

Parsha Pearls

Shemos 5768

And these are the names of the children of Yisroel who came to Egypt, with Yaakov, each man with his household came. (1:1)

The patriarch Yaakov had two names: Yaakov and Yisroel. Why does the Torah begin with Yisroel and then switch to Yaakov in mid-sentence? Rabbi Shmuel Borenstein, son of the Avnei Nezer, said that the name Yisroel denotes the elevated and noble status of the Jew, as the angel said when explaining this name, "For you have ruled over angels and men and been successful" (Bereishis 32:29). The name Yaakov, on the other hand, denotes the Jew in exile who must lower himself, bow and scrape before the gentiles, just as Yaakov bowed before his brother Esav and called him "my master".

When Israel began the Egyptian exile, they had to be very careful not to assimilate there and become like the Egyptians. Therefore they armed themselves with three physical boundary-markers that safeguarded the nobility of the Jew, symbolized by the name "Yisroel": they kept their own distinctive names, clothing and language. They viewed their own culture and beliefs as superior to those of the Egyptians; they looked down on and despised the Egyptian idolatry. Hence: "These are the names of the children of Yisroel who came to Egypt" – they survived their stay in Egypt because of the power and nobility of Yisroel.

Yet at the same time the Torah says "with Yaakov" – that in addition to this

nobility they maintained the attitude of subservience indicated by the name Yaakov. They accepted the yoke of exile willingly, and they did not complain about the heavy burden of exile. The Kuzari (3:12) says that a Jew who endures the exile with complaints almost loses his share in the World to Come. There was no contradiction between their subservience and their nobility and superiority, because the subservience was not to Egypt, but to G-d, Who had decreed the exile upon them. These two modes of conduct were what kept the Jewish people alive in exile.

This conduct must serve as our model during the current long and bitter exile, to feel the nobility of our Torah ways and yet bow to our oppressors, as the prophet writes, "He gives his beater his jaw, and suffers humiliation" (Eichah 3:30). Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa once said, "If a gentile calls out an insult at a Jew and the Jew answers back, he lengthens the exile, G-d protect us." Rather the Jew must bear the exile while feeling inner strength and nobility. (This is the opposite of the well-known movement that cannot bear to continue with the subservience and burdens of exile.) By so doing, we will soon merit the redemption, when our ashes will be replaced by pride. (Shem Mishmuel, Shemos, year 5677 (1917))