

## Changing a Person's Name

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- I. **Introduction.** In this week's *parshah*, the Torah records the story of Yakov's battle with the angel of Eisav. At the conclusion of the battle, Yakov demands a blessing from the angel. After being told that the name of his nemesis is Yakov, the angel blesses him by saying that he will now be called Yisrael, a more appropriate name for one who has defeated an angel. This incident provides an appropriate backdrop to the issue of people changing their names in general. This week we will discuss the significance of names in general, situations where it may be appropriate to change a name, and guidelines to be followed when changing a name.
- II. **The significance of names.** The importance of a person's name is well documented in Rabbinic literature. The *gemara* (*Berachot* 7b) states that one's name can determine his lot in life. The Maharsha adds that God's actions are sometimes influenced by people's names. The *gemara* comments that Rut merited having Dovid as a descendent as a result of her name. The name of Rut is alluded to in the phrase *shiroi v'tishbachot*, a reference to the songs and praises that were written by Dovid. In a similar vein, the *Midrash* (*Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat Ha'azinu* 7) warns us to be careful in choosing a name for a child, as his name may predispose him to certain tendencies. The Midrash proceeds to show how each of the spies who slandered Eretz Yisrael had a name that would indicate a predisposition to this sin.
- III. **Changing the name of a sick person.** The *gemara* (*Rosh Hashana* 16b) lists four methods of changing a heavenly decree that has been issued against a person. The methods listed include giving charity, crying out to God, changing one's deeds, and changing his name. Based on this *gemara*, the *Rema* (*Yoreh Deah* 338:10) records the custom to change the name of a dangerously ill person in an attempt to change the decree against him and save his life. The *Sefer Chasidim* (245) records that some have the practice to sell the patient to a different family rather than change his name. The logic for this custom is that we are concerned that there has been a decree that the son of a particular person should die, and by changing the family that the patient belongs to, he is no longer the son of that person. The *Hagahot Mekor Chesed* on the *Sefer Chasidim* suggests that this is where the name Meshulam comes from. The name Meshulam was given to the child to indicate that he had been sold and paid for. Similarly, *Kuntros Ziv Hasheimot* (page 100 note 12) suggests that the names Tachlifa and Chalafta that are commonly found in the *gemara* also originate with such arrangements where an ill child was sold. Obviously, our custom is not to sell sick children, but to change the name of the patient in the hope of a *refuah*.
  - A. Changing or adding? *Sefer Ta'amei Haminhagim* cites the *Sefer Rachamei Ha'av* who states that not just anybody may change the name of a sick person. Only one whose actions are based in *ruach hakodesh* may give a person a different name than the one he was given at birth. The logic for this ruling is that a name has tremendous significance in determining the

life of a person. Indeed, taking away his old name may cut off his very lifeline. For this reason, the common custom is not to take away the name that a person was given at birth, but to add a different name to the name he already has. Perhaps this is why Avraham, who was renamed by God (from the original Avram), had his new name replace his old name entirely, whereas Yakov, who was renamed by an angel, is called Yisrael in addition to Yakov.

- B. Which names should be added? *Sefer Chasidim* records a custom that when choosing a new name for a sick person one should open a *chumash* to a random page and choose the first name that appears on the right hand side of the page. The logic for this custom is probably based on the above-mentioned idea that we are incapable of really choosing a name that is appropriate for this person. Instead, we leave it in God's hands based on which page we open to. The Rambam (*Kovetz Teshuvot HaRambam V'igerotav* 1:52) writes that in general people should not use a *chumash* to determine the proper approach to take. Instead, our custom is to add a name with a positive connotation (i.e. Rafael, Baruch, Chaim, Shalom, Azriel etc.) that would suggest a forthcoming change of *mazal*. The *Chida* (*Sefer D'vash Lefi*) writes that when adding a name for a woman, one should not add the names Rachel, Batsheva, Tamar, or Leah, but should instead choose Chanah, Sarah, or Yocheved.
- C. The permanence of the new name. Responsa *Minchat Elazar* (4:27) rules that when a person had a name added due to illness, the new name should be his first name, while his old name should be his middle name. If, however, the person dies from the illness, his son should be called to the torah with the new name as his middle name and his old name remaining his first name.

**IV. Changing names for other reasons.** Although the only place that the *Shulchan Aruch* mentions a custom to change a name is in reference to a sick person, the idea behind that ruling may apply to other areas as well. Rav Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvot V'hanhagot* 1:790) was asked for various ideas and *segulot* for a couple that had been married for ten years without having been blessed with children. Amongst his many suggestions, Rav Shternbuch mentions that the names of the parents may not be compatible, and that may be the cause for the lack of children. He therefore suggests to change the name of either the husband or wife with the hope that the new name will be more compatible in the eyes of God. Of course, once the new name becomes well known, the *ketubah* should be fixed to reflect the change. Additionally, the Rambam (*Hilchot Teshuva* 2:4) writes that one of the methods of repentance is for the sinner to change his name, thereby suggesting that he is not the same person who committed the sin. Needless to say, the generally accepted custom does not seem to be to change one's name when he repents.

**V. Conclusion.** We have discussed the pertinent issues regarding the appropriate occasions to change a person's name. It is important to point out that any change in a name must not be done flippantly, regardless of the circumstances,

as the name of a person reflects his very essence. Before changing anybody's name a competent authority should be consulted to provide guidance.