Naming Names: Thoughts for Parashat Vaera

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vaera

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Parasha opens with God's words to Moshe: God hears the cries of the Israelites and will redeem them. God instructs Moshe and Aharon to go to Pharaoh and demand that the Israelites leave Egypt. After this dramatic opening, the Parasha abruptly gives a listing of the names of "heads of the fathers' houses." We learn the names of the family members of Reuben, Shimon and Levi, with special elaboration of the family line of Moshe and Aharon. After this interruption, the narrative continues with God's instructions to Moses to appear before Pharaoh.

Commentators suggest that this break in the flow of the story was to provide the family background for Moses and Aaron. But this hardly explains why so many names of family members of Reuben, Shimon and Levi are mentioned.

Perhaps the extensive listing of names at this juncture is conveying something beyond the lineage of Moses and Aaron. It is a striking contrast to the narrative in last week's Torah portion.

In Parashat Shemot, we read that Pharaoh feared the growing numbers of Israelites in Egypt. 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 Yosef died until the birth of Moshe. (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.

In the generations between Yosef and Moshe, the Israelites had become a nameless mass of anonymous slaves. The condition of servitude erodes the self-respect of the victims so that they tend to lose their own identities. 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."

After the protracted period of slavery, the Israelites needed to be reminded: we are human beings, we have names, we have personalities, we are not beasts of burden. Moshe's initial challenge was to get the Israelites to recognize their own humanity.

So this week's Torah portion begins the process by recounting names and family relationships. Before Moshe and Aharon confront Pharaoh, they need to instill dignity and self-respect in the Israelite slaves. The listing of names is not an interruption in the narrative; it provides the groundwork for the liberation process.

Later in the Torah when the freed Israelites conduct a census, they are counted by "their families, by the houses of their fathers, by the number of names…" (Bemidbar 1:2). They had regained their names, their selfhood, their self-respect. They were no longer anonymous slaves.

What was true for the Israelites of old continues to be true today. People should not be nameless blurs but should be individualized human beings with their own names and identities. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik stated this very well: "To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically. It is more than that: it is an act of identifying him existentially, as a person who has a job to do, that only he can do properly. To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him. The halakha equated the act of publicly embarrassing a person with murder" ("The Community," p. 16).

Freedom is not static but is a process. The first step and ongoing challenge is to remember and insist: we have names, families, and historical context.