

Parashat Vayishlach Sermon

What's in a name? As Julliet argues in Shakespeare's famous play: that which we call a rose, by any other name would smell just as sweet. Perhaps a name is just a name. As a person with too many names, I should know.

Although less poetic, immediately prior to this infamous line, Juliet begs Romeo: Oh, be some other name! And we all know how that story ends. Names do hold meaning after all.

The Torah takes names quite seriously from the get-go, naming Adam after the Hebrew word for the earth, from which he was formed. Our first patriarch and matriarch, Avram and Sarai become Avraham and Sarah, names imbued with meaning by the addition of the holy Hebrew letter *hey*, the sole letter appearing twice in God's name.

In Parashat Vayishlach, our third patriarch receives a new name: similarly significant, but this time, is different.

The man who wrestles with Jacob blesses him with a new name:

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאֵלָה יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת שְׁמָךְ - כִּי אַמְתִּיב יִשְׂרָאֵל

Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel

The wording of this verse is similar to the Hebrew text¹ when Abraham and Sarah receive their new names. One notable difference is that while God alters Abraham and Sarah's names, a violent mystery man is responsible for bestowing upon Jacob his new name, Israel. To further complicate the matter, you may have noticed in our Torah reading this morning that Jacob actually receives his new name twice: the first time from this supposed angel, and the second time, directly from God.

But there's another key difference in Jacob's situation. As opposed to Abraham and Sarah, whose subtle name changes symbolize generational continuity and who, upon receiving their new names, leave their previous names behind, Jacob continues to be called both Ya'akov and Yisrael from this moment on.

To resolve this seeming contradiction, several medieval commentators explain that Ya'akov will not be his ONLY name in the future. But the simple meaning of the text is clear, and this reasoning seems to be a stretch.

For those who appreciate the critical study of Torah, you may find it interesting that the first re-naming is likely an Elohist source and the second is of Priestly origin. I am by no means a biblical scholar, but as I dug a bit deeper in my research, I found an article by Dr. Rabbi Tzemah Yoreh² noting that the E text portrays Jacob more favorably -- as the

¹ Chapter 17

² <https://www.thetorah.com/article/jacob-is-renamed-israel-twice-why-does-the-name-jacob-remain>

most important patriarch, referring to him as Yisrael. In contrast, the other voices in the Torah favor Abraham, and depict Jacob as a more problematic character, continuing to call him Ya'akov.

Who is Jacob/Israel? What is it like to be known by two names at the same time? We know Jacob as the ankle-grabbing trickster, stealing birthrights and blessings. And we know Israel as a strong, struggling striver. Our third patriarch is all of the above. Just like the rest of us, he's a mixed bag.

Looking at Jacob/Israel from two perspectives at once reminded me of a podcast I heard recently, from the Atlantic's new podcast series entitled: How to Live a Happy Life. The episode that came to mind is called "How to know, that you know nothing." In this podcast, Dr. Arthur Brooks, a behavioral social scientist, and Dr. Ellen Langer, a Harvard psychology professor, discuss curiosity and living in the moment.

Dr. Langer said: "Behavior makes sense from the actor's perspective, or else the person wouldn't have done it. You don't wake up in the morning and say: today you're going to be bigoted, clumsy, obnoxious... When we see people in a negative light, we're misunderstanding why they're doing what they're doing from their perspective. Langer continues: "For example, you may see me as gullible, from my perspective, I'm trusting. I may see you as inconsistent, from your perspective, you're flexible. If you and I are close friends, and my being gullible is driving you crazy, and you try to get me not to be gullible -- I don't want to be gullible -- so I'll agree, but I'm always going to fall back to being gullible as long as I value being trusting. And once you see that in fact I'm being trusting, you kind of like that, and our relationship improves. When I stop seeing you as inconsistent and realize that you're being flexible, something I also value, then I treat you with more respect."

Let's apply Langer's framework to our patriarch. If we try to see Jacob from his own perspective, it paints a much more generous picture. Jacob is born strong, grasping his brother's ankle in his first moments of life. He tries to honor his parents, and gets caught in the middle as they play favorites. He is a leader and believes that God has a plan for the Jewish people, and he does his best to play his part in the bigger picture. Perhaps, like many of us, he strives, but does not succeed, in breaking the family patterns that repeat themselves from generation to generation. And like any good modern Jew, he also struggles with God.

This month, I have been learning with a group of amazing TIC teens in our Limmud program on Wednesday nights. We read the chapter on gratitude from the book, Everyday Holiness, by anthropologist Alan Morinis, who is also the founder of the Mussar Institute, a community committed to a modern revival of Mussar, Jewish ethics. In his gratitude chapter, Morinis depicts receiving an email from a disgruntled student who was unhappy with his course.

"All of her problems were on her end," he writes, "like the fact that she had an old computer that didn't like attachments." Morinis decided that he would wait to reply to the email until he could begin his response with the words, "I am grateful..." The first

thoughts that ran through his mind were far from generous. But eventually he got himself to the point of gratitude and wrote, “I am grateful to you for showing me what this situation looks like from your point of view.”

It is not possible to see the world through someone else’s eyes. But that is not an excuse -- it is imperative that we try. It’s so much easier to see the negatives -- judgement comes naturally. In difficult times like these, it is much harder, but even more important to be gentle with others, and also with ourselves. When we find ourselves in our darkest moments and at our wits end, that is precisely the time to practice gratitude.

We are so much more than just our names. We know ourselves well enough to know that our names, and our behavior in any given moment, barely scratches the surface of who we are as people. And we are humble enough to know that we’ll never see the full picture of another person’s life. Curiosity, living in the moment -- rather than holding on to our preconceptions and baggage -- and practicing gratitude are helpful tools that can remind us to try our best to judge others favorably. Easier said than done, of course. But we are the people of Israel, and we are strong, struggling, striving survivors, after all.

Shabbat Shalom,
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