

A Daily Bread

Date: 21 Sivan, 5785 (June 17, 2025)

Torah Portion: Shelach

Topic: Disposition Toward Sin, Part 1

It is written (Num. 13:16), “These are the name of the men whom Moshe sent to spy out the land.” The Midrash delineates the general principles guiding the relationship between a person’s name and his character. The Gemara (Berachos 7b) teaches that a person’s given name is indicative of his future actions. This is based on the principle that a person’s given name expresses his essence, and is derived from the verse (Psa. 46:8), “Come, see the works of YHWH, the ruins He has wrought on the earth.” The word שְׁמוֹת (sha-mot) “devastations”, is expounded as if it were pronounced *she-mot* (שְׁמוֹת), names. Consequently, the verse means: Come, see the works of YHWH, Who has placed ‘names’ in the land. I.e., Elohim acts in this world in accordance with the names He has devised for the participants. A parent naming a child does not receive a prophecy. However, Elohim inspires him or her to select a particular name that has significance unbeknownst to the parent. Many years later, the aptness of the name may become apparent to all.

There are some people (1) whose names are admirable but whose actions are loathsome; some (2) whose names are loathsome but whose actions are loathsome; some (3) whose names are loathsome but whose actions are admirable; some (4) whose names are admirable and whose actions are admirable. The Midrash wishes to demonstrate that a name does not *determine* one’s actions; a name does not preclude free will. Indeed, we find some people with admirable names whose deeds were loathsome, and others with loathsome names whose deeds were admirable.

For although one’s nature may be inclined in a certain direction, as indicated by his name, a person can exercise free will and change his nature for the better or for the worse. For this reason - although people usually act in accordance with their predisposition, and those with admirable names will usually be virtuous and those with unseemly ones will usually be wicked – we should not presume a person with a virtuous name to be righteous; nor may we presume someone with an unseemly name to be wicked. Nonetheless, one may use caution when dealing with someone with an unseemly name.

Accordingly, we can understand why Moshe chose these ten men as spies despite the evil connotation of their names: Since one’s name does not determine his actions, a person cannot be judged on the basis of his name alone. Therefore, these ten men were righteous at the time of their selection. Moshe had no reason to suspect that they would turn wicked and lead the people astray.

The Midrash gives examples for each of the above categories with names and their actions. The category of those whose names are admirable but whose actions are loathsome includes Esau, whose name is related to the word עָשָׂו (*aso*), meaning one ‘who performs’ good deeds (*oseh*; עוֹשֶׂה). And Ishmael, whose name connotes ‘one who obeys’ Elohim (Yishma-El), but in actuality he did not obey Him. Although Ishmael was older than Esau, the Midrash lists Esau first as he is a clearer example of one with an admirable name whose deed were loathsome, since his misdeeds are explicitly mentioned in Scripture. It is not clear from Scripture that Ishmael did not obey the will of Elohim. And, at least, according to some opinions, Ishmael repented sometime before his death.

Nezer HaKodesh¹ adds that, as children of the Patriarchs, Ishmael and Esau had a predisposition toward virtue as well as the perfect role models for parents. Nevertheless, they exercised free will and went against their nature, as indicated by their names and ignored the positive influences of their parents, to rebel against Elohim. As such, they were more deserving of punishment than an ordinary person who sins.

The next category is those whose names are loathsome but whose actions are admirable. This refers to the Babylonian exiles. For example, “the children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur (Ezra 2:51), who merited to ascend from Babylon to the Land of Yisrael and build the Temple. The exiles’ evil-sounding names – strife, emptiness, and beastliness – imply a natural tendency toward wickedness. These exiles also possess a further impediment: They were Nethinites, descendants of the Gibeonites, who deceived Yehoshua into accepting them as proselytes and were prohibited to intermarry with the Yisraelites. Nonetheless, the actions of the children of Bakbuk, Hakupha, and Harhur belied the meaning of their names. They conquered their wicked inclinations and acted meritoriously by ascending to Yerushalayim and building the Temple. For overcoming the obstacles in their path, they were doubly rewarded from Heaven. Shalom.

¹ Moshe Rosen, 1870 – 1957, author of Nezer HaKodesh