

# YA'AKOV/YISRAEL – WHAT'S IN TWO NAMES?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

*"And [Ya'akov] built an altar there. And he called it E-l E-lokei Yisrael." (33:20)*

On its most simple level, the above verse is unclear as to who called what, what? Was it Ya'akov that called the altar E-l Elokei Yisrael/G-d the G-d of Israel? Or did Ya'akov call out to Hashem, G-d of Israel? Rashi introduces a most shocking interpretation: *"From here we derive that Hashem called Ya'akov E-l – G-d,"* understanding the verse such: *"And He [G-d] called him [Ya'akov] E-l – Elokei Yisrael/It was the G-d of Israel [Who did so]."*

While one may on occasion refer to a *"G-dly person,"* what he likely means is that the person is holy, perhaps a reference to the G-dly aura, which is the Shechinah, that surrounds him. How are we to understand that Hashem called Ya'akov E-l? What is the significance of this most unusual title, and why was it applied specifically to Ya'akov?

The holy rebbe of Tzanz notes the Gemara (Berachos 13a) which rules that from the time the Holy One, Blessed is He, changed Avram's name to Avraham (Bereishis/Genesis 17:5), one who continues to refer to him as Avram is in violation of the verse (ibid.), *"And your name will [from now on] be Avraham."* However, the Gemara notes, although Ya'akov was given the name Yisrael, it is permissible to continue to call him Ya'akov, since the Torah itself does so (i.e. refers to him as Ya'akov post name-change), as it is written (46:2), *"And G-d said to Yisrael in a vision of the night, and He said, 'Ya'akov, Ya'akov.'"* We are left wondering why indeed Avraham's name was changed exclusively, while Ya'akov's name Yisrael was merely an addition that didn't negate his previous one?

*"A G-d [E-l] of vengeance is Hashem; a G-d of vengeance He appears,"* (Tehillim/Psalms 94:1). Why does this verse refer to Hashem using the names E-l and Hashem [YKVK], while all the while calling Him a G-d of vengeance? Generally, when Hashem relates to us through the Divine attributes of mercy and kindness, He is referred to as Hashem [YKVK], which denotes kindness. When Hashem relates to us through anger, harsh judgment and vengeance, He is called E-lokim. Yet here, we have vengeance and YKVK and E-l, itself also a name that denotes kindness, all in one. The holy Ba'al Shem Tov notes that the concepts of punishment and judgment are largely in order to awaken man from his sinful ways. However, he notes, there is a more pleasant way to arouse the sinner from his slumber; by showering him with goodness:

A simple lad was once aroused by the sounds of horses and buggies clamoring through the narrow

alleyways of his remote village. Curious, he rose from his bed and went out into the street to check the commotion. Wagon after wagon passed by, many of them spraying him with indifferent waves of mud and pebbles, until finally what was clearly the head wagon passed. In its midst, unbeknown to the simple boy, sat the king. "For this pomposity I was awoken from my sleep?" The youth spat into the carriage, his efforts landing squarely on the king's cheek.

The king, surprisingly, turned a deaf ear to the predictable cries of, "Off with his head." Instead, he brought the lad into his royal carriage, and returned with him to the palace. "The boy has never seen a king before," he told his irate advisors. "What do you expect?!" The sinful boy became the king's personal guest. The longer he spent in the palace, seeing the honoured dignitaries that came from afar to spend a few moments in the royal highness' presence, the more out-of-place he felt. "What am I doing here?" he began to question. "Not only do I not even begin to comprehend the king's great wisdom and immeasurable influence – I had the foolish audacity to spit at him!" When, one day, the lad threw himself at the king's feet and begged his forgiveness, the king was vindicated. He knew he had accomplished far more by allowing the naïve lad a glimpse of royalty than he would have with lashes and labour.

Sometimes, the Ba'al Shem Tov explains, instead of rebuke through punishment, Hashem chastises us through undeserved kindness. He allows us a brief glimpse into His greatness, and the infinite kindness with which He constantly showers the world, in the hope it will arouse us to better our ways. The wise man recognizes the undeserved love Hashem showers on him, and is humbled. The foolish man thinks he deserves it.

The two names, Ya'akov and Yisrael, refer to the two aspects of this phenomenon. Yisrael is a name of greatness: For you have ruled over angels and over man. Ya'akov is a name of humility; the root of Ya'akov is ekev, which means heel – the lowest part of the human body. It is only through this two-faceted existence – complete humility in the face of great accomplishments – that success and prosperity become even stronger conduits of teshuva/repentance than rebuke.

This is why, the rebbe of Tzanz zt"l explains, the name Yisrael was never intended to supersede Ya'akov. When Ya'akov achieved greatness, yet remained the same, humble man he had always been, he received the name Yisrael, the name of greatness, to compliment his humility.

If we were to divide up the 22 letters of the alef beis into two equal groups, the rebbe says, alef would be at the head of the first group, while lamed, the twelfth letter, would lead the second. The first group of letters, the Sanzer Rav explains, are the 'face' or light side of the alef beis, while the second group becomes the 'back' or dark side of the letters.

Combining alef with lamed, or E-L, one of G-d's names, represents the melding of light and darkness, of kindness and judgment, of success and self-effacement. Ya'akov had just wrestled with the angel, and won. His success was no doubt cause for celebration, yet there was none. Even after receiving the name Yisrael, *"for you have wrestled with the angels and won,"* he remained in essence Ya'akov

ish tam/Ya'akov the simple man. He builds an altar upon which to place his offerings of thanks to Hashem. In his eyes, he did not deserve what he had achieved. He ascribed his greatness to Hashem's infinite kindness.

And Hashem called him E-l – you – Ya'akov/Yisrael – are the perfect synthesis between alef and lamed, between the greatness you have achieved and the humility you retain. May Hashem always choose to test us with undeserved kindness, and may we have the wisdom to pass the test. Have a good Shabbos.

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