

**THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG**

*Celebrating 20 Years of Progressive Judaism in Hong Kong*

## **SHABBAT SHALOM**

8 – 9 January, 2010

23 Tevet 5770

Parashat Shemot  
(Exodus 1:1-6:1)

**Rabbi** Stanton M. Zamek  
**Cantorial Soloist** Shani Ben Or

### **From the Rabbi's desk**

The traditional name of the book of Exodus, which we begin to read this week, is Shemot, meaning “names.” Rather than giving the books of the Torah thematic names, the tradition looks to the first significant word of the book. So we call the book of Exodus “Shemot” because it begins with the words v’eleh shemot — “These are the names.”

Rather than launching immediately into the story of the liberation from Egyptian slavery, Shemot begins by recapping the end of the book of Genesis. It reminds us of the origins of the oppression of the Israelites by reciting the names of those who went down to Egypt:

*These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.*

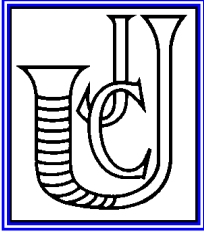
We already know from the story of Joseph in Genesis that these sons of Jacob came down to Egypt to settle and escape the famine ravaging Eretz Yisrael. Why do we need to hear their names again? The Sages tell us that this repetition of the roster, which occurs at the beginning of the end of Egyptian slavery, teaches us that despite severe oppression and centuries of exile, the Israelites never changed their names. This, according to the Midrash, is one of the reasons they were worthy of being redeemed.

Midrash is a homiletic literature and the Rabbis are trying to make a case for the importance of Hebrew names in maintaining Jewish distinctiveness. It is a fair point, but in making it they were required to ignore Joseph. Yoseph is a good Hebrew name, but it was not our ancestor’s only name. He was also known by the Egyptian name “Tzaphenat-Paneach,” a name given him by Pharaoh as a sign of Joseph’s elevation to vizier.

Joseph, like us, is a straddler of worlds, and, as is true for us, his dual identity is reflected by two different names. As far as the wider society was concerned, Joseph was a court official named Tzaphenat Paneach. The Torah, while noting that he was known to most by that name, never uses it to refer to him. He is always just Joseph. Even though few use this name, it is clear that Joseph is the name of his truest self. Ani Yoseph! — “I am Joseph,” he says when he reveals himself to his treacherous brothers. When Joseph cries out his name, he is not just ending his masquerade as an ethnic Egyptian. He is revealing himself at the deepest level.

Like Joseph, the modern Jew bears different names for different aspects of self. The public persona has a name, often one that comes from the dominant culture in which we live. This is the name we use to navigate the secular world, our Tzaphenat Paneach. We are quite identified with this name. It is not just a convenient label, but through long use, a part of us. Even so, this is not the name the soul goes by. This is not the name by which HaShem knows us. I may be Stan (or Stanton if my Dad is angry with me) to most people, most of the time, but at essence I am Sinai Moshe ben Gedaliah v’Fege Leah.

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### **From the Rabbi's desk (con't)**

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Even if our name on the street is a Hebrew name, there is still a division between our common name and our true name. My kids' names are Hebrew, but "Zamek" (Polish for "castle") was originally a concession to a secular world that required Jews to take surnames. True Jewish names are relational. They do not tell the world that your ancestors were tailors (Schneider), but that you are the son or daughter of specific people. In this way "Judah Benjamin" is not a true Jewish name, but Yehudah ben Binyamin is.

But what if a Jew does not have a Hebrew name? Does this mean his or her soul is nameless. Impossible. "Even before I formed you in the womb, I knew you," God told the prophet Jeremiah. The soul always has a name. We just may not know it yet. We could say that names are given to us by our parents or taken by us ourselves, but we could also say these "namings" are merely the emergence of a name known from the beginning by HaShem.

The Rabbis were correct in stressing the importance of having a Hebrew name. If yours has not yet emerged and you would like some help finding it, I am happy to help. The coming weeks, as we are reading Shemot, the Book of Names, are an auspicious time to make this discovery.

All Blessings  
HaRav Sinai Moshe ben Gedaliah v'Fege Leah  
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*7<sup>th</sup> January, 2010*