THE FUNCTION OF THE ROOT Y-R-KH IN GENESIS

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The root "y-r-kh, [thigh]," appears 34 times in the Bible. However, the root is not randomly distributed throughout the Tanakh. Some two-thirds of its appearances are in the Torah, nine of those in Genesis. In this book it is used in two different but related ways that give it a special significance in the lives of the patriarchs and especially of Jacob.

In one set of these references (24:2, 24:9, 47:29) the root is part of a formula for taking an oath. Abraham makes his servant swear, by having the servant put his hand under Abraham's yrkh, that the servant will not take a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites (24:1-9). Similarly, toward the end of Genesis (47:28-31), Jacob, on his deathbed, makes Joseph swear, using the same phrase as did Abraham, that Joseph will not bury Jacob in Egypt, but rather in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron. Whether yrkh in the context of swearing an oath really means thigh or is a euphemism for the genitalia is discussed by the classical commentators. Saadia Gaon and Rashi on Genesis 24:2 explain the rationale for this practice as follows: Since one often holds a sacred object [chafetz shel mitzvah] such as a Torah scroll or tefillin when making an oath, and since the site of the circumcision is also sacred (because circumcision was the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people), it too could be held while making an oath.

The medieval commentators Abraham Ibn Ezra, Gersonides, and Hizkuni, all disagreed, arguing that in such a case the servant should have uttered a formula such as "by the oath of the covenant" rather than I swear to you by the God of the heavens and the Earth (v. 24:3). These commentators all believed that the one taking the oath literally put his hand under the thigh of the person requesting the oath as a sign of dependency that he will carry out the promise.

Either way, the expression sim na yadkha tahat yeraki is an odd formula for an oath. Moreover, it must be a very ancient formula that fell out of use after the patriarchal period, because it appears only in Genesis.

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There is a second cluster of five uses of the root *yrkh* in Jacob's encounter with the mysterious assailant at the ford of the Jabbok River, just before his coming reunion with his brother Esau after 20 years (32:25-33).³ The word appears twice (32:32) when the assailant, who is taken to be an angel of Esau or some other sort of Divine being, injures Jacob in his *yrkh*. Because of that injury (32:32), the Narrator informs us (32:32-33) that Israelites to this day do not eat the *gid hanashe* (traditionally understood to mean the sciatic nerve). The assailant also changes Jacob's name to Israel (32:29), an act which God later affirms (35:10).

I believe that the two sets of uses are connected. Prior to his encounter with the anonymous assailant, Jacob's career had been studded with deceit. He takes advantage of the famished Esau so that the latter will sell Jacob his birthright (25:29-34). Jacob tricks his father Isaac into giving him the blessing meant for Esau (Ch. 27). Jacob is in turn tricked by Laban into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (29:15-27). He later tricks Laban regarding the speckled and spotted sheep that are to be his wages (30:31-31:16).

Hereafter, Jacob turns over a new leaf. Not only is Jacob himself no longer deceitful, but he is critical of deceitful behavior in others, even when that behavior may be justified. For example, just two chapters later (Ch. 34), he rebukes Simeon and Levi for tricking the people of Shechem, whose prince had raped and abducted their sister Dinah. The Narrator here gives the final word to the brothers: 'Should our sister be treated like a whore?' (34:31), implying that their actions may have been justified. Nevertheless, Jacob, on his deathbed, remembers Simeon and Levi as lawless men because of this incident: 'Simeon and Levi are a pair/Their weapons are tools of lawlessness/Let not my person be included in their council/Let not my being be counted in their assembly/For when angry they slay men' (49:5-7). To quote Speiser on Genesis 32:

Jacob is henceforth a changed person. The man who could be party to the cruel hoax that was played on his father and brother, and who fought Laban's treachery with crafty schemes of his own, will soon condemn the vengeful deed by Simeon and Levi by invoking a higher concept of morality.⁴

By skillful use of the root *yrkh* throughout the Book of Genesis, the Narrator is informing us that to make the transition from Jacob to Israel, Jacob
needed a constant reminder to be truthful. Thus, the angel's injury was to Jacob's *yrkh*, the "oath organ," which caused Jacob to limp (32:32), presumably for the rest of his life. Thus, every time he walked, Jacob would feel the injury and be reminded that he needed to be truthful.

There is a play on Jacob's new name of Israel [*Yisrael*], which the Midrash relates to the word *yashar* ['straight'], which emphasizes this same transition. Rashi, on Genesis 32:29, explains: "So that no one will say anymore that the blessings came to you with cunning and deceit, but rather with forthrightness and openness." Rashi goes on to say that the mysterious assailant with whom Jacob fought is also telling Jacob that God Himself will affirm Jacob's change of name and the blessings he received from Isaac. Significantly, God affirms these two momentous events in Jacob's life in Genesis 35:9-13, after the rape of Dinah, presumably because of Jacob's reversal of character at that time. God can only confirm the change of name and the blessing after Jacob proves himself to be a new man, as evidenced by his chastisement of Simeon and Levi who used tactics of which he himself might have once been proud.

NOTES
3. The 9th usage in Genesis (46:26) has the straightforward meaning of descendants, and is not further considered.