VAYISHLACH: What Is the Meaning of the Name Israel?

In Parashat Vayishlach we read that Ya’akob fought with an angel, and the angel blessed him and changed his name from Ya’akob to Israel. Israel became Ya’akob’s second name, and also the name of the Jewish nation.

But is that fair? Why are we, the Jewish people, named only after Ya’akob? Why aren’t we called the people of Abraham, the founder of the Jewish people? And what about Yitzchak? The middle generation is always the hardest one.

Wait a minute. Jewish status goes through the mother. Whatever the mother is, so is the child. So why aren’t we called the people of Sarah, or Ribka, or Rachel, or Leah?

Why are we called Am Israel, after Ya’akob alone?

Now take a closer look at how the name Israel is spelled in Hebrew: □□□□□. You will find in it all of our three patriarchs and four matriarchs.

Yod for Yitzchak and Ya’akob.

Sin for Sarah.

Resh for Ribka and Rachel.

Alef for Abraham.

Lamed for Leah.

They are all there.

Israel is indeed the perfect name for us.



Rabbi Ya’aqob Berab (1474-1546) and the renewal of Rabbinic ordination

Rabbi Ya'aqob Berab was born in 1474 in Maqueda, a small town near Toledo, Spain. His teacher was Rabbi Isaac Abohab, known as the Gaon of Castile and one of the foremost Talmudic authorities of Spanish Jewry in the generation of the expulsion.

In 1492, when the Jews were expelled from Spain, Ya'aqob Berab was only eighteen years old. He fled to Fes, Morocco, the city where the celebrated Rabbi Isaac Alfasi had taught four centuries earlier. The Jewish community of Fes, which numbered approximately five thousand families, recognized the extraordinary scholarship of this young refugee and appointed him as its rabbi.

The wandering years

Like many of the Spanish exiles, Rabbi Berab spent years moving from one country to another. From Morocco he traveled to Algeria and eventually to Yerushalayim, where he was living before 1522. From there he went to Egypt and later to Damascus. During these years, he also became involved in commerce and achieved considerable financial success. By 1527, he was a wealthy man living in Damascus. In 1533, he became a rabbi in Cairo, and some time later he settled in Tsefat, in the Galilee.

Tsefat was then the largest Jewish community in the Land of Israel. Within a few decades, it would become home to some of the most remarkable figures in Jewish history: Rabbi Yosef Caro, Rabbi Moshe Cordobero, Rabbi Shelomo Alkabets and, later, the Ari. Many of these scholars were Spanish exiles or descendants of Spanish exiles. For several generations, this small town in the mountains of the Galilee became one of the most important centers of Jewish intellectual and spiritual life.

It was there that Rabbi Ya'aqob Berab embarked on one of the most ambitious projects in post-Talmudic Jewish history: *hiddush hasemikha*, the restoration of the original rabbinic ordination, as a first step toward reestablishing the Sanhedrin.

Why restore the Semikha?

The original *semikha* was a form of rabbinic ordination transmitted from teacher to disciple, dating back to the moment when Moshe laid his hands upon Yehoshua'. Only judges who possessed this ordination could serve on the Sanhedrin and exercise certain judicial powers, such as imposing monetary penalties or administering lashes. The chain of ordination was interrupted in the centuries following the Mishna, and for more than a thousand years no rabbi possessed this ancient authority.

Rabbi Berab had several reasons for wanting to restore it.

The first was the need for Halakhic unity. As Rabbi Yosef Caro explained in the introduction to his great Halakhic work, the prolonged exile and the geographical dispersion of the Jewish people had resulted in a proliferation of interpretations, rulings and customs. In the absence of the Sanhedrin, there was no central judicial authority recognized by the entire Jewish people that could establish a universally accepted Halakha.

Now that a substantial community of distinguished Torah scholars had gathered once again in the Land of Israel, the restoration of the semikha seemed possible for the first time in centuries.

There was also a more immediate and deeply personal concern. Many of the Jews who had settled in Tsefat came from Spain and Portugal, where they or their parents had been forced to live as Christians. During those years, they had consumed forbidden foods, desecrated Shabbat and committed other transgressions for which the Torah prescribes *karet*, a severe spiritual punishment. The Mishna teaches that those liable for karet who receive lashes are released from that punishment (Makkot 3:15). However, biblical lashes could only be administered by duly ordained judges. Restoring the semikha would provide these Jews, who had returned to Judaism, with an additional means of atonement and spiritual rehabilitation.

Finally, there was the prospect of redemption. Many Spanish exiles interpreted the tragic expulsion from Spain and the subsequent return of Jews to the Land of Israel as signs that the messianic era might be approaching. Maimonides had anticipated the restoration of the great Jewish court before the coming of the Mashiach, in fulfillment of the words of the prophet Yesha'yahu: "I will restore your judges as at first" (1:26).

The legal key

But how could an ordination that had disappeared more than a thousand years earlier be restored? Who could ordain the first rabbi if there was no ordained rabbi left?

Rabbi Berab found the answer in an extraordinary statement by Maimonides in his commentary on the Mishna (Sanhedrin 1:1):

בזמן שכל חכמי ארץ ישראל .מורין ודנין בכל הדברים שהיו מורין ודנין בהם בזמן שהיה סנהדרין קיים ומוסמכין זה מזה עד משה רבינו שקבל מפי הגבורה ומוסמכין בכל מקום שיהיו מוסמכין בכל מקום שיהיו מוסמכין בכל מקום שיהיו

"If all the sages of the Land of Israel agree to appoint and ordain judges, those judges are duly ordained and are authorized to adjudicate cases involving monetary penalties and to ordain other scholars."

According to Maimonides, the original semikha could be restored through the collective agreement of the Torah scholars of the Land of Israel. Once ordained, these rabbis could transmit their authority to others.

The ancient chain of ordination did not have to be recovered. It could be reestablished.

The historic assembly of 1538

In 1538, twenty-five rabbis assembled in Tsefat and formally ordained Rabbi Ya'aqob Berab. They invested him with the authority to ordain other rabbis, laying the foundations for what they hoped would eventually become a new Sanhedrin.

One of Rabbi Berab's first initiatives was a gesture of reconciliation. He extended the semikha to Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib, known as the Ralbach, the chief rabbi of Yerushalayim. The two scholars had disagreed for years on various Halakhic matters. Nevertheless, Rabbi Berab recognized the importance of Jerusalem's participation in his project and addressed his colleague in cordial terms, hoping to secure his cooperation.

The response was the opposite of what he had anticipated.

The opposition of Jerusalem

Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib not only refused to accept the ordination but challenged the legitimacy of the entire project. His objections were substantial. Maimonides had explicitly required the agreement of *all* the sages of the Land of Israel, yet the rabbis of Yerushalayim had not been consulted. Furthermore, when Maimonides discussed this possibility in his Mishne Torah, he concluded with the words *ve-hadabar tsarikh hekhrea'*, indicating that the matter still required resolution. Rabbi Ibn Habib also raised concerns about the implications that a restored Sanhedrin might have for the fixed Jewish calendar, which had preserved the unity of Jewish religious life since the days of Hillel.

For approximately three months, letters traveled back and forth between Yerushalayim and Tsefat. The correspondence was subsequently published by Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib under the title *Kuntres haSemikha*, included at the end of his responsa, printed in Venice in 1565. This remarkable document remains our principal historical source for the controversy.

Unfortunately, what began as a scholarly disagreement eventually acquired a personal dimension. As a young boy in Portugal, Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib had been forcibly baptized and compelled to live for a year as a Christian under a different name. In one of his letters, Rabbi Berab remarked that he himself had "never changed his name." The painful implication of these words was unmistakable. Meanwhile, in Egypt, another prominent Halakhic authority, Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra, known as the Radbaz, sided with Rabbi Ibn Habib.

The intervention of the Ottoman authorities

The controversy soon extended beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community. Rabbi Berab's opponents denounced him to the Ottoman authorities, presenting the restoration of the Sanhedrin as a first step toward the establishment of an independent Jewish state. From a political perspective, a central Jewish governing body could be perceived as the nucleus of an autonomous national institution. Rabbi Berab's considerable personal wealth made him particularly vulnerable.

With his life in danger, Rabbi Berab was forced to flee to Egypt. Before leaving Tsefat, however, he made sure that the semikha would not disappear with his departure. He ordained four distinguished rabbis, among them Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488–1575), the future author of the Shulhan 'arukh, and Rabbi Moshe Miterani (1500–1580), known as the Mabit.

The survival of the Semikha

Rabbi Berab eventually returned to Tsefat, but by then the opposition had gained considerable strength, and the prospects of restoring the Sanhedrin had virtually disappeared. He died in Tsefat in 1546, at the age of seventy-two, and was buried in the city's ancient Jewish cemetery.

Although the project of restoring the Sanhedrin was effectively abandoned after his death, the chain of ordination that he had initiated continued for several generations.

While some of the details remain historically disputed, it appears that Rabbi Berab also ordained Rabbi Israel Curiel (1501–1573) and Rabbi Abraham Shalom (d. 1557), both of whom served on the Bet Din of Maran Rabbi Yosef Caro in Tsefat, as well as Rabbi Moshe Cordobero (1522–1570) and Rabbi Yosef Sagis (d. 1573).

Rabbi Yosef Caro, in turn, ordained Rabbi Moshe Alshekh (1508–1593), who subsequently ordained Rabbi Hayim Vital (1543–1620). Rabbi Caro also ordained Rabbi Berab's grandson and namesake, Rabbi Ya'aqob Berab II, who became one of the leading Torah scholars of Tsefat. The latter ordained seven rabbis, including Rabbi Moshe Galante, Rabbi Eleazar Azikri, author of *Sefer Haredim*, and his own brother, Rabbi Moshe Berab.

We know of other rabbis who received this special ordination in subsequent generations. Among them were another grandson of Rabbi Ya'aqob Berab, Rabbi Ya'aqob Abulafia of Damascus; his student Rabbi Yoshiahu Pinto (1565–1648), also of Damascus; and his grandson, Rabbi Hayim Abulafia (1660–1744).

Nevertheless, although these distinguished scholars were considered *musmakhim*, they neither exercised nor claimed judicial authority superior to that of other rabbis. Eventually, the chain of ordination faded into history.

An unexpected legacy

Rabbi Ya'aqob Berab left behind a collection of Halakhic responsa, published in Venice in 1663, and a commentary on portions of Maimonides' Mishne Torah. His greatest legacy, however, may lie elsewhere.

One of Rabbi Berab's central aspirations was to overcome the Halakhic fragmentation produced by centuries of exile. He dreamed of restoring a central judicial authority that would unite the Jewish people under a common body of Jewish law. He did not live to see that dream fulfilled.

Yet history took an unexpected turn. One of the four rabbis whom he had hurriedly ordained before fleeing Tsefat, Rabbi Yosef Caro, went on to compose the Shulhan 'arukh. Within a few generations, Jewish communities from Morocco to Poland had embraced this monumental work, together with its commentaries and glosses, as their common framework of Halakhic authority.

In a remarkable twist of Jewish history, Rabbi Berab's disciple achieved through scholarship much of what his teacher had hoped to accomplish through the restoration of the Sanhedrin.

What could not be accomplished through the establishment of a court was ultimately achieved through the publication of a book.

SUMMARY OF PARASHAT VAYISHLACH

Jacob returns to the land of Israel after spending 20 years in the house of his uncle Laban, in the city of Haran (in southern Turkey). When he arrives, he sends messengers to his brother Esav to let him know he is back. The messengers report that Esav, who had sworn to kill Jacob for taking his birthright, is coming with 400 (armed?) men. Jacob fears the worst and prepares carefully. He divides his family in case Esav attacks, prays to God for protection, and sends Esav a generous gift of hundreds of animals to try to appease him.

Jacob spends the night crossing the river, moving his family and possessions from one side to the other. Before crossing for the last time, he is confronted by an angel (or a man sent by God). They wrestle, and Jacob prevails. Jacob receives a new name, “Israel,” meaning “the one who fights someone stronger than himself and prevails.”

Jacob and Esav finally meet. Jacob bows down seven times before Esav, in submission and as if asking forgiveness, and treats him with the greatest honor and deference. The brothers reconcile and greet each other warmly. Esav invites Jacob to live with him, but Jacob very diplomatically declines.

Jacob travels to Sukkot, reaches Shechem, and buys land near the city. His daughter Dina is kidnapped and raped by the crown prince of Shechem. Two of Jacob’s sons, Shimon and Levi, convince the men of Shechem to be circumcised. Then, while the men are still recovering, they destroy the city and kill all its men.

Jacob leaves Shechem and goes to Bet-El. God appears to Jacob

and promises that he will inherit the land of his fathers. Jacob builds an altar. Rachel, his beloved wife, dies giving birth to her second son, Binyamin, and is buried near Bet Lechem. Jacob finally reaches Hebron and is reunited with his father Isaac (his mother had already passed away), who dies at 180. The Parasha ends by listing the wives, children and descendants of Esav, who founded the nation of Edom.

VAYISHLACH: The “NOs” That Define Our Lives

□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□

(Bereshit 32:12)

THE SWORD OF ESAV

Ya’aqob Abinu returns to the land of Israel. He has many doubts. One of them is whether his brother Esav still holds a grudge against him. Twenty years earlier, Esav had decided to kill Ya’aqob. Now Ya’aqob wonders: does Esav still hate me, twenty years later? Maybe his resentment has faded and he has forgotten what happened so long ago. Ya’aqob cannot be sure. And there is one more complication: he hears that Esav is coming at the head of 400 men. Too many people for a welcoming committee.

Ya’aqob fears the worst and senses the danger to himself and his family. He prays for Divine help with the famous words: “[HaShem], save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav.”

When the brothers finally meet, Esav does not attack. Some

biblical commentators explain that Esav came intending to destroy his brother and take his family and possessions, but at the last minute his heart changed. Why? The night before, Ya'aqob had fought with an envoy of HaShem (an "angel," although the Torah calls him a "man"). This figure struck Ya'aqob on the thigh and left him wounded. When Esav saw Ya'aqob limping, he was moved (or decided that Ya'aqob was no longer a worthy opponent). According to this reading, what twenty years could not do, pity did in a matter of minutes. Directly or indirectly, HaShem saved Ya'aqob from Esav by making him fight that angel.

ESAV'S INVITATION

Now the mood turns into a family reunion. Esav thanks Ya'aqob for his generous gifts and tells him: "I have plenty, my brother." Esav is a successful man, the patriarch, founder and leader of the people of Edom. But, as his mother had foreseen, he did not follow the path of his grandfather and his father. The Edomites, led by Esav, had abandoned the beliefs of Abraham Abinu and worshipped idols, like the rest of the world.

At this point Esav no longer sees Ya'aqob as his enemy, but as his brother and friend. And here, ironically, a huge problem begins for Ya'aqob. Something more delicate and subtle than Esav's sword, but just as deadly.

Now that they have made peace, Esav does what any brother would do when his sibling comes back from far away. He invites Ya'aqob to join his family (Bereshit 33:12). "Nis'a venelekha." *Come, let's go together to my land, Se'ir, and live there as one family. Your little children will play with my children, their cousins. And I already have some daughters and granddaughters in mind who would be very good matches for your sons.*

Ya'aqob knows that if he accepts, his children will assimilate

into Esav's family. That would be the end of Abraham Abinu's legacy, the "Judaism" of that time, not by Esav's sword but by the quiet dissolution of the faith that Ya'aqob's family practiced.

THE "NO" THAT CHANGED HISTORY

At that crucial moment, Ya'aqob heroically said "NO" to Esav. He said it very diplomatically: *Esav, you go ahead, and I will follow at the pace of my little children.* Esav, who perhaps did not catch the hint, insisted: *If you like, I'll leave some of my men with you to protect you on the way, until you reach my house.* Ya'aqob endured the tremendous pressure of that moment and, uncomfortable but firm, turned Esav down a second time: *Why should I find so much favor in your eyes?* Esav finally got the message and left.

If I had to describe in my own words what Ya'aqob experienced in this encounter, I would say that in one and the same event he faced both antisemitism and assimilation. Against Esav "the enemy," God intervened directly (following the opinion mentioned above) by sending the fighting angel. But against Esav "the friend," there was no Divine intervention. There was a human decision. Ya'aqob had to act on his own and accept the consequences of his choice. In this second case God does not step in. He expects Ya'aqob to make the right decision himself.

IF YA'AQOB HAD NOT SAID "NO"…

We, the descendants of Ya'aqob Abinu, still face very similar challenges. Today's society is open to cultural and social integration without barriers or discrimination. Assimilation has already claimed millions of Jewish souls: children, parents and whole families who did not have the strength or the conviction to say "NO" to Esav the friend. The results have been catastrophic.

Two numbers say it all: 1927 and 4,200,000. In 1927, the

Jewish population of the United States was 4.2 million. How many Jews should there be in the United States today, almost 100 years later? There was no Shoah in America, no concentration camps, no antisemitic massacres. And Jewish immigration to this country continued. I am not a math genius, but my intuition tells me there should be no fewer than 15 or 20 million Jews in the United States today. There are fewer than 6 million. What happened to the millions of Jews who are no longer counted as such?

To resist assimilation, we have to keep growing in our observance and in our knowledge of Jewish values. Educate our children in Jewish schools, and teach by example. And have the courage and conviction to say "NO" whenever a relationship with Esav threatens to move from cordiality and respect to a social level where we risk losing our identity and our Jewish future.

MAOZ TZUR YESHUATI

VAYETZE: Rachel's Segula for Having Children

Rachel was Yaakov's beloved wife, and she had no children. Her sister Leah already had four: Reuven, Shimon, Levi and Yehuda. Rachel said to Yaakov: "Give me children, or else I will die" (Bereshit 30:1).

One day, during the wheat harvest, Reuven came back from the field with some plants called dudaim and brought them to his mother. According to Radak, Reuven was about seven years old. A little boy bringing flowers to his mom.

Rachel saw them and asked Leah for them. The sisters made a deal: Rachel would keep the dudaim, and in exchange Leah would spend that night with Yaakov.

What were the dudaim?

The *dudaim* are mandrakes. The root of this plant looks like a small human body (like a fetus). That is why, since ancient times, people believed it helped women get pregnant. This is the plant Reuven brought home from the field. And this was its reputation.

It is the first "segula" in the Torah. Radak explains why Rachel wanted the dudaim: □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□, "she thought that what people said was true."

And he explains that it was not. He points out the irony: Rachel kept the dudaim and did not get pregnant. Leah gave them away and got pregnant. The Torah tells us why:

□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□

"And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Yaakov a fifth son" (30:17).

"Listened" means that Leah had prayed. According to Radak, the Torah counts Leah's sons, the fifth and the sixth, to show that through her Tefila she merited being the mother of half the tribes of Israel.

Rachel’s son

Years went by. Leah had Yissachar, Zevulun and Dina. Rachel still had no children. When she finally conceived, the Torah says nothing about plants:

□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□

“And God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her, and He opened her womb” (30:22).

Radak explains that HaShem heard all the Tefilot Rachel had prayed during those years. There was no shortcut. Yosef was born through Tefila.

The red string

Today, thousands of years later, many people are still looking for something like the dudaim. One of the best-known examples is the red string. It is wound seven times around Rachel’s Tomb in Bet Lechem, cut into pieces and worn on the wrist. Some wear it against the *ayin hara*, others as a *segula* to have children.

One of the oldest sources that mentions tying a red string is the Tosefta (Shabbat 7:1). So the red string does have a precedent in Talmudic literature! But guess what? It appears in a list of superstitious practices of the pagan nations (*Darkhe HaEmori*).

□□□□□□ □□□□□ □□ □□□ … □□□□□ □□ □□□□ □□□ □□□□□□

“One who ties a red string on his finger… this is one of the ways of the Amorites.”

The irony is hard to miss. People look for a segula to have children at the tomb of Rachel, the very woman whose story teaches that the segula did not work.

Tefila

People who look for “segulot” are not fools. They are desperate. They are suffering, just as Rachel was suffering, which is why she asked her sister for the dudaim. When you want something desperately, you look for something concrete to hold on to: a plant, a string, a list of names.

A “segula” promises results without having to stand before HaShem. Tefila demands more. You have to speak, ask, ask again, and accept that the answer may take years.

The *dudaim* withered in Rachel’s tent. The children came through Tefila.

THE AMIDA: First Berakha, ABOT. Acknowledging the God of Our Ancestors

The Amida begins: “Blessed are You, HaShem, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Yitzchak and God of Ya’akob.”

Before we ask for anything, we make clear who we’re talking to.

OUR GOD AND GOD OF OUR FATHERS

There are two ways to know God.

The first is through our parents. They told us about His miracles, His protection, His love for the people of Israel. We didn’t have to start from zero, the way Abraham did. Even

if our parents weren't especially religious, if they handed us our Jewish identity, we owe them our first idea of the God of Israel. So we say "God of our fathers."

But that only gets us so far. Each of us has to find our own way to God. That's why "our God" comes first.

A century and a half ago, before Pasteur, plenty of people still thought life could simply arise from matter. Darwin himself pictured the first life forming on its own in a "warm little pond." Today we know that even the simplest cell is staggeringly complex. In that sense, we know more about the Creator than our parents did.

The faith we inherit is a starting point, not a finish line.

GOD OF ABRAHAM

Naming the patriarchs tells us something important. We are not praying to a god of our own making. We are praying to the God they prayed to. And each of them taught us something different about Him.

Abraham discovered three things.

1. God has no body. Maimonides explains that early humanity understood the sun and stars as God's servants. Over time, people started worshipping them instead, and God was forgotten. Abraham brought the invisible God back.

2. God is One. This isn't just arithmetic. Abraham lived under Nimrod, a tyrant who did as he pleased and always had a god to blame it on. One God means one standard of right and wrong, binding on everyone, Nimrod included. That's what made Abraham dangerous. The idea of one God changed ethics more than it changed theology.

3. God cares. The ancient gods fought each other and did favors only for a price. Abraham taught that God watches over us the way a father watches over his child, asking nothing in

return. It may have been his most revolutionary idea. And it's why the rest of this berakha isn't about God's unity. It's about how He protects us.

GOD OF YITZCHAK

Yitzchak added something more: God, like a father, also has authority. At the Akeda, Yitzchak was no child. He was a grown man who understood exactly what was happening, and he didn't resist. Abraham discovered God's love. Yitzchak discovered that God is also in charge. That's why we call Him "Abinu Malkenu," our Father, our King. We love a father. We obey a king.

GOD OF YA'AKOB

Deception shadowed Ya'akob's life. Esav deceived him. His mother had him deceive his own father. And Laban deceived him over and over, as we read this week. Yet Ya'akob became the man of truth.

The prophet remembers him that way:

□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□
□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□

"You will give truth to Ya'akob and kindness to Abraham, as You promised our fathers long ago" (Micah 7:20).

So when we say "God of Abraham, God of Yitzchak and God of Ya'akob," we're not reciting a list of names. We're remembering what each one taught us: God loves us, we owe Him our obedience, and He wants us to pursue justice and truth.

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:

□□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□ □□□□□ □□ □□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□
□□□□□□ □□□ □□□□□ □□ □□□ □□□□ □□□□□□

"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.

SUMMARY OF PARASHAT VAYETZE

Jacob leaves Beersheba and sets out for Haran, in Syria. He is fleeing from his brother Esav, who has threatened to kill him, and he also hopes to find a wife in his mother’s hometown. Shortly after beginning his long journey, when he reaches Bet El, Jacob has a beautiful dream: angels ascending and descending a ladder. God promises Jacob His blessing and protection and assures him that he and his descendants will inherit the Land of Israel.

After several days, Jacob arrives in Haran and makes his way to the local well. There he meets a young woman who turns out to be his first cousin, Rachel, and he falls in love with her. Rachel takes him home, where he is welcomed by his uncle Laban. They soon reach an agreement: Jacob will work for Laban for seven years, and in return, Laban will allow him to marry his daughter Rachel. But when the wedding day arrives, Laban gives him his daughter Leah instead of Rachel, and Jacob only discovers the deception the following morning.

How could Jacob have failed to recognize Leah? There are several explanations. The simplest are:

1. Rachel and Leah were sisters and may have looked and sounded very much alike.

2. In ancient times, women wore thick veils, similar to the burkas worn by women in Afghanistan.

3. Everything took place in the darkness of the night.

4. Jacob had absolutely no reason to suspect a deception.

Many commentators explain that Jacob now becomes the victim of an “identity theft” similar to the one he himself had carried out when he disguised himself as his brother Esav to receive the blessing of his blind father, Isaac. The similarities between these two episodes can hardly be a coincidence.

Jacob must work another seven years to marry Rachel as well.

Before the giving of the Torah, there was no prohibition against marrying two sisters. Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah bear Jacob several children. Rachel is unable to conceive for many years, but eventually gives birth to a son, Yosef. Jacob now has eleven sons: Reuben, Shimon, Levi, Yehuda, Yissachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naftali, Gad, Asher, and Yosef, as well as a daughter, Dinah. The birth of his twelfth son, Benjamin, is not mentioned until next week’s Parashah. Each of his sons will become the founder of one of the tribes of Israel.

There is a very important difference between the sons of Yishmael and the sons of Jacob. We read recently that Yishmael also had twelve sons, but each of them established a separate nation (shneim asar nesi’im le’umotam). Jacob, by contrast, succeeded in bringing his twelve sons together as twelve tribes belonging to one people.

After many years of working for Laban, Jacob expresses his desire to return to the land of his ancestors, Eretz Israel. Laban persuades him to stay longer and offers to pay him with a portion of the flock so that Jacob can begin building wealth of his own. Over the following years, Jacob’s flock grows miraculously, and our patriarch decides to return to his homeland without asking Laban’s permission. He gathers his family and tells them that God appeared to him in a dream and announced that it was time to leave.

Jacob and his family practically flee without Laban's knowledge. When Laban finds out, he sets off in pursuit of them with hostile intentions. God appears to Laban and warns him not to harm Jacob. Laban confronts Jacob, accusing him of taking away his daughters and grandchildren. Eventually, they reconcile and make a peace agreement at Gal'ed. Jacob continues his journey toward the land of Canaan and arrives at Machanayim. His next challenge will be to face his brother Esav, who twenty years earlier had resolved to kill him.

VAYETZE: Tell Me What You Dream Of, and I'll Tell You Who You Are

Our Parashah spans twenty years in the life of Yaakov Avinu. Twenty years between two very different dreams that tell the story of a profound transformation.

The first dream is the more familiar one. Yaakov leaves the Land of Israel and dreams of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending upon it.

It is a deeply spiritual dream. The angels represent those who carry out a Divine mission, and Yaakov himself is potentially one of them! His mission, as a descendant of Abraham, is to become a "human angel." The angels ascend and then descend: they rise toward God, listen to His word, and learn His Torah, but they do not remain in heaven. They return to earth to share His teachings so that everyone can understand them and live by them. This is also the Divine mission of Abraham and his descendants: to connect heaven and earth.

Our dreams often reflect what occupies our minds during the day: our passions, our desires, and the realities of our daily lives.

Yaakov's dream did not come out of nowhere. We are what we dream, and we dream what we are. Yaakov had grown up surrounded by "human angels": his father, his mother, his grandfather Abraham, and his teachers, Shem and Eber. These were people who had dedicated their lives to fulfilling God's will. Growing up in such an environment, it was only natural for Yaakov to dream of angels.

TWENTY YEARS A SLAVE

But Yaakov's life changes dramatically.

He is forced to flee his home and seek refuge with his uncle Laban. There, he spends his days working tirelessly, enduring Laban's deception and mistreatment. At the end of those years, when he finally decides to leave, Yaakov confronts Laban:

"For twenty years I was with you. Your sheep and goats did not miscarry, and I never ate the rams of your flock. I never brought you an animal torn apart by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself, and you demanded payment from me. You held me responsible for anything stolen, whether by day or by night. By day I was consumed by the heat, and by night by the frost. And sleep fled from my eyes" (Genesis 31:38–40).

Those were twenty difficult years during which Yaakov devoted his energy to caring for Laban's livestock. From morning until night, his life revolved around sheep: feeding them, protecting them, caring for their young, and increasing the size of the flocks. Yaakov was immersed in a world dominated by material concerns, where sheep had come to occupy nearly every corner of his inner life.

THE SECOND DREAM

At the end of those twenty years, Yaakov dreams again. This time, he sees animals: sheep and goats mating, males and females, and offspring born with stripes, spots, and patches (Genesis 31:10).

What a contrast! In his first dream, Yaakov envisioned his mission of connecting with heaven. In his second, he sees animals reproducing to increase his wealth.

In those days, livestock also served as a form of payment, much like money. A debt could be paid with sheep, and a person's wealth was measured by the size of his flocks. Yaakov's new dream belongs entirely to this consuming world of financial prosperity. It is an utterly earthly dream. Material. Practical. A dream that reflects Laban's mission, a man whose life was driven by ambition, more than Yaakov's own mission as someone called to become a human angel.

In this second dream, an angel appears and speaks to Yaakov in God's name, saying something extraordinary:

"Ra'iti et kol asher Laban oseh lakh" – "For I have seen everything that Laban is doing to you" (Genesis 31:12).

On the most immediate level, these words refer to the injustices and deceptions Yaakov suffered at Laban's hands. But perhaps they also carry a deeper message. As if the angel, speaking in God's name, were saying:

Yaakov, I see what these twenty years with Laban have done to you. You have changed. And that change is reflected in your dreams. You no longer see a ladder with angels; now you see a watering well, with sheep mating and multiplying. Your dreams are now filled with material ambitions. You have traded Abraham's dreams for Laban's dreams.

After working for Laban for so long, Yaakov had unknowingly begun to dream Laban's dreams.

WHAT DR. FREUD DID NOT TEACH YOU

Then comes a direct and unmistakable command: “Now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth” (Genesis 31:13).

This is not merely a geographical return. It is also a spiritual homecoming. Yaakov must return home to recover the dreams of the young man who left twenty years earlier. He must remember that sheep are a means, not an ultimate goal. That work and financial success should serve a higher purpose.

And his return brings about an extraordinary change. At the end of the Parashah, as Yaakov leaves Laban’s house behind, angels once again come out to meet him, at Machanayim (Genesis 32:2–3). At the beginning of the Parashah, the angels appeared in his dream; now they come to welcome him. As though they had been waiting for him for twenty years.

Yaakov’s lesson is also a lesson for us, his descendants. On the one hand, we inevitably have to take care of our sheep. We need to work, earn money, support our families, and provide for our needs. The Torah never asks us to abandon our sheep.

But on the other hand, we cannot allow our sheep to take over our lives and eventually invade our dreams.

Our mission is not to escape the material world, but to become those human angels who bring the teachings of heaven down to earth. The sheep help us make a living. But the ladder reminds us what we are living for: to connect heaven and earth.

And if one day we discover that our dreams have become filled with nothing but business, profits, and material concerns, it will be time to wake up, remember who we are, find our way back, and dream of angels once again.