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From the Desk of Rabbi David E. Fass

A Rose(nberg) By Any Other Name...

What's your Hebrew name? Do you have one? Is it Hebrew or Yiddish? Is it spelled correctly or has it become jumbled over the generations? Who are you named after?

I think each and every Jew, regardless of age, should have a Jewish name. It is part of who we are.

On Friday night, January 19, 2001, we will have a special "Name" Shabbat. Assisted by Mike Richter's ninth grade class, we hope this will be the culmination of a major congregational undertaking to see to it that each and every one of us has a Jewish name. The date was chosen because we will recently have begun reading the second Book of the Torah, called "Exodus" in English but literally called "Names" in Hebrew. Just as this book begins with an enumeration of the names of our ancestors who first journeyed into Egypt, we will attempt to find or create names for all of us.

As you know, custom has us give a first name, followed by son or daughter of (ben or bat) followed by the father's name. Since we treat both sexes equally, we will use names in the form of Child ben (or bat) Mother and Father. I.e., we will use both parents' Hebrew names rather than just the father's.

What's in a name? Identity, for the individual. Anxiety, for the parents, especially as they decide which dearly departed relative to name a child after. Even more anxiety if one parent is an Ashkenazic (European) Jew and the other a Sephardic (Mediterranean) Jew, since the former name only after the dead and the latter often name children after the living.

They are also often corrupted, these names of ours, and fraught with superstition,

especially among the Eastern European Jews who are the ancestors of most of us. Perhaps because there are no laws at all regarding names and naming in Judaism there was plenty of room for superstition and folklore to creep in.

Already by the twelfth century the use of non-Jewish names was so prevalent that the Rabbis of the time had to decree that all Jewish boys be given a Jewish first name at their brit.

Thus developed the custom of using two sets of names: a Jewish, or sacred name (shem hakodesh) and a secular name, called the kinnui, of the "acquired" name. This is the system that is still in use today.

On our Ketubot (marriage contracts) the secular name is given in English, and the Jewish name in the Hebrew section. This custom expanded over time, and became even more muddled with the addition of a second, or middle name, and sometimes even more than one.

As I sit with the families of our B'nai Mitzvah and get from them the people they wish to honor with aliyot at the service, I regularly have to play "name detective" One of the reasons is because our Eastern European forbears spoke so many dialects with so many differing pronunciations (is it kigel or kugel?). They also had a maddening tendency not only to use diminutives and nicknames, but to enshrine them as the "real" names since the correct versions had long since become unknown to them.

One example among myriads: the Biblical Hebrew name Yaakov (Jacob) became (are you ready?): Yekel, Yukel, Yokel, Yankel, Yakobl, Kopel, Kopelman, Yakof, Kofman, Yankif, etc. They are all nicknames, and, in most cases, corrupted misspellings and mispronunciations of perfectly valid Jewish names.

We honor our ancestors, not dishonor them, when we take the time and interest to find out after whom we were named (if that applies) and/or what our Jewish/Hebrew names really are. I would be pleased to help you find out your Jewish names, or help you choose one if you never received one. Instructions as to how to go about this will arrive in every home. It will be an enlightening experience, I'm sure, to try and track down your names.

By the time of the Name Shabbat on January 19, or soon thereafter, we hope to provide everyone who wants one with a certificate with his or her Hebrew name (and English name, of course). At this point we are looking into the possibility of having a new certificate especially designed for this purpose.

What's your Hebrew name? Join us in finding out.

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Cantor's Notes

"Mi Y'malel g'vurot Israel? Who can retell the things that befell us?"

Who does not know this famous Chanukah song? Long known as a Chanukah folksong, it was sung our parents and grandparents. But who can explain how this or any other tune became so popular? Who can explain how Mi Y'malel became such an inseparable part of our observance of Chanukah. Sad to say, it is almost impossible to trace the history of a folk tune.

However, two years ago, while working on my Masters thesis, I went to Kiev in order to do research at the Ukraine Nation Library. I had information that Ukrainian musicologists had found a valuable collection of manuscripts and old recordings. While doing my

research, I found a manuscript named "Tchernobiler Niggun" (a tune without words from Tchernobil). As I read the notes, I was really surprised to find that this was the same tune as Mi Y'male! Thus, it was a prototype for the Chanukah song we know so well. Attributed until today to later composers, now we can say that our song is simply a later rendition of this old Hassidic niggun.

In light of the recent events in Israel, the last sentence of this song unfortunately again sounds very appropriate. "Uvyameinu kol am Israel yitached yakum v'yigael - But now all Israel must as one arise and redeem itself." This is something we need to do now as well. For us, our redemption and our strength were always in our unity. Now is a crucial time to demonstrate our commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. One of the best ways to do this is to gather together with our families at home to celebrate Chanukah and to gather together in the Synagogue with our fellow Jews. In this way, we make the statement that the fate of Israel and the future of the Jewish people really matter to us.

May you celebrate the Chanukah festival with peace, good health, good music, and joy.

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