

Torah Musing Isaiah 56:5

A Memorial and a Name

ונתתי להם בביתי ובחומתי יד ושם טוב מבנים ומבנות שם עולם אתן־לו אשר לא יכרת
To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial and a name better than that of sons
and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:5)

Rabbi Malchah

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Isaiah chapters 40-66 is concerned with the return to Israel after the Babylonian captivity. Some of exiled Israelites were reluctant to return because they had obtained a level of prosperity and comfort in Babylon but Isaiah encourages them to return by invoking that everyone from the wealthy to the destitute and displaced had a place in the newly repatriated land. He speaks special words of comforts to eunuchs. In ancient Israel, one attained immortality through the continuance of their line through descendants. Eunuchs will never have descendants and thus their *'name'* and their future would be permanently erased from posterity upon their death. In Isaiah 56:5, however, God speaks some very startling and comforting words. He promises the eunuchs that within His temple and in His walls, He would provide them with a memorial and a name that would be far superior to having children. In the economy of God no one, not the eunuch or the marginalized would be forgotten. How can we follow His example and provide power and a fitting memorial to those whose lives have been prematurely uprooted or perhaps even forgotten?

The violent history of humankind has repeatedly demonstrated that too many have been cut down long before they should have been. This less than stellar state of affairs has proved to be true even from the advent of human history. Cain murdered Abel, thus preventing Abel from living out the full measure of his days. There are thousands of victims of the African slave trade who were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like trash, whipped to death or torn apart by dogs for having the audacity to want to be free. Some of these people never lived to have children or grandchildren partake of their love and wisdom, nor could they fully contribute to the advancement and betterment of civilization.

Did the genocide in the Congo, the ravaging of the Igbo people and the cutting down of the innocents of the Soweto uprisings prevented humanity from fully exploring the outer limits of the universe or stopped us from peering into our future and delving into time travel? Has society exterminated the one who would write a novel that would have far reaching effects on the life and livelihood of many? Could Travon Martin, Joyce Buthelezi, Steven Biko, Nat Turner, Emmett Till or Jordan Davis have reached a level of wisdom or insight in their lives to fathom a pragmatic method to equitably distribute the world's resources or even prevent the tragic outcomes of unbridled prejudice? Perhaps within these African desolate ranks was the "Prince of Peace," or a person who would deliver a

prophetic word that could have changed the course of history. All of their lives were shortened because of unjust acts. Many of the slaughtered we will never know by name but how do we provide power, a future and posterity for the nameless or those who, as James Baldwin has said, have “no name in the street?”¹

In our passage (Isaiah 56:5), the word יָד “yad” base meaning is “hand” The same word may also figuratively convey memorial and power. None of us can bring the dead back to life but perhaps we can follow Isaiah’s suggestion and provide the untimely fallen with power, posterity and a lasting legacy. How can we do this? We imbue them with an inheritance among our people and power by using our hands (יָד power) in the struggle for equality, teaching others about their struggles, raising our children to be God revering individuals, diligently teaching our children our true history, and by rallying against the forces that keep others in intellectual and physical bondage. We give *the nameless* power and build their memorials by fiercely rising up against intolerance, injustice and immorality wherever and whenever they may present themselves. They will not have died in vain if we, the living, are passionate advocates of justice and fervently practice mercy.

Seeking social justice and being merciful are not unattainable, lofty goals; but something that all of us have within our power and aptitude. Complacency allows demagogues to rise to power and allowed the slave trade to reach its barbaric heights. Too much talk and not enough action always allows people who are sick with power and replete with hate, to prevail. Unreasonable apathy permits ghettos to exist, poverty to kill, ignorance to reign and the forces of evil to be victorious. Their lives will have everlasting meaning and power if we follow the example of Isaiah 56:5 and provide it for them.

Yes, James Baldwin was correct and we must not allow our unjustly fallen to have “no name in the street.” We can dedicate and devote our lives to quenching evil and supporting the forces of social justice. We can leave behind a trail of love, a life of practicing mercy, an example of a moral and upright life (not a perfect life) and deeds of courage. We are compelled to provide all whose futures were cut short by evil atrocities, everlasting power and a

Memorial and a Name

וּוּנַתִּי לָהֶם בְּבֵיתִי וּבְחוֹמֹתַי יָד וְשֵׁם

To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial and a name

שבת שלום מביתנו לביתך

Shabbat Shalom From Our House to Your House

Rabbi Malchah

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Endnotes

¹ Baldwin, James “No Name in the Street.” The Price of the Ticket: Collected non-fiction 1948-1985. Boston: Beacon Press, 2021, pages 449-558.

“No name in the street” is taken Job 18:17

זְכָרוֹ אֲבָד מִנִּי-אָרֶץ וְלֹא-יֵשֶׁם לּוֹ עַל-פְּנֵי-הַחוּץ

“His remembrance shall perish from the earth, and he shall have no name in the street.”