

Parashat Vayishlach, 5784, 2023:

Of Names and Changes

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו, כל בני ישראל בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

Sefer Bereishit presents three celebrated name changes that were declared by the Almighty or one of His angels. The first two were Avram and Sarai, whose names were changed to Avraham and Sarah:

And Avram fell upon his face, and G-d spoke with him, saying...your name shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. And Hashem said to Avraham, “Your wife Sarai – you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name.” (17:3, 5, and 15, these and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Midrash Bereishit Rabbah makes it very clear that Avraham’s name change is absolute and universal in nature, to the extent that it is forbidden to call him by his prior appellation:

Bar Kapparah said: “Anyone who calls Avraham, ‘Avram’ [from this time forward] will violate a positive commandment (*aseh*).” Rabbi Lavi said: “He will not only disobey a positive directive, but he will also transgress a negative prohibition (*lo ta’aseh*), as well: ‘Your name shall no longer be called Avram,’ is the negative prohibition, and ‘Your name shall be Avraham,’ is the positive commandment.” (*Seder Vayishlach* 78:3, this and the following translation and brackets my own)

According to our midrash, however, Sarah’s name change is directed solely to Avraham, since the verse reads: “Your wife Sarai—you shall not call her name Sarai, for Sarah is her name.” In other words, Hashem gave Avraham a clear-cut personal directive to help him understand that his beloved wife was no longer his princess alone (“Sarai”), rather, she was now ready to take her place on the stage of world history as “Sarah.” As the verse states: “I will bless her, and she will become [a mother of] nations; kings of nations will be from her.” (17:16)

Our *parasha* contains the third divinely decreed name change that narrate Ya'akov's transition from Ya'akov to Yisrael:

And he [Eisav's angel] said, "Your name shall no longer be called Ya'akov, but Yisrael, because you have commanding power with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed.

Hashem said to him, "Your name is Ya'akov. Your name shall no longer be called Ya'akov, but Yisrael shall be your name." And He named him Yisrael. (32:29 and 35:10)

On the surface, these *pasukim* seem quite similar. A considered reading reveals, however, that there are two different speakers; in 32:29, Eisav's angel declares Ya'akov's name change, whereas in 35:10, the speaker is the Almighty. In addition, 32:29 appears to depict a permanent name change, "Your name shall no longer be called Ya'akov, but Yisrael," whereas in 35:10, Hashem somewhat curiously reminds Ya'akov, "Your name is Ya'akov," prior to stating, "Your name shall no longer be called Ya'akov, but Yisrael shall be your name." The confluence of these two verses led our midrash to ask whether Ya'akov's name change to Yisrael was similar to his grandfather's transformation from Avram to Avraham, or was it substantively different?

Is it the case that one who calls Ya'akov "Ya'akov" will be in violation of a positive commandment [as in the case of Avraham/Avraham]? It has been taught: The name, "Ya'akov," has not been uprooted, rather, the name Yisrael is now the essential appellation, whereas, the name, "Ya'akov," is now of secondary import. [The opposite approach was offered by] Rabbi Zechariah in the name of Rabbi Acha — [Hashem told Ya'akov] that his primary name remained "Ya'akov," but henceforth, "Yisrael will be your name." In other words, "Ya'akov" was his main name, and "Yisrael" was his additional secondary name.

Based on a close reading of the two opinions in the midrash, Ya'akov, unlike Avraham, retains his original name. The only question under debate is whether or not "Ya'akov" remains his essential name, or is it somehow eclipsed by the new name, "Yisrael?" In my view, the midrash is teaching us a profound lesson regarding Ya'akov's very nature: henceforth he has a dual persona that is reflected by each of these names. As such, there

are periods when he thrives as Ya'akov and lives as “an innocent man, dwelling in tents,” (25:27) and there are times when he must rise to existential challenges and be Yisrael, the one who has “commanding power with [an angel of] G-d and with men.” (32:29)

The Ya'akov persona is illustrated by the prophet Michah when he speaks of him in this manner: “You (Hashem) shall give the truth of Ya'akov (*emet l'Ya'akov*), the loving-kindness of Avraham, which You swore to our forefathers from days of yore.” (*Sefer Michah* 7:20) In my estimation, *Emet l'Ya'akov* is only possible when Ya'akov is living a tranquil and introspective existence. Little wonder, then, that the first *pasuk* of Parashat Vayeshev states: “Ya'akov dwelt (*vayeshev*) in the land of his father's sojourning, in the land of Canaan.” (37:1) In line with this analysis, *Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit* 84:3 interprets “*vayeshev*” as Ya'akov's manifest desire to dwell serenely (*b'shalveh*) in the Land of Canaan, the land of his grandfather and father.

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to see the fulfillment of *emet l'Ya'akov*, and the final words of the *Kaddish* realized in our time: “May He Who makes peace in His celestial heights make peace in His ultimate compassion for us and for all the Jewish people.” May this take place soon and, in our days, *v'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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