

Joseph & Esther

Assimilation, Identity, and Being 'Other'

Genesis 41:14

בראשית מ"א, י"ד

וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־יֹסֵף וַיְרִיצֵהוּ מִן־הַבּוֹר וַיַּגְלַח וַיַּחֲלֵף שְׂמֹלֹתָיו וַיָּבֵא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה:

Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and he shaved himself and exchanged his clothes, and came to Pharaoh.

Rashi on Genesis 41:14

רש"י על בראשית מ"א, י"ד

ויגלח. מפני כבוד המלכות:

He Shaved: Out of respect for Pharaoh.

Bob Deffinbaugh, *Esther: A Study of Divine Providence*

A Jew would wear a beard while an Egyptian would be clean-shaven. It is easy to understand how Joseph, a prisoner, would have a beard, but it was also a part of his Jewish identity. Joseph shaved his beard, however, before he appeared before the Pharaoh. He was not worshipping the Pharaoh; he was simply showing him proper respect.

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 4:12

שיר השירים רבה (וילנא) פרשה ד ד"ה א [יב] גן

רבי הונא בשם בר קפרא אמר, בזכות ארבעה דברים נגאלו ישראל ממצרים, שלא שינו את שמם, ולא שינו את לשונם, ולא אמרו לשון הרע, ולא נמצא בהן אחד פרוץ בערוה. לא שינו את שמם, ראובן ושמעון נחתין, ראובן ושמעון סלקין, ולא היו קורין לראובן רופוס, ולשמעון לא היו קורין לוליני, וליוסף לסטים, ולבנימן אלכסנדרא.

Rabbi Huna in the name of Bar Kapra said: By the merit of four things were Israel redeemed out of Egypt: They did not change their name... Reuven and Shimon went down, and Reuven and Shimon went up. And they did not call Reuven Rufus, and Shimon was not called Loulianni, and Yosef [was not called] Lestim, and Binyamin [was not called] Alexander.

Genesis 41:45

בראשית מ"א, מ"ה

וַיִּקְרָא פַּרְעֹה שֵׁם־יֹסֵף צְפַנַּת פְּעֻנָח וַיִּתֶּן־לוֹ אֶת־אֲסֵנַת בַּת־פּוֹטִי פַרְעֹה כְּהֵן אֵן לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּצֵא יוֹסֵף עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Tzafnat Pa-neach; and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of the land of Egypt.

Rashi on Genesis 41:45

רש"י על בראשית מ"א, מ"ה

צפנת פענח: מפרש הצפונות, ואין לפענח דמיון במקרא:

Tzafnat Pa-neach: [It means] "explainer of hidden things, and [the word] "Pa-neach" has no parallel in Scripture.

Georg Steindorff and Willhelm Spiegelberg, *Zeitschrift für Aegyptische Sprache*

In Egyptian, ṣe(d)-p-nute(r)-ef-onḥ. According to the Egyptian of the 20th dynasty, which is the first we have that records names and their meanings, the name means "God says he lives," or (more literally), "The god speaks, [and] he lives."

(*Zeitschrift für Aegyptische Sprache*, xxvii. 42, modifying Krall's etymology in *Trans. 7th Orientalist. Congr.* p. 110.)

Prof. Aaron Wildavsky (1930-1993)

In ancient times it was believed that a person who could name a thing could control it. That is one reason why God resists being named, so the divide between the holy and the human, between self-worship and worship of the Absolute, is maintained. But patrons can change the names of mere mortals, often signifying a promotion, as when Moses alters Hoshea to Joshua. God changed Jacob's name to Israel and Abram's name to Abraham, indicating a new destiny if not necessarily a whole new character; Pharaoh does the same thing to indicate a break toward the better in Joseph's life. Presumably, the renamed accepts the right of the renamer to alter his status.

(Wildavsky, Aaron. Assimilation versus Separation: Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Biblical Israel, 1993. p. 121.)

Genesis 41:50-52

בראשית מ"א, נ' – נ"ב

וַיִּוֹסֵף יָלֵד שְׁנֵי בָנִים בְּטָרַם תְּבוֹא שְׁנַת הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר יִלְדֶה-לּוֹ אֲסֵנַת בַּת-פְּוֹטִי פֶרַע כִּהֵן אֹזֶן: נ"א וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת-שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי-נִשְׁכַּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-עַמְלִי וְאֶת כָּל-בַּיִת אָבִי: נ"ב וְאֶת שֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי קְרָא אֶפְרַיִם כִּי-הִפְרִנִי אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנָיִ:

⁵⁰ Before the years of famine came, Joseph became the father of two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera, priest of On, bore to him. ⁵¹ Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home." ⁵² And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction."

Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah*

The Hebrew word translated above as "forget" is derived from a root, נָשָׂה, connoting "movement from its proper place": One forgets when something "slips one's mind", as if to say that whatever has been forgotten has moved from its proper place in the brain's retrieval system. The sciatic nerve is called גֵּיד הַנִּשְׁשָׁה (*gid hanosheh*) meaning "the sinew that was displaced" (Gen. 32:33) when Jacob wrestled with the angel, and consequently (though victorious) limped away. By the same principle a creditor in Hebrew is called a *nosheh* since what is rightfully his he has moved out of his domain and placed in charge of another and may demand an accounting of his own. Thus here: God has made "creditors" of my misfortune and my father's house, in other words, what heretofore appeared to me to be the worst misfortune, has now, through Divine guidance, found a happy solution. In other words: Joseph feels deeply indebted to his previous sad experience and the injustice inflicted upon him in his father's house.

Sotah 13b

סוטה י"ג ב

מפני מה נקרא יוסף עצמות בחייו מפני שלא מיחה בכבוד אביו דקאמרי ליה (בראשית מד, כד) עבדך אבינו ולא אמר להו ולא מידי ואמר רב יהודה אמר רב ואיתימא רבי חמא ברבי חנינא מפני מה מת יוסף קודם לאחיו מפני שהנהיג עצמו ברבנות (בראשית לט, א).

R. Judah said in the name of Rav: Why was Joseph referred to as 'bones' while he yet lived (Gen. 50:25)? Because he did not intervene to protect his father's honor. When his brothers said to him, 'Your servant, our father,' (Gen. 44:31) he made no reply to them. R. Judah also said in the name of Rav, although others say it was R. Hama ben R. Hanina: Why did Joseph die before his brothers? Because he conducted himself with rulership.

Genesis 39:6

בראשית ל"ט, ו

וַיַּעַזֵּב כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ בְּיַד-יוֹסֵף וְלֹא-יָדַע אֶת־מְאוֹמָהּ כִּי אִם-הִלָּחֵם אֲשֶׁר-הוּא אוֹכֵל וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יִפְהַתְאָר וַיִּפָּה מְרָאָה:

So he left everything that was his in Joseph's hands, not concerning himself about anything with him there, except for the bread that he ate. Now Joseph was fair of form and fair to look at.

Esther 2:7

אסתר ב', ז

וַיְהִי אִמֵּן אֶת-הַדָּסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בְּתֻדָּוֹ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנְּעִרָה יִפְתַּתְאָר וְטוֹבַת מְרָאָה וּבְמֹזוֹת אָבִיָּהּ וְאִמָּהּ לְקַחָהּ מֵרַדְכָּי לְוֹ לְבַת:

He was foster father to Hadassah — that is, Esther — his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was fair of form and fair to look at (JPS: "shapely and beautiful"); and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.

Megillah 13a

מגילה י"ג א

ויהי אומן את הדסה קרי לה הדסה וקרי לה אסתר תניא ר"מ אומר אסתר שמה ולמה נקרא שמה הדסה על שם הצדיקים שנקראו הדסים וכן הוא אומר (זכריה א, ה) והוא עומד בין ההדסים רבי יהודה אומר הדסה שמה ולמה נקראת שמה אסתר על שם שהיתה מסתרת דבריה שנאמר אין אסתר מגדת את עמה וגו' ר' נחמיה אומר הדסה שמה ולמה נקראת אסתר שהיו אומות העולם קורין אותה על שום אסתהר בן עזאי אומר אסתר לא ארוכה ולא קצרה היתה אלא בינונית כהדסה ר' יהושע בן קרחה אמר אסתר ירקרוקת היתה וחוט של חסד משוך עליה

She was called Hadassah, and she was called Esther. It is taught: R. Meir says: Esther is her name. And why is she called Hadassah? Because of the righteous who are called myrtles (*hadassim*), as it says, "...and he stands among the myrtles" (Zec. 1:8). R. Judah says: Her name is Hadassah, and why was she called Esther? Because she conceals (*masteret*) her words, as is said, "Esther would not reveal her people [or her birthplace]" (Est. 2:20). R. Nehemiah says: Hadassah is her name, and why is she called Esther? Because the nations of the world called her by the name of Istahar/Ishtar. Ben Azzai says: Esther was neither tall nor short, but of medium height, like a myrtle. R. Joshua ben Korha said: Esther was of greenish complexion, and a thread of grace [*hesed*; a play on *hadas*?] was spread over her.

Rabbi Irving/Yitz Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*

Esther's name probably is derived from Ishtar, a Babylonian goddess, and Mordecai's name from Marduk, a Babylonian god. Equivalent names today might well be Mary and Christopher. Of course, committed Jews in open societies also adopted Gentile names. My parents, Orthodox Jews, wanted an Anglo-Saxon name for their little son, Yitzchak—so they named me Irving... Esther possibly lived in two worlds, with the name Esther on her diploma and the family calling her Hadassah at home... Never write off assimilated Jews. They come out of the historical closet in the greatest crises and when they are least expected.