

The Truth in a Name

by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

I remember those last, precious conspiratorial minutes with my husband, a crowd gathering in the backyard, the mohel waiting to fill in his paperwork. On the advice of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, we didn't make a final decision about our son's name until moments before the bris. During the first eight days of life, we got to know our baby and tried to discern which name fit him best.

What's in a name? According to the Bible, your very essence is in it. Biblical names reflect what brings people into the world and who they become. The name Samuel is a classic example. From the root "*sh.m.a.*," meaning to hear, and the word *el*, meaning God, "*Shmue*" can be translated as God hears (Samuel's mother's prayer for a child) or you have heard God (since the child-prophet heeds God's call).

Biblical names not only announce a person's origin and nature, they often convey the Bible's judgment, as well. Jacob (meaning heel-grasper or crooked) is renamed Israel (meaning God-wrestler or God is upright) only when he earns the new title. Hamor (donkey) is Dinah's rapist. Nabal (fool) rejects and challenges King David. The root of David's own name points to his greatest strength – and his greatest weakness: love. David is adored by the people, and Saul puts a price on his head because of it. David is driven to adultery, murder and despair by love. Yet David's love for God and the Jewish people makes him worthy of the kingship, despite his failings.

In the Bible and its commentaries, God's names allude to divine qualities (e.g., Ex. 34:14; Rashi on Gen. 1:1). When asked by Moses for His name, God gives an answer that is both elusive and profound. "I will be what I will be... that is my name [essence] for ever and my memorial for all generations" (Exodus 3:14, 15). That God can never be captured in a simple name is communicated ironically through the popular designation *Hashem* – the Name.

The word *shem* or name once meant mark or brand (hence, signature). *Shem* also means reputation – the name one makes for oneself. "To put out a bad name" (*lohotzi shem ra*) is to ruin someone's reputation through gossip. Of course, *Shem* was also the name of Noah's son and the source of the semitic peoples.

The definitive importance of names is communicated early in Genesis when Adam assigns names to the animals. The "image and likeness" of God is evident in Adam because only humans and God name beings. It is not just that human beings have language, which shapes our reality. We have the perception and power to discern the essence of a thing. Names spring from our God-given, God-like gifts.

People understand this instinctively, which is why we take such great care in naming our children. My husband and I took longer than most, but all parents seek to discern a name that will both reflect and call forth their child's unique spirit. From everything I know about my son so far, he got the right name: Emmett. Emmett derives in English from "son of the mother," beloved by and connected to family; in Hebrew, the name means truth, referring both to a human ideal and to God's seal and essence.

We all have our own stories about the power in a name. In my family, my grandfather, Max, revealed one such story only on his deathbed. He told my father that "Orenstein" was not actually our family name. My grandfather had to leave his home in Darahoi, Romania at age 11 to make his way in the world, so that the younger children of his poverty-stricken family could eat. He ran "the wrong way," toward Russia, where he was imprisoned during the Revolution as a foreign spy. He was freed from jail when he volunteered to become Trotsky's "projectionist" and screened a film about the Red Army throughout Russia. My grandfather knew nothing about movies or projectors, but he knew he was doomed to die if he stayed where he was. One day, at an opportune moment, he escaped from Trotsky as well.

Working and walking his way across Europe, he found himself, at age 16, in a public park in Germany, in the bitter cold of winter. He was sick, penniless, deeply tired, and ready to give up. He put his head in his hands and cried at the waste of all his efforts. Tonight, he would die in the cold.

Just then, a man came up to him and asked in Yiddish if he was hungry. The man took him home, gave him a hot meal, a warm bed, and a job as cabin boy on a ship to New York. The man had no children, no one to carry on his name. That man's name was Orenstein. The German derivation means Ear-Stone. My grandfather became deaf in one ear, but to him the meaning of the name was always hope.

Max never told anyone his birth name. Stalin had put out orders to kill Trotsky and all his associates. Long after both Russian leaders were dead, Max was afraid of men with orders in Stalin's name. But whatever name Max was born into, Orenstein was also, truly, his name.

It's customary to change one's Hebrew name in the face of a grave illness, so as to "fool" the Angel of Death and stake a claim for new vitality. In that sense, Max's name change was traditional. Of course, he changed his name for other practical and spiritual reasons, as well: to have an alias, to get clearance for travel, to distance himself from his painful past, to honor the goodness of the man who saved him, and to keep that goodness close.

This past Rosh Hashanah, my husband, Craig, changed his Hebrew name. Facing cancer, he wanted to add a name that would signify hope, healing – and telling the Angel of Death to get lost. In a different way than Max, he also needed to distance himself from a painful past: both his father and his grandfather died young of cancer. Like Max, like all of us, Craig had the opportunity to choose which memories and legacies he would embrace.

Often, the name “Chaim” is added to the Hebrew name of a man who is ill, since that name means life, but Craig had already adopted the Hebrew name Chaim Reuven. Reb Zalman, the same friend who advised us on choosing a name for our son, suggested adding “Alter,” which means elder in Yiddish. To use this name, you almost have to imagine yourself sitting comfortably on a rocking chair on your front porch, being referred to in the third person by some young whippersnappers as “Old Chaim Reuven.”

On Rosh Hashanah, during an aliyah in front of a large and supportive crowd, Chaim Reuven became Alter Chaim Reuven. We didn’t talk about the Angel of Death with our five-year-old son. Emmett only knew that Craig was sick and getting some medicine that made him tired. In my son’s world, medicine and Hashem make you better, and we had said nothing to contradict that assumption. In fact, in changing his name, Craig was trying to share in Emmett’s simple and profound trust.

Whatever Emmett did or didn’t understand about the name change, he sensed its importance. On the way home, he tried to explain – to me and to himself – what had happened in synagogue. “You see,” he said slowly, using his hands to demonstrate, “Reb Zalman took Pop’s name, pushed it forward, and then filled it up.”

In the end, that’s the task all of us have, with and for our names. We must push them forward, out into the world, to make their difference and earn their reputation. Then, we seek to fill them up with meaning, nuance, energy, light, beauty, goodness, essence, power.

Names come to us as an inheritance, laden with our ancestors’ dreams, visions, and stories. They go forth, we hope, as a legacy, a gift to the next generation.

Rabbi Shimon famously taught [\[DO1\]](#), “There are three crowns: the crown of learning, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty; but the crown of a good name exceeds them all” (Pirkei Avot 4:17). One’s capacity for learning and for certain kinds of service may be limited by heredity, environment, or length of days. But anyone and everyone can wear the greatest of the crowns.

Like the man in the park, may we bear our names well. Like the boy in the park, may we use the power to name wisely.