

# Becoming Our Name

*Rosh Hashanah Day 1 - 5770 (2009)*  
*R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel*

This past year our family, both Frayda and I, were blessed with the birth of our son. The delivery of a first-born is filled with unique anticipation, nervousness, and excitement. There were countless moments of emotional depth and spiritual ecstasy.

I will always remember our drive to the hospital. It was Shabbos, early morning hours, and at one of the lights, I turned to Frayda and I said, “this is a classic example of violating the commandments, of violating Shabbat in order to preserve the commandments.” Frayda looked back at me, as though saying, “I’m about to give birth, you’re about to become a father, and you’re happy because it teaches you Torah!”

At the hospital we were pleasantly surprised to meet our non-Jewish nurse, whose name was none other than Torah. Gevalt! She explained that “it was a common old African name.” It felt very appropriate to us both.

Indeed, our experience was filled with Torah and moments of religious depth.

One such experience was the act of choosing our son’s name. It was a true moment of revelation. The name ‘Hoshaya,’ came to us a very short while after our son was born. For days we carried his name as though it was a treasured secret in our midst. At quiet moments, we whispered it to each other, we whispered it to him: “Hoshaya, Hoshaya.” It seemed as though that name had been waiting for him from the time of *Bereshit*, from the very creation of the world.

However, just as soon as we named him, we began receiving a number of interesting comments.

One close family friend, an Orthodox woman from Long Island, remarked: “Oh, that’s Jewish.” Another person said, “That will serve him well in the secular world.”

But more than any single comment, Frayda and I have been approached with one question in particular, posed repeatedly at different times. In fact, this very question was raised almost instantly after Hoshaya’s naming. It appears to be quite a simple question: “So, nu, what will you call him?”

I initially misunderstood the question. I thought that people had a hard time hearing or pronouncing the name, and so I would proceed by slowly pronouncing Hoshaya’s name: “Ho-Sha-Ya.” Yet often my answer would receive the following response: “Yes, of course, his name is Hoshaya, but what will you call him?” Some people would further clarify by offering a number of examples: “Will you call him, Hosh, Hoshee, Shaya, Shay, Shayman?” To which I would dryly respond, “We named him Hoshaya and we will call him Hoshaya.”

In private I would say to Frayda, “I just don’t get it! If we wanted to call him Shaya we would have named him Shaya.”

At a later point, it occurred to me, that maybe, if we wanted people to call him Hoshaya, we should have just named him Shaya.

Our experience with Hoshaya’s naming brought home a particular message. It suddenly donned on me that we live in a world that so desperately tries to change our name.

I can’t tell you how much I dread going to Starbucks. They always want to know my name, so that later they can call out, ‘George – grande double frapucino,’ “Michelle – venti single soy latte macchiato,” “Laura – double split espresso with milk on the side.” I mean these people have been trained to express, articulate, pronounce, any and every possible variation of coffee types and their names. They just can’t say my name. “Sir what’s your name?” they ask and I am suddenly confronted with an existential crisis. “What’s my name?” “I mean how much time do we have?” and “Why don’t we discuss my name over a cup of coffee?”

I once went to Starbucks with a fellow rabbi, who also has a weird name. When they asked him for his name, he said, "I'm Rabbi." And I immediately thought to myself, "Boy that's interesting." So when they asked me for my name, I said, "I'm Rabbi too."

In all seriousness though, from the moment we are born, from the moment our parents name us, everyone has a claim to our name. Everybody tries to desperately change our name.

The Jewish Israeli poet Zelda eloquently captured this idea in her famous poem, "*l'kol ish yesh shem*" – "Every person has a name." In it she writes:

Each of us has a name  
given by God  
and given by our parents...

Each of us has a name  
given by our sins  
and given by our longing...

Each of us has a name  
given by the sea  
and given by  
our death.

So each of us has many names and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are certainly the right times for each of us to sift through our different names, to reflect, and to come to terms with the names we have made for ourselves. This is our time, each and every one of us, to reconnect and reclaim our name. Indeed, our very challenge is to imagine the name we can yet become.

We each have a name. And so the question is, have we lost our name or are we still living up to our name?

This question confronts us not only as individuals, but also as a collective, as a people. As a community, we all share a number of names: we are called *Ivriim* (Hebrews), *Yisraelim* (Israelites), and *Yehudim* (Jews). And on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, our community must ask itself: Has the world caused us to lose our names or are we still living up to them?

What does it mean to be called an *Ivri* (a Hebrew)?

Abraham the patriarch was called *Avraham halvri*, Abraham the Hebrew because he crossed from the other side. Our rabbis explain, that Abraham did not only cross from side to side in a physical sense, through his journey to the land of Israel, but rather that Abraham was a contrarian in a spiritual, ethical, and political sense. Abraham, we are told, stood on the opposite side of the rest of the world.

Indeed, Rav Soloveitchik described Abraham, and I quote, as “a political and social anarchist who negates the authority of conventional institutions and manmade mores; [Abraham is] not an ethical conformist who just subjects himself to an external authority, which overpowers and enslaves him.” (*The Emergence of Ethical Man*, p. 156)

So what I’m about to say may surprise you, but I truly believe that we Jews are insufficiently contrarian. Sure, we live in Berkeley and there are many Jews that have strange, fringe, and eccentric ideas. But everyone is strange here in the same strange way. I’m not interested in contrarians who happen to be Jewish. I’m interested in *Ivriim*, Hebrews, contrarian Jews – Jews who are contrarian because they are Jewish, not because it’s a fad, or a phase, or in mode.

So my question is: How much of what we believe and pray for, and do, and choose, and oppose, and get angry, and frustrated, and tense about, and also, excited, and passionate, and driven about, and advocate for, is informed by and dictated by our Hebrew identity.

Today, we must ask ourselves, very specifically, as our prophets surely would do: To what extent have we, our homes, our shuls, our schools, our slaughter houses, our youth groups, and

our denominations, have become conventional institutions? In other words, can we still call ourselves *Ivriim*? Where do we stand with the world and where do we stand far and apart from the world?

But we are also called *Yisraelim* (Israelites).

Jacob received the name Israel after having wrestled with the angel a whole night. To be an Israelite means that we contend with God, that we seriously grapple with our mystical weight.

Berkeley is full of Jews who like to tell you that they wrestle with God. And I always ask these people: Where? Where do you wrestle with God? Show me! Do you mean that you wrestle with God in your head, in your heart? But that's not what Jacob did. Jacob struggled with God physically, with his body, with his hands...and Jacob never let go of God until he overcame his struggle.

This last point is critical: Israelites struggle with God while holding on to God.

We hold a prayer book in our hands and we struggle with God. We keep kosher even as we struggle with God. We keep the Shabbat even as we struggle with God. We bless God even as we struggle with God. Yes we struggle and yes we hold on to God.

For too long, we allowed ourselves to use our name Israel in vain. I struggle, you struggle, we all have our struggles. But the name Israel is not an excuse. The name Israel is the way.

Today, we must ask ourselves, very specifically, as our prophets surely would: To what extent do we hide behind these struggles, use them as an excuse for our spiritual lethargy, our social apathy, and our ethical laziness? At this day and age, can we still call ourselves *Yisraelim* (descendants of Israel)? When will our struggles end and when will our actions begin?

But we have yet another name to live up to. We are also called *Yehudim* (Jews).

The name *Yehudi*, which means, of Judah or Jewish, comes from the same root as the word *Todah* – to give thanks, to express gratitude. Every morning a Jew begins his or her day by saying the words “*Modeh anni l’fneich, melech chai ve’kayam, she’hechezarta bi nishmatti be’chemlah, rabbah emunatecha*” – “I gratefully thank You, O living and eternal King, for You have returned my soul within me with compassion – abundant is Your faithfulness!”

Now remember, this Jew, who just woke up, didn’t yet have a chance to check his or her financial portfolio, didn’t yet have a chance to read headlines about the State of Israel, and haven’t yet received his or her latest medical report. This Jew simply wakes up, and before anything else is allowed to enter into his or her consciousness, he or she utters the word: Thank you, thank you God. The concept of giving gratitude is so central to our religious lives that it is our people’s very namesake. To be a Jew is nothing more and nothing less than to lead a life of radical gratitude.

Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way, “there is a built-in sense of indebtedness in the consciousness of man, an awareness of owing gratitude, of being called upon at certain moments to reciprocate, to answer, to live in a way which is compatible with the grandeur and mystery of living.” (*Who is Man?* p. 111)

Unfortunately, in modern times, a book titled “Born to Kvetch” captures our communal and national mode of being much better than the simple prayer that summons up the meaning of our people’s namesake. But you don’t need to be a Jew to be a *kvetcher*. Anyone can be a *kvecher*. Jews however, because of our history, because of our narrative, have the remarkable and unique power to transform any *kvetch*, any lament into a song of praise. That’s what we did with *Hatikvah*. We took a two thousand year old kvetch and turned it into a moving and inspiring national anthem.

Today, we must ask ourselves, very specifically, as our prophets surely would: Are we born to kvetch or are we born to give gratitude? Do we feel, like a *kvetcher* does, that we are owed everything, or do we feel as a *Yehudi* would, that ultimately everything we have is owed right

back? At this day and age, can we still dare to call ourselves *Yehudim* (Jews)? At what point will we limit our expectations to receive and begin to open ourselves towards giving?

A story is told, in the name of Franz Rosenzweig, of “a man named Mendele, who lived in a southern Black Forest village. One day when he was busy at chopping wood in the square beside the synagogue, some local boys decided to have a bit of fun. They called out Mendele’s name and then hid to watch his reaction.” “Mendele, Mendele!” and they would hide. “Mendele, Mendele!” and they would hide. Finally, “at the third call, Mendele threw down his axe, ran into the synagogue, up to the *bimah* where the Torah is read, and called out in Hebrew: “*Hinnen!*” “Here I am.”” (Barbara E. Galli, *Franz Rosenzweig and Jehuda Halevi*, p.450)

The world may call us by many different names, and I promise you, the world will continue to try to distract us, and force us to change our names. But on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, like Mendele himself, let us not be tempted or fooled by those calls. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur only one call matters – it is the call of God. And on these days, God calls His people to return. God calls us to return to the names He has given us at the very beginning.

We are *Ivriim*. We are *Yisraelim*. We are *Yehudim*.

And today, each of these names requires each of us to call out “*Hinnen!*” – “Here I am.”