

From the end of the Book of Genesis last week and the beginning of Exodus now, some 400 years have passed, during which the small group of Israelites Joseph had brought to Egypt, multiplied and prospered enough to have become a threat to the Egyptians. We know the story well, but what about the first five verses of this book, from which its Hebrew name is derived? *Shemot*, the plural of *shem*, means names, and names are always highly significant. Midrash Tanchuma Vayakhel 1 teaches, “Every time a man increases the number of good deeds he performs, he adds to his good name. You will find that a man is known by three names: the name by which his father and mother call him, the name by which other men call him, and the one he earns for himself; the name he earns for himself is the most important name.” Just as they were last week when they arrived in Egypt, Jakob’s sons are listed here according to their birth mothers and in the order of their birth. Therefore, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are mentioned first, together with Judah, although their behavior had been profoundly different from his. Midrash Tanchuma Shemot opens with a discussion about the human potential for good, which parents must nurture and channel. Quoting Proverbs 13:24, “He who holds back his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him early.” It reviews and embellishes the stories of Ishmael, Esau, Absalom, and Adonijah, who caused so much pain because their fathers were not strict enough with them. It sees Abraham disciplining Isaac with his near-sacrifice, Isaac (in delightfully anachronistic manner) teaching Jakob Torah and overseeing his studies in Eber’s Yeshivah, and finally, “Our patriarch Jakob also punished and rebuked his sons, and taught them his customs and practices lest blemishes should appear in their character. How do we know this? Because Scripture states, ‘These are the names of the sons of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, etc.’ Scripture equates them all.” In other words, everyone can repent and make better choices in the future. Incongruously the midrash declares, “Those whose names and deeds are praiseworthy were Reuben, Simeon, and Levi.” Playing on their mother Leah’s exclamations at their birth, which gave them their names, and HaShem’s later intervention in Egypt, it explains that this pertains to the future redemption of Israel. Reuben (from ראה – to see): “I have surely seen the affliction of my people” (3:7). “For God has seen my affliction ...” (Genesis 29:32). Simeon (from שמע – to hear): “And God heard their groaning” (2:24). Because God heard that I felt hated” (Genesis 29:33). Levi (from ליה – to join, accompany): “Many nations will attach themselves to the Lord” (Zechariah 2:15). “This time my husband will become attached to me” (Genesis 29:34). As we know, this is hardly the last time the Israelites will be grouped and counted according to the names of their tribal patriarchs. And we also know that most Hebrew names, including all of the names in our parashah, have meanings that pertain to certain attributes or to past or future events. The midwives who dare to disobey Pharaoh have names befitting their courage (1:15). *Puah* derives from the root פעה – to bleat, groan, cry, and Shifrah (from שפר – to improve, beautify). Rashi says that Shifrah’s care improved the condition of the newborns, and that Puah would call out, speak and croon to the newborn as women do to sooth crying babies. Many midrashim identify Shifrah with Jocheved (Moses’ mother) and Puah either with Miriam or Elisheva, the wife of Aaron. Whoever they were, they “feared God, and they did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they helped the boys live” (1:17). Because they feared (revered) HaShem, they were granted dynasties (1:21), which midrashim identify as the Levites through Yocheved, and the Davidic royal dynasty through Miriam and her husband Caleb. Tractate Sotah 11b elaborates in great detail on the story of the midwives and the significance of their names. It is noteworthy that neither Pharaoh nor his daughter, who saves Moses, are named. Pharaoh is always referred to by his title or as king of Egypt, but the sages of Talmud and Midrash gave his daughter the name *Bithiyah*, or *Bathiyah* - daughter of *Yah* (HaShem). Talmud Tractate Megillah 13a says she was also referred to as *Yehudiyah*, because she went down to wash herself in the river (2:5) to purify herself from the idols of her father’s house, i.e., anyone who repudiates idolatry is called *Yehudi*. Midrash Tanchuma Shemot 7 adds that other sages maintain that she had been suffering from leprosy, and when she stretched out her hand toward “the righteous one” (Moses), she was cured. For rescuing and raising Moses she earned a name, but Pharaoh, who stubbornly continued to oppress the Israelites, remains nameless. Interestingly, Moses’ sister, whose clever intervention ensures that his own mother will nurse him, is not named until the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Here, she is simply the sister of Aaron. Moses received his name, derived from the root משה – to draw out, from Pharaoh’s daughter, who drew him out of the water. But Moses, who insists on learning HaShem’s name so he can tell the Israelites when they ask who sent him, must be satisfied with “I will be what I will be, ... God, the God of your forefathers ... This is how I am to be recalled for all generations” (3:14-15). Four unvoiced consonants! Of all the names in our parashah, I think this is the most significant, because the silent air they spell points out the sheer impossibility of finding adequate words to describe the invisible, ineffable, omnipotent Entity we worship. We must rely on euphemisms like *HaShem* (The Name), *Adonai* (Lord), or on words that describe attributes and manifestations. We, the created ones, can name everything that has been created, but we cannot name the Creator, and that is as it should be.

Shabbat shalom!