

Beyond Twelve Gates by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason *Parshas Beshalach January 31, 2015*

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates ~

Is your last name Miracle, Tumbler or Villan? If so, you're a dying breed. Just be happy you're not a Bread or Spinster, otherwise you'd be presumed extinct! Unusual names have lingered for centuries, but like the dodo bird, passenger pigeon and Jamaican giant galliwasp, surnames can also disappear. These names are presumed extinct since 2011: Bread, MacCaa, Spinster, Pussett, Puscat, Pussmaid, Bythesea and Bytheseashore. Some last names with less than 20 bearers are: Fernsby, Villan, Miracle, Relish, Birdwhistle and Tumbler. Why are so many names becoming extinct? Names linked to uncommon professions or geographic places are dying out slowly, unlike the more popular Smith and Baker.

Is there such a thing as a 'Jewish surname'? Perhaps. But contrary to popular belief, you cannot tell whether people are Jewish from their surnames. According to popular Jewish genealogy site [Avotaynu](#), the third most common surname among Jews in the United States is Miller, which is also one of the most common names among non-Jews. Artist Camille Pissarro, former New York City mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia, actor Hank Azaria and pop singer Paula Abdul, are or were Jewish -- but their names don't sound Jewish to most Americans. Some traditional Jewish names have at times been considered difficult by their bearers. Not only may they be hard to spell and pronounce (think 'Katzenellenbogen'), they've occasionally exposed Jews to prejudice and anti-Semitism. And then there are Jewish celebrities who let go of names that gave away their religion and ethnicity. Robert Zimmerman, Bernard Schwartz, Lucille Le Sueur -- better known as Bob Dylan, Tony Curtis and Joan Crawford, respectively.

The great 17th century rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer became known to history as the *Ba'al Shem Tov* -- the 'Master of the Good Name.' While we have little to say about our given names, the name earned through acquiring a stellar reputation trumps other religious positions and accolades. The verse in *Koheles* (7:1) teaches "*tov shem meshemen tov*" -- a good name trumps even the inaugural oils of the *kohen* or king. What's in a name? Your name is the one you create for yourself.

Parshas Beshalach Exodus 13:17 -- 17:16

As the Jewish people leave the land of Egypt, Pharaoh's heart is once again hardened. The Egyptian army pursues the former slaves, trapping them on the shores of the Red Sea. Moses raises his hand over the sea, miraculously parting the waters and allowing the Jewish people to pass through safely. Pursued by the Egyptians into the sea, Moses once again raises his hand and the waters come crashing down upon Pharaoh's army. Awed by this indisputable miracle, Moses leads the Jewish people in the Shir Shel Yam, a song of praise to G-d acknowledging a debt of gratitude for their remarkable salvation. After traveling from the Red Sea, and following the miraculous sweetening of the bitter waters at Marah, the Jewish people complain to Moses and Aaron that they have no food to eat. G-d responds by providing a great test of faith; a daily ration of manna that would fall from the sky for forty years every morning, except for Shabbos. Some suggest that the manna was the greatest miracle the Jewish people ever experienced. A constant water source is also given when G-d commands Moses to strike a rock, miraculously causing water to flow from it. The portion concludes with the nation of Amalek's unprovoked sneak attack and the Jewish people's victory.

Rabbinic Ruminations

Thanks to the wonders of modern technology, you can track more health metrics than you can imagine: Your steps, your sleep, the pints (or quarts) of ice cream you eat, the number of exercise classes you miss because of that ice cream. But why stop at evaluating yourself when you could measure, chart and optimize your relationships with the people around you, too? The new app [pplkpr](#) offers a provocative glimpse of what this future might look like: It helps optimize your social life, automatically sending messages and using data to determine who's worth spending time with.

Developed by two artists, the pplkpr site suggests you can "see how your friends stack up: who makes

you most excited, anxious, calm, or bored." Pplkpr lets you 'quantify the value' of your relationships based on measurable data. A heart rate wrist band measures the subtle changes in your heart rate, alerting you to spikes in stress or excitement. This biometric data is correlated with information you manually input about the people you're hanging out with. Based on patterns, algorithms will suggest whether you should be spending more time with a certain person or if you should cut him out altogether. One pplkpr user, Micha, said, "pplkpr helped me get a boyfriend." Another user, Jake, said, "it gave me the excuse to cut toxic friends out of my life."

The use of a computer to inform our personal lives is something already accepted. Dating sites, for example, use algorithms to discern who we might be attracted to. But it may not be outlandish to consider a societal reality where people will look to computers to tell them how they feel -- and in the process, nullify the thing that makes us human; introspection, self-awareness, and a lifetime spent trying to master G-d's gift of free will. Where in the Torah are we told that we have free will? *"I've put before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life so you and your offspring would live."* (Deuteronomy 30:15) *Uvkhearta vakhayim (Choose life!)* These are as powerful and important as any words in the Torah.

Quote of the Week

If G-d had wanted to be a big secret, He would not have created babbling brooks and whispering pines.
-- **Robert Brault**, *Author and Free-Lance Writer*

Joke of the Week

A teenager got a job in a supermarket, and one day a man came in and wanted to buy half a grapefruit.

"I don't think we can sell half a grapefruit," said the kid, "but I'll ask my boss."
He walked over to the boss and said, "Some idiot wants to buy half a grapefruit," then noticed that the man had followed him over and heard the comment.

"And this fine gentleman," he added, "would like to buy the other half."