

# What's in a name?

## Lech Lecha 5782/2021

One of my more profound conference moments, was at the Nahum Goldmann Fellowship in 2017. I was a member of the staffing team, and we had just finished a jam packed week. One of our final sessions was with the innovative, social disruptor, Hareidi Rabbi and leader, Rabbi Menachem Bombach. In a moment of profound simplicity, he had us go round in the circle, share our name, and the reason why we were named that way. It was raw, emotional and revealing.

A name is an incredibly powerful tool that one has – it sparks endearment and love in those early years of infancy and childhood, it becomes a social capital tool through high school, in adulthood it represents potential, and in old age it is the sign of legacy. Plainly put, a name is one of the most giving gifts that our parents provide us with. It is the only thing we are born with and die with.

Lech Lecha is all about journeying – geography, theology and identity. Our two protagonists of the early monotheistic story, Abram and Sarai, commune with the Almighty and receive new identities. They now become Abraham and Sarah, representing their closeness with God, and their Otherness with society<sup>1</sup> as the Chizkuni notes it represents a spiritual promotion<sup>2</sup>. The Babylonian Talmud seems to place a very high value on the new found names of Judaism's founding couple, categorising it as a positive commandment, so much so, that if one was to call them by their original names you would be in violation of this positive command<sup>3</sup>.

So what makes the name so powerful?

At a national level, the Midrash explains that the protecting of our names whilst slaves in Egypt was key to our redemption from slavery, it signified our uniqueness and the value we placed on that uniqueness<sup>4</sup>. But on an individual level, we need to realise the weight which others place on our names. As Rabbi Benjamin Blech notes, names tell a story<sup>5</sup>. They have the power to transcend our location and social standing, they take us back in time, through history and across distant lands, and they allow us to dream of unlimited future potential.

This is why one of the most ubiquitous quotes from Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Fathers is about names<sup>6</sup>. The crown of a good name outweighs all other crowns which one might be borne into, or acquired over the years. It is, as I said above, the only thing one is born with and dies with. As my Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Jeremy Wieder, used to point out in his annual mussar schmooze at the end of the first class of the academic year, you can spend a lifetime building up your name and reputation, and you can destroy it in all but a second if you do something terribly wrong.

We live in a world where we don't think twice about sharing every moment of our life. We glamorise the self, the individual, the materialism of life. Our name is everywhere, and for the first time in human history, our name is attached to every thing we do in the most public of ways – the good, the bad and the ugly – all in the name of social media.

How many of us think about the tarnishing of our name through unbridled exposure? How many of us think critically about what we are sharing before we post? How many of us are willing to take the risk of destroying our names in all but a second?

Perhaps in this age of information [non]truth we should come up with an alias or a pet name!<sup>7</sup>

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud – Lech Lecha 5782**