

What's in a Name? Shifting Identities in Lech Lecha

1. Avram / Avraham's name change

Genesis 17:5

And you shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.

וְלֹא־יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת־שְׁמִי אַבְרָם וְהָיָה שְׁמִי אַבְרָהָם כִּי אֲבִ־הֵמוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ:

Rashi on Genesis 17:5

He was previously a father only to Aram (his native country), and now he is a father to the whole world (Genesis Rabbah 47:1)

”...שְׁלֹא הָיָה אָב אֶלָּא לְאַרְם שֶׁהוּא מְקוּמוֹ וְעַכְשָׁיו אָב לְכָל הָעוֹלָם”

2. Sarai / Sarah's name change

Genesis 17:15

And God said to Avraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah.”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם שְׂרַי אִשְׁתְּךָ לֹא־תִקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמָהּ שְׂרַי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ:

Rashi on Genesis 17:15

“You shall not call her name Sarai,” which means “my princess,” a princess to me and not to others, “But Sarah,” a princess in a more general sense, that she shall be princess over all (Berakhot 13a).

לֹא תִקְרָא אֶת שְׁמָהּ שְׂרַי. דְּמִשְׁמַע שְׂרַי, לִי וְלֹא לְאַחֵרִים, כִּי שְׂרָה סְתָם שְׁמָהּ, שֶׁתְּהֵא שָׂרָה עַל כָּל

3. Carrying many names

Midrash Tanchuma, Vayakhel 1:1

“You find that a man is known by three names: the name by which his father and mother call him, the name by which other men call him, and the one he earns for himself; best of them all is the one he earns for himself.”

אֵת מוֹצֵא שְׁלִשָּׁה שְׁמוֹת נִקְרְאוּ לוֹ לְאָדָם, אֶחָד מֵה שְׁקוֹרָאִים לוֹ אֲבִיו וְאִמּוֹ, וְאֶחָד מֵה שְׁקוֹרָאִין לוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם, וְאֶחָד מֵה שְׁקוֹנָה הוּא לְעַצְמוֹ. טוֹב מִכָּל מֵה שְׁקוֹנָה הוּא לְעַצְמוֹ.

4. Reflection

- Why now for this name change?
- What transformation came alongside these new names?
- What pieces of their old lives and names did they have to leave behind?
- Which of your own “three names” resonates most strongly for you?