

Parashat Vayishlach 5776, 2015

Jacob or Israel?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And he [an angel of G-d] said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have commanding power with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 32:29)

G-d said to him, “Your name is Jacob. Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” And He named him Israel. (*Sefer Bereishit* 35:10, these and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

On a certain level, our two *pasukim* (verses) contradict one another. The first verse plainly states that Jacob was no longer to be called “Jacob,” instead he was henceforth to be called “Israel.” Yet, three chapters later, the Holy One blessed be He declared “Your name is Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” (35:10) Moreover, Hashem repeats this process once again, when the Torah states: “And G-d said to Israel in visions of the night, and He said, ‘Jacob, Jacob!’...” (*Sefer Bereishit* 46:2) In fact, with the notable exception of *Sefer Vayikra*, where the name “Jacob” is nowhere to be found, Israel is called “Jacob” no less than 95 times throughout *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (the Five Books of the Torah). Our question, therefore, is eminently clear, “How can we explain the continued use of the name ‘Jacob’ when his name was changed to ‘Israel?’” This is particularly important when we reflect upon Abraham’s name change from “Abram.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 17:5) As *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) stated:

Bar Kappara taught a *baraita*, whoever calls Abraham by the name Abram transgresses a positive commandment. For it is stated: “And your name shall be Abraham.” [*Sefer Bereishit* 17:5] Rabbi Eliezer says: He transgresses a negative commandment. For it is stated: “Your name shall no longer be called Abram.” (*Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 13a, translation, *The Artscroll Gemara* with my emendations)

Given our Talmudic passage, why is the Jacob – Israel name change treated so very differently than the Abram – Abraham name change? A beginning of an answer is found in the Gemara’s subsequent words:

If so [i.e. the discussion regarding Abraham], one who calls Jacob “Jacob” should also [be considered as having transgressed a prohibition, for the Torah states: “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 35:10)] There [in Jacob’s case] it is different, because Scripture itself returned [the original name] to usage, as it is written: “G-d spoke to Israel in night visions and He said: ‘Jacob, Jacob’ ...” (*Sefer Bereishit* 46:2)

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, analyzed our problem basing himself upon the Rambam (Nachmanides, 1194-1270). As we have seen, Abraham’s original name was completely eclipsed, whereas Jacob is often called Jacob, and on occasion, Israel. The Ramban maintained that Jacob was known by his birth name whenever he was in a dependent and subordinate position. In stark contrast, however, he was called “Israel” when he was independent and in control of his future. The Rav formulated these ideas in the following fashion:

Abram’s name change to Abraham was irreversible, and if one calls Abraham by his former name, he has violated a commandment. Jacob’s name was not replaced; he would henceforth be referred to as both Jacob and Israel. Israel did not replace Jacob: Israel was only added to Jacob.

Nachmanides explains that the two names reflect two destinies, two roles played by the covenantal community. On one hand, our patriarch Jacob was often dependent on others. He spent twenty years working for Laban. Jacob also desperately tried to assuage Esau. Finally, he was ultimately forced against his will to come to Egypt.

The name Jacob signifies dependence, being pulled along... Israel, on the other hand represents the patriarch who was no longer subservient, who defeated a mysterious enemy during a long, lonely night. This enemy himself described Jacob as one who has

commanding power with [an angel of] G-d and with men, and you have prevailed. (Sefer Bereishit 32:29) Israel is the free, powerful Jew; Jacob is the Jew dependent on others. (Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Bereishit, commentary on 38:10, pages 261-262, based upon a public lecture delivered in Boston in 1975, underlining my own)

In the final book of the *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) echoed Shmuel's words in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 98b when he declared:

Do not presume that in the Messianic age any facet of the world's nature will change or there will be innovations in the work of creation. Rather, the world will continue according to its pattern... Our Sages taught: "There will be no difference between the current age and the Messianic era except the emancipation from our subjugation to the gentile kingdoms." (*Sefer Shoftim* 12:1-2, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

If we view the Rambam's words within the context of our discussion, we can readily see that the Messianic era will be the time of the ascension of "Israel" over "Jacob," amidst "the emancipation from our subjugation to the gentile kingdoms." As such, it will at long last be the time of complete independence, freedom and peace for the Jewish people. With G-d's help and blessing, may this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:
<http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.