

# WHAT'S IN A (JEWISH) NAME? (and why we change them)

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Parshat Lech Lecha 5778

אַבְרָם



אַבְרָהָם

ה וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת-שְׁמִי, אַבְרָם; וְהָיָה שְׁמִי אַבְרָהָם, כִּי אֲבֹתֵי מִלְּיוֹנוֹת גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיד. 5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for the father of a multitude of nations have I made thee.

ו וְהִפְרֵתִי אֶתְךָ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד, וְנִתְּתִיד לְגוֹיִם; וּמְלָכִים, מִמֶּנִּי יֵצְאוּ. 6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.

טו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, אֶל-אַבְרָהָם, שָׂרִי אֲשֶׁתְּךָ, לֹא-תִקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמָהּ שָׂרִי: כִּי שָׂרָה, שְׁמָהּ. 15 And God said unto Abraham: 'As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.

א נִבְחָר שֵׁם, מֵעֹשֶׁר רַב: מִכֶּסֶף וּמִזָּהָב, חֵן טוֹב. PROVERBS 22:1 A *good name* is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favor rather than silver and gold.

**Which is the “better name?” Which is more “Jewish?”  
Were Abraham and Sarah’s names “good” names? Is yours?**

**What does your name mean?  
What does it connect you to?**

**Match the Jewish celebrity below with the original name. How many of those original names actually sound Jewish to you?**

1. Robert Zimmerman
2. Barry Pincus
3. Ken Gorelick
4. Michael Bolotin
5. Nathan Birnbaum
6. Benjamin Kubelsky
7. Daniel Kaminsky
8. Herbert Khaury
9. Ellen Cohen
10. Allan Konigsberg

1. Bob Dylan
2. Barry Manilow
3. Kenny G
4. Michael Bolton
5. George Burns
6. Jack Benny
7. Danny Kaye
8. Tiny Tim
9. Mama Cass
10. Woody Allen

***Do these names sound Jewish:  
Esther? Mordechai?  
Alexander? Adolf?***

***Esther: It is of Persian origin, and its meaning is "myrtle leaf". Also possibly (Persian) "star". Biblical: a young Hebrew woman named Hadassah who became the wife of the Persian king Ahasuerus, and risked her life to save her people. Jews celebrate the festival of Purim in memory of her. The name may also be a Hebrew form of the name of the Persian goddess of love, Ishtar.***

***Mordechai: of Hebrew origin, and its meaning is "little man". Also possibly "follower of Marduk, a god of the Babylonians". Biblical name. In the Talmud, the name is of Aramaic origin, from "mara dachya" meaning "pure myrrh", the aromatic resin which was used in incense.***

***Source: thinkbabynames.com***

**Alexander** From the Greek name Alexandros, meaning "protector of men." According to legend in the Talmud (Tamid 31b), when the Greek monarch Alexander the Great conquered Palestine in 333 B.C. E. all Jewish boys born in that year were named Alexander in his honor.

**Adolf** Very popular among Jews in Galicia and Germany, and then America. Often seen as an anglicized version of the combined with the Hebrew name Aharon. Fell out of favor after WW2.

**WHAT MAKES YOUR NAME "JEWISH" – OR NOT?**

## WHY DO WE CHANGE OUR NAMES?

### 1) TO MARK A NEW STAGE IN GROWTH...

Every academic or professional remembers the day when we finished our graduate programs and reentered the world with a title before and/or letters after our names. It was both exhilarating and daunting. Our names were now different. Our status in the community was different. We were to do different work and, on some level, we were expected – and expected ourselves – to act differently. We had taken on a new and different identity. For most of us, it took some time to adjust to our new names, our new identities. For those of us who have been practicing our professions for many years it is easy to forget the discomfort, even dissonance that we felt at that time. Were we still the same person we were before we assumed the “mantle of leadership” in the community, or had we changed? Looking back after many years we might ask, “What has become of that person who we were before our names were changed?”

*Before we can truly take on our new name, the name that represents the mantle of leadership, our new identity, we need to recognize who we are, our original identity. **For Abraham and Sarah, as for many of us, this can be a painful thing to confront.** For better or for worse, our former identities do not simply disappear when we take on our new roles. Our strong points and our flaws, our limitations, remain. It is only through our awareness of them that we can navigate our roles successfully.*

Rabbi Jordan Millstein

## HOW IS BECOMING BAR/BAT MITZVAH LIKE TAKING ON A NEW NAME?

### 2) ...OR TO EXORCISE PERSONAL DEMONS

#### *The Sitra Ahra – Our Dark Side*

We like to think of ourselves as decent, enlightened, and rational human beings, motivated only by the best of intentions. Yet experience and honest self-examination tell us that even the most righteous and generous among us possess a murky and more hidden aspect of our psyches. **Our rabbinic tradition calls this the *sitra ahra*, the “other side.”**

Our *sitra ahra* can lie deep within our subconscious and disguise itself as virtue. Thus ruthless ambition can masquerade as “work ethic,” cruelty and vindictiveness toward others as “honesty and sincerity,” vicious gossip and backstabbing as “interest and concern,” and two-faced hypocrisy as “keeping the peace.” The human capacity for self-delusion is almost limitless.

If the *sitra ahra* is to be confronted, we must first, like Jacob, ford a river. For Jacob, it was the *Jabbok*; for us, it is the “River of Denial.” **Then, like Jacob, we must have the courage to wrestle with the murkiest, seediest, and most offensive side of ourselves**—the selfish boor within us, the ruthless schemer within us, the gossip and backstabber within us, the racist, sexist, homophobe, “looks-ist” and, yes, the anti-Semite within us. Only when we have the courage to wrestle with the *sitra ahra* until dawn can we acquire the blessing of becoming Israel and the battle decoration of a wrenched hip. Only when we confront our demons can we begin to free ourselves from their spell and become truly whole.

Rabbi Burt E. Schuman

## WHY DO WE CHANGE OUR NAMES?

### 3) OUT OF FEAR OR OUT OF TRIUMPH?

TO CHANGE OUR LUCK?

TO HIDE ONE’S IDENTITY – OR TO CHANGE IT?

TO DEMONSTRATE LOYALTY?

TO FIT IN?

From Mordechai Kaplan:

"The average Jew today is conscious of his Judaism as one who is conscious of a diseased organ that gives notice of its existence by causing pain" (*The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 1937)

From the "Dearborn *Independent*," 1911

## The Gentle Art of Changing Jewish Names

Full article: [http://www.jrbooksonline.com/Intl\\_Jew\\_full\\_version/ij70.htm](http://www.jrbooksonline.com/Intl_Jew_full_version/ij70.htm)

### ***How is this article factual? Is it also anti-Semitic?***

One of the biggest and best known stores in the United States goes under an honored Christian name, though every one of the owners is Jewish. The public still carries a mental picture of the good old merchant who established the store, which picture would speedily change if the public could get a glimpse of the real owners.

Prior to the nineteenth century the Jews resident in Germany did not use family names. It was "Joseph the son of Jacob," "Isaac ben Abraham," the son being designated as the son of his father. But the Napoleonic era, especially following upon the assembly of the Great Sanhedrin under Napoleon's command, caused a distinct change in Jewish customs in Europe.

In 1808 Napoleon sent out a decree commanding all Jews to adopt family names. In Austria a list of surnames was assigned to the Jews, and if a Jew was unable to choose, the state chose for him. The names were devised from precious stones, as Rubenstein; precious metals, such as Goldstein, Silberberg; plants, trees, and animals, such as Mandelbaum, Lilienthal, Ochs, Wolf, and Loewe.

The German Jews created surnames by the simple method of affixing the syllable "son" to the father's name, thus making Jacobson, Isaacson; while others adopted the names of the localities in which they lived, the Jew resident in Berlin becoming Berliner, and the Jew resident in Oppenheim becoming Oppenheimer.

The Jewish habit of changing names is responsible for the immense camouflage that has concealed the true character of Russian events. When Leon Bronstein becomes Leo Trotsky, and when the Jewish Apfelbaum becomes the "Russian" Zinoviev; and when the Jewish Cohen becomes the "Russian" Volodarsky, and so on down through the list of the controllers of Russia—Goldman becoming Izgoev, and Feldman becoming Vladimirov—it is a little difficult for people who think that names do not lie, to see just what is transpiring.

Indeed, there is any amount of evidence that in numberless cases this change of names—or adoption of "cover names," as the Jewish description is—is for purposes of concealment. *There is an immense difference in the state of mind in which a customer enters the store of Isadore Levy and the state of mind in which he enters the store of Alex May.* And what would be his feeling to learn that Isadore Levy painted up the name of Alex May with that state of mind in view? When Rosenbluth and Schlesinger becomes "The American Mercantile Company," there is justification for the feeling that the name "American" is being used to conceal the Jewish character of the firm.

The tendency of Jews to change their names dates back very far. There was and is a superstition that to give a sick person another name is to "change his luck," and save him from the misfortune destined upon his old name. There was also the Biblical example of a change of nature being followed by a change of name, as when Abram became Abraham and Jacob became Israel.

There have been justifiable grounds, however, for Jews changing their names in Europe. The nationalism of that continent is, of course, intense, and the Jews are an international nation, scattered

among all the nations, with an unenviable reputation of being ready to exploit for Jewish purposes the nationalistic intensity of the Gentiles. To mollify a suspicion held against them wherever they have lived (a suspicion so general and so persistent as to be explainable only on the assumption that it was abundantly justified) the Jews have been quick to adopt the names and colors of whatever country they may be living in. It is no trouble at all to change a flag, since none of the flags is the insignia of Judah. This was seen throughout the war zone; the Jews hoisted whatever flag was expedient at the moment, and changed it as often as the shifting tide of battle required.

A Polish Jew named Zuckermandle, emigrating to Hungary, would be anxious to show that he had shuffled off the Polish allegiance which his name proclaimed; and the only way he could do this would be to change his name, which would very likely become Zukor, a perfectly good Hungarian name. Originally the Zukors were not Jews; now the usual guess would be that they are. In the United States it would be almost a certainty. Such a change as Mr. Zuckermandle would make, however, would not be for the purpose of concealing the fact that he was a Jew, but only to conceal the fact that he was a foreign Jew.

In the United States it has been found that Jews change their names for **three reasons**: first, for the same reason that many other foreigners change their names, namely, to minimize as much as possible the "foreign look" and the **difficulty of pronunciation** which many of those names carry with them; second, for **business reasons**, to prevent the knowledge becoming current that So-and-So is "a Jew store"; third, for **social reasons**.

The desire not to appear singular among one's neighbors, when stated in just these words, very easily passes muster as being a natural desire, until you apply it to yourself. If you were going abroad to Italy, Germany, Russia, there to live and engage in business, would you cast about for a changed name immediately? Of course not. Your name is part of you, and you have your own opinion of an alias. **The Jew, however, has his own name among his own people, regardless of what "cover name" the world may know him by, and, therefore, he changes his outside name quite coolly. The only likeness we have to that in America is the changing of men's pay numbers as they move their employment from place to place. John Smith may be No. 49 in Black's shop and No. 375 in White's shop, but he is always John Smith. So the Jew may be Simon son of Benjamin in the privacy of the Jewish circle, while to the world he may be Mortimer Alexander.**

In the United States it is hardly to be doubted that business and social reasons are mostly responsible for the changes in Jewish names. The designation "American" is itself much coveted, as may be gathered by its frequent use in firm names, the members of which are not American in any sense that entitles them to blazon that name throughout the world. When Moses is changed to Mortimer, and Nathan to Norton, and Isadore to Irving (as for example Irving Berlin, whose relatives, however, still know him as "Izzy"), the concealment of Jewishness in a country where so much is done by print, must be regarded as a probable motive.

When "Mr. Lee Jackson" is proposed for the club there would seem to be no reason, as far as reading goes, why anything unusual about Mr. Jackson should be surmised, **until you know that Mr. Jackson is really Mr. Jacobs**. Jackson happens to be the name of a President of the United States, which names are quite in favor with the name-changers, but in this case it happens also to be one of the "derivatives" of an old Jewish name.

### *Nazi Regulation Requiring Jews to Change their Names, August 1938*

**1) Insofar as Jews have given names other than those which they are permitted to bear according to § 1,\* they are required as from January 1, 1939, to take an additional given name; males will take the given name Israel, females the given name Sara....**

**Zelda**

**לכל איש יש שם**

**Everyone Has a Name**

Everyone has a name  
given to him by God  
and given to him by his parents

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתן לו אלוהים  
ונתנו לו אביו ואמו

Everyone has a name  
given to him by his stature  
and the way he smiles  
and given to him by his clothing

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתנו לו קומתו ואופן חיוכו  
ונתן לו האריג

Everyone has a name  
given to him by the mountains  
and given to him by his walls

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתנו לו ההרים  
ונתנו לו כתליו

Everyone has a name  
given to him by the stars  
and given to him by his neighbors

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתנו לו המזלות  
ונתנו לו שכניו

Everyone has a name  
given to him by his sins  
and given to him by his longing

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתנו לו חטאיו  
ונתנה לו כמיהתו

Everyone has a name  
given to him by his enemies  
and given to him by his love

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתנו לו שונאיו  
ונתנה לו אהבתו

Everyone has a name  
given to him by his feasts  
and given to him by his work

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתנו לו שונאיו  
ונתנה לו אהבתו

Everyone has a name  
given to him by the seasons  
and given to him by his blindness

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתנו לו עונות השנה  
ונתן לו עיוורונו

Everyone has a name  
given to him by the sea and  
given to him  
by his death.

לכל איש יש שם  
שנתן לו הים  
ונתן לו  
מותו.

*(Translated from Hebrew by Marcia Falk, quoted  
from "Generations of the Holocaust" by Bergmann  
and Jugovy)*

# Becoming Avraham: on names and transformation in Lech-Lecha

<http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2013/10/becoming-avraham-on-names-and-transformation-in-lech-lecha.html>

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous."

Abram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, "As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. (Genesis 17:1-5; *parashat Lech Lecha*.)

Many years ago, a dear friend set out to read the Bible because she felt -- I think rightly -- that it had had a tremendous influence on English-language literature. She chose the King James version, both because she felt it had had the most impact on English lit and because she doesn't speak Hebrew. As she began to work her way through Genesis, and came to this passage, she asked me: what's this name change about? What does it mean?

Most simply, the change from Avram to Avraham involves the addition of one letter: ה, the "h" sound. (We pronounce the name of this letter as *heh* or *hei*.) Sarai's name is also changed this week, in a similar way: the י at the end of the name Sarai is changed to the ה at the end of Sarah.

The letter ה is one of our ways of denoting God. ה' means HaShem, "The Name," e.g. the Holy One of Blessing. Some sources in our tradition read the added ה as a symbol of God's presence. Avram becomes Avraham; Sarai becomes Sarah; in both cases, the added letter signifies God. Other sources relate the letter ה to breath (certainly that is how the letter sounds when vocalized), and -- remembering that God breathed the breath of life into the first human only a few weeks ago in our narrative -- see the added ה as a sign of divine spirit.

A change in name can signal a change in destiny. Avraham and Sarah aren't the only ones in Torah to receive new names from God; later in our story we'll encounter Jacob, "the Heel" (his name comes from the word for heel, as he grabbed his twin brother's heel in the womb to ensure that he himself would be born first -- and sure enough, Jacob is kind of a heel as the English colloquial usage would have it!) who wrestles with an angel and becomes Yisrael, "Wrestles-With-God."

An interesting note: the Torah tells us that God said to Avram "Your name shall be Avraham," but of Sarai God says "her name is Sarah." Not "shall be," but already is. We read in Talmud:

Rabbi Huna said, quoting Rabbi Acha: The letter *yud* which was removed from Sarai's name was divided into two letters; one *hei* was added to Abram and the other to Sarah." (Talmud Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin 2:6)

Remember that in Hebrew, numbers and letters are the same thing. The letter י equals the number 10; the letter ה equals the number 5. According to this reading, the 10 in Sarai's name was removed and broken into two 5s, two הs; one ה was attached to each name. In this reading, it was Sarai's deep spirituality which was divided and shared between the two of them -- or perhaps her spirituality which made it possible for both of them to experience this added gift of spirit and awareness.

The Zohar offers a different interpretation. Zohar teaches that the ה -- meaning 5 -- represents the 5 books of Moses, e.g. the Torah. As a prooftext, the Zohar offers a creative re-reading of Genesis 2:4:

"These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created [in Hebrew, "beheibaram"] in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens." He made them with [the letter] hei /ה.

The Zohar deconstructs the word "beheibaram" ("when they were created") into *b'* (which means "with") *hei* ("the letter ה") *baram* ("they were created.") The simple surface meaning of "when they were created" is re-interpreted into "The heavens and the earth were created with ה." Remember that the letter ה, which can also mean 5, represents Torah -- so this teaches us that (in the Zohar's opinion) the whole of creation was created by means of the Torah. That's what Avram and Sarai inherited at this moment of blessing and name change: they inherited Torah, which in a deep mystical sense is the blueprint for all of creation.

Jewish tradition places deep importance on names. There's an old saying that when parents name our children, we experience a frisson of prophecy, since in giving a child a name we create some of that child's destiny. And you've probably heard of (and perhaps even experienced) the old custom of changing someone's name if they are very ill. The folk tradition says it's to fool the Angel of Death, but I think it also has to do with a deep and inchoate sense that when someone's name changes, new possibilities are opened up. (I have many friends in Jewish Renewal who have changed their names, or taken on second Hebrew names, at moments of great personal transformation in their lives for this reason.)

It's worth noting that in the passage I quoted at the start of this d'var Torah, God introduces God's-self as El Shaddai. (Remember that God has many names in Jewish tradition -- even just in the Torah itself.) This name can be understood to be related to the Hebrew root which means breasts, so it can be read as a name of divine mothering and compassion. Can we imagine that in the ה which our ancestors received here was some of that motherly compassion and kindness?

At the start of this week's portion, God commands Avram "*Lech-lecha*" -- go you forth, or as many of us translate it, go forth into yourself. Maybe it's only once Avram has gone forth into himself -- once he has done the inner work of self-discovery and discernment -- that he becomes ready to receive the changed name which implies a deeper awareness of God's presence, a deeper connection to spirit and soul, a deeper connection to motherly kindness and compassion, a deeper connection to Torah... which he can then pass down to all of us. *Kein yehi ratzon*, may it be so!



"What's your name,' Coraline asked the cat. 'Look, I'm Coraline. Okay?'

'Cats don't have names,' it said.

'No?' said Coraline.

'No,' said the cat. 'Now you people have names. That's because you don't know who you are. We know who we are, so we don't need names.'

— Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*

"I read in a book once that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but I've never been able to believe it. I don't believe a rose WOULD be as nice if it was called a thistle or a skunk cabbage."

— L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*

"There are women named Faith, Hope, Joy, and Prudence. Why not Despair, Guilt, Rage, and Grief? It seems only right. 'Tom, I'd like you to meet the girl of my dreams, Tragedy.' These days, Trajedi."

— George Carlin, *Brain Droppings*

"I'm not my name. My name is something I wear, like a shirt. It gets worn. I outgrow it, I change it."

— Jerry Spinelli

"You are a name, not a number. Never forget that name, whatever they tell you here. You will always be Chaya—life—to me."

— Jane Yolen, *The Devil's Arithmetic*

