VAYETZE: The First Thanksgiving

The Jewish people have not always been known by the same name. In the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, three names appear that define our identity: Israel, Hebrew, and Yehudi, each with its own history.

Israel is our oldest ancestral name. We are Bene Israel, the descendants of Yaakov, who received the name Israel after wrestling with an angel and overcoming him. But why are we named after Yaakov rather than, for example, being called the people of Abraham or Yitzhak?

The simplest answer is that Abraham became the ancestor of several nations, and Yitzhak was the father of both Yaakov and Esav. But Yaakov's children, despite experiencing deep conflicts among themselves, ultimately remained united. From them emerged twelve tribes belonging to one people: Bene Israel.

"THE OTHER"

The second name is Hebrew (Ivri), meaning "one who comes from the other side," probably referring to the other side of the Euphrates River, in Mesopotamia. This term, which also carries a profound cultural meaning, is used in reference to Abraham, Yosef, Moshe, and other ancestors of the Jewish people. The Egyptians, for example, called the Israelites "Hebrews."

The third name, and the one most widely used today, is Yehudi. It appeared much later. After the death of King Shelomo, the kingdom of Israel split into two: the Kingdom of Yehuda, with its capital in Jerusalem, and the northern Kingdom of Israel, also known as the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes, with its capital in Samaria, or Shomeron. When the Assyrians conquered Samaria in 722 BCE, the ten tribes were defeated and exiled. The

Kingdom of Yehuda survived, and its people became known as Yehudim, or Jews.

We find this name in Megillat Esther: Mordechai is not called a Hebrew or an Israelite, but a Yehudi. The Greeks and Romans also referred to our people by names derived from Yehuda, and the land was widely known as Judea.

THE ROOT OF YEHUDI

But there is something more to this name. Beyond its fascinating history, the word Yehudi carries a profound spiritual meaning. And that meaning was born in an intimate and special moment described in this week's Parashah, Vayetze.

Yaakov arrives in Haran and marries Leah. She gives birth to three sons: Reuben, Shimon, and Levi. When Leah becomes pregnant again and gives birth to a fourth son, she experiences a special feeling of gratitude. According to Rashi (Genesis 29:35), Leah knew that Yaakov was destined to have twelve sons through four wives. She therefore expected to have three children, her share of the twelve tribes. But when she gave birth to a fourth son, she realized that God had blessed her with more than she had expected. Overwhelmed with gratitude, Leah declares:

"HaPaam odeh et HaShem" – "This time I will thank God."

And so the name Yehuda is born, a name associated with the words "I will thank God."

The Talmud makes an extraordinary observation about this moment. Our Sages teach in Berakhot 7b:

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"From the day the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, no one had thanked Him until Leah came and thanked Him."

Of course, Abraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov had prayed to God and acknowledged His blessings. But our Sages saw something unprecedented in Leah's expression of gratitude. She gave that feeling a permanent place in the name of her fourth son. Every time Leah called her son Yehuda, she renewed her gratitude to God for the extraordinary blessing she had received.

What, then, does Yehudi mean, beyond its historical origins?

We live in a world where spirituality often comes alive only in moments of crisis or personal need, where we easily forget the Creator in our daily lives, even as we enjoy His blessings. Our very name, YEHUDI, should remind us that our most genuine connection with God is meant to be a relationship of gratitude, even when we have no urgent requests, fears, or troubles.

JEWISH IDENTITY

In the United States, Thanksgiving comes once a year. For the Jewish people, giving thanks is a daily practice. Beginning with Leah, who named her son Yehuda as an expression of gratitude to God, Jewish identity became deeply connected to the act of giving thanks.

The name Yehuda comes from the Hebrew root yod–dalet–he, the same root found in the modern Hebrew word todah, meaning "thank you," and in the Hebrew word modeh, meaning "I give thanks."

That is why, every morning, as soon as we open our eyes, the first word we say is Modeh – "I thank You":

Modeh ani lefanecha, Melech chai vekayam – "I thank You, the living and eternal King, for the gift of life and the opportunity to begin a new day."

We are called Yehudim not only because of where we come from, but also because of what we are meant to become: people who

recognize God’s blessings and never take them for granted. Gratitude is not merely something a Jew practices. It is who we are.