

# Parashat VaYishlah 2021 (Temple Beth David)

## Friday Evening

Wow, this Parasha is really loaded with so much stuff! Here is an Executive Summary of the subjects that are discussed in VaYishlah - which means "he sent".

A short prolog – I will try to use the Hebrew pronunciation of the names in Tanakh and other Jewish literature that originates in Hebrew. There are two reasons for it: the first and more important one is that Hebrew names have (almost always) meanings. Tomorrow we will talk just about that. The second reason is that it is easier for me, growing up with the Hebrew names of all these characters and then some.

The first story is about the preparations for the upcoming meeting with Yaakov's brother, Esav. Yaakov is fearful and strategizes how he should face his brother, and decides to split his camp into two, so at least part of his family and possessions would be saved. Then he converts this strategy into a tactical plan and briefs his men what they need to do and say when they encounter Esav.

The second story is about the struggle Yaakov has with a "Man" and being renamed Yisrael.

The following morning is the actual reunion with Esav, at the end of which they depart, each goes on his own way.

The next story is the chronicles of Dina, Yaakov's and Lea's daughter that ends with the brutal revenge Shim'on and Levi took on the men of Sh'chem.

We now witness HaShem's blessings to Yaakov and the ratification of the Exclusive Covenant that HaShem cut with Yaakov's ancestors, Avraham and Yitzhak.

Follows is a recap of Yaakov's decedents, that include also the newborn youngest BinYamin and the passing away of Yaakov's beloved Raḥel during giving birth to BinYamin.

The Parasha also lists the chronicles of Esav and his lineage. Esav is moving from K'na'an and settles in Edom – probably a deserted place that he is the first to inhabit. That links Esav to be identified as The Father (founder) of Edom.

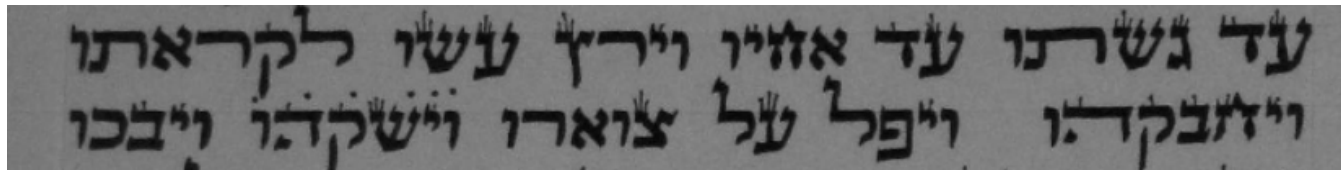
In our literature there are many references and insinuations that the decedents of Esav – Edom are the Romans. Many of them are legends and parables; yet, the notion is definitely there. One example is a saying in Talmud (Megillah 6a-b): "**Jacob said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, grant not to the wicked Esau the desires of his heart, as he wishes to destroy us. Further not his evil device [zemamo]; do not remove the muzzle [zamam] that constrains him and prevents him from breaking out and gathering further strength. This is a reference to Germamya of Edom, i.e., Germany, which is near the land of Edom, i.e., Rome. As, if the Germans would go forth, they would destroy the entire world.**" Rashi comments on this that Germamya is a name of a kingdom from/close to Edom. Rabbi Steinsaltz, relying on sages and commentators such as Rashi and Tosafot, adds to the original Talmudic text – most likely also because of being influenced by 20<sup>th</sup> century history – the "fill in the blanks" that provides sense to the sentence.

Focusing back on one specific story in our Parasha, we know that the meeting between Yaakov and Esav was fearful to Yaakov and eventually ended up peacefully. Genesis 34:4 is the climax of the reunion:

וַיִּרְץ עֵשָׂו לִקְרַאתוֹ וַיִּחַבְקֵהוּ, וַיִּפֹּל עַל צוּאָרוֹ, וַיִּשְׁקֵהוּ; וַיִּבְכוּ.

Esav ran towards Ya-akov, embraced him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him; they wept.

It is very odd to see this verse in the Torah scroll; there are 6 dots – one above each letter of the word “kissed him”. These dots are not accidental drops of ink of a careless scribe. In and by itself, these dots raise curiosity.



A common explanation is that the transcript writers were not sure if the letter or word indeed was there in the original text. Let's try that: what if we take the word Kissed Him out of the sentence? It certainly looks OK! As if this is redundant.

What if the letter Kof (ק) was kaf (כ)? The word וישכהו (VaYishahu) means “he bit him” ...

Take away the shin (ש)? The word now is ויקהו – VaYak'hu – which means “they became dull, not sharp, blunted” with reference to either teeth, or any other sharp object, such as a knife.

Don't think that I am that smart... I just quote sages: Rabbi Shim-on Ben Eli-Ezer says that Esav kissed Ya-akov sincerely with all his heart. To this Rabbi Yannai objects and claims that originally Esav intended to bite Yaakov's neck feigning an embrace. HaShem made his teeth as soft as wax and Yaakov's neck as hard as ivory. They cried, one on account of his neck, the other on account of his teeth.

And of course, the above is only the tip of the iceberg, and there are many more that chime in on this particular word and verse.

We also learn about the passing away of Yitzhak at the age of 180 years. Genesis 35:29:

וַיָּגֹעַ וַיִּצְחַק וַיָּמָת וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל־עַמּוּיֹו זָקֵן וּשְׁבַע יָמִים וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ עֵשָׂו וַיַּעֲקֹב בְּנָיו:

Yitzhak breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age; and he was buried by his sons Esav and Ya-akov.

Interesting to compare this verse in our Parasha to a similar one, Genesis 25:8-9:

וַיָּגֹעַ וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשִׁיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וּשְׁבַע וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל־עַמּוּיֹו: וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וַיִּשְׁמַעֵאל בְּנָיו

Avraham breathes his last and died at a content, ripe old age. He was gathered to his kin. And he was buried by his sons Yitzhak and Yishma-el.

What do you think about this? What is your take?

For me it is the question/direction: despite differences, why can't we do whatever is possible to live in peace and join our kin – Christians and Muslims alike – in actions of true, pure, Hessed, lovingkindness, just as our ancestors joined the ancestors of the Muslims and Christians to do the ultimate act of lovingkindness – burying the dead?

## Shabbat Morning

Let us talk about names. And the meaning of Hebrew names. The Parasha today provides us a great opportunity to do so. We read in the Parasha, in Genesis 32:29:

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יִעֲקֹב יִאמְרָ עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי שָׂרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹהִים וְעַם אַנְשִׁים וַתִּכָּלֵּ:

He said: “Your name shall no longer be said ‘Jacob’, but Israel; for you have striven with Beings Devine and with human beings and you have prevailed.”

And then, again in verse 35:10

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֱלֹהִים שְׁמֶךָ יִעֲקֹב לֹא יִקְרָא שְׁמֶךָ עוֹד יִעֲקֹב כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיֶה שְׁמֶךָ וַיִּקְרָא  
אֶת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל

God said to him, “Your name is Ya-akov; You shall be called Ya-akov no more, But Israel shall be your name.” Thus, He called his name Israel.

Thoughts? Feelings? Questions?

What are the subtle differences between the two?

We know of two more names that were changed by HaShem: Avram – became Avraham, with the addition of the syllable Ha. And Saraie that became Sarah – the Yod was replaced by He. These two changes are really subtle, while the current one is a completely different name.

Radak suggests that it is an additional name – and indeed the two names are used almost interchangeably.

Israel has yet another name: Yeshurun that appears in Deuteronomy three times and once in Isiah.

Now, we’ll try to understand the various meanings of the Name of our People, looking at commentaries, other biblical references and derive conclusions that explain how we behave, and how we should behave to justify our Name.

Y’shurun is the relatively easiest to explain:

### Yeshurun

Two meanings could emerge from this name: Yashar – יָשָׁר – straight, upright, righteous, innocent and Yishar – יִישָׁר – will look forward straight. In fact, Ibn Ezra refers to these meanings. Here are a few additional interpretations and reasonings:

Ramban: the reason to calling Yaakov Yeshurun – because the twisted and the curved becomes straight [quoting Isiah 40].

Rabenu Beḥayey: Yeshurun – because they saw the Sheḥina – Feminine Divine Providence – eye to eye when Torah was given to them.

Sforno: to teach you that they are readers and scholars (coming from observing, looking intensely into things).

Malbim: here are three names, Yaakov, Yisrael and Yeshurun. Yaakov represents the body; Israel represents the soul and the roots that are in heaven [with God]; and Yeshurun is the connection of both the soul and the body.

## Ya-akov

The root of this word is א.ק.ב. – Ayin, Kof, Vet.

The verb form means to follow someone else. Could be following a leader, or one that knows the road, or also following a target, tracking it, stalking someone, conducting surveillance.

The noun form means: heel, the back side of the foot, the back side of the shoe's sole, footprint, trace on the ground of an object.

The conjunctive form (EKEV – עֵקֶב) means because, as a result of.

The adjective form (AKOV – עִקְבֹּ) means distorted, twisted, not straight, high, deceitful.

How are all these meanings portraying in Ya'akov?

## Israel

The suffix EI – means God. The Word ISRA is derived from the root ש.ר.ה. – Sin. Reish. Heh. We already know that the meaning of the verb is struggle, wrestle, fight.

The word SAR – שָׂר – comes from a different root (ש.ר.ה.), however is connected to the previous one. It means in modern Hebrew a Minister, and in Biblical Hebrew – governor, commander, leader, ruler, prince.

## The interchangeable use of the two names

The alternate use of Ya'akov and Israel in Genesis seems to be arbitrary. However, it seems that more often than not, the use of the name Israel is when the issue/matter refers to Ya'akov as the Patriarch of the Nation Israel. When the matter refers to him as an individual, an ordinary person, the use is Ya'akov.

Later in the Bible there is the use of both names one next to the other – mostly in important incidents. Two worth mentioning are the Giving of Torah (Exodus 19:3):

וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן-הָהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

The LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Yaakov and declare to the children of Israel:

Here, some commentators explain, that the Torah was first given to the women – representing the individual homes of the family, referred to as The House of Ya-akov, and only after they accepted the Torah, it was related to the People of Israel, as a nation.

The other good example is the blessing/curse of Bil'am – מַשְׁכְּנוֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל – מה טובו אֶהְלִיךָ יַעֲקֹב, מִשְׁכְּנוֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל – Ma Tovu Ohaleyha Ya'akov, mishkenoteyha Yisrael. How good are your tents, Ya-akov (referring to the living spaces of individuals and single families – Torah – Genesis 25-27 describes Ya-akov as “Yaakov was an innocent and a man of integrity who dwelled in tents”), and your Mishkan – tabernacles, Temples (and also dwelling places), Israel.

Rabbi Sacks suggests that this change of name is not a directive, but rather a request, a challenge and an opportunity. It actually says: you will be named by your behavior. It invites us – each and every one of us – to act in such a way that people will call us Israel and not Ya-akov. Be honest, be direct, be straight, project leadership. Be yourself. Don't follow and try to imitate others. This is the challenge that our forefather Ya-akov—Israel faced, and this is the very same challenge that his off springs will struggle with till almost the end of days. He adds that the fact that Torah and tradition (e.g. in prayer) continue using both names

interchangeably suggests to us that the problem still exists. Today, after thousands of years, we have both independence and sovereignty in the State of Israel and freedom with equality in most of the diaspora. What are we going to do with this prize? Will we continue being Yaakov, following others and trying to become like them, or will we embrace and hold up our uniqueness, be confident in what we are, being Israel? Asks Rabbi Sacks ZTz"l.

What are your thoughts about this? Your own conclusions?

What are we – I mean each and every one of us: look inside and ask yourself: Am I Ya-akov or Israel? Or maybe both? How much of each am I? where do I want to be?

Israel – It is complicated! Sometimes we are Ya'akov, and sometimes we are Israel. So many times, we suffer, and need to deceit others in order to survive (as Ya'akov), and some other times we are Israel – the light for the nations, a leader in so many areas. We, as People, are moving from destruction and disaster to success and striving, and back down, only to be able to rise up again.