VAYETSE: Brief history of the word “Jew”

The word “yehudí” is equivalent to the word “Jew.” But in terms of their function, these two terms are sometimes opposite: “Yehudi” is an honorary title, as I will explain towards the end of this article. At the same time, the word “Jew” in various Gentile cultures has a very negative connotation. Let’s start with the latter. For centuries, the Spanish language could not free itself from anti-Semitic prejudices. The colloquial use of the word “Jew” (judío) demonstrates the depth of that destructive feeling. Spanish dictionaries, until 1983, defined «Judío» as «stingy», or «usurer». There is another word, less used in modernity but with more discriminatory weight: “Judiada” (the action of a Jew). The Spanish dictionary definition was “inhuman action.” Incredibly, and despite the intellectual juggling that some linguists do to defend the indefensible (see here), the Spanish Royal Academy of Language (RAE) still preserves this definition, albeit a little more softened. I Copy & Paste: «Judiada» 1.f colloq. Bad deed or action that harms someone ».

JEWS AND TANGO

In my native Buenos Aires, this connotation of the word “Jew” was very transparent. A few decades ago (not sure if this continues today, but I wouldn’t be surprised) many times I received a derogatory shout, usually coming from a truck or motorcycle driver. What were they yelling at me ? “Judioooo!”. Again, they did not have to shout “Jew of this” or “Jew of the other”, in the Spanish vocabulary of the anti-Semite mind; the word “Jew”, without any other adjective carried by itself the connotation of an insult and no additional epithet was needed. The negative history of this word did not begin in Buenos Aires. And not in the 20th century. The early Christians at first referred to the Jews as

Hebrews. But later, the Church borrowed the term Hebrews for the first Christian (as in “Epistle to the Hebrews”) and referred to us as “Jews”. Why? Because of the derogatory association between the patronymic “Jew” (judío) and “Judas”. Judas, according to the New Testament, was the man who betrayed Yeshu. Thus, whenever they referred to a “Jew”, or said the word “Jew,” Spanish speakers immediately associated it with treason and deicide, which naturally inspired contempt and hatred for mus (the clear sound association between the word “judío” and “Judas” is not immediately recognized in the English word “Jew”. The absence of the letter “d”, which appears in “Judea”, for example, might have had a substantial softening impact on the history of antisemitism in English-speaking culture). In some places in Spain—for example, Melilla, my wife’s birthplace—Jews called themselves “Hebrews”. It is possible that they did it to protect themselves or to try to minimize the demonizing connotation that the term “Judío” inspired (inspires?) in the minds of many Spanish speakers who carry fifteen centuries of systematized anti-Semitism in their subconscious minds.

YEHUDI OR ISRAELITE?

Now let’s look at the word Jew in Hebrew. This patronymic means belonging to “Yehuda”, Judea. But it is not the first nor the only word Jewish sources used to define the Jewish people. The oldest Biblical patronymic has been “Israel”, as *bené Israel*, the people who descend from Yaakob (who is also called Israel). Why are we named after Israel/Yaakob? Despite the conflicts between Yosef and his brothers, in the end, all the sons of Jacob ended up united and created a single nation with 12 tribes. Unlike the children of Abraham, for example, or the children of Ytschaq (Yishmael and Esav), who did not form “tribes” but different “nations”.
There is another patronymic that is also mentioned in the Torah: “Hebrew”, which means “he who comes from the other side [of the river]”. The first time it is mentioned in reference

to Abraham, Yosef, and his descendants. The Tora mentions the word “Hebrew” several times when the Egyptians refer to a member of the Children of Israel (Joseph, Moses, the midwives, etc.). It’s also interesting that in the Amarna Letters, the writings of Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (1350-1330 BCE), which is the oldest non-biblical document mentioning the Jews, the Egyptians also refer to the Jews as “Hebrews” (habiru or habriu).

After the death of King Solomon, around 900 BCE, the Kingdom of Israel was divided into two: on one side was the Kingdom of Judah with its capital in Jerusalem, which continued the dynasty of King David, and on the other side was the Kingdom of Israel, also known as the Ten Tribes, with its capital in Samaria. Around 720 BCE, the Assyrian Empire invaded and destroyed Samaria, killing and exiling its citizens as prisoners of war to their kingdom, where Sennacherib forcibly assimilated them (*Sancherib bilbel et haumot*).. What remained of the Israelite people was the Kingdom of Judah, known in Spanish as “Judea.” From that moment on, we acquired the name Yehudim or Jews. One of the most famous examples of the use of this name is in the Book of Esther, where Mordecai and the Jewish people in general are referred to as Yehudi or Yehudim.

YEHUDI = GRATEFUL

The origin of Yehudi can be found in this week’s Parasha, Vayetse. Jacob and Leah already had 3 sons, which was more than she expected to have. When her fourth son was born, Leah overflowed with joy and gratitude and named him Yehuda, saying, “Now [that I have given birth to 4 sons], I will thank God.” Each time Leah mentioned the name of her son, Yehuda, she immediately remembered that she had to thank God. Indeed, the name Yehuda derives from the Hebrew root YDH, which is the root of one of the most well-known words in Hebrew: TODA, which means “thanks”. When I am asked what the word “Jew” represents to me, it is very clear: YEHUDI is a human being who connects with God and remembers God not only when they

need God but, above all, to be grateful to God.