

The Power to Name

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As symbolic exemplars of the divine, rabbis need to know how to use their symbolic exemplarhood as a source of their rabbinic power. Used competently and with integrity, it is the primary source of rabbinic power. One of the ways in which rabbis use their symbolic exemplarhood is in their ability to name.

A name is a word or words by which an entity is designated and distinguished from others. Since naming can create new realities, rabbis need to believe that when they say, for example, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," they create a new status. Rabbis are vested with the power to name a baby; to change something fundamental in a convert; to bar mitzvah a thirteen-year old, to marry two adults. In the act of naming, rabbis are constantly creating new statuses and identities in the life cycle of individuals and vesting them with new obligations, expectations, and hopefully new ways of perceiving themselves.

If rabbis take this role seriously, they will not just "rattle off" eulogies, invocations, benedictions and personal encounters. All of the above should be seen as opportunities to "name" and create new realities.

While rabbis are symbolic exemplars of the divine, they are also subject to all that is human, including the *yetzer hara* (inclination to evil). Rabbis should accept these personal contradictions, and yet are encouraged to have a sense of awe toward the naming experience. Internally, the rabbi about to name should say,

"I am about to create something new that did not exist in the world before. This is serious business. I need intention, ability and confidence. This child will go through life with that name, this couple will now be different, this convert will be a part of a new people, and new expectations will be built around the new reality I am about to create with my act of naming."