

Parshat Lech Lecha October 15 2021

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Names are critical in the Tanakh, the Hebrew bible. The genealogies are like roadmaps of your family's standing and where you've come from. Often, they tell us something important about our hero. Esther the chic Persian is really Hadassah the Jew. Hosea the spy is really Joshua, son of Nun. Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob all get new names that deepen their stories and the imprint of God on the souls of these first Jewish adventurers.

Our names are not always what they appear to be, especially if you have an anglicized last name. It will come as little surprise that I am not really a Danson but a Danushevsky. On my mother's side, not a Silver but a Cerebrenik. My guess is many of us have similar stories.

Names are also very fragile. A story: I'm preparing for a wedding, and I ask the couple to make sure the friend who is signing their ketubah knows how to write their Hebrew name. Don't worry they tell me, they're almost Orthodox. The day comes, they sign, and I see on Moshe or Rivka on the contract and that's it. I ask, *ben* or *bat* what and get a blank stare? Do you know your parent's Hebrew name? No. *Gevault*. And this story happens again and again., when I'm collecting names for an Aliyah and especially, for *El Maleh Rachamim*, where it's the great grandparent's name that is often lost. I hear grandpa was Reuven or grandma Sprinza but nothing after the *ben* or *bat*. Names lost in only a generation

And I have become like an author doing a reading, relentlessly inscribing a name on the pile of books before them at light speed (a book with a signature has, effectively, been sold). I have turned to writing out people's Hebrew names on every certificate I can crank out – at a brit, at Consecration, at a Bar and Bat Mitzvah, at Confirmation, and at weddings. I don't know if it works but I want to litter a trail of Hebrew names after people like a blaze through a forest.

So, I'm giving you an assignment – tonight you have homework. First, the easy assignment. If you know it, write out your full Hebrew name. Write it out in transliteration and Hebrew if possible. And start giving it away. Send it to your kids if you have them and to nephews and nieces because it's also includes a part of their parents' names. Attach it to your documents like POA's, wills, and if you have one, an ethical will.

A second assignment. Ask around your family for Hebrew names, from parents if they're still alive and ditto for siblings. Write out your kids' Hebrew names if you remember them. The full Hebrew name, David *ben* you. Shoshana *bat* you. Send them along and keep your own record of them. Write out any Hebrew names you know from your family tree, even if it's just a first name. If you know the full Hebrew name of a grandparent that is gold.

Make a call. Interview everyone in your family to find out which Hebrew names they remember. The older they are the better. Write 'em down and send 'em out. And take a field

trip to the cemeteries where your family is buried to take photos of the stone or ground plaque. Sometimes there won't be a Hebrew name on it, but mostly there will. It's especially fertile ground for the women in your family whose names are more fragile because they often didn't get synagogue honors. But in death, Hebrew names were treated equally. If you strike out at the cemetery, try the synagogue they belonged to to see if there's a memorial board and if they have a plaque. You can see, it's a mixed bag on ours. Not a lot of Hebrew names. But often a synagogue will have a culture of inscribing the Hebrew.

Now eyes may roll when your letter bearing the names arrives at the home of your beloved 35-year-old who has barely walked into shul in 20 years or has a nice Buddhist shrine set up. But my guess is they won't throw it out and it will end up in the pile of photos and unsorted artifacts. And one day their 11-year-old or 45-year-old will be going through the pile and their eyes will light up as they discover the Jewish name of a grandparent or great grandparent and another journey will begin. They will wonder at their immigrant great, great, grandmother's name Yenta, which is really Juanita in disguise. Or then they'll be able to fully fill answer the Jewish chaplain's query, "and their Hebrew name" as a misheberach is being said for you. Or they may simply take joy in preserving the details of their family's journey to a new land, their own *goldena medina*.

Our parasha is a tribute to the importance and power of names. Lech l'echa; you will no longer be Avram but Avraham, not Sarai but Sarah, and the world will change. The text was far truer than they could have imagined, these ancestors of the Abrahamic world.