

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

**Parashat Lech Lecha
November 12, 2016**

**פרשת לך לך
יא במרחשון תשע"ז**

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* [Genesis] 12:1-17:27

In this *parasha*, Avram and Sarai follow Hashem's call to journey to Cana'an, where the covenant between Hashem and Avraham is affirmed. Avram, renamed Avraham, has a son with Hagar, Sarai's maid, and Hashem promises that Sarai, renamed Sarah, will bear a son as well.

In chapter 14, verse 13, Avram is referred to as אַבְרָם הָעִבְרִי – *Avram Ha'Ivri*. Two main reasons are given for the appellation of *Ivri*. The first is that, according to a verse in the Book of Yehoshua [Joshua] 24:3, Avram came מֵעֵבֶר לַיַּרְדֵּן – *me'ever layarden*, from across the Jordan River. Hence the term *Ivri*. One who comes from Berlin and lives in Berlin would not bear the name "Berliner." Only someone who comes from Berlin, but lives in a different city would have that name. Avram, having come from Ur Kasdim in modern-day Iraq, and now living in Cana'an, modern-day Israel, would logically have been referred to as the *Ivri*. An alternate explanation is that Avram is a direct descendent of Ever [עֵבֶר], one of the sons of Shem, who in turn was one of the three sons of Noach. *Ivri* [עִבְרִי] then becomes the equivalent of "Jackson" or "Johnson" whose origins are "son of Jack" or "son of John."

It is from the term *Ivri* that we derive the name of the language of our ancient texts and our modern State: עִבְרִית – *Ivrit*. The word "Hebrew" is actually the Anglicization of the Hellenization [Greek transliteration] of the word *Ivri*.

Yet the Jewish people today are not referred to as עִבְרִיִּים, Hebrews. In fact, in some places, it is considered a pejorative term. Instead we are Jews, the diminutive of יְהוּדִים – *Yehudim*, "Judaites."

This name is of a significantly later origin and derives from the last existing tribe of the Southern Kingdom, that of *Yehudah*, Judah, after the others tribes of the Northern Kingdom were exiled by Assyria around the 8th Century BCE, never to be heard from again. What remained were יהודים, *Yehudim*, members of the tribe of Judah. As a matter of fact, the first person in the *TaNakh* who bears the designation *Yehudi* is Mordechai in the Book of Esther, a story which takes place after the exile of the Northern Kingdom.

Many scholars date the existence of the “Jewish” people to this era, maintaining that earlier religionists were “Hebrews” or “proto-Jews.”

There is one more term that is used to refer to Jews today, but is not quite accurate. The term *anti-Semitism* [meaning “opposed to Semites”] was coined in 1879 by the German agitator Wilhelm Marr to designate the anti-Jewish campaigns underway in central Europe at that time. Although the term now has wide currency, it is a misnomer, since it implies a discrimination against all Semites: those who are descended from Shem, the son of Noach. Arabs and many other peoples are also Semites, and yet anti-Arab activity is not referred to as anti-Semitism; the term is limited to thoughts or actions against Jews.

So we are “Jews” descended from the “Ivri” who speak “Hebrew,” who some people refer to as “Semites.” Perhaps this is paradigmatic of a people that is far from monolithic, and that in the modern era defies a singular nomenclature, an idea that, in fact, is something that I think we Jewish people should be proud of.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Are you an “American Jew” or a “Jewish American”? What is the difference between the two, if any?
- Name some ways it might matter how one person refers to another person. Why would it matter in those cases?
- If you had to give a new name to the Jewish people today, what name would you choose and why?