

# Teshuvah Means Change

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Benjamin Kubeksly, David Kaminsky, Issur Danelovitch, Joseph Levitch, Shirley Schrift. All five of these individuals were born in the United States to immigrant Jewish parents at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> or in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All would achieve great celebrity status in the land to which their parents had come in search of religious freedom and economic stability. Of course, each would be better known by the stage names they had chosen: Jack Benny, Danny Kaye, Kirk Douglas, Jerry Lewis, Shelley Winters.

One cannot overstate the Jewish influence in the foundational years of the American film and entertainment industry. Virtually every major film studio was founded and headed by Jewish refugees from Europe, among them Adolph Zukor of Paramount, William Fox and Louis B. Mayer of MGM, Harry Cohn of Columbia and the Warner brothers. For the most part, however, each of these moguls strove to assimilate into the American landscape, and couldn't move far enough away from their Jewish roots.

An exception to this pattern was Carl Laemmle, the founder of Universal Studios.<sup>1</sup> Few of us have ever heard of Carl Laemmle, who died in 1939. He was born in Laupheim, a small German village in 1867, and emigrated in his teens to the United States. In the early years of the twentieth century, he gravitated towards the film industry, then in its infancy. Laemmle is not remembered nearly as well as his fellow Jewish moguls of those years, even though he would produce more than 400 motion pictures, many of them vintage classics – he is not remembered as well, likely because he devoted less time to his studio in his waning years, and most of his time and energy to the Jews he left behind in Germany and surrounding lands.

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<sup>1</sup>Neil Gabler, *Laemmle's List: A Mogul's Heroism*, NYT, April 13, 2014, Arts & Leisure pp. 1, 16.

Like Oskar Schindler, Laemmle had his list, hundreds of names of German Jews whom he sought to bring to the U.S. He battled German government officials and unsympathetic American consular officers in order to secure visas for the Jews on his list – a list to which he continually added names. For each application, he had to provide a guarantee of financial support, and a residence in the U.S., which he did, at his own expense. He used all of his political connections, and did succeed in rescuing over 300 Jews, even though anti-Semitism in high places and lack of support or interest from his industry peers prevented the number being as high as it could have been.

It is easy, and it is tempting to be overly harsh on Laemmle's peers, who separated themselves from their Jewish heritage. But understood in the context of the anti-Semitism of those times, and, unlike today, the tendency for Jews then, even traditional Jews, to downplay their Jewishness, was seen not as betrayal, but rather as survival, in a challenging historical context. It took great courage for a Carl Laemmle to defy that trend, but in that his name is largely forgotten, we recognize the price that he paid to stand up publicly for the sake of his people.

At the same time that resurgent anti-Semitism in Europe led to massive immigrations to North America, its effect was also felt in another part of the world, with the mass-aliyah migrations to pre-State Israel in the early years of the twentieth century. And similar to their contemporaries establishing themselves in the new world, new arrivals to Palestine also changed their names in response to the changing circumstances of their lives and of Jewish history.

Indeed, in the early years of the twentieth century, a word was added to the lexicon of modern Hebrew: לְעִבְרִית – to Hebraize. From the beginning of the First Aliyah in 1882, to the end of the Second Aliyah in 1914, the first two large-scale Zionist migrations to pre-State Israel, and continuing through statehood and beyond, many immigrants chose to change their surnames from their European origins into

equivalent Hebrew names. Most famously, David Gruen from Plonsk became David Ben Gurion. And six who would follow Ben Gurion as Prime Minister would change their names as well: Moshe Shertok would become Moshe Sharett, Levi Shkolnik would become Levi Eshkol, Golda Myerson, Golda Meir; Yitzhak Jeziernicky, Yitzhak Shamir; and Shimon Perski, Shimon Peres; whose passing we mourned two weeks ago. Interestingly, Israel's first President, Chaim Weizmann, refused to Hebraize his name, but his successor, Yitzhak Shimshelovich, would become Yitzhak Ben Zvi, and Israel's third President, Zalman Shazar's original name was reflective of his Hasidic roots – Shneur Zalman Rubashov.

It was not always through personal choice that Israel's leaders with European-origin names undertook the Hebraization process. Indeed, as Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion required state and diplomatic officials and army officers to adopt Hebrew surnames. He felt it incumbent upon those representing the State of Israel to sever links with the old world, and in so doing, to identify totally, and exclusively, with the fledgling Jewish homeland of Israel.

One who resisted Ben Gurion's pressure was Menahem Begin, who adamantly refused to change his name. His disagreeing with Ben Gurion was no surprise, since they agreed on virtually nothing, but his persistence in retaining his birth-name reflected his belief that the "new," even something as precious to him as the State of Israel, for which he fought his entire life, and for which, on many occasions, put his life and his freedom on the line – his persistence reflected his belief that the "new" should not replace the "old"; that the richness of heritage and Jewish tradition of the ages, could only enhance and strengthen what was being created in modern-day Israel. When Begin was called to testify before a Knesset commission late in his life, when asked his name, he replied: "*Menachem ben Dov v'Chasia Begin.*" His Israeli name and his Jewish name, in his view, were one and the same.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Gordis, *Menahem Begin*, 2014, p. xiv

So who was right? Was David Ben Gurion right to suggest a clean break with the past, that the Zionist enterprise entailed a new beginning, total change and separation from yesterday's world? Was he right in assuming that the Israeli represented the new Jew, captured so vividly in posters of the 1950's, whether in army uniform, or in the kibbutz *kovah-tembel* and shorts, on hands and knees, planting saplings in the ground – was he right in asserting that every identifying feature of the Israeli, especially his or her name, had to reflect the new facts on the ground, with the need לעברת, to transition, in total, to the Hebrew-speaking state? Or was Begin right, that it was still appropriate, even necessary, to respect and never reject the past, even the recent past, with its pains and frustrations – that it was important to carry with us, symbolically, as we would make it to the shores of Israel, those who came before us; that by preserving their names, we would be strengthening our resolve to actualize the dream that was always in the hearts and prayers of our previous generations?

When one examines the history of the First and Second Aliyah in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, one quickly realizes that name changes were the least of the problems faced by those courageous pioneering generations. Among them were the poet Rachel Bluwstein, one of Israel's most beloved literary figures, who died in 1931 at the age of 41, after having written the finest, and, perhaps the first modern Hebrew love poetry; and the historian, writer and Zionist thinker Berl Katznelson. Others were not as widely known. They were largely a generation of young men and women who left families behind in Europe to embark on an extremely hazardous journey. They were the generation that would drain swamps, that would literally transform wasteland into fertile fields, that would, out of nothing, build cities that had never before existed, such as Tel Aviv, or revive other centers of Jewish life that had been dormant for centuries or millennia. In many cases, families back in Europe were furious at their young upstarts who had left the comforts of home for such dangerous ground. In some

tragic instances, their families sat *Shivah* for them, disowned them. Here they were in an untamed, dangerous, fiercely hot, unfriendly climate, young, scared, but filled with vision. They risked all, and, in many cases, lost all, on behalf of future Jewish generations, on our behalf, because they were not prepared to sit back and wait for the Messiah. They, through their actions, proclaimed an end to Jewish waiting. They understood that the time had come for Jews, after thousands of years, to take charge of their history, not to wait for miracles or divine intervention, but to act decisively and courageously, once and for all.

And in the living memory of many of you here today, on these very shores of North America, many Jewish immigrants, and many of the first generation to be born here, changed their names, similar in a sense to the high profile founders of Hollywood, because anti-Semitism in the workplace and in society as a whole made it very difficult for Jews with overtly-Jewish sounding surnames to acclimatize in a less than friendly environment, and to find employment and success during times of economic adversity.

The fact that first and second-generation North Americans found it necessary to anglicize their surnames, in most cases, had little bearing on their sense of Jewish commitment or identity. Many if not most were instrumental in building and strengthening our local communities, synagogues and Jewish schools. Their name changes were rarely ideological, not seeking to distance themselves from their heritage or peoplehood, but rather, practical, making it easier to acculturate, and intended to help their children more readily find acceptance and opportunity in the new world.

As was the case in Israel, here too, in North America, name changes were symbolic of the far more dramatic changes in lifestyle, in language, in culture, in surroundings, to which immigrant generations had to adapt, in order to succeed. And more often than not, it was the struggles of the first immigrant generation that

made it possible for the second and third generations to truly feel at home. Many of you here tonight, seated perhaps with your children and grandchildren, can and hopefully do share stories of those early, challenging years of transition, in which you played so active a role. And those who survived the *Shoah*, and found the wherewithal to adjust to a new environment, while at the same time attempting to find healing from those horrifying years of suffering and loss, continue to inspire and amaze those who have witnessed your making that indescribably difficult transition מאפלה לאורה, from darkness to light, with such courage and such determination.

Change, whether it be one's name, one's location, one's career, one's religion, is rarely easy. It can be incredibly tough. Indeed, the major religious theme of these Holy Days is change, which we call *Teshuvah*. Literally, *teshuvah* means 'return', and it is usually translated as 'repentance'. But in fact, *teshuvah* is change. These עשרת ימי תשובה, these ten days of *teshuvah* that began with Rosh Hashanah and culminate on Yom Kippur, are supposed to lead to a personal commitment to make changes in our lives, in terms of our connection to Jewish practice and tradition, and in terms of our relationships with each other.

In his monumental *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, his Laws of *Teshuvah*, the great Rambam, Maimonides, reminds us how easy it is, when it comes to *teshuvah*, to talk the talk, but not walk the walk. In his words,<sup>3</sup> "כל המתודה בדברים ולא גמר בלבו לעזוב" – One who verbally admits wrongdoing, but doesn't really resolve in his heart to make the necessary changes – הרי זה דומה לטובל ושרץ בידו – he is like one who became impure through contact with a reptile, who then immerses himself in the *mikvah* while holding on to the reptile!" The Rambam reminds that "עד שישליך השרץ" – until he casts off the reptile" – in other words, until he changes his behavior, his act of *teshuvah* is meaningless.

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<sup>3</sup> *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 2:3

The issue of change is front-and-center in the current American election campaign, a topic that I happily avoid tonight. But change, rapid change, surrounds us in every aspect of society, and especially, in technology. What was state of the art before I began this sermon (and I won't be speaking that long), will likely become obsolete before the end of tonight's service.

Religion too, Judaism in particular, has been subject to change, and I am not speaking only of the modern period. Much of Torah law was modified in the rabbinic period, some two thousand years ago, to the extent that the Midrash tells us that when Moses was transported to the *Yeshivah* of Rabbi Akiva in the early second-century, he didn't understand a word of what was being discussed, so dramatic were the shifts in law and interpretation from the Biblical to the Rabbinic period.

So the Biblical law of loans being forgiven in the Sabbatical year was revamped by the great Hillel, in what was called *Prozbol*, whereby, instead of being forgiven, the loan was transferred to the courts. When the Torah law alone was in force, the economy, and the poor especially suffered, because people stopped making loans, since they knew they would never be repaid. And *אין תחת עין*, "an eye for an eye," and similar harsh Biblical penalties for inflicting injury, were reinterpreted by the sages to mean financial compensation, a rather modern legal understanding offered millennia ago by our sages, changing the Biblical code to conform to more up-to-date sensibilities.

Change is never easy. There will always be purists, in the U.S. known as "constructionists," who fear any modification in interpretation of codified law. And there will also be those on the other end of the spectrum, who will be too quick to change, not taking the time and the consideration necessary to balance reverence for the past and sensitivity to the present.

Just as name changes were challenging in the early years of the twentieth century, here and in Israel, other adaptations and modifications of community standards were achieved, not without difficult decades of debate, controversy, and sometimes, division and discord.

When I arrived here thirty-five years ago, as a new graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, a proud member of the “right wing” of my graduating class, I was very comfortable with our Beth David practice then, when women were excluded from Torah honors and not counted in the *minyan*. I never imagined that we would change that policy, nor that I would be the one spearheading that change. It took me years here, in my rabbinic work, to recognize the disconnect between my non-egalitarian standard and the desire to empower all congregants, male and female, into the spiritual life of our community. I love the story told by the late, modern-Orthodox rabbinic leader, Rabbi David Hartman, who received a panicked phone call from one of his former students, now serving as rabbi in a synagogue in the U.S. The call went something like this: “Rabbi Hartman, we are about to *daven minhah*, but there are seven men in shul and five women – what do I do?” Rabbi Hartman’s succinct two-word reply to his student went like this: “Idiot, *daven!*”

I love his response because it was my discomfort with leaving five women and seven men waiting to *daven*, while searching the parking lot for male stragglers, and the inevitable joke that we should convert the janitor to make the *minyan*, that led me to tell the *shaliah tzibur* to start the service without ten males present. *Minyan*, intended to create community, especially when much of that community consists of the recently bereaved, cannot succeed when its building of community is exclusionary, and hurt-inducing.

Change, in particular, in religion, takes time. The balancing act between traditional

practice and modern sensitivity is not easy. Respect for both is essential to maintain communal equilibrium, and to enable change, when appropriate, when morally correct, when sensible, to be understood and accepted by the community.

A more recent change in my personal rabbinic practice, with much less impact on the congregation, but which received substantial media attention involved my performance of a commitment ceremony between two males, a couple of years back. I had served on the Conservative Movement Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, known as the CJLS, a decade ago, when the issue of allowing for such ceremonies, along with much greater acceptance of gay, lesbian and transgender relationships, was brought to a vote. The *teshuvah*, the responsum permitting the change was passed by a vote of 13-12, thirteen in favor, twelve opposed. Back in December 2006, at the CJLS meeting at Park Avenue Synagogue, with media crews outside awaiting our decision, I was one of the twelve “no” votes, not ready to say yes to what would represent a relatively dramatic departure from normative Jewish practice.

My change was not calculated, nor did I anticipate it. Like my change in terms of accepting women’s ritual participation, it was the human element, real people and real situations, that moved me to reconsider. Some two years ago, eight years after the vote, I was approached by two young men, who came to meet with me. Their request: that I perform a commitment ceremony to consecrate their relationship. Their wish was threefold. One, that a rabbi be involved. Two, that the ceremony take place in the synagogue. Three, that the reception be strictly kosher.

Recognizing that for me, this would represent somewhat of a leap, I suggested conditions that I would impose, which, potentially, could have been deal-breakers. As a commitment ceremony, and not a classical wedding ritual, the blessings would be different, the *ketubah*, not the standard text; the ritual, not parallel to a typical male-female wedding ceremony. In a heartbeat, the guys agreed. They were not

looking to make political statements, not looking to be a test-case, but simply looking to be welcomed, as two committed, delightful, knowledgeable, young Jews, into the traditional Jewish community. I could not, nor would I decline their request, my “no” vote nine years earlier notwithstanding. The ceremony took place, and may have been one of the most moving life-cycle events of my career. The tears of joy, the *ruah*, the spirited dancing (including a significant representation of the Orthodox community) made that winter evening unforgettable.

Even though this ceremony was private, not involving the greater synagogue community, media did pick up on it, and upon my involvement. I did receive a small number of critical comments, some from people whom I love and respect. One comment suggested that I was ignoring the verse in Leviticus (that we will read tomorrow at *minhah*) that prohibits the male homosexual relationship. I responded that yes, I guess I was (one of the reasons that may have motivated my negative vote nine years earlier), but that I also ignored, as does the entire Jewish people, *mitzvot* that mandate the stoning of rebellious children and Sabbath violators. Even though activating those *mitzvot*, which have been out of practice for thousands of years, would create a great business opportunity for someone willing to enter the stone-provider industry, and even though some parents, at times, may wax nostalgic on the *בן סורר ומורה*, the rebellious child penalty, no one seriously questions why, historically, we recognize that a large percentage of *mitzvot*, including the massive sacrificial legislation, no longer apply to Jewish life, and haven't for millennia. So let's not, I suggested, make Leviticus 18:22 a foundational principle of our Jewish practice, when other *mitzvot*, including one of the ten commandments mandating Shabbat, are routinely ignored.

The other objection shared with me was that the ceremony took place in the sanctuary. Why couldn't it have taken place in the social hall, somewhere else, why the sanctuary? To suggest to committed, deeply decent, highly moral young Jews

who happen to be gay that their ceremony would defile our sanctuary, that we as a Jewish community want to add to the hurt, the ostracism, the abuse that for so long has been coming their way, in and of itself would diminish the קדושה, the holiness to which this very room aspires.

Our synagogue has to be welcoming, a place not of artificially implanted holiness, but where we derive holiness from each other, from a shared mission לתקן עולם, to build a stronger community, molding together the best of our inherited values with what contemporary science and understanding bring to our world.

Yes, change can be tough, it can be challenging, it can be controversial. In the realm of Jewish tradition, it is even more difficult as past meets present, as ageless tradition encounters modern-day sensibilities. That's why, for thousands of years, we Jews have cherished a תורה שבעל פה, an oral tradition, that mitigated the limitations of an ancient, often time-bound text. As my own experience suggests, change can be slow, should not be rushed, needs to be thoughtful and not unduly disruptive.

We have done a lot of changing as a people, especially in response to the upheavals of the twentieth century and the at-long-last return to Israel. *Teshuvah*, the call of this season, demands of us change in how we live our lives, in how we treat each other, when improvement may be necessary.

As we later will conclude tonight's service, in words frequently recited during this sacred season, we will pray: "אבינו מלכנו, החזירנו בתשובה שלמה לפניך – bring us closer to You – בתשובה שלמה – through perfect *teshuvah*," through change in us that, when necessary, will make us better able to navigate the paths of life and lead us to strengthen those who look to us, to be there for those who need us, to encourage those around us.