

To Every Person, There Is A Name
Rosh Hashanah Morning, 5770
September 19, 2009 / 1 Tishri, 5770
Rabbi Charles K. Briskin

About one hundred and twenty years ago my great uncle Sean landed at Ellis Island. When he left Russia, he was Shmuley Yonkel Hershkolivowitz. Throughout the passage across the Atlantic, his friends were telling him, “You can’t keep that name in America. You need a good Gentile name.” Shmuley and his friends discussed the possibilities. Sam? Too Jewish. Isaac? Still too Jewish. How about Simon? That’s good. Now what to do with Herskolivowitz? Shorten to Hirsh? Too Jewish. So was Herwitz. Finally, as the shoreline came into view uncle Sean had chosen a new American name. He declared to his friends: “I will no longer be Shmuley Yonkel Hershkolivowitz. From now on, call me Simon Yates Hart. That’s a good strong Gentile name, right?” Indeed it was.

For several hours, as Uncle Sean waited to disembark, he practiced aloud, “Hello, name is Simon Yates Hart; my name is Simon Yates Hart.” Finally, after making his way through the queue he arrived at the desk where the immigration clerk was ready to gather his personal information. The dour faced clerk at the desk called him forward and asked directly and loudly, “What is your name?” Uncle Sean froze. *G’valt!* He couldn’t remember his new name. He put his hand to his head and muttered in Yiddish, “*Sheyn Fergessen*. I forget.” Since that day, Shmuley Yonkel Hershkolivowitz has been known as . . . Sean Ferguson.

Although Sean Ferguson is a fabrication, we know stories of those who escaped persecution to come to this country, who took new names, worked very hard and became very successful. Many of their names are synonymous with the great achievements of Jewish immigrants who started with nothing, yet left behind an enduring legacy and a good name that we remember to this day.

So this morning, I’d like to talk about names and legacies. How do we honor and earn our names? How will we be remembered by others long after we are gone? You might know this famous *midrash*. It teaches: “Every person is known by three names; the name his parents give him; the name others call him; and the name he earns for himself; and the best one is the name he earns for himself.” (*Kohelet Rabbah*)

Many of our ancestors earned great names for themselves. We remember their achievements and the lessons they taught us, along with their disappointments and failures. For even the greatest among our people were far from perfect. We remember our patriarchs and matriarchs, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, who established the foundation for the Jewish people. We remember Moses, our greatest leader, who transformed a people into a nation.

We remember the prophets—Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, who taught us that ethics are just as crucial as ritual. We remember our sages, Hillel, Akiva, Maimonides who gave us law and learning. And we recall our teachers, who reinterpreted their ideas for our generation:

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Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Buber, Mordechai Kaplan, Joseph Soloveitchik, Isaac Mayer Wise and Steven S. Wise.

When we give our children names, especially in memory of a loved one, we hope they will embody the values engendered by that name. Our son, Ezra, has two middle names. Jerome, after my Uncle Jerry Kahn, one of the kindest and most decent men I have ever known who died suddenly a year before Ezra was born. And Zahavi, derived from the Hebrew word for gold and designed to maintain Karen's maiden name, Goldberg, and the values that her family transmitted to her, which we now transmit to our children.

When we are born, our names are given to us. As we mature, we become known by the names we want others to call us. That is what the *midrash* teaches. Many of Israel's early pioneers wanted modern Hebrew names. They changed their Russian or Yiddish names to reflect the rebirth of modern Hebrew and to demonstrate their Zionist idealism. Israel's Prime Minister, Golda Meir, was born Goldie Meyerson. The great Zionist thinker Asher Ginzberg changed his name to Aḥad Ha'am, meaning "One of the People." These Zionists chose strong Hebrew names at a pivotal moment in our people's history, a moment in which language, culture and geography determined how these and other great Zionist leaders like David ben Gurion, Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin, to name a few, would be known and remembered. They chose Hebrew over Yiddish, Palestine over Russia, and Jewish nationalism over American assimilation or European persecution.

Like our Zionist forbearers, we at times choose new names for ourselves. Other times we're given nicknames, some of which are playful. I was Chuckie until 7th grade. My college roommate, Larry, who took the name Lev when we went to Israel, gave me a nickname derived from my Hebrew name, Yiḥiel. He called me Yiḥee. I opted for gravitas when I came to Los Angeles for rabbinical school, asking my professors and classmate to call me. . . Charles.

That lasted for about three days.

A few years later I became Rabbi Charles Briskin formally and Rabbi Chuck casually. I now spend my days working hard to earn this good name and title for myself, bringing honor to my family name and my vocation. The latter can be difficult when many men who call themselves rabbis violate the laws of the land and breach the ethical mandates of our tradition.

My task is to bring honor and respect to the ordained title of rabbi by being a role model for my community. Simultaneously, I uphold the good Briskin name so that my children will be proud to carry forth this name, a name passed to them by me, and those who came before me.

Remember the *midrash*? It concludes with the sober declaration—the name we earn for ourselves is the best of our three names. This is our enduring challenge and a lofty goal. What name do we earn for ourselves? What do we want to be known for? Being the confidant or the gossip? The optimist or the pessimist? The giver or the miser? Think of some of the most famous or infamous figures in history. We ascribe adjectives to their names: Peter the Great. Ivan the Terrible. Andre the Giant?—maybe not. When you are called to meet our maker, what name will you have earned for yourself? If, God forbid,

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you were to die between now and Yom Kippur, would the works of your life, and the name you earned for yourself be remembered for greatness?

I've written many eulogies this past year. Too many. Nevertheless, each one used anecdotes and adjectives to paint a richly textured picture of the person I was asked to remember. I listened to their loved ones describe character traits. I paid close attention to the adjectives they used; devoted, tough, fair, stubborn, meticulous, kind, loving, giving, generous, funny. They earned these adjectives through their commitment to their cherished values, and through their behavior towards others. That is how they wanted us to remember them. This is the name she earned for herself.

We want our names to be synonymous with greatness, whether known to a large group or a small cadre of friends and family who knew us best. We want our names to bring honor. What happens when that name is reviled? How do we remember someone whose behaviors destroyed lives? That's easy. We treat them like Amalek, the paradigmatic enemy of Israel, a biblical figure who broke a promise to Moses and killed scores of vulnerable Israelites. Amalek, a name that we are simultaneously commanded to blot out but never forget. More often, however, we're asked to remember the complicated, imperfect person who contributed so much to our lives and also caused us pain. At death, do we dismiss their faults and elevate their strengths, transforming sinners into saints? No. That's disingenuous.

What words do we use to eulogize the boss and father who was fair and generous to his employees, yet was absent from his family? Or the loving and devoted husband and father who embezzled funds from his company? Or the person whose pleasant public demeanor masked a painful lifetime battle against demons known to very few?

What do we do when we bear the weight of that name? Did you hear Teddy Kennedy Jr.'s eulogy for his father a few weeks ago? It was touching, beautiful and honest. He spoke of the blessing and the burden of being Teddy Jr. to his well-known and famously flawed father. What words will help us remember the complicated lifetime of Senator Ted Kennedy?

Every person is responsible for earning their good name. Our deeds determine that good name. We all have our great qualities. We all have our flaws. We spend our days trying to elevate the good while diminishing the "not so good." Some, however, lack an ethical foundation and a moral framework. Their destructive deeds earn them a name as reviled as Amalek. Amalek, however, is usually reserved for enemies of the Jewish people. Not one of our own.

Any poor soul who happens to share the last name of Madoff, perhaps the most vilified name in modern Jewish history is destined for a future of suspicion and mistrust, even without any relationship to Bernie. Other acts of destruction cause us to change naming habits. How many German boys born after 1945 are named Adolph? How many American girls born after 2005 are named Katrina? Even names not associated with destruction but tabloid sensationalism can be humorous for the person who shares that name. Who is the mother of two of Michael Jackson's children? Debbie Rowe, of course.

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Nevertheless, the names we choose to blot out must be contrasted against the names of our heroes whose quiet, and often times less publicized, endeavors have brought great pride unto our people. Leonard Abess Jr. is one of those names.

Leonard Abess is a Jewish banker in Miami. Abess recently sold the bank that his father had established, and that he had built up. Abess's share was sixty million dollars. While most executives would have taken that money to retire in luxury, Abess did something different. And remarkable. He gave it all away. To 471 current and former employees. He didn't want to make a big fuss. He told the employees that they'd be getting a bonus. Needless to say the employees were stunned to receive checks for tens of thousands of dollars, even \$100,000 in a few cases. "I've known some of these people since I was seven years old," Abess remarked. "It didn't feel right getting the money myself. I certainly don't need it." When's the last time you heard a CEO say that? He wanted no fanfare or publicity. He just wanted to show his appreciation and share the wealth with those who were such an integral part of his life, whose hard work enabled the bank to grow and who helped make him a rich man.

Leonard Abess Jr. has certainly earned a great name for himself, a name that will remain synonymous with altruism, loyalty, and generosity throughout the remainder of his lifetime and beyond.

For every Bernie Madoff there are scores of Leonard Abess's. We just don't know about them. Why? Because the front page is reserved for criminals. We relegate character and conscience to the obituaries. And when the righteous in our community die, we vow to remember them.

Our congregation is more than eighty-five years old. Countless men and women from one generation to the next have contributed to our good name. We are their descendants. We strive to emulate their values, which in turn help us to maintain our good Temple Beth El name.

The memories of members long deceased endure. We remember them for their reservoir of contributions: unbridled enthusiasm for Temple Beth El; limitless energy to perform the sacred work then, which continues to make us stand out as a congregation now; and yes, we remember them for their philanthropy that helped to sustain us through our congregation's ebbs and flows.

Even though many of these great men and women are dead, their descendants perpetuate their names in different public ways. We think of the giants of our community, especially two who we lost this past year, Dorothy Paul and Elaine Furman, names that we will remember for years to come.

Examine the donor wall at the entrance to the sanctuary. The names etched in glass recognize the past and present builders of Temple Beth El. Read the plaques throughout the Temple. Review the named funds listed in the Temple bulletin. Then you will know some of the names of the giants of our congregation, especially those who have died and whose contributions are woven inextricably into the fabric of our history.

These men and women were the *g'dolei ha'dor*—the giants of their generation. We perpetuate their memories by living according to their values of service and philanthropy

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they shared so unselfishly with us. We preserve their names by sharing their stories with the current generation, including me. We create a legacy that will endure for generations to come.

Eventually, as years pass and the mantle of leadership is passed from one generation to the next, the time will come when we, today's descendants, will become tomorrow's ancestors, the *g'dolei ha'dor*—the giants of our generation, for the ones that follow. What do we want our legacy to be? What name do we want to earn for ourselves?

The great Israeli poet, known only by her first name, Zelda, writes eloquently in her most famous poem, *L'chol ish yesh shem*. To Every Person there is a Name. She writes:

Each of us has a name
given by God
and given by our parents.

Each of us has a name
given by our stature and our smile
and given by what we wear.

Each of us has a name
given by the mountains
and given by our walls.

Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors.

Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing.

Each of us has a name
given by our enemies
and given by our love.

Each of us has a name
given by our celebrations
and given by our work.

Each of us has a name
given by the seasons
and given by our blindness.

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Each of us has a name
given by the sea
and given by
our death.

May we continue to earn our good name. May we always bring honor and respect to that name. May our name be great and become an enduring, blessed legacy for future generations.

Kein Y'hi Ratzon

My thanks and appreciation to my rabbinic colleagues from STAR-PEER for their generous sharing of ideas; to my friend, Steve Beitler for his thoughtful analysis and critique; and to my hevruta study partner, friend and colleague, Rabbi Zachary Shapiro of Temple Akiba, Culver City, CA for our fruitful exchange of stories and texts, encouragement and inspiration.

Any similarities between my sermon and Rabbi Shapiro's are intentional.

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