Shabbat Vaera
January 8, 2016
Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey
Rabbi Dr. Andy Dubin

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By another name would smell as sweet."

-- Romeo and Juliette, Act II, scene ii

There you have it. The quintessential rallying cry to look beyond the superficial. Shakespeare's admonition never to judge a book by its cover.

It makes sense, of course. Who among us has never counseled a teased child to ignore the name-calling? Who among us has never said that we musn't allow another person to define who we are, because no matter what he or she says, no matter what he or she calls us, we are who we are? The truth is the truth. Our essence is our own, and no one can change that – especially by calling us names.

True, perhaps, but really, in the end, not sufficient. Because in my experience, names ***do*** matter. Names wield enormous power. I'd like to think that the core of who I am is constant – and probably it is – but make no doubt about it. The Rabbi Dubin who stands before you this evening is not the same person as the Mr. Dubin who used to administer disciplinary responses as Dean of Students, or the Coach Dubin who used to push kids on the athletic field and track and in the pool. Offering a greeting to "Father" is not the same as saying hi to "Pops." While the essence of the ***man***does not change with one name or the other, the essence of the ***relationship*** most certainly does.

The same, we learn in this week's paresha, can be said for God.

> *God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name, Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey (Adonai)."*
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> *-- Exodus 6:2-3*

Does this mean the essence of God changes from one moment to the other? I don't think so. And neither does the prophet Malachi, who writes in the voice of God, "I am the Lord – I have not changed." (Malachi 3:6) But something ***has*** changed. Otherwise, why would the Bible point out that while God goes by one name now, God went by a different name earlier in the story?

Here's how I look at it. Just as the essence of who I am remains constant when I am Rabbi Dubin to you, Mr. Dubin to students in trouble, Coach Dubin to athletes in training, Sweetheart to my mother of blessed memory, or Abba to Shira, Liron, Noa, and Ari, neither does the essence of God change depending on what name we choose to use. What ***does*** change is the particular aspect of God's essence with which we are engaging at that specific point in time.

In the name *Shaddai*, we find the word "*dai*" (as in "*Dai Daienu*") – "Enough!" This is not lost on the rabbis of our Tradition, who link the name *El Shaddai* to God's Creative force. How did God complete the creation of the world? By shouting, "*Dai*!", "Enough!" when the time was right.

Adonai, on the other hand, is more all-encompassing. *Adonai* is more personal and complete. *Adonai*, which is built on the root for "To Be" might loosely be translated as "Existence." In last week's paresha, at the Burning Bush, God identifies Godself as "I AM WHAT I AM." Not so different. The name, *Adonai*, at the core, signifies God's overall and all-encompassing existence. That's big.

According to the *Zohar* (Chelek B 22b), when God appears to Moses now as *Adonai*, this marks an elevationin relationship as compared to when God appeared to the Forefathers as *El Shaddai*.

But just as our names change depending on the circumstances, just as our names change depending on the relationships in which we are engaged at the moment, so too are there

innumerable names for God, depending on which aspect of the relationship is being emphasized at that point in time. Each of us has a different name for God, because each of us has a unique relationship with God. And I think that's a good thing, because I stand with Martin Buber who wrote that the ultimate experience of God is felt only when we are in true relationship. The relationships we build in community ultimately serve the purpose of bringing us into relationship with God.

But how? How do we weave together our disparate strands of humanity to create the strength of a community in genuine relationship with itself? How do we create a reality in which none of us is lonely, each of us is needed, and everyone feels love? We do this by seeking true relationship with each other, which is a form of mirroring the Divine, because more than anything else, our Rabbis teach, God created humanity in order to be in relationship with us.

God has more names than we can imagine. When we dare to forgive, we engage with our God by the name *Eloha Selichot*. When we speak the truth, we engage with *El Emet*. When we provide healing it is *AdonaiRapha* with whim we engage. When we seek peace, it is *AdonaiShalom*. Those who stand for justice are in relationship with *AdonaiTzidkeinu*, and those who maintain faith in others are with *Ha'El HaNe'eman*. It is with *Adonai Ra'ah* that we speak when providing loving guidance, *El Ha'Gibbur* when we protect the weak, and *AdonaiShammah* when we "simply" offer our presence.

Knowing that God goes by so many names is important, because it helps us recognize that there are at least as many paths to God as there are names for God. I say "at least as many paths" because in reality, there are really so many more! Just as two people might both call God by the name *Go-el* ("Redeemer"), this does not mean they understand God in the same way. Perhaps one worships a God who redeems the world through acts of loving kindness, while the other worships a God who redeemed her from a specific life-threatening challenge. Perhaps one worships a God who redeems the Nation of Israel on a daily basis, while the other worships a God who redeems the addict from a life of pain. Indeed, the same name brings us into a multiplicity of relationships.

Sometimes the differences are even more stark. For instance, while one of us may look to *Ha-Rachaman*, "The Merciful One" to show compassion on the innocent victim of a crime by

convicting the criminal in a court of law, another of us may look to *Ha-Rachaman* to show compassion on the tortured individual who sees no alternative to a life of crime by giving him or her another chance. One name for God; two understandings in diametric opposition.

Perhaps no one knows the possible implications of having two diametrically opposed meanings of the same name as Dennis Hanno, the president of Wheaton College in Massachusetts, who, after a controversy over religious and academic freedom at the similiraly named Wheaton College in Illinois went viral, found his schoolbesieged by anonslaught of vitriol.

As reported in the Washington Post:

> *A tenured political science professor at the other Wheaton posted on Facebook that she would wear a hijab during Advent in support of Muslims. "I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book," Larycia Hawkins wrote on Facebook, "… we worship the same God." Her remarks outraged some, and the college's move to fire her angered others.*
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> *While the debate raged nationwide, employees at the college in Massachusetts found themselves unexpectedly in the line of fire. And the experience left Hanno worried about a larger problem in our society.*
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> *He argues that in a culture that stops children from bullying — yet often ignores hostile behavior by adults — the need to counter aggression and ensure fair and open and civil debate belongs to us all.*
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> RECKLESS INCIVILITY: THE TALK THAT AILS US , by Dennis M. Hanno
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> *I serve as the president of Wheaton College in Norton, Mass. My college shares a name with another college in Illinois. Although we are completely unaffiliated, and there is a rather significant cultural difference, people still confuse us from time to time.*
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> *My Wheaton is a secular liberal-arts college; the other Wheaton is an evangelical Christian school. Though both schools have been around for more than 100 years, we are very different institutions, separated by half a continent but connected by a name and occasionally by careless Googling.*
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> *Under most circumstances, the cases of mistaken identity that arise between the two Wheaton Colleges are of interest and concern only to us and to the people who confuse us. However, a current controversy involving the Illinois college has*

forced me and others here at the Wheaton in Massachusetts to confront a much bigger problem that threatens our nation's democratic foundation.

The problem is reckless incivility. That's the polite way to describe it, though politeness is not a characteristic of this growing culture of harassment and rage. My encounter with this toxic environment stems from the recent news coverage surrounding the decision by Wheaton in Illinois to begin termination proceedings against a tenured professor who shared her opinion that Christians and Muslims worship the same god. It's a controversial situation that puts religious and academic freedom into conflict, not to mention raising questions about the extent of our rights regarding freedom of speech in the United States.

Reasonable people can hold different opinions on which rights should hold sway in such a situation. They can even express those disagreements, explaining their position and their values. This type of discourse has long been recognized as essential to negotiating the conflicts that naturally arise in a diverse, democratic society. Unfortunately, too many people who participate in these "discussions" are neither reasonable nor respectful of others.

This awful truth became clear to many of us on our campus within hours — perhaps even minutes — after the coverage of the controversy on the other similarly named college, located 1,000 miles away from our own, made the news. Calls, emails and angry threats poured in. The fact that they were misdirected (hateful incivility aimed at the wrong college) did little to reduce their sting.

What should we conclude from the person who expressed his desire that the professor — the one at the other college on whom the news story focused — be raped, sold into slavery and stoned to death?

Or the individual who called various offices on our Wheaton campus to tell several administrators that their personal contact information would be posted online with a call for others to bombard them with messages decrying the college's actions?

And the dozens of hateful messages that we received at Wheaton College in Massachusetts is probably just a tiny fraction of those that the professor, the president of the Illinois college and his colleagues received.

Forget for a moment that the move to fire a faculty member for sharing a belief in the commonality among people of different faiths is not something that Wheaton in Massachusetts did, nor is it something that we would do. The confusion between "which Wheaton is which" is a problem for those of us who work at our two very different colleges to address. But the larger issue of extreme incivility is something we all own and is a growing problem in our nation that we all have some responsibility for addressing.

It is not only possible to express disagreement on a matter of principle without resorting to personal attacks and harassment, it should be expected.

Social media, the online comment culture, the popularity of anonymous venting and a growing host of interactive communication options can all be blamed. Although communication technology does make it easier for people to target — or in this case to misdirect — their rage in 2016, it is not the technology that is the problem.

The free-floating rage that is so prevalent on the Internet and social media is not limited to cyberspace. Consider the regular reports of road rage that lead to violence. Or the years-long deadlock of partisan bickering in Washington — not to mention what passes for conversation on talk radio. This behavior is calculated to silence dissent, to obliterate those with whom we hold an opposing opinion, and it merely drives people apart.

In our nation's public K-through-12 schools, educators offer programs for students to combat the bullying that marginalizes those who are different in some way. Yet we continue to tolerate and sometimes cheer this type of behavior as adults. It's time to demand better from each other.

It is up to each of us to revive and advance the once-respected notion that it is unacceptable for members of a civil society to rage with unbridled hostility against others, even if they are expressing viewpoints with which we strongly disagree.

Just because we use the same Name for God, that does not mean we have the same understanding of who God is – or isn't. Sometimes we find a power for good inunanimity. Other times we experience a power that leads to evil. God has many names for a reason. It is dangerous to insist on just one, because when we do, we sow the seeds for intolerance and hatred. In this political season, I caution our national candidates – as well as our local law-makers – against the hubris of confusing faith for certainty. Faith breeds questions. And questions breed growth. Once we know we have the correct answer, we cease to look for even better ways. Not only that, we assume the right to tell other people that we are right and they are wrong. I believe God is bigger than that.

I believe that God seeks to be in relationship with us, and I believe the best relationships are those in which we have the safety of being able to accept our vulnerabilities. I believe God encourages our questions. I believe God's will is that we never stop learning, never stop growing, never stop growing. I believe that God cares about entering into genuine relationship

with us. And to do that, I believe that God is open to responding to whatever Name makes sense to us at the moment.

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by another name might well smell as sweet, but even when two people see the same rose and call it by the same name, chances are their relationships with that rose are not the same.

Rather than insisting that all people have the same name for God, or the same understandings of different names for God, let's celebrate ambiguity and complication. That, after all, seems to me a much more likely path to lead to a world into a state of peace and harmony and sacred civil relationship. And that, I believe, is what God wishes for us more than anything else.