

ALSHICH

INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר בראשית

פרשת תולדות

SERIES 1: ISSUE 6

THE BATTLE BETWEEN ESAV AND YAAKOV BEGINS IN THE WOMB

Chapter 25

22) The children struggled (וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ) within her; she said, "If so, why am I like this?" She went to enquire of God.

(כב) וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרֵּשׁ אֶת ה'.

23) God said to her, "Two peoples are in your womb, and two nations (לְאֻמִּים) from your insides will be separated. One nation will be stronger than the other nation, and the older will serve the younger."

(כג) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבִטְנְךָ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֵאמֹם מְלֹאם יֶאֱמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צְעִירָה.

Consider the following questions:

1. The word וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ (verse 22) is very unusual. What is it coming to tell us?
2. The phrases "Two peoples are in your womb" and "two nations from your insides will be separated" seem to be saying the same thing. Why do we need both?
3. How will it help allay Rivka's concerns to be told that one nation will be stronger than the other, etc.? This would seem to have the opposite effect.
4. After telling Rivka that *one nation will be stronger than the other nation*, why does God add, "... and the older will serve the younger"?

The Sages (*Bereishis Rabbah* 63:6) offer several interpretations of the phrase, *The children struggled* (וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ) within her. Two of them are as follows:

- a) Whenever Rivka passed by a Beis Midrash, Yaakov moved about [inside the womb] and "ran" (רָץ) to get out. Whenever she passed by a place of idol worship Esav moved about and "ran" (רָץ) to get out.
- b) Each one "ran" (i.e., sought) to kill the other.

The first interpretation simply relates the word וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ to the root רוץ, which means "run," and states that Yaakov and Esav each "ran" to get out of the womb at different times. The second interpretation focuses on the fact that the verb is written in the הִתְרַצַּעַל (reflexive) form, which indicates that each of them was going to be killed (connecting the word וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ to the root רָצַץ, meaning "to crush," as well as רוץ). Both explanations are necessary and complement each other. **[This answers Question 1.]**

According to this Midrash, two different things were troubling Rivka: the strong movements she sensed in her womb whenever she passed by a Beis Midrash or a house of idolatry, and the constant struggling and battling she felt going on within her. So *she went to enquire of God* what was the cause of all this turbulence.

God replied, “Two peoples are in your womb. You are carrying twins, and they are already of opposite natures and opposite faiths. Therefore, do not be concerned that you feel a baby attempting to emerge when you pass by two such different houses of worship.”

Then God addressed Rivka’s other concern, viz., that she felt a constant battle going on inside her. He said to her, “Two nations (לְאַמְּיִם) from your insides will be separated. There are two separate nations (kingdoms) here – and it is the nature of nations (kingdoms) to fight one another. Do not be amazed that these two kingdoms are battling already now, when you are still pregnant, since the separation between Yaakov and Esav has indeed already begun in the womb itself. This is because God wanted Yaakov to be born as free of impurity as possible, so He decreed that Yaakov would be born as a twin. He sent Rivka two opposing souls – one holy and elevated, and the other, impure – so that each one would draw into itself its corresponding aspect. The elevated soul became suffused with holiness and emerged as Yaakov, while the impure soul drew into itself all the *zuhama* (impurity) and emerged as Esav. **[This answers Question 2.]**

Now, it happens that kings and kingdoms do not constantly wage war with one another. This is generally for one of two reasons: 1) Each king is afraid of losing the battle against the other, which would diminish his power as well as his honour. 2) The lesser king realizes his inferiority compared to the greater king and is ashamed to wage war against his more prestigious enemy.

God told Rivka that neither of these reasons applied to Yaakov and Esav. The first one wasn’t relevant because the phrase *יְאַמְּיִם מִלְּאֵם וְלְאֵם* does not simply mean that one nation will be stronger than the other. It means that “Each nation will gain strength from [the downfall of] the other nation.” In other words, the only way each can become strong is from the defeat of the other one. When the nation of Yaakov (Israel) rises, the nation of Esav (Rome) falls, and vice versa. Therefore, neither kingdom will be afraid of having its honour and sovereignty diminished by going to war, for if it does not subdue its rival, it will not have **any** honour or power. **[This answers Question 3.]**

We can see that the second reason doesn’t apply from the words, *The older will serve the younger*. It is fitting that the older (Esav) serve the younger (Yaakov), because the younger one is holy. However, Esav will never agree to this, since he is the older and stronger of the two. And Yaakov will never regard Esav as his superior, since Yaakov is more elevated and holy. Therefore, neither king will submit to the other one, and the battle between them will never cease. **[This answers Question 4.]**

THE ALSHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508–1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title “HaKadosh” (the holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. The Alshich is most noted for his monumental Tanach commentary.

The Alshich uses his creative insight and encyclopaedic knowledge of Tanach, Talmud, and Midrash to weave together his profound interpretations. He simultaneously focuses on the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all with one or two concepts.

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