

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah – Vayishlakh

My least favorite line from Shakespeare has to be one from act two of Romeo and Juliet, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." It is over used, and ... well who really says that type of stuff to a young potential date, in these days? Yes, it is an appropriate way of describing so many things in life, but in truth, a rose is a rose, and a non-rose is not a rose, and whether or not it is sweet really depends not on the rose or not rose, but on whether the individual who smells the flower likes that sort of thing. The reality is that names are, at best relative, and the text from Shakespeare only tells us that names are irrelevant in relationship to value. I think Shakespeare was wrong. We are prejudiced by names, and we respond or react to things based on all sorts of things that have nothing to do with data. When I told Rachel that we were having ground up cow for dinner, she refused to come downstairs. Later telling her it was hamburger did not help any. Would you buy C₈H₉NO₂ or Methyl nicotinic acid methyl ester over the counter? How about Acetaminophen which still sounds a whole lot more scientific than just plain Tylenol, and NaCl is a chemical while table salt is edible. And when it comes to people, as much as I want to claim to be one person to all, as Marc, I am seen differently than as Rabbi, Daddy, or any host of other names or epithets by which people might refer to me. In the Jewish version of the Bible, God has 72 names, each referring to a different aspect of the one God, and still, there is only one God.

This week we wrestle (ok, bad pun) with an important name change; Jacob becomes Israel. The epiphanic moment of change is a little weird, though. When Abraham's name changes from Avram to Avraham, there is no turning back. He remains Avraham for the rest of his years and ultimately, the Talmud will teach that anyone who calls him Avram has created an incredible blasphemy. With Jacob, though the text tells us that after the wrestling match at the river, he will no longer be known as Jacob. He becomes Israel, and yet, throughout the rest of the Torah, throughout the midrash, and also in our own liturgy, we continue to refer to him as Jacob. Abraham changes from an exalted father (Av-ram) to father of the many. The additional "h" changes his stature and his calling in life. The names are similar and are separated by only the one letter. Jacob, on the other hand, has two completely separate names. There are two sides to Jacob. Israel literally means one who wrestles with God. The scene is the River Jabbok. It is late at night and Jacob has this incredible wrestling match with an "ish." Ish can mean a man, an angel, or even Jacob, himself. And Israel is not a biologic name. Jacob takes an entourage of 70 to Egypt and comes out two million - 400 years later. At the moment we stand at the foot of Mt Sinai, all two million of us (lots more than for which being fruitful and multiplying could account). we were all called "B'nai Yisrael," the children of Israel, making the term descriptive of all people on the journey of faith, and not just some who claim to be. In the midst of all of this, Jacob becomes a new man, Jacob "the one who wrestles with faith."

Israel is an adjective. It has been accepted as the name of a nation and the name of a people, but it is much bigger than any one faith or any one geography. This is not about a political nation that operates separate and apart from any journey of faith. The word Israel describes people who are faithful enough to wrestle with God in search of greater truths and greater insight into that which God demands of all of us, not just those of any one faith or tradition. To be Israel is to invest one's soul in the journey for peace and the embrace of divinity. And while many claim to wear this label, this is a word that describes

what it takes for us to find and welcome into our consciousness the calm and peace that is the age of peace. We are taught, “Kol ha-olam kulo, gesher tsar me-ode – The whole world, all of it is connected by a very narrow bridge.” It would be antithetical for our tradition to see the words of peace as being only about us. And in our prayers for peace, they extend to the whole world. Near the end of each worship service, we recite the line, “Ba-yom ha-hu yi-h-yeh Adonai ekhad -- On that day, God will be one and God’s name will be one.” The text does not say God will be for only one (religion), nor will God’s name be spoken in only one language or according to tradition. If we are to bring healing to this world, it must start with the recognition that it really is about all of us and not as we too often chauvinistically think about only ourselves. Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya-aseh shalom a laenu v’al kol Yisrael, v’al kol b’nae adam – May the One who makes peace in the heavens cause it to descend upon all of us, that is all of the world.” Shabbat Shalom.