

Vayechie
Ohr Hachaim On Yaakov And Yisroel
by Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh

The parsha opens up with the verse “And Yaakov lived in Mitzrayim seventeen years.” The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh discusses why the names Yaakov and Yisroel are used interchangeably. He also discusses why Yaakov knew at this point that his end was near. A lot of light is shed on these subjects by his opening paragraphs on this Parsha.

As to Yaakov knowing his death was near, the Ohr Hachaim gives a lengthy description, based on the Arizal, about our days on this earth being compared to precious stones that were left by a king in his servants’ charge to beautify. When Hashem originally created mankind we were on a much higher spiritual level and were given far greater quantities of stones to polish. Hence, there was great longevity to man before the flood. When we misused the life Hashem gave us, he gave us a smaller task in hopes that we could come closer to completing it. This explains the fact that we live much shorter lives than those who lived before the flood. A tzaddik is much more aware of these things than we are and surely Yaakov Avinu would have had a sense that his days on this earth, number of stones to polish, were coming to a close.

As to why Yaakov lost thirty-three years, The Ohr Hachaim offers an interesting explanation. Many of us are familiar with the idea that Yaakov lost thirty-three years for each of the thirty-three words of complaint to Paroh about how hard his life had been. [See Bereishis 47:7-10] The Ohr Hachaim gives a different explanation. When Yaakov was confronted by Lavan as to where his idols were, he said “whoever is found with your gods will not live”. He did not know Rachel had actually taken them. Chazal tell us these words brought about Rachel’s demise. The gematriah for *yichye* is 33. For Yaakov causing Rachel’s earlier death, he lost thirty-three years of life. We see how doubly careful a tzaddik has to be with every word he says as Chazal teach us. As an aside, this is a lesson for all of us to be careful with our gift of speech that Hashem gave us.

The Ohr Hachaim discusses the differences between Yaakov and Yisroel. In later history, Yaakov is generally used when Hashem is not so pleased with us, and Yisroel is used to indicate our loftiness and high level of connection to Hashem when we do Hashem’s will and fulfill our mission.

However, we cannot say this by Yaakov Avinu himself. He goes through the Torah from Parshas Vayeishev onto the end and generally concludes that Yaakov is referring to the times when he is sad and less connected, as we find when he thought Yosef was gone. The times we find the name Yisroel being used is when there is at least a spark of connection to Yosef or the loftier side is being brought out in some way. This is all based on the idea that the *Shechina* cannot rest on one in the midst of sadness or when one is not in his/her full spiritual capacity. We especially see this immediately after Yaakov hears that Yosef is still alive, there is an immediate change from ‘And Yaakov’s spirit came alive’ and the next verse that states, ‘and Yisroel said’. [Bereshis 45:27-28]. Other meforshim delve into this issue a great deal but the overall consensus is that Yaakov is referring to the more materialistic existence of Yaakov when he has to resort to *ikva*, trickery at times, even legally, and Yisroel is the higher, loftier side of Yaakov.

With this in mind, perhaps we can better understand one of the brachos that we recite every morning. Every morning we thank Hashem for not making us a goy. It is not meant to be derogatory, as some understand it. We are merely thanking Hashem for bringing us close to Him And choosing us to be his servants and do his mitzvos that only the ‘inner circles’ are required to do. It is an added responsibility but also a privilege as well. Why do we phrase the bracha, ‘who did not make me a goy’ and not ‘Who made me a Yisroel’, as we find in some non-Orthodox prayer books? Perhaps, based on the Ohr Hachaim we can answer the question. Yisroel means that we are totally perfected in our Torah, mitzvos, character traits, as well as our connection to Hashem. It may too presumptuous for every single Jew to phrase the bracha this way to thank Hashem that he/she is a full Yisroel as a Yisroel is supposed to be. Moreover, there is a danger that it can even lead to *gaava*, arrogance which would even be counterproductive to attaining true *shleimus*, completion of one’s true mission here. But every Jew, no matter what level he/she is on right now can thank Hashem that he is not a non-Yisroel, an outsider to our magnificent heritage. No matter where one is, geographically, emotionally, or spiritually, every Jew can feel proud that he is carrying the beautiful, holy and illustrious legacy of our Avos and Emahos, Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah.

As we finish Sefer Bereishis and move on to the rest of the Torah, may it be Hashem’s will that the lessons of Sefer Bereishis remain with us. We are who we are because of the Avos and Emahos. We have the

responsibility and the privilege of conveying their legacy to our children and to all our posterity thereafter.