Naming and framing

By Shari Cohen

What happens when change is so unprecedented that we lack the words (and concepts) to refer to it? One of the most tempting tendencies is to name it. The "end of history," the "coming anarchy," "McWorld," "clashing civilizations" have all competed as names for the "post-cold war" period. This generic remains the most common point of reference. "Post-modern" is an indecisive term with even greater longevity. With the spate of lists of highlights of the millennium, issues of magazines devoted to the meaning of the twentieth century, and general millennial discomfort, this naming has risen to a frenzied pitch. At a moment of change, the stakes of naming and framing are higher than ever. But while naming is essential, it is simultaneously treacherous.

Take the names that were given to the process of change following the "collapse" of communism (or was it the "revolutions" that brought down communism?). On the one hand there was the declaration, spurred by Francis Fukuyama's article, that we were now seeing an "end of history." This provocative name can be translated to mean the emergence of liberal democracies (or the transition to democracy) in places as diverse as Lithuania, Albania and Uzbekistan. They began to become us as they set up parliaments and held elections and began to create "market" economies.

On the other hand there was the equally evocative "return of history," a code for ethnic hatreds surging up from the deep-freeze of communism. And indeed, we saw the past return, or so it seemed, as Croats and Serbs began to kill one another, referring to one another by names associated with the bloody conflicts of World War II.

Both of these framings, however evocative, turned out to obscure rather than illuminate the fundamental dynamics of post-communist societies; both resulted in important limitations in our field of vision. Neither asked a new question: what was the effect of the most radical, most widespread and longest lasting social experiment in history on the societies where this experiment was carried out? What did the return of history and the setting up of democratic institutions mean given this context? (I consider these issues in my recent book, Politics without a Past: The Absence of History in Postcommunist Nationalism, Duke University Press, 1999.)

Often names are chosen to comfort; certainly to set boundaries. Often the names say more about the namers than about the reality being named. "End of history"

was comforting since this meant that democracy had triumphed over communism. The "people" were democratic -- all they needed was the opportunity to be citizens and entrepreneurs. We could now begin to assume that these societies functioned in more or less familiar ways, and could follow elections and track political developments in ways that required little intellectual or political adjustment. Ironically, "return of history" was also comforting, making intervention seem futile because the hatreds were so old and intractable that we couldn't possibly get involved; and these countries, after all, had to have their chance at self-determination.

A desire for easy policy making drove the choice of framing of the post-cold war challenges. Had we focused in the early 1990's on the true nature of the communist legacy, we would have been better prepared for the mess Russia has become. We might, for example, have decided to direct greater intellectual resources and many more dollars and personnel to the Russian transformation when it was still politically possible to do so. But given the basic assumption that democracy had triumphed, we waited, and find ourselves at the end of the decade facing a much more intractable situation and a limited set of policy options.

In Jewish life in America we see a similar drive to name, but a naming process that until now has constrained thinking within familiar paradigms. In Jewish life, too, the naming says more about the interests and assumptions of those doing the naming than about the reality being named. Take the "crisis of continuity" for example. While "crisis" is familiar to Jewish institutions set up to rescue threatened populations and to secure Israel in the face of enemies out to destroy it, naming "continuity" as the challenge assumes that what it means to be Jewish is known, definable and fixed. Even the less fear driven term "Jewish renaissance," that has come to replace continuity in the lexicon of Jewish institutions, comes with similar constraints. What is new about this moment in American Jewish life, according to these namings, is either a decline or a revival of a particular set of Jewish behaviors and possibilities. Both of these names are a response to what all agree to be a process of "assimilation." But just as "transition to democracy" was descriptively correct, though analytically deceptive when it came to post-communist politics, so too "assimilation" might describe a process that Jews (and other ethnic/religious groups) in America have gone through, but not the meaning of this process.

Clearly the naming by Jewish institutions of the current state of Jewishness in America comes out of the anxiety arising from a confusing period. It seems that the scramble to name accelerates as the world around us becomes harder to understand: The weekly (and sometimes daily) shifts in the assessment of the stock market's prospects, or of the current state of Russia, are both good examples.

How do we avoid the pitfalls of naming the unfamiliar in terms so familiar that we cannot respond appropriately? How do we talk in new ways and capture the character of a new period? How do we come to invent new terms to describe the unprecedented? How do we avoid just another framing trap? When should we name and how often?

Perhaps one answer is to avoid naming immediately and instead to try to ask new questions. Obviously, public discourse needs to be based upon mutually understandable terms (we still don't know what to call the "post-Soviet space"). But public discourse is so dominated by "talking heads" obsessively naming to fill broadcasting space that our imagination as individuals becomes limited and our intellectual resources (sometimes those very same talking heads) and time are often poorly utilized. Perhaps more attention and resources should be directed toward the creation of fora where true creative thinking takes place and where new questions are generated. By engaging as many perspectives as possible and subjecting a multiplicity of possible framings to interrogation, we might escape the limitations of prematurely closing down the imaginative process. (The Jewish Public Forum at CLAL is one such example; click here for more information.) We could mitigate our fears in a moment of great change by asking questions about a range of possible futures, given the impact of new technologies, power arrangements and other societal trends. We could avoid narrowing our thinking by remaining self-conscious about our propensity to name.