

Are we Hebrews or Jews?

Category: Shemos, Vayakhel

Do you identify by what you do or by what you don't do?

Between a Rock and Hard Place

The Russian occupation of Ukraine is at the top of the news and occupying the thoughts of millions of people worldwide. For us Jews, this issue is personal. To us, every Jew is family — and a quarter of a million Jews live in Ukraine. To add to the problem, many Jews support Putin's aspirations, while the Prime Minister of Ukraine is a Jew as well. As always, Jews find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

In truth, this is not a conflict between Russia and Ukraine but a conflict between the West and the East, between the United States and Russia.

The attitude of the United States and Russia towards Jews is as far as east is from west; there is even a difference in the names we are called in the respective languages.

In English, we are known as "Jews." In Russia, we are known as "Yevrei," "Hebrews." This is also the case in Greek and Italian.

Where do these names come from? What is their meaning?

What's Our Real Name?

In the Torah, the name given to us by G-d is "Bnei Yisrael" or "Am Yisrael," the children of Israel or the Nation of Israel. Another name used in the Torah is "Bnei Yaakov." A third name found in the Torah is "Yeshurun."

The names "Yisrael" and "Yaakov" are easy to understand. We are named after our ancestor Jacob, who had two names, Yaakov and Yisrael; we are his children, so we are "children of Israel" or "sons of Jacob." But what is behind the name "Yeshurun"?

Commentaries explain that the name Yeshurun stems from the word “Yashar,” which means straight (the name Yisrael comes from the same root as well). It represents the fact that the people of Israel walk in the ways of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who are called “Yesharim,” straight ones.

The Hebrews

Now, these are the three names we are called in the Torah *among ourselves*, but from the vantage point of the non-Jewish world, we are called “Hebrew” or “Jew.”

The name “Hebrew” first appears in Genesis: “And the refugee came and told Abram the Hebrew” (Lech Lecha 14:13). Rashi says: “Why is he called Ivri—Hebrew? Because he comes from the *eiver*, from *across* the Euphrates River.” The second time the name is mentioned is in the story of Joseph. When the wife of Potiphar tells her household members of his alleged exploits, she says, “See, he brought for us a young Hebrew.” In a different source, Rashi adds that Ivri stems from the name of Abraham’s ancestor Eiver, and he therefore he carried his name (Vayeshev 39:14).

There is one more interpretation of the name “Hebrew,” quoted in the Midrash in the name of Rabbi Yehuda: “The whole world stands on one side, and he stands on the other (*mei’ever*)” (Bireishis Rabbah 42:8). This is an ideological interpretation of the name. Abraham is called Hebrew because the entire world stands on one side, they are all idol worshippers, and Abraham stands alone on the other side and declares that there is a Creator of the world, and so do his descendants after him throughout the generations.

Throughout the Torah (with one exception) the name “Hebrew” appears in the context of dealing with the non Jewish world. In Exodus, when G-d appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush, He said to him: “And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to me,” calling them Children of Israel, but when he tells Moses to speak to Pharaoh, He says, “And thus say to him: The G-d of the *Hebrews* has called upon us” (Exodus 3:18).

In fact, when Moses first came to Pharaoh, he told him (in chapter five): “.. the L-rd, G-d of *Israel*, says send forth my people...” and Pharaoh answered him, “Who is G-d that I shall listen to His voice? ...I did not know G-d.” As the Midrash explains, Pharaoh claimed that he had never heard of such a G-d, and therefore

would not listen to Him.

Immediately, in the next verse, Moses changes and says, “The G-d of the *Hebrews* called upon us...” From that conversation onward, Moses always used the name “Hebrew” when speaking to Pharaoh, and this is the name with which the Jewish people were known among the nations for generations afterwards.

Jews

We are a few weeks away from Purim. When we read the Purim story in the Megillah, we suddenly discover a new name: “Jew.” This is a name used very rarely in Tanach – usually referring to someone from the tribe of Judah.

The Rebbe points out that the first time it is mentioned in the Torah as a generic name for every Jew, regardless of his tribe, is in the Megillah. The Rebbe cites Rashi on the verse, “*Ish Yehudi*, A Jewish man was in Shushan the capital...”: “All those who were exiled with the kings of Judah were called Jews by the gentiles, even if they were from another tribe.” Therefore this is the only name used in the entire Megillah when referring to the Jewish people. (*See at length in Tisa 5739, Sichos Kodesh vol. 2 pg. 309 and on*).

The question arises: How did a name as well known as “Hebrew” — the name that defined the people of Israel for fifteen hundred years among the nations — suddenly be replaced by the name “Jew”?

The previous Rebbe says something fascinating:

After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms: the kingdom of Judah which included two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, and the kingdom of Israel which included the other ten tribes.

The first deed of the new king of Israel, Jeroboam the son of Nebat, was to blockade the roads that lead to Jerusalem. He put policemen there to ensure that Jews could not go up to the Holy Temple. Instead, he built two temples, one in Beit El and the other in Tel Dan, where he set up golden calves and forced the people of Israel to worship idols.

And so, three hundred years passed. By the time the ten tribes were exiled from Israel, they were idol worshippers like all the gentiles, and they quickly

assimilated, becoming known as the “Ten Lost Tribes.”

On the other hand, the Israelites in the kingdom of Judah remained believers in one G-d. In that state of affairs, if a person presented himself as a Hebrew, it did not say anything about his beliefs. Perhaps he worships idols, and perhaps he believes in one G-d — just as in our day, the word Israeli does not indicate a person’s beliefs; one can be an Israeli Arab or an Israeli Jew.

This is best expressed in the story of Jonah.

Everyone knows the story of Jonah and the whale which we read on Yom Kippur. He escaped from Jaffa, boarded a boat, and then there was a big storm at sea. The sailors cried out to their gods, but the storm did not subside, and they decided to cast lots to determine, “because of who is this great storm... and the lots fell on Jonah.” They said to him, “Please tell us what your nation is,” and Jonah answered them: “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the L-rd, G-d of the heavens.”

Jonah did not suffice with the general name, “Hebrew.” He needed to add to the definition: “I fear the L-rd, G-d of the heavens”; there were two types of Hebrews, the true Hebrews and the ‘fake’ Hebrews, so Jonah had to explain that he fears G-d, i.e., that he belongs to the real Hebrews (Likkutei Dibburim, Likut 21 pg. 530).

And so arose a situation in which gentiles used the name “Jew” to refer to a Hebrew who did not worship idols. They used that name because those who came from the kingdom of Judah generally believed in one G-d. This explains the statement of the Talmud, “whoever rejects idol worship is called a Jew” (Megillah 13a).

Our Mission

The Rebbe explains that what united the Jewish people in the days of Mordechai and Esther was the common denominator that they all rejected idol worship, and were therefore called Jews.

In our day as well, the common denominator for the entire Jewish people is that we reject other religions and associate ourselves with the Jewish people.

However, that is not enough. We each have a mission to ensure that being a Jew is not only expressed in what we “do not” believe, but in what we do believe.