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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayishlah

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In this Shabbat's parashah, Jacob's name is changed by an angel who had struggled with him: "Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and you have prevailed." Later in the parashah, God Himself changes Jacob's name to Israel. This is reminiscent of the name change of Jacob's grandfather--his name was changed from Abram to Abraham.

These name changes suggest an essential quality of these patriarchs. Abram's name was changed to Abraham as an indication that he would be father of a multitude of nations. God found Abraham worthy of being the progenitor and inspiration of many people. Jacob's name was changed to indicate that he no longer should be viewed as a usurper and hanger-on (as implied by the name Jacob), but as a forceful, courageous individual who could face life's challenges and be victorious (as implied by the name Israel).

What about Isaac? He is the only one of our three patriarchs who didn't have his name changed. He seems not to have experienced the turbulence and conflicts that faced Abram/Abraham or Jacob/Israel. He went through his entire life with one name, a name that refers to laughter (yitzhak=he will laugh). While Abraham reflects nation building and Israel reflects successful struggle with God and man, Isaac reflects--laughter.

Since Isaac is one of the three patriarchal pillars of our people, then laughter must play an important foundational role in our lives and religious worldview.

The Talmud (Taanit 22a) relates a story that Elijah the Prophet pointed out two people who had a place in the world-to-come. Who were these outstanding individuals? They were street comedians! They told jokes. When asked why they devoted their time to making people laugh, they answered: we try to relieve people's sufferings; we offer them a moment of laughter to free them from their woes; we use humor to bring peace among those who are arguing with each

other.

The 18th century sage, Rabbi Eliyahu ha-Cohen of Izmir, elaborated on the virtues of these street comedians. "Anyone who is happy all his days thereby indicates the greatness of his trust in God. This is why they [the street comedians] were always happy…This quality [of accepting life with happiness] is enough to give a person merit to have a place in the world-to-come; for great is trust [in the Lord], even if a person is not perfect in all other moral perfections."

Perhaps Isaac's name was never changed so as to remind us that we must never lose our quality of optimism, of happy and confident faith in God, in the power of laughter to generate good feelings and harmony. While the names of Abraham and Israel suggest serious challenge, turmoil and conflict, the name of Isaac suggests a quiet, steady and optimistic trust in God, and a cheerful approach to life.

The Jewish people need to draw on the strengths of each of our patriarchs. Like Abraham, we need a powerful spiritual vision that can transform the world. Like Jacob, we need the strength and courage to struggle and defeat those who strive with us. Like Isaac, we need to be optimists. We need to have calm, wise faith. We need to laugh, and to share our laughter with others.

***The Angel for Shabbat column is a service of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, fostering an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism. Please join our growing family of members by joining online at www.jewishideas.org

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