

5779:

Despite the fact of deep Jewish assimilation into American society, Jews remain, in some ways, strangers to non-Jews. Several times non-Jews have asked me something about ‘the Hebrews’ or ‘the Hebrew faith,’ when what they mean is Jews, and Judaism. This isn’t so much an error in fact as it is tone-deaf to the ways that Jews self-identify, kind of like referring to American blacks as ‘Negroes.’ We call ourselves Jews, to each other and to our non-Jewish friends as well. ‘Hebrew’ is now an antique term.

But it wasn’t always so. At a certain point in this week’s parshah, Abram (not yet Abraham) hears that his nephew Lot had been captured in battle. The Torah says that a messenger “brought the news to Abram the Hebrew.” That is the term the in Torah for our people when referring to themselves in the presence of others, and it is also how others refer to the them. Later in our history, when our people were returning from exile in the Persian empire to the land of Israel, the name ‘Jews’ (Yehudim, the descendants of the tribe of Judah) came into use.

The fact that such confusion about our name has persisted from the biblical period to the present suggests a long-term identity problem in terms of our relationship with other people. They simultaneously know and don’t know who we are. They are aware of us being different, they have often treated us as being different, and we have ourselves often made the case for ourselves as a people apart. The costs of that sustained arms-length relationship have run from misunderstanding to outright violence against us, and will never be fully resolved so long as Jews remain a unique and distinctive presence in non-Jewish societies.

As our parshah points out, the very beginning of our people, with Abram and Sarai, necessitated a name change to Abraham and Sarah. The infusion of the divine spirit into them as people is reflected in a basic name for God, Yah, becoming part of their names. Without an attachment to God and God’s laws for righteous living, we cannot claim to be distinct, cannot claim a distinctive name for ourselves. At the same time, our acceptance of those attributes, and our difference, will forever subject us to the misunderstanding of those around us. It seems we will somehow always be ‘Hebrews’ to some people.