

Vayishlach

לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׂמֹךְ--כִּי, אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל: כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים, וַתּוֹכַל.

Genesis 32:29 “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, rather it will be Israel, for you have striven with Divine beings and humans, and have triumphed.”



Biblical names often refer to the character of a person, indicate their origins, or foreshadow destiny. In the case of Jacob, his name tells how he “held onto” the ankle of his brother Esau. True to his name, Jacob continues to “hold onto” his brother in attempts to surpass and supplant Esau’s firstborn status. In this week’s portion, Jacob is growing up. He has fled his parents’ home. He married, fathered children, and has himself been deceived and taken advantage of by a family member. On his path to full adulthood, Jacob receives a new name - Israel. The biblical passage explains that the name derived from “*ki sarita*” or “because you struggled.” Jacob struggled with his immediate

family, his extended family, and, in this episode, with some unidentified being which commentators state has divine origins. Jacob’s name change marks a significant transitional point in his journey. So, too, is the name itself - for its meaning. In scholarly circles, the name “Israel” first appears in extra biblical works in a song of King Merneptah of Egypt dating back to 1200 BCE and again in an inscription of King Mesha of Moab in 830 BCE.

Naming the modern Jewish state Israel, as it came into existence, was neither clear nor simple. Zionist leaders met as late as May 1948, only weeks before the state was established, to discuss the possibilities. Would the new State’s name provide a clear historical link to Eretz Yisrael? Or a religious link to Zion or **Judea**? Each of these considerations were rejected in favor of Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel.

Next the question of naming the new Jewish nation in Arabic arose. The original [document](#) (declassified in Spring 2013 and available in Hebrew on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website under State Archive Documents), demonstrates attitudes toward the population, both Jewish and Arab. Again, committee members considered three options: Palestine or *Filastin*; Zion or *Sayoun*; and Israel or *Esra’il*. The three Zionist officials—consisting of D. Remez, B. Shetritt, and M. Assaf—worked under two primary assumptions: first, that an Arab state would be established alongside the Jewish one (in keeping with the UN’s partition resolution the year before); and second, that the new Jewish state would include a significant Arab minority whose political feelings needed to be considered.

The Zionist officials rejected the name Palestine, because they thought that would be the name of the new Arab state to be established in the near future. They rejected the name Zion, or *Sayoun*, seemingly because the words “Zion” and “Zionist” already had a pejorative overtone in the Arab world. The committee referenced conflicting ideologies between Jews and Arab Muslims about attachment to the

region; calling the country Zion “would cause real difficulty for the Arab citizen in the Jewish state,” the document states. In the end, they opted for *Esra'il*, or Israel.

Subject: Translating the State’s Name to Arabic

A special committee that convened on the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel, has decided that the translation of the State’s name to Arabic should be that of “Israel” and rejected other proposals such as “Zion” and “Palestine”.

Israel State Archive: 124/23/3
The National Executive

Considerations and Conclusion

The Committee members M. Assaf, D. Remez and B. Shetritt convened for the purpose of considering the translation of the State’s name – Israel – to Arabic as the name of the Jewish State. We have reached the conclusion that it has to be the literal translation of the name “Israel” and not “Palestine”.

The considerations were as follows:

- A. There should not be a special/discriminatory translation to Arabic; it has to be translated in the same way that it is being translated to other foreign languages.
- B. This is a natural/accepted name and it is rooted in the Arabic tradition. Therefore, it will be understood and recognized.
- C. The name “Palestine” which connotes a geographical entity may raise concerns and problems that are associated with the name: “Eretz Israel”.
- D. It is possible that the name of an Arab state in Eretz Israel may be “Palestine” and it might cause confusion.

It should be noted that using any other name may stir identity difficulties for the Jews living in Arab speaking countries. Hence, using the name “Israel” bears some political consideration as well.

The Committee considered the translation of “Zion” into Arabic but concluded that it might be burdensome for the Arab citizens in a Jewish State.

Signed: *D. Remez, B. Shetritt, M. Assaf*

The naming of people and places holds great significance in the historical narrative of the Jewish people. Jacob’s name change to Israel resulted in his offspring receiving the name b’nai Yisrael, “children of Israel,” and the ensuing generations the name “Israelites.” The Torah tells us that names have power; and in this portion we can see Jacob/Israel’s legacy in the rebirth of the modern Jewish State. Whether in Hebrew, English, or Arabic, the name of the new Jewish State would remain Israel. It evokes the significance of the historical connection to the land, suggests the continuity of the journey of the Jewish people from early biblical times to the present, and finally, foreshadows the inevitable struggle that would ensue as Jews established for themselves a new State.

Discussion Questions:

The name of a country is identity, common experience, symbolism, culture, a literature, a language, something historically distinct. What other component elements constitute a national identity?

What was distinctive about Jews who immigrated to live under British control in Palestine?

Did immigrating Jews to Palestine have a notion that they were creating a nation? That they were transforming themselves from living in separate communities in the diaspora to becoming a common collective?

What might have been the motivation for the discussion of the name Israel in Arabic? Why was there an apparent Zionist sensitivity for non-Jews living in the Jewish state?

Additional Resources:

[Translating the State's Name to Arabic](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/05/). May 1948. From the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Archives Documents. (accessed December 1, 2016). <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/05/>