

Dear Chavraya,

First, to pause and say their names, that by their names they be counted among us:

Jakelin Caal Maquin
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Two children who died at our southern border, two children in the custody of the United States, two children for whom we weep, for whom we are responsible; two children who should have been filled with life, with joy, with curiosity, their days unfolding before them. Two children whose parents could not bear the impossibility of life without hope and so for their children set out into the desert toward the mirage of the promised land and the hope of which they dreamed. Eight-year old Felipe died on Christmas morning, a day that for him should have been filled with magic and delight. As one child of the Holocaust is easier to embrace than all Six Million at once, the tears come so freely for these two children whose names are Jakelin and Felipe, age seven and eight, two children whose names are now known among all the nameless and numberless.

Dispensing with names and identities, border authorities determined that numbers would suffice. A recent photograph from the border could only make us gasp in disbelief, to scream in horror, numbers written upon the forearms of old and young, human beings reduced to a number. If not a tattoo, the permanent markers to remind of the drawings these children should have been making, of the imaginations that should have been given play and expression. Perhaps, for those who live, these shall be their drawings, images of all they have seen transposed some day from head and heart to hand, all that they have seen to be committed to drawings and childlike poetry and prose, if only artist and their work survive to tell the tale. I think of the children of Terezin, whose art I saw last summer upon the walls of the barracks where they lived and dreamed their dreams, signing their holy work with their names.

As we begin the second book of the Torah, *Sefer Sh'mot/the Book of Names*, it is in its first portion that we read this week, *Parashat Sh'mot/the Portion of Names* (Ex. 1:1-6:1) that our enslavement begins. The promise of hope is carried in the book's English calling, the Book of Exodus. The book and the portion begins with the telling of names, *v'eleh sh'mot b'nei yisrael ha'ba'im mitzrayma/these are the names of the children of Israel that are coming to Egypt*. It is in the present tense, not only about them and then, but about us and now, and so for the whole Torah. The portion is filled with names and naming, an emphasis on names when names are about to be taken away by the oppressor. That is the teaching at the outset of this journey into the depths. If we are to survive in order to make the journey into the desert in time to come, we need to hold on to our names, to our identities, to who we are.

Our commentators remind us to hold on to who we are through time, in all of our travels and travails across time and space. Rabbi Ovadia S'forno (15th-16th century Italy) teaches so simply of the link between names and survival: *sh'mo*

shel adam hu atzmi'yuto/a person's name is their essence. Of the opening verse of the Book of Names, Rashi (11th century France) wonders, as we do, why we had the very same words near the end of the first book, B'reishit, when Jacob and his whole family come down into Egypt (Gen. 46:8), *these are the names of the children of Israel that are coming to Egypt....* Rashi offers a beautiful insight, teaching that from the earlier verse we learn *that they were counted in their lifetimes through their names/she'm'na'en b'chai'ye'hem bish'motam.* And then he goes on to tell of what we learn from the later verse, *u'm'na'em achar mitatan/and so they are counted after their deaths.* Having explained why the repetition of a verse, Rashi poignantly tells of deeper meaning, *l'hodi'ah chibatam/to make known that they are beloved,* so in death as in life. Our ancestors were numbered by their names and by their names made to count. They are remembered and beloved by their names, as they were in life, so in death. Through our names, and all that our names stand for, we survive.

When names are taken away, replaced by numbers, identities are destroyed. It is the way of the oppressor. It is harder to notice unique identities, to notice people as human beings when they are part of an amorphous mass, whether as slaves or as part of a migrant caravan. And then to give them numbers at the border, lest we realize they are real human beings with names and identities. It is what Woody Guthrie sang of so long ago in "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos." He wrote the song in 1948, telling of a plane that crashed in California while carrying twenty-eight migrant farmers back to Mexico. Only in recent years were these fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, sisters and brothers identified by name, no longer to be known only as "deportees:"

Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita,
Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria;
You won't have your names when you ride the big airplane,
All they will call you will be "deportees"

Helping us to see our own story as a paradigm, helping us to feel the pain of others through our own pain, to honor the preciousness of each one's name, a powerfully beautiful midrash teaches: *A person has three names/sh'losha shemot yesh ba'adam, one that God calls them, adam/human, one by which their mother and father calls them, and one by which they call themselves....* It is the name by which God calls us, *adam/human,* that reminds us that every human is precious in the eyes of God and so should each one be in our eyes. Other namings are added in a beautiful song by the Israeli singer, Chava Albershtein. We are named, she sings, by our deeds, by the natural world around us, by our work, and by those who love us and those who hate us, by the sea, and by the seasons of a year. And in the end, she sings, *each person has a name... that is given to them by their death/l'chol ish yesh shem... v'natan lo moto.*

Beloved in life and so in death, we remember them by their names, as given to them by God, by their parents, by themselves, their characters only beginning to be shaped, we count them among us and make their memories a blessing:

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Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor