

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Toldot
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פרשת תולדות
כ"ט במרחשון תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 25:19-28:9

In this *parasha*, Rivka gives birth to twins, Esav and Yaakov, who struggle with each other, and Yaakov engages in bargaining and deception to obtain the birthright and Yitzchak's blessing.

Each of the brothers has an interesting name, or rather, two interesting names. Esav is also referred to as Edom, and Yaakov is renamed Yisrael after he struggles with the man/angel in *Bereshit* chapter 32. The Torah explains the origin of each of their names, but then doubles back on its own explanation.

Esav seems to be called Edom due to his appearance at birth (chapter 25, verses 24-25): “ וַיִּמְלְאוּ יָמֶיהָ, לְלֵדָת; וְהִנֵּה תוֹמָם, בְּבִטְנָהּ. וַיֵּצֵא הָרְאוּשׁוֹן אֲדָמוֹנִי, כְּלוֹ כְּאֲדָרֶת; וַיְקַרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ, עֵשָׂו. – And when her [Rivka's] days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first came forth ruddy (*admoni*), all over like a hairy mantle; and they called his name Esav.”

This seems like a perfectly logical reason for Esav to be called Edom. Yet, further on in the chapter, the Torah gives another reason entirely (verses 29-30): “ וַיִּזְדַּק יַעֲקֹב, וַיֵּבֵא עֵשָׂו מִן-הַשָּׂדֶה, וְהוּא עָיִף. וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל-יַעֲקֹב, הֲלֹעִיטֵנִי נָא מִן-הָאֹדֶם; וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב, הִנֵּה--כִּי עָיִף, אָנֹכִי; עַל-כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ, אֵדוֹם. – And Yaakov cooked stew; and Esav came in from the field, and he was faint. And Esav said to Yaakov: 'Let me swallow, please, some of this red, red (*ha'adom, ha'adom*) pottage; for I am faint.' Therefore was his name called Edom.”

A similar switch occurs with Yaakov's name. At first, the reader is sure that he is named Yaakov because of the circumstances of his birth (chapter 25, verse 26): “ וַאֲחֵרֵי-כֵן יָצָא אָחִיו, וַיְדוּ אַחֲזָת בַּעֲקֵב עֵשָׂו, וַיְקַרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ, יַעֲקֹב.

forth his brother, and his hand had hold on Esav's heel (*ba'akev*); and his name was called Yaakov.”

However, in chapter 27, when Esav discovers that Yaakov has obtained the first-born's blessing, the Torah says (verses 35-36): “ וַיֹּאמֶר, בָּא אָחִיךָ בְּמַרְמָה ; וַיִּקַּח, וַיִּהְיֶה עִתָּה בְּרַכְתֶּךָ. וַיֹּאמֶר הֲכִי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב, וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה פַעַמַיִם--אֶת-בְּכֹרְתִי לָקַח, וְהִנֵּה עִתָּה לָקַח בְּרַכְתִּי. – And he [Yitzchak] said: 'Your brother came with guile, and has taken away your blessing.' And he [Esav] said: 'Is not he rightly named Yaakov? for he has tricked (*ya'akveni*) me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he has taken away my blessing.'”

There is a great deal written about names in the Torah. According to the Rabbis of the Talmud, every name is suffused with meaning, and one can learn a great deal about people's characters by analyzing both their given names and their epithets. The names of Yaakov and Esav (Edom) are cases in point.

The Torah contains many hints and secrets, ideas that are ripe for discovering, and Biblical names are one category of these. The meaning that we attribute to characters' names is left to every individual to decide, another example of how the Torah speaks to a multitude of people across a multitude of generations.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What might the name Yaakov tell you about this person's character?
- What might the name Edom tell you about this person's character?
- What is your Hebrew name? Where does it come from? What does it mean? How does it relate to who you are?