Kol Nidre: The names of our nation!

According to the Midrash each person receives three names during his lifetime. T**he first name is the one given by our parents, the second name is the nickname given by our friends and last but not least is the name that we give to ourselves.** What are your names? What is the meaning behind your name? **Are you proud of your name?** This holy night I would like to talk about names. The importance of names, not individual names but the names of our nation, our people. Trying to live our lives understanding the importance of living up to our names.

Three names receive each person and three names receive our people. **We are called Hebrews (Ivrim), Israelites (Bnei Israel) and Jews (Yehudim).** Each of these terms have a meaning about who we are and what we ought to be. Each of these names have a history. Let's explore them together because a name is not just a name, **"Hashem Gorem", "names affect who we are"** we are told in the Talmud (b. Brachot 7b).

Ivri Anochi

Our most ancient name as a nation is "the Hebrews" (HaIvrim). Tomorrow afternoon when we read the book of Jonah when the other sailors want to know who he was they ask him: *"Tell us, you who have brought this misfortune upon us, what is your business? Where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?"*... **For all these questions Jonah has only one answer: "I am a Hebrew" (Ivri Anochi)** (Jonah 1:8-9). Jonah presents himself just as a Hebrew, an Ivri. **Hebrew was his nation, his language, his religion**. The sailors knew that someone that presented himself as a hebrew lived in what we call the land of Israel, spoke a semitic language and believed in only one God of heaven and earth.

Who was the first hebrew? **Avraham Avinu, Abraham our father. He is the one that for the first time is called "Abraham HaIvri" (Gen. 14:13).** From Abraham we receive the name "the Hebrews" that not so long ago was a very common name for jewish organizations, newspapers, and even today in Italy, for example, the jews are called

"*ebrei*". But what is the meaning of the term hebrew? Already in the Midrash this topic is discussed and three options appear (Bereshit Rabbah 42:8):

- Rabbi Nehemiah says that this name **comes from Abraham's grandfather Ever**. Abraham's father was Terah and his father was Ever. According to this position all Ever descendents were called Ivrim, later on translated in english as Hebrews.
- The vast majority of the Sages thought that the name **Ivri comes from the fact that Abraham came "MeEver HaNaar" (from across the sea).** Ever in this case would mean crossing or coming from the other side due to the fact that in the land of Canaan Abraham was known because he crossed the Euphrates.
- Rabbi Nehemiah understood the term Ivri also as "being from the other side" but in a metaphorical way: כָּל הָעוֹלָם כֻּלּוֹ מֵעֵבֶר אֶחָד וְהוּא מֵעֵבֶר אֶחָד **"Everybody in the world was in one side (Ever echad) and he (Abraham) was on the other side".** And the commentators explain this as meaning that everybody believed in many gods back then but Abraham was the only one that believed in only one God.

There is so much in just one name. We can learn so much about our identity by just focusing on these three different interpretations of the term *hebrew*.

- First: **The beautiful tradition of naming our children after a beloved family member,** usually a grandfather or grandmother, didn't start yesterday but came from our very first member of the tribe: Abraham. He was named after his grandfather Ever! Abraham the Ivri because of Ever! What an amazing fact, the origin of this tradition has been more than 3700 years! How many people in the world could say with pride that they follow a tradition of almost 4 millennia?
- Second: We as jews are constantly moving from one river to the other. Staying in one place is not our virtue, we travel like Abraham crossing (Laavor) rivers, states and countries looking for better places for ourselves and our families. We are citizens of the world, crossing barriers like Abraham, the Hebrew (the crossing one) did for the first time. **Being a Hebrew means being on a constant journey.**

- Third: **We learn that being a hebrew means many times to be at odds with the world, not to follow the flow of the river, the opinions of the time but to be like Abraham the Hebrew, to swim against the flow.** Just because everybody believes something doesn't mean that it is right. We imitate Abraham, the Hebrew, everytime we stand firm in our beliefs despite what the world around us thinks. Ivri Anochi!

Am Israel Chai

Our second name as a nation comes from our third patriarch: Jacob. Yaakov comes from the word ankle. **Jacob was named that because he was born holding the ankle of his brother Esav trying to pull him back again so he can be the firstborn. But also Yaakov is named after the ankle because at the beginning of his life he didn't walk on a straight (morally) path of life.** He cheated and lied to his father and his brother. He took advantage of his brother when he was starving and he lied to his blind father. He was Jacob but then later on his name was changed to Israel and since all of the tribes came from his offspring, our people are called "B'nai Israel" (Children of Jacob/Israel) in the Bible.

Who changed his name and what is the meaning? It was an angel. God sent an angel to fight with Jacob the night before confronting his brother Esav after twenty years of being apart from one another. They fought, they struggled until dawn and in the end, Jacob won the battle and asked the angel if before he left he should bless him. And in fact, he blessed him. The angel blessed Jacob with a new name: Israel. ***"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."*** (Gen. 32:30). The angel gives Jacob a new name, a new identity.

His new name became Israel which means "to fight against God and human beings and prevail ". A long meaning just for the name Israel! **But this is our identity. We are a people that do not necessarily accept what God wants but we struggle, we fight, we speak up, we use our voice.** The term muslim means to "surrender", the muslims

surrender themselves to the wish of God. But we, the Israelites, fight against God, against what we consider unfair or immoral. We fight against other humans when we consider it to be a valid fight. We raise our voices! We shout out against injustices in God's world and in our human-made societies. This is the essence of Jacob according to the Talmud. The use of our voices: HaKol Kol Yaakov, this is the voice of Jacob said Itzhak. **The Talmud emphasizes that the strength of our people comes from our mouths.** We fight like Israel against God and humans and we prevail. We never surrender, we fight the fights that deserve to be fought!

Israel means to struggle but also it could mean "to walk straight in front of God" (Iashar - El). We are not called "children of Jacob" but more frequently "children of Israel" because we can always overcome our mistakes, our evil doing, and instead of walking with our ankles zigzagging we can change and become like Israel, following the right path. And Yom Kippur is a yearly reminder that we can change, that we can also be called Israel. That we can overcome our Yaakov side of cheating, lying, and become straight and moral human beings like Israel. Everything is in our name. Am Israel Chai! Our people of Israel are alive. As much as we are alive, as much as the candle still burns, there is time to become Israel.

Ani Yehudi

Hebrews, Israelites... Those are also our names but in the last one hundred years or so the most popularized name that we received as a nation and as a religion is: Jews and Judaism. Many times if people ask us something about us we don't say: "I'm a Hebrew" like Jonah did. We don't answer "I'm a descendant of Israel" but rather "I'm a Jew". So where did this last name come from? **Historically speaking it is the last name to appear. This name comes from Yehuda (Judah), one of the 12 children of Jacob**. For many centuries in the biblical period we were known just as the hebrews or the israelites but not as the Jews, because the Jews (Yehudim) back then was just one of the twelve tribes like the Shimonites from Shimon, or the Dannites from the tribe of Dan. Everything changed after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the army of Assyriah in the year 722 b.c.e. At that moment ten tribes were lost and the only kingdom that remained was the southern kingdom known as Yehuda (Judah) because

that was the biggest tribe of the kingdom together with the smaller tribe of Benjamin. That is the reason that around the 6th century b.c.e. habitants of the land of Israel, the kingdom of Judah and the later persian province called Yehudah started being called simply as Yehudim (Jews). One example is the famous character of the Purim story (situated around the V century b.c) Mordechai, he is called "Mordechai HaYehudi (the jew)". From that moment on we became known also as the jews.

This is history but what is the meaning of this name? Leah was the wife of Jacob and she had already three other children but when she gave birth to the fourth one she said: ""This time ***I will praise*** *(Ode) God.* Therefore she named him Judah" (Gen. 29:34). Lea praises and thanked God for giving her yet another child. And in Hebrew to be thankful is Lehodot (like in the word Todah o Hodu) and that is also the root of the name Yehudah. **So being a Jew is to always be thankful.** Like Leah was. To find each day the possibility to be thankful to God for our family and our heritage, for what we have. Leah was thankful when she had Yehudah and gave to her fourth son this name because she recognized that God gave her more than her share (Genesis Rabbah 71:4). **When we can recognize each day that we have more than what we deserve, that we are privileged, that life is beautiful and God and many others have shown mercy to us many times more than what we truly deserved, we are being Jews in the full sense of the word. Being a jew is being thankful.** That is built in our name.

Sforno, a medieval bible commentator, says that the name Yehudah has still another meaning besides praising/thanking. **The name Yehudah contains the holy name of God, the YHVH**. In every jew there is a spark of God, every Jew ought to be an ambassador of God here on Earth.

Following this same reasoning of Yehudah, having in his name the holy name of God, the YHVH, inserted another medieval commentator, **Rabbeinu Bechaye,** points out that this name of God is related to the first of the thirteen attributes that we repeat once and again during the Slichot prayers during Yom Kippur. Adonai in this case is the attribute of repentance. The capacity to repent. So why does Yehudah bear this name with him? Because, according to Rabbeinu Bechaye: ***"he was the first person to publicly retract and confess a mistake he had made when he accused Tamar of***

being a harlot. He was not ashamed to admit his error, which is the greatest impediment to repentance".

What an amazing idea! In our name of being Yehudi/Jew we don't only find the possibility to be thankful, to see that God is with us but also that we need to be able to repent, to make Teshuvah! This is all in our name!

Hebrew, Israel & Jew

These are our names! These are the names of our nation and our people. With time each one of them represented another pillar of who we are. **Israel became the name of our State. Hebrew became our language. And Jew the name of our people.** Do we honor each one of these names? Do we conduct ourselves as Hebrews, Israelites and Jews in the deep meaning of their etymologies?

Are we Hebrews like Abraham standing firm in our beliefs despite that everybody else thought differently?

Are we Israelites as Jacob fighting our own demons, our own God and other people for what we believe in?

Are we descendents of Yehuda being thankful for our share?

May we always be able to say with pride like Jonah did: Ivri Anochi. I'm a hebrew. When somebody asks us who we are, what our identity is, let us not be afraid to say Ani Yehudi, I'm a Jew. As a people let us all say and reaffirm: Am Israel Chai! My people of Israel are alive.

These are our names. Let's be proud recipients of their meanings. Let be sure to live up to them.

Chatima Tova,
Rabbi Uri