to hear the request of one of his children from another one of his children. We are all the children of Hashem, and everyone is obligated to formulate his prayers to Him directly. Nevertheless, if one among you feels that our Father is angry with him, you can be certain that G-d ardently yearns for us to appease Him. I can assure you that He awaits our prayers and our return to Him.”

In general, it is said that the Chafetz Chaim often encouraged everyone to isolate themselves and pour out their hearts to Hashem, like a son speaking directly to his father. In this time of intimacy with his Creator, said the Chafetz Chaim, a person must implore Hashem with simple words in order for Him to show him compassion and kindness. In this way, we can rest assured of being heard by Hashem.

A Nice Parable

The Chafetz Chaim illustrated this with a nice parable: “Imagine a poor person who, filled with humility, goes to see a rich but stingy man and begs him for help, since he has no other alternative. The wealthy man, observing the grave situation of the poor man who has no one else to turn to, will obviously open his heart and give him something.”

How much more – if we address ourselves to our Creator by sincerely placing our faith in Him and no one else – will G-d obviously consider our prayers, acting immediately on our behalf with mercy and answering all our desires for the best.

A Trial of Faith

Due to his refined character, the gaon Rabbi Yosef Yoizel Horowitz, better known as the “Alter of Novardok,” was able to prove to certain people that their prayers were but spoken words, for they did not truly believe in G-d’s deliverance. The following story is told in the book HaMeorot HaGedolim:

One day a man went to the Beit HaMidrash to ask the Alter of Novardok for help. Weeping bitter tears, the man told the Rav that his son had been struck by a serious illness and was now between life and death. After listening to him, the Rav offered to bring him to a medical specialist who would certainly be capable of healing him, though at the cost of 100 rubles [a high price at the time].

The man was lost at first, but after reflecting he agreed with the Rav despite the great cost. The Rav then said to him, “Listen to me, my dear friend. To save the life of your suffering son, you must instead devote this money to hiring ten men who will pray and beseech Hashem to save him. These ten men will recite Amen, Yehei Shemei Rabba [“Amen, May His Great Name...”], for our Sages were certain that we can annul evil decrees by responding to Kaddish with all of our strength [Shabbat 119b]. Thus with G-d’s help, your son will be cured by this.”

At that point the man began to ramble, regretting the fact that he had agreed to the Rav’s initial request. He even began to complain and protest the elevated price that the Rav had mentioned. Furthermore, he voiced great doubts as to the efficacy of this method for curing his son.

It was then that the Alter of Novardok explained why he had made this request to him: The Rav’s only objective had been to determine the man’s

level of confidence in G-d. When it turned out that his faith wasn’t complete, and that he was not convinced that Hashem was the only physician capable of healing his son, even his prayers were deficient.

The 30 Million Dollar Deal

The following story, which recently took place in the United States, is told to us by Rav Yechiel Levy of El’ad: On Rosh Chodesh Kislev of 5769, a very wealthy man went to pray by his Rav, the Rebbe of Bobov. The prayer service had begun, and as the congregation was reciting the passages on the korbanot [offerings], this man was reading his email on his handheld PC. His eyes then became fixed on an urgent message from his office, a message dealing with a special business transaction that could be worth 30 million dollars, but he had to act on it immediately!

As he was reading this message and thinking about how to respond, the Rebbe approached and sternly admonished the man: “My dear friend, if you want to pray with us, then turn off your computer and don’t miss any part of the prayer. Otherwise, find yourself another synagogue.” The Rebbe’s faithful follower immediately turned off his handheld PC and joined in the Rosh Chodesh prayer, all while strengthening his faith in G-d and in the tzaddikim.

At the end of the service, he quickly reopened his handheld PC and was suddenly confronted by a series of messages that began with: “Where are you? What are you doing? The deal will be lost!”

His heart starting beating wildly as he read message after message. He finally reached the last one, which stated: “There’s been a sudden downturn in the market. By a miracle, we avoided losing 30 million dollars!”

Filled with emotion that he could not conceal, he showed this incredible final message to all his neighbors, which proved that a miracle had just occurred. He immediately went to see the Rebbe and gave him a sizable donation. The Rebbe then said to him, “I have nothing to do with this miracle. It’s simply that when we begin praying and put all our business aside, Hashem takes care of things in the best possible way.”

I Am Prayer

To Strengthen our Faith and Appreciation

I believe that the most important aspect of our Divine service takes place at the start of the day, meaning during prayer, which is the first part of this service. Clearly, prayer must express our appreciation for the fact that all our business depends on G-d. Prayer must be marked by our gratitude.

Truth be told, acquiring faith is rather simple. The difficulty lies in maintaining its fervor, something that requires constant effort.

This is why we have been given prayer, whose sole purpose is to help us strengthen our faith. This is the only goal of all prayers: Emet Ve’emunah, Pesukei D’Zimra, etc. The Torah therefore instituted three prayers a day, for we must constantly work to maintain the strength of our faith in G-d.

– Ohr Yechezkel

Guard Your Tongue

Forbidden to Believe It

There is no permission whatsoever for believing Lashon Harah, even if the speaker says it in the presence of the subject, given that the subject has not admitted it to be true. How much more is it forbidden to believe when the speaker does not say it in the subject’s presence, but only asserts that he would do so! Because of our numerous sins, however, many people make an enormous mistake in this regard. – Chafetz Chaim