

JUNE 12, 2017

Parashat Shelach

What's in a Name?

And these were their names (Numbers 13:4)

ואלה שמותם (במדבר יג:ד)

Earlier this year, Yale University announced that it was changing the name of a residential college commemorating John C. Calhoun, the 19th-century white supremacist statesman from South Carolina, the [New York Times reported](#). Yale's president, Peter Salovey, said that while he was "concerned about erasing history," he made the decision to remove the name of the seventh vice president of the United States, "because I think it is the right thing to do on principle...John C. Calhoun's principles, his legacy as an ardent supporter of slavery as a positive good, are at odds with this university." The recent spate of name changes over the past year reflects an important trend around the world. When we progress and our values advance, the names we choose to identify with should reflect those new values as well. This is because the names that we give not only to our children but also to our institutions and organizations reflect the values and ideals we hold dear.

According to the Talmud, names have the power to tell us about the nature of an individual. The Sages applied this maxim to the Ten Spies who spoke negatively about the Land of Israel, explaining that the names of the spies were not their given names at birth. Rather, they explain that the Torah ascribes to them names that reflect their destructive behavior. "R. Isaac said: It is a tradition in our possession from our forefathers that the spies were named after their actions, but only with one has it survived with us: Sethur the son of Michael. [He was named] Sethur because he undermined [*sathar*] the works of the Holy One, blessed be He; and Michael [was so named] because he suggested that God [*el*] was weak [*makh*]." (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 34b) According to the Talmud, the names of the spies that appear in the text describe their attempt to deceive and entice the nation to abandon the Holy Land. A Talmudic adage teaches that a person's name "testifies about him" or describes his personality. In the book "*Shema Garim*"—an entire work written about the effect and importance of names—Mordechai Gross writes (page 10) that, "At the time of the giving of a name, an additional aspect and element enters into the soul, and the essential name reflects that person's soul." We choose our names extremely carefully not only because of what they say about us, but because the names we choose imbue an identity and a set of values that live on.

This idea applies not only to our children or our companies, but also to our institutions. Gross continues, "When giving a name to a community, synagogue, study hall, neighborhood, city, or any similar body, this requires careful deliberation, for the essential life of the matter and its root in holiness is based on the name it was given." (page 11) Sometimes though, a name reflects an ugly darkness that must be brought to light.

Earlier this month, Norwegian Foreign Minister Borge Brende [condemned the Palestinian Authority](#) for naming a women's center in the West Bank town of Burqa, funded in part by Norway, after Dalal Mughrabi, who took part in the 1978 Coastal Road Massacre. Mughrabi and several other Fatah terrorists landed on a beach near Tel Aviv, hijacked a bus on Israel's Coastal Road and killed 38 civilians, 13 of them children, and wounded over 70. Norway rightfully demanded that the Palestinians either change the name of the center, or remove the Norwegian logo from the building and return the money allocated for the project. Rather than do the right thing and rename the center, last week the PA [refused to rename the center](#), opting instead to return the money to Norway. Burqa council head Sami Daghlas denied that Mughrabi was a terrorist, describing her as a "hero" and role model for young women. He said that Mughrabi's name was chosen "to commemorate a Palestinian hero who sacrificed herself for her country and

therefore they have no intention to change its name, regardless of the price” Daghlis said. He added that the facility was built “to serve and empower young women in the village and to help them develop them to become active members in society.”

The naming of a women’s center after a terrorist demonstrates the warped values that currently guide too much of Palestinian society. While Israel yearns for peace with the Palestinians, peace will never be possible until the Palestinian leadership halts the culture of hate that glorifies acts of violence by naming public buildings, sporting events and children’s summer camps after terrorists. We’ll know that the Palestinians are truly ready to make peace with Israel when they name their buildings and squares not after terrorists and murderers, but after peace activists and leaders who recognize that the best way to achieve a Palestinian state is not by terror, but by sitting down to talk. ■

A Lack of Objectivity

All of them men (Numbers 13:3)

כולם אנשים (במדבר יג:ג)

“The president of Venezuela, whose government shoots protesters in the street, recently thanked the international community for its ‘universal vote of confidence’ in that country’s commitment to human rights. The Cuban deputy foreign minister, whose government imprisons thousands of political opponents, once said Cuba has historic prestige ‘in the promotion and protection of all human rights.’ How can these people get away with saying such things? Because they have been elected to the U.N. Human Rights Council, whose members are — on paper — charged with ‘upholding the highest standards’ of human rights.” So wrote Ambassador Nikki Haley, the United States’ permanent representative to the United Nations [in the Washington Post](#) last week. Haley is pointing out the obvious: how can the Human Rights Council possibly advocate for human rights when it is populated by the world’s worst human rights violators? These countries’ inherent bias precludes any possibility of objectivity, rendering any judgment of the council suspect. According to the Zohar, a similar lack of objectivity drove the Ten Spies to issue a negative report about the Holy Land to the Israelites in the desert.

The Zohar explains that from the very outset of their mission, the spies never actually intended to deliver a positive report. “[What is the meaning of the phrase] ‘they were all men?’ [This means that] they were all meritorious elders of Israel, but took for themselves a wicked plan. Why did they adopt this plan? They said: If [the Children of] Israel enter the Land we will lose our positions and Moses will appoint other princes, for we merited leadership in the desert, but we will not have this merit in the Land.” (Zohar Section 3,158) According to the Zohar, the spies never intended to return with an objective report. Their fear of losing their status prompted them to issue a negative report from the very beginning of their mission. Their personal bias and vested interest drove them to issue a harsh, negative report that ultimately caused great damage to the nation.

Today, like the spies who issued a self-serving report, many member states of the United Nations Human Rights Council cynically use their membership on the council not to advance human rights, but to whitewash and ignore their own human rights violations. In her article in the Washington Post Haley wrote, “The presence of multiple human rights-violating countries on the Human Rights Council has damaged both the reputation of the council and the cause of human rights. When the world’s preeminent human rights body is turned into a haven for dictators, the idea of international cooperation in support of human dignity is discredited.” Last week, Haley addressed the Human Rights Council in Geneva where, according to the [Jerusalem Post](#), she “told the U.N. Human Rights Council...that the U.S. may leave that body unless it stops its Israel bashing.” From there she traveled to Israel for a three-day visit, where Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu thanked her for standing up for Israel and for the “truth,” which he said “is standing up for America.” Haley [replied](#) that while she appreciates the support she has received from the people of Israel, “I feel somewhat guilty because all I did at the United Nations was tell the truth.” While we appreciate Haley’s efforts, it is sad that truth and objectivity are in short supply in the United Nations today—whether in New York or Geneva. ■

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