

A-12

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Sermon

Vayera

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"Names - Living Up to Them and Living Them Down"

The preoccupation of the first sections of Genesis with names - their origins, explanations and histories - indicates to us that a name implies more than a mere word of superficial identification. It goes deeper than that. For if it were only a matter of a verbal tag, as it were, then a number would suffice. Instead of Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, Numbers one, two, and three would do. Moreover - it would be more accurate, more scientific, and would involve less duplication.

What then, does a name imply? It implies a singular and unique individuality, a definite and defined personality. A name is a word which brings to mind a man's character, the totality of a person. This is true even for lifeless bodies. A star, for instance, may be characterized by mathematical co-ordinates, a definite velocity, a certain number of light-years from the earth and from the nearest star, and so on. Yet the professional astronomer soon begins to feel that these heavenly bodies have personalities and characters of their own. <sup>He</sup> ~~They~~ develops an intimate friendship or kinship, so to speak, with the subject of his studies. And so, astronomers, violating the rules of their own discipline begin to call their stars by unscientific names of all sorts. Our medieval philosophers speak of the stars as *עצמות נפשות*, soul-endowed. Soul indeed. Stars, by legend, myth, and their own character are as individuals. How does the Psalmist put it? *אֵלֹהִים מְנַחֵם יִסְמְךָ אֱלֹהִים מִן הַיָּם וְיִסְמְךָ אֱלֹהִים מִן הַיָּבֵשׁ*, God numbers the stars, 'tis true, but he also gives them names. And if it is so with a lifeless body, then certainly so with a human being.

So then, a name indicates individuality, and all the forces that an individual can exert upon his environment. And this is what the naming of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the others means. This business of having a name, of expressing your own individuality and personality, is the very opposite of the abdication and yielding to the sinister mass forces which we face today. Owning a name is the symbol for having the courage of a David and stepping up to the Philistines in our cultural, national and international world and beating them down.

But a name is more than a symbol by which you get a total picture of someone's personality. More than that, it expresses ~~x~~ a standard or ideal which one is expected to attain. In foreboding the future, it also defines the new and higher personality required of the individual. Thus, Abraham had but one child when his name was changed from Abram to Abraham, meaning, *father of many nations*, the patriarch of many nations. His name indicated to him the fact that he was now expected to act as more than the venerable leader of <sup>a</sup> the clan - now he was to ~~do~~ <sup>take</sup> on the mantle of a patriarch of a great people, now his words would be recorded for posterity, and his deeds would be inscribed on the first page of the annals of mankind. And Abraham was expected to live up to this high standard, as indeed he well did.

How well do our sages express this idea.

There are people whose names are beautiful and whose deeds are beautiful, people who succeeded in living up to their names, people in whose lives were fully realized the aims and ambitions expressed by the symbols of their names. Take Isaac, for example, whose birth is recorded in today's Sidra; how well his name set the standard for his descendants through the ages. יִשְׂחַק, our Rabbis of the Agadah tell us, means laughter and happiness. יִשְׂחַק

12 <sup>לְאִימֶלֶךְ</sup> רַבִּי. Consider the life of this man. Here is a man who was blind, orphaned when he was young, childless for many years, finally had born to him and Esau, whose life and marital associations caused bitterness for his parents - <sup>וְיָתִיבָהּ מִחֶבְרָתוֹ עִיָּוִן וְרִיבָה</sup>; here is a man who suffered from hunger, from economic oppression by the Philistines, whose marriage was jeopardized by Avimelech. Yet, despite all, <sup>וַיִּשְׁלַח יִצְחָק וַיֵּאמָר וַיִּשְׁלַח אֵלָיו</sup>

P.N. 8281 175, 11N8, he dies happy, satiated of days, an old man who loved life, serene in the knowledge that his sanguine outlook, his laughing soul, and his smiling (though blind) eyes would outlive and conquer any tragedy. His name does not allow him to cry. His is the lot of the cheerful smile, which encourages his friends and enlivens his people. 1111 1111 P. 111 1111, a good name and good deeds.

But how many are there **שֵׁם יָפֵה וְעוֹלָם** **אִישׁ יָפֵה**, whose names are beautiful and deeds are ugly. The name **יָפֵה** means **שֹׂמֵעַ**, he who obeys G-d. Yet, despite his beautiful and expressive name, he was a **אִישׁ בָּרְבָּר**, an uncivilized barbarian, whose Torah was the bow and arrow and whose delight was the blood of his prey. His life was the hunt, and it dishonored his name. He dismally failed to live up to the expectations of

His parents who set before him the standard of Yishmael or

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This week we shall celebrate Thanksgiving Day, the day on which we recall the Pilgrims and the Founding Fathers. When the Pilgrims first set foot on the soil of this land, they proclaimed the discovery of a new world. The name "New World" symbolized for them, in two words, all that they had hoped for, all that they had suffered and fought for. They were sick and disgusted with the old world that they had left behind them. They despised the racial, political and religious bigotry which reigned supreme in Europe. They despised its ~~its~~ corruption and discriminations and prejudices. They fought an ocean and they fought storms, they fought hunger and they fought Indians and they fought the cold - because on the tablets of their hearts was inscribed in blazing letters the name "New World"; a world in which all the inhabitants would taste the sweetness of liberty; where men would be free to worship as they please and think as they please; where the value of human dignity would be recognized and appreciated. They wanted a world where they and their descendants after them would initiate a new understanding of government by the people, a new faith in people, a new freedom and a new deal for the persecuted. And so they called America the "New World".

Tell me, my friends, those of you who have read of the new racial terrorism in Florida, do the names Shepard and Irvin bring to mind the pilgrims of the New World, or the maranos and martyrs of the Old World? Do the names of Sheriffs Yates and McCall bring back the memory of Washington and Jefferson, or the memory of the Butchers of Buchenwald and Dachau? Does a Florida ~~Grand Jury~~ <sup>State Attorney's office</sup> bespeak the name of "New World", or does it dip into the cesspool of the Old World with its inquisitions and crusades and pious hypocrisy? Does the entire saga of the two manacled Negro prisoners shot in cold blood, and the concomitant talk of a white-wash by the "supreme whites" of Florida, does that live up to the name "New World", or is it a sign that the middle-ages are coming, the same filthy and murderous mess the Pilgrims left behind them in the old and decadent world? And what happened to the indignation of which Americans were once so capable, when only one large <sup>New York</sup> ~~American~~ newspaper decides to make an issue of this tragedy rather than merely utter a few pious platitudes in an otherwise dull editorial? I maintain that it is a matter of פירינג פאדל פאדל פאדל פאדל פאדל פאדל that the name is wonderful but the deeds are foul and offensive and cruel.

In 1620, the Pilgrims deposited a dream in the spiritual vaults of this continent; I submit that we of 1951 seem to be drawing interest on a nightmare. The New World has indeed aged.

If such things are allowed to continue, as they have been allowed to continue uninterruptedly in the past, I don't know if we should permit ourselves ~~the~~ to be called the "New World". It is told of Alexander the Great, that he once was inspecting a regiment of Greek troops when he noticed one Greek soldier who was particularly sloppy. "What is your name?", the great commander asked him. "Alexander", answered the untidy soldier. Alexander the Great was particularly enraged that a namesake of his should behave so unbecomingly. "If so", the general told the soldier, "either change your behavior -- or change your name"!

If we cannot live up to our name of "New World", then let us abdicate our rights to ~~that~~ that glorious name and admit that we are the same old world in a new continent. If we cannot live up to our name, then it means nothing, it is merely a tag and even a number would suffice.

But just as we must attempt to live up to our good names, similarly there are names assigned to us, reputations with which we are stigmatized, which we must live down. פ'עלן ל, tells us the Midrash, פ'עלן פ'עלן פ'עלן פ'עלן, whose names are foul and offensive, but whose deeds are lovely. When names are tainted and reputations ~~are~~ smeared, only good and wholesome deeds can cleanse a person.

Think about your family or the families of your friends. You may recall some child who was dubbed with an unbecoming epithet; he was given a name which was not complimentary and certainly proved discouraging. Sometimes a child is dubbed, by his not-too-immediate family, as "dull". "Oh, he's the somewhat dull one" is an ugly and unfair title sometimes bestowed upon an unfortunate child who really does not deserve a name of that sort. So many of these children suffer because of this name not of their own choosing, and they become rife for the psychiatrists' couch. I know the case of a boy who went through that ordeal -- but survived. For two years that child, a boy of ten, suffered from the stigma of that name, whispered behind his back but quickly detected by the magical and almost telepathic sensitivity of a child. But then he decided to live down that bad name. The challenge was such that he took to his studies with an unequalled zeal. He is now an avid reader, an honor student in his school where he is held up as a model for the younger children. He now no longer suffers from the פ'עלן פ'עלן, from

the unbecoming name, because, by his effort and initiative, he has pursued a course of P L 8 N  
P L 1 J, of lovely and constructive deeds. He has lived down a bad name.

Our country too has been stigmatized with a name which it must live down. It is a name which, though some people may believe we are partly responsible for, we certainly do not fully deserve. It is a name, furthermore, which has been given to us by friends who should know better. The countries of the rising East echo the name "War Mongers", a name conceived in Munich and brought forth in Moscow. What a terrible name, what a P L 1 J P L 1 J! And how pathetic that anti-communist leaders of the East, in a collegiate attempt to find the middle of the road, see fit to continue ~~that~~ <sup>the</sup> illusion inherent in the name they apply to us. It is an undeserved name. Yet the name has infected even the ~~opinions~~ <sup>views</sup> of our own fighting men on the Korean front. A N.Y. Times battlefront report tells of wide-spread resentment at the scene of fighting. The feeling among many of our troops is that the U.N. negotiators are not really interested in peace, and that they are merely maneuvering for time or prestige or what-not. We will have a tough up-hill fight if our own men repeat the enemy's name for us - "War Mongers". What does this indicate? It indicates that our P L 1 J P L 1 J have not been given the proper exposition. P L 1 J P L 1 J, says Solomon, a good name is better than good oil. Oil cannot by itself create beauty, but it is rubbed on the skin to bring out an inherently good complexion. A good name, too, is necessary to bring out an essentially good character. In an age of propoganda, America had fallen behind. She has P L 1 J P L 1 J, good deeds and intentions, but a terrible name, a bad reputation which she must live down. We must be as fair to our own country as we are to others - - America has made a great, if not perfect, attempt to live down that ugly name. The disarmament plan presented by our leaders certainly was an opportunity to begin real peace negotiations. It was a sincere attempt at reconciliation. Yet the Soviet spokesman laughed. He laughed and laughed and laughed. But it was a laugh which was an amalgam of two types - first, the type of laugh you expect from a criminal who nervously faces his accuser and is afraid of being discovered, a very nervous laugh, and, second, the bitter laugh of the cynic who defies and ridicules all decent people. Well, let him laugh - P L 1 J P L 1 J, G-d will yet have the last laugh.

Yes, America must continue on more thorough and more efficient attempts at living down its bad name. The best way, of course, to escape the charge of "War Mongers", is to work to make ourselves deserving of the name "New World". The best way to live down our bad name is to live up to our good name.

As individuals, as Americans, as Jews, as humans -- let us strive to live down our bad names and live up to our good names. And thus will the Name of the Lord be blessed forever and ever.

### Benediction:

The Prophet Nathan bore to David the message of G-d which can serve as an appropriate benediction for us:

וְגָדַל שְׁמִי בְּיָמֶיךָ וְשָׂאָה בְּיָמֶיךָ וְשָׂאָה בְּיָמֶיךָ וְשָׂאָה בְּיָמֶיךָ

"And I will make for you a great name, like unto the name of the great ones upon the earth".

Amen.