



ALSHICH

INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר בראשית
פרשת תולדות

SERIES 2: ISSUE 6

THE BIRTH OF YAAKOV AND ESAV

Chapter 25

25) *The first one came out a reddish color, all of him as hairy as a fur coat; so they named him Esav (עֵשָׂו).*

26) *After that his brother came out, his hand clutching Esav's heel (עַקְבָּן); so he named him Yaakov (יַעֲקֹב) and Yitzchak was sixty years old when [Rivka] gave birth to them.*

כו) וְאַחֲרֵי כֵּן יָצָא אֶחָיו וַיַּדַּו אֲחַזּוֹת בַּעֲקָב עַשְׂוֹ, וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב, וַיַּצְחַק בֶּן שְׁשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּלִדְתָּאָתָם..

Consider the following questions:

1. What is the connection between the name Esav (עֵשָׂו) and his being born covered with hair (verse 25)?
2. Why was Yaakov (יַעֲקֹב) named for the fact that he was born clutching Esav's heel (עַקְבָּן), when this is seemingly only a minor detail of the birth (verse 26)?
3. What is the relevance of telling us at this point that Yitzchak was sixty years old?

Verse 25 clearly implies that Esav was given his name because he was born covered in hair from head to toe, unlike a normal baby: *The first one came out ... all of him as hairy as a fur coat; so they named him Esav (עֵשָׂו)*. The connection between his name and appearance is as follows: The Sages (*Bereishis Rabbah* 63:8) explained that the name Esav (עֵשָׂו) means "a vain, or empty, creation" (שׁוֹא). This explains the last two letters (וָו). We may add that the first letter of Esav's name, ayin (ע), has the numerical value of 70. This signifies that when the people present at his birth saw Esav all covered in hair, they realized that he was enveloped in the 70 forces of emptiness, i.e, impurity, and therefore named him עֵשָׂו. **[This answers Question 1.]**

It should be noted the Alshich does not explain here why the "coat" of hair represents the forces of impurity, nor the significance of the number 70. Regarding the hair, we may explain on a simple level that Esav's being born like that gave him an impure, animal-like appearance. As to the number 70, the early Kabbalistic work *Sefer HaBahir* (#166) speaks of 70 building forces of creation (שְׁבָעִים). Since we know that God created negative forces as a parallel to the positive forces (see *Da'as Tevunos*, section 132), it follows that there must be 70 of them as well.

We asked above why Yaakov (יַעֲקֹב) was named for the seemingly minor detail of clutching Esav's heel (עַקְבָּן) at birth. However, by looking more carefully at Yaakov's name, we see that while it does center

on the fact that Esav was born first, it is not the whole story. If that were the case, Yaakov should have been named עַקְבָּ, which is in the past tense (literally, "he followed on the heel"), rather than עַקְבָּ, which is the future tense (*he will follow on the heel*).

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Toldos* 110) will help us answer this question. It speaks of a certain Roman general who inquired of Rabban Gamliel, "Who will acquire the rulership of the world after us?" Rabban Gamliel wrote back to him, "*His hand [was] clutching Esav's heel.*"

Clearly, Yaakov's grasping of Esav's heel was a symbol of something much deeper.

Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Zuta 19 teaches that Esav's inheritance consists of this world (עולם הזה), and Yaakov's inheritance is the World to Come (עולם הבא). Because this world is a preparation for the future world, it comes first, even though *Olam Haba* is of greater importance. In like manner, even though Yaakov was the holy one and the more important, it is Esav who was born first, because his inheritance and his rulership were to come first.

This fact is Israel's consolation in their current downtrodden and oppressed state. Yaakov was named עַקְבָּ (future tense) to symbolize that while Esav was born first, and would indeed rule first, Yaakov would ultimately prevail. Esav has power over Yisrael in this world because this world is Esav's portion, and it comes first. But in the end Yisrael will take what is his. In the Messianic era, after the Resurrection of the Dead (תְּחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים), it will be Yaakov (Yisrael) who rules.
[This answers Question 2.]

Regarding the last question, verse 26 states: *After that his brother came out, his hand clutching Esav's heel (עַקְבָּ); so he named him Yaakov.* Now, although the text doesn't tell us who named Yaakov, according to the simple meaning of the verse it was Yitzchak. But in light of what we have explained, that Yaakov's name was based on what would happen at the end of history, one might well ask how Yitzchak knew all this. The verse therefore continues: "... and Yitzchak was sixty years old when [Rivkah] gave birth to them." It is at age 60 that a person acquires a full measure of wisdom, and we may assume that Yitzchak by that age had attained *ruach hakodesh*. He was thus able to perceive what would happen in future generations – and he knew who would be a *tzaddik* (Yaakov) and who would be a *rasha* (Esav). [This answers Question 3.] This also explains why Yitzchak personally gave Yaakov his name, while Esav's name was given to him by those who were present at his birth ("so **they** named him Esav"). Yitzchak only wanted to name his righteous son; he had no desire to be the one to bestow a name upon the wicked Esav.

MAZEL TOV ON THE OCCASION OF NAFTOLI ROSE'S BAR MITZVAH

The Alshich (1508 – 1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title "HaKodosh" (the Holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. He simultaneously focuses on both the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all using one or two concepts.

These sheets are drawn from the Alshich on the Torah published by Feldheim and are in memory of Yental Bas Yitzchok, Mrs Jean Silkin. They seek to expand the spectrum of readers who can appreciate the Alshich's true greatness.