



Grasping at heels

RABBI ZVI HOLLAND
Toldot, Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

The Torah tells us that when Jacob was born, he was grasping the heel of his twin, Esau, and therefore he was named Jacob, which means "he will follow at his heels." The narrative then quickly skips to a transaction made between the twins where Jacob purchases the birthright of the firstborn from Esau. This juxtaposition of Jacob's birth posture with the purchase of Esau's birthright begs a meaningful explanation.

When Jacob is named, the verse merely says, "And He called him Jacob." Rashi comments that the "He" Jacob was named by was God Himself. This is even more fascinating when one examines the text regarding Esau's naming - "And they named him Esau." Rashi comments here that everyone called him Esau since he was so well developed when he was born.

Why was the appropriate name for Esau so apparent to all and Jacob's a mystery to all but One?

We might suppose that the birth of Esau, a mature hairy baby with adultlike features, created quite a stir. The bystanders surely assumed that Esau would be the dominant twin, the one who would carry the tradition of his father for the future. As hopes and dreams were just beginning to form for his future, his twin was born holding his heel, clearly not at all worthy of the attention his older brother was attracting. Despite that, God named Jacob, predicting that Esau's superiority would be only superficial and that Jacob's grasping of the heel of Esau heralded quite a different future. Rashi explains that Jacob's heel grasping was a "sign that Esau will not yet have completed his dominion before Jacob will rise up and take it from him."

Although not immediately apparent, Jacob's future dominance over his brother was foreseen at birth. The naming of Jacob and the subsequent purchase of the birthright from Esau are the beginning of Jacob's ascendancy to moral and spiritual superiority; therefore, they are recorded together.

As Esau returns from his first murder, Jacob buys his birthright. Slowly but surely, the weaker, meeker scholarly type, Jacob, who typifies the Jewish People throughout history, gains recognition of his greater claim to the legacy of Isaac and Abraham, his forebears. And while to the onlooker it may seem that Esau should be the heir apparent to the great tradition of Abraham - an imposing man, physically strong, handsome and practical - it is Jacob who can maintain the spiritual integrity needed to carry his family legacy.

What was the difference between them? Why does Jacob achieve superiority? Esau was thrust into the big world; as the verse says, "Esau became a skilled trapper, a man of the field. Jacob was a man without fault, living in tents." Before Jacob ventured into the practical world, he studied in the tents of Shem and Ever, the Torah Academy of the family of Noah. With years of tutelage from his elders, Jacob was prepared for his future, ready to successfully venture into the world and lay a foundation for the future that would outlast every other civilization.

At the beginning of his commentary on the book of Genesis, Nachmanides teaches that the actions of the fathers - *ma'aseh avos siman l'banim* - are an example for the children. The entire book of Genesis is written in order to help the Jewish people make choices in the future. We worry about our future all the time, but Jacob has already shown us the way. Our ability in this generation to achieve meaningful, vital continuity will be dependent on following in the footsteps of our forefather Jacob, and on preparing ourselves and our children with ongoing lifelong Torah study, so that we may prevail against all odds at all times for eternity.

Rabbi Zvi Holland is dean of the Phoenix Community Kollel.