



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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*Changing names, changing fortunes*

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Chukas

## *Changing names, changing fortunes*

So—have you ever wondered where the name “hot dog” comes from? Seriously—whoever thought up such a strange name? And what does a piece of meat have to do with the temperature of a canine?

Well, here are the facts.

The food items we know as hot dogs were invented in Frankfurt, Germany well over 100 years ago, and in the 19th Century, when many Germans immigrated to the United States, they brought this food item with them—which became known as the Frankfurter, after its place of origin, just like the hamburger which originated in Hamburg.

According to one opinion, what happened is that frankfurters were commonly sold on college campuses across the country, and also on the biggest streets and at baseball games, and it was the college students who gave them its name—because they were suspicious of the mysterious source of the meat contained in their frankfurters.

There are several other stories and theories as to how the hot dog got its name. But going with the theory that it was named by American college students, the interesting thing is that these students stumbled across an ancient teaching of the Talmud without realizing it.

How so? Consider this: Where are hot dogs typically eaten? On the street. At train stations. At sports stadiums. At Nathan's Famous on the Coney Island boardwalk—probably the most famous hot dog stand in the world.

In short, in public places.

And the Talmud (Tractate Kiddushin 40b) tells us, "One who eats in the marketplace is compared to a dog." Why? Because a respectable person goes into a restaurant to eat like a gentleman or a lady—eating right on the street is not appropriate behavior. Dogs do that. (Now I'm not saying that when you eat at a sidewalk bistro or in your stadium seat, you're acting like a dog—it's just that there's a certain dignity to eating indoors at a table.)

And so perhaps the title "hot dog" is perhaps the best title for this kind of food.

But name changes are something you'll find quite commonly in Judaism.

The Torah tells us that Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham, history's first Jew, was originally named Avram. And not only that, but his wife was Sarai, not Sarah. And then G-d revealed Himself to him and said, "Your name shall no longer be called Avram; your name shall be Avraham" (Bereishis 17:5). And likewise with his wife, "Sarai your wife shall not be called Sarai, for Sarah is her name" (17:15).

And as Rashi explains, G-d changed Avraham's name because He said to him, "Step out of your astrological fortune in which you saw in the stars that you weren't destined to sire a son—Avram has no son, but Avraham does. And so too, Sarai will not give birth, but Sarah will give birth. I will give you different name, and the stars will change" (Bereishis 15:5).

G-d changed Avraham's name, and thus his fortune too. The celestial decree had been that Avram would not have children—but Avraham was a new man. He wasn't the same person. And so Avraham had children. And the same thing with Sarai, who had no chance of having kids—but Sarah, on the other hand, was a totally different person.

But name changes are something done not just to people but to places, too.

The Zohar (Vayeira 101:1) tells us about the Sage Rav Acha, who once traveled to visit the town of Kfar Tarsha, a Jewish population center in what is today Iraq.

Rav Acha entered a hotel. Meanwhile the entire town was talking about how a VIP had come to town, and that everyone should come and see him.

So they came to Rav Acha and said, "Do you not have mercy on all the lost?" So he asked them, "What are you talking about? I don't know what you want from me!" So they told him that for the past seven days, there was some kind of epidemic in town, and it was getting bigger and bigger with each passing day.

Rav Acha advised them: "Let's go together to the synagogue and beg for mercy from G-d."

On the way to the synagogue, the crowd got more bad news: This one and that one had just died, and this one and that one were on their deathbeds. It was straight out of one of those pandemic virus movies. It was a frightful scene. So Rav Acha said, "Now's not the time to wait—time is of the essence."

So Rav Acha advised that they get the 40 most spiritual people in town and send a group of ten to each of the four corners of the city, and then have them recite the Torah verses about the Temple Incense.

And so the four groups of ten people recited the Parshas HaKetores, the Portion of the Incense, three times at each corner of the city.

Then Rav Acha said that they should send people to each house in which someone was dangerously ill, and recite the Parshas HaKetores there—and add the verses from the Torah portion of Korach describing how the High Priest, Aaron, “stood between the dead and the living” holding an incense pan to stop an epidemic.

And so they did that, and the epidemic stopped.

But what they also did—and this was a critical part of the antidote to the epidemic—was change the city’s name. The city’s name was Kfar Tarsha, which means “hard rock.” The name was meant to symbolize tough laws. And so instead of that, they now called the town Masa Mechasya, which translates to “Place of Pity”—meaning that they introduced some spiritual compassion, and this is what stopped the epidemic.

But what did reciting the Parsha Haketores have to do with it?

In last week’s Torah portion, in the Parshah of Korach, we read about how the Jews complained to Moshe and Aharon, “You killed G-d’s Nation!” and started rallies against them. Then, suddenly, before Moshe could even pray for them, an epidemic started already.

So Moshe told Aharon to run quickly and offer up incense and thus stop the epidemic—and that’s exactly what Aharon did: he came running along with his incense pan and “stood between the dead and the living,” and the epidemic stopped.

That’s how we know that incense stops epidemics.

Today, of course, we don’t offer incense. However, we can recite the Torah verses that describe the offering of incense, and ask G-d to consider it as if we did.

In this week's Torah portion, we find the concept of name-changing too. The Parshah tells us about "the Canaanite, the King of Arad," who came along to fight against the Jewish Nation, even succeeding in taking one prisoner.

Rashi asks, "Who was this Canaanite who came suddenly to the desert to fight against the Jewish Nation? This was Amalek—the same nation that was the first to fight with the Jewish Nation when they had left Egypt. Right after the Splitting of the Red Sea, even before they had gotten to Mt. Sinai, Amalek had already come to make problems. It was the same one—but with a different name. He had changed his name from Amalek to Canaanite.

Why? Rashi says something interesting: "So that the Jewish Nation would pray to G-d to give over the Canaanites into their hands when they were not Canaanites" (Bamidbar 21:1).

In other words, they wanted the Jewish Nation to pray that they be saved from the wrong enemy—to pray to be saved from the Canaanites when their attackers were really Amalekites. But the Jewish Nation was smarter than that. And so Rashi continues: "And when the Jewish Nation came and saw that their clothing and language was Canaanite but they didn't look like Canaanites, they said, 'Let's pray in general,' as the verse states, 'If You will give over this nation into my hand.' "

The Jews smelled that something wasn't right here. These people talk like Canaanites, dress like Canaanites, but don't look like Canaanites. So they prayed that G-d save them from their enemies, but did not specify their enemy's name—save us from "this nation" regardless of what its name is! Just let them leave us alone!

And indeed, the Jewish Nation was victorious in battle.

From the Zohar's story of Rav Acha, we indeed see that changing names helped. Yes, changing names helps, and yes, reciting the Parshas HaKetores helps. But what helps more than anything is who does the helping. In this story's case, it was Rav Acha, one of the great Amoraim and a completely spiritual man who had prayed for them all.

We are now in the immediate vicinity of Gimmel Tammuz, the third day of the Hebrew-calendar month of Tammuz, the yahrzeit of our beloved Rebbe.

A tzadik, a completely righteous man, has the power to pray for us even after his passing and return to Heaven—and especially so on his yahrzeit. So anyone who would like to have a personal written prayer recited or placed at the Rebbe's resting place may feel free to provide it to me, and I'll be more than happy to have it read at the Ohel, as the Rebbe's resting place is called.

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