

SHELACH (NUMBERS 13:1-15:41)

What Was Moses' Last Name?

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Moses had a rebellion on his hands. A scouting expedition to the Land of Israel had produced mixed reviews. (See "Fringe Benefits") Ten of the spies had concluded that the Israelites would not succeed in conquering the Land. Although Joshua and Caleb disagreed with their fellow spies, the Nation of Israel accepted the opinion of the majority.

Caleb needed to get the attention of the mob. How would he silence them? He decided to pretend to insult Moses, calling him by his "last name":

"Do you think that is all *ben Amram* (the son of Amram) has done to us?"

Eager to hear more negatives about "*ben Amram*," the crowd was immediately silent. To their surprise, Caleb began to recount all of the wonderful things Moses had accomplished. (Sotah, 35a)

Caleb fooled the mob into paying attention by insulting Moses. No one likes to be addressed by his "last name."

Let us look at another last name in this week's Torah portion. The Torah lists the twelve distinguished tribal leaders who were selected for the assignment of spying out the Land.

Moses was concerned. The People should have accepted G-d's assurances that they could, and should, enter the Land of Israel. Yet, they requested permission to send spies. G-d granted His permission, but not His agreement. "Send them if YOU want to," G-d told Moses, but He didn't endorse the idea.

Moses was afraid of the attitudes of the spies. His prime student, Hoshea bin Nun, was among the spies. Moses wanted to insulate Hoshea from the negative influence of his colleagues: "... *and Moses renamed Hoshea bin Nun - 'Yehoshua -- Joshua.'" (*Numbers, 13:17)

Several questions:

1. What is the significance of the change from "*Hoshea*" to "*Yehoshua*?"

2. What does "*bin*" mean? Throughout the Torah, a person is always called "... *ben* ..." Why is Joshua the only person in the Bible to be called "*bin*..." instead of "*ben*?"
3. Why is it offensive to be addressed by one's last name?

The word "*ben*"



is written with a "*Segol*," a vowel consisting of three dots. "*Bin*"



is written with a "*Chirik*," a vowel with just one dot. The word "*bin*," which is a "shorter" word than "*ben*," implies being "less of a son."

Although Joshua was physically the son of Nun, he was also the "son," the primary student, of Moses. Much of Joshua's greatness came, not from Nun, his father, but from Moses, his teacher. As such, he was "*BIN Nun*," partially the son of Nun, rather than "*BEN Nun*," the full son of Nun.

Moses took this concept one step further. First he changed his student's name from "*Hoshea* – Save," to "****Yehoshua* – **G-d** will save." That was a prayer that G-d should protect Joshua from being influenced by the other spies. But what the Torah actually says is that "*Moses called Hoshea bin Nun 'Yehoshua.'*"

Moses dropped the "*bin Nun*" altogether! He was saying, "You are not just your father's son. You are a great man in your own right!"

We can now understand the "insult" that Caleb hurled at Moses by calling him "*ben Amram*." Much of who we are comes from our parents. Our personalities are based upon our DNA, our education, and most importantly, what we do with it. By referring to Moses as "*ben Amram*," Caleb was pretending to suggest that Moses had no greatness of his own. He was the son of Amram. Amram had been the leader of the previous generation, and Moses was a nobody, just a son just trying to fill his father's shoes.

I often speak to people who are very proud of their family backgrounds. (As they should be.) "My grandfather was a very learned man." "My mother was a very charitable person." There was one fellow whose claim to fame was, "My father was a *Shomer Shabbos*." (Sabbath observer) The question I always wanted to ask was, "And what about YOU?"

There is an interesting thing about numbers. One zero equals zero. Two zeroes or six zeroes also equal zero. The only way to turn a zero into a substantial number is by putting another number in front of it. Six zeroes preceded by a one become a million. Without the one, they remain zero.

Family background is like a zero. The more illustrious the background, the more zeroes there are. But all the zeroes in the world only make a difference if there is a one in front of it.

Abraham had eight sons. In addition to Isaac and Ishmael, there were the six sons of Keturah -- Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. (Genesis, 25:1) Yet other than the mention of their births, we hear nothing else about them in the Torah. And even Ishmael gets little notice as the son of Abraham. That is because, as G-d told Abraham, "... *it is through Isaac that you will be considered to have descendants.*" (Ibid, 21:12) Isaac was not like his seven brothers. They all carried Abrahams physical DNA, but Isaac was a ONE. He was a genuine individual who carried on the teachings of his great father. When it came to continuing the legacy of Abraham, they were simply zeros.

We are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It doesn't get better than that. Do we make sure to be the one in front of the zeroes?

Have a great Shabbos.

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