

Rotheiser: What's in a name?

We're called to a name change.

We're all familiar with the incident in the bible where God changes the name of *Abram* to *Abraham*. The change seems so small that often times it isn't even picked up by those reading that text. What's the difference between *Abram* and *Abraham*?

The name *Abram*, meaning "Exalted Father", is the name given the great patriarch to whom God made the promise that one day he would be the father of all the descendants of the nation of Judaism. But later when God promises this same man that he is to be the father as well of all nations everywhere, God changes his name to *Abraham*: "You will no longer be called *Abram*; your name will be *Abraham*, for I have made you a father of many nations." (Genesis 17, 5).

What is implied in this change? The name, *Abraham*, in its very etymology, connotes a stretching to become something larger; he's now to be the father of **all** nations. *Abram*, the father of one nation, now becomes *Abraham* (in Hebrew, *Ab hamon goyim*) the father of all the other nations, the "*goyim*".

That change doesn't just stretch a word; it stretches Abraham, a Jew, and redefines his understanding of himself and his mission. He's no longer to understand himself as the patriarch of just one nation, his own, his ethnic and religious family, but he's to see himself and the faith he is entrusted with as someone and something for all nations. He's no longer to think of himself as the patriarch of one particular tribe, since God is not a tribal God. As well, he's no longer to think of just his own tribe as his family, but to think of all others, irrespective of ethnicity or faith, as also his children.

What does that mean for us? T.S. Eliot might answer that by saying: *Home is where we start from*. Our particular ethnic, religious, cultural, and civic roots are precious and important, but they're not the fully mature tree into which we're meant to grow. Our roots are where we start from.

I grew up a very sheltered child, in a very close family, in a very enclosed rural environment. We were all of one kind, our neighbors, my classmates, everyone I knew, all of us, we shared a common history, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, set of values, and lived in a young country, Canada, that for the most part looked exactly like we did. I value those roots. They're a great gift. Those roots have given me a stability that has freed me up for the rest of my life. But they're only my roots, precious, but merely the place where I start from.

And it's the same for all of us. We take root inside a particular family, an ethnicity, a neighborhood, a country, and a faith, with a particular slant on the world and, with that, some people constitute our tribe and others don't.

But that's where we start from. We grow, change, move, meet new people, and live and work with others who don't share our background, nationality, ethnicity, skin color, religion, or particular slant on life.

And so today we share our countries, cities, neighborhoods, and churches with the "goyim", the people of other tribes, and that makes for the long struggle, hopefully successful, to eventually see that those others who are different from us, share the same God, are also our brothers and sisters, and have lives that are just as real, important, and precious as those of our own biological, national, and religious families. Like Abraham we need a name change so that we don't make idolatry out of our youthful patriotism which has us believe that our own tribe is special and that our own country, skin color, background, and religion give us a unique and privileged claim to God.

Our world is globalizing at a dizzying pace and countries, neighborhoods, and churches are becoming ever-more plural and diverse ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously. Our countries, neighborhoods, workplaces, and churches are literally taking on a different face. The old sheltered communities that gave us our roots are disappearing and for many of us this is scary and the temptation is to retrench, to go hard to the right, to militantly defend the old boundaries, and to claim God and truth more exclusively again for ourselves. That's understandable, but not where we're called to be by what's best inside our humanity and our faith. Like Abraham, we're called to a name change.

We're called to cherish our heritage, country, mother tongue, culture, faith, and church because only by being firmly rooted within primary community are we stable and altruistic enough to offer family to those outside of our own. But home is where we start from. From those wonderful families that give us roots, we're called to stretch our hearts religiously, ethnically, culturally so that everyone eventually is embraced as family. We're called to move from being *Abram* to becoming *Abraham*.