



Our Name is Israel

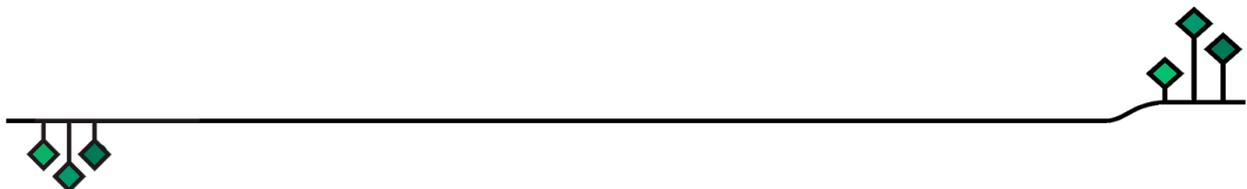
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In the Torah, the giving of a name (or a renaming) is an act of high significance. The new name does not just identify; it typically defines the person and often foreshadows their purpose in life and future contribution. Thus Abram of Ur of the Chaldeans is renamed Abraham and sent to Canaan to establish a covenant that will shape many nations. Sarai is renamed Sarah to signal that she has left behind the idolatry of Haran and is destined to be the one who gives birth and transmits the *berit* to the next generational successor. The name Sarah defines her as copartner in the covenant and consequently a mother of nations (Genesis 17:16).¹

In this *parashah*, our father, Jacob, survives an incredible struggle with a mysterious divine being that all but wipes him out, and is renamed, Israel. We—and all the future people of the covenant—are called not the children of Abraham or the children of Isaac, but the children of Israel. Then this switch may be the most momentous name change in the tradition. It defines not only Jacob and his life but the mission of his descendants for the rest of history.

¹ See my essay on Parashat Lekh Lekha, “Covenantal Pluralism,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenantal-pluralsim>



Note carefully the meaning of the name as explained by the Torah: “You shall be called... Israel, *because you have wrestled with God and with people and you have prevailed.*” (Genesis 32:29).² The mission of Jewry—its contribution to humanity—will be fulfilled through striving with God and humanity for the benefit of both.

Consider: What must the wrestler do in the process of wrestling with another? One: embrace/**hug tightly**/hold the other close to you. Two: **pushing back** and pushing off the other so you do not fall and crash. Three: exhibit **endurance**. Straining muscles and exerting will to the limit in order to hang in there. Four: in spirit, to not give in, not give up and take a fall. Rather you **persist until you overcome**.

How have the people of Israel fulfilled the calling in its name? We have wrestled with God and humanity to bring them closer to each other.

In the annals of civilization, Jewry is credited with bringing monotheism, the understanding that there is one universal God/Creator who brings the universe into being and sustains it. But the deeper contribution to the world is that we taught people that the Infinite Force, greater than the vast universe, beyond human comprehension, cares deeply about finite humans, about this puny fragment of a planet. In fact, this God loves you and asks to join with you in committed relationship for life, i.e. a covenant. We wrestled with the people—not to recoil from the cosmically towering, awe inspiring Lord; not to shrink back out of a feeling of insignificance—but to step up and embrace the Loving God. Be embraced, so that you never will be alone or feel abandoned ever again. Thus we brought humans closer to God.

² **I-sra-el** = one who wrestled/contended with God (and with humans).



We hung in there with our teachings in the face of being marginalized or dismissed by dominant majority religions.

We taught humanity that this world is a Creation, that it came into being before us and will outlast us, but not be forever; that its Creator existed before existence came into being and will exist long after this universe fails. The Lord loves us and loves Creation. God asks us to guard it, preserve it, treat it as a precious, if passing, gift. God asks us to join in and repair this beautiful but flawed Creation, or at least that small part of it that we inhabit. We taught humans to believe and act on the responsibility to upgrade it for the benefit of all life.

To communicate this Creation teaching, we had to wrestle then with Greek science that insisted that the world existed eternally and that God is indifferent to existence. We wrestle now with those modern scientists who argue that the universe is the outcome of a blind random process; therefore, this is a world without values or purpose or outcome. Nor have we been intimidated by the remarkable achievements of science into giving up our teaching that humanity is called to repair the world. We have not yielded our commitment to tikkun olam in the face of entrenched reactionaries who resist changing an unequal, unfair status quo. And we still wrestle with an economic system that puts profits ahead of the environment and that dismisses stewardship of nature as overruled by the need for wealth generation.

We taught humanity that God is moral and wants us to do good and not evil. Our prophets proclaimed to us and to the world that you cannot substitute ritual for ethics. One cannot pay off God with sacrifices while cheating fellow human beings.³ We injected into the Western bloodstream the centrality of conscience—the obligation to uphold the right, even if society

³ See among countless examples, Isaiah 1:10-17; Jeremiah 7:1-15.



looks away or the official religion legitimates the flawed status quo, or the majority shouts you down.

Hermann Rauschning, a close associate of Hitler in his early days, described Hitler's reasoning for his hatred of the Jews: "Conscience is a Jewish invention... my task is to free men from the dirty and degrading ideas of conscience and morality."⁴ We wrestled with Stalinism and multiple tyrannies which claimed total authority and resented our teaching to uphold conscience and give absolute obedience only to God and never to human systems. We taught that human absolutes are forms of idolatry and urged people to separate from them and come closer to God. Jews, whether personally practicing Judaism or not, were persecuted for representing a counter-culture to the reigning absolute system—yet we hung in there.

Three (of many) times that we wrestled with God to bring God closer to humanity or to treat them better: First, in Exodus (ch. 33-34) God proposed to wipe out the people of Israel for betraying the covenant with idol worship (the Golden Calf). God offered to replace the Israelites with faithful Moses and his descendants. Moses pushed back and said: If you are going to destroy Israel, then wipe me out first. Then Moses pressed God to explain God's standards. He receives the following answer: "The Lord, the Lord, God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in love and truth, keeps love for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity and sin—**but will not clear the guilty.** (Exodus 34:7). The Rabbis wrestled with God to come closer and be more merciful. They made this definition of God's nature the cornerstone of Yom Kippur, the holiday of forgiveness. They repeated this divine self-description endlessly, but they **struck the words** "will not clear the guilty." They repeated this formula, without the statement of not clearing the guilty or holding future

⁴ Robert G.L. Waite, *The Psychopathic God: Adolph Hitler* (Boston 1993), p. 16.



generations accountable for generation, until the tradition—and God—accepted to be loving, forgiving, and even clear the guilty. Thus they brought God closer to people.

Similarly, the written Torah: The revelation at Sinai, presented a long list of sins and spiritual crimes for which the penalty was death. The Rabbis, as custodians of Jewish religion, understood that the principle of reverence for life was incompatible with frequent death penalties. They wrestled with God, with the texts, and with the inherited legal process in capital punishments. They tightened the procedures for validating evidence. They narrowed the meanings of the death penalty text and sharply increased the requirements for being classified as a capital crime. They required that every death sentence be the outcome of a judgment of a regional court of twenty-three judges or, preferably of the Supreme Court of seventy-one judges, the Sanhedrin. They wrestled so well that death penalty all but disappeared. If once in seventy years a Sanhedrin approved a death penalty, according to Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, it became known as the “bloody Sanhedrin.”⁵

Many world religions took a judgmental attitude toward humanity and accepted the apocalyptic vision. They predicted that few would earn a place in the world to come and very few would be spared in the end time “cleansing” of sinners. Again, the Jewish tradition wrestled with that exclusion consciousness—whether it was inside our heritage or in other faiths. God was loving, by nature, the Rabbis insisted. All would have a share in the world to come; only the exceptional few would forfeit their place. They wrestled with God to come closer to people—not to be a forbidding, punishing Ruler, but to come into people’s lives as *Shekhinah*: kind, understanding, helpful, forgiving. Again, they would not yield until divinity presented as the Loving God.

⁵ Mishnah Makkot 1:10.



In sum, the descendants of Jacob/Israel have kept the faith and honored the call to wrestle. I see this model as our instruction to contend with inherited harsh judgements in the Torah and tradition—be it on homosexuality, on non-believers, on sinners, on other faiths. As the children of Israel, we need to strive unyieldingly until we, too, overcome and bring God and humanity closer and kinder to each other.

