

Parshat Vayetze 5777

What's in a Name? In this week's Sedra, Yaakov's children were given their names. The selection of a name to commemorate a Tzadik is derived from the pasuk in Mishlei 10:7 – “the memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked shall perish”. We accordingly choose an appropriate name for a child whose future we wish to assist in following the paths of righteousness – conversely, we do not call a child after idolatrous gentiles or accursed people. The Mabit went so far as to forbid names of anyone prior to Avraham Avinu, though the minhag did not follow this; and Kometz Hamincha on Machlon and Chilyon asks who would call his child ‘disease’ or ‘destruction’ which is the apparent meaning of these names.

Yaakov's children: Each of their names have beautiful connotations:

Reuven - See my son; Shimon – Hashem has heard; Levi – My husband will accompany me; Yehudah – Thank Hashem; Yissachar – Hashem has rewarded me; Zevulun – My husband will reside with me; Dan – Hashem has vindicated me; Gad – Lucky Asher – Good fortune; Yoseph – Hashem will add on another son; Binyamin – Son of my right hand

The exception - Naphtali? Rashi quotes the view of the grammarian Menachem ben Saruq, who derives the name Naphtali / נפתלי from the root פתל as in the phrase from Bamidbar 19:15 צמיד פתיל which means ‘closely joined’ or ‘tightly bound’. He thereby interprets pasuk 30:8, that mentions Naphtali's birth as follows: “I (Rachel) have been joined and made equal to my sister Leah by heavenly bonds”. Rashi is unhappy with this because, as explained in Tosfos Hasholem, it is impossible for Rachel who had only achieved two sons to say that she had equalled Leah who had many more.

Rashi himself connects the etymology of Naphtali with the word פתלחול as found in Devarim 32:5 meaning ‘twisted’. He translates the pasuk 30:8, also negatively, as follows: “I (Rachel) have twisted with turnings to Hashem to be like my sister, and I have also prevailed (in that Hashem has consented to let me have a son)”. Artscroll elaborates on this lucidly stating this to mean: “I have attempted every possible scheme to influence Hashem to grant me children as He did my sister”. (Rachel prayed, blamed Yaakov, sought to intimidate him with the threat of her literal or figurative ‘death’ and finally gave him Bilhah.) She refers to these varying attempts to influence Hashem as “schemes and manoeuvres”. These interpretations have the possible negative connotation of twisting, struggling, fighting and wrestling. There are however many positive explanations (and refutations of the above), one of which is from the Sforno on

30:16, that what these all have in common is an emphasis placed on the virtue of personal effort (*hishtadlus*) - *one does not count on a miracle, but tries everything within one's power in order to achieve the desired goal.*

Beautiful meanings of Naphtali: It must be added that there are also many beautiful midrashim based on the name of Naphtali. For example, one quoted by the Torah Shelemah takes the whole word Naphtali and reads its letters differently as נפת לי. Rachel was saying that divrei Torah would be expounded in my territory of Naphtali. According to the Shemot Rabbah, this refers to Tiberias in the land of Naphtali, where the seat of the Sanhedrin was situated for a time (see Bava Kamma 81b).

Tosfos Hasholem makes mention of the fact that Naphtali has a gematria of $50 + 80 + 400 + 30 + 10 = 570 =$ gematria of עשר = $200 + 300 + 70 = 570$. עשר = Ten refers to the 10,000 men from Naphtali who enlisted for the war against Sisra in Shoftim 4:10.

Naming after a person who suffered ill fortune? Finally, there is a principle of not calling a person after another who suffered ill fortune. A very important source for this is found in Yam Shel Shlomo of the illustrious Maharshah on Gittin 4:31:

“Yeshayohu/ ישעיהו – so it is found written Yeshayohu with a final letter vav throughout sefer Melachim and Yeshayohu. However, the general usage is not to call anyone by this name, but rather (the abbreviated version) Yeshaya/ ישעיה (without the final vav). The belief is that it was not wished to call people after Yeshayohu because of his ill-fortune, for his grandson Menashe murdered him in a cruel and bizarre manner (see Yevamos 49b). So they named children instead after the Yeshaya in Divrei Hayamim (Chapter 3:21); or maybe they did have in mind Yeshayohu's superior qualities as a Novi, so they changed the name just slightly – to avoid the problem of the ill-fated name, but yet to retain the advantages of being called after the Novi. Therefore, in the absence of any contrary indication, the correct name to insert in a Get will be Yeshaya.”

It would seem that the Beis Shmuel assumes that the Rema would disagree with this Maharshah, as in Even Ho'ezer 129:26, the Rema paskens that the usual name is Gedalyahu rather than Gedalya. This is notwithstanding that Gedalyahu ben Achikam was also murdered i.e. that despite his ill fortune; people do call their children after him. Using the same principle, Yeshayohu should therefore be acceptable too.

דבר תורה לפרשת השבוע לעילוי נשמת אמה של סוון מרתה מרת לאה בת יצחק ע"ה ביום היארצייט לפטירתה יא כסלב