

FREEDOM AND THE NAME.

Dvar Torah on Parshat Va Era, 5763.

If you have not already seen the new animated movie, Spirited Away, I urge you to check it out. This masterpiece of fantasy combines incredibly creative drawing with a wondrous story about a journey into the world of spirits in Japan. Chihiro, a little girl whose family is moving to a new neighborhood, finds herself in a magical bath house that caters to a variety of weird spirits and ghosts, after she and her parents stumble upon an enchanted world and are trapped in it. When her parents are turned into pigs, Chihiro becomes the servant of the selfish witch Yubaba, the owner of the bath house. The girl has courageous adventures as she attempts to free her parents and herself from the spirit world and return to human life.

One of the main themes of the film is the loss of identity when one is in captivity. Chihiro is befriended by a boy named Haku, a slave of Yubaba who cannot remember his full name or where he came from. Her guides her to the witch who lets her work in the spirit world –the only way that Chihiro can survive there. However, a high price is to be paid: Yubaba steals Chihiro's name and gives her a slave name. Without her parents, who have been robbed of human identities, and without her real name, Chihiro will have to struggle mightily to reclaim who she is in order to free her family from the spirits.

The first few chapters of Exodus, read last week and this week, discuss this connection between identity and slavery as well, though in ways that are quite different from our movie. At the beginning of this biblical book, all of the brothers of Joseph, the twelve children of Israel, are named individually. Once that generation dies, a new Egyptian king arises who brutalizes the Israelite nation, thus stripping it of its humanity.

Though the collective names of Egypt and Israel are used extensively in those first chapters, almost none of the individual characters is ever named: the evil Pharaoh, his daughter, Moses' mother, father, and sister, the Egyptian taskmaster killed by Moses, the two Israelites in whose fight Moses intervenes, as well as the shepherd girls who Moses saves from bullies have no names. Even Moses' name, as prominent and symbolic as it will become, is reminiscent of his passivity as a slave baby who was saved by the kindness of Pharaoh's daughter when she drew him out of the water. Other than the Hebrew midwives who defy the decree to kill Israelite baby boys, and Moses' father in law, Reuel, everyone –slave and oppressor alike- is robbed of a firm identity, because slavery destroys the humanity of the master as well as the servant.

Chihiro reclaims her freedom and her identity by running from the world of the spirit back into the world of humans. Moses reclaims the Israelites' freedom and his own identity in a world of human enslavement by embracing the world of the spirit. This he does through his encounter with God and God's name. Let me explain what I mean by this. Moses is born a Hebrew slave, but he is raised by Pharaoh's daughter as Egyptian royalty. The Bible tells us that he, nonetheless, identifies with the oppressed Israelites, a solidarity that we can only surmise he acquired from his mother who nursed him for the royal family. As Moses rebels further against his royal identity and replaces it with who he really is –an Israelite- he is able to free other individuals from oppression: he kills an abusive Egyptian taskmaster and he stops some ruffian shepherds from bothering Reuel's daughters. In that story of the daughters, the Bible foreshadows Moses' “palace to peasant climb” into a life of freedom fighting by calling him a savior and a rescuer, and by subtly reversing the meaning of his name: Moses, the slave boy drawn from the

water, draws water for the shepherd girls' flocks after he frees them from danger. Still, at that point, Moses has no larger vision of what his life means until God tells him God's name and calls him to redeem the Israelites. At the burning bush, God tells him, "I am the God of your ancestors, Moses, I have heard the cries for help of your people, and I want you to be my agent in freeing them." Moses struggles with all of this. He cannot believe that either he or his people have a name: that he can free them from physical bondage and himself from spiritual bondage. That is why he pointedly responds to God, "Who am I, a nobody with no identity, that You would send me on this mission, and frankly, who are You? When the slaves ask me what Your name is, what Your essential reality is, what am I supposed to tell them?" At that point, God tells Moses God's name, and transforms him from a prince turned fugitive into a man whose divine mission is to fight tyranny and make people free. In last week's and this week's Torah readings, two of God's names spell out for Moses where he fits in the larger scheme of the world. "I am that I am" and Y-H-V-H, God's unpronounceable name related to the Hebrew word for existence, send home to our hero a clear message: "Moses, your life is no accident, it is a purposeful part of Me, God, the source of all being and life. Pharaoh is attempting to destroy your people, by robbing them of their identities, their dignity, and their lives. But I, life itself, am ever flowing, and I will not permit this false god of death to do his arrogant work. Moses, your name recalls how you were drawn from the waters of the river and were saved from death. Now you will be God's agent for drawing water for these half dead slaves, thus sustaining them and returning them to life: you will give them back their names."

What does all of this mean for our lives? Anytime you help others to overcome physical or political oppression you, like Moses, become a redeemer to them who restores them to their full identities and gives them back their lives. In a more poetic way, any time you help another person to understand better who he or she really is or should be, you help to free him or her from enslavement to self deception and self limitation: you give that person the chance to take on a new name, a truer identity that reflects a deep faith in the value of his or her life. The liberation work that we do for each other is as much about freeing one another from within as from without. However, we are not working alone. Whether or not we realize it, God's name is written all over these endeavors. What this means is that our individual acts of human kindness contribute to an infinitely larger cosmic drama in which God is attempting to free the world, God's creation, from brokenness and evil. From a religious perspective, no good thing that we do is ever done in isolation: all of our actions have cosmic implications, and God –as it were- needs us to do them. We need God to give us the moral insight, the spiritual courage, and the deeper wisdom to behave this way and to understand the greater meaning of our actions.

To be a slave is to be robbed of one's name, and to be free is to get it back. The struggle between Pharaoh and Israel, between slavery and freedom, between anonymity and having one's name happens every day in every part of the globe: it is not simply a biblical story of things past. The greatest striving of humanity is to liberate others and to be liberated by them. Standing behind and above and within all of it is God, who never stops calling the divine name into our ears: "I am: I am the source of all existence, and you are Moses. Go, give My world back its name by giving it life." shsh

