
Introduction (10 minutes)

Facilitator's note: This unit asks students to trace the origins of their name, and asks about other names in their family. If your students are unaware of their family histories, ask them to take home Activity Sheet #1 "What's My Name" a few days before the lesson, and ask their parents (or grandparents!) to help. Feel free to adapt, exclude or substitute any of the activity questions to suit your students' interests or needs.

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we're going to trace the history of our names and find out what each name's journey can tell us about ourselves. Then, we'll look at how our names can take on different meanings depending on who is saying them. Let's discover why names are important, read about how some special names in the Bible came to be, and see what Judaism says about looking at things from different perspectives.

According to Jewish tradition, names have a special meaning. They tell us about our past and contain hopes for the future. We are often named after family members, and also sometimes named after people in the Bible.

Where does your name come from? Let's retrace the journey of our names.

Activity #1: What's My Name?

➤ **Hand out Activity Sheet #1 for students to complete. When they have finished, ask a few students to share their answers.**

Names can have an impact on us, and different names can change how we feel in the moment. Names can have meanings that change, depending on who says the name.

➤ **Ask:**

1. Who calls you by your full name? How does that make you feel?
2. Do you act differently when people call you by different names? How?
3. Do you have different nicknames for your friends? What makes you switch between names?
4. Which of your names is your favorite? Why?
5. Do you think your name fits you? Why or why not?

Part One: Gaining a New Name (15 minutes)

Sometimes we gain names later in life, like nicknames or titles. Names we acquire reflect things and experiences that we show to the world about ourselves. They often come from actions we've taken or traits that identify us.

Let's read together a piece of text from the Bible. In the Torah, the names of the characters tell us important things about who they are and why they're important. This story about Jacob happens when he is about to cross a river on his way home. It's late at night when suddenly a strange man appears and starts to fight him! This man turns out to be an angel sent to test Jacob, who finds that Jacob isn't so easily defeated.

The Journey of My Name (Elementary School)

► Read Text #1 aloud.

Text #1: Genesis 32:25-29*. English translation [**bold text**] and abridged commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Humash*, Koren Publishers Jerusalem. (*Note: in the Koren edition, these verses are numbered 32:24-28.).

וַיִּתֵּר יַעֲקֹב לְבָדּוּ וַיֵּאָבֶק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר: וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַה־שֵּׁמְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לָמָּה כֵּן אָמַרְתָּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו: כִּי אֶמְצָא אֶת־אֱלֹהִים וְעָמְדָה עִמָּי וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו: לָמָּה כֵּן אָמַרְתָּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו: כִּי אֶמְצָא אֶת־אֱלֹהִים וְעָמְדָה עִמָּי וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו: לָמָּה כֵּן אָמַרְתָּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו: כִּי אֶמְצָא אֶת־אֱלֹהִים וְעָמְדָה עִמָּי

24 **Jacob remained alone** on the riverbank; **and a mysterious, unnamed man wrestled with him until dawn**. 25 He, the man, **saw that he could not prevail against him, and therefore he touched**, struck, Jacob and injured the **joint of his thigh**; **and the joint of Jacob's thigh was dislocated as he wrestled with him**. Despite the great pain, Jacob remained standing and refused to be defeated. 26 **He**, the man, **said: Release me, for the dawn has broken**. Jacob felt that he was capable of subduing him, and **he said: I will not release you unless you bless me**. Jacob demanded submission, expressed in the form of a blessing. 27 **He**, the angel, **said to him: What is your name? He said: Jacob**. 28 **He**, the angel, **said: No more shall Jacob be said to be your name; rather, you shall be called Israel; for you have striven [sarita] with God [elohim] and with men, and you have prevailed**.

The angel, who is a representative from God, gives Jacob a new name. This new name is made of two Hebrew words. When the name “Israel” is said in Hebrew, the sounds of the Hebrew words for “strive” (wrestle) and “God” are tied together, in the same way that their meanings are tied together. Jacob’s actions — when he wrestled with God’s angel — are recorded in his new name, Israel.

► Ask:

1. Can you think of anything else that can be recorded in a name? (Examples include: multiple family names hyphenated; “ben” or “bar” or “bat”, meaning “son of” or “daughter of”; or “Smith” means originally someone was a blacksmith)
2. Look back at your Activity Sheet and the history of your name. Are any of your names like the name Israel? How are they like that?
3. Look back at the history of your name. Did anyone in your family whose name you have go through a challenge or take a journey that caused them to change their name? (Examples include: family names that were changed during immigration; anglicization of names in other languages such as “Shmuel” being written as “Samuel”; additional or hyphenated surnames from marriage, etc...)
4. What are some of the words you would use to describe what Jacob does when he is challenged?

Every day we face challenges of all kinds and have experiences that we learn from. They have a lasting impact on us. Sometimes, something happens to us that is so big that it can even affect our name, which makes a record of that change that everyone can see.

The words we use to describe challenges are interesting words. We can “rise” to a challenge, “step up” to it, or “go through” it. Why do we use words that show movement when we talk about challenges? Challenges and experiences are like a journey: you go somewhere that is outside of your normal life. You go into a challenge or experience from one end, and come out the other side, and the things you learn or do during that journey become a part of who you are. You grow and change because of them, and that can look and feel like you have traveled or been on a journey.

Part Two: When Names are Promises (15 minutes)

There are other people in the Bible who had their names changed by God. Their names have a different story. Let's look at the Book of Genesis again, this time at Jacob's grandparents: Abraham and Sarah.

Before they became grandparents — and before they even became parents! — Abraham and Sarah's names were actually Abram and Sarai. What did that change mean?

➤ **Read Text #2 aloud.**

Text #2: Genesis 17:1-5. English translation [bold text] and abridged commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Humash*, Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

וַיְהִי אַבְרָם בְּנֵי-תשעים שָׁנָה וַתֵּשַׁע שָׁנָיִם וַיֵּרָא ה' אֵלֶי-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי-קֹל שְׁכֵנֵי הַתְּהֵלֶךְ לְפָנָי וְהִנֵּה תָמִים: וְאַתָּנָה בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאַרְבַּע אֲוָתְךָ בְּמֵאֹד מֵאֹד: וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּדְבֹר אִתּוֹ אֱלֹקִים: לֵאמֹר: אֲנִי הִנֵּה בְרִיתִי אִתְּךָ וְהָיִיתָ לְאָב הַמְּיוֹן גּוֹיִם: וְלֹא-יִקְרָא עוֹד אֶת-שְׁמֹךְ אַבְרָם וְהָיָה שְׁמֹךְ אַבְרָהָם כִּי אֲבִרְמֹן גּוֹיִם וְתִתִּיד:

1 Abram was ninety-nine years old, and the Lord appeared to Abram; He said to him: I am God Almighty. Walk before Me, serve Me, and be wholehearted, perfect. 2 I shall establish My covenant between Me and you. This covenant was established with Abram as a private individual, and also with each of his descendants personally. **And I will multiply you exceedingly. 3 Abram fell upon his face,** in awe, due to the prophecy, and as an expression of his complete submission to whatever God was about to tell him, as the promise would no doubt include an obligation as well. **And God spoke with him, saying: 4 I, My covenant is hereby being established with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 This is a new status, and therefore your name shall no longer be called Abram,** with its simple meaning of lofty [ram] father [av]. **But rather, your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.** As part of the covenant, the name given to him by his parents was exchanged for a name chosen by God.

God makes a promise to Abram: that his family will grow, and that family will become so big it will start whole nations of people. Abram is from the words *av* (father) and *ram* (lofty or great). God adds a *hey* “ha” to the middle of his name, changing it into Abraham, which means “father of all”.

➤ **Ask a participant to read Text #3 aloud.**

Text #3 Genesis 17:15-16. English translation [bold text] and abridged commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Humash*, Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֵלֶי-אַבְרָהָם שְׁרֵי אִשְׁתְּךָ לֹא-תִקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמָהּ שְׁרֵי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ: וּבְרַבְתִּי אִתָּהּ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָּךְ בֶּן וּבְרַבְתִּילָהּ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם מְלֶכֶי עַמִּים מִמֶּנָּה יֵהְיוּ:

15 God said to Abraham, referring to him by his new name, by which he was to be forever known from that moment forward: **Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, as Sarah is her name. 16 I will bless her** with various blessings, **and I will also give you a son from her; I will bless her, and she too shall become nations. Kings of peoples shall be descended from her.**

The Journey of My Name (Elementary School)

To find out more about Sarai's name change, let's see what Rabbi Steinsaltz has written. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

➤ **Ask a participant to read Text #4 aloud.**

Text #4: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Note on Genesis 17:15.

Sarah is her name: The name Sarai can be interpreted as “my princess” or “my queen ruler.” The possessive form indicates a certain limitation. Just as her husband's name was changed from that of a private individual to one that described him as the father of a multitude of nations, so too the name Sarai, meaning my princess or my queen, became Sarah, the princess or queen of all.

God also makes a promise to Sarai: that she will be the mother of a son, who will grow the family into nations of people. Her descendants will be kings of those nations, too. Her name, “Sarai” in Hebrew is “my princess” or “my queen”, meaning, to Abram she is his beloved wife. But as Sarai she is only a princess or a queen to him alone. When her name is changed to “Sarah”, that *hey* “ha” is the same as the *hey* “ha” in Abraham: it turns her name into “queen of all”.

For both Abraham and Sarah, the promises in their names are not in the past but in the future. Their names represent things that have not yet come to pass. Because the promise of becoming such an important family comes from God, they have the responsibility — they have to promise to God — to be worthy of that importance. They need to act like their names' meanings. Their names represent the personal qualities that God wants them to have

➤ **Ask:**

1. What do you think it means to have a name that is a promise?
2. Look back at your name history. Are any of your names from Bible names?
3. Do you have any names that come from people in your family history?
4. Do you have any names that show where your family came from originally?

The history of our names is quite a journey to go on! Some of us have names that came from the Bible. Others of us have names that came from other countries and languages. Several of us have names that carry the memories of our ancestors. Family names can change when people immigrate or come to a new place and want to make their names sound like everyone else's. When you change your name to fit in, that's also a kind of promise to yourself. When your name is a promise, it's like a journey that hasn't started yet.

There are many ways to think about the names people call us or we call ourselves and how these may change when we look at things from a different perspective or when we change as we grow up.

Conclusion (15 minutes)

Let's read a quote from *Pirkei Avot*, which means "The Ethics of the Fathers". It is a collection of teachings that have been passed down the generations of rabbis, starting with Moses. This one is from a rabbi named Ben Bag Bag.

Text #5: *Pirkei Avot* 5:22.

בן בג אומר, הפך בה והפך בה, דכלא בה. ובה תקוני, וסיב ובלה בה, ומנה לא תזוע, שאין לך מדה טובה הימנה:

Ben Bag Bag says: Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow old and gray with it. Don't turn from it, for nothing is better than it.

➤ Ask:

1. What do you think is the "it" Rabbi Ben Bag Bag is talking about?
2. What do you think he means when he says, "turn it"?
3. Can you think of something you "turn" over again and again, and find something new to see each time?
4. How does your understanding of your name, and your own history, change when you look at your name from the different perspectives we used today?

The "it" Rabbi Ben Bag Bag is talking about is actually the Torah. The idea that we "turn it" is important in Judaism and connects with why we continually reread the Torah. We know we are never finished learning and we can always get new information.

There are many ways to understand ourselves and our personal journeys. Whether it's through the names people call us or by looking at things from a different perspective, it's important to think about our histories, and remember the ways we change and grow.

Activity #2: My Memory Suitcase

Facilitator's Note: This activity encourages participants to make creative representations of memories and experiences they carry. Depending on the comfort level and age range of your students, you can ask them about specific types of challenges, such as those they may experience at school or in your class, or if appropriate, ask about broader experiences in life, such as moving to a new city, or gaining a sibling, or even losing a family member. By drawing or making things to "pack" in a "suitcase" of experiences, students can see how their life experiences become part of who they are.

➤ Supplies:

- Pens, markers, color pencils for decorating
- Scissors (optional)
- Transparent tape or glue (optional)
- Color craft paper (optional)
- Stencils or printed outlines of geometric shapes and objects (optional)
- A copy of Activity Sheet #2 for each participant

The Journey of My Name (Elementary School)

➤ Directions:

1. Give each participant a “suitcase” by printing Activity Sheet #2.
2. Using the craft paper and pens/pencils, ask participants to draw or cut out shapes that represent different memories or experiences that are important to them. For example, if a student has recently arrived from another school they might draw/cut out a backpack shape and write the name of their school on it.
3. “Pack” each suitcase by taping or gluing the cut out shapes onto the suitcase, OR draw/write directly on the suitcase.

➤ Hand out Activity Sheet #2. At the conclusion of the activity, bring the group back together and ask:

1. What is the purpose of a suitcase?
2. What kinds of things would wish to take? What would you like to leave behind?
3. Did you “pack” the memory of something that had a big effect on who you are today? What is it?

Our experiences shape us and become part of who we are. The challenges we face, the times we succeed, the moments when we learn something new — they all combine in a way that adds to our whole selves. It’s like we carry those experiences — or their memory — in a suitcase. We can open up the suitcase and take out individual memories to look at them again. Sometimes we forget them. Others we keep but don’t like to think about very often. Whatever we feel about our experiences, they come with us wherever we go, and they are unique to each of us.



The Journey of My Name (Elementary School)

Text #3 Genesis 17:15-16 English translation [**bold text**] and abridged commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Humash*, Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

ויאמר אלקים אל־אברהם שְׂרֵי אִשְׁתְּךָ לֹא־תִקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמָהּ שְׂרֵי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ: וּבְרַכְתִּי אֹתָהּ, וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֵּן וּבְרַכְתִּיהָ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם מְלֶכֶי עַמִּים מִמֶּנָּה יֵהְיוּ:

15 God said to Abraham, referring to him by his new name, by which he was to be forever known from that moment forward: **Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, as Sarah is her name.** **16 I will bless her** with various blessings, **and I will also give you a son from her; I will bless her, and she too shall become nations. Kings of peoples shall be descended from her.**

Text #4: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Note on Genesis 17:15.

Sarah is her name: The name Sarai can be interpreted as “my princess” or “my queen ruler.” The possessive form indicates a certain limitation. Just as her husband’s name was changed from that of a private individual to one that described him as the father of a multitude of nations, so too the name Sarai, meaning my princess or my queen, became Sarah, the princess or queen of all.

Conclusion

Text #5: Pirkei Avot 5:22.

בֵּן בַּג בַּג אוֹמֵר, הִפַּךְ בָּהּ וְהִפַּךְ בָּהּ, דְּכֻלָּא בָּהּ, וְכֵהָ תִּחְזִי, וְסִיב וּבִלְהָ בָּהּ, וּמִנֶּנָּה לֹא תִזְוַע, שְׂאִין לָהּ מִדָּה טוֹבָה הֵימָנָה:

Ben Bag Bag says: Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow old and gray with it. Don't turn from it, for nothing is better than it.

The Journey of My Name (Elementary School)

Activity #1: What's My Name?

My **first name** is _____

That name means/I was named after _____

My **middle name** is _____

That name means/I was named after _____

My **family name** is _____

That name comes from _____ (e.g. another language or country)

My **Hebrew name** is _____ (Optional question)

That name means/I was named after _____

Some **nicknames** that people call me are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Some **names in my family** that come from different places or languages:

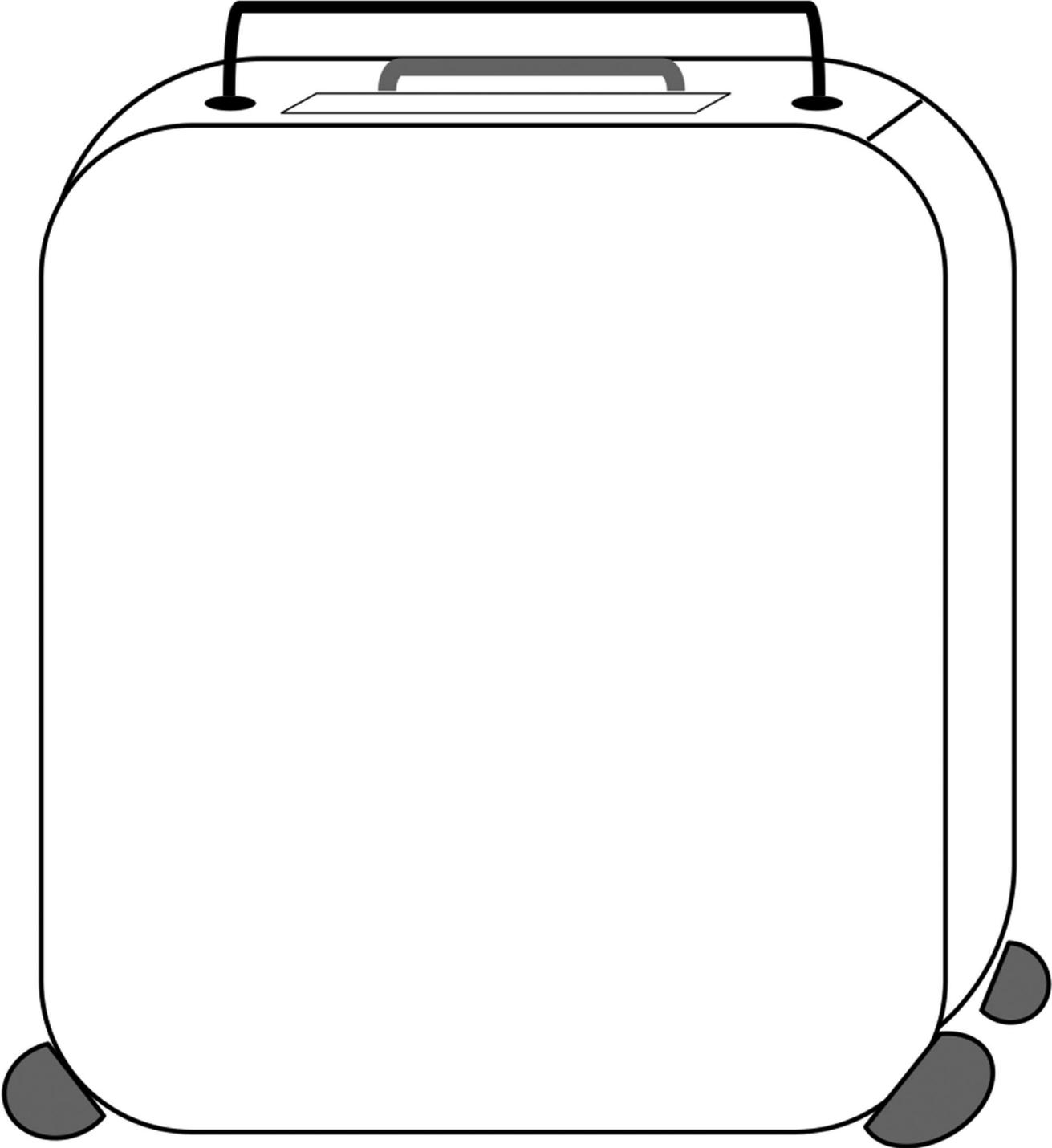
1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

My favorite name to be called is: _____, because _____

Activity #2: My Memory Suitcase





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