

What Does Israel Mean?

By Aron Moss

The homeland of the Jews (also called the Israelites) is the Land of Israel. Excuse my ignorance, but what does the word “Israel” actually mean?

Answer

That’s an important question. Names are significant; your name is your essence, your true self, your mission. And the name of a nation describes its collective character. If we are called the Children of Israel, that must define our destiny.



Art by [Sefira Lightstone](#)

Which makes the meaning of the word Israel quite surprising. Israel literally means, “One who struggles with G-d.”

The origin of the name Israel is a Biblical verse, referring to our forefather Jacob: “Your name is Israel, because you struggled with G-d and with man, and prevailed.”

Indeed Jacob’s life was a relentless series of struggles. He clashed with his brother, Esau. He was swindled by his father-in-law, Laban. He even wrestled with an angel.

But he always came out on top. He prevailed. So Jacob, and the nation that came from him, are called Israel.

Which makes the name Israel even more surprising. If our name is all about prevailing in our struggles, why not call us “the one who prevails,” rather than “the one who struggles”? Isn’t the point that we win the battle? Why name us after the struggle instead of the victory?

Here is the essence of Judaism: We do believe that goodness prevails, but the happy ending is not our focus. Our focus is the struggle to get there. Regardless of the result, the struggle itself is holy. If you strive for goodness, you’re in, even before you get there. If you’re trying to be better, even if you fall sometimes, you’re on the path. It’s all about the struggle.

That’s why the Torah doesn’t speak about heaven. We believe in the afterlife, but we aren’t preoccupied with it. We focus our energy on the effort to be a good person, the struggle to do the right thing, the battle against our adversaries, both internal and external.

Some religions seek serenity. Some spiritual paths promise peace. Others offer a place in heaven. Judaism embraces the struggle of the here and now. The victory will come. But for the time being, we are here to grapple with G-d, debate with our fellow humans, and struggle with ourselves, never accepting that the world can't change, starting with me. That's Israel.

Sources:

Genesis 32:29.

Torat Emet, R' Leibel Eiger of Lublin, Parshat Vayishlach.

By Aron Moss

Aron Moss is rabbi of the Nefesh Community in Sydney, Australia, and is a frequent contributor to Chabad.org. His latest book is "Can I Name My Dog Israel? Life Questions That Aren't So Black & White".

© Copyright, all rights reserved. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with Chabad.org's copyright policy.