

Dear Chavraya,

When I taught at the Solomon Schechter School, at the start of every class I would always say the b'racha for learning with my students before taking attendance. I did this in order to emphasize that every one of these children, as everyone of us, is Torah. Every name is holy and conveys the holiness of the one who carries that name. How could I utter such words of Torah without first saying a blessing?

At the start of the second book of the Torah, which begins on this Shabbos, names are enumerated, attendance taken, as it were. Our enslavement in Egypt is about to begin. The oppressor dehumanizes by taking away names. Before the descent, a voice calls out, as though to say, "hold on to your names." Our names identify us as unique individuals, singing of who we are. So begins the second book of the Torah, *v'eleh sh'mot b'nei Yisrael/And these are the names of the children of Israel*. In English, the book is called *Exodus*, referring to the seminal event in its narrative. In Hebrew, the book is called, *Sefer Sh'mot/the Book of Names*, from its first words, which become the first words of this week's Torah portion, *parashat Sh'mot*.

In a beautiful teaching, Rebbe Tzadok of Lublin writes on the beginning of our portion, *the light of Torah is itself the light of the souls of the children of Israel*. We are the light of Torah, the light of Torah is carried within us. Rebbe Tzadok goes on to say, *and therefore the holiness that is within everyone is hinted at in their names*. Our names are vessels that we fill with the meaning of our lives. Every name is holy, not meant to be snarled or shouted, each as a word of Torah, as Torah itself, to be blessed in the song of its calling. Only then can we begin the lesson.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor