

In 1968, the Hebrew poet Zelda Schneerson Mishkovsky, who most often goes by her first name alone, and who was a niece of the Lubovitcher rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, published a poem that quickly became a classic of modern Hebrew literature. L'chol eish yesh shem, Everyone has a name, is a wise and warm account of the way that our personal identities take shape, as human beings, as Jews, as family members. We, the members of Temple Shir Shalom, will be talking a great deal about our names this year, in a series of programs built

loosely around the words of Zelda's famous poem. The programs are being supported by a grant from the Jewish Council of North Central Florida, and our goal will be to learn and think and talk about the names we are given by our parents and the names we make for ourselves through our actions. Let me read you the poem:

Our names are, in the first place, given us by our parents, who choose them in hope, in love, and in memory. My name, for instance: "Michael", which means "close to God." This was a prayer of my parents for me, that I would be close to God. My middle name is "Lewis," which was also the name of my father's grandfather, who was a tailor on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Family legend has it that he once made a suit for Fiorella LaGuardia, the great Depression-era mayor of New York City. I was given his name for memory's sake, yes, but also in the hope that

I might inherit his highest qualities. Lewis Mackler the tailor worked incredibly hard on behalf of his family, pulling them up out of immigrant poverty, and he was also a self-taught intellectual who bequeathed to his children an enormous respect for knowledge and learning.

So what have I done with my given names Michael and Lewis? What have I done just this past year with my given names? I have often been lazy about helping the people I am responsible for helping, my family and

others. I have sometimes been deliberately ignorant, pretending to be blind rather than seeing and acting. I have taken shortcuts in learning, Wikipedia instead of real books, saying things that I think are true without really checking. Through my actions I have sullied my names. I have not made myself close to God, as my parents hoped when they named me. I have moved myself much, much further away.

Of course it is not just me who does things like this. Someone's given name might be

“Deborah,” for instance -- and I am not, not, not picking on my wife Deborah, who is the one person in the world who has been perfect this year. But some other Deborah -- her name means “honey bee,” a creature meant to bring sweetness into the world. But this other Deborah also stings with the sharp and bitter words she speaks about the people who are supposed to be her friends.

Or say that someone’s given name is Joshua, which means “God’s salvation.” But this Joshua has been one who has vexed his

parents, troubled his partner, neglected his children. Rather than being a salvation, he has been a burden to all who might love him.

Or let's take "Susan." There are lots of "Susan's" -- it is such a pretty name. The name may refer to a type of lily that grows in the Land of Israel, a beautiful flower with a long, straight stem. Or it might be related to the ancient name of the mineral we call alabaster -- pure, creamy white, translucent, often used for pillars and religious sculpture. Either way, a "Susan" is meant to become

someone straight and true and beautiful. But most “Susan’s” in real life bring twisted ugliness to their names rather than the straightforward beauty their parents intended for them.

We could, it is quite clear, go on and on with this. We are named by our parents for love, for beauty, for virtue, yet we stray each year far from the intent of our naming. L'chol eish yesh shem, Everyone has a name, in the words of the poet. Everyone has a name given by one’s parents, and a name given by one’s

sins. One of the reasons we are gathered here today is to reclaim and restore the original beauty of our names, the Michael's and Deborah's and Joshua's and Susan's that were given to us in love and in hope. The High Holidays are a time of reclamation and rededication and purification of our names.

There is one particular ritual of reclamation that I will describe to you today in some detail, because it is one that we will put into practice as a congregation on Sunday, October 2 in the first of this year's "Everyone

has a name" programs. This ritual is called Tashlich, which means "casting away." The name comes from several verses in the Book of Micah:

God will take us back in love;

God will cover up our iniquities,

{Hebrew}

[God] will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).

There are probably a million variations of the Tashlich ceremony, but let me tell you about our plans for October 2. We will gather here at

Temple at 9:00am, along with our Religious School students, and we will have a simple breakfast together. After we have eaten, everyone will receive a pencil and three or four slips of a special paper that will dissolve in water without leaving a trace. Explanations will be made, of course, but the gist of the matter is that each of us will write on these strips of paper things like this:

My name is Michael -- but I have been lazy with my responsibilities

My name is Deborah -- but I have often  
spoken stinging words rather than sweet  
ones

My name is Joshua -- but I have been not  
salvation but trouble to my loved ones

My name is Susan -- but I have acted in ways  
that are twisted and ugly rather than straight  
and beautiful

We will take these slips of paper, crumple  
them up, and thrust them deep into our  
pockets, way down there with the crumbs and  
the lint that never quite come out in the wash.

And so, with these truthful indictments  
weighing us down physically just as the sins  
they acknowledge weigh us down  
emotionally, we will walk together about half  
a mile up 8th Avenue to Cofrin Park. The  
travel is important in itself, the walk or the  
drive for those who might not want to walk  
that far. The travel establishes our intention.  
Tashlich is not just an idle or empty gesture.  
It can only matter to a person if he or she  
really means it.

At Cofrin Park, we will stand along the edge of the little stream there -- let's hope it rains a bit between now and then - and we will unburden ourselves. We will empty our pockets into the living, flowing waters of the stream. We will lose weight, literally and figuratively. Physically the difference may only be the few ounces of those slips of paper. But emotionally, the relief will be enormous. Tens of pounds, hundreds of pounds of anguish will be cast into the sea -- or the creek, as the case may be. We will

demonstrate through our actions that the beauty of our names can be reclaimed.

As I mentioned earlier, there are a million variations to the ritual of Tashlich, and some of these variations are actually quite instructive. The Jews of Kurdistan, for instance, will jump into the water for a little swim after they have emptied their pockets, the better to insure that every single stubborn sin be washed away. Now that may be impossible at Cofrin Park with its inch and a half of water, and it may be inadvisable

anywhere in the alligator infested waters of north central Florida, but it gives us a good idea of what the ritual is all about. It is actually considered preferable, whenever possible, to cast one's sins into waters where fish are swimming. The idea is that just as fish have no eyelids so that their eyes are always open, so should our eyes always be open against repeating the very same sins we are at that moment trying to cast away.

And that is the great difficulty, isn't it, not only to purify and repent but to ensure that

our sins are not repeated, to see that our names remain beautiful and pure? It is a very easy thing to recognize fault in other people. It is harder, but not impossible, to recognize fault in ourselves. To long for renewal and restoration is, I think, a fundamental human emotion, something we all share. And to create rituals like this one to symbolize our longing is something that most every culture has done. But how much harder is it to stick to one's resolve, to be, forever after, not the Michael who is neglectful of his duties but the Michael who is close to God? It is something

so hard that no mortal human has quite ever done it. Purification is relatively easy, but transformation is desperately hard. No mere symbolism or one-time ritual can accomplish transformation for us. We can "get right" with ourselves here at Temple today or out a Cofrin Park on Sunday or in any one of countless other ways and times throughout the course of our lives. But we can only "stay right" with ourselves through near-constant vigilance and effort.

It is deeply instructive, I believe, that we perform Tashlich, whenever possible, not in a stagnant pond but in a moving, flowing, living body of water. This means that the water into which we cast our sins is not the same water that was flowing by just a moment ago. The water into which we cast our sins is not the same water that will be flowing by in just the next moment. As life moves on, so do our sins and so does our repentance. So if the sinner will say to him or herself, "I will not repeat my sin; my behavior will change; my name will remain pure," then

the sin, like the flowing waters, will move on and away. Transformation is desperately hard, but it is not impossible. It is accomplished by every little pissant stream and brook in the whole world, where now moves on into yesterday and tomorrow is always coming. We should be able to do it, too.

I am going to finish today by reading you a very short story called Paper Boats, another poem, really, by the Calcutta-born Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore. In this

book, a young man floats off downstream  
little strips of paper that bear his name. But  
he understands his "paper boats" a little  
differently than Jews have traditionally  
understood their Tashlich confessions. These  
paper boats bear not only our sins but also  
our aspirations and hopes and struggles.  
There is beauty to them, not only the ugliness  
of sin and failure. It is unfortunate that I am  
not purely a "Michael" who is close to God. But  
neither am I purely a "Michael" who dishonors  
his name. I am, most accurately, a "Michael"  
who recognizes his faults and works to

overcome them -- and there is great beauty in being a person who tries to become better. When I write my name and my faults on those strips of paper, I am not ashamed to send them floating downstream. I send them downstream as a prayer and as an offering. I am grateful for the beauty of the paper boats as they glide downstream, and I am grateful for their disappearance.