Story of the Name

Rabbi Shlomie Chein
University of California S. Cruz

In the Torah every name has a meaning. Most have a story.

A Jewish name has tremendous impact on the past, present, and future.

A name might perpetuate an incident from the past. For example the name Moses, which means “he was drawn” reminds us of Moses’ miraculous childhood, when a selfless princess drew him out of the water.

Our Jewish name also offers insight into the here and now, since it tells us something about the nature of our soul, and helps shape the expression of our soul. When someone is ill G-d forbid, we often add a name that means life or blessing (eg. Chayim, Chaya, Baruch or Bracha), to infuse the soul with added vitality.

Sometimes names actually help shape the future. The Talmud gives such an example of a sage who avoided being robbed because the name of a man he met, warned him that this man could be a thief. As a matter of fact the very story of the survival of Jewish identity in an assimilated world was largely contingent on the fact that our ancestors maintained Jewish names. Twice in telling the story of our original journey into exile, into Egypt, the Torah makes a point to list the Jewish names of the people who entered that experience.

Tonight I want to share with you a story about one of the strangest names in Jewish history. I want to tell you the story of Rabbi Shmuel Satan.

A strange name, "Satan," isn't it? What Jew would want to have such a name? Yet; Rabbi Shmuel, the President of the Jewish community of Prague in the 14th Century, bore this name proudly and gratefully. And here is the story:1

In those days, the Jews of Prague suffered much persecution at the hands of their Christian neighbors. The church leaders and priests were especially hostile to the Jews, and not infrequently were the mobs incited to attack the Jewish ghetto. Under the reign of King Wenceslaus IV2 [wen-sis-laws], the position of the Jews went from bad to worse. The king took no interest in the affairs of state, but liked to have a "good time," which for him meant eating and drinking and hunting, and spending the royal treasury in extravagant luxuries. His ministers, who were entrusted with the affairs of state, were unfriendly to the Jews, and were only interested in squeezing out from them the greatest possible amount of money by means of various taxes.

The year 5149 (1389) was a particularly tragic one for the Jews of Prague. During the Christian Easter festival a procession moved through the Altstadt ("Old Town"), where the Jewish ghetto was, to the

1 http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112325/jewish/Rabbi-Shmuel-Satan.htm
2 Emphasis serves to highlight key points for retelling the story.
Moldau River. It was a religious procession, carrying crosses and images. A rumor spread quickly that Jewish children threw stones at the crosses and images. In a wave of fury; whipped up by the priests, the frenzied mob attacked the Jewish quarter, mercilessly killing the defenseless Jews and burning their homes. About three thousand Jews, men, women and children, were massacred in cold blood, and much of the Jewish quarter went up in flames. The Rabbi, who was also an outstanding scholar of the Kabbalah, Rabbi Avigdor Karo, composed an elegy to commemorate the tragedy. It begins with the words "Eis kol hatlo’oh" and it was incorporated in the prayers of Selichos.

Despite the great loss of life and property which the Jews suffered from this cruel attack, a heavy fine of ten thousand pounds of silver was imposed on the Jews of Prague!

The year 5151 (1391), two years after the devastating riots and 10,000 silver Thaler tax, was a year which also brought terrible persecutions for the Jews of Spain—the Jews of Prague were again faced with a staggering blow to their very existence. They had not yet recovered from the previous calamity when a further heavy tax was imposed upon the Jewish community in the sum of twenty thousand silver Thaler. Moreover, the President of the community was informed that the money must be paid to the city treasury within eight days, otherwise all Jews would be expelled from Prague and their property taken over to cover the tax.

The President of the community was a prominent Jewish merchant whose name was Reb Shmuel. He was very highly respected for his learning, piety and good deeds. His business affairs brought him in contact with the nobility and he was able to obtain favors from the people of power, and influence for his downtrodden brethren. He was therefore known as the "Shtadlan" (intercessor).

The new tax levy was the "last straw that broke the camel's back," as the saying goes, though it, was more like a ton of bricks than a "straw."

Deeply shocked by the new demand, Reb Shmuel went to the Rabbi to consult with him. The Rabbi then summoned the seven community leaders. After much deliberation it was decided that there was nothing else they could do except to send a delegate to plead with the king for mercy. This was no simple matter. It was not easy to get an audience with the king, and it might be very dangerous for the delegate if an audience were obtained. But who among the king's ministers would want to risk his own position to persuade the king to receive a Jewish delegate?

At this point, Reb Shmuel rose and said, "Esteemed Rabbi and colleagues, I am prepared to go to the king."

"This is very noble of you, Reb Shmuel," the others replied, "But what are your chances of getting to see the king?"

"I will tell you something which I had not intended to tell anybody, for it was of no concern to anybody. But now it is different. This may be a case where, as our Sages say, the Merciful One provides the cure before the malady strikes. This is what happened: Several years ago, as I was driving in my coach on one of my business trips, I turned off the road into the woods in order to davven Minchah. At a brook nearby, I washed my hands and then davvened. After concluding my prayers, I decided to take a stroll to admire the beauty of G-d's nature which was in its spring bloom. I was in no hurry, as I wanted to give my horse a chance to rest and nibble at the fresh green grass. Returning to my coach along a beautiful trail in the woods, my eyes caught a handsome leather pouch lying there before me. I picked it up, and opened it. It was crammed with gold pieces and precious gems, and with documents which bore the royal seal. It was clear that the pouch belonged to a high-ranking royal personage, if not the king himself. Examining the sealed documents further, I discovered the name of the King's treasurer on one of the envelopes..."
While all present listened with spellbound attention, Reb Shmuel continued:

"I lost no time in making my way to the castle of the King's treasurer. Informing the guard at the gate that I had important business with the Treasurer, I was not kept waiting long. When I was admitted to the Treasurer's study, I could see at once that the Treasurer was in a state of mental distress. I produced the pouch and handed it to him. The man nearly jumped out of his skin. Quickly he opened the pouch and examined its contents. Satisfied that nothing was missing, he embraced me and hugged me, and thanked me profusely. 'Did you know what was in this pouch?' he asked me. 'I had no choice but to look inside in order to identify the owner,' I replied. 'Upon my soul,' he said, 'had it been found by one of ours I would have never seen it again. Had a peasant found this pouch, he would have taken the gold and gems and buried the documents, and I should have had to kill myself for shame. If you only knew what these documents mean to me! You see, I had to deliver these secret documents to a foreign ambassador, whom I had arranged to meet on a hunt only yesterday. And then I discovered that I had lost the pouch. I shall be forever indebted to you. By the way, forgive me; I have forgotten to ask your name in my excitement.'

"I told him my name, and he thanked me again and again. Finally he said, 'My dear Shmuel, the money is all yours, as I have in any case despaired of ever getting it back. Besides, the money is of small consideration to me; it is the documents for which I would have to account to the King. You have truly saved my life and honor.' He took out the documents and offered me the pouch with the rest of its contents.

'G-d forbid that I should take any reward for a Mitzvah,' I said to him. To return a lost article to its rightful owner is one of the rare precepts of our faith which comes our way perhaps once in a lifetime, if at all. No, good sir, I cannot accept any reward. The Mitzvah itself is my greatest reward.'

"'What a strange people you are!' the Treasurer exclaimed unbelievingly. 'Is there any other way in which I can express my gratitude to you?'

"I told him that there was no need for that. But should there be an occasion when he could do a favor to any Jew, or Jewish community, that would be the time for him to express his gratitude to G-d..."

"Now, you see, my friends, I think that if I turn to the King's Treasurer, he may arrange an audience with the king for me. The rest is up to G-d."

Thereupon the Rabbi rose and shook Reb Shmuel's hand. "What you did, Reb Shmuel, was truly a kiddush haShem, a sanctification of G-d's name, and an honor for our people. Go then, with G-d's speed, and may you be successful in saving our community."

"I want to ask one thing," Reb Shmuel said to the Rabbi, and he asked that the Rabbi proclaim a day of fasting and prayer for all the community that the Almighty bless his mission with success.

"Certainly, certainly," the Rabbi said. "I was going to do this in any case."

Thus Reb Shmuel started out on his dangerous mission. He had no trouble in being received by the King's Treasurer, who greeted him warmly, and asked what he could do for him. When Reb Shmuel told him, his face fell. The Treasurer told Reb Shmuel that the king had been in a bad mood lately and had been drinking heavily, so that he was more often drunk than sober. "Even when sober, the-king could be dangerous, but if he should be drunk, your life would not be worth a copper coin," the Treasurer told him. Then after thinking a while, he said:

"I have a better idea. I will loan you the money; better still, I will make it a personal gift to you, since you refused it last time. Pay the tax, and be done with it."
"This is very generous of you," Reb Shmuel answered gratefully, "but I am afraid this will be no solution. You see, today we pay this enormous tax, and tomorrow there will be another and heavier tax. My people are impoverished; we are being plundered constantly, and we are hated and persecuted. I want to plead with the king to show us mercy, protect us from the mobs, and enable us to live in peace; then we could do more for the king's treasury and for the country. I must get an audience with the king."

The king's minister said not a word more. He ordered his coach and together with Reb Shmuel they set out for the king's palace. Leaving Reb Shmuel waiting in the hall, the minister went into the inner royal chambers. In due course he returned with a sad expression on his face. "My dear friend," he said. "The king is in an ugly mood. He acceded to my request and agreed that you should appear before him. But - and here lies the trouble - he said that you may only say four words. If you say as much as half a syllable more, you will forfeit your head! There is a royal whim for you... but there is nothing more that I could do. Believe me, I am deeply sorry..."

"Four words?!" Reb Shmuel cried in dismay. "There is a flood of words and pleas bursting from my heart; I want to pour out my heart to his majesty; to appeal to his royal grace and mercy. What can I say in four words?"

Reb Shmuel thought for a moment: "I have no choice. I must see the king even to say four words to him."

"Then let's go," the minister said, and he led Reb Shmuel to the king.

The massive golden doors of the royal chamber opened wide, and both were admitted. They bowed their heads respectfully.

"So this is the Jew?" the king said with a mocking smile on his face. "Well, then, speak your four words; not a sound more!"

Reb Shmuel stepped forward with dignity, and said:

"Vayomer haShem el haSatan." Then he bowed again, stepped back, and waited to be dismissed.

"Wait, what is it you said?" the king asked.

Reb Shmuel pointed to his mouth, to indicate that his lips were sealed by the king's order.

"Never mind that," the king said impatiently. "I withdraw the condition. You may speak freely."

"The four words, your majesty, are from our Holy Book, the Bible. They are from the seventh verse of the first chapter of the Book of Iyov (Job). The meaning of these words is that when it pleases G-d, the Supreme King of Kings, He descends from His Holy Throne and speaks even to the lowliest of all creatures, to Satan. More than once did G-d speak to Satan, as that holy book tells us, and He gave Satan the opportunity to speak to Him to his heart's content. I pray that the illustrious king of Bohemia will be gracious enough to permit a poor, unfortunate and persecuted Jew, who is nevertheless one of his most loyal subjects, to speak to his majesty and pour out his heart before him..."

For a moment the king remained silent. His eyes blazed with anger at the impudence of the Jew, but the courage with which Reb Shmuel spoke his words, and the way in which he caused the king to withdraw his condition won the king's admiration. The anger disappeared from his eyes and in a somewhat softer voice he said to Reb Shmuel:

"Very well, I shall listen to you."

Reb Shmuel spoke feelingly, but firmly. He told the king that his Jewish subjects are loyal to him and pray for his health and the welfare of the country. He reminded the king of the great contribution the
Jews have made to the development of the commerce and trade of the city of Prague, and of the high taxes they were paying to the royal treasury. But now the community was completely impoverished, especially after the tragedy of two years previously. He pleaded for the king's mercy to spare the unfortunate Jewish community of Prague, to enable them to improve their economic position under the king's protection, so that they could continue to be useful citizens of the king and the country.

King Wencelaus listened attentively, and Reb Shmuel's words made a deep impression on him.

"Go back and tell your people that the king has withdrawn the tax, and, moreover, frees them from taxes for the next two years. However, I have yet to square a personal account with you. You deserve both a punishment and a reward: a punishment for your impudence in 'telling off' the king; a reward for your courage and wisdom. As a reward, I appoint you my Kammer-Jude: You shall be privileged to appear in my palace at any time; I might even ask your advice sometimes. But what shall be your punishment? Tell me, what's your name?

"Shmuel."

"From now on you shall be known as 'Shmuel Satan,'" the king said with a gleam in his eyes. "Yes, this shall be your official title - Sir Shmuel Satan - a hereditary title for you and your children," and the king laughed merrily.

And that, my friends, remained Rabbi Shmuel’s name, and Rabbi Shmuel’s story.

What is your Jewish name? What is your story?

Are you named after a grandparent; what’s their story? Do you have a biblical name; what do you like most about that biblical figure? Can you find hints of your soul/psyche in your Jewish name?

If you don’t have one speak to me after dinner, and we can find your befitting Jewish name. We can all find ways to use our Jewish name more often, and make our story more Jewish. A story of Exodus. A story of redemption.