

DISTINGUISHING JACOB AND ISRAEL

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Jacob, the younger of twin brothers and the third of the biblical patriarchs, was in his mature years when he received his name Israel. Having two names is unusual in the Bible, and thus raises the question as to why this son of Isaac and Rebekah was granted a second name

When he was born his parents called him Yaakov, derived from *akev* [heel] because he emerged from his mother's womb holding on to the heel of his older brother Esau (Gen. 25:26, 27:36). The name Israel was bestowed on Jacob many years later, by a mysterious "divine being" after a nightlong struggle between the two (32:25-29). The name "Jacob" has negative connotations in his relationship to his twin Esau and the deceit of his father Isaac, but "Israel" marks the beginning of Israelite peoplehood.

From this incident onward, some biblical passages use the name Jacob and some use Israel. Even God was not averse to using both names in one verse. *And God spoke to **Israel** in a vision at night and said, '**Jacob!**' 'Here I am,' he replied (46:2).* Is there some deliberate reason for choosing one or the other, depending on the context? The sages of the Talmud (Berachot 13a) held that both names may be used as written, but that Israel should be of greater significance.

Until he received his new name in Genesis 32, Jacob was a compliant person easily swayed by stronger characters like his mother and Laban. When he took advantage of Esau and outwitted Laban it was by subtlety not assertiveness. A man of this kind of character could not be the Patriarch who gave his name to the people of Israel. The man Jacob had to be superseded by a solid, determined man, one who recognized the need for strong, positive action and was ready to take it. Such a person would bear the name Israel, as one who struggled with the Divine and prevailed. This was clearly stated by the being with whom Jacob struggled: *'Your name shall no longer be **Jacob**, but **Israel**, for you have striven with God and men and have prevailed'* (32:29).

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What were the events that lead up to Jacob's unusual encounter and new name? He was traveling back to Canaan, the place of his birth, with his family and flocks. He expected to have to face Esau, and sent him humble messages and offers of gifts (32:4-6, 14-22). When he learned that his brother was coming towards him with 400 armed men, Jacob arranged his family and entourage to protect them in case of an attack. Then, all alone that night, he made a final check, and prayed for God's protection (32:7,11).

Physically and mentally weary, and worried about the arrival of Esau the next morning, Jacob fell asleep and dreamed. In earlier dreams, Jacob sought God's protection and guidance. In his first dream after leaving his parent's house (28:21), he entreated God to protect him and enable him to return to his father's house, and *then shall the Lord be my God*. Thus, the younger Jacob sought to make a bargain with God. In another dream many years later, he was directed to return home and assured of God's protection during the journey (31:11,13). Now he was frightened by the thought of his forthcoming meeting with Esau. Would God's promised protection be sufficient?

At this point came the nighttime struggle with the stranger. If this was a dream, a new Jacob arose from his sleep. He was ready to meet with his brother. He would not be afraid nor would he be a supplicant. He had striven with a creature of divine powers and prevailed. He now had a dual personality – Jacob and Israel, two distinct characters resided in one man. When circumstances called for a person of positive, strong, decision-making ability, Israel would dominate. The remaining chapters of Genesis depict Jacob-Israel's changed and strengthened character.

The name Israel has a double usage: It can refer to the person, Jacob, and it may refer to a geographical place, the Land of Israel. Genesis 34:7 in relating the events in Shechem uses the phrase *had wrought a vile deed in Israel*. Some may suggest that this part of the Jacob story preceded the significant dream and encounter with the stranger, for the new Jacob-Israel would not have allowed the Shechem massacre to take place.

Genesis 35:22 relates the following incident: *While Israel was living in the region, Reuben went and slept with his father's concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it*. This verse cites "Israel" twice for, indeed, he made two decisions. First, he did not at this time take open issue with his son, but he did decide that though Reuben was his oldest son he would not inherit his father's place

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as head of the family. This is noted in Jacob's final words to his family (49:3-4). Second, in spite of Reuben's despicable act, Israel did not exclude him from his family, as it is stated in the verse immediately following: *Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.*

Genesis 37:3, tells of **Israel's** special love for Joseph, and his gift of a many-colored coat. This act of showing preference for one son would not have been done by the timid **Jacob**.

Genesis 37:13 records that **Israel** sent 17-year-old Joseph to visit his brothers who are shepherding the family flocks in Shechem, despite the hazards of the journey and the known hatred of the brothers towards Joseph. The more careful and timid **Jacob** would have kept Joseph at home.

Genesis 32:33, tells of **Jacob's** many days of mourning for Joseph whom he assumed had died during the journey to see his brothers. **Israel** would have hurried to the scene and attempt to find at least some evidence of Joseph's alleged encounter with an animal that killed him.

Genesis 42:1: When **Jacob** learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt during the famine, he very mildly requested his sons to go down to Egypt to procure food for the family. **Israel** would have ordered his sons to hurry down to Egypt.

As the famine continued, the Egyptian ruler (Joseph) made the sale of more grain dependant on the brothers bringing Benjamin down to Egypt, and kept Simeon as hostage for their return. In Genesis 42:38, **Jacob** is unwilling to let Benjamin leave him even though the family is close to starvation. In Genesis 43:11,14, it is **Israel** who understands the reality of the famine, relents and allows Benjamin to go down to Egypt with his brothers.

In subsequent passages, the phrase *sons of Israel* is used, apparently saying that they are derived from the more assured, positive father Israel, rather than from the passive father Jacob.

Genesis 46:2-5: the famine continues and Joseph invites his family down to Egypt where food is plentiful. **Jacob** is pictured as a reluctant, unwilling traveler who wants to remain in Canaan until God assures him that He will protect him and bring all the family back to their homeland as a great nation. The trek to Egypt pictures a reluctant Jacob riding in a cart during the journey, but the sons of **Israel** are in a glad and happy mood.

Genesis 46:6: all his offspring accompany **Jacob** to Egypt. A new life begins for **Jacob**, a life of ease, and an opportunity to meet the Pharaoh and to live in best part of the land, as Pharaoh directed.

Genesis 47:28: **Jacob** lives in Egypt for 17 years, and passes away at the age of 147.

Genesis 47:29: **Jacob** accepts that his life is drawing to a close, and wants to be buried with his forebears in the cave at Hebron. A determined **Israel** speaks to Joseph in positive terms concerning his place of burial, and makes it clear that he does not want to be buried in Egypt.

Genesis 48:29,30: **Jacob** has an important act to accomplish – blessing Joseph's children, and establishing that they will be ancestors of tribes in the land of Israel. In a sense, he "adopted" them. **Jacob** is dying, but throughout this narrative, it seems that his stronger inner character – **Israel** – has taken control.

Genesis 49: A dying **Jacob** calls for his sons to gather around him *so I can tell you what will happen to you in the days to come*. His final words to his sons are blessings and admonitions. Genesis 49:1 has **Jacob** calling for his sons and Genesis 49:2, summons the sons of **Jacob** to *listen to your father Israel*, as if to say: follow Israel, that decisive part of your father.