

"THE VARIETIES OF ANONYMITY"

A name, in our Western civilization, is simply a tag, a mere label and means of identification. Hence, it is understandable though regrettable that names are gradually yielding to numbers, which are more rational and more easily classifiable. We are beginning to lose our individual names to Social Security numbers, credit card numbers, and other computerizable figures. Street names, which are often of historic value, are more and more becoming merely numbered streets, like "West 86th Street"; town and cities, whose names are frequently picturesque, characteristic, and sometimes unique, have all but faded from our envelopes as postal authorities record merely the ZIP code numbers.

However, in the Bible -- as in all Semitic culture -- a name is more than a means of identification. It is somehow related to essence, it is mystically identified with the substance, with the individual. Therefore the Torah usually explains why a specific name is given to a certain individual.

It is for this reason that I have often wondered about those occasions in Jewish life, and general life, when the revers occurs, when a name is covered up, deliberately omitted.

It may be instructive, therefore, to analyze the varieties of anonymity, and perhaps emerge with the beginnings of an ethic of anonymity.

For our first instance of anonymity, let us look to today's Sidra. In response to the complaints of the Israelites, the Lord sent them the manna, and Moses instructed them to take only a certain amount and eat all of it, without letting any remain to the next day. Most Israelites obeyed Moses, but not all:

... וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְיִזְכְּרוּ אֲנָשִׁים מִמֶּנּוּ עַד בֹּקֶר...
וַיִּקְצוּף עָלֵיהֶם מֹשֶׁה.

"They did not listen to Moses, but some people from amongst them left the manna over till the morn... and Moses was angry with them." Who are these people? Tradition identifies them as the two infamous malcontents, Datan and Aviram. But why does the Torah not say so explicitly?

I suggest that the anonymity the Torah employs here is a way of denying to the arrogant and the wicked the very publicity they seek. Thus, Datan and Aviram considered themselves leaders, but the Torah referred to them as merely **אֲנָשִׁים** , "people"; they wanted to "make a name" for themselves, so the Torah denies them that which they most wanted. Hence, their anonymity.

Similarly, the Talmud removed the name from the greatest heretic of that era, Elisha b. Abuyah, and refers to him simply as **הַשֵּׁנִי** , "the other one."

Perhaps too, this is the reason why the Torah does not name the Pharaohs of Egypt who are so prominent in the Exodus story. "Pharaoh" is merely a generic name for an Egyptian king, in the same way that Caesar is the Roman emperor, or Czar is the Russian king. The Torah refused to immortalize Pharaoh by mentioning his name, specifically because the Pharaohs were fanatic in their desire for their names to be memorialized -- witness the pyramids they built, the glorification of their own posterity.

But this question about the Pharaohs leads us to another reason for anonymity (which I had once before mentioned), proposed by Dr. Israel Eldad. The Torah cloaks Pharaoh in anonymity not in order to provide a livelihood for historians, antiquarians, and anthropologists who will build careers on the problems of identifying Pharaohs. Rather, it is a challenge to think historically, rather than individually; to attempt to achieve an over-all view, rather than being lost in picayune details. Had the Torah mentioned the name of the individual Pharaoh, we would have discovered details of his biography, and then depth psychology would have taken over and we would have found individual reasons for his malice. We would have discovered that he was a paranoiac, or he was deprived in his childhood, or weaned prematurely, or the object of sibling rivalry... At that point, we would have stopped thinking historically, and focused too narrowly upon one individual. Psychoanalysis leads us to explain Pharaoh, explanation leads to understanding, and understanding leads to forgiveness. And the victims -- are forgotten. In this manner, the lessons of history recede and are lost on us. So the anonymity is there in order to fix the moral responsibility for one's actions. No matter what the reasons, man cannot escape the guilt for the consequences of his decisions on society and history.

I would add that the same holds true for the reverse situation: the anonymity of the benevolent and great figures. Moses' real Hebrew name is not given to us in the Torah (although tradition told us that he was called מֹשֶׁה). Neither are we told much about his parents. His genealogy is rather humble: "וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח בֵּת לֵוִי" "A man from the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi." Perhaps the Torah is telling us that just as you may not explain all the evil of Pharaoh by ascribing it to his hereditary or environmental idiosyncracies, so can you not explain away the greatness of Moses solely by genetics and upbringing. Of course, psychology is important, but there is always a core of free will which accounts for moral responsibility.

The third variety of anonymity is fairly obvious: modesty. A man who performs a good deed and does it for its own sake, signifies this absence of ego-dividends by obscuring his own name.

Thus, one of the highest forms of charity is אֵתְנָן בְּסֵתֶר, one who gives secretly, so that he does not know the recipient, and the recipient does not know him.

This is true not only for philanthropy, but for other human achievements as well. The highest point is reached when a man can do something without attaching his name to it, and thus do it purely for its own sake.

That this is difficult is unquestionable. The founder of the Mussar movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter, once made the whimsical comment that he knows people who have written great, thick volumes on the quality of עֲנוּוָה, humility, but somehow always remembered to affix their names on the title page...

Similar to this is the fourth variety: sensitivity to the feelings of others.

The Gaon of Vilna, in his halakhic writings, made it a practice never to mention the names of those with whom he disagreed, or those whose theses he disproved. What was important was the שְׂקֵל וְטַרְיָא (reasoning, dialectic) and not the personalities involved. Similarly, his leading student, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, who was the most trenchant ideological critic of the growing Hasidic movement, never mentioned the Hasidim either by their individual names or even as a group, and instead referred to them by a circumlocution.

In this respect, it is interesting to notice a significant difference in practice between Anglo-Saxon case law and Jewish law. In American law, whether in the law-books or newspapers, cases are entitled by the names of the litigants. As a result, all the dark secrets of a couple's domestic difficulties are spread out for all the world to see, satisfying a casual reader's prurient interest as much as teaching students legal principles. If a man, in the course of a lifetime, experiences a temporary aberration, and does something wrong, this system of putting his name on a case ensures that he will be condemned to eternal disgrace. How different, how much more sensitive, how much more moral, is the practice of Jewish case law, the responsa literature. In the great majority of instances, cases are not discussed by using the real names of people, but instead Jewish respondents will use fictitious names, especially those of the first large Jewish family: Reuven, Simeon, Levi... Rachel, Leah, Sarah... The real names of the individuals are protected by the anonymity which comes of sensitivity.

Finally, the fifth variety of anonymity is that of fear, or, better, cowardice. Anonymity is often the cloak of the spineless and the gutless.

An example: the International Red Cross a week or two ago circulated to all member governments a document complaining that "the Middle East is not fulfilling the Geneva Convention concerning prisoners of war lists." What Middle East? What child does not know that there is only one country which is so debased, so cruel, so inhuman, that it would withhold this information from families? They meant Syria, but they did not call it by its name because of their cowardice. Imagine if Israel had been the culprit, Heaven forbid, and practiced such barbarism. Would the Red Cross have spared Israel and not mentioned its name? Some day the entire record will be there for the whole world to see -- how the International Red Cross dealt differently with Jews from the way it dealt with others, both in the Holocaust and the three wars of the State of Israel.

Related to this form of cowardly anonymity is the anonymous letter writer. As a public figure, it has not been unusual for me in the course of the years to receive an occasional anonymous letter.

I confide to you: I never pay attention to them. I never even try to even figure out who the writer is, never

try to decipher his handwriting or discern how he changed his style or punctuation or spelling in order to disguise his identity.

I just don't care. People who do not have the courage of their convictions, and are not willing to engage in serious dialogue, do not deserve to have others listen to their monologue. I consider them as nothing but pathetic.

And yet I recognize that it is often difficult for a person to voice criticism and place himself squarely behind it. I remember that several years ago the New Yorker magazine carried the following item:

Dear Editor:

I am revolted by those weak-kneed characters who are not manly enough to sign their own names. I suggest that in the future you never again publish anonymous letters. We can do without them.

Signed:
Disgusted.

Sometimes I think that the anonymous letter-writer is really revealing his true identity as symbolized by his anonymity: namely, nothing, the absence of personality, or better -- the absence of character. The anonymous letter has the same value as a check signed "Anonymous."

So, we have enumerated five varieties of anonymity: one that is used to deny the malicious, self-serving publicity seeker what he most wants; the anonymity which emphasizes historical thinking and moral responsibility; modesty; sensitivity to others; and the anonymity of cowardice.

I wish to conclude with a species of anonymity which is radically different: divine anonymity.

At the end of the Sidra, we read of the hateful attack by Amalek on Israel. Because of this, the Lord swore that he would never forgive Amalek, in the following words:

כִּי יָד עַל כֶּסֶף יְיָ מִלְחָמָה לֵּל בְּעַמְלֵק מְדוּרָה דוֹר
that God's hand is placed on His divine throne (a figure of speech denoting an oath) that the Lord will war against Amalek in every generation.

The Rabbis are quoted by Rashi as follows:

ומהו כס ולא כסאן ואף השם נחלק לחציו? נשבע
הקב"ה שאין שמו שלם ואין כסאו שלם עד שימחה
שמו של עמלק בולד.

Why did the Torah use the word כס instead of כסא
"throne?" And why is the Lord's Name only half of what it
usually is? (י-ה is only the first half of the full Name of
God). The answer is: the Holy One swore that His Name would
not be complete and His Throne would never be complete until
the name of Amalek would be utterly destroyed.

The Name of God cannot be revealed as long as the name
of Amalek is not erased. God suffers partial anonymity as long
as the Amaleks of life still defy Him, still disturb the peace
of mankind, still have "a name" in the world. The struggle
is between the Name of God and the name of Amalek; between
the anonymity of the One and the anonymity of the other.

Our prayer therefore is that, regardless of the
varieties of human anonymity, God no longer be anonymous in
the world.

יְהִי ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בְּיוֹם הַהוּא יְהִי ה' אֶחָד
וְשִׁמוֹ אֶחָד.

"May the Lord be acknowledged as King over the entire world;
on that day the Lord will be One and His Name will be complete."