**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Reading Sefer Bereishit: A Literary Approach**

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Dedicated in memory of Moshe Eliezer   
ben HaRav Avraham Yehoshua Aryeh Engel z"l   
whose yahrzeit is 15 Kislev. Yehi zikhro barukh.   
By his daughter, Toby Schlussel,   
and his great granddaughter, Migdal Oz graduate Marilyn Meyers

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**Shiur #07: The Meaning of Names**

Names in a literary work of fiction can be full of symbolic significance or simply an arbitrary choice to give characters an identity. Sometimes we feel confident about the deeper meaning. For example, it would not be the same story if Hawthorne’s Young Goodman Brown were called Fred Brown. A name with Biblical resonance creates a similar assumption; it is no accident that Melville creates a Captain Ahab. On the other hand, the story of Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke would not change much if her name were Samantha Kane.

What about names in *Chumash*?

**Names Lacking Explanation**

In many instances in Tanakh, the mother or father states the etymology of a child’s name, with the name reflecting the inner feelings of the parents. The names of Moshe’s and Yosef's sons give expression to their respective fathers’ feelings (*Shemot* 2:22, 18:3-4*, Bereishit* 41:51-52), and the names of the tribes do the same for Leah and Rachel *(Bereishit* 29:32-30:25, 35:18). (Though this is not the focus of our discussion, it is noteworthy how often the mother names the child; see also *Bereishit* 4:1, 25.)

Instances that lack any explanation present a trickier situation. When can we attribute symbolic meaning to such names? There are situations where the meaning appears quite clear. For instance, the kings of Sedom and Amora are called Bera and Birsha (*Bereishit* 14:2). When we recall that these cities are so evil that God will soon annihilate them (Chapter 19), it becomes clear that we are meant to hear the words “*ra*” (evil) and “*resha*” (wickedness) in these monarchs’ names. Similarly, “*hevel*” refers to something vain or fleeting, and the short life of this son of Chava was certainly fleeting. The fact that the verses explain the source of Kayin’s name but not that of Hevel (4:1-2) calls the reader’s attention to the absence of explanation and the search for an answer.

While the following interpretations are difficult to prove, a few other suggestive names appear. The word *rachel* means sheep, and our matriarch Rachel tends to a flock (29:5); the name *Chamor* (donkey) may convey the animalistic impulses that drive his son Shekhem to rape Dina (34:2). Rashi hears the sounds of rebellion (*mered*) in the name Nimrod and states that Nimrod led the Tower of Babel’s war on God. However, such interpretations can be subject to debate. Ibn Ezra counters that “we should not search for reasons for all names”; after all, perhaps Nimrod’s parents just liked the way the name sounded. (See their respective commentaries on 10:9.) In support of Rashi, we should note that multiple literary factors connect Nimrod with the tower: Nimrod appears in Chapter 10, and the tower is in Chapter 11; he is also explicitly associated with the land of Shinar and with Bavel, both places that appear in the tower episode.

And the beginning of his kingdom was **Bavel**, and Erech and Akad and Calneh in the land of **Shinar** (10:10).

And it came to pass as they journeyed east, that they found a valley in the land of **Shinar** and they dwelled there…And they said let us build a city and tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth...Therefore, its name was called **Bavel**, because God confounded there the langue of all the earth, and from there God scattered them upon the face of the entire earth. (11:1,4,9)

Furthermore, Nimrod establishes a kingdom in Bavel which may connect to the centralized government of the tower. On the other hand, even if we link Nimrod with the tower, it remains unclear whether the tower story presents a rebellion against God or a more innocent human endeavor; if the latter, Rashi’s connection between Nimrod and *mered* falls apart.

Seven generations down the family line of Kayin, Lemekh has three sons named Yaval, Yuval, and Tuval Kayin (4:20-22). Inevitably, the reader hears an echo of the names of Kayin and Hevel. Abravanel explains that these children emulated the professions of their ancestors: Yaval innovated a method of shepherding, and Hevel was a shepherd; Yuval crated musical instruments, and shepherds play music in their pastoral setting; and Tuval Kayin engaged in metalwork and produced weapons, reminding us of Kayin, history’s first murderer.

**Name Changes**

Name-changing in midlife indicates an important shift in identity and role. God’s covenant with our first patriarch and matriarch finds expression in Avram becoming Avraham and Sarai turning into Sarah (Chapter 17). Yaakov becoming Yisrael (32:28, 35:10) reflects his newfound ability to face obstacles and overcome them. Pharaoh gives Yosef an Egyptian name to ease his integration into the Egyptian royal court (41:45). After all, some of the Egyptian aristocrats would invariably resent a Hebrew foreigner achieving greater status, and giving him an Egyptian identity could help minimize the antipathy. For the same reason, he marries Yosef off to a woman from a prominent Egyptian family. *Sefer Bereishit* also has a name change occurring immediately at birth: Rachel calls her second son Ben Oni, meaning either “the child of my afflictions” or “the child of my mourning,” as she dies in childbirth; Yaakov alters the name to Binyamin, “the child of my right hand,” deflecting the negative weight of the original choice (35:18).

This may not be the first such motivated name change among Rachel's sons. She names her first son Yosef, apparently because "God has gathered away *(asaf*) my shame" (30:23). However, the very next verse offers a different etymology: "The Lord should add to me (*yosef*) another son." Shadal explains that after picking the name Yosef for the former reason, Rachel realized that being permanently associated with his mother's pain was an unfair burden to place on her child. She therefore came up with a new meaning while maintaining the identical name.

Perhaps we should also take note of a character whose name does not change. God changes the names of Avraham and Yaakov, but not that of the middle patriarch, Yitzchak. Chizkuni (on 17:5) explains that God had selected the name Yitzchak, while the names of the other patriarchs were chosen by their parents. Divinely chosen names remain locked in for a lifetime. In contrast, R. Yitzchak Hutner sees this as reflective of Yitzchak’s specific patriarchal role. Avraham is the first to become a Jew, and Yaakov is the first to include all his children in the covenant, whereas Yitzchak is the first to be born Jewish (*Pachad Yitzchak*, Sukkot no. 5). Putting it slightly differently, Yitzchak symbolizes continuity and stability; note how he digs the same wells as his father and gives them the identical names (26:18). It is fitting that a person entrusted with a mission of stability would maintain a consistent name for a lifetime.

**Names with Double Meaning**

We have already seen how the name Yosef carries a double resonance: both the gathering up of shame and the prayer for an additional child. Scripture informs us that Esav was called Edom (red) because he demanded the red porridge that Yaakov was cooking (25:30). When we recall that Esav was *admoni* (25:25, meaning either a redhead or of a ruddy complexion), it would seem that we have a double meaning here as well. Finally, in one instance, a character in the Bible itself explicitly provides a second level of name interpretation. At birth, Yaakov receives his name because he was holding onto the heel (*ekev*) of his older brother (25:26). After Yaakov has taken Esav’s anticipated *berakha*, Esav asserts that his brother’s name stems from *ekev* meaning something crooked or dishonest. "Therefore he is called Yaakov, since he has deceived me twice. He took my *bekhora* and now he has taken my blessing" (*Bereishit* 27:36). This may point to a broader theme in this patriarch’s development, as Yaakov moves from deceiving others (Esav, Lavan) to confronting them directly (in the case of Esav, both the "man" he wrestles with and Esav himself).

**Names Reflecting a Parent’s Emotional State**

We have already seen Rachel giving expression to her trauma in her two sons’ names: the name Yosef refers to her embarrassment about her barrenness, while Ben Oni alludes to the pains of her fatal childbirth. The names Yosef gives his children are also quite revealing. He calls the oldest Menashe because "God has made me forget all my toil and my father’s house” (41:51) and the second Ephraim because “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction” (41:52). These names reveal both Yosef’s acute pain in being sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt and his powerful sense of overcoming that hardship.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch sees a development in the progression of names given by Leah (29:32-35). The first two names convey a profound sense of suffering: “God has seen (*ra’ah*)my affliction” (Reuven) and “God has heard (*shama*)that I am despised” (Shimon). Leah understands very well that her husband truly loves Rachel, and she suffers as a result. The third name she bestows, however, already turns less negative: “Now, my husband will accompany (*yilaveh*)me” (Levi). Finally, the name of Leah’s fourth child relates to a robustly positive expression: “This time, I will give thanks (*odeh*) to God” (Yehuda). According to Rav Hirsch, Leah grows more comfortable with her place in the family dynamic as she continues to provide her husband with children.

While I find the idea convincing, things may be more complicated. Tension between two sisters married to the same husband does not dissipate so easily. Leah seems to still resent her sister in the mandrake episode: “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband?” (30:15). Furthermore, the etymology of the name of her sixth son, Zevulun, indicates ongoing insecurity regarding her relationship with Yaakov. “Now my husband will dwell with me (*yizbeleini*), because I have borne him six sons" (30:20). Indeed, difficult situations lead to ups and downs rather than easy solutions. Leah arrives at a more comfortable place, but the underlying problem does not disappear.

**Prophetic Names**

Lemekh names his son Noach because "this one will comfort us (*yenachameinu*) in our work and in the toil of our hands from the soil which God has cursed (5:29). The reader's immediate reaction is that Noach provided comfort by keeping humanity alive at the time of the flood. Of course, one wonders how Lemekh would already know that at his son's birth. Furthermore, the *pasuk* seems to focus more on farming and the difficulties remaining from the punishment of Adam. Rashi, citing a *midrash* (*Tanchuma* *Bereishit* 11), indeed explains that Noach invented a new piece of farming equipment which helped ease the burden of the ground's curse. This new approach explains the connection to farming but still leaves the question of Lemekh's foreknowledge intact.

*Rishonim* offer three explanations for Lemekh's foresight: perhaps he received information from a prophet (Ibn Ezra); perhaps the name was more of a petitionary prayer than a prediction (Seforno); and maybe Noach being part of the first generation born after the death of Adam gave the family hope that Noach could overcome the long-running curse (*Chizkuni*). Alternatively, Lemekh had no prior knowledge and in fact did not name his son Noach at all; rather, Noach was a name adopted later in life, only *after* he had provided consolation. Ibn Ezra suggests this and compares it to Gidon taking on the name Yeruba'al after he broke the Baal altar (*Shoftim* 6:32). This approach adds an important element to our entire discussion. The recorded names may not be the names given at birth and may even be names never used by our protagonists; rather, they carry symbolic weight. For example, perhaps Naomi's sons were never called Machlon and Khilyon (disease and destruction), but the Bible uses these names to convey their short and tragic lives.

This *shiur* focused on the literary possibilities of proper noun names. *Tanakh* also refers to characters by pronouns, professions ("the shepherds"), family relationships ("his brother"), age ("the youth," "the child"), and other means. We shall see the artistic possibilities of such an array of descriptive terms next week.