We are Yisrael: Thoughts for Parashat Vayishlah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayishlah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Bible refers to our people using three names for our forefather: Yaacov, Yisrael, Yeshurun.

The name Yaacov was given to him at birth because he was clinging to the heel (ekev) of his older twin brother, Esav. This name characterized Yaacov in many challenges he faced. He did not confront things directly but acted cleverly, even deviously, to achieve his goals. He outsmarted Esav, Yitzhak, and Lavan through his wit, not through physical strength or courage.

The name Yisrael was given to him first by an angel and later by God. He earned this name because he "struggled with God and with men, and prevailed." Yaacov was no longer dependent on victories won through subterfuge. He now proved that he was able to confront challenges directly and forcefully…and prevail.

The name Yeshurun was applied to his people, the Israelites, in the book of Devarim and in Yeshayahu. Yeshurun derives from the word Yashar…upright. It has the opposite resonance of the name Yaacov, which is related to the word akov, crooked. Yeshurun, in a sense, is the "ideal" name, representing truthfulness, integrity, and commitment to principle.

Throughout Jewish history, we have had phases when the name Yaacov seemed most appropriate. For centuries of exile, we lived in Christian and Muslim lands where we were deprived of basic human rights. We lacked elementary abilities to defend ourselves physically from far more powerful entities. We survived through our wit, our ability to fend off dangers by bending our heads to the prevailing powers.

In our messianic vision, the name Yeshurun will be most appropriate. We will be living in a calm, peaceful world dedicated to the ideals of the human spirit. God will be universally acknowledged by all humanity. Truthfulness will be valued by all and will prevail among all.

But it was the name Yisrael that has been our primary designation since biblical times. We are known as the children of Israel, the Israelites, the benei Yisrael. The modern Jewish State is aptly known as Israel, Medinat Yisrael. And Yisrael is a name that signifies ongoing struggle.

We live in an as yet unredeemed world. We face numerous challenges on so many fronts. We confront threats to our physical wellbeing by hateful enemies. We face spiritual battles with those who seek to undermine our religious foundations. We have no shortage of internal controversies pitting Jews against Jews.

We remind ourselves: we are Yisrael. We face struggles…but we prevail. We muster the physical strength to ward off enemy attacks; we draw on our spiritual strength to overcome ideological opponents.

We don't forget that we have the wit and wisdom of Yaacov. We don't abandon our vision of Yeshurun. But we are Yisrael. We struggle. We face challenges directly and courageously. We strive to overcome internal and external dissension. We sometimes fail, we limp…but we do not surrender and lose hope. We are Yisrael. We struggle with God and with human beings…and we will prevail. AM YISRAEL HAI.