

What's in a name?

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Parashat Bo introduces us to the world of Mitzvot. The narratives thus far, have given us an understanding of the remarkable lives of those who created Am Yisrael. We have had a long shiur in derech ertez, it's now time for Torah. The first mitzvah was to create a calendar. The Seforno teaches us that time is only relevant to free people who can speak of yesterday, today and tomorrow with a measure of autonomy. We still use this calendar today although not as dictated by Hashem. We have replaced the numbering system with names, even names that are taken from pagan gods! The obvious question is why?

What follows is a summary of a masterful insight from the Emet Le'Yaakov from Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky.

The Midrash praises the Bnei Yisrael for not changing their names and language whilst in Mitzrayim. How could the Jews returning from Babylonian exile maintain practices that are so un-Jewish?

The Gemarah presents five differences between the first and second Temples. A major flaw with the second Temple was the absence of the Aron, which had been hidden by King Yoshiyahu. The Mishnah in Shekalim (6:2) brings a story; It once happened that a priest who was busy [there] noticed that the floor [of the wood storage area] was different from the others. He went and told his friend about it but before he had time to finish his words, his soul departed. Then they knew for certain that the Ark was hidden there.

This story suggests that they knew exactly where the Aron was but for some reason did not want to display it. The Emet Le'Yaakov suggests that the Jews returning from Bavel knew that they didn't really deserve to be returning home and that the second Bet Hamikdash was not the permanent house of Hashem that the Prophets had spoken of. They reasoned that it was a temporary measure to help ready the nation for their final destiny. Assimilation had ravaged the nation and, similar to Yetziat Mitzrayim, Hashem intervened to get the nation out before we self-destructed.

Keeping the Aron hidden symbolised the estranged nature of the relationship of the Jews with Hashem. To underscore this spiritual malady, the returnees decided to bring aspects of exile back with them such as the names of the months and the Aramaic language. This also explains why some of the names of the Taanaim are Aramaic and why the Jerusalem Talmud is in Aramaic instead of Lashon Ha'Kodesh. All these measures were enacted to underscore the fact that the nation was spiritually distant from Hashem. Although they physically lived in Eretz Yisrael, spiritually they were in galut.

Over the coming weeks we will read of the continuing struggles of the fledgling Am Yisrael to live up to its destiny. These struggles continue to manifest themselves in our time. The Jewish worlds gives us much to be proud of, at the same time we must strive to actualise our national destiny.

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