What is Your Name? Thoughts on Parashat Shemot

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemot

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When I was a student at Yeshiva College many years ago, I saw a passage scribbled onto a subway wall at the IRT 181st Street station. That passage had a big impact on me then, and continues to be important to me so many years later. The passage was a quotation from Alan Watts: "For when man no longer confuses himself with the definition of himself that others have given him, he is at once universal and unique."

It is so easy to confuse ourselves with definitions of ourselves given to us by others. People may stereotype us, may impose their standards on us, may treat us as "things" rather than as autonomous human beings. They may judge us based on our religion or race, on our political views; they may see us as "the other" without ever bothering to see who we really are. When we are constantly being dehumanized or stereotyped by others, it is all too possible for us to internalize the external definitions of ourselves imposed on us by friends and foes alike.

The Torah portion relates that Pharaoh feared the growing numbers of Israelites in Egypt, and he decided to enslave them and to have their male children murdered. Rabbi Hayyim Angel has pointed out that the Torah conspicuously avoids mentioning the names of any Israelites or Egyptians--except for Shifra and Puah-- from the time Joseph died until the birth of Moses. (Pharaoh is a title, not a personal name.) People--both Egyptians and Israelites--had become nameless "things"--oppressors and oppressed, masters and slaves. When humans are reduced to "things", then both the oppressor and oppressed are dehumanized; they internalize false ideas about who they are and about their true worth as human beings.

To be universal and unique--to be who we really are--we need to develop a strong inner life that enables us to resist becoming victims of dehumanization. Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, who had been a Jewish prisoner in a German concentration camp, wrote that the prisoners feared not only for their physical lives; they feared that they would come to see themselves as the Nazis saw them--as animals. "The main problem is to remain alive and unchanged...the more absolute the tyranny, the more debilitated the subject." A Midrash (Tanhuma, Vayakhel) teaches that each person has three names: the name given by parents, the name given by fellow human beings, and the name which one acquires for him/herself.

The name given by parents represents their hopes for the child. The name may link the child to an ancestor; or may be something untraditional. This name reflects the parent's values and traditions. Each of us is shaped by the name our parents gave us. This is good and valuable for us, but should not be allowed to undermine our own individual freedom and choices. Parents should give us roots; but also wings. The name given to us by fellow human beings represents our reputation in our community and world. The name might tend to idealize us or to demonize us; it might be true to who we are, or it might be a total misreading of who we are by people who do not know us or understand us.

If we live our lives by the definitions given to us by others, we live a life of shadows and illusions. These first two names are given to us by others. The third name, though, is what we acquire for ourselves. This name draws on what we have learned from parents and fellow human beings; but its ultimate source is our own individual minds and souls. Inside of each of us is our own "name", our own real being. This is who we really are when we rise above externally imposed definitions of ourselves. Throughout our lifetimes, we learn--we grow--we strive. We are each a work of art in progress.

We derive strength and inspiration from many sources. We are accosted and dehumanized by unpleasant and hateful people. If we are to develop the full potential of our lives, we need to focus on the name we acquire for ourselves--our true selves. We need to foster the inner strength and wisdom to be universal and unique. We need to answer the question: what is your name?

Angel for Shabbat