



## Allison Searches for Her Hebrew Name

ON THE FIRST DAY OF HEBREW SCHOOL, teacher Brett handed out white sticker labels and markers. He asked the students to make themselves name tags using their Hebrew names. Jackson’s Hebrew name was Yehoshua. Sam’s Hebrew name was Shmuel. Sherrie’s Hebrew name was Brachah.

The problem was, Allison didn’t have a Hebrew name. She stared at the blank sticker, not knowing what to do.

Brandon wrote “Zev” on his sticker, peeled off the backing, and stuck it proudly on his shirt. “I’m named after my great-grandfather,” he said. “It means ‘wolf.’” Brandon growled and made his fingers like claws.

Jesse wrote “Yishai.” Madison wrote “Miriam.” Tina wrote “Tikvah.” Ralph wrote “Raphael.”

Sarah’s name was the same in Hebrew and in English. The same was true for Oreet. But Oreet was from Israel, and Sarah was from Hazelton, Pennsylvania.

Oreet said, “In Israel we don’t have two different names. We just have one Hebrew name.”

Parker squeezed “Esther-Malka” onto her sticker. “I was born on Purim.”

Soon A.J. was wearing the name “Avraham,” Becky was wearing “Rivke,” Matthew was wearing “Mattityahu,” and Kelly was wearing “Kahatya.”

Teacher Brett looked at Kelly’s sticker and said, “I don’t know that Hebrew name.”

Kelly said, “It is an acronym. K, H, T, Y. It stands for *Kol han’shamah t’ha-leil Yah*, which means ‘Every soul will praise God.’”

“How beautiful!” teacher Brett exclaimed.

“Allison Searches for Her Hebrew Name,” by Rabbi Zoe Klein  
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There was another girl in Allison's class named Alyson. Their names sounded the same, but they were spelled differently. The other Alyson wrote on her sticker "Aviva."

David was taking his time writing and decorating his Hebrew name, "Dov-Ber." Allison would have thought he would have David as a Hebrew name, but she supposed it didn't always work that way.

"Interesting," said teacher Brett. "Your name is both Hebrew and Yiddish. Dov is Hebrew for 'bear,' and Ber is Yiddish for 'bear.'"

Allison wrote a big purple question mark on her sticker and stuck it over her heart.

"Don't worry, Allison," teacher Brett said, "lots of people don't have Hebrew names. The good news is you can still get one! A lot of Hebrew names start with the same letter as the English name. You and your parents can talk with the clergy about choosing one. It is fun to choose a Hebrew name when you are a little older, because you get to think about what is meaningful to you and what you like."

The other Alyson said, "Why don't you choose Aviva, like me?"

"Aviva is a very lyrical name," teacher Brett said, "and it means 'spring.'"

"It's a pretty name," Allison said. "But I don't really feel like an Aviva."

"How can you not feel like an Aviva?" the other Alyson asked. "You feel like an Alyson, don't you?"

Allison knew their English names sounded the same. But she also knew that they were very different, she and the other Alyson. The other Alyson had wavy blond hair, green eyes, and no freckles, and she always wore dresses and barrettes. Allison had curly brown hair, dark brown eyes, and lots of freckles, and she liked to wear shorts, colorful knee-high socks, and white converse sneakers. Plus, the other Alyson was born in April, which was the spring, while she was born in September.

Allison excused herself to go to the bathroom. When she stood in front of the mirror and saw the question mark over her heart, it made her sad. She took off the sticker and threw it in the trash.

That night Allison asked her parents why she didn't have a Hebrew name. Her parents said that they hadn't really thought about it at the time, but if she wanted a Hebrew name, they could pick one together.

"How about Latke?" suggested her father. "Those are yummy."

"How about Mazal Tov?" suggested her mother. "Or L'chayim?"

“Those are not names,” Allison said.

“Why not?” they asked.

Allison opened the browser on her phone and looked up Hebrew names starting with the letter A.

Adi: Jewel

Adina: Gentle

Ahuva: Beloved

Aliza: Happy

Amit: Friendly

Ariella: Lioness of God

Ashira: Rich

Atara: Crown

Ayelet: Deer

As she read each name, she imagined trying it on like a beautiful silk robe. She imagined how the name would feel against her skin and in her heart. Each name was beautiful, but none of them felt right. They felt foreign to her, like she was trying on robes that belonged to someone else. None of them fit.

After school the next day, Allison went shopping with her mother. While her mother was in the freezer aisle, Allison wandered to look at the yogurts. There, picking out parmesan and ricotta, was Cantor Tovah from the temple.

“Hi, Allison,” Cantor Tovah said.

“Hi, Cantor,” Allison responded. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Certainly!” Cantor Tovah put the parmesan and ricotta in her shopping cart next to two shiny eggplants, a jar of tomato sauce, and a carton of eggs.

“How do you choose a Hebrew name?” Allison asked.

“There are lots of ways,” Cantor Tovah said. “Some people choose a Hebrew name based on the name of a relative who died. For example, if someone had a great-uncle whose Hebrew name was Yitzchak, they might name their baby Yitzchak to honor him.”

“What if their baby is a girl?”

“Well, they could choose a Hebrew name starting with Y, like Yael, or Yaffah, or Yardenah. I am named after my grandfather Tuvia.” The cantor rested her arms on her cart and leaned forward, studying Allison for a moment. “Are you shopping for a Hebrew name for yourself?” she asked.

Allison nodded.

“Exciting!” Cantor Tovah exclaimed, straightening up. “You could choose a name based on a holiday near your birthday; for example, if you were born near Tu BiSh’vat, you could be named Ilanah, which means ‘tree.’ Or it could be based on a personality trait. If you are joyous, you could be named Gilah; if you are pleasant, you could be named Naamah; if you are compassionate, you could be named Ruchamah. I know for a fact that you are all three of those things.”

Allison smiled.

The cantor continued, “You could also base your Hebrew name on something you really like. For example, if you like the sea, you could be named Galyah, which means ‘wave,’ or Peninah, which means ‘pearl.’ If you like music there is Shirah, which means ‘song.’ Lots of cantors name their daughters Shirah.”

“I don’t know,” Allison said, putting her hands in the pockets of her denim shorts. “I’ve looked at a lot of names, and none of them really feel right.”

“Hmm,” Cantor Tovah thought out loud. “You could also choose a name based on a person in the Torah, like Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, or Leah. Or choose a name after a place in Israel like Moriah, Natanyah, or Carmel. Or you could do what some people do in Israel and get really creative and choose names that don’t appear in Torah, like Orah, Vered, Lilach, and Dalyah.”

“Allison!” Allison’s mother called to her. She came around the corner and smiled at Cantor Tovah. “Is she talking to you about Hebrew names?”

“Yes,” smiled the cantor. “I think this is something that deserves more than a passing conversation in the dairy aisle. Let’s explore together at the temple. Okay, Allison?”

Allison nodded.

In the car, Allison told her mother some of the ways people choose Hebrew names.

“How about Glidah?” Allison’s mother said. “Doesn’t that mean ‘ice cream’? You love ice cream!”

“Mom,” Allison groaned, rolling her eyes.

“You were born close to Rosh HaShanah. How about Shofarah? Is that a name?”

“No, I am pretty sure that is not a name.”

“But you said they get creative with Hebrew names in Israel.”  
Shofarah definitely did not feel right to Allison.



Now, what Allison could not possibly know is that while she was searching for her Hebrew name, there was a Hebrew name searching for her—it had been searching for her for 240 years. In 1770, on the outskirts of the city of Plovdiv in Bulgaria, a poor couple welcomed their only child into the world. She was born on the fourth night of Chanukah, when it was bitter cold and there was hardly a moon in the sky. She was healthy and strong, and her parents named her Yehudit, after the Jewish heroine in the Chanukah story who single-handedly conquered the Assyrian general Holofernes and inspired her people to rise up and fight for their freedom. She was the light of her parents’ lives and filled their hearts with joy. Yehudit was Allison’s great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother. That’s six greats—eight generations ago.

Yehudit’s mother was a seamstress, and her father worked in a tannery. Yehudit was a voracious reader and made a living as a bookbinder. Every year the family attended an annual fair to sell garments and books. It was at one of these fairs that Yehudit fell in love with the man she would marry, a Jewish merchant from Turkey. They married and had two children, a daughter who died young of yellow fever and a son who lived a long life. Yehudit’s son had three sons of his own, and his sons had sons. Yehudit lived to be a 102. After she died, her name began searching for a place to land, carrying within it some of the precious light of Yehudit’s spirit.

The name darted in and out of history, ducking into shadows to protect itself. It hid when the Ottoman Empire fell and the Jewish community suffered riots and expulsions. It found safety in a coat pocket and migrated back to Hungary. It retreated into the tall trees of the forest when there was danger and rode fallen leaves down the Danube river. It curled up behind the yellow Star of David and stowed away in the bundles that refugees carried on their backs. Most of Yehudit’s descendants disappeared in one of history’s darkest hours, buried in unmarked graves. Her name slipped into a transit visa and crossed the sea to Palestine. There it sought its lost family, traversing fields and town squares, climbing mountains, fluttering around campfires. It wandered through orange groves, over aqueducts and stone

ruins. Eventually it surrendered itself to a drifting cloud and sailed out to sea, where it clung to the mast of a ship. The name reached New York harbor and resumed the long, nearly hopeless search, alighting from mezuzah to mezuzah until it finally decided to stop searching. It looked for a resting place in a small synagogue in a small town, in the folds of an ancient Torah scroll inside a humble wooden ark.

Like the name, the Torah scroll had also traveled across the sea, having survived fires and looting. There was another, newer Torah beside this one, with polished handles and ink bright as patent leather, but the name felt more comfortable amid the fading letters. The name's light was dim now, barely a flicker, and there, inside the stained parchment with crumbling edges, it lay itself down.



Allison sat with Rabbi Reyna in her office on a comfortable couch. On the coffee table was a stack of books and a bowl of Sunkist fruit gems. Rabbi Reyna was the same height as Allison, with a kind face and intelligent eyes. "What is so important about a Hebrew name anyway?" Allison asked her. Rabbi Reyna said, "A great sage, the Chatam Sofer, taught that one of the main reasons we were rescued out of Egypt was because we kept our names. Our names connect us to our history, to our future, and to God. A Hebrew name is like a passport that we keep hidden away in our back pocket, tucked away and ready to be taken out at any time so that we may enter magical worlds. Names have powerful associations in Jewish tradition. God is even called *HaShem*, which means 'The Name,' expressing a belief that God's true name is unknowable and unpronounceable, because a name contains the essence, power, and unity that is God. When Moses asked God what God's true name was, do you know what God said?"

Allison shook her head no.

"God says mysteriously, 'I am that I am. I was that I was. I will be that I will be.' The founder of the Chasidic movement was called the Baal Shem Tov, 'Master of a Good Name,' because he possessed great wisdom of the power of God's name. In the Talmud it is written, 'The crown of a good name excels all other crowns, including the crown of learning, of priesthood, and even of royalty.'"

“I want a Hebrew name, and I have been looking and looking, but I don’t know which one to choose. And my mom wants to name me Glidah.”

Rabbi Reyna laughed. “Come with me,” she said. As they left the office, Rabbi Reyna invited Cantor Tovah to join them, and together they went into the sanctuary. There was no one else besides the three of them there, and it felt big and echoey. “Let’s all stand in front of the ark.”

Allison felt special being in front of the ark with the cantor and the rabbi. Rabbi Reyna said, “In the midrash, it is written that there are three names by which a person is called. One by which her father and mother call her. One by which other people call her, and one that she earns for herself. The best one is the one you earn for yourself. I have no doubt, Allison, that you and your Hebrew name will find each other.”

Cantor Tova started singing, “*L’chi lach*, and I shall make your name great. *Lech l’cha*, and all shall praise your name.” Rabbi Reyna sang along with her.

Allison closed her eyes and felt the words and the melody surround her like waves of silk. What Allison, the rabbi, and the cantor did not know is that their words and Allison’s search for her Hebrew name had stirred awake the name that had laid itself down inside one of the temple’s Torah scrolls. The name felt a rush of joy invigorate its spirit.

It slipped out of the old scroll and alighted onto a curl of Allison’s hair.

“You will find your name,” Rabbi Reyna said. “And whatever it is, it will be a blessing.”

That night, Allison lay in her bed and realized she felt better. She hadn’t yet found her Hebrew name, but she was okay with that for now. She didn’t want to just slap a label on herself and call it a day. Her soul knew her name, even if her brain hadn’t received it yet. She whispered *Sh’ma Yisrael* and turned over, nestling into her pillow. As Allison drifted to sleep, the name that had alighted on her head slipped down to her cheek like the gentlest kiss, and light as a snowflake, it melted into the warmth of her skin.

Allison dreamed she was in a room surrounded by books and candlelight. In her hand was a needle, and she was stitching a soft leather binding of a book. She opened the cover of the book in her lap and tried to read the faded name that had been stamped there. *Ye . . .* She could not make out the rest.

The next day, in religious school, teacher Brett was talking about how much he liked chopped liver.

“Gross,” said Parker.

“Blech,” said Matt.

And the other Alyson said, “Yeah, who’d eat that?”

“What did you say?” asked Allison.

The other Alyson said, “I said, ‘Yeah, who’d eat that?’”

“Yeah, who’d eat that.” The words felt strange but also familiar in Allison’s mind. She contemplated the syllables slowly. Yeah-who’d-eat-that. Yeah-who’d-eat. Ye-hoo-deet . . . and then she laughed out loud. “Yehudit,” she said in a whisper to herself. And then louder, “Yehudit! That is my Hebrew name!”



Allison stepped onto the bimah during Shabbat services. The congregation rose, and the rabbi opened the ark.

“May the one who blessed our ancestors bless you with life, health, goodness, and peace,” said Cantor Tovah.

“Your Hebrew name is Yehudit. May this name be respected and honored for wisdom and good deeds, and may it be a beacon of light in our world,” said the Rabbi, and the community said, “Amen.”

Allison felt complete. What had begun as a purple question mark on a sticker on her shirt had become a name inscribed in her heart. She would treasure her name always, and her name would treasure her.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the story behind your name?
2. In Judaism, names have power. That is why we do not know how to say God’s true name—it would give us power over God! What power do you think names have? Why are names so important?
3. There is a Rabbinic teaching that one of the reasons the Israelites were freed from Egypt was that they didn’t change their names (*Vayikra Rabbah* 32). What is the importance of a Hebrew name?
4. It is written, “Every person has three names: One their parents give them, one others call them, and one they acquire for themselves” (*Kohelet Rabbah* 7:1:3) What are your three names?

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