

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Shemot  
January 10, 2026 \*\*\* 21 Tevet 5786

Shemot in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3233/jewish/Shemot-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3233/jewish/Shemot-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The name of the Parshah, "Shemot," means "Names" and it is found in Exodus 1:1 - 6:1.

The children of Israel multiply in Egypt. Threatened by their growing numbers, Pharaoh enslaves them and orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah, to kill all male babies at birth. When they do not comply, he commands his people to cast the Hebrew babies into the Nile.

A child is born to Yocheved, the daughter of Levi, and her husband, Amram, and placed in a basket on the river, while the baby's sister, Miriam, stands watch from afar. Pharaoh's daughter discovers the boy, raises him as her son, and names him Moses.

As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and discovers the hardship of his brethren. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and kills the Egyptian. The next day he sees two Jews fighting; when he admonishes them, they reveal his deed of the previous day, and Moses is forced to flee to Midian. There he rescues Jethro's daughters, marries one of them (Tzipporah), and becomes a shepherd of his father-in-law's flocks.

G-d appears to Moses in a burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai, and instructs him to go to Pharaoh and demand: "Let

My people go, so that they may serve Me.” Moses’ brother, Aaron, is appointed to serve as his spokesman. In Egypt, Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel to tell them that the time of their redemption has come. The people believe; but Pharaoh refuses to let them go, and even intensifies the suffering of Israel.

Moses returns to G-d to protest: “Why have You done evil to this people?” G-d promises that the redemption is close at hand.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 27:6 – 28:13; 29:22 – 23](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/615789/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)  
[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/615789/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/615789/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week’s haftarah parallels the week’s Torah reading on many levels. One of the parallels is the message of redemption conveyed by Isaiah—“and you shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel”—that is reminiscent of the message of redemption that G-d spoke to Moses at the burning bush, a message that Moses then communicated to Pharaoh.

The haftarah vacillates between Isaiah’s prophecies concerning the future redemption, and his admonitions concerning the Jews’ drunken and G-dless behavior. Isaiah starts on a positive note: “In the coming days, Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom, filling the face of the earth . . .” He mentions G-d’s mercy for His nation, and the measure-for-measure punishment He meted out upon the Egyptians who persecuted them. And regarding the future redemption: “You shall be gathered one by one, O children of Israel. And it will come to pass on that day that a great shofar will be sounded, and those lost in the land of Assyria and

those exiled in the land of Egypt will come, and they will prostrate themselves before the L-rd on the holy mount in Jerusalem."

The prophet then proceeds to berate the drunkenness of the Ten Tribes, warning them of the punishment that awaits them. "With the feet they shall be trampled, the crown of the pride of the drunkards of Ephraim . . ."

The haftorah ends on a positive note: "Now Jacob will no longer be ashamed, and now his face will not pale. For when he sees his children, the work of My hands, in his midst, who shall sanctify My name . . . and the G-d of Israel they will revere."

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Leadership and the People by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks \(5767\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/leadership-and-the-people/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemot/leadership-and-the-people/>

The sedra of Shemot, in a series of finely etched vignettes, paints a portrait of the life of Moses, culminating in the moment at which God appears to him in the bush that burns without being consumed. It is a key text of the Torah view of leadership, and every detail is significant. I want here to focus on just one passage in the long dialogue in which God summons Moses to undertake the mission of leading the Israelites to freedom – a challenge which, no less than four times, Moses declines. I am unworthy, he says. I am not a man of words. Send someone else.

It is the second refusal, however, which attracted special attention from the Sages and led them to formulate one of their most radical interpretations. The Torah states:

Moses replied: “But they will not believe me. They will not listen to me. They will say, ‘God did not appear to you.’”  
Shemot 4:1

The Sages, ultra-sensitive to nuances in the text, evidently noticed three strange features of this response. The first is that God had already told Moses, “They will listen to you” (Ex. 3:18). Moses’ reply seems to contradict God’s prior assurance. To be sure, the commentators offered various harmonising interpretations. Ibn Ezra suggests that God had told Moses that the elders would listen to him, whereas Moses expressed doubts about the mass of the people. Ramban says that Moses did not doubt that they would believe initially, but he thought that they would lose faith as soon as they saw that Pharaoh would not let them go. There are other explanations, but the fact remains that Moses was not satisfied by God’s assurance. His own experience of the fickleness of the people (one of them, years earlier, had already said, “Who made you ruler and judge over us?”) made him doubt that they would be easy to lead.

The second anomaly is in the signs that God gave Moses to authenticate his mission. The first (the staff that turns into a snake) and third (the water that turned into blood) reappear later in the story. They are signs that Moses and Aaron perform not only for the Israelites but also for the Egyptians. The second, however, does not reappear. God tells Moses to put his hand in his cloak. When he takes it out, he sees that it has become “leprous as snow”. What is the significance of this particular sign? The Sages recalled that later, Miriam was punished with leprosy for speaking negatively about Moses (Bamidbar 12:10). In general they understood leprosy as a punishment for lashon hara, derogatory speech. Had Moses,

perhaps, been guilty of the same sin?

The third detail is that, whereas Moses' other refusals focused on his own sense of inadequacy, here he speaks not about himself but about the people. They will not believe him. Putting these three points together, the Sages arrived at the following comment:

Resh Lakish said: He who entertains a suspicion against the innocent will be bodily afflicted, as it is written, Moses replied: But they will not believe me. However, it was known to the Holy One blessed be He, that Israel would believe. He said to Moses: They are believers, the children of believers, but you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, and the people believed (Ex. 4:31). The children of believers [as it is written], and he [Abraham] believed in the Lord. But you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is said, [And the Lord said to Moses] Because you did not believe in Me (Num. 20:12). How do we know that he was afflicted? Because it is written, And the Lord said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak' (Ex. 4:6).  
Shabbat 97a

This is an extraordinary passage. Moses, it now becomes clear, was entitled to have doubts about his own worthiness for the task. What he was not entitled to do was to have doubts about the people. In fact, his doubts were amply justified. The people were fractious. Moses calls them a “stiff-necked people”. Time and again during the wilderness years they complained, sinned, and wanted to return to Egypt. Moses was not wrong in his estimate of their character. Yet God reprimanded him; indeed punished him by making his hand leprous. A fundamental principle of Jewish leadership is

intimated here for the first time: a leader does not need faith in himself, but he must have faith in the people he is to lead.

This is an exceptionally important idea. The political philosopher Michael Walzer has written insightfully about social criticism, in particular about two stances the critic may take vis-à-vis those he criticises. On the one hand there is the critic as outsider. At some stage, beginning in ancient Greece:

Detachment was added to defiance in the self-portrait of the hero. The impulse was Platonic; later on it was Stoic and Christian. Now the critical enterprise was said to require that one leave the city, imagined for the sake of the departure as a darkened cave, find one's way, alone, outside, to the illumination of Truth, and only then return to examine and reprove the inhabitants. The critic-who-returns doesn't engage the people as kin; he looks at them with a new objectivity; they are strangers to his new-found Truth.

This is the critic as detached intellectual. The prophets of Israel were quite different. Their message, writes Johannes Lindblom, was "characterized by the principle of solidarity". "They are rooted, for all their anger, in their own societies," writes Walzer. Like the Shunamite woman (Kings 2 4:13), their home is "among their own people". They speak, not from outside, but from within. That is what gives their words power. They identify with those to whom they speak. They share their history, their fate, their calling, their covenant. Hence the peculiar pathos of the prophetic calling. They are the voice of God to the people, but they are also the voice of the people to God. That, according to the Sages, was what God was teaching Moses: What matters is not whether they believe in you, but whether you believe in them. Unless you believe in

them, you cannot lead in the way a prophet must lead. You must identify with them and have faith in them, seeing not only their surface faults but also their underlying virtues. Otherwise, you will be no better than a detached intellectual – and that is the beginning of the end. If you do not believe in the people, eventually you will not even believe in God. You will think yourself superior to them, and that is a corruption of the soul.

The classic text on this theme is Maimonides' Epistle on Martyrdom. Written in 1165, when Maimonides was thirty years old, it was occasioned by a tragic period in medieval Jewish history when an extremist Muslim sect, the Almohads, forced many Jews to convert to Islam under threat of death. One of the forced converts (they were called anusim; later they became known as marranos) asked a rabbi whether he might gain merit by practising as many of the Torah's commands as he could in secret. The rabbi sent back a dismissive reply. Now that he had forsaken his faith, he wrote, he would achieve nothing by living secretly as a Jew. Any Jewish act he performed would not be a merit but an additional sin.

Maimonides' Epistle is a work of surpassing spiritual beauty. He utterly rejects the rabbi's reply. Those who keep Judaism in secret are to be praised, not blamed. He quotes a whole series of rabbinic passages in which God rebukes prophets who criticised the people of Israel, including the one above about Moses. He then writes:

If this is the sort of punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and the ministering angels – because they briefly criticised the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the least among the worthless [i.e. the rabbi who

criticised the forced converts] who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of Sages and their disciples, priests and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, and heretics who deny the Lord God of Israel?

The Epistle is a definitive expression of the prophetic task: to speak out of love for one's people; to defend them, see the good in them, and raise them to higher achievements through praise, not condemnation.

Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God. "Those people of whom you have doubts," said God to Moses, "are believers, the children of believers. They are My people, and they are your people. Just as you believe in Me, so you must believe in them."

Hearing the Cry: Miriam, Pharaoh's Daughter, and Moral  
Courage by Naomi Kalish

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/hearing-the-cry/>

At times of difficulty, uncertainty, and strife, I often find comfort and courage in stories, especially stories about people who connect and transform or resolve conflict. This week's parsha, Shemot (Exodus 1:1-6:1), gives me such a story of hope in its portrayal of the relationship between two people from groups in conflict.

After the triumphant conclusion of the book of Genesis, the rise of a new pharaoh ushers in an era characterized by fear, distrust along ethnic lines, and the imposition of harsh labor. Exodus 1 ends with Pharaoh's ominous decree: "Every

[Hebrew] boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile but let every girl live.” (Ex. 1:22)

The story hinges on a pivotal encounter between two women, who forge a partnership that bridges across a dangerous social divide: Pharaoh’s daughter (unnamed in the text but named Bitya in rabbinic literature), and an endangered baby’s older sister (unnamed here but named Miriam later in Exodus). Centering on their process of relationship-building provides us with a model for and transforming a bleak situation into a livable one.

While the midrash imagines that Bitya converted and became part of the Hebrew people, thus providing a rationale for why an Egyptian woman would defy the pharaoh’s decree (BT Megillah 13a), for this reading I prefer to think of her as an Egyptian princess who maintained her sense of peoplehood, belonging, and spirituality within the Egyptian context. Thus, when she hears baby Moses cry, she hears not the cry of a fellow Jew but the cry of a fellow human being. When she defies her father’s decree, she does so as a person solidly located within Egyptian society. And, when Bitya and Miriam encounter and engage one another, they do not do so as sisters in the Hebrew community, but as two people connecting around common values and purpose, while maintaining their differences, including differences in power.

Like Pharaoh’s daughter, the midrash recognizes Miriam as a child of a communal leader, who displayed a courageous inclination to defy community norms. The midrash expands her heroism of accompanying her baby brother to ensure his safety to include a backstory of her challenging her father when he decreed for the Hebrew slave community that not even baby girls should be born (Sotah 12a). However, we

cannot assume that Bitya and Miriam engaged each other the same way they did with their families, especially given the fraught circumstances.

A close reading of the text of their story, told in five verses in Exodus 2, reveals distinctive features in each of their voices and postures as they approach each other and their relationship emerges. When reading texts, whether they are contemporary interview transcripts or ancient literary texts, to gain an understanding about a person or character's inner experience, psychologist Carol Gilligan recommends listening for the verbs used by the narrator to describe each character. She advises creating a poem of just those verbs in the order they appear to gain a sense of movement of the person's self, psyche, or spirit over time, as well as listening to the actual words attributed to each character. Through these methods, we hear how Bitya and Miriam's voices sounded and how they postured themselves to make a connection at this precarious time.

Gleaning just the verbs from the text that the Biblical storyteller used for Miriam, we have the following poem:

And she stood	וַתֵּצֵא צָב
And she said	וַתֹּאמֶר מִרְ
And she went	וַתֵּלֶךְ וְ
And she	וַתִּקְרָא רָא

called

Miriam's poem consists of four verbs or actions, that are all different. Half are physical – standing still and moving; and half are spoken with two different kinds of speaking.

The Biblical text quotes Miriam's own words to Bitya:

הֲאֵלַי וְקִרְאתִי לָךְ אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקוֹת מִן הָעִבְרָיִת וְתִינֶק לָךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד:

“Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to nurse the child for you?”

With the Egyptian princess Miriam is deferential. However, her question is not submissive but rather suggestive.

Astoundingly, the enslaved girl uses no honorifics in speaking to the princess, showing none of the linguistic deference we might have expected in such an encounter. Miriam's voice is smart, savvy, and strategic. From a disenfranchised and vulnerable position, she is navigating this distressing situation with nuance and subtle leadership. Just as Bitya does not denigrate baby Moses or Miriam, Miriam does not diminish Bitya's humanity by vilifying her.

Listening to the poem of verbs used to describe Bitya also provides us with a window into her inner experience:

And she came down	וַתֵּרֶד
And she saw	וַתִּרְאֶה א
And she sent	וַתִּשְׁלַח לָךְ
And she took	וַתִּקַּח חֶמֶד
And she opened	וַתִּפְתַּח תַּח

And she saw וַתִּרְאֵהוּ

And she felt  
compassion וַתַּחֲמֵן מֵל

And she said וַתֹּאמֶר מָר

And she said וַתֹּאמֶר מָר

And she said וַתֹּאמֶר מָר

And she  
called וַתִּקְרָא רָא

And she said וַתֹּאמֶר מָר

Bitya has more narrative, more verbs, and more quotations than Miriam. This poem has a major turning point: Bitya starts off actively engaged and then fully shifts to speaking. When we look back in the narrative, we see in the plot what was happening when this shift took place: it is immediately after she sees – encounters – a crying baby and one that has no one to console it. Crying is the paradigmatic communication that cuts across humanity. Bitya is not only moved by the suffering of another human being, but her compassion is resistance toward the social forces of dehumanization that surrounds her.

Bitya's encounter with the humanity of the baby prompts her shift from acting to speaking and into relationships with multiple other people, as evident by the five times she is quoted in the text. She recognizes the baby for who he is and speaks for the first time saying, "This must be a Hebrew child." Bitya is presumably speaking with her maidservants, with

whom we had not previously heard any verbal exchange. Miriam likely hears Bitya's acknowledgement of the baby and perhaps feels her compassion, and she then ventures to speak directly to her. When Bitya and Miriam each say something, the text notes that they say it to the other. After Miriam offers to find someone to nurse the baby, Bitya instructs her לֵךְ / "Go." Bitya also instructs Yocheved, Moses's mother, to care for the baby and offers her compensation. When Yocheved brings the baby back, the narrator tells us that Bitya uses her speech to give him a name. While Miriam uses her intelligence and gall to diplomatically engage Bitya and promote a recommendation, Bitya conveys a sense of command to bring the plan to action. Each woman finds agency to form their partnership.

This story illustrates two people breaking social norms, resisting the pressures of polarization. They were different in many ways – religion, ethnicity, social status, power – but they connected on a human level. Instead of operating according to a system with Egyptians against Hebrews, they were they rewrote the social structure to be a system that arrayed those who wanted to save the baby against those who did not.

As we navigate our contentious, polarized, vilifying and dehumanizing times, we can be inspired by Miriam's boldness and Bitya's compassion, and their courage in engaging with each other despite their differences. *(Naomi Kalish is the Harold and Carole Worlfe Director of the Center for Pastoral Education; Assistant Professor of Pastoral Education at JTS)*

[The Burning Bush- The Thorny Entrance to Leadership's Path](https://ajr.edu/parashat-shemot-5786/)  
[by Rabbi Dorit Edut](https://ajr.edu/parashat-shemot-5786/)

<https://ajr.edu/parashat-shemot-5786/>

As you enter my living room, a print of Chagall's Moses and The Burning Bush greets you. It is a simply constructed painting, with a very bright colorful burning bush (oranges, reds, yellows) next to a kneeling figure of Moses, in a metallic blue robe, hand on his heart, and looking out at you with an amazed expression. Above the bush are the letters of the Tetragrammaton encircled, while a small green angelic figure waves downwards, and some random small sheep float off to one side. While Chagall grew up in a religious home in Vitebsk, Russia (now Belarus), he certainly adds his own interpretation to the Biblical narrative of this week's portion, Shemot. Not only is Moses not hiding his face, but we see the karnei or, the rays or horns of light, which are only mentioned much later when he descends from Mt. Sinai after receiving the Torah. But it brings forth the message very clearly that this encounter is, as renowned Professor Harry M. Orlinsky stated in his article on Moses in the book Great Jewish Personalities (1959), "the turning point of Moses' career". And it certainly occurs in a most unusual way with this unnatural phenomenon and at a time in Moses' life when he thought he had found a stable life as a shepherd in Midian, far away from the drama of Egypt and the suffering of his fellow Israelites.

We know, as the text continues, that Moses, like other great biblical prophets, does not easily accept this mission, whether from feelings of personal inadequacy or from fear of facing both the Egyptians and the Israelites, or from a certain irritation at having to give up his stable and mundane lifestyle. Yet, ultimately, he goes along with the plan and learns to be a leader – arguably the greatest leader that the Jewish people have ever had. But Moses' beginnings, somewhat like those of Joseph, seem not to follow any logical, predictable course –

but ultimately are seen to have experiential value in developing the kind of leader that was needed by the Jewish people.

The symbolism of the Burning Bush has also long been a subject of commentaries, but there are several that talk about the importance of this strange object for the development of Moses as a leader. The Midrash of Shemot Rabbah focuses on the word “eilav – to him” which seems to be superfluous in that there are no other people around to whom God was presenting this amazing sight. This means that this was indeed a private revelation meant just for Moses, as the dreams of visions God had communicated privately with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. It perhaps was a kind of test to find out if Moses indeed had that special power of “seeing” needed to become a real messenger of the Divine.

Continuing on from this are the words in the next verse “b’levat aish – in a flame of fire” – which the Midrash explains was in order to give Moses courage when he later would face the fires of Mt. Sinai and not show fear in front of the Israelite nation, especially when he had to go to receive the Torah there. Having a positive encounter now would steel him well for the later one. At some level this acknowledges the humanity of Moses and draws a fine line between fear and awe.

As rabbis and cantors, spiritual and educational leaders of our Jewish community today, we each have had different paths which led us to this career. At some point in our lives, or maybe at several, I believe that we probably experienced some kind of Divine call, something that pushed us, like Moses, perhaps reluctantly, to accept this message and begin walking on this road that led us to ordination and beyond.

Maybe it was a crooked road, with many turns and twists, bumps and dead ends, that we can now see was vital to traverse to give us the strength and skills to persevere and to serve in all kinds of situations. But looking back, there was also at least one special moment when we met our own 'burning bush' and realized that, yes, we each had the faith in God and in ourselves to become the modern version of Klei Kodesh.

My own encounter came when I was 12 years old and my Hebrew school class had just studied the Book of Judges. Something inside of me was so inspired by this image of the strong, wise female leader – a rarity for Jewish girls in 1961- that I asked my rabbi if I could become a prophetess someday or if not that, what about a rabbi? He looked at me kindly and replied "Well, no honey – but you could marry one!" That was like a knife going through me, and I kept that hurt inside for 40 years, always murmuring to myself that 'Someday I WOULD become a rabbi and a leader for our Jewish community.' So I became a teacher, and then a crisis counselor for families and youth – until one day, I realized I had gotten another message that confirmed my inner voice. Twelve different times I had to send students who seriously threatened suicide for intensive in-patient treatment – and each time when they returned to public school, they wanted to discuss life after death, a subject that I told them was a religious one and best handled by their minister, imam or rabbi. Soooo – it dawned on me that it was time for me to free myself from these constraints, to be able to guide people spiritually, to answer that long-ago call and become a rabbi! But how valuable were the side roads of having been a teacher and a counselor prior to taking on this new vocation – God had been preparing me all along!

Certainly, the times we live in challenge each of us and our

Jewish people especially. How do we as Jewish leaders deal with the growth of antisemitism, the relationship to Israel, the sharp political divide here, the many social and climate issues that demand our attention? And that is in addition to serving the individual and communal needs of our own congregants and neighbors. But now more than ever we can draw strength as leaders from those special moments of faith, inspiration, encounters with God which started us on this journey. As Moses left the Burning Bush with a Divine rod in his hand, with instructions how to face Pharaoh and the Children of Israel, and a renewed faith that God was guiding him, so let us find the strength to stand up, speak out, and bring the lessons of Torah to our people.

I bless each of you my friends and colleagues with these words from a poem called "A Blessing" by Danny Siegel:

"May your eyes sparkle with the light of Torah,

And your ears hear the music of its words.

May the space between each letter of the scrolls

Bring warmth and comfort to your soul.

May the syllables draw holiness from your heart,

And may this holiness be gentle and soothing

To you and all God's creatures.

May your study be passionate,

And meanings bear more meanings

Until life arrays itself to you

As a dazzling wedding feast.

And may your conversation,

Even of the commonplace,

Be a blessing to all who listen to your words

And see the Torah glowing on your face.”

*(Rabbi Dorit Edut was ordained in 2006 after completing her studies at the Academy for Jewish Religion. Currently she has been teaching and helping with programming at the Downtown Synagogue of Detroit. )*

[Shemot: What's in a Name by Cantor Yael Fischman](https://truah.org/resources/yael-fischman-shemot-moraltorah_2026/)  
[https://truah.org/resources/yael-fischman-shemot-](https://truah.org/resources/yael-fischman-shemot-moraltorah_2026/)  
[moraltorah\\_2026\\_ /](https://truah.org/resources/yael-fischman-shemot-moraltorah_2026/)

The name of the weekly Torah portion is assigned according to the first significant word in the first sentence of that reading. When starting an entire new book of the Torah, we can glean additional insight, and perhaps a pun or two, from that name, or in this case, names (Shemot). When Shemot begins, our ancestors had recently gained their identity as b’nai Yisrael, the children of Israel, or as Rabbi Arthur Ocean Waskow, z”l, put it, “**God-wrestlers.**” Their identity as the children of Israel was tested during all their years of slavery. Ironically, our ancestors had to figure out how to remain b’nai Israel, while contending with no longer being remembered as related to Joseph, who had saved Egypt from famine but assimilated and taken an Egyptian name.

This led me to think about the importance of names and traditions for naming. As a light-hearted example, when naming our two cats, our daughters chose from names they had picked out in anticipation, should the time come to adopt our next furry family member after the cat they considered their brother, and the cat we inherited from my own brother, had gone to kitty heaven. When that time came, the girls

watched the antics and nature of the kittens and picked from their list the names that best suited each individual. The name Ringo was chosen for one, because they liked the name, and because he had an extra toe on each forepaw. The name Nudnik was chosen because... let's just say he continues to live up to his name!

Naming, we could then surmise, is a positive act; one which confers desirable traits (or at least the hope for desirable traits) upon the recipient. But what if taking on a name confers guilt by association, or boxes a person into a preconceived identity? Unless it is a name one chooses, or has won at personal cost, such as when Jacob wrestled with the angel, naming can also lead to blaming and shaming. When people are the recipients of names, especially by bullies, name-calling can lead to violence because it seems to put them in an entirely different realm from the one in which the namer-caller inhabits.

Returning to a more desirable form of naming, in Hebrew, alphabetical acrostics are sometimes employed as a mystical way of calling down the qualities of God. That is one reason why the Ashrei is recited so often! Another kabbalistic naming method is to pair the first letter of the alef bet with the last letter, the second letter with the next to last letter, and so on. I have personally never tried to do this, but I imagine that it is a type of spiritual crochet, in which patterns emerge from one's subconscious mind, giving voice (name?) to different aspects of godliness with each loop.

Another naming mantra, if you will, exists in our daily prayers. In Birkhot ha Shakhar, the Morning Blessings, we name different aspects of the Divine by acknowledging their presence in our lives. Merely by acknowledging these

qualities, through mentioning their names, it is as if we are funneling them into our day. From the creation energy that we reference throughout the prayer, to the more actionable ways of imitating God (clothing the naked, freeing the bound, raising the downtrodden), we are giving ourselves permission to be what God intended us to be: little versions of the Shechinah, imbued with God-like qualities, and hopefully, always winning our battle to emulate God in a positive, giving, and supportive way.

Yet, all humans (and perhaps all felines) are a mix of good and bad traits; the same potentialities that exist within our Divine Parent. Our names are not necessarily our destiny.

*(Yael Fischman is the recently installed cantor at Mishkan Torah in Greenbelt, MD, where she also continues to serve in her position as Educator for the Karp Family Sunday school, and where she is a longtime member.)*

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### Yahrtzeits

Treasure Cohen and Rachel Rose-Siwoff remember their father Abraham I. Levin on Saturday January 10<sup>th</sup>.