

Torah Talk - מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Vayishlach
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פרשת וישלח
ט"ז בכסלו תשע"ט

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 32:4-36:43

In this *parasha*, Yaakov confronts Eisav, wrestles with a “man” who blesses him by changing his name to Yisrael, loses his wife Rachel in childbirth, and experiences the trauma of the incident with his daughter Deena.

The Torah and the rabbis place great import on the meaning of a name. We learn of the power of naming from Adam, who is charged by God to name all of the animals. According to Ramban (Nachmanides – 13th Century Spain/Palestine), as each animal passed before him, Adam would discern that animal’s distinctive nature and grant it a name according to its nature. When God wants to mark Avram and Sarai for their devotion, God adds the letter *hey* – a symbol of God’s own name – to their names, now calling them Avraham and Sarah. Many centuries later, the rabbis in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Sages) noted that there are three crowns in the world, but the *keter shem tov*, the crown of a good name, is greater than all of them. And the rabbis also teach us that a *shinui shem* – a change of names – can result in a *shinui mazal* – a change in one’s luck or fortune.

In this week’s *parasha*, we also have a change in names. Not once, but twice, Yaakov is given a new name: Yisrael. The first time we hear about the change is toward the beginning of the *parasha*, after a long night in which Yaakov wrestles with a mysterious being. When the sun rises and this mysterious being indicates Yaakov has won and should release him, Yaakov demands a blessing. The being then tells Yaakov (32:29) “ לא יַעֲקֹב עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ--כִּי, אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים “ (32:29) “ Your name shall be called no more Yaakov, but Yisrael; for you have wrestled with God and with people, and have prevailed.”

Later in the *parasha*, we see this name change repeated, but this time it is God who bestows the name, saying (35:10): “ לֹא-יִקְרָא שְׁמֶךָ עוֹד יַעֲקֹב, כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיֶה ” – ‘You shall be called Yaakov no more, but Yisrael shall be your name.’ Thus God named him Yisrael.”

There are at least two unusual aspects of this story. First, why does God need to change Yaakov’s name if it had already been done? And second, why does the Torah sometimes continue to refer to Yisrael as Yaakov, even after this point? After all, Maimonides (12th Century Spain/Egypt) teaches us that anyone who calls Avraham by the name Avram after his name was changed would be transgressing a commandment. Why doesn’t the same hold true with Yaakov?

On the first question, Rashi (11th Century Franco-Germany) explains that God needed to repeat the granting of the name because it was God’s prerogative to give Yaakov the name change and the blessing. The first time the name was changed, it appears that it had been because Yaakov demanded the change and, therefore, one might think it was only given under duress. God repeats the name change to make it clear that God is granting the new name to Yaakov because God wants to give him this blessing, not because Yaakov demanded it.

On the second issue, regarding why Yaakov is sometimes called Yaakov and sometimes called Yisrael, the commentator Or HaChaim (Chaim Ibn Attar – 18th Century Morocco/Palestine) explains that when God grants a new name, it is to indicate a change in the person’s soul, in the person’s very essence. When this happens, the person’s old essence is not uprooted altogether, but rather, something is added onto it. Therefore, he explains, there are times when we see the character acting as Yaakov and there are times when we see him acting as Yisrael, and the Torah indicates which is which by using the appropriate name in each moment. Or HaChaim explains that this was also true of Avraham, but in that case, because his former name, Avram, was already included in his new name, there was no need to revert to it.

This commentary offers us an important insight about how people change. When a person makes a decision to make a change in his or her life, the “old” person still lies within, no matter how dramatic the change may appear to others. This is true regardless of what the change is, whether it is living a healthier lifestyle, converting to a different religion, switching careers, or something else. Often we will see someone acting in a new way and say that they are a “totally different person” from how – or who – they used to be. In reality, while some behaviors may have changed,

the individual will often share that they miss certain aspects of the previous life, or are still tempted by some of their old temptations. The Or HaChaim is teaching us that this is natural and that we always bring our “old selves” into our “new selves.”

Happy Thanksgiving and Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What does your name mean? Were you named after someone?
- How is a person connected to his or her name? How would you feel if someone changed your name?
- Do you have a different Hebrew and English name? If so, why do you think that is?