

Dear Chavraya,

I would ask you first to think about your own name. What comes to you when you hear your name? Or when you write your name, or see it in print? Who do you think of, what associations do you make with your own name from way back right up until the present moment in your being who you are? In that way, what does how we see our name have to do with how we see ourselves? I share two stories about names, one my own middle name and one the story of a childhood neighbor long ago.

On my birth certificate, my middle name is given as “Hall,” Victor Hall Reinstein. Even as a child I found it strange. As I heard of the person the name came from I was perplexed. My middle name came from a beloved uncle of my mother, *feter Hillel/uncle Hillel*. I would often ask, so why isn’t my middle name Hillel? When I started college, I decided that I wanted to legally change my middle name to what it was meant to be. When I went to Boston city hall and was told it would cost \$200 to change my name, I sighed, knowing I couldn’t pay such a sum for my own name to be what it was meant to be. I held the desire to change Hall to Hillel, but I did not act on it, until....

In the midst of the Vietnam War, on arriving at the Worcester County Jail to serve a ten-day sentence for a draft board sit-in, I stood before an unsmiling officer who dryly asked one question after another, never looking up. When he asked for my full name and told me to spell it, I paused for but a moment and said Victor Hillel Reinstein, slowly spelling my middle name, H-I-L-L-E-L. From that moment on, I never again used the name Hall in any document or context, proudly giving my name then as it was meant to be, striving to fill it through the years with who I try to be.

We are joined to the past and to the future through our names. It is a lesson I learned as a child from our Italian neighbor, Mr. Pagliarulo. My father would often go next door after work, particularly in the summer months, and sip some wine with the elder man. One day my father was quite delayed in returning to us for supper. When he returned, he shared that Mr. Pagliarulo had needed to talk. I remember so clearly how my father shook his head with empathy for the old man’s distress. Mr. Pagliarulo cried, my father said, as he shared what his son had done. The son had changed his last name from Pagliarulo to Page, severing for the father the thread of connection and identity as it had been carried from the old country.

This week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Sh’mot* tells of names, teaching that each one’s name as a source of identity and connection is a means of survival. The entire second book of the Torah, *Sefer Sh’mot*, can literally be understood as the “Book of Names.” The first words of the portion and thus of the book it begins are, *eleh sh’mot b’nei yisra’el ha’ba’im mitzrayma/these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt....* In almost poetic form, Rashi reminds us that these very same words were said in the previous portion. He explains that there those who went down to Egypt were counted by their names while still alive. Now they are counted by their names in death in order to show that they are still beloved.

Our names become a link in our own continuity, allowing us to transcend our selves and the moment in time in which we live on this earth. Our names are the means by which we are remembered and our memories crystallized as a blessing. That we be remembered as a blessing depends on the meaning with which we fill our lives and the deeds with which our names are associated. Offering beautiful affirmation for each person's uniqueness as reflected in our names and the deeds with which we fill them, the commentator S'forno teaches, *r'u'i l'hi'yot nech'shav ish al sh'mo/it is fitting for a person to be considered by their name, which teaches of one's personal uniqueness/ ha'moreh al tzurato ha'ishi'it.*

Set in the context of *Sefer Sh'mot*, the Book of Exodus that is really the *Book of Names*, each one's name becomes a means of survival. One's name is a link in the golden chain of continuity, a gossamer strand that joins one to their people, a strand of hope and grounding in the face of all that might beset us. In the very beginning of this second book of the Torah, the enslavement of our people in Egypt begins. The oppressor would take away our names and thereby our identities. The slave becomes merely property, denied humanity. The beginning of resistance is to remember who we are, to remember that which can never be taken away. As the slavery begins, the Torah emphasizes our names that we might remember who we really are. When the oppressed call each other by name, so they begin to resist and set the path to freedom. Whether our own enslavement in Egypt, or African American slavery in the United States, or numbers tattooed into our arms in Auschwitz, remembering our names is an act of hope and resistance, an expression of who we are and of our will to survive.

Learning from times of extremis, our names become guides, light on the path of life all along the way. Our parents give us our names, even if at times we shape them to what they were meant to be, but only we can fill our names with meaning that reflects who we are in this world. One of the greatest blessings we offer to a child is that their name should be a *shem tov/a good name*. Though we name our children, however beautiful the name or the person or quality it is meant to reflect, it is only the child who can make it a good name in the way that they live. A beautiful midrash teaches: *a person has three names, one that the Holy One calls them, which is adam/human; one that their father and mother calls them; and one that they call themselves* (Torah Sh'laymah/Tanchumah).

As I proudly spelled my middle name in that moment, my name as it was meant to be, H-I-L-L-E-L, so I called myself as my parents had meant to call me, and as God in that place and time called me to be. Resisting tyranny and affirming each one's uniqueness along the way to a better world, may each of us in the way we live be the cherished possessor of a "good name."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor