

The Holiday When We Became Jewish

By: Naftali Silberberg

What is the significance of the name "Jew"? Where does the word come from and what does it mean?

The word Jew (*Yehudi* in the Hebrew) is a derivative of the name Judah (*Yehudah*), Jacob's fourth son; hence calling someone by this name would seemingly imply that the person is a descendant of that particular tribe. However, as is well known, Jacob had twelve sons, progenitors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, all of whom comprise our great nation. Why, then, is the entire Israelite nation known as "Jews"?

(The conventional answer to this question is that the majority of Jews today are descendant from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin—the two tribes which comprised the "Kingdom of Judea." The other ten tribes, the members of the "Northern Kingdom," were exiled to unknown lands. There must, however, be a deeper reason for the fact that the Chosen Nation has been called by this name for close to 2500 years!)

Perhaps this question can be cleared up by analyzing the very first individual to be dubbed "Jew." The first instance of this word appears in the biblical Book of Esther, which chronicles the story of Purim: "There was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital, whose name was Mordechai the son of Yair... a Benjaminite" (Esther 2:5).

That's right: the first "Jew" was actually from the tribe of Benjamin!

An objective study of the Purim story reveals that the whole frightening episode was plainly avoidable. The entire incident was a result of Mordechai's obstinate adherence to a code of behavior which was clearly outdated and inappropriate for the times. Mordechai was an elderly rabbi who yet recalled days – more than half a century beforehand – when the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem and Torah Law was supreme. His snubbing of Haman might have been condign during that generation. But things had changed dramatically. The people of Israel were in exile. How did Mordechai dare put his entire nation in danger of extinction by slighting the king's favorite minister? Apparently someone neglected to inform this sage that the ability to conform is the key to survival...

Mordechai, however, thought otherwise; and he had a famous precedent supporting his "foolish" actions. Many years earlier, a powerful Egyptian ruler wished to take his ancestor, Benjamin, as a slave. Benjamin's brother Judah wouldn't hear of such a possibility. In what would be his proudest and most defining moment, Judah completely ignored all royal protocol, angrily approached the powerful ruler – who, unbeknownst to him, was actually their brother Joseph – and threateningly demanded Benjamin's release.

Judah is the embodiment of the exiled Israelite who must walk a thin line: While he must live at peace with his neighbors, follow the laws and customs of the land, and "pray for the peace of the regime," he has the courage of his convictions to stand up against all the powers that be in order to defend his ideals. In the words of Rabbi Sholom DovBer of Lubavitch, "Only our bodies were sent into exile; not our souls!"

Mordechai "the Jew" was a proud student of his great-uncle Judah. He knew that Torah law forbids a Jew from bowing to Haman (and the statuette which dangled from a chain around his neck), and for him that was the final word. Indeed,

18 March | 12th Adar II

Tvaz and Zachor

Shabbat Begins: 5:55 pm

Shabbat Ends: 6:59 pm

Judah's and Mordechai's actions were vindicated as events unfolded--no harm came to either of them as a result of their brave conduct.

Leading by example, Mordechai succeeded in implanting this sense of pride in the hearts of the masses. When Haman issued his decree of annihilation, not one Israelite even considered abandoning his religion in order to be spared death. At that moment, we all became "Jews." Accordingly, the Book of Esther is the first place where our nation as a whole is referred to as Jews.

The name stuck. Because the next 2,500 years would repeatedly test our "Jewishness." Under countless regimes – both friendly and, as was usually the case, hostile – we struggled against friends and enemies who wished to impose their will upon us at the expense of our relationship with G-d. Again and again we proved ourselves true to G-d, earning the name Jew through oceans of blood and tears.

The grand story of history concludes in similar fashion as the Purim story: we are here to tell the tale and our enemies aren't... The joy of Purim is greater than any other holiday because it tells the story of the nation who never allowed its soul to be shackled--the story of the Jew.

The content in this page is produced and copyrighted by www.chabad.org

18 March | 12th Adar II

Tvaz and Zachor

Shabbat Begins: 5:55 pm

Shabbat Ends: 6:59 pm