

**Parshat Vayetze**

December 3, 2022 | 9 Kislev 5783

**Torah:** Genesis 28:10-32:3 **Triennial:** 28:10-30:13

**Haftarah:** Hosea 12:13-14:10

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## Adding Names

### Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

#### *Parashah*

Our parashah is fantastic for baby naming. In quick succession, we read name after name and the meanings behind them. However, many of these meanings may not be the sort of names with which you want to burden a newborn. In the moments after birth, in the first week of sleep deprivation, our matriarchs choose names which reflect their own experiences rather than wishes or hopes that they may have for the child. The children carry the lowest points of the pasts of their mothers as their names. In our parashah, the names given will go on to be the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. They will be reinterpreted later to have different weight, focusing on the good rather than the pain.

Leah uses the naming of her children to work through her desperation to get Jacob to notice her. Her firstborn is Look-a-Son, otherwise known as Look-at-My-Affliction or even Let-Him-Love-Me. She then

bears He-Hears-My-Affliction and Let-My-Man-Become-Attached-to-Me. With her fourth child, Leah gives up hope of changing Jacob and instead turns her attention to God, naming this child, I-Give-Thanks-to-God. This fourth child is Judah, the tribe from which we get our name as Jews today.

Rachel is in a very different mental state when she names her firstborn child. After years of infertility, God finally remembers Rachel and opens her womb, removing her infertility. This is the very Rachel who had told her husband, “Give me children or else I am dead.” We might think that upon finally bearing a child, Rachel would feel only joy, only thankfulness. But Rachel is not able to shake off her past that easily, to let go of her long years of suffering. Even with a baby in her arms, Rachel recalls the difficulty of the journey to produce her child. She explains Joseph’s name twice, using two different root words. In the first explanation, she says, “God has collected up my disgrace,” with the root aleph-samekh-pe for collect. In the second explanation, she says, “May God add for me another son,” with the root yod-samekh-pe for add.

The first explanation with its emphasis on disgrace seems to emphasize Rachel’s suffering. Medieval commentator Sforno explains that this disgrace is the fact that God listened to Leah’s prayers but not Rachel’s prayers. Rachel may have been chosen by Jacob but she seems not chosen by God. It is not surprising that she is the one who will later take idols with her on the journey to Canaan. Rashi cites Bereshit Rabbah to offer a different explanation of her disgrace. He takes her focus on the past and turns it to the future. He writes, “As long as a woman does not have a child, she has no one to blame her

shortcomings on, one who does have a son does have someone to blame. For example, 'who broke this vessel?' 'your son!', 'who ate these figs?' 'your son!'" It is a hilarious explanation of the point of having children - we have children to take the fall for our mistakes. Rachel's disgrace was not that God didn't listen to her or that she was unable to have children, rather it was the thousand little things that we do everyday that she can now blame on her child.

Rachel's second explanation for Joseph's name straddles her past and her future, with little regard for the baby himself. She names him with a prayer for yet another child. Even as the baby leaves her womb, she is already hoping for another, ever yet competing in the child production game with her sister.

These children will all grow up to be more than the names they are given and they will redefine the ways we understand their names. But in the biblical explanation for where children come from, in the story we get in four verbs of he lay with her, she got pregnant, she gave birth, and she named, we can understand why these women might want to hold onto to their own stories in the naming. They will fade from view once their children are born. By giving their children names that encompass their suffering, their stories live on as the twelve tribes of Israel and to this very day in the thousands of us named for them.

## Transformation at Beth El

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Haftarah

The appearance of a reference to a Torah story in the later parts of Tanakh opens the opportunity to track down missing details and different understandings of the story by comparing the various occurrences.

Hosea, an eighth-century bce prophet of the kingdom of Israel, chooses to address his audience using the stories of Jacob that are familiar from the Torah:

*“And Jacob fled to the field of Aram,  
And Israel served for a woman/wife,  
And for a woman/wife he kept [sheep].” (12:13)*

The kingdom he lives in, containing most of the tribes, referred to itself as “Israel” or “Jacob”. Those names came about because of specific episodes, and their use in the prophecy is not random. Jacob is associated with deceit and trickery. It is Jacob who flees. However, in the second line Hosea shifts to using the name “Israel”, not simply as poetic balance but as a more positive view of some of the patriarch’s actions. Something happened between the flight of “Jacob” and the hard and loyal work of “Israel.” The key to understanding that is found in the story of Beth El.

Hosea is suggesting that Jacob’s name change took place much earlier than the known Torah stories suggest. It took place already at the first encounter in Beth El.

According to the parashah, Jacob flees his brother whom he tricked. He finds himself spending a night at Beth El and experiencing a revelation: a ladder with angels and a promise from God that he will receive the land and become a great nation, and God will protect him. With that, he sets off and finds himself embroiled in another story of deceit as he marries Leah by mistake. In the next parashah Jacob, returning to the land of Israel and to Beth El, now with his wives and 11 sons, receives a name change – Israel, and a repeat of the land and nation promise.

In that story Jacob’s name-change is similar in language (a unique name of God) and themes to the name-change and land-nation promise that Avraham receives in chapter 17. Both are connected to a promise of the land and of becoming a great nation. Both are a prelude to the birth of a significant child, Yitzhak for Avraham and Benjamin for Jacob.

In the book of Bereshit Jacob’s renaming and the promise at Beth El take place only *after* Jacob returns from Aram. But Hosea seems to be familiar with a tradition linking the name-change and land-nation promise with the first revelation at Beth El, *prior* to leaving to find a wife.

That changes the story that we are familiar with. Hosea tells a different story about our origins: As Jacob leaves the land he becomes Israel, and with a name change comes an identity change. The person that leaves Beth El is no longer Jacob – the person who achieves by deceit, it is Israel, a person who will work hard to make the destiny attached to his new name come true. According to Hosea, it is Israel, not Jacob, that marries and sires 12 sons. All his children, not only Benjamin as Bereshit would have it, are born under the name Israel, a name associated with strength, respect, and destiny. These are “the Children of Israel”.

## The Purity App

*Adventures in Mishnah with My Kids*

*Hagigah 2:5, 7*

**Ilana Kurshan**

Matan and I are learning the end of the second chapter of Hagigah, about the laws of purity and impurity. Commentators explain that these laws are included in tractate Hagigah—which is about the commandment to bring sacrifices to the Temple on the pilgrimage festivals—because the entire nation had to be pure in order to enter the Temple. Throughout the rest of the year, not everyone was careful about the purity laws, even during Temple times. Broadly speaking, the Jewish people could be divided into two categories – Amei Haaretz, who were not strict in their observance of the purity laws, and the Pharisees (Perushim), who were.

Matan understands these categories immediately. "It reminds me of Corona," he says, referring to the Covid-19 pandemic. "During Corona, some people were really strict about masks, and some people weren't. But on airplanes, everyone had to observe the mask rules." I think about his analogy. "So airplane trips are like the pilgrimage festivals, when everyone was extra-careful," I add. "Which makes sense, since an airplane trip is a kind of pilgrimage."

But presumably the analogy goes only so far, because the laws of purity had nothing to do with masking. The Mishnah (2:5) teaches that there were different levels of purification that an individual had to engage in, depending on what he or she wanted to eat. If a person wished to eat ordinary bread, he would simply have to wash his hands

ritually, as many do today. Such ritual handwashing would also suffice to enable that person to eat from tithed produce. However, if she wanted to eat sacrificial meat—since some of the sacrifices could be consumed in part by those who brought them—she would have to immerse her entire body in the ritual bath. "It reminds me of the Corona rules we had to follow last year," Matan explains, extending the analogy further. "If you wanted to go to school, you had to take a Corona test twice a week. But if you wanted to go to a museum or to the zoo, you had to show your Green Pass with your vaccinations. And if you wanted to get on an airplane, you needed a test within twenty-four hours. Depending on what you wanted to be able to do, there were different levels of requirements."

In the final Mishnah of the chapter (2:7), we learn that there was a hierarchy among individuals in terms of how strictly they observed the purity laws. In addition to the Pharisees, there were those who were even more stringent. The priests, for instance, kept stricter standards, because they ate from the tithed produce designated specifically for them. And those who ate from sacrificial meat had to be on an even higher level of purity. Finally, those on the highest level were the priests who dealt with the *mei hatat* – the waters of purification which contained the ashes of the red heifer and were used to purify anyone who had come into contact with the dead. The Mishnah explains that when a person who kept a higher standard of purity sat, leaned, or lay upon the garment of anyone who kept a lower standard of purity, he or she would become impure. For instance, if the priest who ate from the priestly tithe touched the garment of a Pharisee, the priest would become impure. "So the Pharisees were vaccinated, but maybe only once. The priests had to get the first booster as well, and the people

who ate sacrifices got two boosters. And maybe the priests who came in contact with the dead were like those people who already had Corona and were completely immune.” Matan has it all figured out.

The Mishnah’s ranking of degrees of purity indicates that it was important to keep track not just of one’s own degree of purity, but also of the garments and other items with which one came into contact. “Sounds like you really need an app for that,” Matan muses. “It would be hard to keep track of how pure you are, and what you touched. But an app could automatically measure your purity level depending on whether you washed your hands or went to the Mikveh or touched something impure. Especially if the app used GPS to track your location.”

I don’t exactly understand how GPS works, but I like the idea of a purity app. “I think I’m going to make one when the Temple is rebuilt,” Matan tells me. He explains that if you’re just an Am Haaretz, then you can get the regular membership, which would just tell you if you need to wash your hands or not. But if you’re a priest, then you can get the premium membership. “Like Spotify Premium,” he tells me. “It will tell you when you have to go to the Mikvah, and what you’re allowed to eat and touch at all times.”

I’m struck that Matan said he’s going to make his app “when” and not “if” the Temple is rebuilt. Though most of us hope never to have to return to the Covid protocols, there are Jews who very much hope and dream of a time when the Temple will be rebuilt. Matan’s use of “when” reminds me of the rabbis, who always took into account—when ruling in matters of halachah—that at any moment the Temple might be

rebuilt, and we have to be prepared. The Torah teaches that when coming to the Temple on the pilgrimage festivals, you cannot appear before God “empty-handed” (Exodus 23:15), which the rabbis understood to mean that you need to arrive bearing sacrifices. Sounds like in the future, when the Temple is rebuilt, you’ll need to bring a smartphone too.