

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### Shhh...Differences Exist in Unity

As our year transitions through January, we acknowledge a new year on the secular calendar. In addition to the calendar, our Torah gives us ways to look at transitional times in multiple ways. One significant transition occurs five times a year, when we conclude the reading of one book of Torah and begin the next. The transition from the end of the Book of Genesis to the beginning of Exodus occurred a few weeks ago, helping us look at a variety of transitions as well as the significant way the Torah is constructed. The change in these two books, especially, is much like the end of one era and the beginning of another. Like many transitions, the ending of one period is bittersweet, and the beginning of the new one is filled with drama, excitement, nervousness and mystery.

Genesis includes the creation of the world and the beginnings of our patriarchal ancestry. As we conclude the Genesis, at the end of the beginning, our elderly patriarch, Jacob – also known as Israel – calls each of his sons by name to give them individual, parting thoughts. Then Exodus begins with listing each name again.

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

Both of Jacob's names are listed, and both are significant. As Jacob, he is the father of 12 sons; as Israel, the father of a nation. Names are important. The Torah doesn't merely say that lots of people from a Hebrew tribe came into Egypt; it carefully lists each name, even though we just heard all these names at the end of the last book of Torah. At the end of Genesis, they are sons of Jacob; in Exodus, they will represent the 12 Tribes of Israel.

The common names for the books of the bible are based on the general theme of the book. Exodus is about our leaving, our exiting the land of Egypt and the narrow bondage of slavery. Egypt, in Hebrew, is Mitzrayim, or "a narrow place." Exodus is about fleeing the narrow nature of servitude as well as the narrow-mindedness of serving a Pharaoh with a hardened heart. The Hebrew names of the Torah are taken from the first significant word in the Book. The Book we begin this Shabbat is called "Sh'mot – NAMES". While this book of Torah IS about the Exodus from Egypt, our Hebrew name suggests it just as much about the individuals as the event. It wasn't just "the Hebrews," or "the Israelites" who came to Egypt and were redeemed...not just a group or a category a label...it was individuals, each with a name, a history and a future. As Jacob pointed out at the end of B'reishit/Genesis, all his sons had unique personality, strengths, weaknesses and potential.

When Jacob and his sons came to Egypt at Joseph's invitation, at first, there was peace. But, as the Torah says, "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." Of course, the new king did not know Joseph personally; he was long dead. But the Egyptians were meticulous about the historical records. He would have had to have known about Joseph. The verb for "know" that is used is Ya-da. It is a special kind of knowing. If you know someone, in the Hebrew language, the common verb is Ma-kir. But by using the verb Ya-da, it implies an intimate kind of knowing. Ya-da is the same verb used in Genesis when Adam knew his wife. It's not about generally knowing who somebody is or was, nor is it merely a sexual act...it's

the intimacy of knowing who they are inside. All Pharaoh really knew about Joseph's family was the label, the category: Hebrew. He knew Hebrews were different, and differences inspire fear...unless you take the time to really get to KNOW the person underneath the difference.

One of the secrets to the unity of K'lal Yisrael, the community of Israel, is looking beyond our labels. I'm not suggesting eliminating identification – just not allowing the identification to become limiting. By truly getting to know the person underneath the label, we learn that individuals are more than labels, worship practices, kashrut observance, political views, profession, marital status, age, education and economic level. We are one people, with many faces.

It takes listening. Listening without imposing our will on another. Listening in a way that acknowledges there are different ways to be Jewish and different paths to righteousness, truth and spiritual fulfillment. As we transition in so many ways this January, let's remember the importance of recognizing both our differences and our unity, and truly LISTEN to each other.

Perhaps that is why the word Sh'mot starts with Shhhhh.

L'shalom,

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