

“I’ve never been good with names. No seriously.”

“I’ve never been good with names”, said everyone, ever. “No no, but *I seriously* just can’t remember them”, said a similar number of people. And it’s true that I, like many, struggle to commit names to memory. I’ve examined this trait in myself and have reasoned it well away.

On the one hand, I think: *I may have forgotten your name, but I remember you as a person; so it’s not you I’ve forgotten. I remember facts X, Y, Z about you, so don’t get so hung up on your name.*

Incompatibly, I also know the warmth of recognition that comes from someone mentioning my personal name; especially if it comes by surprise, or I don’t know them that well, or I haven’t seen them in years.

My brain says: *it’s just a word.* My heart knows: *it’s so much more.*

I’m on good authority to grapple with this because it turns out the Holy One does too.

Yay name or nay name?

In this week’s parasha, God hands to Moshe the text of *Birkat Kohanim*, the Priestly Blessing (*duchening*), with which Aharon and his sons are to bless the people:

The LORD (יהוה) spoke to Moses:

Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

The LORD (יהוה) bless you and protect you!

The LORD (יהוה) deal kindly and graciously with you!

The LORD (יהוה) bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!

Thus they shall place My name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

Reference to ‘LORD’, or the Hebrew יהוה, is so frequent, and the ultimate request – “*thus shall they place My name*” – so explicit, the Lord clearly wants their name to be known to all.

On the other hand, the name of יהוה is also known as the “Ineffable Name”; a name too great or extreme to be uttered. The Talmud teaches:

The Sages transmit the correct pronunciation of the four-letter name of God (יהוה) to their students once every seven years, and some say twice every seven years... as it is written: “This is My name forever [le’olam]” (Exodus 3:15), which is written so that it can be read le’alem, to hide. This indicates that the Divine Name must remain hidden.¹

So, which is it: “Place my name upon the people” or hide it away?

The risk in the name

In school we learnt the nickname for God – Hashem, ‘the Name’. Strange, perhaps ironic (even a bit funny) to replace the actual name of God with simply: ‘the Name’. But even as a child I knew that this nickname was protecting God in some way; it always felt *riskier* to use ‘Adonai’ (the truer stand-in for יהוה) which we were told should only be used in prayer or study. On reflection, it was a beautiful and rare example of the living word of the Sages in our modern lives – to feel a Jewish practice so viscerally and emotionally, without knowing much why.

¹ Talmud Kiddushin 71a.

I wonder now, all these years later, if the Name needs our protection because it is both vulnerable and precious; like many things that we protect. Our dignity, our children, our wealth.

The Name is vulnerable

We know instinctively from, say, defamation law and common gossip, that names are vulnerable to degradation. This is because humans *carry* names in their hands and are free to wield them as they wish.

I borrow “carries” from the 3rd commandment which decrees: *Do not carry (תשא) God’s name falsely*, echoing the name of this week’s parasha, naso (נָסוּ). Sforno (16th C, Italy) tells us why carrying God’s name falsely is such a crime: *“It is not compatible with God’s honour and dignity that man use His Holy name for his own ends.”*

A Digression On Name-Based Crimes

RELATED CRIME – PERJURY: using God’s name for your own ends. Using truth for your own ends. SENTENCE: Loss of honour and dignity.

RELATED CRIME – NAME DROPPING: using names for your own ends. SENTENCE: Gossip. A name for a name.

The Name is precious

While the Priestly Blessing articulates God’s blessing that emanates from using the Name, there can be too much of a go(o)d thing.

The Sages taught:

*Initially, the Sages would transmit the twelve-letter name of God [one of God’s many sacred names] to any person. When the **uninhibited** ones (הפריצים) who used the name disrespectfully increased, they would transmit it only to **discreet/modest** members of the priesthood (לצנועים שבכהונה), and the discreet members of the priesthood would pronounce the name during the Priestly Blessing. They would conceal it by saying it during the sweet melody of their priestly brothers, so that it would not become publicly known.²*

The Rabbis are talking here about guarding the Name from becoming a cliché through cheap overuse. In classical Hebrew, a cliché is a “ביטוי נדוש”, a ‘trampled word’. One can trample a name as well.

The correct pronunciation of this 12-letter name is now protected but forgotten. While many wish to unearth it, theologian R. R. Reno reminds that: “at the end of the day, we really don’t know [the pronunciation], and...the ancient imperative of spiritual modesty remains compelling.”³

In the modest use of a word, we *feel* its power. When our name is said in a special way or a special place – a Torah call-up, a chuppah – it jolts us into aliveness. When the name of a deceased is said at a funeral, it jolts the living into aliveness.

Names as anchors

² Talmud Kiddushin 71a.

³ Commentary on Genesis.

When a word is used specially and carefully, it carries more of its meaning. So too a name.

In the continuation of this week's Haftara is one of the Torah's most dramatic and intimate moments. Samson finally tells Delilah the truth about "what makes him so strong" after lying to her three times. When he finally reveals that he is "a Nazirite to God" from birth, and that cutting his hair will drain his power, the text tells us: *Delilah saw that he told her all his heart.*

How did she know that this time he was telling the truth, when he had lied so many times before?

The Sages tell us that, because Samson used God's name, Delilah knew he was telling the truth. The Sages protect the Name to protect the anchor of truth.

Apart from יהוה, God is known by other names (e.g. Elohim, Tzeva-ot, Shaddai). Rabbeinu Bahya (13th/14th C, Spain) teaches that this is because:

man cannot express in his language all the attributes of God which combine to make up His Essence in a single word. The nearest thing we can do is describe [God's] facets in terms reflecting His activities⁴

Each of God's names carries a truth about who God is and how they relate to this world. These names, too, are to be treated with "spiritual modesty" and not bandied about to the point of cliché. The Ba'al Ha-Turim (13th/14th C, Spain), though, makes a specific point of saying that we humans are *unlike* God in His multiplicity of names:

Celestial forces, unlike terrestrial phenomena, do not have fixed names, as they adopt names that match whatever task they perform at a given point in history.⁵

But I respectfully disagree that humans have "fixed names". We perform many duties and roles in our lives that attract as many names. And while no name, job title, relationship status, or trait will encompass a person's full humanity, only a thoughtful use of all these things is "compatible with [a person's] honour and dignity."

While I think my struggle to remember people's names will continue, now feeling the risk to the dignity of others from that forgetfulness I hope to be shaken more from my stupor. As man struggles (with names), so does God. As man struggles with honour, so does God.

Learn *all* of people's names, use them wisely, and in so doing, struggle and prevail.⁶

⁴ On Exodus 3:13.

⁵ On Exodus 3:13.

⁶ Genesis 32:29: "וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב אֵמַר עוֹד שְׁמִי כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעַם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּזְכֹּךְ"
The man said to Jacob: "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."