

Parshat Vayishlach - Torah From The Holy Land

Torah: To Be Both Israel and Jacob

“Then Elohim said to him, ‘Your name is Jacob. Your name shall not always be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.’” (Bereshit 35:10)

Throughout the Torah, we see multiple names used for Jacob, even after God changes his name to Israel. In the parasha, “although God was about to give Jacob the additional name of Israel,” Ramban says, “God told him that he would continue to be called Jacob.” From this point on, Jacob would be referred to by both names. So which name is used when? “From that time onward, the name Jacob would be used for matters pertaining to physical and mundane matters,” says Rabbeinu Bachya (1255 – 1340), “while the name Israel would be used for matters reflecting the spiritual role of the Patriarch and his descendants.” This distinction between names is a curious one, as we know in Chassidut that the purpose of the Jew is to bring the Divine into the mundane, everyday moments. We strive to have God-consciousness in every moment. So how can we understand the different usage of names?

The distinction is not one of reality, but of perception. Just like we saw last week, Jacob exclaims “God is in this place, and I didn’t know it!”. The Divine is always present, but Jacob was so preoccupied with the goings on in his world that he forgot to open his eyes to the world around him. He couldn’t perceive God, and these very human moments are what the Torah records. All he needed to do, however, was wake up and be in the present moment, and when he did he was able to realize that the Divine was also there with him. So too here, the moments when he is called Jacob clue us into his momentary distancing from the Divine, and the instances of the name Israel show Jacob’s connectedness to the Divine that is present in every moment.

I write this from the place named after Jacob, the State of Israel. Based on the teaching above, it’s quite odd that the secular Zionist founders of the State would name it after the spiritual side of Jacob Avinu. Perhaps it’s still a rejection of the religious aspect of Judaism, repurposing Jewish spirituality as the land itself. In any rate, it can’t be neglected that the State is named after the idea of connectedness with the Divine, even in the mundane. This is the unique project of modern Israel: How do we create a society which manifests the Divine while still remaining democratic and open to people of all religions and religious backgrounds? The key cannot be in religious coercion, but from a very real consciousness of the Divine. A recognition of the Divine in every human being, in every blade of grass, in every bite we put into our mouths. This is the essence of Israel. In the coming week, may we be blessed to see the Divine revealed in our lives, and to have a consciousness of the Divine in the world around us.

Tefillah: Elohei Avoteinu

In the Amidah prayer, one way which we refer to the Divine is through the name Elohei Avoteinu, the God of our Forefathers. By grouping all the Patriarchs together before saying them separately, it begs the question, what is the common experience of the Divine that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob shared? It’s actually a different name of God, El Shaddai, Lord Almighty, which they have in common. In the stories of all three ancestors, God appears to them as El Shaddai and reaffirms the covenant with them, promising what was promised to their father. Abraham (Bereshit 17:1) is told “Walk in my ways and be blameless. I

will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.” God continues to promise a multitude of children, some of them kings, along with the land of Canaan as an inheritance. As long as the people continue to circumcise their boys, the covenant will not die with Abraham but continue for all generations. Likewise, Isaac invokes the name El Shaddai (Bereshit 28:3) in his second blessing to Jacob, where Isaac is blessing Jacob to be numerous and possess the land as promised to Abraham. Finally, in our parasha (Bereshit 35:11), God appears directly to Jacob as El Shaddai, and reaffirms the blessing gave to him by his father. In all of these cases, El Shaddai is invoked to uphold the covenant and reaffirm that the covenant will last for all generations. In our connection to the Divine as Elohei Avoteinu, we are reaffirming our commitment to this covenant and asking the Divine to remember the promise made to our ancestors, that we should become numerous and inhabit the land that was promised to us.

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