YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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GEOGRAPHY IN THE PARASHA

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated in memory of Henry Lehmann z”l
by Richard Lehmann

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***PARASHAT VAYETZE***

**Assigning Names**

**By Prof. Yoel Elitzur**

*Parashat Vayetze* opens with a naming – “Jacob named that site Bethel” (Genesis 28:19) – and closes with a naming – “So he named that place Mahanaim” (32:3). Indeed, a host of new names are given throughout the *parasha*, including people (all of Jacob’s sons) and places (Gal-ed and Mizpah). Each new name is generally accompanied by an explanation that clarifies why the name was given, usually a reflection on an incident that occurred or on the emotional state of the person giving the name.

 The phenomenon of naming people and places and concurrently including an explanation for the name can be found throughout the Torah and the books of Joshua and Judges; it is a central fixture of the Biblical narrative.

**The problems**

Those familiar with this Biblical naming procedure will note several problems that arise.

1. **Multiple namings**: In our *parasha*, Jacob names Bethel on his way to Haran, but to our surprise, names it Bethel again upon his return from Haran in *Parashat Vayishlach*: “There he… named the site El-bethel, for it was there that God had revealed Himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother” (Genesis 35:7). Several verses later, he names the same place yet again: “Jacob gave the site, where God had spoken to him, the name of Bethel” (35:15). Why did Jacob name the same location three times?

In the Vilna Gaon’s commentary on Joshua 16, he proposes a brilliant solution. According to him, Jacob actually visited three different places and gave each place a distinct name. The first place (Genesis 28:19) was named “Bethel,” the second place (35:7) was named “El-bethel” and the third place (35:15) was named “Elohim-bethel.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What makes this interpretation especially brilliant is that it comes as an explanation for a problematic verse in Joshua: “From Bethel it ran to Luz” (Joshua 16:2), implying that these are two different locations, and not two names for the same location, as the plain meaning of Genesis indicates. Additionally, the Vilna Gaon bolsters his argument for the name “Elohim-bethel” with a novel interpretation of a phrase in Samuel: “*Shelosha anashim olim el Ha-Elohim Beit-El*”(I Samuel 10:3).While the common translation is “three men making a pilgrimage to God at Bethel,” the Vilna Gaon translates it as “three men making a pilgrimage at Ha-Elohim-Bethel.”

While the Vilna Gaon’s interpretation is certainly clever, the actual language of the text makes it difficult to accept. Why would Jacob have given three adjacent locations names that are almost identical to one another? Also, if the location mentioned in Joshua was not actually Bethel but “El-bethel” or “Elohim-bethel,” then why would the text have used the inaccurate, misleading name Bethel? Furthermore, the Masoretic cantillation marks in both Genesis and Samuel suggest a pause between “Elohim” and “bethel,” indicating that “Elohim-bethel” is not a discrete phrase, let alone the name of a unique location, and the Targumim on Genesis and Samuel indicate the same. Most importantly, the Torah explicitly states in *Parashat Vayishlach* that Jacob was commanded to return to the location where “God had revealed Himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother” (35:7), meaning that Bethel and El-bethel are clearly one and the same. In light of all these difficulties, it seems that the Vilna Gaon’s inventive approach only accentuates the problem. [See map below.]



1. **Different explanations for the same name**: This phenomenon can be seen in the naming of Beersheba. First, the problem of multiple namings occurs in the case of Beersheba as well: Abraham gives it this name in *Parashat Vayera* (Genesis 21:31) and Isaac does the same in *Parashat Toledot* – “Isaac’s servants came and told him about the well they had dug… He named it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day” (26:32-33).

But the case of Beersheba poses a new difficulty. The Torah relates:

Abraham then set seven (*sheva*)ewes of the flock by themselves, and Abimelech said to Abraham, “What mean these seven ewes which you have set apart?” He replied, “You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well.” Hence that place was called Beersheba. (21:28-31)

Noting, in particular, the repetition of the number seven in the Torah’s account, it may seem clear that Beersheba was named for the seven ewes that Abraham gave to Abimelech as part of their pact. However, the sequence concludes, “For there the two of them swore an oath (*nishbe’u*)” (21:31), meaning that the place was named for the oath, not the ewes.

 Thus, we have in one passage two different explanations for Beersheba’s name, one at the beginning and one at the end. There is a syntactic subtlety here as well. One can begin reading from verse 28 – “Abraham then set… ‘What mean these seven ewes?’… ‘You are to accept these seven ewes from me’… Hence that place was called Beersheba” – and stop at that point, satisfied with the Torah’s explanation. Alternatively, one can begin reading from verse 31 – “Hence that place was called Beersheba, for there the two of them swore an oath” – and be equally satisfied with that explanation. Each reading can be taken as a distinct textual unit, and each tells a different story about the etymological history of Beersheba.

 Our *parasha* contains a similar contradiction, not relating to the name of a place but to the name of a person: “She conceived and bore a son, and said, ‘God has taken away (*asaf*)my disgrace.’ So she named him Joseph, which is to say, ‘May the Lord add another (*yosef*)son for me’” (Genesis 30:23-24). What is the explanation for the name Joseph? Again, one can read the first section of the passage as a distinct unit – “[She] said, ‘God has taken away my disgrace.’ So she named him Joseph” – and one can read the second section of the passage as a distinct unit as well – “So she named him Joseph, which is to say, ‘May the Lord add another son for me.’” According to the first version, “Joseph” is a kind of shortened version of “Yehoasaf,” whereas according to the second version, “Joseph” is a verb conjugated in the future tense from the root y-s-p.

1. **The name exists already in a different place**: Often, a name is explained in one place in *Tanakh*, but the same name exists already, referring to an entirely different location. One example of this is Gilgal:

After the circumcising of the whole nation was completed, they remained where they were, in the camp, until they recovered. And the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away (*galloti*) from you the disgrace of Egypt.” So that place was called Gilgal, as it still is. (Joshua 5:8-9)

But if we read through the book of Joshua thoroughly, we will find two other Gilgals, one in the list of the kings of Canaan – “the king of Goiim in Gilgal” (12:23) – and the other on the northern border of the tribe of Judah – “Gilgal, facing the Ascent of Adummim which is south of the wadi” (15:7). Sources outside the book of Joshua, not to mention sources outside *Tanakh* entirely, feature still other Gilgals, but only the Gilgal of Joshua 5 comes with an explanation.

 We find this same phenomenon in the cases of some people’s names in *Tanakh* as well. For example, the explanation given in our *parasha* for the name Reuben is: “The Lord has seen (*ra’a*) my affliction (*be-onyi*), that now my husband will love me (*ye’ehavani*)” (Genesis 29:32). However, the book of Joshua lists a place on the border of the territories of Judah and Benjamin known as “the Stone of Bohan, son of Reuben” (15:6; 18:17), seemingly referring to a Canaanite who preceded the Israelites’ arrival in the Land.[[2]](#footnote-2) Clearly, there is no reason to connect this Canaanite Reuben to the Israelite tribe of Reuben, whose territory lay entirely in the Transjordan.

1. **The name preceded its explanation**: Continuing with the example of Gilgal, the book of Joshua mentions Gilgal well before the name is explained in chapter 5: “The people came up from the Jordan… and encamped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho” (4:19). At that point, the people erected a monument out of twelve stones, the nation was circumcised and they named the place Gilgal. The same is true of Bethel: Abraham moved his tent “between Bethel and Ai” years before his grandson Jacob named the site Bethel – and other examples of this abound. The suggestion that each of these places was named for events that would only occur much later in history is difficult to accept, as the text usually indicates explicitly when it uses the future as a point of reference.[[3]](#footnote-3)
2. **The explanation does not fit well linguistically**: Many of the explanations for names that we find in *Tanakh* seem to ascribe homiletical meaning to names that are easily explained in a much more simplistic manner. These interpretations often eschew the basic and simple meaning of the name in favor of a deeper, more sophisticated approach. In these explanations, the linguistic connection to the name is often tenuous and awkward, sometimes using artificial phrases and *hapax legomena*.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, according to the book of Joshua, Gilgal was named for the national circumcision that took place there. However, a person visiting the site two hundred years later would certainly not be able to guess that explanation from simply hearing the name “Gilgal.”

Similarly, we read: “‘This is God’s camp (*machaneh Elohim*).’ So he named that place Mahanaim” (Genesis 32:3). The use of the term “*machaneh*” seems out of place for a description of angels, which is what Jacob is referring to here. “*Machaneh*” usually denotes a cluster of tents in which a nomadic people or an army in the field resides.

We also find: “And [Jacob] built a house for himself and made stalls (*sukkot*)for his cattle; that is why the place was called Succoth” (Genesis 33:17). Why would Jacob name the place for the stalls that he built for his cattle and not for what he built for himself and for his family? In addition, the word *sukkot* in Biblical Hebrew usually refers to temporary living structures for people, whereas stalls for animals are generally called *gidrot tzon*.[[5]](#footnote-5) On the other hand, it would be very reasonable for a place that began as a group of temporary houses to take on the name “Succoth,” as we find in the case of the other Succoth, on the Egyptian border: “The Israelites journeyed from Raamses to Succoth” (Exodus 12:37).[[6]](#footnote-6)

This phenomenon is especially striking in the names of Jacob’s sons. There is no simpler name to understand than Reuben: “*Re’u*, *ben*!” – “Look, a son!” Jacob’s wife Leah has just given birth to a firstborn son. She is overjoyed, and the choice of the name Reuben is simply her way of inviting the world to come look at her beautiful baby boy. But according to the Torah, Leah was saying something completely different. She says, “The Lord has seen (*ra’a*) my affliction (*be-onyi*), that now my husband will love me (*ye’ehavani*)” (Genesis 29:32). The first portion of the name Reuben is taken from *ra'a*, while the letters *beit* and *nun* of the latter section of the name are taken from the words “*be-onyi*” and “*ye’ehavani*.” There is no natural linguistic connection between these words and the common word *ben* – the final element of the name Reuben.

The same can be seen in the case of Naphtali: “‘A fateful contest (*naftulim*) I waged (*niftalti*) with my sister; yes, and I have prevailed.’ So she named him Naphtali” (30:8). Nowhere else in *Tanakh*, or in any ancient Hebrew source, does the term “*naftulim*” appear. Its meaning may be understood based on nouns that share the same linguistic root, but the word “*naftulim*” itself is unique in the Hebrew of *Tanakh* and is not known in either the Hebrew of Qumran or *Chazal* or in any other Semitic language.

Regarding Zebulun, we read: “‘God has given me (*zevadani*)a choice gift (*zeved*); this time my husband will exalt me (*yizbeleni*), for I have borne him six sons.’ So she named him Zebulun” (30:20). Based on several similar words and names, we might be able to infer the meaning of the words “*zevadani*” and “*yizbeleni*.” However, the root z-b-d only appears a handful of times, all in Biblical names, and the root z-b-l only appears in one noun and one person’s name, but never in verb form.

In all of these cases, it seems clear that the name is what led to the explanation, and not that the explanation led to the name!

**Rabbi Obadiah Sforno’s approach**

*Parashat Vayetze* provides an uplifting, spiritual explanation for Leah’s choice of the name “Judah” for her fourth son: “This time I will praise (*odeh*)the Lord” (Genesis 29:35). Rabbi Obadiah Sforno comments on this verse: “This name contains both the letters of God’s distinguished name and the language of praise.” However, he also points out that the name of Judah’s aunt by marriage to Esau – “Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite” (26:34) – shared these characteristics. Was it Beeri the Hittite’s intention to praise God when he named his daughter as well? Similarly, Sforno notes that the famed prophet Samuel was preceded by several centuries by Samuel son of Ammihud (Numbers 34:20), the tribal chieftain of the Simeonites. In contrast to the more well-known Samuel, in all likelihood, Samuel son of Ammihud’s conception and birth did not share the drama described in the first chapter of I Samuel:

[Elkanah] had two wives… Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless… [Peninnah] would taunt [Hannah] that the Lord had closed her womb… In her wretchedness, [Hannah] prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while. And she made this vow… and the Lord remembered her. Hannah conceived, and at the turn of the year bore a son. She named him Samuel, meaning, “I asked the Lord for him (*me-Hashem she’iltiv*).”

Samuel son of Ammihud was most likely born under normal circumstances, without any taunting, weeping or vows. He was named Samuel – a beautiful name whose simple meaning is “the name of God,” as we read: “The name of the Lord is a tower of strength, to which the righteous man runs and is safe” (Proverbs 18:10).

 Sforno addresses this problem and comes to the conclusion that “all of these were names that were common among the ancients… and they would choose from these ancient names a name that would play upon the events of the present.” If this is true, the whole naming phenomenon that we are analyzing here is not a process of *creating* new names, but of *homilizing* on existing names.

The same is true regarding names of places. People would travel to a place that already had a name from ancient times, and place their stamp upon the place by giving its name a novel interpretation that reflected their ideas and values. In our *parasha* this idea can be found explicitly: “And Mizpah, as he said, ‘May the Lord watch (*yitzef*)between me and you’” (Genesis 31:49). The verse does not say, “And he called the place Mizpah,” but “And [concerning the name] Mizpah, he said…”; he pointed to Mizpah and expounded upon its name.

**Rabbi Matityahu Strashun’s incredible discovery**

Those who have spent time studying the Talmud extensively are undoubtedly familiar with Rabbi Samuel Strashun of Vilna, better known as the Rashash, whose illuminating commentary on almost every page of the Talmud is hard to overlook. But Rabbi Samuel’s son Rabbi Matityahu was also an eminent Torah scholar, as well as a prominent expert in many languages and fields of research. Rabbi Matityahu was famous for his personal library that contained a vast collection of Jewish books. A part of this library survived the Holocaust and eventually found its way to the Heichal Shlomo library in Jerusalem.

In the Rashash’s commentary on *Bereishit Rabba* 71, he quotes his son Rabbi Matityahu, who had managed to solve a puzzling textual difficulty. The text of the *midrash*, according to the common printed version, reads: “Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina said: ‘The names of the tribes are not stirred up (*akhur*) for them, but rather hemmed (*chafut*)[[7]](#footnote-7)for them.’” The meaning of this line is difficult to comprehend, and the commentaries struggled to understand it. Based on an Amsterdam print, Rabbi Matityahu proposed emending the word “*akhur*” to “*avud*,” meaning “made” (following the Aramaic *avad*), rendering the line as “The names of the tribes are not made for them, but rather hemmed for them.”[[8]](#footnote-8) What does this mean?

Rabbi Matityahu explained as follows: When a person goes to buy a suit, he has two options. He can go to a tailor, who will take careful measurements and prepare a new suit that will fit him precisely. On the other hand, if he does not have the time or the money for a custom-made suit, he can go to a large clothing store and buy a suit there. Since it is unlikely that he will be able to find a suit that will immediately fit his exact dimensions, a store employee will have to alter the closest-fitting suit to his precise measurements – perhaps taking in the waist or letting out the cuffs.

 The names of the tribes can be thus compared to a store-bought suit. Our matriarchs took names that already existed and “altered” those names to the current situation or to their current emotions by giving them novel explanations. Clearly, then, this notion was not innovated by Sforno, but was accepted long before his time, as early as the time of the Midrash.



MS Vatican 60: “The names of the tribes are not made for them, but rather hemmed for them.”

 To take this idea one step further, we may explain that this idea of injecting new meaning into existing names is intrinsically connected to the way in which the Jewish people relates to the world around it. Devotees of other religions and cultures often preach separation from the world and its vices. Some dream of destroying the old world and building a new, better world in its place. Not so the faith of the Torah and the Jewish people, which has always worked under the assumption that the world that the God of Israel created is meant to exist. It is our responsibility as the Chosen People to perfect the world, sanctifying it with holiness, faith and *mitzvot*. This is why the first commandment in the Torah is to “be fertile and increase” (Genesis 1:28). We sow in the world and we harvest in the world, and through the grains that we reap we fulfill the commandments that sanctify them – “You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes” (Deuteronomy 16:18), “You shall be free to set a king over yourself” (17:15) and “Army commanders shall assume command of the troops” (20:9). The concept of assigning names ties into this idea. We do not create our own separate framework, full of new names. We take the naming system that already exists, which arose naturally in the course of the world’s cultural and linguistic development, and inject within it new meaning.

**For further study:**

Y. Elitzur, “*Anashim Ve-nachalot Bi-Menasheh U-veshivtei Yisrael*,” *Al Atar* 4-5 (1999), 243-249 [Hebrew].

M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (trans. P. Hackett), Ramat Gan 1991.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. The third name deviates from the simple reading of the Torah’s account, deriving from the juxtaposition of the words “Elohim” and “Bethel” at the end of the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Similarly, we read of “Ben-hinnom” (Joshua 18:16), through whose valley the continuation of that same Judah-Benjamin border passes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example: “the Valley of Siddim, now the Dead Sea” (Genesis 14:3); and, “For the prophet of today was formerly called a seer” (I Samuel 9:9). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Words that do not appear elsewhere in *Tanakh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, Numbers 32:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A modern equivalent of Succoth is the city of Arish in North Sinai, *carīsh* or *carīshe* meaning “hut” or “arbor” in Arabic. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Compare to “*u-bechefet chaluko*” (*Mishna Shabbat* 10:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This version is corroborated by MS Vatican 60, one of the most reliable *Bereishit Rabba* texts that we possess, which was not available to the Rashash or to his son. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)