

A Town by Any Other Name

Lech Lecha 5780

How many of you have visited, heard of or have family in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Nof? If you've ever been there, you know that it is defined by its majestic views of the Jerusalem forest that surrounds it, and other Jerusalem neighborhoods. Indeed, it is named after this view- Har Nof translates as Mountain with a View. It is also a melting pot of Israeli religious life; since 1984, it has been headquarters to the Israeli branch of the Bostoner Chassidim, with a strong presence of members of other chassidic groups. There has always been a considerable Anglo Dati Leumi presence, as well as many well known Chareidi personalities. It is a hub of Torah, chessed and, of late, a number of financial firms have opened offices there as well. Tragically, Har Nof is not just known for these attributes. Since November of 2014, it has become synonymous with one of the many brutal, horrific terrorist acts that are part of the history of the State of Israel- the massacre in the Bnei Torah shul. Prior to that, however, Har Nof was famous for something else: it was the neighborhood that former Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, Maran Rav Ovadia Yosef, of righteous memory, called home. From his residence on Rechov HaKablan and his yeshiva that was adjacent, he taught Torah to the masses, gave ethnic and spiritual pride to his adherents and issued the courageous and groundbreaking halachic

rulings that were his trademark. This past week, the mayor of Jerusalem, Moshe Lion, stunned Har Nof residents by informing them, without their consent or input, that their neighborhood would no longer be known as Har Nof. Henceforth, it would be known as Ne'ot Yosef, after Rav Ovadia Yosef and Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv. Unsurprisingly, the residents of Har Nof did not take this lying down. To change the name of a neighborhood flies in the face of its history. The community that has been built, the Torah that was studied by Rav Ovadia and so many others, the blood that was shed- all those happened in Har Nof, not Ne'ot Yosef.

Perhaps in navigating this situation, our brethren living in Har Nof might look to this week's Torah reading, because its two main protagonists go through a similar experience.

בראשית פרק יז

(ה) וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת-שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָם וְהָיָה שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָהָם כִּי אֲבֵרְהֶם כִּי אֲבֵרְהֶמוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ:

...

(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם שְׂרֵי אֲשַׁתְּךָ לֹא-תִקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמָהּ שְׂרֵי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ:

And you shall no longer be called Abram and Sarai, instead your names shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations, and Sarah- for that is her name.

There were other name changes in the Torah subsequently, but this is distinct for several reasons: it is the very first name change - and it is permanent. It is the only one where the name change is prefaced with the directive that the previous name shall never be used again. Most notably, Yaakov - who is given the name Yisrael, but reverts back to his birth name throughout his life.

When placed in this context, it begs the question: why would we want to change a name at all? Why not give the names Avraham and Sarah originally?

To quote Shakespeare,

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet.”

What difference does it make whether it’s Avram of Avraham, Sarai or Sarah, Hoshea or Yehoshua and Har Nof or Ne’ot Yosef?

In the Torah, we find that names serve two functions. They can be ontological, defining one’s existence and essence, or teleological, defining one’s purpose. Until Avraham, names fell into the first category. Adam is so named because he is fashioned from the *adamah*, from the earth. His

partner Chava was named that because she was the **אם כל חי**, the progenitor of all living things. These are definitional, factual titles. The pattern continues; it is what the Medrash¹ meant when it described Adam's process in naming the animals, whereby he incorporated their essence, and their function, into their names. For example, a donkey is the epitome of a material existence, or **חומר**- it is a beast of burden, bred to carry things and people from one place to another. Later on, this methodology was still employed by Yitzchak in naming one of his twin sons. When Esav emerged an **אדמוני**, red headed or with a ruddy complexion, Yitzchak calls him *Edom*, or "the red one."

But with Avraham's name change, we see a paradigm shift. No longer are names ontological; instead, they become *teleological*, focused on a person's sense of purpose and mission. Avram and Sarai were the names they were given when they were born, but those names only went so far. The name Avram- an elevated individual- **אברם**, gave him the strength to reject his

¹ בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת בראשית פרשה יז
א"ר אחא בשעה שבא הקדוש ברוך הוא לבראת את האדם, נמלך במלאכי השרת, אמר להן נעשה אדם,
אמרו לו אדם זה מה טיבו, אמר להן חכמתו מרובה משלכם, הביא לפניהם את הבהמה, ואת החיה, ואת
העוף, אמר להם זה מה שמו ולא היו יודעין, העבירן לפני אדם, אמר לו זה מה שמו, אמר זה שור, זה
חמור, זה סוס, וזה גמל, ואתה מה שמך אמר לו אני נאה להקרא אדם שנבראתי מן האדמה, ואני מה
שמי, א"ל לך נאה להקראות אדני שאתה אדון לכל בריותיך,

idolatrous upbringing and formulate a monotheistic identity amidst a pagan world. The name Avraham meant that God was telling him, “I did not put you in this world to be all alone (the עברי). Your mission now is no longer to be an iconoclast, but to spread your teachings far and wide- to other nations, to your disciples and, most importantly, to your future children.” The Malbim (Gen. 17:15) explains that this was the reason behind the name change for Sarai, which originally meant “my princess and superior.” Just as Avraham took on a new status as the “father of a multitude of nations,” Sarah too, was to take on a more universal status role, reflected in the name Sarah, **princess of all**, and not just Sarai, princess of Avraham.

מלבי"ם בראשית פרק יז פסוק טו

ויאמר אלהים. בא דבור מיוחד שלישי בעבור שרה, שרי אשתך עד הנה נקראת שרי, כי עיקר שמה היה יסכה ואברהם קראה שרי ר"ל שרתי שלי, עתה שאתה נעשית אב המון גוים כן היא שרה שמה, ע"ש השררה הכוללת לא המיוחדת לך:

In the name change of Avraham and Sarah, we find a challenge for us. There is no legitimate claim in Judaism to say “this is who I am, and I can be no greater. I am limited by a set of parameters- psychological, financial and intellectual- and I cannot and will not change.” These parameters may be true, but they also serve as a cop out. Indeed, the sin of the generation of the Tower of Bavel, known as the דור הפלגה, the generation of the division, can be summed up in three words: ונעשה לנו שם- let us make for ourselves a name.

They wanted to be recognized for who they were, not for what they could accomplish. In fact, our name is not our fate- it is our purpose, and what we should live up to, not that which we've inherited, but rather that which we can achieve. Avraham is promised the exact opposite by God, אגדלה שמך, that He will make the institution of names great, by endowing them with a sense of ambition and mission.

Though most of us are not asked to undergo a name change, perhaps we can put more emphasis upon our Jewish name and what it connotes. Sadly, it seems that Jewish names are often used solely at lifecycle events- the naming of a child, their bar or bat mitzvah, weddings, God forbid if they experience illness and, after 120 years, in their memorial prayers. The fact that we invoke these names at these auspicious occasions means that we understand, intuitively, how significant they are.

Rabbi Emmanuel Feldman, the legendary Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Beth Jacob in Atlanta, opens his memoir, *Tales out of Shul*, with the story of the first Rabbinic question he ever received in the position that would span his entire career.

I was duly ordained, accepted my first pulpit, and anxiously awaited my first religious question. It was not one for which my yeshivah training had prepared me: "We just had a baby boy. What is the Hebrew name for Nicholas?"

Now that's a fine name for a Jewish boy: Nicholas Greenstein. Nick. It has a certain panache to it, a certain cadence - *goyish*, but not completely. Not yet. If Nicholas still has its Greenstein to maintain some vestigial ancestral memories, Nick's own first-born, in the shifting sands of time, will probably be Nicholas, Jr. Not Nicholas Greenstein, Jr., but some other name with a less Jewish residue which, in a guilt-assuaging maneuver, will undoubtedly begin with a "G": Guerin perhaps, which still has some subtle greenery growing within it. Perhaps Graham. No vestiges of anything there. Grimes? Green? It will probably be Guerin: Nicholas Guerin, Jr., followed in a generation by Nicholas Guerin III, devoted member of the First Episcopalian Church of Atlanta.

Here was an infant in whose fate I was now an accomplice. By giving him a Hebrew name, was I not contributing to the delinquency of a Jewish minor? Rabbi, I said to myself, just tell Mrs. Greenstein that Nicholas is not a suitable name for a Jewish boy. Certainly the child was not being named after his grandfather.

"Mazal Tov, Mrs. Greenstein. Now, let me see. Nicholas is a very interesting name. Is he being named after anyone?"

"His grandfather. He had some really Jewish name that began with an 'N.' No one is really sure what it was, 'Nemmy' or 'Neemy,' something like that. We thought Nicholas would be a fitting remembrance because it retains the N."

Having grown up in a rabbi's home, I was not unfamiliar with such insipidities, but I could not help thinking to myself: Am I going to spend the balance of my life providing people with the Hebrew equivalents for Butch and JoAnn, Cleo and BettyLou? (Baruch, Chana, Kalman, and Beracha Lea were my contributions to Jewish posterity.)

To Mrs. Greenstein I suggested Nehemiah. She liked it but could not quite pronounce it. It didn't matter, because I knew

that Nicholas would not be called Nehemiah more than a total of four times in his life: at his Bris Milah, Bar Mitzvah, wedding, and, if he was still listening, his funeral.

I was young, sure of myself, and angry at the creeping assimilation that the Nicholases of the Jewish world represented — and I was wrong about little Nick. Over the years, strange things occurred in the Greenstein household. Against all odds, Nick's parents gradually changed their way of living: they added kashrut to their home, later they began observing Shabbat, and lo and behold, Nicholas Greenstein entered the local Jewish day school, went on to a Jewish high school in another city, and today is a professional who is an observant Jew. His shingle reads: Nehemiah Greenstein, Ph.D.

I was wrong about his children as well. Not only are they not "Juniors"; they don't bear secular names at all. They are Chaim and Devora and Yaakov and Meir and Lea, and this is what everyone, Jew and non-Jew, calls them. They are not headed for the First Episcopalian Church.

Rabbi Feldman's anecdote reminds us that a name is not merely a casual label, a sobriquet which may be used as a descriptor and identify - rather, our name is our life's charge, it motivates us, and reminds us of the possibility that we can accomplish much more than what appears to be possible.

I cannot say how I would feel right now if I had the privilege of residing in Har Nof, nor do I have the right to weigh in on the debate. But I will add one argument in defense of the mayor. Naming a neighborhood after Rav Ovadia and Rav Elyashiv tells all current and future residents that they can strive for greatness and achieve it. Rav Ovadia himself, whose yahrtzeit was

last week, was born in humble circumstances. His father was not a Torah scholar; he was a shopkeeper who attempted to end the career of his brilliant son on the grounds that it was time for him to take his place in the family business. Yet, where would Sephardic Jewry, and world Jewry be, without his leadership and vision?

And so the next time someone tries to categorize us, label us, restrict us to a given set of parameters, or exclude us, it would be wise to remember the words ואגדלה שמך, our name makes us great and, more importantly, it continues to make us even greater.