

Tikkun Olam Chavurah, Yom Kippur 5787

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My father died on February 10/ the 7th of Adar--over 40 years ago. Those dates almost never occur simultaneously (well they do every 20 years), so my mourning for a man I was not close to and who had a tragic life lasts, usually, for the several weeks between those dates. Most often it's a peaceful period, its occurrence in the drabness of February notwithstanding. But last winter, I felt my father's presence keenly. I wasn't sure what his spirit was trying to tell me, but somehow it felt like it had to do with his name. At his birth in 1905 and for somewhere between 16 and 20 years after that, my father's name was Israel.

When I knew my father he was called Irving. But as I became more involved in Jewish life in my teens, I asked him his Hebrew name, which was, of course, Yisrael, because I needed to know it for my Hebrew name, Rivkah bat Yisrael (and eventually v'zeesel as my mother was known in her family only by a Yiddish name). When my father died when I was pregnant with my son, we gave him the Hebrew name of Yisrael. (In English we named him Avi, my father), and Charles after his other grandfather).

So the sadness that enveloped me this winter was both my general ambivalent grief about this man who rarely talked and whom I didn't really know, and the legacy of Israel he left me with, which in my musings I began to connect to the Israel in the sh'ma.

For years now I have been having trouble saying the sh'ma. At first it was because I really found the "renewalish" version, that drags out each word, annoying. Still do. (It's easier on high holidays when we use the traditional nusach, but still not easy.) Not easy because I don't like making God's oneness the central tenet of Jewish belonging and belief. If I'm going to relate to the Jewish god, it's a god of many varieties and attributes and ways (some I like, some I don't). But this past winter, in my grief, as I was thinking about the sh'ma, I began to wonder, why is it Israel who is commanded to hear? And what does it mean if our most important prayer/affirmation calls us by that name given its usurpation by a state that is doing things I abhor.

So I got curious about how that usurpation happened—why did the state come to be called Israel?

Was it biblical? Other than in the sh'ma the word Israel isn't prominent in the text. Yes, the biblical author tells us that our ancestor, Jacob, had his name changed to Israel meaning one who wrestles or struggles with God. Jacob's children (well only his sons) are called the twelve tribes of Israel, and Israelites becomes the name of the confederation of the twelve tribes. They are said to have founded the kingdom of Israel that lasted from c. 1047–930 BCE. That founding and King David's reign is the first event in the bible that can be corroborated by evidence from contemporary sources—the rest is how the story has come to us, through the lens of the kingdom of Judea (or the southern kingdom) that split from the northern kingdom of Israel in 930. The kingdom of Judea, from whence we get the name Jew, had a contentious relationship with the kingdom of Israel, hence the split. The northerners only lasted until 722 when they were destroyed (and dispersed) by Assyria. Judea lasted until the Babylonian Exile in 586, and survived in Babylon to return to that land (called Judea, not Israel). The Judeans were primarily responsible for writing our biblical text, which is very critical of the northern kingdom, claiming their destruction in 722 was because they were not monotheists and sacrificed to other gods. The Judeans wrote the stories of the ancestors, like the one about Jacob's name being changed to Israel, the god wrestler, from Jacob, the heel who stole his brother Esau's birthright. The midrash suggests that when the sh'ma says hear oh Israel it means Jacob. It's more likely that it's a reference to the kingdom of Israel not heeding the monotheistic agenda, hence, hear o kingdom of Israel, god is one—no more idol worship!

But if our ancestry is primarily Judean and that's why we're Jews, why not Judea, claiming the fictitious indigenous rights of the past, as in the current right wing focus on the so-called Greater Israel, comprised of Judea and Samaria (in reference to the southern and northern kingdoms respectively)?

Here's what historian Martin Kramer has to say about how the state became Israel:

On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion declared statehood. The climax was this sentence: “We hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel.” This was the applause line, the culmination, and the naming of the state.

Until that moment, very few people knew what the state would be called. In the various drafts of the declaration, the space for the name was left blank. When the diplomats of the

Jewish Agency in Washington went to secure an advance promise of recognition for the state, they couldn't tell the Americans what the name would be.

How was the name decided? By a vote in the People's Administration, the cabinet-in-waiting, on May 12. It records Ben-Gurion as saying: We have decided that the name of the state will be Israel.

He claimed it was a unanimous vote, but at least one cabinet member, Yizhak Gruenbaum, became public about the fact that he wanted the state to be called Judea as everyone expected it would be.

For Gruenbaum, the name Judea had the advantage of creating *continuity*, from the last expression of Jewish sovereignty, Judea under the Hasmoneans, and through the 2,000 years of the dispersion of the Jews when it was, of course, Palestine. Judea had been embraced by the Zionists when they campaigned for a *Jewish* national home and a *Jewish* state. A state called Judea would emphasize not only that continuity in time but would link the new state to Jews everywhere in the present.

Gruenbaum suspected that the real reason Ben-Gurion preferred the state of Israel over the state of Judea was that he wanted a *rupture* of continuity, a *rupture* with the Jewish, exilic past.

Ben-Gurion didn't want a bridge to the Diaspora, but its subordination to the new state. By the choice of the name of Israel, then, Ben-Gurion was out to create a new identity, building upon yet superseding Jewish identity.

[From: Why the Name Israel? <https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/why-the-name-israel>]

Of course Ben Gurion didn't have his way completely. Although we all didn't move there or disappear as he wished, diaspora Jewry became, more powerfully identified as Am Yisrael, the people of Israel. And if you listen to Shlomo Carlebach, or read the slogans proffered by those who are standing with Israel, it is the state that makes us Am Yisrael. I won't sing Carlebach's Am Yisrael Chai to remind you, (I can't bring myself to anymore) but you get the idea. That the other words in that song are Od Avinu Chai, still our father lives, links back to our father Jacob, to make the connection complete.

I'm guessing you don't think about my father and son, or the state, the patriarch Jacob or the ancient kingdom of Israel when you recited the Sh'ma but rather you think of Us, the People of Israel/ Am Yisrael. It is that term that connects us to all of the above.

But must we abandon our ethnoreligious identity as Am Yisrael if we don't share that strong identification with the state or the ancient kingdom?

Some argue that we should cut our ties, and not think of ourselves as Am Yisrael, the people of Israel. Zionists have so poisoned the word Israel, they argue, that it would better to go back to Jew as a religious identity only and abandon the idea that we are a people, responsible for one another. A brilliant Palestinian author, Mujahid Sarsour, argues for that in his new book, *Palestinians at the Holocaust Museum*. In a conversation, he wrote to me:

What I'm trying to get at is that once you abandon the religious parameters of Jewishness and embrace the ethnic definition, there is a huge amount of room for ambiguity—and I think that is what Zionism partly thrives on. This ambiguity allows Zionism to centralize Jewish identity in Israel and create a definition of Jewishness that requires support for Israel. There is no question that Zionism nowadays has the most influence inside the Jewish community and because of that it is capable of exploiting that ambiguity to the degree that many Jews feel pushed to defend Israel.

Despite all these problems, even if Israel haunts and troubles me, just like my father does, I cannot abandon either Israel my father's memory or Israel the state's existence. Nor do I want to. Being a part of the people Israel, fundamentally disagreeing that its central tenet that asserts that god is one, is something I cherish, what makes me feel Jewish. And it gives me the right and the purpose to stand up **to** rather than **with** the state of Israel for what it has done during the whole course of its existence to obliterate not only the Palestinians but to disenfranchise Jews who do not follow the Zionist script. Listen, Israel, I say, listen to those of us who demand that you become the democracy you claimed to be, that you recognize that you must share the land with Palestinians so that everyone who dwells from the river to the sea, can live in dignity and freedom.