

TORAH WEEKLY



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Jewish Origins

By: Rabbi Eli Mozes (Originally Published 2015)

Jew [joo]

1. a : a member of the tribe of Judah b : Israelite
2. a person belonging to a continuation through descent or conversion of the ancient Jewish people

We are all familiar with the term Jew; however, the origins of this title are not so well known or understood. The term comes from Yehudim (Judeans), which is derived from Yehudah (Judah), the fourth son of Jacob and patriarch of the tribe that bore his name. This raises the question: Why is the entire Nation of Israel named after one tribe? And why, out of all the tribes, was Yehuda's name chosen? Why are we not referred to as Zevulunites or Shimonim?

In this week's parshah, we read the blessings that Yaakov gave his children at the end of his life. These blessings are multilayered and the commentaries discuss many different aspects that they included. In the blessing that Yaakov gave to Yehudah, he said "Yehudah, your brothers shall acknowledge you." The etymologic root the Hebrew word for "acknowledge", yoducha, can also mean "admit". Based on this, Targum Yonasan (an Aramaic translation/elucidation of the Torah) translates this statement as, "Yehudah, you admitted your guilt in regard to the incident of Tamar; therefore, your brothers will acknowledge you and be called Yehudim after you". This is referring to the incident when Yehuda realized that it was he who was the source of Tamar's pregnancy, and publicly admitted his involvement, when he could have kept quiet. The Torah tells us that due to this act, the entire nation inherits his name.

A person's name is more than just a way to refer to the individual; it represents the essence of the person. The name Yehuda is, in fact, very much related to the incident of Tamar. Yehudah is from the same root as yoducha which, as discussed earlier, can mean to acknowledge or admit. The name Yehudah thus means admitter. By referring to the entire Nation of Israel as Yehudim, we are defining them as a people who can admit that they did something wrong.

At first glance this doesn't seem like much; after all, what's the big deal about admitting one's guilt? However, if you think about it you will realize that it is exceedingly difficult for one to fully admit his own guilt. People have a need to find some excuse to qualify their actions as not really being so terrible. Why is it so tough to say, "My fault, I really messed this one up!" One part of the difficulty is that we tend to view ourselves as a finished product, and we don't really want to put in the effort needed to change. Therefore, if we admit guilt, we are, in essence, saying, I have faults, and I need to change. By saying it's not my fault or it's not so terrible, we avoid facing the reality that change is needed.

This is not the way of the Jew. To be a Jew means to be an admitter, one who can freely admit that he made a really big mistake, just like Yehudah. This is because a Jew is never allowed to view himself as a finished product; rather, one's entire life is but a work in progress. The fact that I made a mistake yesterday isn't an eternal condemnation of my persona, but just another step in the journey of life.

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