

**Lech Lcha**  
**10.26.2012**

When I was about 10 years old, I was accidentally assigned to a boys cabin at sleepaway camp. It was the first time I had ever been to Camp Newman, so they had never seen me before, and even though I am sure my parents had checked the box for “female”, I was initially told I would be spending the week in Cabin 5, with all the smelly smellyboyd..

As soon as my counselors saw me, of course, I was re-assigned.

Later, in college, my dad called me one day to tell me that he had received a fundraising letter from UC Santa Barbara – they wanted to know if he would be willing to donate funds to the school his son was currently attending. He replied to their request with a strongly-worded letter about how important it was that his daughter be educated by people who knew her gender.

And just a few weeks ago, while checking in for an appointment with a new doctor, the receptionist, looking puzzled, asked for my name and birthdate three times before finally apologizing and explaining that I was listed in the system as a fellow, and not a lady.

Names, it turns out, are rather important.

A commentary on Ecclesiastes tells us that we are each given three names: the first by our parents, a second by the people we surround ourselves with, and a third that we are responsible for making for ourselves.

The Hebrew poet Zelda thought it was a bit more complicated than that. In her poem “L’chollshYesh Shem”, Every Man Has a Name, 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 stature and our smile  
And given by what we wear.  
Each of us has a name  
Given by the mountains  
And given by our walls.  
Each of us has a name  
Given by the stars  
And given by our neighbors.  
Each of us has a name  
Given by our sins  
And given by our longing.  
Each of us has a name  
Given by our enemies  
And given by our love.  
Each of us has a name  
Given by our celebrations  
And given by our work.  
Each of us has a name  
Given by the seasons  
And given by our blindness.  
Each of us has a name  
Given by the sea  
And given by  
Our death.

For Zelda, names are not static and they are not simple.

Objectively, names are simply requirements for speech – to talk about any object or person, you must distinguish it from the other objects (or persons) around it. In this way, names serve an important and practical purpose.

But subjectively, names are much more nuanced, much more along the lines of Zelda's description. To begin with, names mean different things to different people And names come with qualifiers, because our basic names often say very little about us. When we introduce people, we include job titles and a word or two that explains how we know these people – Rabbi Dr. Rachel Adler, meet my college roommate Melanie.

In short, our names are not really so much for us – they are for the people we are in relationship with. People need a way to speak about us, to describe us. These qualifiers and descriptors give us information about a person.

Parashat *Lech L'cha* is full of naming. First, God gives Hagar instructions on how to name her son. She is to name him Ishmael. The text of the Torah tells us that Ishmael is to be named as such because “God has heard Hagar's suffering”.<sup>1</sup> And indeed, we know that ‘shma’ means hear and ‘el’ means God.

But this naming decision has little to do with Ishmael or who he will become. It is instead a name created by God to comfort Hagar, to remind her that she has not been forgotten, that God has in fact paid attention to her troubles. Every day that Hagar calls for her son, she will be reminded: “I-shma-el”, that God heard her.

Isaac too is named in reaction to the actions of his parents. His name means “he laughed”, which is exactly –to the letter- what Avram did when he heard that he and Sarai, in their advanced age, would be giving birth to a baby boy.

The other two names we read about this week are re-namings; Avram becomes Avraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. These names are also given by God, but they DO convey meaning directly to the newly re-named.

Avraham the man is meant to become the father of many nations, and Avraham the name means just that: av = father, r hearkens to the Hebrew word ‘rov’, meaning many, and ham is the beginning of ‘hamon’, which means multitudes.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Gen 16:11]

<sup>2</sup> Play on Rashi's understanding, Genesis Rabbah 46:7

Sarai's name is given less explanation in the text itself, but I might suggest that her name change parallels her husband's transformation; after all, if Abe's going to take on a new name and whatever else may come with that, she should probably go with him on that metaphorical journey; and she can only do that if she is given a new name as well.

Thus far we have mostly spoken about the effects others have on our name. Do we have any control at all over our own name!?

The answer, thankfully, is yes.

We choose what we do with our lives, and those choices are what follow our name; those choices shape the names we are given.

When God calls him for the first time, Avram is just a guy hanging out in Haran. He is descended from Shem and his dad's name is Terach, but that's about all we know of him. Once God has called Avram, however, we learn just what kind of a man Avram is.

He is obedient to God, going where God says to go.

He is generous, the family peacekeeper, giving the better of the land options to his nephew Lot.

He is a warrior, stepping in to save Lot after he is captured during a multi-nation war.

God sees, God approves, and God recognizes these actions, these deeds. And he bestows upon him the name Avraham.

I will always be Dusty, short for Dustin, but the way I choose to live my life affects what people know about me when they hear that name. If we color our choices with humility, respect, and genuine care for others well-being, our names will be heard well. If we color our choices with frustration, hypocrisy, and grudge-bearing, our names will be conjure up a very different image.

Ecclesiastes 7:1 tells us that “A good name is better than fine oil.”

When we work to “do good” in the world, we are seen as good by the world. Merely by living our lives, we are transformed. May we be generous and compassionate, may we “do” lots of “good”, may we be transformed for the better, and may we all make names for ourselves that we are proud to be known by.

Shabbat Shalom.