

Sh'mot 5780
Names Still Matter
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Last week, Josh Garoon gave a fabulous d'var Torah that I had the pleasure of reading. Today I'm going to put some more thoughts on the table to expand that conversation a bit, but with particular slant.

On this Shabbat, when we began reading the book of Sh'mot--names--, I think it's worth thinking about the difference names make to us--as part of the Jewish People and as individuals. This is a Shabbat when many community leaders are speaking about voting for Mercaz representatives in the upcoming World Zionist Congress elections. Mercaz represents the interests of Conservative/Masorti Jews. So I will be speaking about that today--and it won't surprise that I will speak about it on my terms.

We all know that names distinguish. They draw adherents closer and they push others away. In our parasha, the most frequently repeated words are "Egyptian" and "Hebrews," or "Children of Israel." The insistence of those names repeating themselves over and over again feels almost like an attempt to address a fundamental anxiety: Are we really so different from *them*? At the Pesach seder, we like to remember a *midrash* that says we remained a distinct people, keeping our Israelite names and modesty practices. But the Midrash is also full of musings to the contrary, because throughout our *parashah*, there are moments of surprise, when the lines blur and it is not at all clear that the Israelites are essentially different from the Egyptians, besides in social standing and, maybe, maybe the notion that Pharaoh was godlike. Fundamentally, who we are to ourselves and among ourselves is not so clear.

For some of us, the name "Conservative" reminds us of who we are as Jews. For others of us, it is a name we don't much care about, because the community we find here matters more to us than a particular religious approach or praxis.

Half a century ago, Movement affiliation meant a lot to non-Orthodox Jews. When I was growing up, my parents would tout "Conservative" policies as personal dogma. For those who pursued a halachic lifestyle within Conservative Judaism, Movement affiliation meant following decisions of the Conservative Rabbinat--unless they felt too uncomfortable. But what the "Movement" said, was what we understood to be our personal guidance. So, for example, we ate gelatin products in my home, because the Conservative Rabbis said we could. My father called our rabbi, who drove 20 minutes to shul, "shomer Shabbat" because the Movement permitted driving to shul (actually,

under very limited circumstances, which probably did not cover our Rabbi, but the caveats got lost in translation very quickly). And, people who did not feel themselves bound by halacha but wanted a traditional davening milieu found Conservative organizations to be welcoming and forgiving, and they accepted Movement standards in Movement buildings as right and proper.

By all accounts from sociologists and, well, anyone who's paying attention, we have entered a post-denominational period. We still have our movements, but fewer and fewer people feel attached to Movement ideology. Fewer and fewer Jews affiliate at all. At the recent USCJ/RA conference Elissa and I attended, there was a plenary called "Why Do We Need a Conservative Movement?" Responses were thin, in my view, although emotionally resonant: "There is strength in numbers. Conservative Jews know by the name that they are likely to feel at home when they enter a particular space."

I am one of those people who has always felt deeply attached to Conservative Movement ideology and practice. I'm not sure how much that matters as far as the Movement goes, but it is essential to how I lead our community, here. I'd do it pretty much the same if there were no Movement, and I'm not sure I'd miss much in terms of what the Movement itself provides, separate from the institutions that currently affiliate with it. I think JTS would survive and the Ramah camps would continue to thrive. The day schools--well, they have already left the Movement; there is no longer an official meaning, an office or authority, behind a "Solomon Schechter Day School" name.

And we would still be here. Just as strong? I don't know, but I think so. All of this is to say that I think we'll be just fine, whichever direction the Movement goes.

And, personally, I would be quite sad and feel unmoored as a practicing Jew--not so much on a professional level as on a personal level. I wish the Movement only the best, as it continues to shrink.

The reason I would feel sad and unmoored by the erosion of the Movement is that I believe the Conservative, or Masorti Movement, is the most authentic living out of rabbinic Judaism, which I love, and which also is undergoing drastic redefinition, in many ways for the better. I believe that it is good for us to be held to high standards of scholarship and personal practice, in a context of pluralism, and grounded in a carefully cultivated synergy of Torah and rabbinic creativity.

As many of you know, Scott and I just returned from Israel yesterday. We spent a week with our kids who live there. Rena, who made aliyah, teaches mindfulness and yoga,

and is not particularly observant but has a spiritual practice and loves her Judaism. Benjy, who is observant and fiercely egalitarian like me, is training to become a Conservative rabbi. I'll be delighted to share highlights of our trip with you during Kiddush and in the days head.

Right now, I want to remind you that when I walk around in Israel, I often feel in some ways that I am home and in other ways like a Jew who does not fit in there. A woman in pants and a kippah, who keeps Shabbat and lays *t'fillin* is still an apparition in many places there. But this last trip was different in Jerusalem and in Zichron Ya'acov. (Describe our Shabbat experiences in Jerusalem, and how different storekeepers in Zichron asked me if I were a rabbi) (Contrast to other places where I was asked, "Are you wearing a kippah? Is it a real one? Shouldn't you wear a head scarf?) I have a sense that what made it possible for me to feel a growing sense of legitimacy acceptance in Israel is the growing presence of vibrant, non-Orthodox Judaism there. But the question I was asked most often was, "Are you Reform?" And when I said, "No, I'm Conservative," or "Masorti," the Israeli equivalent, I got blank looks and felt a need to explain.

רבי שמעון היה אומר:
שלושה כתרים הם:
כתר תורה, וכתר כהונה, וכתר מלכות-
וכתר שם טוב עולה על גביהם.
(אבות ד', י"ז)

Rabbi Shimon liked to say:
There are three crowns:
The crown of Torah,
The crown of priesthood, and
The crown of royalty;
But the crown of a good name is greater than all of them.
(Avot 4:17)

By the time Rabbi Shimon was talking about crowns, in the mid-second century, the Jewish people were desperately trying to identify the next paradigm that would support their thriving as a people after the destruction of the Second Temple, with the Jewish population center having shifted to the Babylonian diaspora. What they came up with was Rabbinic Judaism. Rabbi Shimon wistfully remembers a Davidic dynasty and a cult of Priesthood, but all of that was already gone. And Torah, too, was under attack. Torah

was older than kings or priests, and obviously, it survived the Destruction, but Roman persecution under the Emperor Hadrian threatened its continued vitality. And so Rabbi Shimon would teach that we could internalize our sense of regality and find a holy path through life based on virtue, the kind of virtue that garners respect and inspires others. I know how *I* do that, but unfortunately, I cannot bring the virtue that is mine to serve others as a Rabbi, in Israel and in many other parts of the world.

As much as I am excited about the opportunities post-denomination Judaism holds for us to thrive here, I need to feel like my legitimate and life-giving way of living Jewishly has a place in the Jewish homeland and modern State of Israel. I need for there to be pluralism, **and in that process, names matter.**

Every five years, we have a chance to stand up for what we believe and claim our rights as non-Orthodox Jews, through the World Zionist Congress elections, which are nearly upon us. This is where Diaspora Jews can have our say about critical policy decisions and how Israel will support religious organizations. We cast our votes in the hope that the government of Israel will choose to support the Judaism that sustains us. Our votes for MERCAZ, the official slate of Conservative/Masorti Judaism, can have a huge impact on Masorti/Conservative institutions and rabbis in Israel and other parts of the world and so that we can thrive there, gain respect, and feel like we belong there.

I am told that in the last World Zionist Congress election, Conservative Jews did not come out and vote, but the Reform did, and that upwards of \$2 million was given to Reform organizations in Israel and other parts of the world, verses more like \$20 thousand that were allotted to Conservative/Masorti organizations. We lost out because we had fewer votes, and so there is a special push for us to vote this time.

Our sages teach that just before our ancestors left Egypt, they were instructed to take a “bunch of hyssop,” dip it in blood, and sprinkle it on their doorposts. The “bunch,” say the rabbis, represents the unity of the Jewish people. That unity was a precondition for our redemption from Egypt (Shemot Rabbah 17:3). Do you want an Israel where all Jews are free to worship as we please, where a woman’s voice, or a queer person’s voice, is not silenced, where I have the right to perform my daughter’s wedding, hopefully someday, where all people may read from the Torah or lead a service without fear of intimidation or reprisal? I know I do. Israel will only move forward as a nation and we will only advance as a robust Jewish People when we work together and make space for one another. So I’m voting for Mercaz--not because I think that’s the answer to all of our problems, but because it is something I can do, and I hope you will do so as well.

Full disclosure: my son is on the slate. I discovered his name there when I was mid-process in preparing this d'var. I was looking around for more information and pulled up the slate, and there was his name. I'm sure he'll get no fame, glory, or shekel notes if he joins the Congress--and I'm even more sure that if elected, he will represent us well.

We need to understand that is no single way to read and interpret Torah. Owning that reality seeds the halachic pluralism that is the hallmark of Conservative/Masorti Judaism. Said Rabbi Tanchum: "Had the Torah been given in cut and dried form, the Teachers of the Law would have lost prestige entirely if they [ruled differently from the accepted position]. But since final rulings were not given, teachers who follow reason to form different approaches are *not* regarded as guilty of errors, and they can find companions to share their opinions. The decision by the majority, contrary to the opinion of some teachers, does not make the minority view wrong" (Pesikta Rabbati 21, 6). It behooves us to stand up proudly for our approach to Jewish study and practice. Our way is every bit as legitimate, if not moreso, than the approach of the Orthodox who wield control and deny our practices and the standing of our weddings and conversions.

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelman, a Masorti rabbi in Jerusalem, reflecting on Rabbi Shimon's teaching about the crown of a good name, writes the following: "Perhaps Rabbi Shimon is telling us not to be too cautious [in asserting that] you have a good name waiting to be discovered, an inner language seeking to break out from inside you and give voice to new possibilities of thought and knowledge...All of these 'crowns' [are] always available--waiting for individuals, by virtue of their actions in the world, to demonstrate that they have earned the right to wear them..."(Lev Shalem Pirkei Avot, 203-204). She argues, as I do, that we must navigate prudently the interstices between caution--not throwing the baby out with the bathwater--and bold, daring experimentation and change (Ibid., in my words).

I love what we have here, and I am committed to the possibilities that we will find as we navigate our way in this rapidly shifting landscape with good Torah, open hearts, and creativity. And I want to be able to bring what we do here with me when I visit Israel and other Jewish communities around the world. We have a life-giving, smart, joyful approach to Jewish life and learning that hearkens back to the early rabbis just as it supports our human flourishing in the modern world. And I want others, like Rena, who "do their Jewish" in new and creative ways, to find respect and legitimacy in Israel and worldwide. I hope that you will join me in voting for the Mercaz slate in the upcoming

World Zionist Congress election. The voting window opens this Tuesday and runs through March 11, and it is easy to vote online.

In today's Torah reading, most fascinating name given is the name God gives for Godself, when Moshe asks for it. In a parasha where several key characters go unnamed, it is especially striking that Moshe asks the question. I love God's answer: "Eh'yeh Asher Eh'yeh," "I will be what I will be." My theology is grounded in the idea of God as the Eternal Unfolding of Being, always in process, evolving and changing. God tells Moshe not to tell the Israelites the whole name--just say "Eh'yeh," I Will Be, because there will be times ahead that will be difficult. The Exodus will not be the ultimate happy ending, but rather part of a long story and that will unfold with new challenges in the future. But the Israel can count on this: God will *be*, growing and evolving, and so can they, when they align themselves with the Divine reality.

Whether or not you choose to vote, I hope and pray that we will all carry our good names forward, as individuals and as a kahal, that we will bring a light that inspires and serve and a force for good in a world that needs our help.