

# A struggle between our names and our natures

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet laments that because she and Romeo are in opposing houses – the Capulets were rivals to the Montagues – they are artificially kept apart. However, she says, “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet”, inferring that the name is irrelevant since it is her inner core that really matters.

Juliet is of course correct, but nevertheless names are important in Judaism. In fact, the first action of Man was to name the animals. In Hebrew more so than English, words have great meaning. Jonah is reflective of peace (a dove, to be precise) while David might be a man of action. Ori is my light, while Matan is a gift.

Parshat Va'era begins with God telling Moses that “I am Hashem. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac



and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but with My Name I did not make Myself known to them.”

He goes on to say that while previously He had been a God of a covenant – an agreement – now He was becoming a God of redemption. In the first reading of the parsha, he hammers home this changed behaviour that goes with his changed name: “I am Hashem, and I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you ... I shall redeem you ... I shall take you ... I shall bring you.” The list of acts of redemptions ends with the simple statement: “I am Hashem.”

Nowadays, while we think very

carefully about the names of our children – who doesn't compile a list? The names that make the shortlist are as emotive as the names that do not. We all know to avoid the name of the child we knew at school as children who used to hurl the furniture around the room.

But as Juliet implores of us, names are not our nature, and we can overcome them.

Which brings us to Pharaoh in this parsha. In the story of Joseph, Pharaoh is a positive force, while in the story of the Exodus, Pharaoh is a mass murderer. In the short jump from the books of Bereshit to Shemot, our concept of what the name Pharaoh refers to changes dramatically, and the negativity sticks. But is it all Pharaoh's fault?

We all remember the story

of Moses going to Pharaoh demanding that he “let my people go”, and with each refusal a plague is unleashed. Rashi notes that for the first five plagues, Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but for the final plagues, Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart. It is as though Pharaoh needed help to be evil.

Yet holding Pharaoh to account for his crimes, when he was not in full control of his own choices, appears to be a bit of a conundrum. His final act, sending the army to the Israelites after they had left Egypt though, needed no hardening of his heart by an external force. In the children's version of the story, this action was a change of mind since he simply wanted to bring his slaves back. In reality, this was not a mission of returning the slaves, but in fact an expedition of annihilation; with

the Egyptian army in pursuit, the slaves were not coming back.

So Pharaoh did revert to type and fulfilled the negativity of his name.

So is there a way of bridging Juliet's determination to rise above the meaning of her name and fulfil Virgil's exhortation that “amor vincit omnia”, or “love conquers all”? Absolutely. Our names are important, and our nature is a powerful force. But we are able to rise above the natural order and make choices that change ourselves, our families and our communities. And the Torah, while emphasising the importance of names, is packed with stories of those who overcome their natural but ill-informed instincts.