# Issues in Vayishlach

### The Edomite King List: Nahum Sarna

This list is not genealogical like the others, but it simply details eight kings who ruled in Edom prior to the establishment of the Israelite monarchy. The register is characterized by a lack of uniformity and by an assortment of anomalies: The length of the monarch’s reign is never given; in four cases, the father’s name is recorded, in four not; a place-name is attached to seven kings, but in three instances the formula is “the name of his city was X,” and in four there is simply the particle “from”; no place-name is repeated; with two kings some additional information of a personal nature is brought; remarkably, no king is succeeded by his son, yet the invariable formula “When X died, Y succeeded him as king” suggests unbroken continuity.

The royal record inserted here is unique in the Hebrew Bible. It is strongly reminiscent, however, of the several king lists that have come down to us from Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria. It may well have been extracted by the Hebrew writer from original Edomite sources. The variations in formulas used, and the lack of uniformity in the type of detail cited, suggest that we have a compilation drawn from more than one Edomite source, not a single homogeneous tradition.

In its present form, the list conveys the impression of a continuous succession of national kings, each reigning from a different center. The absence of dynastic kingship is paralleled in the election of Saul in Israel. Here, too, no provision was made for the passage of the crown from father to son. If, then, we are dealing with a list of consecutive monarchs, the period of time covered by the eight would be between 160 and 200 years, based on the average 20- to 25-year reigns of ancient Near Eastern kings.

This conclusion raises serious problems. Since Saul ascended the throne about 1020 B.C.E., the Edomite monarchy could not have been founded before about 1200 B.C.E. Yet, according to Numbers 20.14 and Judges 11.17, Moses sends a communication to “the king of Edom,” and the latest possible date for the Exodus is about 1250 B.C.E.!

Of course, the eight kings could have exceeded the average in the lengths of their reigns, and this would take the establishment of the monarchy in Edom still further back in time. The indisputable fact, however, is that Egyptian texts from the 13th to the 12th centuries B.C.E. depict the Edomites as Bedouin, and the region of Seir as the grazing ground of nomads. Thus, Rameses II (ca. 1290-1224) claims to have “laid waste the land of the Asiatic nomads and plundered Mount Seir.” The report of an Egyptian frontier official from the end of the 13th century B.C.E. refers to “bedouin tribes of Edom” passing into Egypt. Rameses III (1183–1152) boasts about having destroyed “the people of Seir among the bedouin tribes” and claims to have “razed their tents.” There is not the slightest suggestion of a settled kingdom of Edom in this period.

The same picture emerges from recent archaeological excavations in Transjordan. These provide no evidence for sedentary occupation in Edom between the 13th and the 11th centuries B.C.E.

The solution to the problem lies in a proper understanding of the title “king” used in our text. By no means need it imply a settled, unified, national monarchy. The phenomenon of petty tribal kings who held sway over grazing lands within a particular locality is well documented in the ancient world. The Assyrian King List opens with the names of “17 kings living in tents.” Royal archives from the city of Mari claim the defeat of “seven kings,” and, further, of “three Yaminite Kings,” the names being those of seminomadic tribes

In Greece, the three tribes that made up the Dorian group and the four Ionian tribes that constituted the Athenian group had tribal kings

The Bible itself testifies to this restricted, tribal use of “king” in that the same five personages who are designated “kings of Midian” in Numbers 31.8 are called chieftains (nesi’im) in Joshua 13.21. It is no coincidence that in Genesis 25.4, Midian is made up of five tribes. Similarly, the king of the Amalekites referred to in 1 Samuel 15.8, 20, and 32 is nothing more than a tribal chief. Throughout its history, this wild people roamed the wastelands of the Negev and Sinai regions, and had no state of its own, only fortified encampments from which forays were made into the settled areas.

Thus, there is nothing in our Edomite King List that requires the existence of a national, unified kingdom of Edom. The various individuals cited were simply localized tribal chieftains, as were also “the king of Edom” with whom Moses dealt. This explains why each king is assigned a different territory and why there are no dynasties, just as there were none for the Israelite judges.

Finally, the possibility cannot be ruled out that our list, if it is a compilation made from originally distinct Edomite records, refers in reality to tribal kings, many of whom were contemporaneous with one another. The formula that presupposes succession may well be the work of the Hebrew writer, not a part of the Edomite document from which it was extracted. If this is the case, the need to suppose a history of two centuries for the Edomite monarchy is eliminated.

### God-Wrestling: Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben

P’shat: Explanation

When this portion opens, 20 years have passed since the broth­ers Jacob and Esau have seen one another. Jacob stole Esau’s rightful blessing from their father, fled in the night, and forged a new life for himself far away from home. Now, the two are about to be reunited.

Two decades later, Esau remains the more powerful brother. At pres­ent, he commands 400 armed men. Understandably, Jacob is terrified that Esau will finally exact revenge for Jacob’s childhood deception, taking everything he has accumulated over the years—wealth, wives, and children.

The night before the confrontation is to take place, as Jacob stands alone with his fears by the river Yabbok, the Torah tells us that a “man” appears and wrestles with Jacob until dawn. Jews traditionally under­stand the mysterious “man” to be an angel sent by God to test Jacob’s strength and readiness to face up to his childhood actions. This “angel” might also represent Jacob’s inner demons of regret.

As Jacob conquers his fears by overcoming his midnight adver­sary, the mysterious wrestler then gives him a blessing in the form of a new name, “Israel,” which means literally “God-wrestler.” He tells Jacob that this name is a blessing because Jacob has “striven with beings divine and human, and you have prevailed.” Because of this fateful night and Jacob’s willingness to confront his fears and over­come them, Jacob—and subsequently the entire Jewish people—will be forever characterized as and challenged to be “God-wrestlers.”

D’rash: Mordecai Kaplan’s Insight

The God-impulse in us is not fear but hope, not helplessness but self-help, not despondency but courage, not the obfuscation of the mind, but the light of reason, not the belittlement of what man is but the exaltation of what he might be.

Kaplan understood that being human inevitably entails spiritual and psychological struggle-wrestling with our own inner polarities of fear and hope, despair and courage, helplessness and empowerment. Like Jacob’s encounter in this portion, whenever we struggle, it is akin to confronting the Divine within ourselves.

Kaplan also believed that each of us is challenged to become “God­-wrestlers” in our own ways. However difficult it is, when we allow the “God-impulse” within us to lead us along a path of continued spiri­tual growth, we emulate our spiritual ancestor Jacob, who willfully confronted the demons of his past and emerged a far better human being. Each of us can emerge from our own struggles better able to fulfill the divine potential of what we are meant to become.

A Personal Reflection—What Matters Most

The Midrash Derech Eretz Rabbah 7 tells us, “Three things are of equal importance: wisdom, fear of God, and humility.”

One Sunday morning, I sat in my study listening as a long­time congregant and by all outward appearances a powerful titan of industry described his inner pain and confusion. As his eyes teared, he spoke of a profound feeling of being lost and unsure about what his life truly meant.

Many times over the years, I had heard other men and women utter this same lament of outward success and inward emptiness. Some­times, lives can crash and burn despite—or perhaps even because of—external accomplishments. As some people rise in their respective fields, they become increasingly enamored of their own successes to the point of believing they are truly “self-made”; they achieved it all on their own. They may take their spouse or partner for granted, dis­counting that person’s extensive care and support over the years. Only when this primary connection crumbles do they realize that the most important things in life are never things at all, but rather the relation­ships we have with those we love. Without these relationships, we can easily lose our spiritual center and our life’s meaning.

The congregant sat with me off and on over the coming months as we wrestled together with his inner demons. He sought to recapture the values, goals, and heart that represented the best version of who he wanted to be.

Ultimately, he found the courage to open his heart once again to those he loved. He realized that being strong requires vulnerability, and being whole as a person requires us to recognize our dependence on one another, as well as to appreciate all those (known and unknown) without whom our dreams would never have been realized.

He also embarked on a spiritual life-journey on which he saw him­self, like Jacob, as a God-wrestler. In so doing, he regained the essential character trait of humility.

My time with him reminded me that each of us can be Jacob/Israel in our own way. Every one of us can be God-wrestlers. We can hum­bly embrace our dependence on one another and courageously face the demons of our past, all the while staying present to discover the everyday wonders that imbue our lives with meaning.

### Reading The Face(s): Udi Aloni

Udi Aloni is an Israeli American filmmaker, writer, visual artist and political activist whose works focus on the interrelationships between art, theory, and action. He is a son of the Israeli politician Shulamit Aloni.

Panim, which in English means “face,” in Hebrew is plural. The word panim is, further, both masculine and feminine. Also, if, in English, panim is sur­face, in Hebrew it’s both surface and interior (p’nim). So panim is inside and outside, it’s male and female, and it’s multiplicity. Let’s keep this full notion of panim in mind as we go on.

Jacob is in a very defensive position as Esau approaches. Says Genesis, “Jacob was greatly afraid and anxious.” Rashi writes that Jacob was greatly afraid that Esau might kill him, and he was anxious, or sorry, that he might have to kill Esau. This powerful and inevitable encounter with the other led me to the question: What is it in this moment that forces one to either become a murderer or to be murdered? In her book Precarious Life Judith Butler tries to find a third place for this moment. She writes, “the face makes various utter­ances at once: it bespeaks an agony, an injurability, at the same time that it bespeaks a divine prohibition against killing.”

When you meet yourself, the question is “to be or not to be.” But when you meet the other, the question is, “to kill or be killed.” And Jacob dis­covers the most radical sort of third place, a place in which he simultane­ously meets the self and the other. In the story, Esau is on his way toward Jacob, who begins to send him many presents. The various English trans­lations do not convey how present the face is within the text, so I’ll provide you with my own translation from the Hebrew. However, note that the repetition as such does not reveal itself to even Hebrew readers. So the text reads: “I will make his face pardon me with the gift that goes before my face, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept my face. So the present went over his face.”

Jacob sends the gifts in order to prepare for this face-to-face. We know that Jacob is aware of the gravity of the situation even before he encounters his brother. Yet this is Jacob the manipulator, as his name suggests. This is the Jacob who inveigles his brother by sending gifts, the Jacob who is trying to avoid being murdered alongside his whole tribe.

Rashi’s beautiful interpretation regarding Jacob’s double fear (to kill or to be killed) can be read retroactively as a prophecy, because at this stage in the story Jacob has only the fear of being killed. The narrative is about to reach the encounter between two brothers—or should I say two nations, as the prophecy stated when the twins were in Rebecca’s womb: “two nations are in your womb.” But at this moment, at the very apex, the narrative suddenly, aggressively, splits in the middle. Just as Jacob is sending presents and fretting over his future face-to-face with Esau, a new narrative penetrates the text. In this new narrative Jacob struggles with an angel all night long.

The morning after, the angel tells him: “Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel.” The angel continues, explaining the name: “Ki saritah im Elohim vayanashim, vayacholta.” The word saritah in Hebrew has a double meaning, so the statement is translated as both “You have fought with God and humans, and you managed,” and “You have been with God and humans, and you managed.” Whereas his former name, Jacob, in a way means “manipu­lator,” the name Israel means “fighting with God” and “being with God.” In the moment that Jacob becomes Israel, he becomes a powerful person.

In the morning, he gives a name to the place in which they were strug­gling: P’nay El, “the face of God.” Thus the face of God becomes the place of the radical and eternal change, the place from which Jacob, or better said, Israel, will go to meet his brother. To use Nietzsche’s terminology, he changes from the slave morality to the morality of the master. (In the name Israel, we also find the word sar; which can mean “high prince” or “master.”)

Therefore, in the morning, when Jacob continues to send presents to Esau, I read this as the most radical change of the meaning of giving. If Jacob’s gift previously came from his position of weakness, now it’s his generosity that generates the giving. So, in a way, we can now understand Rashi’s interpretation of the sentence “Jacob was greatly afraid and anx­ious.” Before the struggle with the angel, he sends gifts out of his fear of being killed. And now, when he’s very powerful physically and spiritually, he sends the gifts so as not to murder.

What we learn is that even though, at first, it seems unclear why the struggle with the angel appears in the middle of the story, it is now obvious that this appearance comes from the most ethical change in the encoun­ter with the other. It is not, as we might first assume, a separate narrative; rather, it is the heart and soul of the story. The narrative shifts point us in the direction of the true meaning of a radical ethical change in one person and his relations with his other. Interestingly enough, whereas in English the word brother contains the other, in Hebrew, “other” (acher) includes the word for “brother” (ach). The other is never an absolute other. Or, moreover, as in the case of Jacob and Esau, the other also always has the quality of the twin.

In the morning, Jacob is no longer weak; he’s no longer the Jacob who tries to pull tricks; he is Israel now. The giving is now an entirely different act, and the gift is an entirely different gift. It’s a gift in good faith. It’s the gift to the other from an entirely different position.

Then Esau runs toward him, embraces him, and kisses him on his neck.

Both brothers are hugging and crying. Jacob tells Esau, “I saw your face as I saw the face of God.” We have to remember that after he struggled with the angel he said, “I have seen God face-to-face.” So the face is not the face of a Big Other; when you act in good faith, the face becomes familiar. The face of God and the face of the (br)other and the face of the self are a multiplicity of faces that meet in this act of good faith.

Now one might think that we could end the story here, with this beau­tiful happy ending. But, in reality, there is another chapter to the story.

What bothers me is this: when I reread this narrative, I realized that there’s something so beautiful in it, in the two brothers falling on each other, kissing each other on the neck, etc. So I wondered: if this is the case, why is Esau always portrayed as such a villain in Judaism? There’s something so beautiful about Esau here.

So I went to Midrash B’reshit Rabbah and I found that they turn the text of the Bible upside-down using the similarity of the words “kiss” and “bite” in Hebrew, nashak and nashach. And they write: “He didn’t come to kiss him, but to bite him, and Jacob’s neck turned into marble. And the teeth of the villain became dull.”

This story then comes to explain why they were crying: “One wept about his neck which became marble, and the other was crying about his teeth that became dull.”

One might ask: what is the psychological phenomenon that is hap­pening here? We have rabbis who read this text and felt a lot of guilt toward Esau. Guilt toward someone who has been wronged by Israel, by us. Someone who suffered because of our fathers, our ancestors. Yet Esau accepted our kind of generosity. He came to us and hugged and kissed us. Esau felt the radical change in Jacob, and when he realized that his gener­osity came from good faith he ran to Israel, hugged him, and kissed him. But what Israel the father understood, Israel the nation couldn’t handle: the guilt and the shame of facing the narrative of Esau.

Israel comes to meet his brother limping, i.e., humble. He is not trying to show his power, rather, he is ready to concede his weakness. This limp is the sign we should carry with us in order not to forget the moment of the radical change that empowered us. Yet the limp is also the sign that protects us from our vanity. It is the sign that we carry with us, in good faith and humility, to our inevitable meeting with our other, our brother, our twin.

### The Struggle: Nahum Sarna

This extraordinary episode, related with remarkable brevity, is replete with problems of interpretation. These involve: the imagery, the geographic locale, the purpose of the assault, the identity of the assailant, the significance of the name change, the cohesion of the diverse elements, and the place of the story within the larger narrative unit.

The literary artistry shows every sign of the influence of two dominant motifs common to a broad range of cultures. The river as the scene of the struggle recalls the many tales of river-spirits that fight with humans who seek to cross their abodes. Insofar as rivers frequently prove to be unexpectedly treacherous, they were believed to possess some malevolent power dangerous to human life. Travelers would take good care to propitiate the river-spirit through sacrifice, libation, or other ritual before attempting to ford. Equally widespread is the motif of a demonic being whose power is restricted to the duration of the night and who is unable to abide the breaking of the dawn. An obvious corollary is the opportunity accorded a brave soul to derive profit from the situation by holding on to the demon long enough to bend it to his will.

These motifs are obviously incompatible with Israelite monotheism. They have consequently been refracted and transformed in our biblical narrative. Nothing in the text connects the mysterious assailant with a river-spirit. The stranger does not interfere with the passage of personnel, livestock, and baggage. It is only after these have already crossed the river that he becomes active. It is Jacob alone who is the object of his aggression. Jacob clearly knows nothing of any river-spirit, for the attack is wholly unexpected, and no propitiatory ceremony takes place.

The contrast with the folk-tale genre is further accentuated through the absence of any description of the adversary. The usual pattern requires the spirit to assume the form of animals, serpents, and monsters in a constant shift from one guise to another in the course of the struggle. Again, in a complete reversal of roles, it is the mysterious being who injures Jacob; traditionally, the spirit is the one who is punished and wounded by the human defender. The fact that the assailant blesses Jacob proves that it cannot be a demon, for the notion of eliciting and receiving a blessing from a demon is unexampled and inconceivable in a biblical context.

In short, the occurrence of this incident by a river and the sudden attack by a mysterious assailant indicate that popular folk tales provided the literary model for this biblical narrative, but a careful and radical purging of all elements offensive to the monotheism of Israel has taken place.

The geographical locale of the incident is crucial to its understanding. Its true significance lies not in the river ambience as such, but in its having occurred exactly at the crossing of the Yabbok. This river is otherwise mentioned in the Bible exclusively as a frontier of Israel, the limit of Israel’s first victory against the kingdoms east of the Jordan [that of Sichon and Og] after it emerged from the desert wanderings. The location at the Yabbok cannot be coincidental; it suggests that the purpose of the assault upon Jacob is to frustrate his return to his homeland, to prevent him from crossing over into the future national territory of Israel.

This raises the question of the identity of the antagonist. Who but Esau would have had such an obstructionist interest? But the wrestler is definitely not Esau himself. Hence, he must stand for Esau in some manner. He is, as it were, Esau’s alter ego. The vocabulary employed in the narrative to identify the strange personage—a “man,” “a divine being” (elohim)—is that used elsewhere of angels. Indeed, the prophet Hosea explicitly describes him as such in Hosea 12.4. The most plausible solution, therefore, is to see in this mysterious being the celestial patron of Esau. This, indeed, is the interpretation given in a midrash. Throughout the ancient world, the idea was current that each city-state, each people, had its divine protector.

In monotheistic Israel such a notion was intolerable. It therefore became transmuted into a belief in the existence of subordinate tutelary spirits who were part of the celestial host. This notion finds unambiguous expression in Daniel 10.13, 20, and 21, which speak of the celestial princes of Persia and Greece, but it is rooted in much earlier times. Psalm 82 is a classic example, and Isaiah 24.21 reflects the same picture. This idea is behind such passages as Deuteronomy 4.19 and 29.25, which state that God Himself allotted the nations their divinities. An interesting light on this belief is shed by the textual history of Deuteronomy 32.8, which reads as follows: “When the Most High gave nations their homes / And set the divisions of man, / He fixed the boundaries of peoples / In relation to Israel’s numbers.” In the last phrase, the Greek version of the Jews of Alexandria has “the messengers (angeloi) of God” presupposing a Hebrew reading b’nei el/elohim instead of our received Hebrew text b’nei yisra’el. Such a Hebrew text actually turned up in Cave 4 of Qumran.

In summation, the mysterious creature who assails Jacob as he is about to cross the future border of Israel is none other than the celestial patron of Esau-Edom, who is the inveterate enemy of the people of Israel. The entire episode foreshadows the impending confrontation with Esau, whom Jacob can now meet with confidence. It is also emblematic of subsequent historic relationships between the peoples of Israel and Edom.

It is this antagonism that makes the blessing, the change of name from Jacob to Israel, all the more meaningful. This act constitutes Esau’s acquiescence in Jacob’s right to the paternal blessings. It acknowledges the promised land to be Jacob’s rightful heritage. It is entirely appropriate that the new name, that by which the future nation is to be known, should be bestowed at the frontier, just as the patriarch overcomes his opponent and can enter that land unhindered. Seen in light of the above, the narrative of the assailant is an integral part of the Jacob-Esau encounter, not an intrusion.

### The Struggle: W. Gunther Plaut

Since ancient days, crossing a river has been symbolic of overcoming hazard and going forward to new experience (note such expressions as “crossing the Rubicon”). In this sense, Jacob passing over the Yabbok to meet Esau crosses the watershed of his life. Everything that has hap­pened to him since he obtained both birthright and parental blessing by doubtful means has been tainted with his own guilt and his brother’s enmity. Jacob cannot fully face his own past unless he seeks reconciliation with Esau, and this he can do only as he becomes a different person. When Jacob becomes Israel, he can achieve rec­onciliation with his brother.

Rivers, it was believed, were infested by de­mons. We may therefore infer that Jacob first thought that the “man” who met him during the night was a river demon—the assonance between the words Yabbok and va-yei’aveik, “he struggled,” is not accidental. The man’s urgent request, “Let me go; dawn is breaking,” fortifies Jacob’s belief that he has met a demonic being who must not be seen and who therefore must depart before sunrise.

Until that moment arrives, Jacob is still his old self, albeit struggling to emerge into a new moral consciousness. As long as he can assume that his adversary is a demonic force, the old Jacob stands rooted in his past; it is only as the light breaks that he realizes it was not a de­mon but God whom he resisted (but see the next little essay below)—and now he sees his own past and present struggle in a new light, and asks his adversary for a blessing.

The struggle may be seen as a reenactment of the Eden theme: God wants us to conform to the divine will, yet also wants us to be free, even to oppose and struggle with God. Jacob becomes Israel only after he has wrestled with God. The Torah says that there was also physical evidence of the struggle. The formerly self-assured and successful Jacob is now diminished in appearance; no longer with proud purposeful strides, but with a hesitant limp will he greet his brother.

Some interpreters say that Jacob struggled with no one but himself, emerging from the fight purified in soul. However, this complete internalization of the struggle does not reflect the biblical intent. The text tells of God’s role in Jacob’s renewal; Jacob becomes Israel only with God’s help, hence God’s name is embedded in the new name that the forefather now bears and that his descendants will bear after him. Its etymology appears to proclaim “May God rule.” Like Abram and Sarai, like a new king ascending the throne, Jacob receives a name that testifies that he is ready to assume his inheritance, and that he has founded his life on the pledge he made at Beth El.

Let me go, for dawn is breaking

The folkloric character of this haunting episode becomes especially clear at this point. The notion of a night spirit that loses its power or is not permitted to go about in daylight is common to many folk traditions, as is the troll or guardian figure who blocks access to a ford or bridge.

This temporal limitation of activity suggests that the “man” is certainly not God Himself, and probably not an angel in the ordinary sense. It has led Claus Westermann to conclude that the nameless wrestler must be thought of as some sort of demon. Nahum Sarna, following the Midrash, flatly identifies the wrestler as the tutelary spirit (sar) of Esau.

But the real point, as Jacob’s adversary himself suggests when he refuses to reveal his name, is that he resists identification. Appearing to Jacob in the dark of the night, before the morning when Esau will be reconciled with Jacob, he is the embodiment of portentous antagonism in Jacob’s dark night of the soul. He is obviously in some sense a doubling of Esau as adversary, but he is also a doubling of all with whom Jacob has had to contend, and he may equally well be an externaliza­tion of all that Jacob has to wrestle with within himself. A powerful physical metaphor is intimated by the story of wrestling: Jacob, whose name can be construed as “he who acts crookedly,” is bent, permanently lamed, by his nameless adversary in order to be made straight before his reunion with Esau.

### The Name “Israel”: Nahum Sarna

The precise understanding of this name is impeded by many difficulties, not the least being that its grammatical structure has no exact analogue among biblical personal names.

The explanation presupposed by the narrative requires a stem *sin-resh-hei*. This must be taken seriously for the following reasons: the same stem is found in Hosea 12.4; it is also the base of Seraiah, another fairly frequent, if equally enigmatic, name; the element *sin-resh-hei* is unlikely to be folk etymology, which invariably explains an obscure term by one in common use, not by one just as arcane—and *sin-resh-hei* is otherwise unknown.

The meaning “to strive” for this stem is extracted from the context. However, in names formed by a verb combined with el, the divine element is usually the subject of the action, not its indirect object. Yisra’el, therefore, should properly mean “God strives,” not “He strives with God.”

None of the suggestions proposed to explain the verbal element has yielded satisfaction. Until more philological evidence is forthcoming, the true explanation escapes us. It is worth noting that in biblical times there already seem to have been traditions connecting the name yisra’el with either sovereignty or rectitude. Hosea 12.5, in reference to our narrative, says of Jacob va-yasar, which can only derive from *sin-vav- resh*, a byform of *sin-resh-resh*, “to have dominion.” This suggests that the prophet took the name to mean “He had dominion over a divine being.”

Further support for this interpretation is the word misrah in Isaiah 9.5,6, which undoubtedly means “authority.” Just as apt is the poetic use of yeshurun (Jeshurun) as a synonym for Israel in Deuteronomy. In this last passage it parallels “Jacob” (Isaiah 40.4). Since the stem yod-*sin-resh* means “to be upright, straight,” it forms a perfect antonym of ya’akov, understood to be connected with “craftiness, deceit.” If yisra’el is indeed associated with yeshurun, the change of name would express the transformation of character from deviousness to moral rectitude. According to this particular interpretation, found in Ramban’s commentary on Deuteronomy 2.10 and 7.12, the name would mean “He who is upright with God.” Another explanation, frequent in the writings of Philo and also adduced by Seder Eliyahu Rabba, regards yisra’el as a contraction of ish-ra’ah-el, “The man who saw a divine being.” This has doubtless been influenced by Genesis 32.31.

### The Name “Israel”: W. Gunther Plaut

Abraham’s change of name was a mere rhetorical flourish compared to this one, for of all the patriarchs Jacob is the one whose life is entangled in moral ambiguities. Rashi beautifully catches the resonance of the name change: “It will no longer be said that the blessings came to you through deviousness [which is suggested in the name Jacob], but instead through lordliness [from a root that can be extracted from the name Israel] and openness.”

It is nevertheless noteworthy that the pronouncement about the new name is not completely fulfilled. Whereas Abraham is invari­ably called “Abraham” once the name is changed from “Abram,” the narrative continues to refer to this patriarch in most instances as “Jacob.” Thus, “Israel” docs not really replace his name but becomes a synonym for it—a practice reflected in the parallelism of biblical poetry, where “Jacob” is always used in the first half of the line and “Israel,” the poetic variation, in the second half.

### The Reconciliation: W. Gunther Plaut

Esau’s readiness to make peace comes as a surprising climax to the carefully prepared encounter. His retainer of 400 armed men allows us to suppose that he did not begin with peaceful intentions, especially since his scouts must have informed him that Jacob was unarmed. Esau expected to meet the old Jacob, the hated sibling who had overtaken him with clev­erness and guile. He was prepared for violence.

But in the brothers’ fateful meeting all is sud­denly changed—and hardly because of the gifts that Jacob brings, for Esau is a wealthy man in his own right. The reconciliation occurs because it is Israel, not Jacob, whom Esau meets, and Jacob is a new man who asks forgiveness, if not in words then in manner, who limps toward him with repentant air and not deceitful arro­gance. He is not a man to be put to the sword; he is a man who can be loved as a brother. Uncomplicated Esau, who himself has matured, senses this at once and runs to kiss his newly found brother. The two are now at peace; and Jacob-Israel, who has no further need to flee from Esau’s wrath, settles down and builds a house.

### The Rape of Dinah: W. Gunther Plaut

The Tragic Element

Why does the Torah retell this violent tale of rape and murder when many other incidents in the rich and varied lives of the Ancestors were probably forgotten? Why not this one?

A partial answer lies in the fact that this story would later serve to explain the landless status of Simeon and Levi. The Levites became hereditary temple servants without a territory of their own, while a portion of the tribe of Sim­eon seems to have intermingled with the tribe of Judah and also with the Canaanites. This may explain the startling difference between Simeon’s census figures in Numbers 1 (59,300) and Num­bers 26 (22,200) and the complete omission of Simeon in the blessing of Moses (Deut. chapter 33). The story of the rape of Dinah may thus have helped to provide a moral explanation for certain geopolitical realities of later centuries.

The incident at Shechem must also be seen as another chapter in the Jacob tragedy. As a youth, Jacob had practiced deceit; now two of his sons dishonor themselves and him by deceiving the people of Shechem. Dinah, Simeon, and Levi are the first three children about whom, for different reasons, Jacob grieves; Judah, Reuben, and Jo­seph will follow in time.

Jacob has become Israel, but this fact has not erased the tragic ele­ment from his life. Quite the contrary, his per­ception and deep sensitivity have brought him a greater capacity for suffering. His children, who represent his future, will bring him untold ag­ony. This long-range retribution visited on Jacob also underscores the Bible’s condemnation of the hypocritical concern for religion with which Jacob’s sons induced Shechem and his people to submit to circumcision. The story of Dinah ex­poses this pretense of faith in all its ugliness.

The Reprimand

Jacob’s castigation of his sons is so weak that it is puzzling. He seems worried only that his own reputation will suffer. To be sure, he will speak more strongly on his deathbed, but how is it possible that he would view the unwarranted killing of so many people merely as having brought trouble to himself?

Some critics say that there were two separate strands of the Dinah story. Jacob’s response, they say, belonged to a tradition (attributed to J) that told of the slaying of only Chamor and Shechem, an act that could have appeared as justifiable ret­ribution and that would elicit the reprimand now found in the text. The story of the killing of the city’s inhabitants, they say, stems from another tradition (P), one that had no record of Jacob’s reaction. However persuasive this argument seems, we nevertheless must approach the text as it is now. And it here portrays the biblical Jacob as a man who makes no moral judgment on his sons.

Jacob is silent because he has in fact nothing to say. He has already become the object of events and has entered the twilight of his life. He is still young enough to become a father once more, but he is already too old to be in sole command of his fate. The divine blessings that follow (in chapter 35) merely reiterate what has already been bestowed on him in the past, and Jacob returns to Beth El as if symbolically to revisit the earlier stages of his life. This is what we tend to do when growing old. In Jacob’s case, how­ever, old age will betoken not serenity, but further trials. It thus becomes painfully clear that “Israel” was a name, not a reward; a potential, not a fulfillment. Literally and figuratively, Jacob will limp through the remainder of his life.

### Shechem: Nahum Sarna

Biblical archaeologists now have identified Shechem with a mound situated about 1 mile east of modern Shechem (Nablus). It is flanked by Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. Already settled in Neolithic times, Shechem is first mentioned in the Egyptian “execration texts” of the 19th century B.C.E., a collection of clay tablets inscribed with the names of towns and their rulers hostile to Egyptian occupation of Canaan. From the same period comes a stela referring to an Asian campaign by King Sen-Usert III (c. 1880-1840 B.C.E.), which shows Shechem to have been a large and important city. The El-Amarna letters make clear that in the 14th century B.C.E. it was a major city-state. Other texts show that Western Semites were the main element in the population at this time.

Shechem was destined to play a crucial role in the history of Israel. Abraham had made it his first stopping place when he arrived in the land. Here he received his first theophany and built an altar. Jacob had the same experience in Shechem and bought a plot of land there. He also buried there the idolatrous appurtenances found in his retinue. Joseph set out for this city when he searched for his brothers, and he was ultimately buried there. Joshua appointed it one of the “cities of refuge” and assembled all Israel there for a covenant-making ceremony. In the days of the judges, Avimelech tried to set up a monarchy in the city, and it became the first capital of the secessionist northern kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam.

Because of the special role that Shechem played in the history of Israel from earliest times, the narrative of Genesis 34 assumes great interest. It contains several unusual features that suggest traditions of great antiquity. First, there is the contrast that it offers to the generally idyllic biblical picture of peaceful relationships between the patriarchs and the local peoples. Then, too, Levi is here depicted as a secular warrior figure, in contradistinction to the later image of the tribe of Levi, which is dedicated to priestly and religious duties and plays no military role in the wars of conquest.

The martial image of Simeon is not in accord with later developments. This tribe lost its independence early, was swallowed up by Judah, and became insignificant. It is ignored in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). The alliance of Simeon and Levi is unparalleled. Strangely, Reuben and Judah, also full brothers to Dinah, are not mentioned by name as being concerned with vindicating their sister’s honor.

These unusual aspects of the narrative militate against a late fictional account. A late author would surely have drawn upon more conventional, familiar material in order to impart to the tale an air of authenticity. It is probable, therefore, that Genesis 34 records an incident that belongs to the prehistory of the Israelite tribes, the period prior to Joshua’s wars of conquest. This is strengthened by the reference to Shechem as a “country,” a designation that makes sense only in terms of conditions prevailing in that era. Similarly, the ruler’s not being accorded the title “king,” usually given to the heads of the Canaanite city-states in the Torah and in Joshua-Judges, is another indication of authenticity. The Narrator was obviously familiar with a special political reality.

It is to be noted that the narrative speaks only of the fortunes of a family, of individuals within it, not of tribes. But it is difficult to understand the terms of the agreement with the Hivites unless one is dealing with a much larger unit than Jacob and his sons. Given the ages of the latter, how meaningful is the pledge to give their daughters in marriage to the men of the city? The possibility exists that the characters of the story are really personifications, corporate personalities, much as John Bull and Uncle Sam represent, respectively, the English and American peoples. The actual presence of this phenomenon in the Torah is abundantly illustrated by the Testament of Jacob in Genesis 49 in which the individual and the tribe imperceptibly merge. Seen in this light, Genesis 34 would be an account of an assault upon Shechem by Israelite tribes in a very early period. Such an interpretation is of special interest because, as a matter of fact, the history of that city in relation to Israel is shrouded in mystery.

The Hebrew sources have preserved no traditions about the Israelite occupation of this city by force. The silence is wholly surprising in view of Shechem’s strategic importance as the natural capital of the central hill country lying at the intersection of major arteries of communication. Its unusually large size and its historic role, as evidenced by Egyptian and El-Amarna texts—not to mention the fact that it was the first Canaanite city at which Abraham stopped over when he arrived in the country, the site where he built his first altar, the place where he first received the divine promises of nationhood and territory—make it inconceivable that a successful campaign against this city by Joshua would not have been recorded had it occurred. Confounding matters further is the absence of Shechem from the several notices about still unconquered Canaanite enclaves. As a matter of fact, archaeology does not support any devastation of Shechem in the Late Bronze period or early Iron Age, when so many Canaanite cities mentioned in Joshua show signs of violent destruction.

Despite all this, we find reports that Joshua built an altar and conducted a solemn national ceremony in the environs of Shechem and that he assembled all the tribes of Israel at that city for a rite of covenant renewal. In other words, Shechem is found to be in Israelite hands in Joshua’s day, but how it came to be so is an enigma.

It is not possible to claim that Genesis 34 represents the story of Shechem’s capture, for the clan of Jacob fled the place immediately after the assault. Nor can it be argued that Joshua occupied and rebuilt a city that had all the while been in ruins. This is contradicted by both archaeological research and by our own story that says nothing about the devastation of Shechem itself.

The only feasible solution is that Shechem was taken over gradually by peaceful infiltration. Indeed, the story of Judges 9 supports a theory of symbiotic relationship between the Canaanites and Israelites until the city was destroyed by Avimelech in the period of the judges. The archaeological remains testify to the violent destruction of Shechem during the second half of the 12th century B.C.E. (cf. Judges 9.45), after which it lay in ruins for about 200 years.

In sum, the narrative of Genesis 34 has preserved authentic historical traditions deriving from preconquest times. It therefore cannot be used to sustain a theory of the retrojection of later events back into the patriarchal period.

### Efrat and Rachel’s Tomb: Nahum Sarna

Leaving Beth-el, Jacob journeys southward on the north-south longitudinal road that traverses the central hill country. Rachel’s death and burial must have occurred not far from “Efrat”; otherwise its location would have been gauged in relation to a nearer locality.

Where is Efrat? At first glance, the answer is simple: It is identified with Bethlehem in verse 19, in 48.7, and in a host of other texts. Thus, in 1 Samuel 17.12, David is described as “the son of a certain Efratite of Bethlehem in Judah.” In Ruth 1.2, the two sons of Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, are similarly termed “Efratites of Bethlehem in Judah.” Micah 5.1 addresses “Bethlehem of Efrat,” and in Ruth 4.11 Boaz receives the blessing: “Prosper in Efratah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem.”

But there are difficulties. It is strange that Rachel would be buried in Judean territory, which is where Bethlehem lies, rather than within the Benjaminite or Josephite tribal boundaries. Also, there exists another tradition, in 1 Samuel 10.2, that places Rachel’s tomb “in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah.” This place is not otherwise known, but the text must refer to somewhere near or on the border, and it locates the tomb, more appropriately, within the territories of the Rachel tribes. Jeremiah 31.14 supports this location of the tomb: “A cry is heard in Ramah—Wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children.”

The two traditions would seem to be mutually exclusive. Rabbinic literature made attempts to harmonize them by reinterpretation of the texts. As far as Jeremiah 31/14 is concerned, it is not at all certain that Hebrew ramah is in fact the locality Ramah, that is, er-Ram, 5 miles north of Jerusalem. It may simply mean “on a height” and was so understood by Targum Yonatan, Rabbi Joseph Karo, and Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi)—not without good reason, for the place-name otherwise invariably appears with the definite article. But the explicit statement of 1 Samuel 10.2, cited above, cannot be convincingly argued away. It appears to testify to a different tradition from that of Genesis 35.19.

It should be noted, however, that this latter text speaks primarily of Efrat and only secondarily identifies it with Bethlehem. In Psalms 132.6, which is a poetic summary of the wanderings of the Ark as described in 1 Samuel 6-7, we learn that the Ark was at Efrat. This cannot be Bethlehem; no such fact is otherwise recorded. The parallel clause mentions “the region of Ya-ar,” which is certainly the Kiryat-y’arim of 1 Samuel 7.1. In other words, there is a tradition that identifies Efrat with Kiryat-y’arim, which lay on the border between Judah and Benjamin, about 8 miles west of the Beth-el-Hebron road, close to present-day Abu Ghosh. Both Bethlehem and Kiryat-y’arim are thus identified with Efrat. Many of the passages cited show that Efrat was originally an important clan that became dominant in both locales. This is explicitly stated in 1 Chronicles 2.50-51, where one descendant of Efrat is designated “the father of Kiryat-y’arim” and another “the father of Bethlehem.”

The original tradition about Rachel’s tomb located it in Efrat, that is, within the area occupied by the clan of Efrat. More precisely, according to 1 Samuel 10.2, it lay on the Benjaminite border. When Bethlehem came under Efratite hegemony, it too came to be known as Efrat, which is how the phrase “now Bethlehem” came to be appended to the original Efrat in Genesis 35.19.

This conclusion receives support from Jacob’s next station, Migdal-eder, to which he journeyed after burying Rachel. Had he placed the tomb near Bethlehem, he would have had to reverse his direction, for Micah 4.8 identifies the site with a section of Jerusalem. The same is found in Mishnah Sh’kalim 7.4. If, however, the tomb lies on the border of Benjamin, then such a turnabout becomes unnecessary.