

# Vayetze

Names and souls

*Leah conceived and she bore a son and she called his name...*

Bereishis 29:32

The Imahos (matriarchs) were the ones to name all of the twelve tribes.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, it was they who were best suited for the task! Why was this? And is it really that important who names the child?

Naming a child after nothing at all is ridiculous. Just imagine a close friend who suddenly picked up and moved to Pittsburgh. You call him up and ask why he moved there, and he offers no reason other than, “I like cities that are spelled with a ‘gh’ in them, and I’ve always thought that the letter ‘P’ is a great one to start a word.”

“Did you look into the school system, or think about your distance from family, or the weather, or the proximity to religious institutions and synagogues, or the prevalence of above-average Chinese-style eating establishments?” you would then, of course, ask him.

“Pooh-pooh to that,” this very strange man would reply; “I already told you that I like the ‘gh’ and plus, on my map, Pennsylvania is orange. I like orange juice.” It is even more foolish to name a child on a whim.

A child’s name is something very important. The Arizal<sup>2</sup> tells us that parents are enveloped in holiness and divinely prodded toward the right name, should they choose to listen.<sup>3</sup> This name relates to the mission and very soul of the child.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, many do not listen. To name a child after nothing meaningful is a travesty. To name a child Ilana, because “I like the sound,” is childish and immature. To name that very same name to remember a kind grandmother or because of something that one finds inspiring about trees is an entirely different story. Those reasons are noble ones. But to arbitrarily choose a name for no reason other than “it’s just so cute” is outrageous. The name of the child can be something meaningful that he or she can relate to over the course of his or her lifetime. Names can provide children meaning both in a rational way, and by defining their mission in this life in a spiritual way.

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1 This is with the exception of Binyamin, who was named by his mother, Rachel, at birth BenOni, and then the name was changed by Yaakov. But Yaakov would not compromise the intent of Rachel, he just modified it a bit, retaining the original meaning.

2 Arizal, *Shaar Hagilgulim*, *hakdama* 23, and *Mishnas Chasidim*, *meseches* “*Chasuna Umilab*,” 3:6, where it says, “The name given to a child is prepared by Hashem and placed in the mouth of the person, for this is the name that he has in holiness, and on the other side, there is a name in the *klippah*...” see also *Emunas Itecha* (R. Moshe Wolfson), p. 188.

3 See also *Ohr Torah*, of the Maggid of Mezritch (Bereishis, p. 10), where he explains that according to the Arizal, even we who name our children after our ancestors, still have this amazing ability to know what the child’s soul really needs to be named.

4 See Chasam Sofer, *Parshas Korach*, where he asserts that the sins that Korach committed were as a result of his name!

The great Bnei Yissaschar of Dinov writes<sup>5</sup> that a person is drawn after his name. It is like a handle, for by attaching to it the larger object, the whole item will move. It is for this reason that we find Nebuchadnezzar giving secular names to Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, in the book of Daniel<sup>6</sup> calling them Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He hoped to influence them.

Man is complicated. He is not his heart – that can be transplanted. So can his liver and kidneys. His arms and legs can be removed and he is still a man. But his thoughts, accumulated memories, loves and desires cannot be separated from him. They are the man. When we talk about a person and call him by his name, “Melvin,” we are not referring to his car, his home, his arms and legs or his heart. We talk about the real him, the part of him that differentiated him from all other people. One’s name is the access path to his essence. Names are not simply borne of convenience. When we wish to refer to the real person, we use that person’s name. The name therefore is not simply a cute nickname or tag, as the name of a dog might be. To refer to one’s child by a nickname that one finds very cute is an expression of love. But to name them that and thereby spiritually define their essence based upon immediate cuteness is a bit shallow.

A chasid entered the chambers of the saintly *Chiddushei HaRim* upon the birth of his newborn son. “Rebbe, what name do you recommend that I give my child?” The Rebbe replied, “The Arizal has taught us<sup>7</sup> that at the time that a father names his child, he is given Ruach Hakodesh (Divine Inspiration) so that he will choose the true name of that child that is being given to its soul from on high. The name that defines his root. Why should I spoil your opportunity to receive ruach hakodesh?”<sup>8</sup>

Our mothers can see much in us. They can often tell, even from the moment when we are born, who we are, and who we can become. The twelve tribes of Israel were named, and thus given their charges, by their mothers – each Jew is a member of one of those tribes. Those of us who are mothers would do well to internalize this awesome responsibility, and those of us who have a mother ought to give her a call! A mother is always “naming” her child, in every interaction that she has with him.

“If someone is great, he is then called “Rabbi.” One greater than him is called “Rabban.” If he is even greater than that, he is then simply called by his own name.”<sup>9</sup> Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Shamaya, Avtalyon, Yosi ben Yoezer. There is nothing greater than being

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5 Nissan 4:10 Al Derech Hasod

6 1:7

7 *Shaar Hagilgulim, bakdama 23*

8 *Emunas Itecha* (R. Moshe Wolfson) p. 188

9 Tosefta Eduyos 3:4; see Sheloh, *Torah Shebeal Peh, klallei Yichusei Hachachamim*. See also Aruch on Abaye, where he writes, “Early generations who were exceedingly great had no need for names like “Ravram, or Rabban, or Rabbi, or Rav...as it says, ‘Hillel came from Babylonia.’” See there, where he goes on to speak of how nobody ever called the prophets “Rabbi Chaggai,” or “Rabbi Ezra.” See also *Magen Avos* (to Avos), where he explains that Moshe and Yehoshua are simply called by their names, with no appellations of respect, in Avos 1:1, for this reason.

yourself. To truly be oneself is a far greater title than even Rabban! All of the striving of a person in this world is really nothing more than a quest to become oneself, and be true to one's own name.