

Birth Ceremonies and Life Beginnings: What's in a Name?

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For Jews, as it turns out, an enormous amount.

The first ceremonial act in the life of a child is the receiving of a name, a name chosen by her or his parents. Jews pay a great deal of attention to names, as we can see from our earliest sources. In the previous section we indicated the importance of family in Judaism by making reference to the fact that the first Jewish stories in the Tanach are family stories, and that the first things that we hear about the Jewish People concern families. We can see a similar phenomenon relating to the importance of names.

The first act described in the sacred texts is G-d's act of Creation of the world. There are many versions of the world's Creation in different mythological and religious cultures. It is clearly the archetypal creative act and it is described in different ways in different traditions. The Jewish tradition, however, appears to be unique in connecting the act of Creation to the power of words and names.

It has been observed that in the Jewish description of the creative process, the various acts of Creation are preceded by the word *and He said*. Creation proceeds out of words, or pronunciations. According to the tradition at the beginning, there is only G-d. There is no need to postulate a G-d who speaks before creating; G-d could just create, but the word is an essential part of the creative process. More than that: in several instances in the process described in the first chapter of Bereishit, after the creative act of a specific day has been completed, we are told that G-d assigns names to the things He created.

G-d called the light day and the darkness He called night
G-d called the expanse Heaven
G-d called the dry ground Earth and the gathering of the waters he called Seas.
Bereishit 1: 5,8,10.

In addition, one of the primary tasks of the man whom G-d creates in His own image is to assign names to the animals and living creatures that have been created.

Now the Lord G-d had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would call them and whatever the man called each living creature that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field.
Bereishit 2: 19-21.

There is something unfinished in the process of Creation without the use of names to fix the identity of each of the things created.

There is considered to be something inherent in the object that, in some way, corresponds to the name that it is given: it is a part of the creative process, not an afterthought. It is hardly surprising that in a culture that opens its sacred texts in this way, enormous power has been connected to the idea of language and naming. It is as if we say to each other on

the cultural level: if G-d's first act was to create out of words and to make sure that the right name was supplied to all objects, and if one of Adam's first acts was to name the animals and birds, then we, too, have to take the act extremely seriously.

In more general terms, we should mention that the Jewish tradition has developed a key belief in the enormous power of words. The Jewish tradition is among other things, a textual tradition, one that places enormous importance on the written and the spoken word. Words and names are of primary importance: when we join in that tradition of supplying names to the children whom we have created (according to tradition, with G-d as a silent partner), we are told to take it seriously. When we supply names to our children, we are participating in a ritual act begun by G-d at the beginning of time and continued by the first human being. We are not to take our responsibility lightly.