

SERMON FOR SHEMINI ATZERET
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In this past Monday's New York Times there was an article from a correspondent, Michael Wines, who is based in Zimbabwe. He reported on a fashion in that country to name children in English to convey a special meaning. However, he wrote, some of those names to English speaking persons are rather unique and, in fact, somewhat bizarre. He reports that in western Zimbabwe a baby boy named Tlati was born so sick his parents feared he would die. They tried all kinds of traditional healers and doctors but nothing worked. It seemed that G-d, not man, would decide his fate. Thus, his parents changed his name to reflect that, and called him G-dknows. He also reports that in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, there is another person named Enough. When asked how he got his name, he simply said: "My mother had 13 children and I was the last one." Across southern Africa, there are individuals named Lovemores, Tellmores, Trymores, and Learnmores, along with lots of people named Justice, Honor, Trust, Gift, Energy and Knowledge. There are even Zimbabwean children named Wedding, Funeral, Everloving, Passion and Anywhere.

While the names themselves may bring smiles to our faces, the concept is not so different from the way children are named in the Jewish tradition. The Ashkenazic custom is usually to name a child after a deceased relative so their name may be carried on. But like Zimbabwean culture sometimes names are given as a means of recording an event or a circumstance that accompanies the birth. Naming is a significant moment in the lives of parents and the name that we carry usually tells a great deal about us and our heritage.

This past Sunday in our Sunday Vav Class I led my usual procedure of asking each parent and child to stand up and to recite for me and the class their Hebrew name, the manner in which they will be called to the Torah for an Aliyah. We learned about their Hebrew names, as well as those of their parents, and found out a great deal about their personal family history. I encouraged them, as I have encouraged so many others in our community, to know their names and to appreciate that history for when it is lost, it almost can never be retrieved.

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, made a trip to Saragossa Spain back in the early 1990's. Before 1492 this was a thriving Jewish community but now there are no more Jews there. When Wiesel was at the Cathedral in Saragossa, a man approached him and started speaking to him in French which Wiesel speaks and writes fluently. He offered to be his guide for no fee and was very proud to show Wiesel around. They started talking and the man asked Wiesel some personal questions. When it became obvious that Wiesel was Jewish and he knew Hebrew, the man said to him: "There have been no Jews here for almost 500 years. I've been waiting to meet one so I could ask for some help. There is something I want to show you at my home." The two of them walked off to a small apartment on the third floor and the man took out a fragment of yellowed parchment. "Is this Hebrew?" he asked. Wiesel examined the yellowed document and as he started to read it he was visibly shaken. These were not only Hebrew

letters, but they had been written over 500 years ago. He started to read and translate for the man: "I, Moses, the son of Abraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, its head high under the sun without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie. Written at Saragossa, this 9th day of the month of Av, in the year of punishment and exile." The year of course was 1492, the year of the Spanish Inquisition.

The man explained to Wiesel that this document was cherished by his family and passed on almost as an amulet from one generation to the next. He wanted to know more about this Jew and the Jewish background that he professed. So Wiesel took many hours to explain who the Jewish people were and what had happened to them. He then left Saragossa to continue his travels. A few years later Wiesel was walking down a street in Jerusalem when suddenly a man ran up to him and said: "Shalom, Shalom, do you remember me? Saragossa, Saragossa." There he was on the streets of Jerusalem this man, but he wasn't speaking French this time, he was speaking to Wiesel in Hebrew. "I have something to show you." He took Wiesel by the hand and led him up to his apartment. Up three flights of stairs they walked and Wiesel saw that yellowed parchment in a picture frame on the wall. But this time the man read it to Wiesel in Hebrew. He had come to Israel, had learned Hebrew and had redeemed his Jewish tradition.

Wiesel said, "Please forgive me, I'm so embarrassed I didn't recognize you." Jokingly the man said to Wiesel, "Maybe you need an amulet like I have to help you not to forget." As Wiesel was about to leave, the man said, "You forgot to ask my name. I want you to know my name. My name is Moshe ben Avraham. My name is Moses, the son of Abraham. He is alive after 500 years." A remarkable story of a Jew and a heritage almost lost to posterity and yet redeemed by a name. The name lives on, this time in the State of Israel, this time with an individual who knows Hebrew, this time in the personage of an individual who is both not embarrassed and persecuted for being a Jew.

Our names tell so much about us. When we lose that name we lose that heritage that has been bequeathed to us and we discard much of our personal family history. While there are no Halachot, Jewish legal strictures, having to do with naming there are many customs and those customs have even more force than some of the laws that we follow.

As many of you know, Bryna and I were privileged to become grandparents almost five weeks ago. We followed Hadassa's pregnancy and as Rosh Hashanah neared we both hoped that the timing would work out so we could be there for her and her new born child. Thankfully, with G-d's help, all worked out and a baby boy was born to her and her husband, Haim. I traveled to Israel for five days to be there for the Bris and Bryna spent a little over two weeks helping out with the newest member of their family.

People began to ask us about the baby's name. We told everyone that the custom is that he is named at his Bris and until that time we would not know the name. As you can imagine, since I had lost both of my parents in the last four years, I secretly hoped that the baby would carry at least one of their names, and that symbolically he would know

the heritage from which he had come. Hadassa was close to her grandparents who visited her in Israel and with whom she spent time both in Chicago and Toronto. But today, you have to give your children some leeway and allow them to make their own decisions. So I trusted Hadassa and Haim to remember this custom.

The Bris itself was emotional and very meaningful. I was the Sandek and had the privilege of holding on my lap my new grandchild as the Bris took place. One of Haim's good friends offered the blessings and prepared to announce the name of this new child. When he reached that passage in the liturgy, Haim leaned over and whispered that his name would be Shmuel Binyamin. I knew that Binyamin was named after my father, the great grandfather of this baby. I found out later that Shmuel was Haim's grandfather, his father's father with whom he had a close relationship in their home town of Buenos Aires. Thus, this baby now carried the heritage and the names of his two great grandfathers, one from Buenos Aires, one from Toronto. His parents had made Aliyah to Israel, met there and married there two years ago. And now their child is a Sabra born in Israel. In some ways both of our families have come full circle. Historically the families lived in Europe, traveled to both North and South America and now returned home to Israel with a new child born there.

We were fortunate that Bryna's family and my family in Israel were present as well as many of the friends of the new mother and father, both Spanish speaking and English speaking, in addition to Hebrew. I was moved that my daughter and her husband chose to commemorate my father's memory by having this young baby carry his name. I felt that somehow he knew that and I felt good about it.

In a few moments we will recite the Yizkor memorial prayers. We will remember people whose names are familiar to us. We will recall parents and relatives, spouses and siblings, children and members of our community. Each one of them was blessed with a special name and it is our task to remember them, to recall their lives, their legacy and the true meaning of their existence on earth. It is our privilege to ensure that their stories are not lost, that their names are not simply discarded but instead that their stories and their names are remembered by us and by generations that follow us. It is a moment of true meaning for us as human beings, as members of families, and as members of a community.

This Yizkor for me will probably be a little more meaningful than most. I am now a grandfather with a young baby carrying on the tradition and the name of my father. This coming week starting Sunday night and through Monday, is the Yahrzeit of my father Binyamin ben Raphael v'Aidel, Bernard C. Kurtz. Four years ago, two days after Simchat Torah, he passed away in Toronto. Four years later on this Yahrzeit my family and I have been privileged to welcome in a new young soul who will carry his name. As the book of Kohelet that we read last Shabbat states, "Generations come and generations go." It is at moments like this when Yizkor is recited, when Yahrzeits are observed and new babies enter this world that we feel it most of all.

I pray that our new grandson will learn of his great grandfathers, carry their names and cherish their legacies. May our new grandson be privileged to grow up in a world of peace and blessing and may we all be privileged to carry on the legacy of our ancestors with a great deal of pride and honor.