

Vayishlach 5779  
What is Your Name?  
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What significance do our names hold for us? After all, typically we do not choose our own names, and as such, naming tends to have more to do with those who bestow a name than with those who carry it. When we name another, we project a combination of worldview, hope, and expectation upon the one we name.

Recently I have had several conversations with parents planning to name their children. Many decisions need to be made. Will the baby be given a Hebrew name as well as an English name, or only a Hebrew name? What options may be considered when one parent is Jewish and the other is not? Will the baby's Hebrew name include the names of both parents? If so, in what order? What if only one adult plans to raise the child? This morning, we named a baby "Esther," linking her to family members of blessed memory and joining her to a major Jewish story about where we find God and how we discern our own purpose in life. We projected those meaningful associations onto a baby girl, hopefully for her benefit. I also meet with adults who wish to change their own Hebrew names to better reflect their gender identity or their sex. We discuss possible names in light of the lived experiences and personal hopes of the ones seeking to take on a new name.

I find the considerations and conversations about naming to be powerful and meaningful and power, because often so much often is invested in bestowing a name and then living up to our unique identities, which our names symbolize.

In our Bible, names often suggest character traits or predict outcomes. After Jacob wrestles with some sort of angel in the guise of a man all night, the angel gives up and asks our forefather, “what is your name?” Yaacov responds by giving his name, a name based on the way he exited the womb, clutching his twin brother’s heel. Yaakov has now spent many years being a supplanter and has also been on the receiving end of deception at the hands of Lavan, his father-in-law. His name has defined a certain scheming way of living and achieving material gain. However he may want to distance himself from that identity, what else can he say? Yaacov is his name.

And then the angel tells Yaacov that henceforth, he will be known as Yisrael, a name linked to struggling, striving, or wrestling, for, the angel tells him, “you have struggled with God and with human beings, and you have prevailed.” It seems that God wants to locate Yaacov in a different reality, a different way of being. His new name, Yisrael, is universally viewed as a positive, honorable distinction, and to this day, our People is known as “b’nei Yisrael,” the “Children of Yisrael.” Not “b’nei Avraham,” the Children of Abraham, and not exactly Jacob’s, either. For now that Yaacov has become Yisrael, something new has happened, which the Jewish people takes on as a mantle.

What, exactly, has happened? What struggle, or striving, precipitates the name change? The enigmatic exchange between Yaacov and the angel defies easy explanation. Some commentators see the angel as Yaacov’s conscience, called to account for his past dealings in preparation for re-entering Canaan and establishing his place as the next patriarch of an emerging nation. Others see the angel as some sort of spirit of Esav, with whom Yaacov must reconcile and of whom he remains mortally afraid. Perhaps each of those readings clarify what it means for Yaacov to have “struggled with a man,” but neither fully explains what the angel says. What does the angel mean when he says that Yaacov has striven with God?

I would suggest that in his nocturnal wrestling, Yaacov gains an awareness he had lacked previously. He has reached the point where he can apprehend God's presence in his struggles. He emerges from the match physically and spiritually touched, ready to face future challenges differently from before, now against a vision of a more sacred way of being in the world, with a sense of himself as a potential vessel for God's goodness. Perhaps what it means for him to "prevail" is that he can assert his own identity and purpose imbued with a sense of sacred mission and a more expansive perspective.

The sad fact is that the name Yisrael never fully sticks. Like real human beings, Yaacov continues to struggle, even in this very parashah. His brotherly relationship remains a struggle. Esau meets him with good intentions but Yaacov cannot imagine that they can dwell together and does not join Esau to dwell with him at Se'ir like Esau hopes. Yaacov also struggles with his sons over their murderous rampage over the people of Shechem, and he struggles with his son Reuven over Yaacov's own marital bed. Yaacov's silence after the rape of his daughter Dina and the ill-fated negotiation of her marriage suggests that he continues to wrestle with his own demons as well. Anyone who has faced a challenge can tell you that God's presence can be excruciatingly elusive in moments of intense challenge. Indeed, the reader searches in vain for God's presence or any sort of clarifying vision in each of the painful episodes in today's parasha. God offers no direction or response to the brotherly reconciliation and parting of ways, the rape of Dinah, the marriage negotiation with the Shechemites, and the bloodshed and plundering. It almost looks like God is not there, waiting backstage for a different cue, waiting for Yaacov to acknowledge that the promises God made to him all those years ago when fled Canaan and dreamed at Bet El have materialized. Yisrael is left to test out his new name seemingly on his own, and time and again, it is Yaacov, and not Yisrael, who steps up to the plate.

The impermanence of Yaacov's personal identity as revealed by his being renamed a new, important name that he cannot always live up to is striking. Yaacov has struggled with God and with people, and he will continue to struggle, unevenly, as people often do. Yet each struggle will represent a new opportunity to define himself.

When the Torah shines a light on Jacob's struggle with the angel, and God honors his striving with a new name, it seems to me that the text wants to tell us that striving, struggling, wrestling, is crucially important in order for us to learn, grow, and thrive, even when the struggle takes all night and leaves us wounded, bearing a mark forever. Yaacov-who-is also Yisrael comes to model for us that we face an unending choice in how we engage with life's challenges. Will we be like Yaacov and fall back on habit, dig in our heels, and say we are how we are, we feel what we feel, and we want what we want, remaining entrenched in those realities alone? Or, will we be like Yisrael, and ask ourselves what it would mean to face the same challenges as if God were present in our desires, in others' desires, in the choices we make about how we behave and interact, and in how we construct an enlightened vision for moving toward what is possible? Yaacov retains a physical reminder of that struggle when he wrestles with the angel: his hip is wrenched from its socket. Even now, Jews do not eat the sciatic nerve as a remembrance of that holy moment when Yaacov owns his strivings and struggles and becomes Yisrael, and by extension, as a reminder of our own responsibility to locate our better selves in our strivings and our struggles.

Most of us will not choose the names we carry, but we can all choose how we inhabit them. I pray that when life asks us who we are, will we remember that we have a choice. May we cultivate our ability to make choices worthy of blessing.