

Who Am I?

Alfred J. Kolatch

An outstanding Israeli singer – Dudu Fisher – appeared for a time in the Broadway musical *Les Miserables*. His voice is enchanting, elevating, melodious and electrifying. His cassette, מעבר לקשת – “Over the Rainbow” includes selections from *Porgy and Bess*, *West Side Story*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats* . . . all in Hebrew.

At about the third or fourth musical number you all of a sudden hear the enchanting *Kol Nidre*. Soon you begin to detect, in the background, strains from *Les Miserables* – Victor Hugo’s search to discover his inner essence. As Fisher reaches the crescendo מיום כפורים זה (From this *Yom Kippurim* day) he segues into Jean Valjean’s piercing question “Who am I” (מי אני)?

Who am I?
Can I conceal myself forevermore?
Pretend I’m not the man I was before?
And must my name until I die,
Be no more than an alibi.
Must I lie?
How can I ever face my fellowmen?
How can I ever face myself again?
My soul belongs to God I know.
I made that bargain long ago.
He gave me hope when hope was gone,
He gave me strength to journey on.
Who am I?

Listening to the blend of the two powerful pieces – *Kol Nidre* and *Les Miserables* is thrilling. Both pieces force us to reflect: מי אני – Who am I?

This is indeed the theme of *Yom Kippur* – to penetrate our inner beings and to go very deep into our most hidden selves and ask the foreboding question: Who am I?

To reveal who we are is not an easy task. The first thing you think of when someone asks “who are you” is to give your name. So you identify yourself by saying I am “Chayim Yankel,” or “I am Sarah Leah.”

In fact a boy is given a Hebrew name at his *brit* – his circumcision – and a girl is given a Hebrew name at a service when the Torah is read and the parents receive an *aliyah*. They are called to recite the blessings over the Torah.

This Hebrew name is generally needed:

When one becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah;
Whenever one receives an *aliyah*;
When one gets married the Hebrew name is inscribed
in the *k’tubah* – the marriage certificate;

When one dies – the Hebrew name is incorporated into the
מלא רחמים ל א-ל prayer for the soul of the deceased;
and finally it is generally engraved upon one's tombstone.

From the beginning of time a person's name was his identity. In biblical days and to the time that the early American settlers, who were steeped in the Bible, used biblical names: Abraham, Zechariah, Jonah, Daniel, Miriam, Sarah, Ruth Esther . . .

This trend seemed to change at the end of the last century, both for the Jews and non-Jews who emigrated to this country. As for our Jewish grandparents and parents, who came here, were eager to acculturate, to assimilate, להיות תככל הגויים – to be like all the other people.

A majority of Jews who came to this country, consciously or sub-consciously, adopted the teaching of the Hebrew writer A.D. Gordon, who penned his works during the Period of Enlightenment in Europe. He wrote: יהיה יהודי בביתך ואדם בצאתך – be a Jew in your home and “like the rest of the population” when you go out. Thus they gradually shed their European garments, shaved off their beards and *payot*, shed their Jewish names and noses. As the poet Louis Untermeyer humorously said: “they cut off their noses to spite their race.”

Whereas, all Jewish children are given Hebrew names, the names used daily are not their Hebrew names. Even if the Hebrew or Yiddish nickname were used in the home, we only wanted to be known by our English name in public.

A favorite anecdote tells of a woman whom a rabbi visited in the hospital shortly after she gave birth to a son. She was having trouble choosing a name for him. She wanted to name him after a grandfather, but couldn't find it in her heart to name a modern child “Yitzchak.” “That's no problem” the rabbi said: “Yitzchak” is “Isaac,” call him “Isaac.”

No, she didn't like the name Isaac either. “Well, Isaac could be Ike or Ira or even Irving,” said the rabbi. “Those names are too Jewish” she replied. Exasperated, the rabbi said: “Yitzchak is too Jewish? Then call him Hitchcock.” And that is what she called him.

Jews were not the only ones caught up with the idea of being like others. These words are self explanatory.

In Aberdeen that Bonny town
A house was full of joy,
As Macpherson told his happy wife,
How grand: it is a boy.
Aye that it is, his wife agreed,
What shall we call the lad?
A good Scot's name will do him proud,
Maybe Agnus like his dad.
Nay lass, Macpherson then replied,
A better name I see,
I have the lad's name all picked out,
We'll call him Yehudi.
Stop your jesting mon, said his wife,

Of a Yehudi Macpherson pray
What Scot has ever heard?
Well, I don't know, her husband said,
So silly it is not,
For my friend, Epstein, in New York,
Has named his first son "Scott."

I don't know whether it is because of the revival of the Hebrew language, or the creation of the State of Israel, or the world's increasing interest in the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible), Hebrew names are in again.

You should know that it has always been the practice for Jews to bestow upon their children any name they wished. However, as surprising as it may seem, it is an ancient and hallowed tradition among the Sephardim (Jews whose ancestry emanated from Spain) to name a child after a living relative or an outstanding living personality, as a symbol of love, admiration and adoration. To the contrary, *Ashkenazim* (East European Jews) named children after departed relatives in order to perpetuate the memory of the deceased.

In either case the intent was for the person after whom the child was named – living or deceased – was to be a role model for their youngster to emulate the ideals, values and heritage of the person after whom they were named. Our ancestors' prayer for their children was **הוּא כְּשִׁמּוֹ כֵן הוּא** may the child be as his or her namesake in personality and deed. The name was an indication of **יְרוֹס** indicating one was of good stock, fine pedigree, and proud lineage . . .

Now, you might be right if you said that this may have been true in the *shtetl*, but it no longer holds true. Today, we have to establish our own identity. On *Yom Kippur* we are asked to look within – not only to respond to who you are by your name, but what and where you are.

God calls Adam in the Garden of Eden and asks **אִיכָּה אַדָּם** – “Adam where are you?” Didn't God know? Of course, but God wanted to know if Adam knew where he was. Not where you were, but where are you, now. Today more than ever before in human history our actions speak of who we are.

Tonight, I do not speak of global issues - war and peace, man's inhumanity to man, world poverty and hunger . . . , but issues for which we alone have total responsibility and we cannot shift that responsibility onto anyone else.

I speak to those who took marriage vows – to love, honor and respect. Was it a formula, a momentary declaration? Did you say the words, and participate in a ritual to satisfy your parents, perhaps the rabbi? You took those vows under the *chuppah* (symbol of the home). Is your home warm and inviting, spreading love and understanding? The vow you took was according to the faith of Israel. Tell me, is there a Yiddish *tam* in your home – Jewish flavor – radiating from its walls? Is there concern for each others' feelings, space and freedom? Do you get the impression that the children seem to sense a double standard emanating from the household – one you live by and one that you expect your children to adhere to?

And you young people – are you giving your parents a fair shake? Your parents are trying their hardest to save for your higher education, and in a rising economy to make ends meet.

WHAT, they seem to be meddling in your life? But what they really want is what they think is best for you. Maybe they lack finesse. Maybe they do not have the patience you rightfully expect. Perhaps rapping about it with them as you do with your peers would be a better way to cope. Don't alienate or add to the myriad of needed resolution that life demands.

One dad speaking to another dad said: "I am not a model father. All I'm trying to do is to behave so that when people tell my son that he reminds them of me, he'll stick out his chest and not his tongue."

And what about us who have reached the age of maturity – what are you doing with your life? Are you using your time wisely, intellectually, in service to others? Or are you making demands of your children that take them from their families – something you resented when you were their age? Do you feel unwanted, not needed, that you are in the way, feel no fulfillment in the day to day hours, just sitting and waiting for the day to end and life to take its toll?

Come on, Rabbi, you will rationalize: with all the problems and vicissitudes in the world, my personal life is so insignificant. In the long run does it really matter who I am.

Yom Kippur comes along and says that this is not so. We can change, we must change.

We can become loving parents. You young men and women have eager minds and can assure the promise of tomorrow. We have family and friends with whom to share our joys and sorrows, and grandparents who shower us and our children with love and affection. *Yom Kippur* wants you to feel that you are important to the tapestry of life. This "Holy of Holy" days calls upon you to live your life as if everything depended on you.

The great conductor, Sir Michael Costa, was leading a rehearsal, with a vast array of musicians and hundreds of voices. As the mighty chorus rang out with the thunder of the organ, the roll of the drums, the horns ringing and the cymbals clashing, the piccolo player stopped playing. Sitting in the corner of the orchestra, he said to himself: "In all this din it matters not what I do." Suddenly the great conductor stopped, flung up his hands and all was still. He then cried out aloud: "where is the piccolo?" All was spoiled because the piccolo failed to take its part.

God, the orchestra leader of the universe, pleads with us on *Yom Kippur* to answer who you are.

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During the next 24 hours I pray that we may each find a glimmer of who we are, and when the great shofar will be sounded tomorrow night we will feel renewed and prepared to face the new year with God's blessing and our firm determination to make it a **שנה טובה** very good year.