

Who Wants to Be Jewish?

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

This week we read (in Genesis 32) how Jacob acquires a new name, "Israel," after wrestling through the night with an angel representing the spirit of Esau. "No longer shall your name be called Jacob," proclaims the defeated angel, "but rather Israel, for you have contended with G-d and with men, and have prevailed."

And yet, Jacob continues to be called "Jacob" in the Torah, though he's also called by his new name, "Israel"; from this point onward, the Torah alternates between the two names. The same applies to the Jewish people as a whole: we're generally referred to as "Israel" or "The Children of Israel," but there are also numerous times in the Torah when the Jewish people are collectively called "Jacob" or "The Seed of Jacob."

The Chassidic masters point out that the name Jacob is used when we're referred to as G-d's "servants" (as in Isaiah 44:1: "Now, listen, My servant Jacob"), while the name Israel is employed when we're called G-d's "children" (as in Exodus 4:22: "My first-born child, Israel").

The difference between a servant and a child can be understood on many levels. A most basic distinction, however, is the motivation behind the relationship. Both a child and a servant serve the parent/master and fulfill his will. The difference is in *why* they do it. When a child does something for his father or mother, he does so with love, pleasure and joy. The servant, on the other hand, does these actions not because he desires to, but because he must.

This difference will affect the quality of the relationship on all levels. While the "child" and the "servant" may be doing the same actions technically, there is a tremendous difference in the nature, quality and impact of an action if it is done out of love and desire, or because one feels compelled to do it.

These prototypes--the "child" and the "servant"--exist in all relationships: in a marriage, in the family, in the workplace, etc. There can even be a child who in his feelings and actions towards his parents more resembles a servant, or a servant whose service of his master is suffused with a child-like love and desire.

In our lives as Jews and our relationship with G-d there are also these two prototypes. Our Jewishness can be the Jewishness of a "servant"--one who has no choice in the matter and simply accepts the fact that this is what he is and these are what his duties are. Or we can be "children" of G-d who rejoice in their role, who desire it and celebrate it and revel in it.

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Vayishlach

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The "spirit of Esau" with which we all grapple is our own material self. It's the part of us that just wants to be like everyone else--make a living and get through life with the least hassle possible. It's the part of us that "accepts" our Jewishness as something that's been imposed on us: we do our bit, but without the love, joy and desire that comes from doing something we truly want to do.

This is our "Jacob" personality--the self that's still locked in the struggle with the spirit of Esau. But we each have our moments of triumph over the angel of materialism and apathy. Moments when we rise to our "Israel" self--the self that rejoices in our relationship with G-d and our special G-d-given role as Jews. Times when we experience a mitzvah not as a duty, but as an act of love and personal fulfillment.

But the Torah knows that it's not simply a matter of defeating the angel and "graduating" from our Jacob personality to our Israel self. Rather, we remain both Jacob and Israel, alternating between these two modes of our Jewishness. Some of us may be Jacobs most of the time, while in others the Israel self predominates. But, in truth, we each have our Israel moments, as well as the times that we regress to the Jacob mode.

That is why, even after Jacob defeats the angel and acquires the name "Israel," the Torah continues to call him--and us--by both names. The message is two-fold: firstly, that G-d continues to value our Jacob self as well, cherishing every good deed we do even--and perhaps especially--when we lack the joy and desire and need to force ourselves to do our duty; and secondly, that the opportunity is always there to access our inner Israel and experience the joy and fulfillment that comes from desiring and rejoicing in who and what we are and our mission in life.

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