

Vayashev: Hyphenated Jews

Rabbi Alexander, Davis Beth El Synagogue

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It's time for another edition of "Better Known As."

I am going to give you the name and you'll tell me who they are better known as. Ready?

- Barry Alan Pincus better known as Barry Manilow
- Bernie Schwartz better known as Tony Curtis
- Winona Horowitz better known as Winona Ryder
- Issur Danielovich better known as Kirk Douglas
- Betty Paske better known as Lauren Bacall

We know that there are many people who adopt stage names. But there is clearly more to it in these cases. To gain acceptance into America, these stars chose names that sounded less Jewish.

I am not here to cast aspersions on them. I didn't live through that era in which job opportunities for Jews were curtailed. And for all I know, these stars may be proud Jews who care about our people. My point is that there have been times when we've chosen to blend in. And then there were times when we were basically forced to blend in.

Such was the case in ancient Israel under Greek rule. It is the story we recall as Chanukah approaches this Sunday night. While the Selucid and Egyptian Ptolemy empires respected Jewish culture and protected Jewish institutions, these policies were reversed under Antiochus IV. His decree set forth in 167 BCE prohibited Jews from circumcising their sons, studying Torah, observing shabbat and holidays and sacrificing to God at the Temple.

We read in II Maccabees 6, "Not long after this, the king sent an Athenian senator to force the Jews to abandon the laws of their ancestors and live no longer by the laws of God, also to profane the temple in Jerusalem and dedicate it to Olympian Zeus... No one could keep the sabbath or celebrate the traditional feasts, nor even admit to being a Jew." According to some scholars, that last phrase, "no one could even admit to being a Jew," implied that Jews were forced to change their names. At the minimum, they adopted double names, one Greek and one Jewish. They became hyphenated Jews.

Who was the first hyphenated Jew? We read in our parasha this morning that when Joseph refuses the sexual advances of Potifar's wife, she calls out to the servants of the palace saying, "Look at the Hebrew. He came to lie with me, but I screamed, rau, heivi lanu ish ivri (Gen. 30:14). By describing Joseph as "ivri the Hebrew," Potifar's wife made it clear that he was not one of us not just because he was a slave but because he was a Jew. Being of Egyptian stock, she appealed to Egyptian racial prejudice. Admitting this Hebrew alien into her home was an insult to her and to every pure Egyptian.

Over the coming years, Joseph himself seems to have internalized this message. As he rose in the ranks, he adopted an Egyptian name, Tzafnat Paneiach. This then is the first instance in Jewish tradition of having more than one name, one Jewish and one not Jewish. In this first diaspora, Joseph was the first hyphenated Jew.

I want to pause her for a moment because we are living through a time in which antisemitism is on the rise. We are horrified and worried by attacks in Jersey City and by vandalism in Beverly Hills. Almost every day, we hear about another incident at a university or on a Brooklyn street. But there is another kind of antisemitism that is no less pernicious. It doesn't make the headlines but is a threat, nonetheless. It is an attack on the very notion of the hyphenated Jew. This is the antisemitism of the Chanukah story.

Recall, on Purim, Haman wanted to kill the Jews. By contrast, on Chanukah, Antiochus wanted to kill Judaism. Seeking to unify the world under Greek culture, he was enraged by the stubborn, backwater Jews who refused to adopt the more sophisticated, universal approach of Hellenism. His universalism, his desire for a pure Greek society, left little room for Jews to keep their ways.

And although the Maccabees defeated the Greeks, they did not defeat this world view. Skip ahead 2000 years to these shores. Reacting to waves of large-scale immigration to the United States, President Teddy Roosevelt declared, "There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism."

"Roosevelt objected to the newly arriving immigrants who thought to preserve a conjunctive identity between their countries of descent and their adoptive home in hyphenated formulas like "Irish-American," "German-American," and "Italian-American." Instead, as Professor Berel Lang wrote in a paper titled, "Hyphenated Jew and the Anxiety of Jewish Identity," "Roosevelt and later Wilson affirmed a project of nation-building in which Americans were to be just that: Americans, without hyphens or other conditions—the whole warmed in the melting pot... to produce an undiluted national identity."

Some of you probably remember youth group programs that had you debate if you were an American Jew or Jewish American. In other words, what is our core identity- a Jew or as an American? The question of the hyphen is slightly different. Can you be fully American if you are a Jew? Can you be fully Jewish if you are an American?

These are the questions that Chanukah raises. They are the questions we often discuss in the month of December. This past week, they became the source of a public debate.

A week ago, at the White House Chanukah party, the President signed an executive order to combat antisemitism. Sadly, and ironically, that very order is seen by some to stoke the flames of antisemitism. I have received several questions about this order and the controversy that exploded around it. Indeed, it is quite confusing. So, let me try to explain.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination in programs receiving federal support on the basis of "race, color, or national origin." What is not included is religion. If Judaism is just a religion, Jews could be discriminated against, not protected by civil rights laws. Secular Jews, for example, would not be covered under Title VI.

Beginning in the Bush era and continuing with Obama, Title VI was expanded to include national identity so that Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and others could be included. In other words, a group's actual or perceived ancestry or ethnic characteristics qualified for protection under Title VI.

This approach made sense because among other reasons, antisemites consider Jews as a racial group.

A week ago, President Trump's enshrined the Bush and Obama administration policy as law. Jews would be covered under Title VI. But this executive order to fight antisemitism struck a raw chord and set off a fire storm of criticism for a whole variety of reasons.

First, President Trump is hardly one to be trusted when it comes to fighting antisemitism. His own rhetoric has given fodder to antisemites. He has played to antisemitic stereotypes of Jews and money and questioned our loyalty referring to Israel as "your country," Netanyahu as "your Prime Minister," as if America was not our country, Trump not our president.

Another reason the President's Title VI executive order was criticized was because some fear that it will limit freedom of speech by denying legitimate criticism of Israel of BDS supporters. How does this work? If Judaism is a national identity, undermining the State of Israel is clearly an antisemitic attack on Jews.

There are other reasons why the order was criticized including how it was initially misrepresented by the New York Times. And in fairness, it didn't necessarily deserve all the critique. It does expand protections for Jews. But with nerves already raw and the Jewish community on edge, the report about an executive order that even hinted at dividing "Jewish" from "American" was the last straw. It was perceived as another way of telling American Jews, "This is not your country."

In so doing, the executive order exposed a Jewish fear that encoding Jewish difference into American law may enable antisemitic hatred. Writing in *The Atlantic*, David Schraub, a law professor at UC Berkley explained: the critique of the order reflects a "very old worry that promoting any sort of "hyphenated identity" ultimately gives succor to racists and bigots of all stripes who claim that to be accepted as American, Jews and other minority groups must simply be American—no ifs, ands, or buts."

To be fair, the Maccabees themselves were purists. They were zealots who had little tolerance for blended identities. And thank God for them. We needed their commitment to push back against the Greeks and to reestablish national and religious independence. We needed their loyalty to reassert the centrality of Judaism. Without it, we would have disappeared as have so many people.

But let's understand and acknowledge what really happened. Within a generation, the Maccabees had Hellenized. They adopted Greek names. They attended the gymnasium and theater. Still, we survived as a people. How? We survived, we avoided assimilation, not by isolation but through acculturation. Examining Hasmonean coins stamped with Greek and Hebrew names, Professor Elias Bickerman wrote in his landmark study, *From Ezra to the Maccabees*, "[in these coins] the character and significance of Maccabean Hellenism is plainly revealed. [Whereas] The reform party wished to assimilate the Torah to Hellenism,

the Maccabees wished to incorporate Hellenic culture in the Torah.” With a strong identity as Jews, the Maccabees could incorporate the best of Hellenism without fear of losing their Judaism. Those of us who travelled recently to Spain saw evidence of a similar dynamic. We explored a cultural synthesis created by Jews living in Moslem Spain that produced what today we rightly acknowledge as a Golden Age of Jewry. It happened davka because of the hyphen.

At its best, America is a beautiful patchwork of hyphenated identities- Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, African-Americans- striving to live together. Indeed, America is enriched when Jews live as Jews as only Jews can do.

On this Chanukah, in the face of fear and uncertainty, let’s give a gift to ourselves and to America. Following the footsteps of the Maccabees and as loyal Americans, let us let’s be proud, knowledgeable, committed, observant Jews. Then will our light illumine not only our lives but our land.