

What's In A Name

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When I was 7 years old and attending a day camp, I decided that “Caryn” was too serious a name, especially spelled *C-a-r-y-n*. I wanted something with less angst. Something that sounded more happy-go-lucky and would make me feel more like Cindy Brady of the Brady Bunch. “Kim” sounded just right. It was short, peppy, couldn’t be spelled funny, and had no trace of angst. So I told everyone at camp my name was Kim, and was called “Kim” all summer. I would always walk home from camp but it was the last day, so my mother came to pick me up. When she asked where “Caryn” was, to her great surprise, she was told that there was no “Caryn” who attended that camp!

The Talmudic sages teach that *“a person is called by three names: one given by his father and mother, a second given by other people around him, and a third given by the life which he or she leads.* The Hebrew poet Zelda wrote a poem that is based on that Talmudic teaching. It is in our machzor and begins . . .

Each of us has a name
given by God
and given by our parents . . .

Each of us has a name
given by the stars
and given by our neighbors

Each of us has a name
given by our sins
and given by our longing . . .

We have multiple names, and the names we carry express both our history and our lives. They connect us with our Jewish ancestors and their lives going back to the Torah; they connect us with our families and our family history; and they express our individuality and uniqueness as our lives shape our name and the name shapes our lives.

I first became interested in the idea of names and naming while reading Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, which is about three generations of characters whose last name is "Dead"—D-e-a-d. Living with and in the shadow of that name, the family indeed suffers from being spiritually dead, living as they have in the larger context of slavery and its aftermath of racism in America. The novel is about Macon Dead's journey of self-discovery by means of his discovery of

his name and his heritage. By discovering his grandfather's real name, he is able to uncover his family's heritage and find inner freedom. Since his grandfather's name was also the author Toni Morrison's grandfather's name, it is a novel of name recovery and discovery for both the author and character.

What are *our* names and their histories? What have we discovered about our names? What remains for us to discover? In the book of Genesis, Jacob blesses his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe saying, "bless the lads. In them may my name be remembered, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac." (Gen. 48:16) Today, Jewish parents all over the world bless their children on Shabbat in the name of Ephraim and Menashe. What are the blessings we give and receive from our Jewish names? What does being a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel and Leah, call you to be?

Vincent Harding, the great civil rights leader and associate of Martin Luther King, who died this past year, may his memory be for a blessing, had an important understanding of the power of names. Whenever he was invited to speak to a group, he would begin by asking everyone to say their name, their mother's name, their

mother's mother's name, and where they were from. My husband Brian, who was his friend, relates that Vincent would say, "before we talk, we need to know one another, who is in the room, who we are.' He did this everywhere he spoke, even at the celebration after his own wedding ceremony!" It transformed the room and created a unique bond between the people present.

So who are *we*? Today, I want to look at our own names, understanding that we too have multiple names, as the midrash suggests. And we are not only named but *namers*. We name as a way of healing, of remembering, of transforming. What is the connection between our names and our very being? How can names we give and receive be a means to blessing, connecting and healing?

We are descendants of Avram, who became Avraham or Abraham. In the Torah, when God first calls to Avram, he speaks about the blessing of a name. "I shall make your name great," God promises Avram as he tells him to go forth on an open-ended and unknown journey. Most people understand that phrase, "I shall make your name great" as meaning that Avram will come to have a great reputation far and wide. Rashi, the medieval commentator, however, understands it in a way that is both more literal and more open to

deeper layers. “I shall make your name great” literally means, he posits, “I shall name longer by adding a letter.” Adding one letter, a *hey*, to Avram’s name, makes his name “Avraham.”

What is so significant about an additional letter in your name? In Torah, every letter is significant so the *Hey* that is added to Avram’s name must have meaning and of course it does. In fact, the letter *hey* in Hebrew indicates a *question*. One only need put a *hey* as a prefix to a declarative sentence in Hebrew, and that sentence becomes a question. Inspired by a reading of R. Yitzhak Hutner, Aviva Zornberg writes that the “The open-ended command [of Lech Lecha—go forth] brings Abraham into the field of questioning: he will find his destination only after prolonged not-finding; he will question every place he encounters; and only by way of the urgency of his questions will he come at knowledge at all.”ⁱ

Avraham, therefore, whose prefix “Av” means father, will become the father of a new people through the transformation of his name to one which indicates a question. He will ask central questions about God, about the meaning of life, and about justice. Avraham will never be the same. He is *Avraham Avinu*, Avraham, our father. He is a new person, the father of a new people—a people of questioners.

As a Jewish people, collectively we have many names. We are descendants of Avraham, the questioner. We are also called Hebrews, because Abraham is referred to as a Hebrew, *Ivri*, in Genesis, which means “the other side.” Midrash teaches that Abraham is called a Hebrew because he had the courage to stand alone on the other side of accepted opinion and believe in one God. We are also called “Jews” or *Yehudim*, a name that comes from Jacob’s son Yehudah, Judah. The name “Judah” derives from the word “Hodaya,” for gratitude. Leah names her son Yehuda, or Judah, exclaiming “this time I will thank (*odeh*) God. “Gratitude,” therefore, is one of our names.

Finally, we are called “B’nai Yisrael” children of Israel, and Israel, of course, is the name acquired by Jacob, whose encounter with the divine resulted in another transformative change of name from “Jacob” meaning “Heel” to “Israel” meaning “wrestler or striver with God”. Our people, *b’nai Yisrael*, is named after one who alternates between being a heel and a God-wrestler. Jacob’s lifelong task is to integrate Yisrael, the one whom he is called to be, with Jacob, the one who he has been.

As Jews, all of us carry the transformative names of Avraham, Yehudah, and Yisrael. We are called to question, to stand on the

other side from convention, to live a life of faith and gratitude, to wrestle with God. Those names are our religious and spiritual heritage. Let's now turn to our individual other names. As the Talmud says we have the names our parents gave us, the names society gives us, and the names our actions and our life choices give us.

Let's talk first about the names given by our parents. Naming is an expression of love and blessing in Judaism. The wardrobe of the High Priest, for example, included a breast plate on which was written the names of the 12 Tribes, that was how dear those names were to God. That tradition is continued on the breast plate of the Torah. So names are an expression of love, remembrance and connection. Some of us have names that go back to the Torah itself linking us both to our ancient tradition and to our loved ones who have died and carried that name. The Jewish thinker Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, encouraged Jews to name their children with Hebrew or Jewish names "as a means of fostering Jewish consciousness." (453) Biblical names are more accepted and popular among Jews now than a few generations ago, when Jews felt more of a need to assimilate. My father, for

example, named after his grandfather Zelig, was given the British name “Selwyn Arthur.” And my name, Caryn, is actually a Welsh name, although my Yiddish speaking great grandmother, for whom I was named, probably wouldn’t have known where Wales was.

So our names certainly reflect current fashions as well as deeper historical connections. Names, however, also carry with them mystical connections. Kabbalah teaches that there is an intimate and mystical connection between the name, even the letters of the name, and the person. Midrash instructs parents to name one’s child after a righteous person “for sometimes the name influences the person’s behavior and destiny.” (Chana Weisberg quoting Tanchuma). That is why many Jewish parents choose to name their child after loved ones who have died whose qualities we want our child to spiritually inherit through the name. That is also why some of us change our names, hoping we will either change our fate because of the new name, or live up to what the name implies. The Talmud teaches that there are four things that transform the decree that seals a person’s fate: tzedakah, prayer, and change of deed, and *change of name* (RH 16b)

Over the course of history Jews have taken on new names for any number of reasons. Traditionally, those who were seriously ill

often ritually took on a new name such as Chaim or Chaya (life) or Raphael (healer of God). Women who yearn to be married or have a child, or men or women suffering from some kind of trouble have taken on new names. In the state of Israel, there are what are called “name therapists,” and it is not unusual for someone either wanting a new direction in their life or wanting to choose just the right name for their child, to go to a “name therapist” or a kabbalistic rabbi for a new name.

Such name changes, however, aren’t as simple as magic. As one Israel name therapist said, “Changing your name won’t change your life, it will better equip you to deal with life. If a bird changes its name to lion, will that make it a lion?” Though it must be said (just as an aside) that name changes can work for animals as well. That is why there is now a trend in animal shelters to change the name of a dog needing rescue to a celebrity name. It seems people are more likely to adopt a dog named “Bill Murray” than “Rover”.

Let’s move for a moment from first names to last names. Did you ever wonder what Avraham, Jacob, Moses and Miryam’s last names were? Well, as you may have guessed, they didn’t have any. Until modern times, Jews were named with a first name alone

followed by *ben or bat*, son or daughter, of their father (and sometimes mother). Sephardic Jews living in and then exiled from Spain were the first Jews who were made to take on surnames so officials could keep track of them. Many of them took on names that indicated where they lived. The family of Baruch Spinoza, for example, was from the Spanish town of Espinosa de los Monteros.

For Ashkenazi Jews, that is, those of us whose families were descended from Germany or other parts of Central or Eastern Europe, surnames date back only to the 18th century in the Austrian Empire or the 19th century in Eastern Europe, when rulers forced Jewish subjects to take on German or Slavic surnames also so they could keep track of them. Calling ourselves up to the Torah using our Hebrew names, is naming ourselves according to our ancient way.

Nevertheless, our last names have become our own and a key to our ancestry. The most common Jewish surnames are Cohen and Levy and their variants. In our congregation, we have 28 families with those names. Also common are patronymic surnames or “son of” names, such as Mendelsohn which means son of Mendel. Jewish names ending in the slavic *ich, off, ov, sky or owitz* all mean “son of”. Also common are surnames that indicate occupation such as my last

name. “Broit” in Yiddish means “bread” and perhaps denoted a baker. Other examples in our congregation are “Wasserman” or water carrier; “Graber” or an engraver; “or Reznick,” a ritual slaughterer. Green, Roth, Weiss, Shwartz, or Blau are ornamental names that are colors. Many of us in the congregation have names that indicate place: Horowitz from Horovice in Bohemia; Rappaport from Porto, Italy; Pinto from Pinto, Spain; Ginzberg or Frankfurter from Germany.

When many of our families came to Ellis Island, even some of those last names, originally consequences of forced assimilation, sounded too Jewish, and some of us were re-named again by an official who couldn't or didn't want to properly transmit the name. In addition, many of our families chose to change their names seeing that their name's Jewishness stood in the way of professional advancement or other opportunities because of anti-semitism. I will always remember my consternation when I went to a Chinese restaurant with my grandparents as a child, and they gave the hostess the name “Shaw” instead of “Shwartz”. It was upsetting to me that my grandparents felt they needed to change their name even for an evening. Myself, being a fighter, I wanted to yell out to everyone that

we were indeed the Shwartz family, proud Jews that should be allowed to eat spare ribs in any Chinese restaurant in the country. Of course, by that time, I could afford to be courageous. I doubt that the Chinese hostess, who could barely speak English, would have cared whether my grandparents were “Shaw” or “Shwartz,” and certainly not in a restaurant whose clientele was 90% Jewish anyway.

Nevertheless, changing one’s name or having it changed for you is, in a way, an ancient Jewish tradition. According to Genesis, Pharaoh changes Joseph’s name to the Egyptian name Zaphenath-Paneah. And in the biblical book of Daniel, Daniel, who is in exile in Babylon, has his name changed by the Babylonian officer to the Beltashazzar. I guess Daniel sounded more ethnic to Babylonians than Beltashazzar.

Today, many of us are searching for names, old and new. We may go on ancestry.com to learn about our names and our history. We may recover lost names or adopt new ones. In a series on names in the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz, journalists reported on how more and more millennial Jewish singles and couples are reinventing their name. Some recover their more ethnic sounding name from a past generation such as when a young man named Daniel Busch changed

his name to back to Silberbusch. Some couples create new surnames, occasionally to the consternation of their parents, who feel those new names separate their children from their families and their family history. Some of these new names are created by mashing up two names, such as the NYT Israel correspondent Jodi Rudoren, whose name takes the last five letters of her surname “Wilgoren” and the first few letters her husband’s name “Ruderman” to make “Rudoren. Other couples take the first letters of their hyphenated names and create a new name through that acronym. Jews, it seems, are not only a people of the book but, as the journalist writes, a “people of the name.”ⁱⁱ

Names are so important in Judaism, that there is a whole holiday devoted to trying to stamp out the name of the Bible’s worst villain, Haman. And to this day, the harshest Yiddish curse you can hurl is, *yimach shmo*, which means “may his name be wiped out.” The other side of that, helping a name endure is a supremely important mitzvah. This is why we give tzedakah in memory of those loved one’s who have died, or name our children after those loved ones. It is why we take the time to read names aloud at Yizkor. We are helping the name and therefore the memory live on. Through this

naming, we express our love and contribute to healing. In Psalm 147, the verse where God is called the one who assigns names to the stars is also called “Healer of the brokenhearted.” When our hearts are broken from loss, helping our loved one’s name to live on is an act of healing.

Similarly, when people have been killed through war or persecution, the acting of naming is an act of powerful resistance and healing. Part of the mission of Yad Vashem, which means “A Monument and a Name,” is to recover the names of the 6 million. Their “name recovery project” so far has 4 million names and the hall of names is a remarkable memorial with pictures and names all over a huge circular ceiling. Similarly, the Vietnam War Memorial and services commemorating 9/11 consists of names. Poet Laureate Billy Collins’ wrote a poem called “The Names” after 9/11. The poem ends with the verse: “So many names there is barely room on the walls of the heart.”

Names connect us to our heritage, our family and our parents. They can be paths to freedom in their affirmation of both our individuality and our belonging. As an example, as I learned from Gabe Robinson-Lynch, think about the way sign names are given in

the deaf community—not by parents but by the community based on the life you lead. The sign name is “thought up after an intense period of observation, when people have worked out firstly whether they like you enough to give you one . . . and they've taken all your habits and mannerisms into account to find a name that best sums you up.”ⁱⁱⁱ A sign name expresses both one’s individuality and one’s connection to the deaf community.

In Jewish tradition, our Hebrew names have an important connection to our lives and our afterlife. There is a belief about the soul being called by its name after death, so traditional Jews choose verses from the Bible that they say daily in morning prayer that begin and end with the first and last letters of their name. I love that tradition because our name then becomes a kind of mission statement that we choose. Our lives become a sacred verse. If you don’t currently have a Hebrew name you can always choose a name and a verse. What verse would you choose to live out at this time in your life?

Important as a name is, however, a name is still only an aspect of one’s particularity and therefore has limits. Just as there are many names of God because we cannot know the essence of God, a human

being has many names, because each name can only point to an aspect of that person whose *neshama*, or soul, is beyond the name.

The prophet Hosea, for example, teaches (2:1) that “The number of the people of Israel shall be like that of the sands of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted. They shall be called, he says, “Children-Of-The-Living-God.” In other words, while we try to define, measure and count by naming, the deeper reality is that each of us shares the same name, “Children of the living God.” With all our uniqueness, we are essentially one in name and in being.

This is what I believe the prophet Isaiah teaches in his speech about naming in which he uses the famous phrase *Yad V'Shem*, a monument and a name, after which the Holocaust museum in Israel is named. Isaiah describes a righteous eunuch, who obviously cannot have children to carry on his name. But it is that childless eunuch, Isaiah says, if he is righteous and just, who will have the name that lasts forever.

“And let not the eunuch say,
'I am a withered tree.'
For thus said the Lord:
'As for the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths,
and hold fast to My covenant—
I will give them, in My House
And within My walls,
A monument and a name *yad v'shem*

Better than sons or daughters.
I will give them an everlasting name (*shem olam*)
Which shall not perish.

In other words, according to Isaiah, the real memorials, the real monuments, the real everlasting name, is a way of being—serving God and acting with justice. That path will lead us to a name that transcends all names, all individuality. It is a universal name. That is why Isaiah goes on in the same passage to call to his sacred mount all peoples of all religions, with all kinds of names, as long as they serve God, as long as they are just.

As for the foreigners
Who attach themselves to the Lord,
To minister to Him
And to love the name of the Lord,
To be His servants-- . . .
I will bring them to My sacred mount
And let them rejoice in My house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
Shall be welcome on My altar;
For My House shall be called
A house of prayer for all peoples.'

The “everlasting name” the name that is a true monument, is the One name, in and through whom we all live. All peoples, regardless of their name, regardless of their particularities of religion or ethnicity or whether they have children that carry their name or whether their children’s names are hyphenated or mash-ups or assimilated or

historical, all will be part of that great name—*Ehiyeh asher Ehiyeh*, the name that is no-name, the name that is pure presence.

Our people are descendants of Abraham, the questioner, the seeker. We are called Israel, after our ancestor who experienced the presence of God within and without through his wrestling. And we are called Jews after Judah's name meaning gratitude. We are inheritors of the names of our family and our tradition going back three thousand years. We are seekers who are called to new names and renewed lives. On this holiest of days, the day when the High Priest would pronounce that ineffable name of God, the day when we pray for our names to be written in the Book of Life, let us ask ourselves what are true names are, what they call us to do, and how they call us to seek the nameless one, *Ehiyeh Asher Ehiyeh*, not a noun but a verb, who in our life and in our death, enfolds us in the everlasting name, that includes all being.

ⁱ Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep*, p. 161.

ⁱⁱ Ilene Prusher, "How Millennials are reinventing Jewish names, Haaretz, April 17, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/features/sign_names.shtml