



To Be More Like God

The Power to Self-Define

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When we first moved to Washington, D.C., we discovered a neighborhood playground down the block from where we lived. Whenever my kids express a particular love of a new place, I make it a point to teach them the name of the place so that they can articulate what they like and are empowered to ask to return. However, this particular playground lacked a name. We asked our then-3-year-old, “What should we call this playground?” He said, “Alex.” The name stuck. Not only does our now-4-year-old continue to lovingly advocate that we visit Alex on a daily basis, our 1-year-old has also taken to calling the playground Alex. By giving the playground a name, my son was able to personalize his experience of the playground and create the possibility of a long-term relationship.

In this week’s *parashah*, a key act of naming, or rather renaming occurs. God renames Abram Abraham and renames Sarai Sarah. God says to Abraham:

בראשית יז:ד-ו

אָנִי הִנֵּה בְרִיתִי אִתְּךָ וְהִייתָ לְאָב הַמִּון גּוֹיִם: וְלֹא־יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת־שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָם וְהָיָה שְׁמֶךָ אַבְרָהָם כִּי אֲבֶרְהָמוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ: וְהִפְרֹתִי אֹתְךָ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד וְנִתְּתִיךָ לְגוֹיִם וּמְלָכִים מִמֶּךָ יֵצְאוּ:

Genesis 17:4-6

Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.



When Abraham enters into covenant with God, his destiny is transformed. He is no longer just Abram, a seeker out on his own; rather his fate is now linked to the entire Jewish people. He will be a father of many nations, in Hebrew an *av hamon*, and thus this new identity requires a new name.¹

Abraham's name change always causes me to stumble. When referring to the stories about Abraham when he was still Abram, I wonder, should I refer to him as Abram or is it more appropriate to use his new name, even when recalling history that occurred under his old name? I struggle with the tension between wanting to honor his new name and the person that he becomes while wondering if it's more accurate to refer to him as Abram when speaking of events that occurred pre-name change.

If we look to the Tanakh for the answer, from here on out the Torah consistently refers to Abraham according to his new name. This seems to suggest that once a person undergoes a name change, we must honor that change and refer to them only in their new identity. However, in the Book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah refers to Abraham by his old name, Abram. We read:

נחמיה ט:ז

אַתָּה־הוּא ה' הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר בְּחַרְתָּ בְּאַבְרָם וְהוֹצֵאתוֹ מֵאוּר כַּשְׁדִּים וְשִׁמְתָּ שְׁמוֹ אַבְרָהָם:

Nehemiah 9:7

You are the Lord God Who chose Abram and took him out of Ur Kasdim and made his name Abraham.

Who did God choose according to Nehemiah? God chose Abram. In referring to Abraham this way, Nehemiah dredges up Abraham's old name and old identity. Like me, it seems Nehemiah also struggles with how to refer to Abraham when speaking of past events.

While the specific question of which name to use when speaking of past events may be unclear, what is made powerfully evident is the importance of using the new name in all other situations. In Massekhet Berakhot, we read:

¹ See the *midrash* quoted in Talmud Bavli Berakhot 13a.



תלמוד בבלי ברכות יג.

תני בר קפרא: כל הקורא לאברהם אברם עובר בעשה, שנאמר "והיה שמך אברהם" (בראשית יז:ה). רבי אליעזר אומר עובר בלאו, שנאמר "ולא יקרא עוד [את] שמך אברם" (בראשית יז:ו).

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 13a

Bar Kappara taught: Anyone who calls Abraham Abram transgresses a positive *mitzvah*, as it is stated: “And your name will be Abraham” (Genesis 17:5). R. Eliezer says: [One who calls Abraham Abram] transgresses a negative *mitzvah*, as it is stated: “And your name shall no longer be called Abram[, and your name will be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations]” (Genesis 17:5).

It is not only advisable that we call Abraham by his new name, it is in fact on the level of a commandment. Bar Kappara focuses on the positive aspect of “your name shall be Abraham,” to emphasize that we are positively commanded to use Abraham’s new name. R. Eliezer either disagrees with Bar Kappara that failing to call Abraham “Abraham” would be a transgression of a positive commandment or perhaps agrees with Bar Kappara and takes it a step further. Rather than focus on the positive commandment to call Abraham by his new name, he emphasizes the potential transgression of a negative commandment, as implied by “and your name shall no longer be called Abram.” Regardless of whether one classifies calling Abraham by his former name as a violation of a positive commandment or a negative commandment, the Gemara makes it clear that once a person undergoes a name change, we have a very strong obligation to refer to them by their new name.

The question of how we respond to a name change is a live issue for me. I have been on both sides of a name change. I have been the one asking loved ones to call me by a new name and I have also been the one struggling to call someone in my life by their new chosen name. People may change their names for a variety of reasons. Some people do so because their name feels out of alignment with their identity. Others may change their names through marriage or add a name when confronting illness. Whatever a person’s reasons for taking on a new name, surely they hope—and perhaps even expect—that people will honor their choice of a new name.

Yet, how people respond to a name change is variable. Some disregard a person’s decision to change their name altogether, refusing to attempt the new name. Others may in theory respect and even honor the new identity marker, but may struggle to call someone so familiar and intimate by such an unfamiliar name. There can be a discomfort in using this new name even when you know that this is what someone wants. And some people may even be able to



make the switch to the new name when referring to present and future events but stumble, as I do, when referring to events that happened under the former name.

In Abraham's case, God changes Abraham's name—and it's a given that if God tells us to call him by this new name, we better be sure to respect that name switch. God's authority commands respect and perhaps compliance for this new name. However, when it comes to names that someone takes on for themselves, to what extent are we obligated to call someone by that newly chosen name, taking on their personal decision as a positive or negative commandment for ourselves?

While Jewish tradition is rich with name changing,² there are very few examples of individuals changing their own names. All of the examples that are familiar from the Torah involve an outside party—often God—changing someone else's name. The exception to this general rule, however, is God. God seems to be the only one that is able to change God's own name with any sort of staying power. Early on in God's relationship with Abraham, God introduces Godself saying, "I am El Shaddai,"³ and later, when Moses asks God how he should refer to God when convincing the people of his holy mission, God says, "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*,"⁴ I will be what I will be." Traditional commentators are quick to dig into the various aspects of God's identities represented by each of God's divine names, although "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*" is particularly resonant for this conversation. When asked for God's name, it's as if God refuses to be defined by any one name. Instead, God insists on the ability to continue to reinvent Godself, to be a God called by many names with many identities that cannot be defined by just one. I will be what I will be. I will keep defining and redefining myself. I cannot be limited by one name.

It's only in later Jewish texts that the idea of changing one's own name comes into play. In the Gemara of Rosh HaShanah, we learn:

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה טז:

וא"ר יצחק: ד' דברים מקרעין גזר דינו של אדם. אלו הן: צדקה, צעקה, שינוי השם, ושינוי מעשה... שינוי השם, דכתיב: "שרי אשתך לא תקרא את שמה שרי כי שרה שמה" (בראשית יז:טו) וכתיב: "וברכתי אותה וגם נתתי ממנה לך בן" (בראשית יז:טז).

² Abram-Abraham, Sarai-Sarah, Jacob-Israel, Hosea-Joshua for starters.

³ Genesis 17:1.

⁴ Exodus 3:13.



Talmud Bavli Rosh HaShanah 16b

And R. Yitzhak said: A person's sentence is torn up on account of four [types of actions]. These are: Giving charity, crying out in prayer, a change of one's name, and a change of one's deeds [for the better]... a change of one's name, as it is written: "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be" (Genesis 17:15), and it is written there: "And I will bless her, and I will also give you a son from her" (Genesis 17:16).

Based on this Gemara, changing one's name is one of four actions a person can take to change their decree in life. How do we know this? From Sarah. God changes her name, and with the name change comes blessing. As Sarai, she was destined to be a person without children. It's the act of God changing Sarah's name that changes her course in her life. This is connected to that which we learn in the Rambam that changing one's name is a pathway to *teshuvah* or atonement.⁵ When I change my name, it's as if I am a new person; I rip up that decree pending against the person who I once was. Change the name, change your destiny.

While the Torah only lays out a name change that comes through others, these texts lay out the possibility for one to define one's own identity. It gives the individual the ability to say I am not the person I was. This is how I will now be called in the world.

How must we as a community respond when a person redefines their identity through a change of name? I want to suggest two texts as possible answers to this question. We learn in the Mishnah of Bava Metzia:

משנה בבא מציעא ד':

שם שאונאה במקח וממכר, כך אונאה בדברים. לא יאמר לו בכמה חפץ זה, והוא אינו רוצה לקח. אם היה בעל תשובה, לא יאמר לו זכר מעשיך הראשונים. אם הוא בן גרים, לא יאמר לו זכר מעשה אבותיך, שנאמר, "וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו" (שמות כב:כא):

Mishnah Bava Metzia 4:10

Just as the laws of fraud apply to buying and selling, so too do they apply to the spoken word. One may not say, "How much is this object," if he does not wish to buy it. If one had repented, another should not say to him, "Remember your earlier deeds." If one descended from converts, another should not say to him, "Remember the deeds of your ancestors." For it is said, "And a stranger you shall not wrong or oppress" (Exodus 22:21).

⁵ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:4.



The Mishnah is teaching us that just as we have the ability to oppress and wrong one another through dishonest business practices, we also have the ability to wrong one another with our words. How do we do this? If there's a person who is a *ba'al teshuvah*, who has done something wrong in their past but has since atoned, we cannot remind them of their former deeds. So too, when someone converts to Judaism, we cannot remind them of their prior history. When a person makes an active decision to shift their identity, we have an obligation to only see this person in their new identity. They define how they are seen in this world. When we remind the person of a former identity that they have left behind, we violate the laws of *ona'ah*, or oppression, and wrong them with our words.

This same principle applies to a name change. When someone changes their name, they mark an active shift in their identity. In effect, they are saying this is the person that I am in the world now and this is how I want to be seen. If we fail to call them by this new name, we wrong them with our words.

The laws around name changes as they relate to *gittin*, or divorce documents, confirm this obligation.⁶ We learn in the Shulhan Arukh:

שולחן ערוך אבן העזר קכט:יח

מי שנשתנה שמו מחמת חולי אע"פ שקורין אותו תמיד בשם ראשון מ"מ שם השינוי עיקר

Shulhan Arukh, Even Ha'ezer 129:18

Someone whose name was changed due to illness—even though people always address him with his original name—despite this, the changed name is the primary name.⁷

There are two items of note that we can learn from the Shulhan Arukh. First, we see that even when someone changes their name because of illness, people around them may still refer to them using their original name. It's unclear from this text whether this is because the person herself prefers the original name or other people struggle to integrate the new name into their worldview of their friend or loved one. Second, at the end of the day, the new name is the

⁶ As with all contract documents between individuals, accuracy of names is particularly important when it comes to divorce documents. A mistake in names can result in an invalid *get* (meaning that the two people would still be considered married) with serious halakhic consequences in terms of future relationships and children.

⁷ There's a long tradition of changing one's name in the face of illness in order to avert the decree of the illness. We can see the roots of this tradition in our text above from Talmud Bavli Rosh HaShanah 16b: "And R. Yitzhak said: A person's sentence is torn up on account of four types of actions. These are: giving charity, crying out in prayer, a change of one's name, and a change of one's deeds for the better."



primary name when it comes to writing a *get*, and this new name is the name that should be used. So, while people may fail to actually call someone by this new name, we recognize the ability of a person to change their name and the legal power of this shift.

Names are not inconsequential. Rather, they have the ability to define us and to help us define ourselves. Rebbe Nahman of Breslov teaches:

ליקוטי מוהר"ן נ:ח

כִּי הַתּוֹרָה הִיא שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ-הוּא, וְהַשֵּׁם הוּא הַכֹּלִי שֶׁל הַדָּבָר, שֶׁבְּהֶשֶׁם הַזֶּה נִגְבֵּל הַחַיּוּת שֶׁל הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב (בְּרֵאשִׁית ב:ט): נִפְשׁ חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ, שֶׁבְּהֶשֶׁם נִגְבֵּל הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְהַחַיּוּת שֶׁל כָּל דָּבָר. וְעַל כֵּן כְּשֶׁקוֹרִין אֶת הָאָדָם בְּשְׁמוֹ, הוּא מִזְמֵן וְתִכְף אֶצְלוֹ, מִחַמַּת שֶׁבְּהֶשֶׁם נִגְבֵּל כָּל הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְהַחַיּוּת שֶׁלּוֹ.

Likutei Moharan 56:8

This is because the Torah is the Name of God, and the name of a thing is its vessel; within this name is contained the life force of that thing. As it is written, “living soul that is its name” (Genesis 2:19)—contained in the name of each thing is its soul and life force. This is why when we call a person by his name, we gain his attention immediately, because his total soul and life force are contained within his name.

In Genesis, Adam names each of the living creatures and whatever name he calls them, this is their name. Rebbe Nahman plays with the language for living creature, *nefesh hayah*, and reads this rather as referring to a person’s life force. What is a person’s *nefesh hayah*? It is their name.

Rebbe Nahman writes that a name is not an arbitrary thing to which we are assigned at birth. Rather, our name has the power to define us; it is the source of our very vitality. When we honor a person’s choice of a new name, we allow them the power to define themselves. When we fail to respect this choice, it’s as if we deny them their very life source.

There’s an enormous power in using language to name something, to create the vessel by which to define it. That’s the power of God naming Adam and Adam in turn naming the living creatures in the Garden of Eden. Both of these acts are instances of creation, of calling a world into being. That’s the joy of my son naming his playground Alex, and in doing so creating for himself a world of intimacy and relationship. But it’s all the more powerful when we have the ability to name not only others, as we see in the Torah, but to name ourselves. When we allow ourselves and others to reshape the very vessels, their names, that hold their identities.





I wish for us all that we can be a little bit more like God and take on this aspect of “*ehyeh asher ehyeh*,” as we define and redefine who we are in the world. I wish for us that we are able to be at home in our names and that they give us strength to be who we need to be in the world. And, if these names feel out of alignment with our identities, that we are blessed to be in communities of people who will help us transition into new names, as we live out the fullness of our identities.

