

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

VAYISHLACH 5785

In the heartbreaking episode of Rachel's death while giving birth to her second son, the Torah relates that while she called her son Ben Oni, Yaakov named him Binyamin (35:18). Rav Aharon Shteinman zt"l (Ayelet HaShacher, ad loc.) raises the following difficulty: In the naming of all the children of Yaakov, all the names are given to them exclusively by either Rachel or Leah, with Yaakov saying ne'er a word. Yet, in this case, Yaakov intervenes and seemingly overrides Rachel's choice and calls his twelfth son, Binyamin, a name which ultimately remains. How can this be explained? Why indeed would Yaakov deny his wife's dying wish to name her son, Ben Oni?

In answering this question, there have been two basic approaches. The first, understands Ben Oni to mean, "the son of my pain, my misery". Clearly, the anguish Rachel experienced during her last moments as she realized she would never enjoy the parental nachas of rearing her children surely must have been deep and unbearable. Her son as Ben Oni would thus give expression to her poignant and terribly sad feelings. In response, Yaakov could simply not abide having his son bear such an unhappy and saddening name and

thus chose one which either signified a son born in Israel (Rashi) or a reference to a son born in his old age (Rashbam, Radak, Chizkuni).

As an extension of this approach, it has been suggested that the following final exchange may have taken place between Yaakov and Rachel. Rachel, on her deathbed, was worried about what would happen to her child growing up without a mother. As Yaakov was sitting at her bedside, she expressed her feelings: "I am very concerned about my child. Since he is growing up without a mother to take care of him. I pray that when I am gone from this world and in my heavenly abode, his behavior should not cause me grief." (Ben Oni = child of my grief). Yaakov, wanting to comfort his dying wife, told her not to worry. He promised her that he would take extra care of him and assured her that he would be a Binyamin", a right son", one who would conduct himself in a righteous and holy way, and be a source of delight and nachas to his mother in the world to come.

A second approach is advanced by Ramban (ad loc.) which contends that Yaakov did not completely alter the name given by his wife, but rather substituted a synonym (YAMIN) for the original word (ONI). Rather than disregarding Rachel's choice of name, he simply wanted to assign a different, positive meaning to Ben

Oni. As Ramban explains: the word ONI can mean either mourning or strength. Therefore, lest people mistake ONI to mean grief, Yaakov "called him Binyamin which means 'son of might/strength (BEN YAMIN)', for the right side - YAMIN ... [typically denoting] goodness and strength."

Still more remarkable is how both Malbim and Netziv (Ha'amek Davar, ad loc.) take Ramban's explanation ever further and cleverly argue that even Rachel herself also intended BEN ONI it to mean "the son of my strength". With her last breath, Rachel was declaring that in giving birth to her son, he was BEN ONI. She gave him "all of her strength", even at the expense of her own life.

In reflecting upon this second elucidation of the two names, we encounter one of Judaism's most extraordinary and impactful lessons, a magnificent message that, in many ways, runs through our entire Parsha. To wit: that suffering and defeat, sorrow and pain - ONI as desolation and grief, can also be the harbinger - can be "the birth" - of renewed vigor and even greater accomplishment - ONI as strength and vitality.

One instance in our Parsha: Yaakov in confronting his brother Eisav, is consumed by fear and dread (32:8), and yet when he courageously rises to fight the mysterious foe, his name is changed from Yaakov to Yisrael -

"[He] who has striven with [an angel of] Gd and with men and has prevailed" (32:29). The very shadowy adversary who seeks to defeat Yaakov, paradoxically ends up blessing him. And another: The Talmud (Chullin 91b) which states that the very sun that set for Yaakov (B'reishit 28:18) was the same sun that rose for him - VAYIZRACH LO HASHEMESH (32:32). Yaakov's setting sun, portending a night filled with dark foreboding and fright soon gave way to a shining sun of hope and newfound opportunity.

In the changing of the names, Yaakov would ensure that his son would not see himself as a product of grief and heartache. Instead, his name, Binyamin, would transform his pain into a springboard for a new source of strength and empowerment.

"The deeds of our Forefathers have been predictive of the future vicissitudes of their descendants." The events in our Parsha, as well as the entire Sefer B'reishit, foretell our destiny and reveal the mystery of Jewish existence. So much of what we've experienced throughout our long and tumultuous history: persecution and enormous Torah creativity and continuity, catastrophic holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel - is to be found cloaked and alluded to in the narratives of B'reishit. And not just in the past, but even now. Indeed, the recurrent

struggles and triumphs continue and hang on, and, however unsettling and distressful they may be, these historical - at times, inexplicably unfathomable "ups and downs" will persist and inexorably continue until, as the prophet has proclaimed, "Saviors will ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Eisav and the kingdom will be Gd's." (Ovadya 1:21)

The interminable, chronic history of war and peace, the seemingly endless cycle of defeat and victory will ultimately be redeemed in the Messianic era (Yerushalmi, Avoda Zara 2a) when the "amalek-evil" of Eisav will be eradicated and the good of Eisav will finally recognize his Creator, "and the earth will be filled of knowledge of the Lord..." (Yeshayahu 11:9, Chavakuk 2:14). But until then, the Jew must fight the good fight and at the same time internalize and adopt the great virtue of waiting; waiting and waiting while doggedly, untiringly exhibiting the indomitable faith that in the end, goodness and righteousness will permanently and everlastingly triumph!

