

Drashah Vayishlah 5770—Changing Names, Changing Lives

I have a confession to make—Marci Jacobs is not my real name. While Jacobs is my legal name, the name that appears on my birth certificate, and the name my father grew up with, it is not our authentic family name. Like countless others who came to this country with long, European, Jewish-sounding names, my family's name was changed soon after their arrival in America from Humenne, which was then in Hungary. Originally, when my great-great-grandparents came here in the late 19th century they were all Jacobowitz. The 5 daughters kept their last name, changing it to their husbands' upon marriage. The 3 sons took a different route. Arnold became Jacoby (with a "Y"), Milton (Max) become Jacobi (with an "I"), and Yosef Yonah, my great-grandfather, became Jacobs.

When my branch of the family became Jacobs, we lost some connection to our other family members. I have never met any Jacoby/i-s—I have only heard about their existence through relatives who keep track of our family tree, and recently I have started doing a little research on my own through the Jewish genealogical resources

available on the internet. Admittedly, I do not know why my ancestors chose to change their name. It is likely that the social exigencies of the day made it easier for them to succeed in business (my great-grandfather had a printing and advertising agency in New York) with a more easily pronounceable, less overtly Jewish name. Making the change from Yosef Yonah Jacobovicz to J. Jonas Jacobs undoubtedly had an impact on my great-grandfather's life. It allowed him to function more easily in American society. As a constituent of the melting pot, perhaps his new name made him feel more connected to those around him. It was certainly an entrée into an American identity. As J. Jonas Jacobs, he was, in many ways, an entirely new person.

Name changes are not the exclusive province of modern immigrants. The Torah gives us many examples of our ancestors whose names were changed. Avram became Avraham; Sarai became Sarah; a little later on, Hoshea becomes Yehoshua. These name changes are all relatively slight, involving the addition of an extra letter—a *hey* or a *vav*—to the original name. However, they indicate a major change in status. The added letters come from the name of God; their insertion

into these figures' names shows the closeness of their relationship to the Holy One, their important role in carrying forward the covenant between God and Israel.

Parashat Vayishlah gives us another example of a patriarch who has his name changed. Upon hearing that his brother *Esav* is coming to meet him, *Ya'akov* panics, fearing that his brother seeks to kill him. Sending his family to safety across the *Yabbok*, *Ya'akov* is left alone to spend the night. A mysterious man wrestles with him until dawn, wrenching his hip, and changing his name from *Ya'akov*, to *Yisrael*, meaning, as the man explains, that he has wrestled with beings both divine and human and prevailed.

Ya'akov's shift to *Yisrael* is noteworthy on a number of levels. First, it is a total name change. Rather than slightly altering his original name to showcase his relationship with God, the man gives him an entirely new name. While the new name, *Yisrael*, does include a reference to God, the main purpose of the name is not to demonstrate a new aspect of God in *Ya'akov's* life, but rather a new aspect of *Ya'kov*. Second, the name-change is not absolute. Despite the mysterious

man's declaration that "Your name shall no longer be *Ya'kov*," the Torah refers to him both as *Ya'kov* and as *Yisrael* throughout his life story and beyond. The people who spring from his family are known both as *b'nei Yisrael*, the children of Israel, and *beit Ya'akov*, the house of Jacob. Whatever the larger message of his name-change—and we'll get to that in a moment—it is not meant to completely override his experience as *Ya'akov*.

In order to see the real significance of *Ya'akov's* name-change, I want to look at both aspects of it—its completeness and non-absolute-ness—from *Ya'akov's* perspective. What did it mean for *Ya'kov* to have his name completely changed to *Yisrael*? The meanings of the two names shed some light on this. *Ya'kov* was so named, in the words of the Torah, because he came out of the womb holding onto his twin brother's *eikev*, or heel. *Ya'akov* literally means, "he shall pursue." *Ya'akov* certainly lived up to this prediction, pursuing the birthright and blessing that rightfully belonged to *Esav*, pursuing wealth and stability by working for—and then by outmaneuvering—his father-in-law—much of his life to this point has been about trying to grasp at the heels of the things he seeks.

Yisrael, which the Torah explains means, “one who struggles with God,” is also a name that relates to pursuit. But in this case, the pursuit is not of material wants, but of God, of a connection to the Divine presence. *Yisrael* is to be a person who seeks the way of God. Rashi’s commentary adds another dimension to how this change portended for *Ya’kov*’s future. He writes: It will no longer be said that your blessings came to you בעקבה טו, through ruthless pursuit, or deceitfully. Rather, they will come to you through שררה, leadership (a play on the name *Yisrael*) and open honesty. Whereas *Ya’kov* became successful through dishonesty, always grasping at something or someone’s heel, *Yisrael* would attain blessing through honest connection with God. When *Ya’kov* had his name changed to *Yisrael*, it meant that his life would be taking a new direction.

And yet, *Ya’kov* remained in use as his name. The non-completeness of his name change indicates his new identity would not be replacing his old one. Both names, both identities, would co-exist in his future life. The Midrash, in Bereishit Rabbah, even presents a dispute about which name—*Ya’akov* or *Yisrael*—was the “essential”

name and which was “secondary.” *Yisrael* would be his future, but his past as *Ya’kov* would still be a part of who he was. Moreover, there would be times when his past as *Ya’kov* would serve him well, and times when it would have an impact on the dynamics of his own family.

Over the next few chapters of Bereishit, we will see *Yisrael* emerge—as the two brothers reunite peacefully, with our newly changed patriarch telling *Esav*, his brother, that seeing his face is like seeing the face of God. And he will again need to refer back to what he learned as *Ya’akov*, as his sons engage in the same kind of deceit that dominated his own earlier life when they throw their brother, Joseph, in a pit and arrange to have him sold to a passing caravan. *Ya’akov*’s life was changed when he became *Yisrael*, but it did not obliterate his history. While things might have been more pleasant for him if becoming *Yisrael* had erased all the difficulties he encountered as *Ya’akov*, his life was made fuller by both sets of experience—the tranquility and personal growth he experienced as *Yisrael*, and the turmoil and pain he faced as *Ya’akov*. As someone

who embraced both of his names, both of his identities, he becomes a model for us.

Like my family coming over to America, and like *Ya'kov*, we often change our names to reflect shifts in our identities. Upon marriage, many change their names, taking on a new spouse's family name, hyphenating, or choosing a new family name together. There is an ancient tradition of taking on a new name during a difficult sickness, the idea being that the new name would transform the ailing person's identity into a person who can be healed. People who choose to become Jewish have the opportunity to choose a Hebrew name as a part of their new Jewish identity. Some of us shed childhood nicknames when we become adults.

Our identities—our life experiences, how we see ourselves, how others see us, how we want others to see us—these are all things that shift throughout our lives, and our names, like *Ya'akov's*, may make a similar shift to reflect our changing selves. Whatever our names, and whatever stage in our development they signify, *Ya'kov's* lesson teaches us that we can never leave behind our former

selves—nor would we necessarily want to. Our “past lives” may contain parts of ourselves we’d like to transcend. And they also likely contain parts of ourselves we cherish.

An (innocuous) personal example: When I was little, my Aunt Ruthie called me “Monkey.” As I grew older, I came to resent that nickname, and told her not to call me that anymore. While I don’t go by “Monkey,” I still like to look back on that time and appreciate the fearless little girl that loved to climb on anything and everything, and feel the love of a doting and devoted aunt.

Even after he was *Yisrael*, *Ya’akov* still had to grapple with his place in the world, with his character, and with his relationships—both human and Divine. There were parts of his past that haunted him, that he had to contend with, and parts of his former self that buttressed him, that helped him develop more fully. Becoming *Yisrael* allowed him not to avoid that past, but to reframe it as someone who would struggle—and prevail—in relationship with God.

Perhaps this is why the Jewish people go by his name—*b'nei Yisrael*, the people of Israel. Like *Ya'akov*, we seek to understand our ever-changing identities—sometimes struggling, hopefully prevailing—with God as our partner.

Shabbat Shalom.