

Changing My Name Brought Me Closer to My Biblical Jewish Ancestors

As a trans person, choosing a name for myself felt like prevailing over many hurdles in my life — a surprisingly Jewish tradition.

By [Ari Fernandez](#) March 5, 2021



Design by Emily Burack. Still via Transparent season 4; Jacob Wrestling with the Angel, by Rembrandt; Genesis 32:29 via Sefaria.

I recently joined the ranks of people from the Torah like Sarah, Abraham, and Jacob. No, I didn't have a transcendental experience with God or anything like that. Rather, I changed my name to something that better suits who I am — as a queer person and as a Jew. And though it didn't happen during a wrestling match with an angel or while making a covenant with the Divine, it feels transformational, like I'm connected to my tradition now more than ever.

The whole process of formally coming out with my new name took over a year — it actually began on Yom Kippur 5780/2019, when I was avoiding morning services and curled up on the couch watching the trippy musical finale of the Amazon Prime show *Transparent*, which features a Jewish family navigating the world after a parent, Maura, comes out as transgender. In the finale, one of the storylines they wrap up includes one of Maura's children coming out as non-binary and changing their name to Ari. You don't see Ari coming out, but in one of the first scenes of the feature-length finale is a discussion amongst Ari's siblings and their mom about how their mom needs to accept her child's new name. Throughout the rest of the finale, you see Ari exploring their gender identity, name, and their relatively newfound love for the religious side of Judaism and the intersection of all these things.

Watching this play out on screen resonated strongly with me. At the time, I was a brand-new Jewish professional still figuring out the intersection of my Judaism, and therefore my work, with my non-binary gender identity. Also at this time, I was recognizing the dissonance that I felt between the way I presented and felt and my feminine birth name. I knew that I wanted to change my name but I didn't know to what; I even had scrolled through baby name websites looking for the right fit. Watching a story that felt like mine unraveling on screen that drizzly, gray Yom Kippur morning seemed like *besmert*: I instantly fell in love with the name Ari as a name for myself.

I let this realization simmer for a while, nervous of sounding clichéd since I knew the name Ari is common in the Jewish world. I also had some self-shame around the fact that I had gotten my name from a television show. Eventually, I told my partner about Ari in spring 2020 and she wholeheartedly agreed that the name was a good fit for me. She also agreed to help me “try on” the name in private. After letting the name hang out with just the two of us for a few months, I expanded the usage of my new name to a few of my close friends, only to be met with more positive affirmations. I eventually felt empowered enough to start using Ari with my Hillel colleagues and students this past fall, which was another incredible experience. I felt bold enough to put my new name on my rabbinical school application, which was a huge deal.

And then it was suddenly the end of January and my birthday was coming up. It might seem trivial, but I didn't want to go through a round of greetings on social media where my family and friends used my birth name. On the Thursday before my birthday, I made a social media post announcing that I would be going by Ari from then on.

To my surprise, the reaction was so warm! So many affirmations from students, friends, colleagues, and family members. And then, on my birthday, to have family members sing “Happy Birthday” to me over the phone using my name plastered such a huge smile on my face.

As I mentioned, I’m not alone in the Jewish tradition of changing one’s name. Our matriarch Sarah was born Sarai and our patriarch Abraham was born Avram. It was through a covenant with God (*the* covenant with God) that they were given the names we know, with promises that they would be parents “of a multitude of nations.” And then there is Jacob, who was awarded the new name of Israel after wrestling throughout the night with an angel. I love the line of Torah where the angel gives the explanation of the name Israel as, “for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” Although the angel says this because that is a translation of what Israel means, it also relates to the experience of being trans and choosing to change your name.

Being trans can be incredibly difficult, bringing with it a multitude of barriers and obstacles when trying to access employment, housing, healthcare, or even just living your life on a day-to-day basis. It can be dangerous, especially if you are a trans woman of color. Getting to the point in your trans journey where you get to choose a name for yourself can definitely be seen as prevailing over many hurdles in your life. I know it did for me.

I also relate to the story of Jacob receiving his new name because I wrestled with my own name for over a year before coming out with it publicly. To get to choose my name and go by it feels like a true blessing, which is what Israel was for Jacob. But it was because of this wrestling that I feel even more self-assured that I am on the right path, and it feels good to know that I am following in the footsteps of ancient Jewish leaders by going by a name that differs from what I was given at my birth.

This also is relevant to my Jewish journey. I was raised secularly in a multicultural home and over time have become more observant of Judaism while feeling called to become a leader within the Jewish community. To have my public announcement of my name change come only a couple of months after learning I was accepted into rabbinical school makes me relate to these stories of Sarah, Abraham, and Israel even more, because it was in the moments that their names were given to them that they were also affirmed as being Jewish leaders who would go on to create great nations. I don’t expect to create a nation, but I do hope to aid in bringing the Jewish people towards a brighter, more universally accessible world. And I will be doing so with a name that finally feels like me.

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