



## **Harnessing the Power of Eisav**

We know little about the birth of most Biblical personalities. Yet, the Torah describes in detail the birth of Jacob and Eisav and their respective naming.

“The first one came out reddish, hairy all over like a fur coat. They named him Eisav. His brother then came out, his hand grasping Eisav’s heel. He named him Yaakov” (B’reishit 25:25-26)

The name Eisav means “made” or “completed”. From day one, Eisav was full of strength and energy. The name Yaakov refers to the fact that he was holding on to Eisav’s heel (AKEIV). Later on, Yaakov is named a second time; here too, his name refers to his relationship with his brother Eisav. The night before meeting up with Eisav, he struggles with a mysterious stranger. This stranger – according to some, Eisav’s guardian angel – informs him:

“Your name will no longer be Yaakov, but Yisrael. You have struggled with angels and men, and you have prevailed” (32:29).

What is the inner meaning of Yaakov’s names? What is the

significance of his grasping on to Eisav’s heel? Why does he have two names?

### **Restraint versus Control**

Just as there are both positive and negative forces in the world, so too, every person is a composite of positive and negative traits. We need these negative forces, however; without their power and vitality, many goals and aspirations would lack the energy necessary to be realized.

Eisav represents the raw, base forces in the world. His reddish complexion indicated the violent and brutal nature of his personality. Yaakov did not prevent Eisav from coming into the world; after all, the world needs Eisav and his raw power. Rather, Yaakov held on to Eisav’s heel, holding him back. The name Yaakov refers to this aspect of restraint, reining in the fierce forces.

Ultimately, however, our goal is not to simply hold back these negative forces. We aspire to gain control over them and utilize them, like a hydro-electric dam that harnesses the vast energy of a raging waterfall for the production of electricity. For example, the Talmud tells us that a person with blood-thirsty tendencies should become a shochet (ritual slaughterer) or a mohel, thus sublimating his violent nature for noble

purposes. This higher aspiration is represented by Yaakov's second name, Yisrael, which comes from the root-word SAR, meaning "to rule".

The name Yaakov is appropriate when the Jews are in the Diaspora. There, they serve as a moral conscience to partially restrict the wild and violent forces in the world. But when redeemed and living in their own land, the Jewish people are able to attain the higher level of Yisrael. Then they have the opportunity to demonstrate how a nation may utilize its material capabilities for constructive and ethical goals.

*Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 58-59.*

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