

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacoheh Kook (1865-1935)

from *Midbar Shur* ("In the Desert, a Vision") – Sermons, 1894-1896

He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." He said, "No longer will your name be called Jacob, but rather Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and you have prevailed. Bar Kappara taught, "Whoever calls Abraham, 'Abram,' transgresses a positive commandment, as it says, 'Your name will be Abraham.'" Rabbi Eliezer says, "He transgresses a negative commandment, as it says, 'No longer will your name be called Abram'". . . Perhaps the same should apply to one who calls Jacob, "Jacob"? There it is different, for the text itself later reinstated it (the name Jacob), as it says, "God said to Israel in visions of the night: 'Jacob, Jacob,'"

based on the Midrash

It is worthwhile to ponder the difference between these two patriarchs. Such gravity was attached to the change of Abraham's name, that one who refers to him by his original name, Abram, transgresses both a positive and negative command. The name of Jacob, on the other hand, though similarly altered, remains as a residuum. One would have thought just the opposite. Abraham's name was changed but once, whereas Jacob's was altered twice, once by the angel, and a second time by God Himself. If anything, the change of Jacob's name should have been irreversible.

In order to properly understand the significance of these shifts of nomenclature, we must first understand the essential roles these two patriarchs played in Jewish history. The rabbis opened a window: "'Abram is Abraham.' In the beginning, he was a leader of Aram, and at the end, he was a leader of the whole world." But for the moment, this explication only adds to our confusion. To be father of a nation, of Aram, though not as grandiose as global leadership, is not bad! To bring up to someone who is a player on the world scene, that he was once at the forefront of national affairs, is not an insult. On the other hand, to throw up to an Israel that he was once a Jacob, a Ya'akov, which insinuates subterfuge and deceit, is a clear affront. Certainly, the ruling should have been reversed. Leniency is indicated in the case of calling Abraham by his erstwhile name, Abram; the stiffer judgment should have been meted out to one who slurs Israel by calling him "Jacob."

The statement of the rabbis concerning Abraham contains a universalist message; it condemns in the harshest terms possible the evil of nationalism. There is a certain convention that has become accepted by practically the entire human race, and that is the right of every nation to aggrandize itself at the expense of other nations. Even supposedly righteous rulers are guilty of having shed

blood to bring enhanced material prosperity to their nation, without so much as a thought to the havoc wreaked on surrounding nations. Even though human decency dictates that the individual not pursue success through the destruction of fellow humans, on the national level—so according to conventional wisdom—there is free license to achieve success, come what may. Even those who shun military exploits, are incapable of desiring the success of other nations to the same degree they seek their own nation's advancement. The most righteous of individuals would find strange the thought that all human beings be given the same advantage seeing as one God created us in His image. This chauvinist thinking is so ingrained in human nature, that even the great champions of justice defend this notion by saying that the scientific and material development of the world requires that nations compete against one another.

Now one might receive the mistaken impression that the Torah endorses this attitude, whereby we should assign a greater value to our own people's good than to the welfare of others. After all, the Torah commands the Children of Israel to conquer the land from the indigenous nations. But this is clearly unacceptable! How could God, Whose mercy extends to all His creations, oppress His own handiwork?! How could the Most High command that we remove from our hearts the well being of the entire human race for our own selfish good?! Therefore, at the time the covenant was first established with our ancestor Abraham, a divine protest was lodged: The very thought of nationalism is despicable to God, for He equates all mankind. The goal is to seek the true success of all God's creations. True justice means that one views with equal concern the advancement of the entire human race.

Where then does the notion of the "Chosen People" enter? The Jews were elected to work at uplifting the entire human race; to bring humanity to the goal the Almighty

expects of it. Israel were set aside as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” A kingdom of priests ministers to the other nations in order to morally perfect them. So the separation from the nations is itself the greatest unification, in order to benefit the human race. However, if Israel will desert the good, which is the holy Torah, then its nationhood and its territorialism are an abomination before God. It is inconceivable that for the sake of a people’s natural self-love, other nations should be displaced. All are God’s handiwork. Israel must know that no permission was granted to displace a nation for the sake of national self-aggrandizement. There is one form of justice, whether it be on the individual or collective level. Therefore, several times over, the Torah links the giving of the land to the observance of Torah. Without the *raison d’être* of Torah, the setting apart of one nation, would be considered an injustice.

War? A war could be waged only if divine will had ordained that it was necessary for *tikkun ‘olam*, for setting the world right. Halakhically, a *milhemet ha-reshut* (optional war) could be authorized only by the king acting in consonance with the *Urim ve-Thummim* (oracle) and the Sanhedrin.

This is the import of God’s directive to our ancestor, “No longer shall your name be called Abram,” which, as the rabbis say, signifies leadership of the single nation of Aram. I have raised you beyond this norm of nationalism, which is but a convention, not true justice. Your heart should not be devoted exclusively to the benefit of Aram, but rather seek the peace of all God’s creations. “Your name shall be Abraham, father of a multitude of nations.” Your role is as father of all nations, of the entire human race. Seek out the wellbeing of all.

“One who calls Abraham, ‘Abram,’ transgresses.” By doing so, one causes Israel to regress to a state of nationalism. One makes a statement that Israel’s existence can be founded on nationalism. Nationalism, which is no more than a collective form of egoism, is a transgression. Israel’s election is just only if its basis is true universalism. Israel is to be “a father of a multitude of nations.”

Abraham represents a combination of two tendencies, universalism and separatism, but even his being separated from the world is in order to positively influence the world. His son Isaac again combines these two tendencies: Uniting with the world and retreating from it to preserve an ideal of *kedusha* (holiness). By the third generation, these two tendencies had grown apart; each of Isaac’s two sons inherited a different facet of his personality. In Esau, the aspect of worldliness was pronounced, but he was defiled by the world. In his twin brother Jacob,

particularism was more pronounced. His allegiance was to preserving the ideal of *kedusha* (holiness); the goal of universalism will emerge on its own when the time is ripe. Esau was “a hunter, an outdoorsman,” which is another way of saying, a man of the world; “Jacob, a simple man, a homebody,” a man who cultivates his own innate spirituality in the hope that thereby the world will benefit.

If Esau would have utilized his worldliness with the proper intention, he could have attained true greatness. To share with the world the light of Abraham is indeed a great thing. It was for this reason that Father Isaac was so fond of Esau. Isaac thought that through Esau the promise of Abraham would be fulfilled; through Esau’s dealings with mankind, the world would be ennobled. Unfortunately, in the process of going out to the world, Esau lost the blessing, the gift of Abraham. Jacob’s so-called “usurping” of Esau’s birthright, came out of his desire to acquire the worldliness of his elder brother. To be sure, Jacob’s union with the world would not be immediate as was Esau’s. The world is not ripe yet. Jacob must bide his time. There is much work to be done to prepare the world for the goal of unity. “And Jacob remained alone.” As it says of the Holy One, “The Lord alone will be uplifted,” so “Jacob remained alone.” The situation of Jacob is lonely. The man of God, of the spirit, is lonely. Israel is “a people that dwells alone.” Throughout the generations, the “archangel of Esau” has attempted to draw Israel out of its isolation. As Maimonides wrote in his Epistle to Yemen, historically, the nations of the world have attempted to vanquish Israel in two ways: Militarily, by the sword, and theologically, by the power of persuasion. This is the meaning of the verse, “For you have striven with angels and with men.” At times, Esau comes in the guise of an “angel”; he musters every possible theological argument to dissuade Jews from Judaism. Alternatively, Esau comes with the weaponry and armaments of “men.”

In the relations between Jacob and Esau there is symmetry. Esau (or his archangel) touches the thigh of Jacob; Jacob holds Esau by the heel. Until the nations of the world learn to respect “Israel,” who “has striven with angels and with men and overcome,” there is yet room for the residual name of Jacob. The Hebrew *Ya’akov* refers to the fact that at birth, he held onto his twin’s heel (‘Ekev). Jacob must yet hold onto Esau’s heel, just as Esau impinges on Jacob’s thigh.

- translation, Bezalel Na’or