

## How Do I Look?

Lech Lecha 5782

The name Avraham Leizer Grussgott is one that may be familiar to Dallasites, or anyone who read Liz Liener's biography of Marcus Rosenberg, as he was a friend of the Rosenberg brothers since their Bardejov days. After the war, he emigrated to the United States and served as an executive director of a number of shuls in Brooklyn, where he was beloved as a *chevremán* with a boisterous personality and a terrific sense of humor. My dear friend and colleague Rabbi Moshe Grussgott of Kansas City is his grandson, and at the bris of his son Avraham Eliezer (Ezra), he told a humorous story about his grandfather.

*Although he was only about 5'4, he had a cousin, a pious and serious chassid named Naftuli, who was maybe 2 inches shorter than him. He would affectionately make fun of how short Naftuli was. He'd say "Naftuli can walk underneath the dining room table with an umbrella, and it still wouldn't hit the bottom of the table!" Apparently one time, Naftuli broke from his serious demeanor. [Invoking the famous biblical giant, he] responded very gently with: "you know, Avraham Leizer, you're not exactly Oyg Meylech HaBooshan yourself."*

Og is a nearly deathless person, whose life spans the entire Torah. In this week's Parsha, our sages identify him as the survivor who informs Avraham that Lot had been taken captive. Elsewhere, our sages describe him as having been saved from the flood by holding on to the

Ark and swimming. In Parashat Chukkat<sup>1</sup>, Og gathers his army to wage war against the Israelites who marched through the Bashan, and God promises Moshe victory. Finally, in Parashat Devarim, recounting this incident, Og is identified as the sole survivor of the *Repha'im*, the race of giants that once inhabited the land.

How did Og get his name? If you think about it, with a name like Og, how could he be *anything but* a belligerent giant? Somehow, “Og the massage therapist” or “Og the accountant” doesn’t really fit. In 1994, the magazine *The New Scientist* published a hypothesis called “Nominative Determinism,” which suggested that people gravitate toward areas of work that fit their names. Years before that, the columnist Franklin P. Adams coined these “aptronyms,” or names that are especially appropriate for what the person is, or does. For example, Lord Russell Brain was a British neurologist, and the founder of Tito’s Vodka, Bert “Tito” Beveridge. The corollary to this is “inaptronyms,” or names that are ironic based on the profession of the one who holds them. Some of my favorite examples are that of the recently retired CEO of Food for the Poor, whose name is Robin Mahfood, and that of the late Roman Catholic Archbishop of Manila, Jaime Sin. It gets even better: on May 24, 1976, Pope John Paul VI made him a member of the College of Cardinals, and henceforth, he was known as Jaime Cardinal Sin!

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<sup>1</sup> Bemidbar 21:33

So while Og sounds like a perfect aptronym, Tosafos<sup>2</sup> quotes the Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer<sup>3</sup> and asserts that the name was appended to him after a particular incident. When Og came to Avraham to tell him about Lot, he encountered Avraham in the granary, making cakes (עוגות) for Pesach, and that's why he was given that name. The Baal HaTosafos based his interpretation upon a prominent view found in rabbinic literature, that the Avot observed all 613 biblical commandments as well as some Rabbinic ones. (It's important to note that some *rishonim* disagree with this idea, stating that no mitzvot were observed until *Matan Torah*). In this interpretation, Avraham was not baking cakes; his preparation for Pesach was to bake matzot, yet to the untrained eye, they looked like flatbreads or cookies. When Og approached him to share the news about Lot being taken into captivity, he didn't see them as anything holy. Instead, all he saw was עוגות, cookies- and somehow the name עוג stuck, much in the same way that Cookie Monster will forever be known by that moniker even if he has shifted to a more balanced diet of late.

Here is a man who has survived the two greatest catastrophes in the history of the world thus far, yet his entire persona, his very name, is based upon his perception in one fleeting moment. Noticing what Avraham was baking wasn't even the purpose of his visit, which was actually an errand of mercy for which he was rewarded with a long life. Indeed, Moshe was terrified of Og precisely because of his behavior on this visit, because he was worried that Og had accrued considerable merits that would stand him in good stead on the battlefield. How can we reduce him, nickname him, based on this event alone?

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<sup>2</sup> Niddah 61a

<sup>3</sup> 34

I think this Tosafos is teaching us something important. Your name, your reputation is determined by the way in which you see the world around you. To Og, seder night isn't a majestic evening of family, song, and the bread of faith- it's a meal, one we need to hurry up for, and the central food item is just a snack. Usually, nicknames like this are the product of an inside joke, something from the schoolyard, are based on an idiosyncrasy or an incident that had long been forgotten. I remember once meeting an old classmate of my father's whom my father still knew as Schmaltz, even though his actual name is Samuel. Sometimes these nicknames persist even after death. Every time I'm at Restland Memorial Park, I find myself wondering about Elycia Fanarof, whose nickname, "Bubbles", is also engraved on her tombstone. Because Og never thinks beyond the mundane, never transitions to a more mature, more spiritual perspective, he never lives down his childhood nickname.

Og's name presents a challenge for us as well. How do we look at the world around us? Do we look at the holy and see the mundane, like Og, or look at the mundane and see the holy? Is our enjoyment of Shabbos solely defined by the dips course, the herring at kiddush or the quality and quantity of alcohol that is being served, or are those incidental vehicles to enhance the change of pace and augment the spirituality of the day? Is a wedding an open bar, fancy food, a chance to dress nicely and maybe an excuse to travel, or is it a celebration of two people entering into a sacred relationship and are about to build a Jewish home? When you see a kitchen, do you think of all the cool appliances and gadgets it contains, or all the chessed that can originate there, in the form of *hachnasat orchim*, meals for those who

are sick or new in town, or donations to food banks? My great uncle, Rav Eliezer Rackovsky zt”l, was the director of the Zion Blumenthal Orphanage, in the heart of the Geula neighborhood in Yerushalaim for many decades, until his passing in 1996. The orphanage has an attached simcha hall for smaller events like engagement parties and bar mitzvahs, and on one Shabbos many years ago, the Alexander Rebbe of Bnei Brak came to Yerushalaim. To accommodate larger crowds, the Rebbe held the Shabbos morning kiddush in that hall. You may recall from when the Modziter Rebbe visited Dallas, or if you’ve ever been to a different *tish* before, that one of the central events in a tish is when the Rebbe distributes *shirayim*- literally, leftovers, when the Rebbe hands out food from his table to his disciples. As a gesture of respect and gratitude, the Rebbe invited my great-uncle for Kiddush as well and seated him in a prominent location. After making kiddush, he began to distribute the kugel. The way the Rebbe did it was to take his hand and stick it in the tray of kugel, taking out a small amount and dumping it on a plate. My uncle was repulsed. Sensing his discomfort, the Rebbe turned to him and said, “Reb Leizer, I understand why you’re uncomfortable. You’d prefer I cut the kugel with silverware, and eat it with silverware too. But think about it. When you buy silverware, you immerse it in the mikvah, and that’s all- you don’t have to do anything else to make it usable. That fork and knife you want- when was the last time it was in the mikvah? Probably years ago! My hand was in the mikvah ***this morning!***” The Rebbe understood this lesson well. To him, the kugel was just a prop, and it, along with his holy hand, was another vehicle for bringing sanctity to the world.

Let us learn from “*Oyg Melech Habooshan*” and let us put on holy-colored glasses. What we see in the world around us determines not only our reputation, but the kind of world we create.