

What's in a Name? By Rabbi Jason Miller

G-U-D-E-S. Pronounced "Goód-es." That is my mother's maiden name. All throughout her single years, her last name was mispronounced in every imaginable way. From "Goods" to "Goodies" to "Goddess," people could never get it right. Everyone from friends to teachers seemed to have their own way of pronouncing, or rather mispronouncing Gudes. Of course, the most grievous mispronunciations quickly became the funniest stories, told by family members throughout the years. To this day when my grandmother makes a reservation at a restaurant, she has the maître d' put it under the name "Smith." It saves some time and confusion! My mother explains how relieved she was when she got married and took my father's last name.

But then, a little over a decade ago, when seeing "Schindler's List" for the first time, there was a shift. My mother noticed that at the beginning of the movie, as the camera pans down the list of names, there it is; shown prominently on the list of Jews whom Oskar Schindler attempted to save: H-U-D-E-S. Chudes. The original spelling of her name. Her legacy. She had to tell her relatives about this. She told everyone.

Do you ever consider how important your name is to you? It truly is your legacy; it is your identifying label in the community; in the world. When you go up to the Torah for an aliyah, you are beckoned before the minyan and before God with your moniker including your parents' names. You are invited to have the kavod, the honor... you and your heritage. When we name a baby, come under the chuppah, offer a misheberakh, recite yizkor, we include the individuals' heritage. For our name is more than mere nomenclature, a classifying label - it is who we are, what we stand for, and where we have come from.

In Pirkei Avot, the teachings of our sages, R. Shimon said: There are three crowns. The crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. But the crown of a good name exceeds them all. For, to achieve the crown of Torah, one must have a quick mind and a sound memory. And the crown of priesthood, much like royalty, only comes with birth, for one must be born into the tribe of Levi or into the dynasty. Thus, the crown of a good name transcends them all, for it is open to all.

This morning's parsha, Ki Tetze, ends with the famous commandment to remember what Amalek did to our ancestors and to blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Timche et-zecher Amalek mitachat hashamayim. *Lo Tishkach!* We must at the same time remember what the nation of Amalek, the Amalekites, did to our ancestors and also blot out their name. As the commentary in the Etz Hayim chumash has it, we are not being commanded here to eradicate all recollection of the Amalekites. Indeed, we are commanded to remember forever what the Amalekites did. Remember what they did, but erase their name. That, the Torah seems to be teaching us, is the ultimate revenge - to eliminate or wipe out a name. And we do just that. On Purim, when we hear the name of Haman, the descendent of Amalek, read from the Megillah, we literally drown out the name. And when we utter the name of Hitler, arguably another descendent of Amalek, we make sure to add the words "*yimach shmo*," that his name should be erased. But these stand as negatives; ways to blot out the name and heritage of people; of evil individuals. If we look back only a few verses before the mitzvah to eradicate the name of Amalek, we learn of another mitzvah concerning names, but in this instance, it is a positive. It is to carry on the name of an individual - the man who dies childless.

Levirate marriage or yibum is the commandment stating that the brother of a childless husband is obligated to marry his widowed sister-in-law and the first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother that his name should not be blotted out in Israel. Thus, the underlying intention of this mitzvah is that a man's name should not disappear forever if he dies leaving no children to carry on his name. His legacy will be assured. We learn in the Book of Ruth, when Ruth's relative Boaz marries the widow Naomi, that yibum is considered the ultimate in loving-kindness. There is simply no better way to honor one's memory than by perpetuating one's name. Inherent in a person's name are all of their achievements, their beliefs, their ethical creed. Indeed, the memory of our loved ones is bound up in their name. When we remember their name, we maintain an enduring nearness to their neshama, to their soul.

In college, I remember discussing at a Hillel board meeting how we should create a Yom Hashoah program for the entire university. A way to honor the memory of the six million without an overtly religious event. We decided to set up a table in the Student Union whereby students and faculty could take turns reciting the names of the six million individuals who perished in the Holocaust, just as is done here in Caldwell on Holocaust Remembrance Day. Speaking these names, the names of those whose lives were cut short during the darkest time in our people's history, is not only the greatest way we can carry on their legacy, but also the greatest way we can ensure that we remember what Amalek did to us and blot out their name. Zakhor - Remembrance can be for both good and evil. In remembering the good, we too, erase the evil.

In a few short weeks, we will have the daunting task of commemorating the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11. How fitting it truly is that the New York City mayor's office has decided that among other tributes to the victims, the names of those who perished will be recited.

In Judaism, we understand that while our body will eventually cease to function, our name will continue on. And as a community, we have the task, indeed the commandment, to perpetuate the name-the legacy-of others, carrying their name forward throughout the generations. Francis Bacon, the famous English essayist, lawyer, philosopher, and statesman, once said: "I bequeath my soul to God... My body to be buried obscurely. For my name and memory, I leave it to men's charitable speeches, and to foreign nations, and the next age."

Shabbat Shalom.