

## D'var for Shelach: Naming Names

June 19, 2020

Joshua Garoon

Good shabbes! And happy Juneteenth.

This week's parasha, Shelach, has been a favorite of mine since I was a kid. It's the parasha in which my namesake's named. Before sending Hoshea, son of Nun out with 11 other spies, Moses changes his name to "Yehoshua." That's a pretty exciting moment of Torah for a kid named Joshua.

What was lost on that kid, though, is the **reason** for the name change.

It's not entirely clear to the adults, either. Our texts feature a number of explanations for the change, ranging from the numerological to the grammatological. My favorite, often attributed to the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian scholar Sforino, focuses on the *tense* of the name. "Hoshea," by this gloss, means "he saved": past tense. "Yehoshua," by comparison, means "he **will** save": future tense. Moses changed Joshua's name to emphasize his future, and the future of the people he'd lead.

This leaves us, though, with another question of time: why it's at **this** specific point in the Torah that Joshua's name change is announced. After all, when we first meet him, in Shemot 17, he is defeating the Amalekites – and he's already "Joshua," not Hoshea. And when we encounter him again, in Shemot 24, as he ascends Mount Sinai with Moses, he is "Joshua." And he's "Joshua" in Shemot 33. And in Bamidbar 11. Ironically, without the line in our parasha, we'd never know his name changed.

Why is it only in this week's parasha that we learn about the change?

Rashi tells us that Moses was anticipating what would happen with the twelve spies. He chose this moment to **remind** Joshua that he was destined to lead the

people into the land they'd been promised. The announcement, then, was for **Joshua's** benefit.

I want us to also reflect, though, on the effect the announcement would have had on **others**. A public name change is what the philosopher John Langshaw Austin called a "**performative** utterance" – a speech act which actually changes things in the world. Another example is a rabbi declaring two people married. The announcement itself, and the power vested in it, actually changes that couple's status in and for the rest of the world.

This, I'm arguing, is what's going on in our parasha. Moses is making a **performative** utterance. It's not an explicit appointment of Joshua as his successor. But it does signal Joshua's future role. And not just to him: to the entire people. As the disaster of the spies unfolds, and the people are condemned to wander the desert for decades, we, like them, learn that Caleb will inherit land, but **Joshua** – Joshua will inherit leadership. He will lead the people into the land, into their future. It mattered, a great deal, that the people would recognize that change: that Moses **named names**.

Having made that argument, I want to focus on the idea of the performative. Today, as many of you are aware, we're celebrating Juneteenth. The holiday celebrates the end of slavery in my birth state of Texas, in 1865. This might be a bit confusing. After all, Lee surrendered to Grant on April 9, 1865. A month later, Union forces captured Jefferson Davis. So why did it take until June 19 for slaves in Texas to be freed? (Hear, here, the echoes of my question about the timing of Joshua's name change.)

The answer is **distance**: physical and mental. Texas is physically far from Virginia, and the effects of the Confederacy's loss arrived slowly. And Texans were not **mentally** prepared to recognize the inevitable until those effects arrived. That occurred when General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, accompanied by two thousand Union troops. Upon his arrival, General Granger read General Order

Number Three aloud, declaring that the more than 250,000 enslaved people in Texas were emancipated.

That order changed things. The people of Texas, and especially the quarter of a million people the order formally freed, took its words seriously. It was the best, fullest sort of performative utterance.

But today, as many of you also know, the term “performative” is often used as a pejorative. We hear people described as “performative allies” and as “performatively woke” and as playing “performative politics.” All of these are accusations that people are play-acting, acting in a superficial way: that they are only performing a role, and not actually committed to real action. That they’re all talk. That their words are empty: they don’t really matter.

I want to insist that words matter. But I also want to ask where, when, and how they matter. What might we learn from the performative power of Moses’ announcement of Joshua’s name, and of General Granger’s reading of General Order Number Three?

To think through that, I want to turn to the statement our shul issued via email yesterday afternoon. It responds to the murder of George Floyd. If you haven’t read it yet, I encourage you to do so.

I want to start by saying how much I appreciate all the work that went into this statement. It was crucial for our qahal to publicly support a statement of this sort. Its words matter.

And I want us to think hard together about a word that comes up over and over in the statement: the word “neighbor.” Such a Jewish word. It’s the heart of the most famous summary of the Torah, Hillel’s answer when asked to teach the entire Torah on one foot: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your **neighbor**. That is the entire Torah, the rest is just commentary. Now go and study” (Shabbat 31a).

The word translated as “neighbor,” in that passage, is *chaver*. We usually translate that word as “friend”, and there’s much commentary on this distinction. But I don’t want to delve into those details, today.

Instead, I want to concentrate on the **performative** aspect of Hillel’s dictum. **Who** is our neighbor? Is it just someone who happens to live next door? Does it matter how we define our **neighborhood**: whom we include, and whom we exclude?

I’d say it does: that Hillel is forcing us to consider whom, exactly, we consider our neighbors, and thus to whom we should not be hateful. It’s not everybody, clearly, or he would’ve just said that. So we have to define it. We have to **name names**.

In the shul’s statement, we name names. We say, “George Floyd was our neighbor. Breonna Taylor was our neighbor. Ahmaud Arbery was our neighbor. Many more Black people now dead were our neighbors.”

In doing this, we are doing what so many leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement have insisted we do: say their names. Say his name: George Floyd. Say her name: Breonna Taylor.

But there is a name conspicuously missing from our statement. Conspicuously, because the statement comes from a synagogue in Madison, Wisconsin.

Tony Robinson.

Tony Robinson was killed by a Madison police officer on March 6, 2015, on the 1100 block of Willy Street. He was nineteen years old.

Tony Robinson was our neighbor. He literally lived in the same neighborhood as some of our members. There was so little **distance**, physically, between us. We did not, like the Texans of 1865, need to wait for the effects of the loss to travel. The mental, though: that remains a serious question, a serious challenge. Are we still distancing ourselves from Tony Robinson’s death? How do we overcome that

distance, so as to arrive at a better place – to fulfill the promise of **our** land – together?

We can start by saying his name. His name was Tony Robinson. It matters. Tony Robinson's life, like each Black life, matters.

Naming names matters. And **not** naming names **also** matters. The names we say, and the names we **don't**, determine the power of our performative utterances.

But naming names is not enough. Even saying them in public – in statements, at rallies – is not enough. It matters. But for our statements to really matter, we must, like Moses, and like General Granger – and like the rabbi marrying a couple – invest them with **power**. We have to sustain the changes our performative utterances make in the real world, by working with people: people who occupy powerful positions, and people who occupy our streets, in protest.

On that note, here's another name to be named: Freedom, Inc. Right now, as we schmooze and daven, as I deliver this d'var, Freedom Inc. is helping lead a march to the Dane County Jail. Alongside the Free the 350 Bail Fund and other organizations, they will enact a mass bailout of the 35 people currently held in that jail only on account of unpaid bail. (If you're unaware of but interested in supporting those efforts, please let me know, and I'll provide links.)

This is an act fully in keeping with the traditions of Juneteenth. It is an act fully in keeping with our traditions, Jewish traditions: traditions which could only be performed once brave leaders stepped forward and confronted power with a simple declaration: "Let my people go."

**My people. Our people. Our neighbors.**

Say their names.

Shabbat shalom.

