VAYETSE: The First Thanksgiving

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A NAME

The Jewish people were not always called by this name. In the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh, three names appear that define our identity: *Israel*, *Hebrew*, and *Yehudi*, each with its own background.

Israel is the oldest patronymic. We are *Bene Israel*, the descendants of Yaacob, who received the name *Israel* after struggling with and defeating an angel. Why are we called by the name of Yaacob and not, for example, the people of Abraham or of Yitsjaq?
The simplest answer is that several nations came from Abraham, and the same from Yitschaq. But the children of Yaacob, despite having gone through very deep conflicts, ended up united. From them came the twelve tribes and one single people: Bene Israel.

“THE OTHER”

The second name is “Hebrew” (*ivri*), which means “the one who comes from the other side,” probably referring to the other side of the Euphrates, that is, Mesopotamia. This term, which also has a very deep cultural meaning, appears in reference to Abraham, Yosef, Moshe, and other descendants of the Jewish people.
The Egyptians called the Israelites “Hebrews.” Even in the El Amarna letters—Egyptian documents from the fourteenth century B.C.E., the oldest sources outside the Torah that mention our people—they are identified as *habiru* (“Hebrews” in ancient Egyptian).

The third name, the most universal today, is *Yehudi*, and it appears much later. After the death of King Shelomo, the

kingdom of Israel split in two: the kingdom of Yehuda, with its capital in Jerusalem, and the kingdom of Israel, also known as the kingdom of "the ten tribes," with its capital in Samaria or Shomeron. When the Assyrians invaded Samaria in the year 720 B.C.E., the ten tribes were destroyed and exiled. Only the kingdom of Yehuda survived, which in English and Spanish is called Judea. Since then, we became known as *Yehudim*, "Jews."
Thus it appears in Megillat Esther: Mordechai is not called Hebrew nor Israelite, but *Yehudi*. The Greeks and Romans also called us *yehudim*, and the territory of Israel was always known as "Judea".

THE ROOT OF YEHUDI

But there is something more in this name. Beyond its fascinating history, the name *Yehudi* has a very deep spiritual meaning. And it was born in an intimate and special moment described in this week's *parasha*, Vayetse.

Yaacob arrives in Haran and marries Lea. Lea had already had three sons, which was, in a certain way, the expected number. Let us remember that Sara had one child and Rivka had two. For Lea, having three children was the "expected evolution" of the next matriarch. But, to her surprise and joy, Lea gives birth to a fourth son, and her happiness overflowed. At that moment, she expressed her feeling in words of gratitude to God. Lea declared:
"HaPaam ode et HaShem – This time I will thank God,"
and thus the name *Yehuda* emerged, which literally means: "I will thank God."

This is the first recorded instance in the Torah in which someone verbally expresses gratitude to God. That emotion became sealed forever in the name of her fourth son. And every time Lea pronounced the name of her son, she repeated her desire and need to thank God for the great blessing she had received from Him.

What, then, does *Yehudi* mean, beyond historical considerations?

In a world where spirituality tends to "activate" only in moments of crisis or convenience, where we forget daily about the Creator even while enjoying His blessings, our own name *YEHUDI* must remind us that the most genuine connection with God must be a relationship of "thanks," when there are no urgencies or anguish.

JEWISH IDENTITY

In the United States, Thanksgiving occurs once a year. In the Jewish people, gratitude is a daily act. From Lea, who named her son Yehuda in order to thank God, Jewish identity became organically linked to that gesture. The root of *Yehuda* is *yod–dalet–he*, which is also the root of the modern Hebrew word *toda*, "thanks " and of the Hebrew word *mode*, "I thank.. ."

This is why, every morning, when we open our eyes, the first word we pronounce is *mode*, "I thank You [God]":
Mode ani lefanecha melekh chai vekayam – "I thank You, God, for being alive, for the opportunity of this new day that begins."

The identity of a *Yehudi* is defined by this act: starting the day with a word of thanks to God.