

In her poem “Every Man Has a Name” the Israeli poet Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky z”l lists the many different aspects of our lives that “name” us, from our environment to our intrinsic and acquired attributes. As we know, names in our holy scriptures are descriptive, either of the person or of the issues surrounding their birth. And as like Abram-Abraham and Sarai-Sarah, names can change according to circumstances. Now, in our parashah Jakob acquires a new name, but also retains his original name. Of our three patriarchs and four matriarchs, Jakob is the most complex and certainly the most dichotomous. His birth name derives from the root עקב, which forms a multitude of words such as heel, succeed, consequence, hold back, supplant, follow, investigate, crooked, deceive, and steep. Indeed, Jakob is born grasping the heel of his twin Esau, and his life is subsequently marked by all of these diverse terms. He deceives and supplants Esau and is in turn deceived by Lavan. He follows in the footsteps of his father and marries into Abraham’s family, and his path is steep and often painful. As he tells Pharaoh later, he has led a short and miserable life. But still, he is portrayed as a symbol of truth (Micah 7:20), and as an *ish tam*, a pure man who dwells in tents (Gen. 25:27). And it is he who fathers the tribes that become *Israel*, the name he acquires after his nocturnal wrestling match with the mysterious “*ish*” (man), whom our sages alternately identify as Esau’s guardian angel and Jakob’s own conscience. In essence, Jakob struggles to find his elusive true identity, just as Torah and midrash struggle to define him in unequivocal terms. One verse in Zelda’s poem says, “Every man has a name given to him by his sins and by his yearnings.” Jakob the crooked, Jakob the deceiver, Jakob the supplanter, and now, Jakob wrestling with the consequences of his actions as he prepares to meet Esau. “Every man has a name given to him by his stature and by the manner of his smile and by his clothes ... by his enemies and by his love.” Jakob has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, reaping the material fruits of the blessings intended for Esau and fathering 11 sons and a daughter in the process. No longer the smooth-skinned, innocent, studious man of the tent, he has become the rugged, seasoned entrepreneur who has used every trick in the book to get ahead. Now, after learning that Esau is coming to meet him accompanied by 400 men, he is understandably extremely frightened and distressed. Will all this success, which is largely the product of his deviousness, end up destroying him and his family? From his words and actions, it is evident that his fear of Esau is also tinged with feelings of guilt. He prepares outrageously elaborate gifts for Esau, which he urges him to accept. And despite Esau’s tearful embrace and kiss (viewed by some as insincere or even as a bite, because of the dots over “and he kissed him” וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ, another Torah anomaly provoking much speculation), Jakob remains aloofly servile, and uses all his wiles to maintain physical as well as emotional distance. He is obviously in the midst of profound transformation and his encounter with the “*ish*” the night before meeting Esau is his watershed moment. *Jabbok*, the name of the river where this event occurred, likely derives from the root בקק to empty, remove, destroy. It is an apt place for someone like Jakob to begin to confront the jagged pieces of his persona, excise what makes him uncomfortable, and come to grips with his true identity and his purpose in life. “Every man has a name given to him by his holidays and his profession.” Jakob is burdened by his enormous wealth and family responsibilities, and equally burdened by his vow to HaShem at the place he named Beth-El (House of God) after awakening from his mystical ladder dream 20 years before on his flight from Esau – if HaShem protects him, feeds and clothes him, and allows him to return in peace. What chutzpa! HaShem has delivered in grand style, but Jakob has procrastinated, settling at Shechem and building an altar there instead of in Beth-El. Midrash Tanchuma teaches that the tragic incident surrounding his daughter Dinah was the punishment for his procrastination, and other midrashim say his negligence even caused Rachel’s untimely death. After the debacle at Shechem, HaShem reminds Jakob of his vow, and he finally sets out to fulfill it. In preparation he commands his people to remove all foreign objects of worship, and to purify themselves and change their clothes. The people give him their idols and their earrings, which he buries under the terebinth tree (אֵלֶּה, which is also a word for goddess) at Shechem, ridding himself and his people of any vestiges of idolatry. “Every man has a name given to him by God and by his father and mother.” At Beth El, HaShem reiterates Jakob’s new name, along with blessings of progeny from whom will come nations and kings (35:10-11). The name *Israel* is itself dichotomous, deriving from roots meaning either straight, honest, righteous (יִשְׂרָאֵל), or God-Wrestler (יִשְׂרָאֵל). As *Israel*, the name HaShem gives him, he is the honest, righteous father of nations, but whose progeny will indeed contend with HaShem. And as Jakob, the name he receives from his parents, he is still the fallible human being who will make many more mistakes that will cause him much suffering. “Every man has a name given to him by the seasons and by his blindness ... by the sea and by his death.” His silence after the rape of Dinah, and the blatant favoritism with his children and their mothers are prime examples. Jakob-Israel will die a stranger in a foreign land, dependent upon the protection of favored son Josef and the grateful generosity of the Pharaoh he serves, but his remains will return to the land that still bears his name, and the stories of this most complex and dichotomous patriarch will always have something to teach us.

Shabbat shalom!