

I am proud and honored to be the "kick off" for the Friday night darshan program. Rabbi Netter has asked for volunteers to deliver the d'rash or words of Torah on the first Friday night of the month. As chair of the Ritual committee, I felt it was appropriate that I step up and take a first shot and participate in this program. Volunteers are welcome and we look for many individuals to participate in this meaningful way of participation and learning throughout the year.

I debated what to speak about and thought I would start with looking at the parsha. Parshat Vayetzei talks about Jacob leaving Be'er Sheva and going to Charan.... Then, as we know, Jacob worked for seven years hoping to marry Rachel, but Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah. Then Jacob worked another seven years to marry Rachel. The dream scene, Jacob's ladder and the creation of the cornerstone of the beit hamikdash (the holy temple) are also discussed in this parsha...

but I wanted to focus on the birth of the twelve tribes .. How appropriate is it that in this week's parsha we read about the introduction of the 12 sons of Ya'akov and how they were named... and here we sit in the beautiful sanctuary surrounded by the "tribal" windows each depicting a different son of Ya'akov. I'd like to look at their names briefly with you this evening.

First, I must admit that much of this discussion was derived from various online resources, including Aish Hatorah and Chabad. Second, I hope that I am actually sharing new knowledge with you and that you may learn something from this evening's discussion.. I know that I certainly did as I read through the materials in preparation for the dr'ash.

So, we all know that Ya'akov had twelve sons (and yes, Dinah, his daughter as well). For now, I'm focusing on the twelve sons... Jacob had six sons with Leah, two with Rachel, and four with the handmaidens (Bilhah and Zilpah). The tribes were all named by their respective mothers, Leah and Rachel... their father Jacob had nothing to do with the name selection. Wonder if that would happen in the modern world?

The Talmud teaches that a Jew's name accurately reflects his/ her essential character..When parent's name their children, they are given a prophetic glimpse of their child's neshama, or soul.

The Talmud also teaches that the spiritual potential of the Jewish child is brought down from heaven by the father, but it is the mother who possesses the ability to express this new spiritual dimension in the physical world packaged in a living human child born from her body. The Hebrew word *zachor*, meaning "male," has the same numerical value as the Hebrew word *bracha*, meaning "blessing." The Talmud teaches:

A husband must always be careful about his wife's honor, because blessing is found in a person's house only on account of his wife. (Bava Metzia 59a)

The male may be the source of blessing, but it is through the female that the blessing fills the Jewish home.

So, let's look at the twelve sons and their names.. and see what the torah (and commentaries have to say)... all the names selected describe the status of the romantic relationship between Jacob and the naming mother. The story of the selection of names incidentally reveals that Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, were engaged in a ceaseless rivalry over their husband's affection. This plays out a bit in selection of some of the names.

**Reuven** (literally "see my son") or from the hebrew "reiyah" or sight. Leah's message in naming her son was: "The way Jacob looks at me is not the same as when he looks at Rachel. Now that we have a son together, he will look at me differently!" Leah says, in Bereshit 29:32 "G-d has seen my suffering: now my husband shall love me". We know that Jacob wanted to marry Rachel because of her beauty. It was discussed that Leah was always jealous of Rachel and crying because of this.

**Shimon** (literally "hear my son"). Leah said: "The way I hear Jacob talk to me is not the same as when he talks to Rachel. Now he will talk to me differently!"

**Levi** (literally "accompany"). Leah said: "Now my husband will accompany me." (verse 34) One of the commentaries indicated that when a woman has one or two children, she can carry them in her hands, but when she has three, her husband must accompany her! One might wonder whether this is even realistic in this day and age!

Levi turned out to be the originator of the tribe that attaches Israel to God; Levi's descendants consisted of the *Kohanim*, who officiated at the sacrifices in the Temple, and the Levites who accompanied these sacrifices with song and were in charge of the general maintenance of all holy property. The commentaries inform us that G-d Himself consented to this name, as it says, "*He called his name Levi,*" - the "*He*" in the verse refers to God, not to Jacob. Leah named him Levi and God enthusiastically endorsed her choice.

**Yehudah** (literally "thank you"). Leah realized she had received more than her fair share. Leah was a prophetess, as all the matriarchs were, and she knew that Jacob would have twelve sons from four wives; her fourth son was therefore more than her fair share of three and called for special gratitude.

"She conceived again, and bore a son and declared, 'This time let me gratefully praise God.' Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she stopped giving birth." (Genesis 29:35)

This son, Judah, became the progenitor of Jewish royalty. Of the first two Jewish kings descended from Judah, King David authored the Psalms, the hymn-book universally adopted by mankind as the book of praise and thanksgiving to God; while David's son, Solomon, authored the Song of Songs.

**So, we've covered four sons of Leah...**

**Now, Rachel's handmaiden, Bilhah had two sons: Dan and Naphtali..**

**Dan** – "g-d gave me justice", proclaimed Rachel upon the birth of Jacob's first son by her handmaiden, and she named him 'judgement'. "Dan shall be the judge of his people" said Jacob in blessing him before his passing.. if you meet a person, says the Talmud, who is forever insisting on justice, this is a sure sign that he is from the tribe of Dan.

**Naphtali** – means literally "prayers answered" or engagement and connection. Bilhah's second son was so named by Rachel to signify the fact that 'I have engaged my sister and I have prevailed'. Rachel felt that her prayers were answered, so she could have a part in the Jewish people like her sister.

**Even though Leah had 4 children, she also gave her maidservant, Zilpah, to Jacob to beget more of the 12 tribes:**

**Asher** – (literally "happiness"). Leah was jubilant in her happiness for all women to see. both Jacob and Moses blessed Asher with the blessing of oil. "his bread is saturated with oil" said Jacob... "he dips his feet in oil" blessed Moshe. In Torah law and Chassidic teaching, oil signifies the quality of saturation. The nature of oil is that when it comes in contact with something, it permeates it in its entirety.

**Gad** means blessing and good fortune "good fortune has come" said Leah upon giving this name to Zilpah's elder son.

**Because Leah so desired to have more sons, God answered her prayers:**

**Yissachar** (literally "reward"). Leah declared that "God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband."

**Zevulun** (literally "good portion"). Leah said: "The good portion is mine, because from now on my husband will dwell mainly with me, as I have given birth to half the tribes."

Next the Torah records the birth of Leah's daughter, Dinah (literally "she judged"). The Sages explain that when Leah got pregnant for the 7th time, she judged herself: "If I have 7 sons and each of the maidservants has two, that leaves only one for Rachel."

(She knew prophetically that there would be only 12 tribes.) In order not to shortchange her sister, Leah prayed that the fetus should turn into a girl.

At last, God heard Rachel's prayers and she gave birth to a future tribe of Israel:

**Joseph** (literally "additional"). The entire life goal of the matriarchs was to build the future nation. Rachel's prayer was that she should have an additional son - i.e. that son #12 should also be from her.

**Benjamin** ("son of the right"), named because this was the only one of the sons born in Israel. Benjamin thus represents the utter righteousness and holiness of the tzadik.

As we conclude our review of the names of Jacob's sons, it was suggested that I try and relate these names to modern society or try and figure out what lesson you can take away from this discussion.

So, I did what any modern Jewish mom would do.. and went on the Internet. Did you know that for \$29.95, Babynames.com will provide you with name suggestions after you fill out an online form listing your preferences. In addition to the name suggestions, they will be happy to mail a certificate with the name to your home. Their website disclaimer indicates "BabyNames.com provides you with name suggestions based on your listed preferences. We do not guarantee that you will like or choose any of the names that we suggest. Ultimately the decision is between you and your partner."

Or a visit with kveller.com can provide you with jewish name selections for any of the following: Top Jewish Names in America, jewish celebrity names, american political names, jewish flower names for spring, jewish tree names for fall, names that sound good in hebrew but really bad in english, and the lists go on and on...

But, I come back to the same thought that I started with.. the selection of these names and how did Rachel and Leah divine that the names they selected would be appropriate for their kids.. The naming of a Jewish child is a most profound spiritual moment. Further, the Talmud tells us that parents receive one-sixtieth of prophecy when picking a name. An angel comes to the parents and whispers the Jewish name that the new baby will embody.

The Sages say that naming a baby is a statement of her character, her specialness, and her path in life. For at the beginning of life we give a name, and at the end of life a "good name" is all we take with us.

So, may we all take our names and make them good and holy. Thank our parents for having the spiritual guidance and wisdom and listening to that wisdom in selecting the name that will carry us forward. Thank you. Shabbat Shalom.