

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
ASBI Congregation
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Striving and Prevailing

“In the Beginning God created Heaven and Earth - the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water— God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “Day”, and the darkness He called “Night.” And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.”

Creation and naming go hand in hand in Sefer Bereishit. וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים | לְאוֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה. god called the light “day” and the darkness was called “night.” The granting of the name is the final step in creation. For some medieval scholars, this link between naming and identity is a characteristic of Hebrew as a sacred language.

Ramban, Nachmanides, writes (Ex. 30:13) that Hebrew is called “*lashon kodesh*” the sacred language because it is the language used by God to create the universe and assign names to all that the Torah says was named directly by God.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, in the Kuzari, a masterpiece of medieval Jewish philosophy, argues that we can still see evidence that Hebrew was the language of creation in the ways that Biblical names reveal their etymology. So “*adam*” person is fashioned from “*adamah*” the earth.

And it isn't only God who bestows names. Adam gives names to the animals which they retain forever. Adam even names his own wife, לְזֵאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לְקָחָהּ זֵאת. this one will be called “woman” “*ishah*” for she was taken from a man “*ish*.” Throughout Sefer Bereishit, the Book of Genesis, parents name their children and in that way share their deepest hopes for their children or express their most vulnerable insecurities.

For Rambam, Maimonides, this is all nonsense. Language is conventional and determined by those who speak it and there is nothing whatsoever that is intrinsically special about Hebrew. The Torah was given in Hebrew because that is the language that was spoken by our ancestors who received the Torah. If the Torah had been given in the Alps instead of on *Har Sinai* it would have been given in French. Or German. Or Italian.

There are name puns in languages other than Hebrew too. “Man” and “woman” works just as well as “*ish*” and “*ishah*.” A language is holy, Rambam argues, because of how one chooses to use it to communicate, not because of anything intrinsic to the language itself.

But whether we agree with Rambam, Yehuda Halevi, or Ramban, there does seem to be a deep and organic connection between the names that God bestows in the Torah and the thing that is named. When God names something it seems to be more than just a description or a blessing; the name says something about the identity of the thing being named.

Sefer Bereishit is the book of creation. First the heavens and earth are created, and then the Jewish people is created out of the family of Avraham and Sarah. God names day and night and the other components of creation, and God gives new names to Avraham and Sarah as their family becomes the nucleus for the Jewish people.

And then, in this morning's Torah portion, God bestows a name for the very last time in the Torah.

After Yaakov's name is changed to Yisrael God stops naming things. A pattern of Divine behavior that began at the very dawn of creation comes to a sudden stop when Yaakov is given the name Yisrael. Generations later, when God once again identifies things in the world and assigns them to categories, it is done, not by giving them a name, but by associating them with a mitzvah.

In Exodus 12 God shows Moshe the first crescent of the new moon in the sky and says, “הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם” this shall be the sign of a new month to you. The moon was not given a new name; its basic and intrinsic identity were not changed. Instead, we were told to change our attitude towards the new moon and to assign it a specific task in our life of mitzvot. The moon did not change, God assigned us to have a new attitude towards the moon and a new relationship with the moon.

This is the path of the Torah. We endow the world with meaning through our mitzvah observance. Animals are kosher and not kosher. Some days, but not other days, are Shabbat and Yom Tov. The elaborate rituals of the beit hamikdash are defined and described, but not named. The Torah does not tell us what is, the Torah tells us what is to be.

And that transition began with Yisrael. s

Yaakov earned the name Yisrael when he wrestled with an angelic figure through the night:

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יִעֲקֹב יִאֲמָר עוֹד שְׁמִי כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּכָּל:

“Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.”

Yisrael is a curious name to give to someone who has prevailed over an angel. כִּי שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים “You have strived with God and with humans and prevailed.” Why not then select a name that derives from “Vatuchal?” Let Yaakov's triumph be immortalized with a name that encompasses that triumph? Yisrael evokes “ki sarita” you have struggled. What a strange name to give as a way to bless our patriarch upon his return to Eretz Yisrael!

The questions multiply when we recall that this name change did not exactly stick. Yaakov continues to use his old name alongside this new one for the subsequent decades of his life. What kind of name change is it if the old name continues to be used?

And why did the angel feel empowered to give a new name to Yaakov? Yaakov had not wanted a new name. His own father and mother never had their names changed, why would Yaakov want a new name? He had asked his angelic wrestling partner for a blessing. The wrestling partner responded with a new name which God only endorses later.

Yisrael is a name of becoming. Yisrael is a name of action. Yisrael is a name of moving towards a goal. Avraham and Sarah, the new names that were given to Avram and Sarai are names that reflect their new status as the patriarch and matriarch of the nascent Jewish people. Their old names were not used again because the names they were given more accurately reflect the achievements they had attained in their old age.

Had Yaakov's new name been “VaTuchal” or some derivative that indicated triumph and success, then he too would have been known only by that new name. But Yisrael is not about attainment, it is about orientation towards a goal. Prevailing, Vatuchal, may be pleasant but it has no religious meaning. Struggling and striving and fighting for a noble cause is more important than any final victory.

The Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hassidic Judaism, was once asked by a community for advice on selecting their next rabbi. He advised them to ask all of the candidates to share their method for overcoming the vice of arrogance. The Baal Shem Tov then told them to reject any candidate who could answer the question. Eventually they came to Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz. When asked for his technique for overcoming arrogance

he responded that he could not answer the question as he too was searching for a way to defeat that sinful character trait.

We are called Yisrael because we struggle on behalf of *kedushah*, holiness, and we struggle on behalf of *tzedek*, justice, and we struggle on behalf of *hesed* and *rahamim*, kindness and mercy. We are not defined by our successes, but by our never ending attempt to achieve greatness in precisely these ways.

The Jewish people have never been known for our great achievements. Others have built grander buildings and composed more beautiful symphonies and written more perceptive plays. Our scattered and brief attempts at self-government produced no great empires, and have all quickly ended in failure. We are not the people of victory. We are not the people who overcome. We are the people who never give up.

God stops naming in our parasha because when God grants ultimate and intrinsic meaning to something or someone, there is no longer any room for us to sanctify it and define it. Ultimately the Torah becomes, not a book of Divine definitions or declarations, but a book of mitzvot. The burden of those mitzvot grants God-given meaning and purpose to our lives in a way that no name, or status, or identity ever could.