

Shemot 5786
January 10, 2026

The name of our parasha is misleading. It's called *Shemot*, Names. You would never know that this is the parasha where the action abruptly shifts from the family narrative of Genesis to the grand national drama of enslavement and the first glimmers of liberation. You would never know that this is where we meet the central figure of the Torah. You would never know that here is where we watch our defining leader grow up in Pharaoh's palace then come of age seeing the brutality wrought upon his own kin, impulsively kill a taskmaster, and flee into the wilderness. You would never know that this is the parasha of the burning bush and his encounter with Gd and with his life mission. You would never know that this is the parasha when he returns to Egypt, reunites with his brother, convinces the Israelite elders that Adonai has heard their sighs and moans and has sent him to confront Pharaoh and liberate them. You would never know that in this same parasha, he calls upon Pharaoh for the first time to let his people go, and Pharaoh refuses for the first time, immediately punishing the Israelites with even harder labor and beatings so that they turn against their liberators for making their lives more difficult. And you would never know that a parasha named *Shemot*/Names ends with a nameless mass of slaves mired in doubt and despair, as life has become even more onerous and freedom is nowhere to be seen.

The parasha opens by naming the ancestors of the Israelites who are now in Egypt.

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרַיִם אֲתָּה יַעֲקֹב אֲיַשׁ וּבֵיתוּ בָּאוּ:

These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, Issachar, Zebulun, Binyamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

But by the next chapter, their descendants have become *nameless*. Chapter two opens,

וַיָּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לְוִי וַיַּקְחֵת אֶת-בְּתִלְוִי: וַתִּהְרֹר הָאָשָׁה וַתַּלְדֵּד בָּן

“A certain man of the tribe of Levi took as a wife a certain woman of the tribe of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son.” This man and this woman, these are not unimportant people. How curious that these two people are nameless here in the parasha called “names.” They don’t even name their baby, afraid as they must have been to get too attached given that they believed he was destined to die.

What can it mean that in a parasha called names, that begins with the names of the ancestors, that the most important person in the Torah is not named by his parents, who also go nameless?

Speaking of the ancestors in the first verse, Sforno teaches, “the ones mentioned here were deserving to be mentioned with their names. The reason is that each one of them possessed sufficient individuality to give meaning to his name....[but] after the last of the original 70 migrants had died, the [Israelites] became more like that of creeping insects, creatures headed for destruction.” Chizkuni says, “The Jews that Jacob brought with him to Egypt were not only numbered but they were named...The fact is that in retrospect, after having been subjected to cruel treatment by the Egyptians, the people had forgotten about the good years and felt as if they had only just arrived there.”

Writing about this parasha, Isaac Luria, the founder of Lurianic Kabbalah, taught that under these conditions, essential awareness or knowing, called *da’at*, left the Israelites. He imagined it as its own kind of exile, the exile of *da’at*, the exile of awareness. Toldot Yaakov Yosef teaches that “the essence of the time in Egypt was the removal of *da’at*, which was a spiritual exile, the aspect of forgetfulness...”

This isn’t so different from words written millennia later by the 20th century thinker Hannah Arendt as she tried to describe the mechanisms and effects of totalitarianism. Arendt used the phrase “holes of oblivion,” as she described what happens when regimes dispute facts, even easily observable facts, and erase history. When we can’t agree about what happened, nothing is real and nothing is sacred. People become disoriented. Memory malfunctions. A forgetting takes hold.

And when the claim of the regime is that it alone possesses all legitimate power and that all of its exercises of power are legitimate, everyone else’s power is tenuous, and conditional. The rest of us feel uncertain about whether it is legitimate, or safe, to exercise our own agency, our own power, and in what sphere and at what times. When we’re unclear about our own agency, we’re unclear about our responsibility. Arendt says thinking fails. If I don’t have power, if I don’t have legitimate agency, then there’s nothing I can do that matters in the face of evil. And if I believe that there’s nothing I can do that matters, then I will do my best to choose the lesser evil, but I will not take risks to challenge the evil. Silence, complicity, going along to get along.

It is in this context that we meet the Pharaoh of our parasha and the Exodus story. Sometimes we relate this story to inequality and oppression in our own time. Sometimes we relate it to xenophobia and immigration, as it was the Israelites’ status as strangers

that made them vulnerable to enslavement. But in the Biblical narrative Pharaoh most represents raw, unbridled power. And the society of Pharaoh's time represents the celebration and worship of that concentrated power. Pharaoh orders the midwives to kill Israelite baby boys and throw them in the river because he is worried that they will become numerous and threaten his monopoly on power. He enslaves the Israelites to dominate them, to subjugate them to his power. When they indicate that they believe that there is another source of power in the universe that they call Adonai, and that they want to worship that other source, Pharaoh's response is to demonstrate his hegemonic power over them. Power is both the means and the ends for Pharaoh. It is power for power's sake.

Adonai represents a different kind of power. As Pharaoh will come to learn, Adonai's power is greater than his. But Adonai's power is not for its own sake. It is a means to other ends. Adonai exercises power for the purpose of redemption. For human freedom. For justice. For dignity. For compassion. As we say in the Gevurot prayer that we sang this morning, (Gevurot by the way means power) *mechalkhel chayim b'chesed*, that power is used to value life with lovingkindness. *Somech noflim*, to lift up the fallen; *matir asurim*, to free the captives. And in our story, that power is used to challenge the misuse of power, the abuse of power, by human beings.

When people abuse power over one another, when they celebrate and revel in that abuse of power, the message to those watching is, "you could be next." Whether it's the ability to swoop into a country, kidnap and imprison its despotic leader, and seize its oil industry. Or the ability to send troops of gunmen into cities to harass, intimidate, kidnap, and kill people. Or the ability to take away the straw that your slaves need to make bricks but to keep the brick quota the same, as Pharaoh did, and have your taskmasters beat the slaves if they can't meet that quota. This is the exercise of power for power's sake. Acts that are for show, to signal danger to those watching; to signal the magnitude of the power, the unaccountability of the power, the recklessness of the power, the unreasonableness of the power. When this kind of abuse happens, we lose our way. Those watching, those afraid of being targeted, those enacting the abuse. We get lost. We lapse into a kind of haze. Da'at departs into exile. It's as if we forget our own names.

When Moses, having fled this hole of oblivion, encounters the burning bush, and is called upon by Gd to lead his people to freedom, his first question is *Mi Anochi?* We usually read it as Who am I? As in who am I to go to Pharaoh, little me? But we could equally read it as Who am I? I'm lost. I've experienced erasure. I doubt sincerely that I have power of any kind, that anything I do matters. I don't even know what's true or what's real or if there are facts or if I have a history. Who Am I to go to Pharaoh. Very different question.

But there's a nechemta. There's hope. Arendt says that though the erasure of facts is attempted, facts themselves are stubborn. Human beings are stubborn too, and find their way, over and over again, back to facts, back to narrative, back to histories, back to their assertion of human freedom, to their sense of both agency and responsibility. And to the chagrin of tyrants throughout history, this makes complete erasure impossible.

It is not until next week's parasha, not until Gd provides a narrative, recounting the history of the covenant and setting forth a vision for the people's freedom and their destiny, that the campaign to challenge Pharaoh's power is set in motion in earnest. And only then do we learn the names of Moses's parents, Amram and Yocheved. It's as if, when the action turns toward remembering, toward creating narrative, and toward action, they remember who they are.

It's through these same practices that we'll keep knowing our own names. Participating with others in the smallest of actions to remember together who we are and what we stand for, to say out loud together what is true, to say that we still believe that what we do matters. Please join me after Shabbat services on January 24, January 31, and February 7, as we study Rabbi Yitz Greenberg's book *The Triumph of Life*, and in this time of forgetting, explore together who we are and who we can be.

Shabbat Shalom.