

LECH LECHA (GENESIS 12:1-17:27)

Tune that Name!

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

One of the highlights of the Bris ceremony is the naming. After the circumcision has been performed, a cup of wine is poured and blessings are recited. In many circles, the parents don't tell anyone the name before the actual naming ceremony. The guests listen attentively, to find out what moniker the little guy will carry with him for the rest of his life.

A name is a very important thing. There is a tradition that parents are given the gift of Divine inspiration to enable them to select their child's name. In fact, Adam was given the task of naming all of the birds and animals, as well as naming himself, his wife and even his Creator!

There is, somehow, within a creature's name, the very essence of its being. Adam called himself "*Adam*", because he had been formed out of the "*Adamah=Earth*". He called his wife "*Isha=woman*", because she was formed from the "*Ish=man*", and "*Chava=Eve*", because she was the "*mother of all CHAI=Life*". He called G-d "*Adon=Master*", which is basically the name we use when we refer to G-d in our prayers.

Adam was not just displaying a knack for turning a pun or making a play on words. There was great wisdom and profundity utilized in the selection of these names. This writer is not proficient in the depths of Jewish mysticism (How's THAT for an understatement!) so I cannot tell you the deep meanings behind the selections that Adam made. But our Sages tell us that Adam knew exactly what he was doing.

We see G-d doing some name selection in this week's Torah Portion. An angel told Hagar that she would bear a son, and that she should name him "*'Yishmael=G-d will hear' because G-d has heard your prayer.*" (Genesis, 16:11) He later told Abraham to name his son who was to be born the following year "*Yitzchak=He will laugh*" as a reference to the fact that Abraham laughed for joy when he heard the news. (Ibid. 17:17)

We see, perhaps, an indication of parental Divine inspiration from the fact that ABRAHAM "...gave the name *Yishmael* to his son" (Ibid. 16:15) although the prophecy had come to Hagar. We don't see any indication that the prophecy came to Abraham as well. Parents somehow know what to name their children.

It is customary among most Ashkenazic Jews and some Sephardic ones not to name children after living people. Some Sephardic Jews make it a point to name a child after living people. Sometimes relatives are chosen, sometimes famous righteous people. Regardless of which custom one follows, it is the universal desire of all parents to give their child an honorable name, and to bless him with the hope that he will grow up to bring credit to his name.

Some of my children are named after grandparents or great-grandparents, and some after great Torah Sages or Biblical heroes. (When a parent names a child, it is with the hope that the child will grow to emulate his great predecessor. Therefore, we make it a point to find positive role models after whom to name our children.

Being a Mohel, I am often consulted by parents to help them select a name. I am often surprised by their selections. Someone once wanted to name their son Esau until I talked them out of it! Great! Name your child after a Biblical figure who was the sworn enemy of Israel! (After World War 2, many Jews named Adolph legally changed their names.)

It is, therefore, rather surprising that we find that several of the Sages of the Talmud were named Rabbi Yishmael. Ishmael, the oldest son of Abraham, does not seem to be a person whom we would want our children to emulate. He was *“a wild man, his hand against everyone (in theft -- Rashi) and everyone’s hand against him (in hatred -- Rashi) and over all his brothers he will dwell.”* (He will be a very large nation) (Ibid, 17:12) He ridiculed Isaac and his observance of G-d’s Commandments. He was a murderer. He was so lacking in ethics and morality that his own father sent him away, so that he wouldn’t be a bad influence on Isaac. (See “Under the Influence of Dregs”.)

How could it be that parents would want to name their children after such a scoundrel?

The answer, I believe, is that there is an important lesson that can be learned from Ishmael. To be sure, he was a terrible person. At least he started out that way. A son has to be pretty bad to be banished by his father. (with G-d’s approval!) And most certainly, his descendants have not distinguished themselves as great lovers of Israel. (A few cases in point: The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who encouraged Hitler to bring the “Final Solution” to “Palestine”, Yassir Arafat, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Ladin, to name a few)

However, there was something special about Ishmael. Our Sages tell us that despite a “slow start”, he became righteous later on. He was spared from dying as a young man, shortly after his expulsion from his father’s house, because he repented his evil ways. And, to a certain extent, the repentance seems to have lasted. When Esau wanted to impress his parents by pretending to be righteous, he did so by marrying into Ishmael’s family. (Ibid. 28:8-9) In fact, our Sages tell us that Ishmael died a righteous man.

Ishmael teaches us that it is never too late to change one's ways. The great High Priest Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, when asked by G-d for a "blessing," responded by asking G-d to always judge His children favorably and deal with them mercifully. G-d gave that first Yishmael the benefit of the doubt and judged him favorably, allowing him to live, in spite of the angels' protestations that he should die. (See "Could the Twin Towers Have Been Saved?") Ishmael eventually showed himself deserving of that mercy.

So why aren't there more Ishmaels in the Jewish community? I imagine that it is mostly cultural. In Talmudic times the Ishmaelites had not declared Jihad against us. Perhaps it was easier back then to separate Ishmael from his descendants. Today that is much more difficult.

However, there are SOME. There is, for example, a rabbi I know of whose first name is Ishmael. I have come across Jews in Arab countries named Muhammad; it wouldn't surprise me if there a couple Ishmaels out there. (Much as we find today Jews with Christian names such as Elizabeth, James, Jason, Lois, Matthew, Peter, Paul, Phillip, Stephen, Thomas, etc.)

There, you have it. A person who starts off less-than-perfect, and strives for greatness, and achieves it. Is that such a bad lesson? We can learn something from everyone. If our children learn the lesson of self-redemption through changing one's ways, that's a good thing.

Now, if only Ishmael's children could learn the same lesson!

Have a great Shabbos.

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