

Shemot 5784
Some (Not So) New Names
Rabbi David Englander

I'm sure we could have tied our theme today into just about any parasha but once again the coincidence of topic and portion does not disappoint. Because I want to talk about names today and today our foray through the Torah continues with the opening of the book of Shemot, appropriately enough, names.

Names in the Torah, and the rest of the Bible, if you counted them up, and I haven't, would be overwhelmingly recorded as male names. You don't need me to tell you that extended narratives about women are few and far between. And you also don't need me to tell you that it is only in recent times - the last couple of generations - that women's voices have been reclaimed, with compelling and creative expansion of the scant narratives of the Bible in order to make sure their stories are known as well as their male counterparts. And the last thing you don't need me to tell you is that it is only in that timeframe that women's roles have been expanded in the ritual and leadership sphere, and this is a good and welcome thing.

One step toward both of these things - reclaiming of women's voices and their fuller inclusion in the ritual and leadership life of Jewish communities - is amplified by the change I announced in my congregational email last week. Which, in case you missed it, is that beginning in just a few minutes we will be adding the names of the imahot - Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah - to the opening of every amidah that we recite out loud. This will put us in step with most other Conservative congregations, and while that is

somewhat comforting on making a change like this, it is not a reason to implement it.

No - the reasons to implement it, that I have taught about and outlined with various groups and committees for many months, is that it is both a permissible and a desirable change, because it is a reflection of the core value that undergirds our entire communal effort. And that is an affirmation of everyone's human dignity and their open invitation to find affirmation on their Jewish journey regardless of many factors that have previously served to exclude or sideline people in smaller or larger numbers. While our commitments to full inclusivity for Jews of various ethnic backgrounds and the LGBTQ community are also in this affirming effort, it is the move toward egalitarianism that has all but defined this evolution in Jewish inclusivity, and adding the imahot to the amidah is an extension of that baseline commitment.

The halakha of the change was dealt with by the movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Of course in a pluralistic environment not all legalists agree but the paper that most rely on to support this change is that of Rabbi Joel Rembaum, the long serving rabbi of Beth Am in Los Angeles. As I mentioned previously, I had a question about one aspect of his argument. And because he's a colleague, I didn't hesitate to call him up to ask him about it. And he explained his reasoning, which was compelling, and also told me he was writing a follow up to his original paper with even more reasons that this change is consistent with a cautiously evolutionary approach to Jewish life and living. And I am comfortable with that reasoning as well. So from my position it was not a hard thing to work

toward. But just because I think it is a good idea does not make it a good idea - something else was also required.

And that was listening, closely, to all who shared their views with me.

There were some who objected, mostly on the very stable and solid grounds that they like things the way they are. Nothing wrong with that - consistency is a hallmark of Jewish ritual. But overwhelmingly I was told in any variety of ways that this is a welcome change. And one way that this was represented is in a Talmudic phrase that I would like to teach you.

A long time ago a rabbi was asked a question on a matter of practical halakha, in other words, what to do in a certain scenario, which involved the saying of a blessing following drinking water. Instead of saying yes you do or no you don't, he said "פוק חזי מאי עמא דבר" "go out and see what the people are doing", and do that. They know the right thing to do, and so in this case what they are doing is the law. (For those curious, there is a blessing after drinking water, just like eating or drinking almost anything else.)

So what does pook chazei have to do with the matriarchs? On the one hand, nothing - it is not a principle that can be relied on to create or even confirm law, and sometimes the rabbis were aware that what the people were doing was not exactly in ideal conformation with what they would have them do given the choice. But in these conversations more than a few people told me that they were already adding the matriarchs into their amidah, and had been doing so for some time. This bit of getting out in front of things in order to better align personal practice with one's values, was, I think, something that makes this change among those that are

evolutionary rather than evolutionary. And that is a good and often the best kind of change.

I want to say a word to those who are uncomfortable with this. I see and hear you as well. Truth is it was about fifteen years ago that there was a lay-led movement in my prior congregation to make this change. I had not davened this way for my whole life up to that point. I was also comforted by and connected to the consistency of the liturgy. And when the change was announced I have to admit it took me a while for my silent amidah to match what we were saying out loud. But I continued to think about it, reflect, learn, and especially hear my fellow community members voicing these names in a way that fairly soon became my own practice, and soon after that became so natural that when I got here it took an act of will to once again leave them out. And I've slipped up more than a few times.

I can say with a full heart that what you say in your private amidah, and what words you voice out loud and which you may choose not to when we begin an amidah together, are between you and God. But I will also push just a little bit to encourage us to move toward more universal adaptation of this change, and only ask that those who are not adopting it in their personal practice continue to continually consider one's own reasons for not adopting it, and to consider the reasons why from this point forward Beth El will.

I know this is not a momentous change. I know many of you feel it's about time and what took so long. And I am hopeful that it will be widely recognized as a step in the direction of our core values which are

expressed through prayer but fulfilled in our actions, priorities, and lived commitments. May the merits of our forefathers and our foremothers impact and influence us all for good, even twice as strongly as ever before. May the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah bless us all with strength and inspire us toward becoming our best selves, community, people and may our work ultimately impact our world for good.

I invite you to rise in body or spirit for the chatzi kaddish, after which we will begin the amdiah together on page 156 b.

Shabbat shalom.