



From Ya'akov to Yisrael—and Back

R. Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

Parashat VaYishlah 5786

“Ya’akov was very afraid and distressed” (Genesis 32:8). He takes many different precautions in order to avoid a violent reunion with his brother, with potentially severe consequences. At the same time, in our *parashah* Ya’akov receives a new name: Yisrael—a name he receives twice! The name, at its core, describes a person caught in conflict, and it is given to Ya’akov the first time in the midst of a struggle.

What does the *parashah* teach us about the relationship between Yisrael and conflict or struggle? And what do the shifts in the Torah between Ya’akov’s old name and his new name (and back again) teach us?

A. Ya’akov and Struggle

What do we do with fear of violence? Ya’akov is afraid of the possibility of conflict when meeting Esav, and that fear is grounded in what his messengers report to him: “The messengers returned to Ya’akov, saying, ‘We came to your brother, to Esav; moreover, he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him’” (32:7). Esav is on his way toward him with a group that is hard **not** to see as a threat.



Ya'akov responds with a creative, multi-layered strategy. We know Ya'akov as someone skilled in tactics—sometimes not fully honest ones. Here, too, we meet Ya'akov the strategist, but this time he channels his creativity toward defusing danger, seeking help, and preparing wisely. This moment of deep fear drives him to act constructively and from multiple angles.

First, he organizes his camp so that if an attack does occur, not everyone will be lost. Ya'akov divides his people (32:8-9). In addition, he turns to God: “Ya'akov said, ‘God of my father Avraham and God of my father Yitzhak... I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness You have shown Your servant; for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, please...’” (32:10-12). Ya'akov's prayer, too, is multidimensional: it recalls the past—the bond God had with Ya'akov's forebears; it expresses gratitude for the present—You have dealt kindly with me and brought me to this moment—and it appeals to the future—You promised me a destiny that cannot be fulfilled if Esav kills me.

Ya'akov also takes a third step: he reaches out to Esav before Esav reaches him. In doing so, he actively shapes the encounter rather than merely awaiting its outcome:

בראשית לב:יד, יז-כ

... וַיִּקַּח מִן הַבָּא בְּיָדוֹ מִנְחָה לַעֲשׂוֹ אָחִיו: ...¹⁷ וַיִּתֵּן בְּיַד עֲבָדָיו עֵדֶר לְבָדוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל עֲבָדָיו עֲבְרוּ לִפְנֵי וְרוּחַ תְּשִׁימוּ בֵּין עֵדֶר וּבֵין עֵדֶר: ...¹⁸ וַיִּצֹו אֶת הָרֹאשׁוֹן לֵאמֹר כִּי יִפְגְּשֶׁךָ עֲשׂוֹ אָחִי וּשְׂאֵלְךָ לֵאמֹר לְמִי אַתָּה וְאַתָּה תִּלְךָ וּלְמִי אֵלֶּה לִפְנֵיךָ: ...¹⁹ וַאֲמַרְתָּ לְעַבְדְּךָ לִיעֲקֹב מִנְחָה הוּא שְׁלוּחָה לְאֲדֹנִי לַעֲשׂוֹ וְהָיָה גַם-הוּא אַחֲרֵינוּ: ...²⁰ וַיִּצֹו גַם אֶת הַשֵּׁנִי גַם אֶת הַשְּׁלִישִׁי גַם אֶת כָּל הַהֹלְכִים אַחֲרֵי הָעֲדָרִים.

Genesis 32:14, 17-20

¹⁴... He selected from what was at hand a gift for his brother Esav... ¹⁷He placed each herd in the hands of his servants, and said, “Go on ahead of me, and leave space between each herd.” ¹⁸He instructed the first one: “When my brother Esav meets you and asks, ‘To whom



do you belong? Where are you going? And who do these animals belong to?’¹⁹ you shall say: ‘They belong to your servant Ya’akov; they are a gift sent to my lord Esav, and he himself is behind us.’”²⁰ He gave the same instructions to the second, the third, and all who followed the herds.

The Torah even shares Ya’akov’s internal reasoning: he is trying to create an encounter in which Esav will be able to tolerate him—perhaps even accept him: “כִּי אָמַר אֶכְפֹּרָה פָּנָיו בַּמִּנְחָה” - For he said, “I will soothe his face with the gift that goes ahead of me; afterward I will see his face—perhaps he will show me favor” (32:21).¹

B. Yisrael and Struggle

Against the backdrop of Ya’akov’s fear and his expectation of violence, the Torah describes a night of confrontation: “Ya’akov was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak” (32:25). At the end of this struggle, Ya’akov receives a new name—or perhaps a new title: “Your name shall no longer be Ya’akov, but Yisrael” (32:29). The name Yisrael is given as a response to Ya’akov’s demand for a blessing. But it is not entirely clear how this response constitutes a blessing. The explanation sounds more like a description: “For you have struggled with God and with humans and have prevailed” (32:29).

The explanation refers to the past (“you have struggled”), while the name Yisrael—which looks like the future tense of “he will struggle”—has a sense of the present or ongoing future. And since this name emerges from conflict and grappling, the question becomes even sharper: is this truly a blessing?

¹ Ya’akov may be attempting here to atone for the selling of the birthright and the stealing of the blessing with giving and gifts.



The struggle lasts all night, and Ya'akov refuses to release the man until he blesses him: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (32:27). In Bereishit Rabbah, this demand is described as insistent, almost threatening.

בראשית רבה עח:ב

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחֲנִי, שֶׁהִגִּיעַ זְמַן קְלוּסִי לְקַלֵּס לְהַקְדֹּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, אָמַר לוֹ יִקְלְסוּ חֲבֵרָיָהּ. אָמַר לוֹ אֵינִי יָכוֹל...
אָמַר שְׁיִצֵּת סִיבָתָהּ, (בראשית לב, כז): לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחָהּ כִּי אִם בְּרַכְתֵּנִי ... [אמר לו] אָבֵל אֲנִי לֹא נִשְׁתַּלְּחֹתִי לָכֶה.
אָמַר לוֹ שְׁיִצֵּת סִיבָתָהּ, לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחָהּ.

Bereishit Rabbah 78:2

“Let me go [for it is dawn],” for the time has come for me to offer praises to the Holy One. Ya'akov said, “Let your colleagues praise God.” The man said, “I cannot...” Ya'akov said, “Have you finished your task and earned your reward?”² ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’ ... [The angel responded:] “But I was not sent for that purpose.” Ya'akov said [again], “Have you finished your task and earned your reward? I will not let you go [unless you bless me].”

The angel finally yields—perhaps out of exhaustion—and reveals a future secret: “עֲתִיד הוּא - להגלות עליך בבית אל ולהחליף את שמך - God is destined to appear to you in Bethel and to change your name.”

Thus, the name Yisrael is born out of struggle, insistence, almost coercion—fitting for a name rooted in “for you have struggled (*sarita*).”³ The *midrash* uses this to address a narrative difficulty in the Torah: the fact that Ya'akov receives the name Yisrael twice.

² The precise meaning of the phrase in the *midrash* is unclear.

³ “For you have struggled **with** God”—the word “with” can be understood in different ways, and this changes God’s role in Yisrael’s struggles. Is God an adversary? Or perhaps God joins Yisrael in its struggles? Or is God the motivator—the very cause—of Yisrael’s struggles?



Between these two namings, Ya'akov himself uses the name Yisrael. The Torah tells us that Ya'akov approaches Shechem, buys a plot of land, and builds an altar there: “He called it ‘El, God of Yisrael’” (33:20). The *midrash* reads this sharply: “אמר ריש לקיש... אמר אתה אלוה - בעליונים ואני אלוה בתחתונים - Reish Lakish said:... You are God in the heavens, and I am god on earth” (Bereishit Rabbah 79:8). According to this reading, Ya'akov applies the title “El” to himself—perhaps an expression of overconfidence. Indeed, the *midrash* continues with criticism: “ואתה היית נוטל שררה לעצמך - And you would take authority for yourself?!”

The name Yisrael is given again, this time without struggle:

בראשית לה:ט-י

⁹וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶל יַעֲקֹב עוֹד בָּבֹא מִפָּדַן אָרֶם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ: ¹⁰וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֱלֹקִים שְׁמְךָ יַעֲקֹב לֹא יִקְרָא שְׁמְךָ עוֹד יַעֲקֹב כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל יִהְיֶה שְׁמְךָ וַיִּקְרָא אֶת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Genesis 35:9-10

⁹God appeared to Ya'akov again when he came from Paddan-aram and blessed him. ¹⁰God said to him, “Your name is Ya'akov; your name shall no longer be Ya'akov, but Yisrael shall be your name.” And God named him Yisrael.

This second naming comes together with the familiar patriarchal blessing of land and descendants. Ya'akov receives the name anew—this time without pressure, without demanding it. Yet unlike Avraham and Sarah, whose old names disappear entirely, Ya'akov's original name does not vanish. Despite the verse “your name shall no longer be Ya'akov,” the Torah continues—immediately in the same chapter and many times afterward—to call him Ya'akov. Bereishit Rabbah makes this explicit: “לא שיעקר שם יעקב ממקומו - It is not that the name Ya'akov is uprooted from its place” (Bereishit Rabbah 46:8).

The bestowal of the name “Yisrael” is fundamentally different from the other name changes in the Book of Genesis. It occurs not once but twice. One instance is a divine act accompanied by a blessing, but it appears earlier as well—born out of a nighttime struggle with an anonymous, shadowy figure, at a moment of transition, just before a fateful encounter, a situation marked by vulnerability and instability concerning Ya'akov's future, fate, and identity. In contrast to other transitions of names—and identities—the shift from Ya'akov to Yisrael is not absolute; the old identity remains a living and legitimate possibility.

It seems that this teaches not only about Ya'akov's complex character, but also about the Torah's approach to the question of how we, the children of Ya'akov-Yisrael, engage in struggle.

The *parashah* teaches that, as the people of Yisrael, part of our story is to fight. Part of our very essence—our name—is bound up with struggle. Yet we are the people of Yisrael and the children of Ya'akov, and we have a choice at every moment. There are times when the people of Yisrael must be Ya'akov: strategic, creative, and acting with deliberate caution. And there are moments when we must be Yisrael: wrestling, confronting, fighting through the night. Our identity lies not in a sharp transition from “Ya'akov” to “Yisrael,” not in a final decision between the model of caution and craftiness and the model of struggle, but in the ongoing movement between them.

