

PARASHAT VAYISHLACH

The Vow and the Name Change

by Yonatan Grossman

Our parasha mentions twice the change of Yaakov's name to Yisrael. This change is announced first by the angel with whom Yaakov wrestles (32:25-33) and then by God, following the fulfillment of Yaakov's vow in Beit El (35:9-13). The commentaries regard God's blessing in Beit El, including the name change, as a new incident, in which the words of the angel are repeated. This leaves us with the question why the name change needs to be repeated. Moreover, if what we have is indeed a new and separate incident in which Yaakov's name is changed, is it not strange that the Torah, in describing the second incident, totally ignores the first name change? Would we not expect God to tell Yaakov that He joins the angel in changing his name, or some similar phrase which would recall the fact that the name had previously already been changed? It should be borne in mind that the Torah treats announcements by angels with all due seriousness, and the angels concerned are always considered God's messengers. When the angel blesses Hagar, we are left in no doubt that it is God who is actually blessing her via His agent; when the angels visit Avraham and Sarah in their tent and inform them of the son who will be born to them, this news clearly comes from God; similarly the angel's message to Manoach was not something that the angel transmitted alone. If, then, there is indeed a second occasion on which Yaakov's name is changed, we need to ask ourselves why God was not satisfied with the original name change by the angel.

If we examine the Torah's introduction to the second name change ("And God appeared to Yaakov again, when he came out of Padan-Aram and He blessed him"), we perceive the possibility that in fact the name change described here refers to the same incident which was mentioned previously. The introduction takes us back into the past, as if to say, "The following account describes something which already took place." As we know, Yaakov had returned from Padan-Aram some time previously; he had meantime even managed to purchase a tract of land near Shekhem and to dwell there. Nevertheless, the Torah opens the account by informing us that this incident occurred "when he came out of Padan-Aram." Hence it may be that there is no second name change introduced here, in addition to the change announced by the angel, but that for some reason the Torah chooses to recount the same episode twice.

A number of proofs exist to support this view:

1. In both places we read of a berakha that was bestowed in addition to the actual name change. In Yaakov's battle with the angel we read, following the name change, "And he blessed him there" (we know nothing of the content of this berakha; this issue will be addressed below), and similarly immediately after the "second" name change God blesses him ("Be fruitful and multiply...").
2. The Torah, in its description

of the second name change, adopts a strange syntax: "And God said to him, Your name is Yaakov. You shall no longer be called Yaakov but rather Yisrael will be your name. And He called his name Yisrael." What is the significance of the opening words, "Your name is Yaakov"? If what we have here is indeed a reference to the previous name change, the syntax is more easily explained: In the previous instance there was a dialogue between Yaakov and the angel - "And he said to him, What is your name? And he said, Yaakov. And he said to him, Your name will no longer be Yaakov but rather Yisrael...." Now, in recalling this incident, the Torah merely hints at this dialogue: God's opening words in the second name change, "Your name is Yaakov", hint at the angel's question and Yaakov's answer. 3. At the conclusion of God's berakha to Yaakov, we read: "And God went up from him in the place where He had spoken to him." This is an unusual description with reference to God, but is perfectly acceptable with reference to an angel (e.g. the angel's appearance to Manoach and his wife, Shoftim 13; the conclusion of Avraham's argument with the angel concerning the destruction of Sedom - see Rashbam on 18, proving that the argument was indeed conducted with an angel; etc.). If the second name change is merely a repeated description of the earlier event - when the name change was effected by an angel - then the language here presents no problem.

In truth, beyond all this detailed analysis, the very repetition of the name change by the Torah - with not even the slightest indication or mention in the second instance of the fact that Yaakov's name was already changed previously - points to the idea that in fact we are re-reading the same event, which the Torah for some reason has chosen to repeat. If this is the case, we need to understand why the Torah repeats - and specifically here - the name change which already took place.

The second mention of the name change appears immediately after Yaakov's fulfillment of his vow. Let us examine the vow and its significance, with a view to understanding the reason for the repetition.

When Yaakov, in Parashat Va-yetze, flees to Charan, God appears to him in the dream of the ladder and promises him that he will return in peace to the land of Canaan. In response to this promise, Yaakov makes a conditional vow - if he indeed returns in peace, he accepts certain obligations. There is a clear parallel in the wording of the promise and of the vow:

God's promise: "Behold, I am with you, and I shall protect you wherever you go, and I shall bring you back to this land." The condition: "If God will be with me and will guard me on this road upon which I am going and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and I shall return in peace to my father's house...." The vow: "Then the Lord will be my God... and everything which You give me I shall tithe for You, and this stone... shall be God's house."

The importance of this vow is highlighted by the fact that when God reveals Himself to Yaakov in Charan, commanding him to return to Canaan, He presents Himself in terms of this very vow: "I am the God of Beit-El, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to Me. Get up now; leave this land and return to the land of your birthplace." (31:12-13).

Now read the promise and the vow again - there is one striking exception to the parallelism. God promised Yaakov that "I shall return you to this land." Yaakov makes his vow conditional on "and I shall return in peace to my father's house." At first glance this difference may not appear to indicate anything of importance, but in our specific situation it takes on great significance.

It must be remembered that Yaakov leaves for Charan for two separate reasons; he is thereby obeying the commands of both his father and his mother. Rivka sends Yaakov away out of fear for his life; at the same time, Yitzchak sends him to find a wife ("Get up, go to Padan-Aram, home of Betuel, your father's mother, and take for yourself from there a wife from the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother"). On one hand Yaakov hears his mother's exhortation - "Get up, run away...;" on the other hand he hears his father's command: "Get up, go...." And, as the Torah takes pains to point out, "Yaakov obeyed his father and his mother." (28:7)

Thus Yaakov's journey to Charan embodies two separate aspects: flight from Canaan because of the family feud, and journey TO CHARAN specifically in order to find a wife from amongst his kinswomen. The latter aspect is connected with Yaakov's destiny as the one chosen to continue Avraham's family and his covenant with God. The Torah emphasizes the dual aspect of Yaakov's journey as he leaves: "And Yaakov LEFT Be'er Sheva" on one hand (fleeing from Esav), "and WENT TO Charan" on the other (in order to find a wife). [As we have seen in previous shiurim, these two aspects, the personal and the covenantal, characterize every stage of the lives of our forefathers. It would therefore be of interest to examine Yaakov's actions in Charan and to analyze each event in terms of its connection to one or other of these aspects. Suffice it for the purposes of this aside to note that Yaakov marries two women...] We, reading the story of Yaakov, wonder which of the two aspects was uppermost in Yaakov's mind.

The vow which he makes hints clearly at the answer to this question. God's promise to him is obviously related to the general, national aspect. Yaakov is chosen by God (it is only now that Yaakov - and we - become aware of this) to continue the covenant which God made with his fathers. This is his destiny and his life's task, and therefore it is entirely logical that God should emphasize that he will return to "this land." Eretz Canaan will wait for Yaakov, and he and his descendants are destined to inherit it. Yaakov, however, discloses his innermost emotions in the wording of his vow: "to my father's house." It is not "this land" which occupies his thoughts but rather the family feud. He wants to return in peace to the bosom of his family, to his father's house.

It is against the backdrop of this tension and rift that Yaakov leaves for Charan and it is there that God reminds him of his vow, attempting once again to direct him towards his historical, nationalistic destiny: "I am the God of Beit-El, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to Me. Now get up, leave this land AND RETURN TO THE LAND OF YOUR BIRTHPLACE." God specifically mentions "the land of your birthplace," rather than "your father's house."

With Yaakov's return to Eretz Canaan God waits to see whether Yaakov is now conscious of the task and destiny which await him. We, too, are waiting to discover what Yaakov is now thinking. The indicator is simple: "this land" or "my father's house." When will Yaakov fulfill his vow - upon his return to the land (in which case

we can rest assured that he has internalized his historical mission), or only when he makes peace with his brother and returns to his father's house?

Just as Yaakov encounters angels on his journey towards Charan ("And he stayed in that place... and behold, angels of God..."), likewise he encounters angels upon his return ("And angels of God met him..."). This parallel would seem to indicate a completion of the cycle of Yaakov's exile. Now, with his return, the Torah closes the circle. We would now expect that Yaakov will fulfill his vow since he has, after all, returned in peace "to this land." But Yaakov is busy preparing for the encounter with his brother! He seems to be making the fulfillment of his vow dependent on "his father's house." The discrepancy which revealed itself in the condition to his vow has remained, and what concerns Yaakov is still his brother Esav. We are somewhat disappointed in Yaakov, and it seems that the Holy One also disapproves: He sends a messenger to remind Yaakov of his vow, in the form of the angel who wrestles with Yaakov until the dawn. Let us make no mistake: the explicit framework of the narrative - "And a man wrestled with him... and he limped on his thigh" - makes it unequivocally clear that a real battle took place; Yaakov wrestles with an angel, who is God's messenger, and at the conclusion of the story, even if he has received a berakha, he remains with a permanent limp.

In what way is this battle meant to remind Yaakov of his vow? Let us return to the berakha which we examined earlier. The last time Yaakov encountered angels and was blessed was when he left for Charan, in the dream of the ladder, when he made his vow. Now once again he encounters an angel who blesses him. Just as the previous encounter took place at night ("He stayed in the place for the sun had set"), so this encounter too takes place at night, as Yaakov is preparing to sleep ("And he slept that night in the camp"). Just as at the conclusion of the previous encounter Yaakov names the place after his experience ("And he called that place Beit-El"), so at the conclusion of his battle with the angel here he names the place after his experience ("And Yaakov called the name of the place Peniel"). More than anything else, though, it is the content of the berakha which Yaakov hears from the angel which reminds him of the only other time he merits this berakha. At the conclusion of the battle we learn that Yaakov receives a berakha but we know nothing of its content. When the event is described a second time, though, we discover the content of the berakha - "Be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a multitude of nations shall come from you, and kings shall issue from your loins. And the land which I have given to Avraham and Yitzchak I shall give to you, and to your seed after you I will give it (35:11-12). When Yaakov hears this berakha, he is supposed to remember his destiny and task (the berakha to Avraham), and to remember the last time he heard this berakha - at the time he made the vow.

The battle with God's messenger only hints at the vow, but no explicit mention is made of it. Just as Yaakov made the vow spontaneously, as an expression of the depths of his soul, so he is meant to fulfill his vow out of a feeling of spiritual identification with it. It would not be appropriate for him to fulfill the vow in response to a Divine command, for thus the process of his preparation to accept the special task which awaits him would be harmed.

Yaakov fails to understand the significance of the message, and he continues with his preparations for the encounter with Esav. In the course of this encounter Yaakov will

tell Esav, "Therefore I have seen your face, as though I had seen God, and you have been appeased" (33:11). In our context this sounds somewhat ironic, and the Midrash comments on these words of Yaakov as follows: "Just as concerning God's face it is written, 'And they shall not see My face empty-handed,' so Yaakov could not approach Esav empty-handed." (Bereishit Rabba, 78). Let us keep in mind that part of Yaakov's vow was "whatever You will give me I will tithe for You."

Even after this battle, then, Yaakov continues to dwell in the land but does not go back to Beit-El to fulfill his vow. There is even a Midrash which regards the other troubles which befall him as hints that he should do so: "He went and became rich (in Charan) and came back and settled himself without fulfilling his vow. God brought upon him the prospect of Esav with his murderous intent... he did not understand the message. He brought upon him the angel who battled with him, but he did not understand... Since he did not perceive God's message He brought upon him the trouble with Dina... Since he did not perceive even this He brought upon him the trouble of Rachel... God said, For how long will this tzaddik be punished without understanding his sin? Behold, I shall inform him. As it is written, "And God said to Yaakov, Get up, go up to Beit-El and dwell there"... These troubles have befallen you only because you have tarried in fulfilling your vow." (Tanchuma, Vayishlah 8).

The conclusion of the above Midrash informs us that God eventually commands Yaakov explicitly to go up to Beit El and to fulfill his vow. Why does God suddenly mention this explicitly?

Apparently this is related to the imminent arrival of Yaakov at his father's house; his meeting with Yitzhak. Yaakov, as we have explained, has yearned for this homecoming, and only thereafter does he feel a desire to fulfill his vow. Although it would be preferable for Yaakov to fulfill the vow out of inner conviction and identification with his historical, nationalistic destiny, as expressed in God's words, immediately upon returning to Eretz Canaan, there is a real danger that it is Yaakov's version which will be fulfilled and that the vow will be repaid only after his return in peace to "his father's house." A moment before the anticounter between Yaakov and his father, God commands him explicitly to fulfill his vow. He can wait no longer, for otherwise the vow will be fulfilled only after the meeting, and the educational message embodied in the timing of the vow will be lost on Yaakov.

Following God's command Yaakov does in fact go up to Beit-El and fulfills his pr, and thus it is God's words, "to this land," which are realized, rather than Yaakov's - "to my father's house."

It seems that ultimately it was God's explicit command which made it clear to Yaakov what his scale of priorities should be, and it is interesting that the account of his emotional homecoming makes no mention whatsoever of Rivka. The Midrash explains that she was already dead, but if this is true then we would expect to find it explicitly written. I believe that the Torah is focusing specifically on Yaakov's meeting with Yitzhak, who represents the national-historic nature of the journey to Charan (i.e. with a view to finding a wife), and ignores Rivka, who represents the specific family feud which forced Yaakov to flee. This choice of focus hints at a new consciousness in Yaakov; he now understands that he faces an historical mission,

having fulfilled his vow upon his return to the land promised to his fathers and to his chosen progeny, a moment before the return to the bosom of his family.

Let us now return to our original question: Why does the Torah segment the account of Yaakov's name change to Yisrael and describe it in two separate instances? The name change should have come after the fulfillment of Yaakov's vow, after his internalization of his historical mission. At this point it would have been appropriate for his name to change from Yaakov - signifying the private individual - to Yisrael, the person who would establish a new and chosen nation, the Israelites. However, God was "forced" to change his name prior to the fulfillment of the vow in order to remind Yaakov of the nationalistic aspect; in order to indicate to him that the name Yisrael needed to overcome his private name, Yaakov, and thus to bring him to fulfill his vow. The name change is mentioned at just the point where it actually takes place - during the battle between Yaakov and the angel - but there it is recorded without the special berakha which is later juxtaposed (although Yaakov himself hears the berakha from the angel, as the Torah tells us). The content of the berakha, which is tied up with the historical-nationalistic status of Yaakov-Yisrael, appears only at the point where it was originally intended - immediately after the vow has been fulfilled, an event which takes place just before Yaakov returns to his father's house.

[Two comments, with the reader's permission: 1. This tension which is embodied in Yaakov's life in fact characterizes all of us: on one hand we are "private" people, with personal concerns and aspirations for our private lives. On the other hand the story of Yaakov's vow should remind all of us that there is another dimension to our lives - the fact of our membership in Am Yisrael, a nation which is meant to carry a national message to the entire world. This aspect of ourselves also requires effort, and we should beware of forgetting the fulfillment of the vow which is bound up with "this land" even in the midst of our concern with various vows pertaining to "my father's house." 2. I would be glad to receive reactions and comments on the shiur, with a view to a joint quest for the ultimate truth of Torah. Readers are invited to send questions pertaining to future parshiot, and perhaps some of these questions can be addressed in the shiur of the appropriate parasha.]