

## *Shmos*

With this week's Torah portion we begin the reading of the Second Book of the Five Books of the Torah. The name of the Sefer is Shemot, and the very first Sidrah is also so called. Why? A conjecture which may be correct is that the Torah wants to emphasize and underline the importance of the Hebrew names for the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup>

If we are to survive in this and other alien societies, we must never forget our Hebrew names. We are dutybound to call our children by Hebrew names and avoid the common practice of using gentile first names. A son or daughter with a Hebrew name cannot easily forget his or her origin and race.

A name is a distinctive mark of a person. The Hebrew name invariably reminds one of his background and religion. The Hebrew name is usually associated with some great Biblical personality or closer to home, with some special grandparent or other pious relative. Being constantly made aware of his Jewish background can be a most effective antidote against cultural and eventual physical assimilation.

It would seem rather awkward to have an Abraham, Saul, Jacob, Ezra, Esther, Rachel etc. establish an intimate relationship with a Christine, Geraldine or Tony and John amongst others. When our forefathers entered into Egypt, they came with their Hebrew names unchanged and intact. It would then have seemed the proper thing to do—to change their Hebrew names to conform with Egyptian society—in order to mingle more freely with them and to be accepted as real Egyptians.

Nevertheless, the Midrash<sup>2</sup> elaborates on the great stress by our forefathers not to adjust their names to the prevailing stylish Egyptian names. They remained proud of their origin and insisted on retaining their original Hebrew names. Hundreds of years later, this became one of the redeeming factors

of the Jewish people which justified their being emancipated and freed from Egyptian slavery.

Had they changed their names, it would follow that they would also alter their native Hebrew tongue and their specific garb which identified them as the original Hebrews from Palestine. It would then be more difficult to find reason for their exodus from Egypt, since they would have been almost completely assimilated into the Egyptian culture and society.

Today, as we face a tidal wave of assimilation and intermarriage, it is even more vital than ever to reassign Hebrew names to our children. Sons and daughters must be made aware of basic differences between them and the gentile majority. Just as our names are different, so are our customs, traditions, holidays and life styles at variance with the vast non-Jewish majority. If we are to retain our uniqueness, we must use every opportunity to reaffirm our distinctiveness.

History is replete with the names of outstanding individuals who made major contributions in every conceivable field of endeavor, without finding it necessary or beneficial, to hide behind a non-Jewish name. On the contrary, respect and recognition are afforded to the person who has the moral stamina and guts to be proud of his Hebrew name, which reflects his racial and national Jewish roots.

Perhaps it would be wise for all of us to study our habits in this area. It is not too late, even after the son or daughter are grown, to designate a Hebrew name for them. Rabbis and Yeshiva Day School principals can be most helpful. Contact them and if you too are bereft of a Hebrew name, by all means get one quickly. In fact it could be made into a beautiful religious ceremony.

The new Hebrew name can be announced in the Synagogue when you or your son get an Aliyah to the Torah and then have the reader proclaim the new name. You can associate it with Kiddush for all the assembled and invite relatives and friends to the ceremony.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Shmos 1:1 Baal Haturim
2. Vayikra Rabbah 32:5