

**Potomac Torah Study Center**  
Vol. 10 #6, November 25, 2022; 2 Kislev 5783; Toldot 5783

**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

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When my sons were young, whenever they would read a book or watch television, I would ask them who were the good guys and who were the bad guys. I do the same now with my grandchildren. In the realm of fiction for children, certain characters are “good guys” while others are “bad guys.” In real life, people are more complex. While it is easy to characterize Putin, the Iranian political leaders, and Hitler as “bad guys” (without redeeming qualities), the vast majority of people have both good and bad qualities. Each year, when we go into the High Holy Days, we should feel as if we are near the margin between overall good and overall bad. During Elul and the days leading up to Kol Nidre, our task should be to do teshuvah so that we clearly swing the balance toward good and earn Hashem’s decision to permit us to live for another year.

In Sefer Bereishis, our Patriarchs go through two generations when they have two sons but only one earns the privilege of fathering God’s special nation. With Ishmael and Yitzhak, the decision comes early. Sarah notices evil tendencies in Ishmael from an early age and demands that Avraham send him and his mother away. God sides with Sarah and tells Avraham to do whatever Sarah wants with Ishmael and Hagar. While our tradition holds that Ishmael and Hagar do not deserve to remain part of B’Nai Yisrael, chazal accept that after Sarah’s death, Avraham remarries Hagar (now called Keturah, because her actions were as sweet as ketoret, the special spices used with korbanot) and that Ishmael and Yitzhak reconcile. When Avraham dies, Yitzhak and Ishmael bury their father together, as brothers. The Torah indicates Ishmael’s teshuvah before his death by reporting his life using the formula established for Sarah: one hundred year plus thirty year plus seven years (25:17). Despite his teshuvah, Ishmael has remained a nation separate from B’Nai Yisrael, as Hashem had promised to Hagar years earlier (21:17-18).

Chazal are less generous with Esav, considering him to be the ancestor of Rome (actual and in spirit), enemy of the Jews for two thousand years. Esav and Yaakov fight even before birth, and the interactions that the Torah reports show that their issues continue for many years.

Yitzhak and Rivka contribute to the problems that their sons have relating as brothers. The Torah is explicit, stating that Yitzhak prefers Esav while Rivka prefers Yaakov. While Rivka receives a prophecy that Esav will serve Yaakov, apparently she is unable to share this prophecy with anyone else. One interpretation of Yitzhak’s preference for Esav is that he hopes that both sons will end up as part of B’Nai Yisrael and hopes that Esav will be the business/financial partner and that Yaakov will be the religious leader. If Yitzhak worked toward this goal, it could explain why he waited until near his death before giving blessings to his sons.

In chapter 27, Yitzhak, old and blind, asks Esav to hunt an animal and make him a delicious meat meal. Yitzhak tells his son that he wants to give him a bracha before he dies. Rivka listens, hears Yitzhak’s plan, and tells Yaakov to select two young goats, dress in Esav’s hunting clothes, and bring the meal that she will prepare to his father. Rivka hopes that Yaakov will convince his father to give him the blessing before Esav can return. Most commentators interpret the Torah as stating that Rivka and Yaakov intend to deceive Yitzhak. Rabbi David Fohrman, however, argues that one can read the text as indicating that Rivka wants to give Yaakov courage to go in, identify himself as Yaakov, and ask his father for a bracha for himself. Either way, Yaakov ends up stating that he is Esav, receives his brother’s bracha, and ends up with Esav stating that he will kill his brother for the deception and theft. Rivka sends Yaakov home to her family in Paddan-

aram, for two reasons. Far away from Esav, Yaakov should be safe from his anger. Also, staying with Rivka's family, he should be able to find a good wife, one who is not a Canaanite. (By this time Esav has two Canaanite wives.)

My question is whether we should consider Esav to be a good guy, bad guy, or complex character whose overall merit could go either way. When Rivka tells Yitzhak that Esav's Canaanite wives make her life miserable, Esav almost immediately goes and marries one of Ishmael's daughters. When Yaakov and Esav meet again after more than twenty years, Esav does not mention his earlier vow to kill Yaakov. Indeed, they meet on friendly terms, and Esav asks his brother to come and visit, with his large family. When Yitzhak dies, the Torah explicitly states that Esav and Yaakov bury him [together] (35:28). As an adult, Esav seems to have overcome his early animosity toward his brother and apparently hopes for a positive relationship with Yaakov. The Torah does not mention any further meetings between the twins, so we do not know whether Esav and Yaakov become (or could have become) close as adults. The Torah does not mention any aggression from Esav after they meet again, so apparently they live in peace until generations later. (For additional discussion, see Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' Dvar Torah below.)

God had promised Avraham that he would be the father of many nations. Ishmael and Esav both found nations, and the Torah lists numerous nations that his own descendants lead as kings or chiefs (ch. 36). None of these nations become part of B'Nai Yisrael.

Humans are complex, and additional complex creatures living together can make family dynamics difficult. As the focus in the Torah moves from fairly small family units to Yaakov's large family (four wives, twelve sons, at least one daughter, and grandchildren), interactions among individual family members continue to raise challenges. By the end of Sefer Bereishis, Yaakov's family has more than seventy individuals. In Sefer Shemot, the number of B'Nai Yisrael rapidly increases to more than two million. In more than three thousand years as a distinct people, no other people have kept as distinct as we Jews. When Jews have genetic tests of our DNA, most of us come back with Jewish ancestors providing the vast bulk of our DNA. The survival of Jews this long, with such purity of DNA, is a miracle – evidence that God has kept His promise to our ancestors. Meanwhile, the descendants of Ishmael and Esav have inter married and melded so that one cannot identify any of them as separate nations back to the children and grandchildren of Ishmael and Esav.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, told me nearly half a century ago that we can look around at the precision in the world and see evidence that there must be a God. Avraham figured out this lesson by himself more than 3500 years ago. Rabbi Cahan spent more than half a century teaching Jews how to learn the lessons that God has provided for our people. He also participated in classes with non-Jewish clergy and students so they would understand our religion and beliefs better. Our task is to absorb these lessons and pass them along to our children and grandchildren. Yes, the world needs perfecting – and yes, doing our part is an important part of why we are here in the world.

[Note: Rabbi Yehoshua Singer's extensive comments on an earlier draft again kept me from many errors and greatly improved the final result. He does not necessarily agree with my approach or interpretation.]

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Yonatan Ophir ben Ilana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Asher Shlomo ben Ettie, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Sharon bat Sarah, Noa Shachar bat Avigael, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, who need our prayers.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom,

## **Dvar Torah: Toldos: The Tragic Flaw of Brother Esau**

by Rabbi Label Lam © 2002

*And the youth grew up and Essau was a man who knew how to trap. He was a man of the field. And Yaakov was a wholesome man who dwelt in tents. And Isaac loved Essau because he trapped him with his mouth while Rebbecca loved Yaakov. (Breishis 25:27-28)*

*To trap: To trick his father. He asked him, "How does one tithe salt and straw?" His father thought he was careful in the performance of Mitzvos. (Rashi)*

*A wholesome man: Was not an expert in all these matters. As his heart so was his mouth. (Rashi)*

*Because he trapped him with his mouth: Targum translates, "the mouth of Isaac" (with food). The Midrash explains with "Essau's mouth," that he trapped and tricked him with his words. (Rashi)*

From Essau we can learn a few good things. Even from the apparently bad things we can glean a few helpful lessons, not just what not to do but what can and must be done. There is purposeful ambiguity in the statement that, "Isaac loved Essau because he trapped him with his mouth." Who is the antecedent to the pronoun, "his"? The mouths of Essau and Isaac are each candidates for the meaning of the verse. Which one is the real one, though?

Down on the "Lower East Side" we had just finished one of those exciting back to school shopping sprees. Our bags were filled with a year's supply of socks and personal under sundries. It's not like we couldn't wait to get home and try everything on! In that ho hum mood, we stopped in a local restaurant for a bite of lunch. This was my first encounter with such an eating establishment.

The waiter had an attitude and an approach that set new limits for over-familiarity bordering on downright intrusiveness. We sometimes call it "chutzpah"! Everything we selected on the menu he recommended something different and without consulting and in the face of open objections wrote it down as the final order, insisting, "You'll like it! Trust me!" We rolled with the punches and accepted his idiosyncratic antics with minimal resistance. He was right. We liked it! The time came to vacate the premises so we called for the bill. He came over to the table with a new quietude and paused before ripping the bill off his pad. He bowed his head and said with the most perfect sincerity, I'll never forget those words, "You're the nicest people I've ever met in my entire life!" He tore the paper from the pad, placed it upon the table and humbly backed away.

For a few moments we sat in shock. What had we done to deserve such a compliment? This fellow looked as if he was waiting on tables for 50 years. He must have seen tens of thousands of customers. We reasoned before digging out a handsome tip to add onto the bill, that although we had not been extra friendly, we didn't give him a hard time either. Probably he gets plenty of complaints and we're kind of pleasant. Yeah! That's it! We had convinced ourselves.

Moments later we witness the same waiter at another table laying the bill down and declaring aloud, "You're the nicest people I've ever met in my entire life!" Then to the next and the next table unashamedly making the same statement. At first we were shocked and then humored. The truth is though, it's so seldom that one is ever treated to such a superlative compliment, we continue to revel in the glory of it, even still and although is also a shared honor and understandably hollow.

Essau gave his father what he liked to eat and also told him what he wanted to hear. These are powerful tools for winning friends and influencing spouses and children. However, the cautionary note is that if these approaches are not used to build bridges of trust, furthering relationships, but to mask malevolence, then it cannot qualify as communication but rather a campaign of manipulation.

Ultimately, Essau fell prey to the politics of perception, believing that symbolism substitutes for substance, and public relations portrays reality. Blaming Yaakov for his own failure in the end betrays the depth of his self-deception, and magnifies that much more the tragic flaw of brother Essau.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5763-toldos/>

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## **Yitzchak: The Father of Continuity**

by Rabbi Dov Linzer \* © 2009, 2022

Yitzchak's story is one of the major themes of parshat Toldot. Until now, the stories involving Yitzchak have really been stories of other people – Avraham offering up Yitzchak at the akeida, and Avraham's servant finding a wife for Yitzchak. Now, finally, it is Yitzchak's turn to write his own story, to have his own narrative. However, the first pasuk of the parsha already tells us what Yitzchak's story will be – v'ela toldot Yitzchak ben Avraham, Avraham holid et Yitzchak, "These are the generations [or "stories"] of Yitzchak the son of Avraham, Avraham sired Yitzchak." The story of Yitzchak is that he is Avraham's son, that Avraham sired him and that he is a continuation of Avraham. Indeed, we already heard in last week's parsha that he took Rivkah into his mother Sarah's tent – she became Sarah and he became Avraham. He prays for a son, just as Avraham beseeched God for a son; as a result of a famine, he goes into a foreign land, just like Avraham – wanting to go to Egypt, like Avraham, but staying in the land of Canaan, in the land of the Plishtim, on God's behest. He gets in trouble on account of his wife as Avraham did, having told the same story as Avraham that she was his sister. He gets into quarrels with the Plishtim over ownership of the wells, just like Avraham; he makes a covenant with Avimelekh, just like Avraham; and he spends a lot of time redigging the wells that Avraham dug. And then that is it. His story is over, and we move on to the story of Yaakov and Esav.

There is nothing new and innovative in Yitzchak's life. He continued in the way of Avraham. It is easy to dismiss such a life as mundane and meaningless, but in fact, without Yitzchak we would not have survived. Yitzchak took all of Avraham's creativity and innovations, all of Avraham's vision – and he ensured it's continuity. Avraham was the creator, the founder, the leader with charisma. Yitzchak was the one who took that charisma and creativity and institutionalized it. Avraham was chesed – bursting out of bounds, overflowing with ideas and energy. Yitzchak was din – the one with bounds, with limits, the one with rules, and laws, and a fixed way of doing things that must be adhered to. Yitzchak could not go out of Canaan – he could not explore new vistas. He had to stay in Canaan and invest all of his energies in building, in establishing, in redigging the wells. If another Avraham had followed Avraham, nothing would have progressed. All those amazing ideas, visions and goals of Avraham would have been forgotten in the excitement and passion of the new Avraham. The wells would have gotten clogged and the water would have stopped flowing. Redigging the wells, doing the hard work that is necessary to sustain the vision and bring it into the next generation, that day-to-day commitment can often be unexciting and thankless work – that was Yitzchak's task. And yet, had it not been for Yitzchak, all of Avraham's contributions would have been lost.

As a people, we have had a few Avrahams – Rambam, the Vilna Gaon, the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Ari, Rav Soloveitchik, and Rav Kook to name a few. But had they not had Yitzchaks to follow them – to take their ideas and programs and turn them into reality, to commit to the day-to-day effort needed to bring their ideas into the next generation – then their legacy would have been lost to us. While it is exciting to be an Avraham, we have only survived as a people because of our Yitzchaks. Our Yitzchaks have not only preserved the innovations of our Avrahams, but they have preserved for us our mesorah, our tradition, and our way of life.

Yitzchaks are the backbone of our people. They are those countless mothers and fathers who have sacrificed everything so their children would have a Jewish education and a Jewish home. They are the ones who learned Torah every day – not because they would become great scholars, but because it was the lifeblood of the Jewish people. They are the ones who toiled to provide for their family, who endured hardship to keep the mitzvot, who refused to give up or compromise their Jewish identity no matter what the cost. They are the women who used a deep, dark well as a mikveh when no other mikveh was available. They are the men who scrounged to make a living to support their families rather than take a job that entailed violation of the Shabbat. They are the ones who day to day – with or without hardship – have lived and continue to live a committed life of Torah and mitzvot, keeping it alive for themselves and passing it on to the next generation. They are the ones who keep redigging the wells and keep the water flowing.

We all need to be more thankful for the Yitzchaks in our lives. First, to recognize the profound value of our own work as Yitzchaks – what we do in our daily lives as Jews to keep the Torah alive for ourselves, our family, and our community.

And we must recognize all those who are the unsung Yitzchaks – the teachers in our schools, the mashgichim of restaurants, the mikveh attendant, those who work in the office of our synagogue – the ones who give of themselves day-to-day for the Jewish community in quiet ways, off of center stage – and be profoundly grateful for their constant redigging of our wells. It is not always easy being a Yitzchak. It is a lot more exciting being an Avraham. But it is only because of Yitzchak that we survive, and that the waters of Avraham continue to flow.

\* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. I am posting an archive Dvar Torah, because I did not receive a new Dvar Torah from YCT in time for my deadline this week.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2009/11/yitzchak-the-father-of-continuity/>

## Confronting Hatred: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

*“Now all the wells which his father’s servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them and filled them with earth. And Abimelech said unto Isaac: Go from us; for you are much mightier than we.”* (Bereishith 26:15-16)

In an arid land, Abraham had his servants dig wells to provide water for people, animals and fields. Rabbinic tradition refers to this as work on behalf of human settlement, yishuv olam. Everyone in the area benefitted from the wells, not just Abraham and his entourage.

Yet, the Philistines’ hatred of Abraham and family was so great, they filled the wells with earth so that no one — not even themselves — would benefit from the water. Why would they do such a malicious and self-destructive thing? What are the sources for such visceral hatred?

The Torah informs us that Abimelech, head of the Philistines, told Isaac to go away from his territory *ki atsamta mimenu me’od*. This phrase is generally translated: “for you are mightier than we.” Yet, the Philistines were well in the majority and Isaac posed no physical threat to them. On the contrary, Isaac followed his father’s example of being a constructive member of society.

Hatred is not necessarily based on objective reality. To the Philistines, Isaac’s very existence was perceived as a threat. They had their own “conspiracy theory” that Isaac was really more powerful than they, and that he would seek to control and rule them. They were jealous of Isaac’s success and fearful that he would continue to succeed.

Nechama Leibowitz cites various commentators who provide another dimension to this episode. They translate *ki atsamta mimenu me’od*: for you have become very strong through us. You have plundered us, you have taken away from us in order to enrich yourself. In this interpretation, the hatred of the Philistines was based not merely on fear or jealousy: it was based on a vicious claim that Isaac was successful because he was exploiting the Philistines. They couldn’t imagine that he was an honest man doing honest work; rather, they imagined him to be a parasite who robbed them of their property.

How was Isaac to deal with such irrational hatred? The Torah tells us that Isaac left Abimelech’s territory, but he also redug the wells that Abraham’s servants had dug and that the Philistines had plugged up. As he continued to move away, Isaac’s men dug new wells but were challenged by the other shepherds in the vicinity. He finally found an area where he was left alone.

But no sooner had he re-established himself, Abimelech came after him with the captain of his army. Isaac said: “Why have you come to me seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?” Abimelech replies: “We saw plainly that the Lord was with you...Let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no hurt, as we have not touched you and as we have done unto you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace; you are now the blessed of the Lord.”

Abimelech’s words are remarkable. On the plus side, he realized that Isaac was blessed by the Lord, that Isaac had not deprived the Philistines of anything. He somehow was able to dismiss the “conspiracy theories” that had turned him and his people so cruelly against Isaac.

On the minus side, Abimelech presented himself in a false light. Instead of the hateful leader who drove Isaac away, Abimelech describes himself as one who never did any harm to Isaac but actually only acted nicely to him. He rewrote events to make himself look good and to exonerate himself for his misdeeds.

Isaac did not reject Abimelech's request for a mutual covenant. They ate a festive meal together, after which Isaac sent off Abimelech on peaceful terms.

This episode points to the roots of hatred and conspiracy theories. It indicates that it is possible for haters to overcome their animosity and actually to see the virtues of those they once feared and despised. And it shows the importance of forgiving those who want covenants of peace, even if their presentation of facts falsely presents them in a positive light.

The story of Isaac and Abimelech repeats itself in various forms throughout history. It is a reminder of human conflict and reconciliation, enmity and peaceful relations. It is a story that speaks to us today.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/confronting-hatred-thoughts-parashat-toledot>

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### Thoughts for Thanksgiving

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

President George Washington proclaimed Thursday November 26, 1789 as a day of national thanksgiving to God:

*"for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us."*

The Jewish communities in the United States of that time rejoiced in the role they played in establishing this new country. Already in 1784, leaders of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City (founded 1654) had sent a letter to Governor George Clinton on behalf of "the ancient congregation of Israelites" in which they said: "Though the society we belong to is but small, when compared with other religious societies, yet we flatter ourselves that none has manifested a more zealous

attachment to the sacred cause of America in the late war with Great Britain....And we now look forward with pleasure to the happy days we expect to enjoy under a constitution wisely framed to preserve the inestimable blessings of civil and religious liberty."

A new country was born, and the Jews had participated in its formation. They were equal citizens in the United States. This was not true of Jews in any country in Europe or in the Muslim world. American Jews were the first in the history of the diaspora to be citizens on an equal footing with their non-Jewish neighbors, and to have actually participated in fighting for the independence of a new nation.

When President Washington called for a day of Thanksgiving, Jews observed this day with joy and pride. At Shearith Israel in New York, the Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas arranged a suitable service of prayer, and delivered an address in

which he called upon Jews "to support that government which is founded upon the strictest principles of equal liberty and justice."

In subsequent years, days of Thanksgiving were similarly celebrated at Shearith Israel and the other early Jewish congregations. These days were invariably proclaimed in the name of the American people, and were meant to be observed by each citizen according to his or her own faith. In 1817, New York State established an annual observance of Thanksgiving Day. Shearith Israel held services on each subsequent year – except 1849 and 1854. In those two years, the Governor of the State had addressed his proclamation specifically to "a Christian people" instead of to Americans of all faiths. Other than these two years, Thanksgiving has been proclaimed for all Americans, each according to his and her own faith.

It is sometimes heard in Orthodox Jewish circles that Thanksgiving Day is a "non-Jewish holiday" and should not be observed by religious Jews. This view is historically wrong and morally dubious. Thanksgiving Day is a national American holiday for all residents of the United States, of all religions. Jews participated in Thanksgiving from the very beginning of the United States' history. This national holiday belongs to Jews as to all other Americans. It is altogether fitting that Jews join fellow Americans in observing a day of Thanksgiving to the Almighty for all the blessings He has bestowed upon this country. Jews, in particular, have much reason to thank God for the opportunities and freedoms granted to us in the United States.

In his famous letter to the Jewish community of Newport in 1790, President Washington wrote: "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants – while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid." These are words, expressive of the American spirit at its best, for which we can be thankful.

Happy Thanksgiving.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/thoughts-thanksgiving>

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### **Toldos -- The Pig and Esav, A Perek Shirah Perspective \***

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \* © 2015

Pork is anathema to the Jew. Even those who do not diligently observe Kosher will steer clear of products that come from a pig. What is it about the pig that creates such revulsion among our people?

The Medrash tells us that the pig symbolizes the hypocrite, a person who preaches lofty goals and gives the impression that he practices them, but in reality he is corrupt and the righteous impression that he tries to portray is merely a facade. The pig has one of the two criteria that an animal must have to be kosher. The pig has split hooves, but it does not have the internal organs to chew its cud. Yet, although the pig is not kosher (because internally it does not meet the criteria) it is known to show off its split hooves as if to lure the naïve passerby into thinking that it is kosher. So does the hypocrite show off some good qualities in the hope that people will be tricked by that which they see, and overlook the corruption that lies beneath the surface.

The Medrash tells us that Esav, the brother of Yakov, personified this quality of the pig. He spent his days and nights in immoral conduct, yet he would come to his father, Yitzchak, with detailed questions of Jewish law thus giving the impression that he was righteous. Likewise, Esav regularly stole and assaulted women, yet when he reached the age of 40 he said, "Now I must marry just as my righteous father, Yitzchak, married at the age of 40." Thus with some good questions and marriage at the age of 40 he tried to cover over all the other behaviors which he hoped would not be noticed.

Noteworthy is that when Esav saw the lentil soup, he called it "the red stuff," and the name "red" or in Hebrew, "Edom," stuck and became the way he was known as a nation. Esav did not see the soup as food with nutritional value. He saw it as colorful -- as "red stuff" -- purely an external definition, because the externals were all that mattered to him.

No wonder we feel revulsion to the pig, well beyond our feelings to other non-kosher animals. The pig symbolizes Esav, the hypocrite. It represents a facade of kosher and goodness which is not really present on any authentic level.

Interestingly, there are times that a person is on a journey of self-improvement and they find that they are not entirely the high level person that they would like to be. This could be true in character and conduct where a person chooses an area for improvement but finds that they sometimes still fail even after they resolved to succeed. A person may decide to be neater, calmer, or kinder, and find that they only succeed some of the time. Likewise a person may decide to improve in spirituality and religious observance and find that they are not instantly transported to the level of saintliness. A person who did not until now observe kosher diligently, for example, may find that even after their resolve to do so there still are lapses. These lapses may well be cause for concern and should be addressed, but they are not in any way related to the hypocrisy that we find so troubling.

The difference is simple. A person trying to become better is sincerely trying to become better, but good things are not achieved instantaneously. One does not become a scholar, a skilled artisan, or a talented musician in one day. The fact that a person is not yet perfect does not minimize the fact that one is to be respected and praised for having started the journey. As one great Jew explained, "The train going to Florida is called the Florida train, even though you have just barely started out on the journey. That's because the train is called by the name of its destination."

A hypocrite, in contrast, is quite happy with the corruption that is their lot, but they wish to paint a facade of righteousness so that people shouldn't know.

As Jews we thrive on growth and stretch goals, aspirations that seem to be just out of our reach. We have high standards of expectation, but we are aware that at times people fail. To fail at a stretch goal, and then to rise and try again, is to experience greatness. Delve deeply into yourself and the system you are in and consider, "Through this system, where am I headed?" A step forward is greatness, so long as it is taken with sincerity.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

\* Because of family obligations out of town for Rosh Hodesh/Thanksgiving, I had to post before Rabbi Rhine sent a new Dvar Torah this week. I am therefore sharing a Dvar from his archives:

<http://www.teach613.org/toldos-the-pig-and-esav-a-perek-shirah-perspective/>

Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.

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## **Toldos - The Bigger Picture**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \*

In the beginning of this week's Parsha we are introduced to Yaakov and Eisav, the twins who would eternally be at odds with each other. The enmity between them was so deep that even when Eisav hugs and kisses Yaakov the Torah marks the word "vayishakeihu" – "and he kissed him" (Bereishis 33:4) with dots over the word in the Sefer Torah, indicating an anomaly. Rash"i quotes the Medrash Rabbah that some understand the anomaly to be that Eisav's kiss for his brother was not a genuine kiss of brotherhood. Rabi Shimon bar Yochai says that although it was genuine, that itself was the anomaly for it is a fact of Torah law that Eisav hates Yaakov.

This battle between Yaakov and Eisav was not standard sibling rivalry, but rather an ideological difference which began even in the womb. When Rivkah was pregnant the Torah says they were running and chasing within her. She seeks G-d's guidance with her difficult pregnancy and is told that there are two great nations within her who will separate from the womb. (Bereishis 25:23) From their youth they took very different paths. Eisav was a man of trapping, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a man of wholesomeness, one who dwelled in tents. (Bereishis 25:27) Rash"i explains that Eisav trapped people with his words and engaged in lazing around fields and hunting. Yaakov sought G-d and self-development in the tents of Shem and Ever.

After this introduction, the Torah shares with us the first interaction between the two brothers. Eisav is out hunting and Yaakov is making a lentil soup. Eisav returns from the field exhausted and asks Yaakov to please feed him from, “*ha’adom ha’adom hazeh*,” “that red stuff,” earning for himself eternally the name “*Edom*” – “Red.” Yaakov responds by asking Eisav to sell him the birthright “as of this day.” Eisav wholeheartedly agrees, ultimately despising the birthright. (Bereishis 25:29-34) Eisav’s expression, “that red stuff,” concretized their differences and set history in motion. He and his descendants were named Edom until today and Yaakov chose “this day” as the ideal time to claim the birthright. What was the significance of Eisav’s words?

The Sforno (Bereishis 25:30-31) explains that Eisav’s expression was an insight into his essence. He had come home from hunting and working the field with such exhaustion that he genuinely couldn’t think straight and was unable to recognize more than the color of the food. He had allowed himself to be drained of all rational thought for the sake of something temporal. This was indicative that he had no greater purpose in his life. If Eisav had been engaged in any personal development or meaningful pursuits, he could never have been so emotionally invested in a temporal endeavor. He would have at least been able to recognize that it was lentil soup. This says the Sforno is not the way of a human being. We have within us a spiritual core and a dignity and nobility to see beyond the moment and focus on the bigger picture. How could anyone devote themselves so completely to something temporal? How could one fail to engage their mind and seek a greater and more lasting goal? For this failure of character, he and all his descendants were eternally named, “*Edom*.”

The Sforno continues and says that Yaakov chose “this day” to ask for the birthright, because if Eisav was dedicated to temporal pursuits without any broader goal, then he could never possibly apply himself to self-development and the service of G-d. One who is so short-sighted can never achieve greatness.

One of the greatest challenges in life is engaging in our physical needs without losing sight of the more important things in life. This is a challenge we all face. We recognize the challenge and strive for balance. Even as we engage in our physical needs, we search for meaning and purpose. That search is the foundation for greatness. When Eisav showed that his physical achievements were his entire life, and that there was nothing else he lived for, Eisav showed that he would never achieve true nobility. Striving beyond and seeking a greater purpose in life is the essence of our humanity.

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### Rashi on Toledot: Tackling Educational Obstacles

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

#### **[25:20] Yitzhak was forty years old when he married Rivka.**

*Rashi: When Avraham came from Mount Moriah he was told that Rivka was born. Yitzhak was then 37 years old, since Sarah died at that time... she was 90 when he was born and a 127 when she died. Yitzhak waited until she was 3 so he could consummate marriage and then married her.*

Rashi’s commentary is based on Seder Olam, a Midrashic work whose goal was to fill gaps in the biblical narrative, particularly the chronology. It uses few available details to arrive at a conclusion, which in this case is shocking and unnecessary. The conclusion rests on the assumption that the Akedah, Rivka’s birth, and Sarah’s death all occurred simultaneously, since they are written next to each other. Following that logic, the story which preceded the Akedah, of Avraham’s pact with Abimelech (21:22-34), also took place at the same time. One more step back will take us to the expulsion of Hagar, and if that also happened at the same time, we have a serious problem, because it came immediately after Avraham celebrated Yitzhak being weaned. The clear and logical explanation is that the Torah only highlights the important events, and unless there is a date or age, there is no way to determine the exact time of the event.

The impossibility of the Midrashic statement has been expressed by Ibn Ezra (Gen. 25:5):

*The sages said that Yitzhak was 37 years old. If they had a tradition, we will accept it, but it does not make sense, because if so, Yitzhak should be praised and rewarded for his devotion. The Torah says nothing of Yitzhak’s age. Some say he was five years old, but this also is illogical*

*because he carried the firewood. The most reasonable is to assume that he was around 13 years old, and his father forced and bound him against his will.*

*If Rivka indeed was born around the time of the Akedah, she would have been 24 at the time of her marriage.*

Rashi's commentary is also directly refuted by the Daat Zeqenim commentary, written by Rashi's disciples. The rejection of Rashi's commentary is based on a different Midrashic statement, and the conclusion of Daat Zeqenim is that Rivka was 14 years old at the time of her marriage.

To conclude, there is no indication in the Torah of Rivka's age in any of the important events of her life, and it would be safe to assume that she was in her early twenties when Yitzhak married her.

**[25:22] Yitzhak prayed to God for [also: in front of] his wife... and God answered his prayer...**

*Rashi: He stood in one corner and prayed, and she stood in another corner and prayed. God answered him and not her, since he was righteous and his father was righteous, while Rivka was righteous but her father was not.*

This commentary seems to draw a beautiful image of a couple engaged in common prayer, but it makes them detached from each other, and eventually pits them against each other. The Midrashic statement that God prefers the prayer of a second generation Tzaddik over that of one whose father was a pagan was directed at Hellenist Jews, and tried to convince them to adhere to their parents' tradition. In addition, when the prayer is answered, both Rivka and Yitzhak are blessed with a child, and not only Yitzhak. Is the Midrash suggesting that maybe Rivka prayed for years but was never answered until Yitzhak joined in prayer? That idea of the way God hears our prayers is hard to accept, and I believe it should not be taught to our children.

The message the Torah conveys in describing Yitzhak's prayer is that he loved Rivka and cared deeply for her. He does not pray for himself but for her, as opposed to his father who complained to God that he does not have children, without mentioning his wife (Gen. 15:2-3). Not only that, after Ishmael is born, Avraham is willing to waive the promise that Sarah will have a child, and tells God that he is satisfied with Ishmael, to which God responds, as if being surprised: "But, Sarah, your wife, will bear you a child!" (Gen. 17:17-19).

**[25:22] The children struggled within her, and she said, "if this is so, why am I alive?" so she went to seek God's word.**

*Rashi: When she would pass by the study halls of Shem and Ever, Yaakov would struggle to get out, and when she would pass by pagan temples, Esau would struggle to get out... she said, why do I pray and desire to be pregnant?*

This commentary is part of a broader worldview of the Midrash in which Esau is the archenemy of Yaakov. Accordingly, he is described later in Rashi's commentary as a trickster (25:27), a robber (27:5), one who does not mention God's name (25:21), a murderer (25:29), and a hypocrite (33:4). The reason for the perception of Esau by the Midrash as the personification of evil, is that after the Roman takeover of Israel, he became identified with Rome. Associating Esau with Rome was not based on historical evidence or geographic proximity, since Esau's descendants, the Edomites, were residents of the Cisjordan and genetically close to the Israelites. It was rather based on a prosaic and external detail, the red color which featured prominently in the royal garb and military regalia of the Romans. The identification of "Red" Esau with Rome, and consequently, with Christianity, led to the vilification of Yaakov's twin in Midrashic literature.

The second part of the commentary, in which Rivka questions her desire to have a child, is challenged by several commentators. Nahmanides simply says that it is incorrect. R. Ovadia Sforno explains that she knew she had twins but was afraid that she would lose one of them, which would have put her life at risk. R. Haim ben Attar says that one cannot agree with Rashi. He explains that she was concerned that she will lose both fetuses, and was therefore satisfied with the answer which guaranteed a healthy delivery.

**[25:26] After that his brother emerged holding unto Esau's sole.**

*Rashi: I have heard a Midrash which explains this according to the Peshat. Yaakov's claim for the right of the firstborn was justified, since Yaakov was created from the first drop and Esau from the second. This is analogous to a narrow tube, in which you put two stones. The one which came in first will come out last. Yaakov, who was created first, was trying to emerge first and become the firstborn as he was entitled to.*

This commentary presents us with important insights:

Rashi's distinction between Midrash and Peshat is different than ours.

Rashi, like the Sages before him, relies on the "scientific" knowledge of the Greeks.

The Midrash doesn't bother to research the full implication of its statements.

In addition to these general insights, the obvious agenda of the Midrash and Rashi is to clear Yaakov and Rivka from any accusations of mischief, deception, and wrongdoing in taking the blessing from Esau. That agenda is contradictory to the rest of the narrative of Beresheet and the high price Yaakov had to pay for his actions. Now let us return to the insights.

When Rashi says that the Midrash explains the text according to the Peshat, he does not use the word Peshat in the sense of literal meaning, as is common today, but rather as an interpretation which fits the context of the narrative.

The description of fetuses as stones deposited in a narrow tube follows Greek embryology. The Greeks believed that the male sperm contains tiny humans, and that the mother's womb is no more than a vessel for them to grow in. This reliance on outdated science does not harmfully impact our understanding of this particular story, but it has serious and even life-endangering implications when applied to Halakha.

Finally, when saying that Yaakov was rightfully the firstborn, the Midrash not only validates his deceitful actions, but also gives license to any second twin to claim that he is the firstborn, and maybe even encourage them to deceive their twins. This probably was not the intention of the Midrash, but it could have happened.

When reading Midrash, or Rashi's commentary, which is 85% Midrash, we must be careful not to accept things as they are written, we should conduct research, and not hesitate to reject that which seems illogical. It is our right and duty. Shabbat Shalom.

\* Torah VeAhava (now SephardicU.com). Rabbi, Beth Shalom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD) and faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **New: Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/aim-ovadia?tab=sheets>**. The Sefaria articles include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

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## Planting Seeds of Light

By Raffi Levi \*

What is Judaism's take on the goal of spiritual living? Importantly, what is the essential realization we need in order to live with sacredness? In this week's parsha, after Yitzchak struggles to survive a famine and risks his life by visiting the king Avimelekh, he comes home and decides... to plant! The Torah says

*"Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. HaShem blessed him" (Gen. 26:12).*

The Noam Elimelech offers a fascinating insight on this statement from our parsha. He suggests that a fundamental trait of righteousness is planting seeds: seeds of holiness. He refers us to Tehillim 97:11 which states: "Light is sown for the righteous, radiance for the upright."

For the Noam Elimelech, light is the thing that is sown by the righteous. Rather than simply receiving light, a person of righteousness plants lightness and sacredness in others. When Yitzchak planted, spiritually speaking, he lifted up the sacredness in all life. He did not just plant in the earth, but as an individual, planted seeds of an encounter with the Divine in other human beings. A person cannot merely cultivate joy in themselves. The spiritual life is, as the Noam Elimelech suggests, cultivating the sacred for others.

Yitzchak was not a talkative person. He was understated, but he was able to plant seeds. He, according to the Rabbis, established the Mincha prayer, as it says in Massechet Berakhot 26b referring to this week's parsha. Tosafot there suggests that while Yitzchak was not the first to pray Mincha, he was the first to establish it. Yitzchak's purpose was not merely for himself to pray, but it was to cultivate prayer for others.

The Noam Elimelech brings this point home by reminding us that each of us has our own unique gate, our own sha'ar, through which we have the ability to make change. Each of us has a unique way of bringing out the sacred in others, of planting that seed and cultivating expansive light.

What I would like to suggest here is that perhaps Yitzchak's accomplishment tells us a secret about the goal of spiritual living: Living spiritually is not something we can keep to ourselves. Rather, as Yitzchak does, we must each give over our own personal spirituality to others and learn to inspire others with a sense of depth and radical amazement for what life has to offer us.

May we all find radical amazement for ourselves, but more importantly, let us help others find that too.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Third-year semikha student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2022/11/planting-seeds-of-light/>

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### **Shavuon Toldot** By Rabbi Moshe Rube \*

#### **A Dramatized Fictionalized Version of a Conversation I Had This Week**

Conversation Partner: Rabbi, I really liked your Dosh in the Shavuon this week.

Rabbi: The protein bar one? So you like protein bars?

CP: Yeah but some are better than others. But I really liked the general message at the end. Where you said that we should respect each other despite differing values and opinions.

Rabbi: Oh I'm so glad you liked it!

CP: Yeah. People make Judaism out to be so complicated, but it's really not. Just treat others the way you'd want to be treated.

Rabbi: Indeed. It's not so complicated. You don't need to go to rabbinical school to get that. In fact that was the whole theme at the Kadimah Siddur presentation. Treating others well. Rabbi Akiva and Hillel presented this Golden Rule as the one foundation of the whole Torah on which we base everything else on.

CP: Really? So how does keeping kosher fit in to that? Is that based on the Golden Rule too?

Rabbi: I suppose someone would have to go to rabbinical school to answer that. Maybe it causes us to be more sensitive to other living beings' experiences by using a slaughtering method that kills without any pain? I'll have to think about it.

CP: Ok. But what about that whole story of Jacob stealing the blessing from Esav and causing Esav to cry and scream? I don't think Jacob would want to be treated that way. So why did he treat Esav like that?

Rabbi: Good question. To be fair, Rivkah was the one who really egged Jacob on. And she seems to do a 180 at the end of the parsha when she expresses fear that she will lose both Yaakov and Esav. As opposed to the beginning of the parsha where the Torah presents her as only caring about Yaakov.

CP: So she saw how her behavior caused Esav to want to murder Yaakov? It sounds like she regretted what she did.

Rabbi: Who's to say? The Torah is definitely not above presenting its characters as human beings who make mistakes. I've heard several great rabbinic teachers express the view that Esav could have been the 4th Patriarch.

CP: That makes sense. There's 4 Matriarchs but only 3 Patriarchs. I've always wondered where the 4th one went.

Rabbi: Yeah. Our rabbis even tell a story of how Esav's head was buried in the Cave of Machpelah. I bet they recognized that Esav had redeemable qualities as well as foibles like all of us have. He's sometimes presented as a caricature of evil but he wasn't. Perhaps if he would have received the blessing, the redeemable qualities would have come out more. In fact, there's another rabbinic story where Yaakov gets taken to task for hiding his daughter Dinah from Esav. The rabbis say he should have let Dinah marry Esav because this would have helped Esav release the wonderful inner qualities he had. This really gets one to think about the nature of humanity. What is our nature? If we look further at the Patriarchs...

CP: Sorry to interrupt Rabbi. But I'm about to sit down to dinner.

Rabbi: Oh of course. No worries at all. What's for dinner?

CP: My favorite protein bars. \*\*

Shabbat Shalom!

\* Rabbi Rube recently moved from Alabama to Auckland, NZ, where he is Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation.

\*\* [Ed. Note: Apparently New Zealand does not celebrate a holiday with a turkey dinner this week.]

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### **Rav Kook Torah** **Toldot: Abraham Kept Mitzvot**

Why are practical mitzvot so central to Judaism? Why is it not enough just to believe in the Torah's central tenets and teachings?

When famine struck, Isaac considered leaving the Land of Israel. But God commanded him to remain in Israel. God allayed Isaac's fears, promising him:

*"I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, and grant them all these lands.... Because Abraham obeyed My voice; and he kept My charge, My commandments, My decrees, and My laws." (Gen. 26:4-5)*

Abraham kept God's commandments?

Indeed, the Sages interpreted this verse literally. They wrote that the Patriarchs fulfilled the precepts of the Torah, even before their revelation at Sinai centuries later.

Fifth-century scholar Rav Ashi made an even more audacious claim. He asserted that Abraham even observed the mitzvah of eiruv tavshilin — a rabbinically ordained ritual which enables one to prepare food and lights for the Sabbath when a holiday falls out on a Friday (Yoma 28b). (Ordinarily, it is forbidden to cook on a holiday if the meal is intended to be served after the holiday is over.)

### **Observing Eiruv Tavshilin**

A certain scholar once commented to Rav Kook that Rav Ashi's statement clearly cannot be taken at face value. How could Abraham know what the rabbinical courts would decree a thousand years in the future? The Sages must have intended to convey a subtler message: Abraham's philosophical mastery of the Torah was so complete, his grasp of the Torah's theoretical underpinnings so comprehensive, that it encompassed even the underlying rationales for future decrees.

Rav Kook, however, was not pleased with this explanation. In his response, Rav Kook emphasized that the Torah's theoretical foundations cannot be safeguarded without practical mitzvot. It is impossible to truly internalize the Torah's philosophical teachings without concrete actions.

This is the fundamental weakness of religions that rely on faith alone. Without an emphasis on deeds, such religions retreat to the realm of the philosophical and the abstract. They abandon the material world, leaving it unredeemed. The Torah's focus on detailed mitzvot, on the other hand, reflects its extensive involvement with the physical world.

### **Levels of Holiness**

Rav Kook elucidated this Talmudic tradition in a slightly different vein. While Abraham did not literally perform the ritual of eiruv tavshilin as we do today, he was able to apply the essential concept of this ceremony to his day-to-day life. This was not just some abstract theory, but practical knowledge which guided his actions.

What is the essence of eiruv tavshilin? The Sages explained in Beitzah 15b that this ceremony helps one fulfill the Biblical injunction to "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." Due to the fact that there is a holiday preceding the Sabbath, the Sabbath could be forgotten or neglected. In what way might one forget the sanctity of Shabbat?

The holiness of Shabbat is greater than the holiness of the holidays. But when Shabbat immediately follows a holiday, one might mistakenly equate the two and forget that there are different laws governing them. This could lead one to desecrate the Sabbath by performing activities that are permitted on holidays, such as cooking.

Just as we need to distinguish between the holy and the profane, so too we need to distinguish between different degrees of holiness. This is the underlying purpose of eiruv tavshilin: to remind us of the higher sanctity of the Sabbath.

Abraham, who kept the entire Torah, also made this fine distinction — in his life and actions. Abraham differentiated not only between the sacred and the profane, but also bein kodesh le-kodesh, between different levels of holiness.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Igrot HaRe'iyah vol. I, p. 135 (1908); vol. III, p. 92 (1917).)

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/TOLDOT58.htm>

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### **Why Isaac? Why Jacob? (5778)**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.\*

Why Isaac, not Ishmael? Why Jacob, not Esau? These are among the most searing questions in the whole of Judaism. It is impossible to read Genesis 21, with its description of how Hagar and her son were cast out into the wilderness, how their water ran out, how Hagar placed Ishmael under a bush and sat at a distance so she would not see him die, without feeling intensely for both of them, mother and child. They are both crying. The Torah tells us that God heard Ishmael's tears and sent an angel to comfort Hagar, show her a well of water, and assure her that God would make her son "a great nation" (Gen. 21:18) – the very promise he gave Abraham himself at the start of his mission (Gen. 12:2).

Likewise in the case of Esau. The emotional climax of the parsha occurs in chapter 27, at the point when Jacob leaves Isaac's presence, having deceived him into thinking that he was Esau. Then Esau enters, and slowly both father and son realise what has happened. This is what we read:

*Then Isaac trembled with a very great trembling, and said, "Who then was it who hunted game and brought it to me and I ate it before you came and I blessed him? — and he will be blessed."*  
*When Esau heard his father's words, he cried an intensely loud and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me too, my father!" Gen. 27:33-34*

These are among the most powerful descriptions of emotion in the whole of the Torah, and they are precisely the opposite of what we would expect. We would expect the Torah to enlist our sympathies for the chosen: Isaac and Jacob. Instead it almost forces us to empathise with the unchosen: Hagar, Ishmael and Esau. We feel their pain and sense of loss. So, why Isaac and not Ishmael? Why Jacob and not Esau? To this there are two types of answer. The first is given by Midrash. On this reading Isaac and Jacob were righteous. Ishmael and Esau were not.

Ishmael worshipped idols.<sup>[1]</sup> He violated married women.<sup>[2]</sup> He tried to kill Isaac with his bow and arrow while making it look as if it were an accident.<sup>[3]</sup> Esau was attracted, even in the womb, to idolatrous shrines.<sup>[4]</sup> He trapped not only animals but also his father Isaac by pretending to be pious when he was not.<sup>[5]</sup> God cut short Abraham's life by five years so that he would not live to see his grandson violate a betrothed woman, commit murder, deny God, deny the resurrection of the dead, and despise the birthright.<sup>[6]</sup> Such is the way of Midrash. It helps us see Isaac and Jacob as perfectly good, Ishmael and Esau as dangerously bad. That is an important part of our tradition.

But it is not the way of the written Torah itself, at least insofar as we seek what Rashbam called *omek peshuto shel mikra*, the "deep plain sense of Scripture."<sup>[7]</sup> The Torah does not portray Ishmael and Esau as wicked. The worst it has to say about Ishmael is that Sarah saw him *metzacheck* (Gen. 21:9), a word with many meanings, most of them not negative. Literally, it means, "he was laughing." But Abraham and Sarah also laughed.<sup>[8]</sup> So did Isaac.<sup>[9]</sup> Indeed Isaac's name, chosen by God himself,<sup>[10]</sup> means, "He will laugh." There is nothing in the word itself that implies improper conduct.<sup>[11]</sup> In the case of Esau, the most pointed verse is the one in which he agrees to part with his birthright in return for a bowl of soup (Gen. 25:34). In a staccato series of five consecutive verbs, the Torah says that he "ate, drank, rose, went and despised" his birthright. Yet this tells us that he was impetuous, not that he was evil.

If we seek the "deep plain sense," we must rely on the explicit testimony of the Torah itself – and what it tells us is fascinating. An angel told Hagar before Ishmael was born that he would be "a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him" (Gen. 16:12). He became an expert archer (Gen. 21:20). Esau, red-haired, physically mature at a young age, was "a skilful hunter, a man of the field" (Gen. 25:27). Ishmael and Esau were at home in nature. They were strong, adroit, unafraid of the wild. In any other culture they might have emerged as heroes. And that is the point. We will only understand the Torah if we recall that every other religion in the ancient world worshipped nature. That is where they found God, or more precisely, the gods: in the sun, the moon, the stars, the storm, the rain that fed the earth and the earth that gave forth food.

Even in the twenty-first century, people for whom science has taken the place of religion still worship nature. For them we are physical beings. For them there is no such thing as a soul, merely electrical impulses in the brain. For them there is no real freedom: we are what we are because of genetic and epigenetic causes over which we have no real control. Freewill, they say, is an illusion. Human life, they believe, is not sacred, nor are we different in kind from other animals. Nature is all there is. Such was the view of Lucretius in ancient Rome and Epicurus in pre-Christian Greece, and it is the view of scientific atheists today.

The faith of Abraham and his descendants is different. God, we believe, is beyond nature, because He created nature. And because He made us in His image, there is something in us that is beyond nature also. We are free. We are creative. We can conceive of possibilities that have not yet existed, and act so as to make them real. We can adapt to our environment, but we can also adapt our environment to us. Like every other animal we have desires, but unlike any other

animal we are capable of standing outside our desires and choosing which to satisfy and which not. We can distinguish between what is and what ought to be. We can ask the question "Why?"

After the Flood God was reconciled to human nature and vowed never again to destroy the world (Gen. 8-9). Yet He wanted humanity to know that there is something beyond nature. That is why He chose Abraham and his descendants as His "witnesses".[12]

Not by accident were Abraham-and-Sarah, Isaac-and-Rebecca, and Jacob-and-Rachel, unable to have children by natural means. Nor was it mere happenstance that God promised the holy land to a landless people. He chose Moses, the man who said, "I am not a man of words," to be the bearer of His word. When Moses spoke God's words, people knew they were not his own.

God promised two things to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: children and a land. Throughout history, most people at most times have taken children and a land for granted. They are part of nature. They constitute the two most basic natural drives: the Darwinian imperative and the territorial imperative. All animals have children, and many have their own territory that they mark and defend.

Jews – one of the world's smallest people – have rarely been able to take children for granted. Abraham's first recorded words to God were: "O Lord God, what can you give me seeing that I go childless?" and even today we ask, Will we have Jewish grandchildren? Nor have they been able to take their land for granted. They were often surrounded by enemies larger and more powerful than themselves. For many centuries they suffered exile. Even today they find the State of Israel's very right to be called into question in a way that applies to no other sovereign people. As David Ben-Gurion said, "In Israel, to be a realist you have to believe in miracles."

Isaac and Jacob were not men of nature: the field, the hunt, the gladiatorial game of predator-and-prey. They were not Ishmael and Esau, people who could survive by their own strength and skill. They were men who needed God's spirit to survive. Israel is the people who in themselves testify to something beyond themselves.

Jews have consistently shown that you can make a contribution to humanity out of all proportion to your numbers, and that a small nation can outlive every empire that sought its destruction. They have shown that a nation is strong when it cares for the weak, and rich when it cares for the poor. Jews are the people through whom God has shown that the human spirit can rise above nature, testifying that there is something real that transcends nature.

That is a life-changing idea. We are as great as our ideals. If we truly believe in something beyond ourselves, we will achieve beyond ourselves.

## **FOOTNOTES:**

[1] Bereishit Rabbah 53:11. Shemot Rabbah 1:1.

[2] Bereishit Rabbah 53:11.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Bereishit Rabbah 63:6.

[5] Tanhuma, Toldot 8.

[6] Baba Batra 16b.

[7] Rashbam to Gen. 37:2, 28; Ex. 3:14, 13:9.

[8] Gen. 17:17; 18:12.

[9] Gen. 26:8.

[10] Gen. 17:19.

[11] Robert Alter makes the ingenious suggestion that it means that Ishmael was “Isaac-ing,” imitating his younger brother (Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: a translation with commentary*, Norton, 2004, 103).

[12] Isaiah 43:10-12; 44:8.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/toldot/why-isaac-why-jacob/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

## Did Jacob Not Care for His Mother?

By Yossi Goldman \* © Chabad 2022

Three Jewish mothers were sitting on a bench discussing how much their sons love them.

“You know the Chagall painting hanging in my living room?” asked Betty. “My son Arnold bought that for my 75th birthday. What a good boy, he really loves his mother.”

“You call that love?” scoffed Dorothy. “You know the BMW I just got for Mother’s Day? That’s from my son Bernie. What a doll!”

Whereupon Shirley countered, “That’s nothing! You know my son Stanley? He pays tons of money for a session with a psychologist every week. And what does he talk about? Me!”

I was reminded of this old Jewish joke when reading this week’s Torah portion. Rebecca overhears her blind and elderly husband, Isaac, telling their son Esau to bring him some food so that he may bless him before he dies. Rebecca instructs Jacob to impersonate his twin brother Esau, and gives him food that Isaac enjoys, so that he, rather than the wicked Esau, will receive the blessings.

But Jacob protests. “My brother Esau is a hairy person, and I am smooth-skinned. If my father feels me and realizes that I am an imposter, I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.”

“Let your curse be upon me, my son...”1 his mother offers.

And indeed, Rebecca gave Jacob the food and Esau’s clothing to wear, and the rest is history. Isaac felt the hairy skins Jacob had placed on his arms and was confused, uttering the now-famous line, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.”2

In the end, Jacob received the blessings, Esau was incensed and threatened to kill his brother, and Jacob was compelled to leave town.

But my question is: Didn’t Jacob love his mother? He was afraid of incurring his father’s wrath, but no sooner does his mother say, “Your curse be upon me, my son,” and Jacob agrees to go along with the ruse! You don’t want to be cursed, but you’re happy for your mother to be?!

Is this behavior becoming of Jacob, one of the founding fathers of our faith?

One straightforward approach I have gathered from the commentaries is this:

When Jacob saw that his mother was prepared to take the fall, to risk the potentially lethal curse of Isaac, he realized that these were no ordinary blessings.

It wasn’t a case of Fiddler on the Roof’s “A blessing on your head, mazel tov, mazel tov.”

These blessings would effectively designate the recipient as the next link in the chain of Jewish leadership and peoplehood. Whichever son received them would determine the very fate and destiny of the Jewish People.

Can you just imagine if in our prayers every day we intoned “the G d of Abraham, Isaac and ... Esau”? Would our nation ever have become who we are if Esau, rather than Jacob, was the spiritual successor to Isaac?

If his mother was prepared to risk being cursed by the holy Isaac, this was proof enough to Jacob how absolutely critical it was for these blessings to be conferred upon him and not Esau. And so, then and there, Jacob agreed to his mother's request.

This also explains how the holy patriarch Jacob could engage in deception, impersonating his brother before his blind father. Every year in shul someone asks me the obvious question: How could Yaakov Avinu, Jacob our forefather, lie?! How could he tell his father he was Esau?

But to save a life, deception is justified. And to save the life and legacy of an entire nation it is certainly justified.

Indeed, when Isaac realizes what transpired, what does he say? He doesn't berate Jacob at all. Instead, he states “Indeed, [Jacob] shall remain blessed.”<sup>3</sup>

Jacob, like all Jewish boys, loved his mother. But he and his mother loved G d and were fully aware of the sacred responsibility on their shoulders to be guardians of our faith and our people. This was not a game. This was no charade. Isaac, in his blindness, or for whatever reason, felt that Esau should receive the blessings. Rebecca, with her woman's intuition, knew better.

Both Jacob and Rebecca were fully cognizant of their mission to perpetuate Judaism and our glorious nation. And thanks to their courage, commitment, and preparedness for sacrifice, Jewish continuity was safe and assured for eternity.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 27:11-13.

2. Ibid verse 22.

3. Ibid verse 33.

\* Founding Rabbi of the first Chabad in South Africa. Life Rabbi of the Sydenham Shul and President of the South African Rabbinical Association.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/5703269/jewish/Did-Jacob-Not-Care-for-His-Mother.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5703269/jewish/Did-Jacob-Not-Care-for-His-Mother.htm)

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## Toledot: Grasping for Holiness

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

After 30 years of marriage, Isaac and Rebbecca had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau emerged from the womb first, but Jacob was holding on to Esau's heel.

*“His brother then emerged, and his hand was grasping Esau's heel. He named him Jacob. Isaac was in his 60<sup>th</sup> year when she gave birth to them.” Genesis 25:26*

Esau and Jacob serve as metaphors for our animating and Divine souls, respectively. Just as Esau emerged from Rebecca's womb before Jacob, so does our inner Esau get a head start on our inner Jacob. Whereas our Divine soul manifests itself gradually, only becoming fully manifest when we reach the age of maturity, our animating soul is fully manifest from birth.

Yet, “his hand was grasping Esau's heel”: Our inner Jacob, our Divine soul, grasps at our inner Esau, our animating soul. The purpose of our Divine soul's descent into this world is to refine the animating soul and actualize its inherent potential

for goodness. Moreover, Esau's heel symbolizes the lowest levels of Esau, meaning the lowest levels of animalistic materialism. Our Divine soul strives to elevate and refine even those aspects of life normally considered intrinsically outside the realm of holiness.

– from *Daily Wisdom #3*

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society  
291 Kingston Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11213

\* A Chasidic insight that Rabbi Wisnefsky selected for the parsha.

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**Covenant and Conversation**  
**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l**

**Isaac and Esav**

It's a haunting question. Why did Isaac love Esau? The verse says so explicitly: "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob" (Gen. 25:28). Whichever way we read this verse, it is perplexing. If we read it literally, it suggests that Isaac's affections were governed by no more than a taste in a particular kind of food. Surely that is not the way love is earned or given in the Torah.

Rashi, citing a Midrash, suggests that the phrase translated as, "who had a taste for wild game," and referring to Isaac, in fact refers to Esau, and should be read "there was hunting in his mouth," meaning that he used to entrap and deceive his father by his words. Esau deceived Isaac into thinking that he was more pious and spiritual than in fact he was.

Bolstering this interpretation, some suggest that Isaac, having grown up in the household of Abraham and Sarah, had never encountered deception before, and was thus, in his innocence, misled by his son. Rebecca, who had grown up in the company of Laban, recognised it very well, which is why she favoured Jacob, and why she was later so opposed to Isaac's blessing going to Esau.

Yet the text suggests undeniably that there was a genuine bond of love between Esau and Isaac. The Zohar says that no one in the world honoured his father as Esau honoured Isaac.<sup>[1]</sup> Likewise, Isaac's love for Esau is evident in his desire to bless him. Note that Abraham did not bless Isaac. Only on his deathbed, did Jacob bless his children. Moses blessed the Israelites on the last day of his life. When Isaac sought to bless Esau, he was old and blind, but not yet on his deathbed: "I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death" (Gen. 27:2). This was an act of love.

Isaac, who loved Esau, was not deceived as to the nature of his elder son. He knew what he was and what he wasn't. He knew he was a man of the field, a hunter, mercurial in temperament, a man who could easily give way to violence, quickly aroused to anger, but equally quickly, capable of being distracted and forgetting.

He also knew that Esau was not the child to continue the covenant. That is manifest in the difference between the blessing Isaac gave Jacob in Genesis 27 (believing him to be Esau), and the blessing in Genesis 28 that he gave Jacob, knowing him to be Jacob.

The first blessing, intended for Esau, is about wealth – "May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth" – and power, "Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to you." The second blessing, intended for Jacob as he was leaving home, is about children – "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples" – and a land – "May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of ... the land God gave to Abraham." The patriarchal blessings are not about wealth and power; they are about children and the land. So Isaac knew all along that the covenant would be continued by Jacob; he was not deceived by Esau. Why then did he love him, encourage him, wish to bless him?

The answer, I believe, lies in three extraordinary silences. The most pointed is the question, What happened to Isaac after the binding? Look at the text in Genesis 22 and you will see that as soon as the angel has stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son, Isaac drops out of the picture completely. The text tells us that Abraham returned to the two servants who accompanied them on the way, but there is no mention of Isaac.

This is a glaring mystery, tantalising the commentators. Some go so far as to say that Isaac actually died at the binding and was brought back to life. Ibn Ezra quotes this interpretation and dismisses it.<sup>[2]</sup> Shalom Spiegel's *The Last Trial* is a book-length treatment of this idea.<sup>[3]</sup> Where was Isaac after the trial of the Binding?

The second silence is the death of Sarah. We read that Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and weep for her. But the primary mourner in Judaism is traditionally the child. It should have been Isaac leading the mourning. But he is not mentioned in the entire chapter 23 that relates to Sarah's death and its consequences.

The third is in the narrative in which Abraham instructed his servant to find a wife for his son. There is no record in the text that Abraham consulted with Isaac his son, or even informed him. Abraham knew that a wife was being sought for Isaac; Abraham's servant knew; but we have no idea as to whether Isaac knew, and whether he had any thoughts on the subject. Did he want to get married? Did he have any particular preference as to what his wife should be like? The text is silent. Only when the servant returns with his wife-to-be, Rebecca, does Isaac enter the narrative at all.

The text itself is significant: "Isaac had come from Be'er Lahai Roi." What was this place? We have encountered it only once before. It is where the angel appeared to Hagar when, pregnant, she fled from Sarah who was treating her harshly (Gen. 16:14). An ingenious Midrash says that when Isaac heard that Abraham had sent his servant to find a wife for him, he said to himself, "Can I live with a wife while my father lives alone? I will go and return Hagar to him."<sup>[4]</sup> A later text tells us that "After Abraham's death, God blessed his son Isaac, who then lived near Be'er Lahai Roi" (Gen. 25:11). On this, the Midrash says that even after his father's death, Isaac lived near Hagar and treated her with respect.<sup>[5]</sup>

What does all this mean? We can only speculate. But if the silences mean something, they suggest that even an arrested sacrifice still has a victim. Isaac may not have died physically, but the text seems to make him disappear, literally, through three scenes in which his presence was central. He should have been there to greet and be greeted by the two servants on his safe return from Mount Moriah. He should have been there to mourn his departed mother Sarah. He should have been there to at least discuss, with his father and his father's servant, his future wife. Isaac did not die on the mountain, but it seems as if something in him did die, only to be revived when he married. The text tells us that Rebecca "became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death."

That seems to be the message of the silences. The significance of Beer Lahai Roi seems to be that Isaac never forgot how Hagar and her son – his half-brother Ishmael – had been sent away. The Midrash says that Isaac reunited Hagar with Abraham after Sarah's death. The biblical text tells us that Isaac and Ishmael stood together at Abraham's grave (Gen. 25:9). Somehow the divided family was reunited, seemingly at the instigation of Isaac.

If this is so, then Isaac's love for Esau is simply explained. It is as if Isaac had said: I know what Esau is. He is strong, wild, unpredictable, possibly violent. It is impossible that he should be the person entrusted with the covenant and its spiritual demands. But this is my child. I refuse to sacrifice him, as my father almost sacrificed me. I refuse to send him away, as my parents sent Hagar and

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Ishmael away. My love for my son is unconditional. I do not ignore who or what he is. But I will love him anyway, even if I do not love everything he does – because that is how God loves us, unconditionally, even if He does not love everything we do. I will bless him. I will hold him close. And I believe that one day that love may make him a better person than he might otherwise have been.

In this one act of loving Esau, Isaac redeemed the pain of two of the most difficult moments in his father Abraham's life: the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael and the binding of Isaac.

I believe that love helps heal both the lover and the loved.

[1] Zohar 146b.

[2] Ibn Ezra, Commentary to Gen. 22:19.

[3] Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, Schocken, 1969.

[4] Midrash Hagadol to Gen. 24:62.

[5] Midrash Aggadah and Bereishit Rabbati ad loc.

### **The Person in the Parsha** **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

#### **Different Forms of Power**

The professor was wrong. But in his field of expertise he was always right. His name was Dr. Dennis Wrong, and his surname made him the object of much teasing, at least during his childhood. He was a prominent sociologist, and I took a course from him while still in graduate school. The course was entitled "The Sociology of Power."

I learned a lot from him, and kept notes of his lectures for many years. Some years after I took the course, I came across a book he had written, based upon those lectures, and discarded my notes in favor of his text. The title of the book was *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses*.

It was in his course that I began to appreciate that "power" need not involve physical coercion. There are many ways to exert power, ways that are much more effective than brute force. This insight has proven helpful to me in many areas of my personal and professional life. It has even helped me come to grips with a problem that is related to this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Toldot* (Genesis 25:19-28:9).

The problem to which I refer does not directly involve the biblical text. Rather, it is derived from the Kabbalistic tradition, from the book of the Zohar. In this tradition, each of the patriarchs is assigned a different spiritual virtue. Abraham, for example, carries the banner of chesed, or lovingkindness. This is easy to understand because almost every record that we have of Abraham's behavior involves qualities such as hospitality and concern for others.

The virtue designated for the patriarch Isaac is gevurah, and this presents a problem. Gevurah means strength or power, and even after carefully reading the entire narrative of Isaac's life, we find no evidence of special acts of

strength that he performed or displays of might that he exhibited.

For example, Isaac was never involved in a war. He was decidedly pacifist in every conflict that he encountered. This is in stark contrast not only to the other patriarchs but to almost every other biblical hero.

Abraham, for example, courageously pursued the combined armies of four kings in order to rescue his nephew Lot. Jacob wrestled with an angel and boasted of his conquest of a portion of land which he "wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow." (Genesis 48:22) Moses slayed an Egyptian tormentor and waged war against Sichon and the giant Og. Joshua is the quintessential general, and the first kings of Israel, Saul and David, led their people in battle.

But Isaac? We find no trace of martial activity on his part. Why then is strength considered his signal virtue? Why does he, of all the biblical heroes, carry the banner of power?

I first found this dilemma articulated in a wonderful book of commentaries on the weekly Torah portion, *MiSinai Ba*, by contemporary Israeli scholar Rabbi Yehuda Shaviv. Rabbi Shaviv discovered a somewhat obscure passage in the Midrash that not only formulates the question but provides an answer. The passage reads: "Where do we find that Isaac was a strongman, a man of power? Behold: how many wells he did dig! It is written, 'And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his [Isaac's] father's servants had dug... Isaac dug anew... and gave them the same names... And Isaac's servants, digging in the wadi found there a new well of spring water... And then they dug another well... He moved from there to dig yet another well...' (Genesis 26:15-22). Behold the power that he possessed!" (Midrash Tanchuma, Buber Edition, Toldot 7).

Isaac's power did not resort to coercion and involved neither aggression nor physical force. His was the power of persistence, of the stubborn commitment to pursue his goals despite the obstacles with which he was confronted. He avoids conflicts and seeks alternate paths to his objectives, yet he projects neither weakness nor cowardice. Ultimately, he achieves his objectives and exclaims that they are especially blessed, as we read, "Now at last the Lord has granted us ample space to increase in the land."

Isaac's capacity to persist in the face of frustration is demonstrated in the very beginning of our Torah portion. There we read of how he and his wife Rebecca face the challenges of infertility. What was his response? Prayer! As we read, "Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife... And the Lord responded to his plea..." (Genesis 25:21). The Torah does not tell us just how long he prayed. We are left to "do the math" for ourselves. Isaac was forty years old when he

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married Rebecca, and sixty years old when Esau and Jacob were born. He persisted in prayer for no less than twenty years. That is how he demonstrated strength and power.

Professor Wrong does not offer Isaac as an exemplar of this alternate form of power. But he does enumerate numerous examples, drawing from history and literature and sociological research, of a wide variety of forms of power which do not involve violence. As always, the discoveries of modern social science find precedents in ancient Jewish texts. Consider, for example, the fact that while the Talmud in Tractate Kiddushin 49b speaks of the strong man as one whose "fellows fear him because of his might", a contrasting definition is offered in the Talmudic tome entitled *Avot D'Rabbi Nathan*. There we read, "Who is the strongest of the strong? He who can convert his enemy into a friend."

The Sages memorialize Isaac's paradigm in an unforgettable passage in the beginning of the fourth chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers. There we read, "Ben Zoma said... Who is strong? One who masters his evil impulse, as it is written, 'He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules over his spirit is better than he who conquers the city.' (Proverbs 16:32)"

Rabbi Israel Salanter, the brilliant ethicist who lived in the latter half of the 19th century, explains that besides physical strength there are two models of gevura. One way is to "master the evil impulse" and become "slow to anger." But, insists Rabbi Salanter, such an approach suppresses but does not totally eliminate the evil impulse. A person who chooses this way may be "slow to anger," but anger still resides within him.

The alternate model is the person who "rules over his spirit." He totally circumvents his evil impulse. He finds ways, writes Rabbi Salanter, to "conquer the city" by persuading its inhabitants that his rule will benefit them. He demonstrates his care and compassion for them and thus wins them over. This is the preferred way to demonstrate strength.

I conclude by paraphrasing a remark by Rabbi Shaviv in his helpful essay: Throughout our history, resorting to struggle and even war was often necessary. Certainly Abraham and Jacob, and even Moses, had to follow that route.

But it is so comforting to know that there is another way, Isaac's way. It is a way which avoids battle and heroically persists in the search for paths to blessings and roads to peace.

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#### **Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's** **Derashot Ledorot**

#### **Religion by Relegation**

In an almost casual, offhand way, our sidra tells us of a series of incidents in the life of Isaac that are apparently of no special

significance, but in which our rabbis have seen the greatest importance.

Isaac lived in the land of Canaan, which suffered from scarcity of water most of the year, and he therefore decided to dig a well. We are told of three wells that he and his entourage dug. The first two involved him in difficulties with the people of Gerar, a Philistine nation. The first of these Isaac called Esek, because it was the cause of much strife and contention. He was no more successful with the second well; after his servants dug it, he incurred the hatred of the people about him. He therefore called the second well by the name Sitna, meaning enmity. It was only when the third well was dug that happiness prevailed once again; and so he called the third well Rehovot, meaning: room, freedom, scope, peace, or joy.

Of what importance can these apparently prosaic matters be to later generations, who search in the Torah for matters of timeless significance and are not particularly interested in economic clashes and riparian rivalry in ancient Canaan? Nachmanides, following the principle of the rabbis that “ma’aseh avot siman levanim,” that the deeds of the fathers anticipate the history of the children, has taught us that the three wells of Isaac recapitulate the stories of the three great Sanctuaries of the people of Israel. The first well is a symbol of the First Temple, which was destroyed because of Esek – because of the battles and wars waged on the Jewish people by the surrounding nations. The second well, that called Sitna, represents the Second Temple, for this Temple was brought to ruins by the hatred and enmity that prevailed among the children of Israel during that period. However, the third well, Rehovot, is the symbol of the Sanctuary that has not yet been built – that of the great future. It represents the Beit haMikdash which will one day be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and which will last forever in a spirit of Rehovot – freedom, peace, and plenty.

However, the question remains: why indeed was Isaac successful with the third well, while failing with the first two? In what way was the third well, symbol of the Third Temple, superior to the others?

Permit me to provide an answer which has been suggested to me by my uncle, Rabbi Joseph M. Baumol, which not only answers this question but also provides us with a powerful moral for our own lives. If we analyze carefully the three verses which tell of how these three wells were dug, we will discover one significant difference between the first two and the third. The first two were dug by Isaac’s servants, his hired help. Of the first well we read: “Vayahperu avdei Yitzhak,” “And the servants of Isaac dug the well.” With regard to the second well, we read: “Vayahperu be’er aheret,” “They dug another well.” In both cases, Isaac relegated his duties and activities to others. Only with regard to the third well do we find the element of personal

participation: “Vayahperu be’er aheret,” “And he dug another well” (Genesis 26:19, 21, 22). As long as Isaac was going to leave the performance of his duties to others, and not do them himself, there was bound to result Esek and Sitna, hatred and argumentation. It is only when Isaac, despite the many people ready to serve him, was willing to dig the well by himself, that he was able to achieve Rehovot – the peace and plenty and freedom that he so very much desired. The Third Temple, that which will last unto all eternity, will come about only when every Jew will take it upon himself to perform the “Vayahperu be’er aheret,” the willingness to work by himself, to commit his own energies, talents, concern, and participation to the sacred tasks which we have been assigned.

Actually, Isaac’s career from the very beginning reveals this tension between relegation and participation. Throughout his life we find signs of his struggling to learn this great principle of personal involvement. Even before he was conceived, the message came to his father Abraham that Sara would bear the child, Isaac. However, the message came not from God Himself, as it were, but through an angel. And so, when Sara heard it she laughed and ridiculed it – incurring Abraham’s annoyance and God’s irritation. Only afterwards do we read, “And the Lord said unto Abraham” – when God Himself addressed Abraham, by Himself and not through an angel, Sara began to believe in reverence and awe, and not doubt in mocking laughter, that she would be blessed with a child.

The great story of the Akeida also reveals this oscillation between relegation and participation. At first, Abraham decides to offer up Isaac himself. At the last moment, his hand is stayed and, instead, Abraham offers up a ram caught in the thicket nearby. The Torah puts it this way (Genesis 22:13): And behold, “Ayil ahar ne’ehaz basvakh,” which we normally translate: “A ram was caught in the thicket behind them.” But this has also been interpreted in an equally valid fashion as: “Another ram was caught in the thicket” – that is, instead of Isaac, another sacrifice was discovered: the ram. Isaac’s life was saved and a “messenger” was offered up in his place, the ram!

His very marriage followed the same pattern. Isaac did not himself go to look for a wife; his father sent the servant Eliezer instead. According to our tradition (Tosafot on Ketubot 7b), Eliezer was legally a “shaliyah kiddushin,” an agent to marry a woman for Isaac by proxy. No wonder, as the Netziv has pointed out, throughout their married lives Isaac and Rebecca suffered from a sense of distance and remoteness between them, a lack of open communication and participation with each other. The Netziv sees this symbolized in the event that occurred when Isaac and Rebecca first met. There we read that at the moment she saw him, Rebecca took her veil and covered her face. This veil is a symbol of a domestic

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curtain, an obstruction that prevented them from communicating freely. If there is no direct personal participation, then there is a possibility of misunderstanding and even enmity.

So it was with the wells. It took two difficult diggings until Isaac learned that you ought not send someone else to do your tasks. He then learned that only if “he dug another well,” by himself and with his own effort, could he achieve Rehovot, the peace and freedom and space that he needed for his full development.

This idea is especially important in contemporary society. As civilization grows more complex, each person grows less whole and less integrated, for he is less involved in the tasks that require his attention and devotion. With the division of labor, and the progressive concentration of expertise in narrower and narrower fields, we begin to suffer alienation, a sense of distance between ourselves and our fellow-man, a withdrawal from all of life to within ourselves. Especially in our crowded cities, this introversion and withdrawal takes place if only as a means to protect what little precious privacy we have left for ourselves.

And of course, to some extent, we must limit our involvement in society and the lives of others. We need the mechanics of the delegation of duties and tasks in order for society to function. A good administrator is one who does not do everything by himself, but sees to it that others do their parts. We cannot and should not attempt to do everything by ourselves.

The halakha recognized this idea and incorporated it in the institution of shelihut, agency. We are permitted to designate an agent to perform certain tasks, not only in financial law, but even with regard to such mitzvot as the giving of charity or the writing of a sefer Torah. Nevertheless, the principle of shelihut is not valid for every occasion. For instance, I cannot make an agent to eat in the sukka for me, nor can I appoint someone to listen to the sound of the shofar for me. If I do, I have failed to fulfill my religious obligations. How do I distinguish between those functions for which I can appoint a messenger, and those which I must perform myself? The famous author of the Ketzot haHoshen put it this way: I may make an agent to perform any commandment save a mitzva shebegufo, a mitzva which I am required to perform with my own body, my own self. Thus, charity can be given by anyone – the important consideration is the result, that the poor man be fed or housed. Anyone may write a sefer Torah for me, provided that I commission it and possess it and use it. But when the commandment is that I eat in a sukka or that I hear the shofar – that is a commandment relating to my body, to my person, and no one can take my place.

Thus, certain things cannot be delegated and relegated to others. Today, as we are threatened with the progressive depersonalization of life, we must emphasize as never before the mitzva shebegufo, the significance of the individual, of selfhood, of personal participation and responsibility. We must come to recognize that we are each of us not only a collection of assignable functions, but integrated, whole, unique individuals, who must act by ourselves and as ourselves.

*[Excerpted from Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's *Derashot Ledorot: A Commentary for the Ages – Genesis*, co-published by OU Press, Maggid Books, and YU Press; edited by Stuart W. Halpern]*

### **Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissacher Frand**

#### **The Value of Planning, Forethought, Process and Development**

The pasuk says, "And Yaakov boiled a stew, and Eisav came in from the field, and he was exhausted." (Bereshis 25:29). The sad news reached the family that Avraham Avinu has passed away. Yaakov Avinu was cooking lentils because it is customary to serve a mourner round food items. (This is why an egg is typically eaten at the Seudah Mafsekes before Tisha B'Av.) Yaakov Avinu was cooking lentil soup for his father as part of the customary "Seudas Havra'ah" (the first meal a mourner consumes following the funeral, typically prepared by neighbors). Eisav came home from the field tired and famished. We know the rest of the story. Eisav asked for the lentil soup. Yaakov made a deal with him. Eisav sold the birthright to Yaakov, and thus abandoned the bechora. This is the beginning of Parshas Toldos.

The Tolner Rebbe asks three interesting questions:

On the above cited pasuk (vayazet Yaakov nazid), Rashi explains that the word vayazet means to cook. However, the far more common word for cooking in the Torah is the word bishul or some derivative of that root word. Why suddenly over here when the Torah wants to say that Yaakov was cooking lentil soup does the Torah use the word vayazet, necessitating for Rashi to explain that vayazet is the same as bishul?

What was the dish that Yaakov cooked? The Torah here calls it nazid (some kind of soup). It is not until five pesukim later (Bereshis 25:34) that the Torah calls it nazid adashim (lentil soup). Why do we need to wait to find out what Yaakov was cooking? Get to the point right away!

Yitzchak was a wealthy man. Avraham Avinu was a wealthy man and he gave everything that he had to Yitzchak. We are not aware of Yitzchak suffering any financial setbacks. Would we not expect Yitzchak to have servants in his house who did the cooking? Yaakov was a diligent student. He spent his time in the Yeshiva of Shem v'Ever. He learns all the time. Later in life, he learned fourteen years straight without sleeping. Yet what is he doing at the beginning of Parshas Toldos? He is cooking! What about the

servants? In fact, the Medrash here points out the humility of Yaakov Avinu that he was cooking lentil soup himself, despite the fact that his father had many servants!

The Tolner Rebbe cites a Malbim who explains the relationship between the word vayazet and the idea of cooking. The Torah uses the same root word in the expression "Ki ba'davar she'ZADU aleihem" (Shemos 18:11), where it means planned or schemed. The Malbim asks: Why is the same root word in Lashon HaKodesh used for cooking and also for planning and scheming? The Malbim answers that when a person schemes, he is cooking up a plan. The word zeidim (as in the expression zeidim b'yad osekei Torasecha) refers to people who plan nefarious and malevolent schemes. These plans that they "cook up" need to first percolate until they are fully ready to be put into action.

There is an expression – if someone wants to cheat in business, he "cooks the books". What kind of expression is that? It is the same idea. If someone wants to try to fool his partner or the government or someone else, he may plan how to charge this expense and how to charge that expense. That is "cooking the books".

That is why the expression vayazet is synonymous with the expression "bishul"—it requires this great forethought of planning, which is synonymous with "cooking up a plan" to do something.

Now we can explain why the pasuk specifically uses the verb vayazet Yaakov nazid. The Torah is trying to indicate that Yaakov Avinu carefully planned this activity with great forethought and intent. He reasoned: My father just became an avel. I want to cook for him. Yaakov's action was done with great planning and forethought in order to fulfill the commandment of honoring his father. This answers the first question.

That is why he did not just let the servants cook the soup—the third question. This was not just a bowl of soup. This was Kibbutz Av. Yaakov wanted to do it, and he wanted to do it from the get go. "I don't just want to serve my father. I want to cook the soup and I want to prepare the soup. This is how I want to serve my father." The purpose of the cooking was not just to get something on the plate (for which the word bishul would have sufficed). The cooking over here was a well thought out plan of providing the Seudas Havra'ah and fulfilling the mitzvah of Kibbutz Av v'Em.

This is also why the Torah does not state right away that it was a bowl of lentil soup—the second question. That is immaterial at this point. At this point, the Torah is interested in stating that Yaakov was doing the act of cooking, the act of preparing food to serve his bereaved father. If his only interest was to convey the bottom line, then the menu would have been mentioned up front: A bowl of lentil soup. However, that is not the Torah's intent

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over here. The Torah is trying to emphasize that Yaakov did this entire act with great forethought.

This answers all three questions.

The Tolner Rebbe explains further that within this idea of planning and forethought lies one of the fundamental differences between Yaakov and Eisav. Eisav (as we also see from his name and from his whole life) is not interested in process. He is not interested in preparation. He is interested in the bottom line. That is why the name Eisav is related to the verb ossuei (done). Yaakov comes from the word Akov – crooked. Yaakov's whole life was a life of process, a life of growing, a life of becoming. His life was a life in which the journey and the path itself had merit.

Eisav is a "Just get it done" person. That is why Chazal say that when Yitzchak Avinu told Eisav "Go out and hunt for me," the Medrash says that Eisav said to himself – If I find an animal quickly, fine, I will hunt for it, otherwise I will steal an animal from someone who has already found one. To Eisav, it was just a matter of getting it done. How? Where? The process is all immaterial.

This is reflected in the difference between Yiddishkeit and secularism. Yiddishkeit emphasizes process and growing in stages. "Going through the motions" itself has value. This is not the case in the secular world. They are not interested in process. What's your batting average? How many runs did you score? How much money do you make? They are not interested in the effort you put into it. It is just the "bottom line." This is not a Jewish value.

Anu ameilim v'hem ameilim (we toil, and they toil). We are rewarded even for the toil (even when it does not necessarily lead to concrete accomplishment). This is the difference between Yaakov and Eisav.

The Tolner Rebbe told an amazing story at the end of this presentation: In Europe there were a number of very brilliant people. There was a child prodigy known in Europe as the prodigy from Meit'zat. He wrote a sefer called Chidushei ha'Ilui m'Meit'zat (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/50602>). He later came to America and was a Rosh Yeshiva in Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchonon. His name was Rav Shlomo Polacheck (1877-1928). His son told over an amazing story about his father:

When Rav Polacheck came to America from Poland and he saw children playing with toys and games, he cried. Why? He said "If I would have had the opportunity to play with toys and be a child when I was young, I would be a bigger Talmid Chochom than I am today – because the process of growing up is important." There is a thing called maturation. There is a stage called childhood and a stage called adolescence and a stage called

adulthood. He was such a prodigy that perhaps he knew Mishnayos by heart at age three. Someone who knows Mishnayos by heart is not able to play around with whatever little toys three-year-olds played around with in Europe. So, he did not really experience childhood. He said about himself that if he would have had a proper childhood, he could have become an even greater Talmid Chochom (which is hard to imagine).

That is the point of the Tolner Rebbe's whole shtrickle Torah. Process and development have value. A person cannot just skip to the bottom line or skip to the end. That is what we learn from "vaYayed Yaakov nazid."

### Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

A missing letter provides a clue to the survival of the Jewish people. In Parshat Toldot, we read how Jacob deceived his father Isaac into thinking that he was his twin brother Esau. Isaac declared (Bereishit 27:22),

"Hakol kol Yaakov v'hayadaim yedei Eisav." – "The voice is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Esau."

From here the Midrash teaches as follows. As long as the voice of Jacob is heard in houses of prayer and halls of study, the hands of Esau will not be able to destroy the Jewish people. Now, many of our commentators ask how the Midrash derives this lesson from our verse. After all, Isaac exclaimed, "Hakol kol Yaakov," – "The voice is the voice of Jacob," indicating that the voice was heard, "vehayadaim yedei Eisav," – "and the hands are the hands of Esau," indicating that his hands were there and they were powerful.

'Malei vechaseir' - The Vilna Gaon brilliantly explains that this has everything to do with 'malei vechaseir'. What is 'malei vechaseir'? The term literally means 'complete and incomplete', and it refers to a phenomenon that we sometimes see in the Torah, wherein some of the words are missing a vowel. Each time this happens, "zeh omer darshaini," – the word cries out for an explanation.

I cannot think of a better example of this than in the verse that we have quoted. "Hakol kol Yaakov." The word 'kol' is mentioned twice. On the first occasion the 'kol', the voice, is spelled kuf-lamed which is 'chaseir', missing the vav. On the second occasion just one word later, it's spelled kuf-vav-lamed which is 'malei' – complete – it has the vav in the middle of the word.

Thanks to the Vilna Gaon we can now understand the Midrash. Because the first word 'kol' is missing a vav, it is indicating that something is absent. The voice is not as loud as it might have been. Kol has become 'kal' – light. The power of the voice has gone. It is in such circumstances, God forbid, that "hayadaim yedei Eisav" – the hands of Esau can be powerful.

Authentic Jewish voice - What emerges from here is a timeless and powerful lesson for the Jewish people. Time and again we have needed to fight for our very survival on the battlefield, but in addition to doing that there is another source of great Jewish strength. It lies in the kol Yaakov, the sound of Jacob, our voices in our shuls and in our halls of study. It is the authentic Jewish voice of tradition, and the more it is heard the stronger we, as a nation, are. The better our Jewish education, the more we have a capacity to guarantee our survival.

Yes indeed, a missing letter of the Torah provides us with the key to Jewish survival.

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### Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel Encyclopedia of Jewish Values\*

#### Two Worldviews of Bechor-First Born: Primogeniture or Not? The Essence of Judaism

Although not obvious at first glance, there seems to be an underlying recurring theme in the Biblical narrative of the Book of Genesis concerning the concept of the First Born and the rivalry between brothers. Many of the issues that are presented in the Torah can be framed through the prism of how to understand this concept of Bechor-First Born, and the competition between every generation of brothers can better be analyzed as a struggle between the First Born who feels entitled due merely to his birth position, and the more deserving younger sibling, who feels more worthy based on his actions. Several key words in the text in every story point us in this direction. It is only in our Parsha, Toldot, where the clash over the Bechora is the main focus. In addition, the concept of First Born can help us understand two larger world views of this concept, and man's general mission between Jews and non-Jews, as well as the goal and achievements by God to eradicate a misguided belief system in Egypt, based on the concept of the Bechor-First Born.

The concept of Primogeniture, i.e. the right, by law or custom, of the firstborn child to inherit the parent's entire estate and authority, in preference to shared inheritance among all or some children, represents a world view that has always existed in most societies, and still exists today. It is a concept of power and preference, not by merit, but, rather, by birth order. Before she became Queen of England in 1952, Queen Elizabeth's sister, Margaret, reportedly privately tried to assert that she would be a "better" queen, due to her personality and skills. But this idea was quickly shot down, since royalty in England (and most countries that have had royalty) has nothing to do with "worthiness," and is always determined by Primogeniture, the accident of birth. We will see that this concept of the First Born is antithetical to the Jewish concept of First Born.

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#### The Book of Genesis is a Series of Competitions Between the First-Born Younger Sibling

Although not highlighted in the text directly, except in the story of Jacob and Esau, the verses all use, from the very beginning that each story of siblings, is a battle between the elder first-born, who feels entitled because of birth order, and the younger who is more deserving, because of his actions. In the non-Jewish world then (and often still today), merit played little role is who inherits and receives the power. How does the Torah and Judaism view these incidents?

In the first set of siblings in the Torah, it is not clear from the text what precisely is the cause of the fight between Cain and Abel is about. Clearly, God favors the younger Abel which incensed Cain. There are dozens of credible Rabbinic explanations about the cause of this hatred. Perhaps it was about the birth order itself. Cain felt entitled, that God had to accept his offering (even though it was lesser, according to the Rabbis) because he was the First-Born. Abel felt that his superior offering should be preferred by God. But the Torah "alludes" to the first-born controversy by telling us that Hevel-Abel brought from the first-born animals (Genesis 4:3-4). While he understood that he could never be an actual first born, perhaps Hevel, by bringing from superior cattle and that it was also first born, God would favor him. And such was the case, which Cain could not accept, and eventually murdered Abel as a result. An important principle was established in this story which follows in the rest of the book of Genesis: first born in Judaism does not signify automatic entitlement. God judges only on merit, not entitlement. Hence God favors the superior offering of Hevel, the superior actions of all men, regardless of their status in life (for example, King David was the youngest and the least likely (physically) to be king, as Samuel went through each of his six brothers first before God told Samuel that David was the worthiest).

In the next group of brothers, following the Flood, their father Noach became drunk, Cham was involved somewhat in the sin and Cham's son, Canaan, clearly sinned with his grandfather. Shem took the lead and, with his brother Yefet, preserved his father's dignity without shaming him, by walking backwards into the tent, in order to clothe him. Noach praises and blesses Shem, curses Canaan, and gives a secondary blessing to Yefet (Genesis 9:18-26). One might think that, in this particular case, that the eldest brother, the First-Born, was more righteous and most deserving because of his actions, since every place in the Torah that describes the three siblings, Shem is mentioned first, and we assume he is the eldest. However, the Midrash, based on a verse in the next chapter (Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 4:8, Genesis 10:21), proves that Yefet was the oldest. Although he did not sin, he should have taken the lead in this story, but he abdicated this responsibility. Thus, the

more meritorious child, Shem is blessed (and from him emerges Abraham and the Jewish people). However, it is often said that the exception proves the rule. There is one place in the book of Genesis where the actual first-born son IS more deserving due to his actions: that of Abraham, who towered morally over his younger brothers Nachor and Haran (Genesis 11:27).

When it came to Abraham's sons, clearly, a different story emerged. When Sara could not get pregnant, it was Sara's idea to give her maidservant, Hagar, to Avraham to have a child, as that might help Sara to eventually get pregnant herself. As soon as Hagar became pregnant, things changed and there was great enmity between the two women. Sara became very upset, and Hagar eventually ran away (Genesis 16:3-6 with Radak commentary). The details are not clear, and certainly nothing about first-born is mentioned directly in the Torah. However, Radak explains the verb (mentioned twice) "Vatekel Gvirta Bi-eineha." As soon as Hagar became pregnant, she began to look down upon her mistress Sara. Now, she would give birth to the eldest son, Yishmael, and by that right alone, she is entitled to become the mistress of the home and take Sara's place as the only wife to Abraham and receive all the power. Hagar's view of the first born is what caused Sara so much psychological pain, because of the Jewish view of the first born is quite different (see below). Eventually both Hagar and Yishmael were forced to leave Abraham's home, because they continued to assume that merely being the first born gave them all the rights and special status, which was an improper assumption.

In the next generation, twins are born. Even though he was old by only a few moments, Eisav assumed he was the only entitled son of Isaac and Rebecca – as the Bechor. In a strange story, Eisav comes from the field tired and famished. Jacob, his brother, sells him the Bechora-first born rights, the first born, and Eisav responds that if he is going to die, why does not he need this power or title (Genesis 25:32-33). This is the first narrative where the first-born issue is front and center. Based on this story, we can begin to see the two different views of the Bechora-first born son. The non-Jewish view is clear and has been the claim of the "upper class" of society for millennia. I am privileged because of birth. All power is due me, and I do not have "earn it" or justify my ways. But what, then, precisely, is the Jewish view of Bechora-first born? Based on this story and a Midrash, Maharal (Maharal, Netzach Yisrael, chapter 15, p. 87) write and intimates that for Eisav (and the non-Jewish world), the role of the first born is a physical one, about power in this world. For the Jew, it is about responsibility and (reward for) the Next World. Jewish Bechora-First Born is about responsibility to others, not power. Thus, if Eisav is really about to die, Bechor is worthless to him. (later on, Jacob could not understand why Jacob had so many children. If Bechor-First Born is about this world, more

children do not help a Bechor. But if it is about responsibility, then more children, more spirituality adds to the Bechor-First Born concept).

The word Bechor-First Born recurs repeatedly is the Jacob-Eisav story, because each child basis his claim upon his understanding of this concept, although in a different manner. Jacob uses the term when he appears to Isaac disguised as Eisav, to show his father why he is worthy to receive the blessing – he is the Bechor. Eisav uses the term to complain that his physical rights and power as a first born were stolen through the sale and blessings (Genesis 27:32, 36). Neither son realizes that Isaac truly understands his children. Thus, Isaac gives Jacob (whom he thinks is Eisav) a blessing only about physical benefits in the world, since that is what Eisav desires and that is what the Bechor signifies to him (Genesis 27:19, 28-29, 28:1-4). (Later on, Isaac gives Jacob the "real" blessings, based upon Jacob's understanding of the spiritual nature of the Bechora – the Land of Israel and many children).

### What, Then, Is the Unique Jewish View of Bechor-First Born?

There are four unique Jewish aspects to the first born, which, in a sense, are the core values of Judaism. The first is that the birth of a first-born forces every parent, for the first time in his or her life, possibly, to focus on someone else besides themselves. A baby cannot survive unless a parent changes attention from self and devotes serious attention to the infant, which continues for many many years. Thus, a Bechor forces a parent to become other-directed, not inward directed. Second, the first child has the unique role of assisting the parent physically as he or she gets older. Not only assisting as a babysitter, but with tasks around the house. Until very recently, the oldest child had to do many physical and "adult" tasks, often helping a parent at work or in the field and function as an adult before he or she might be "ready." This forces a Bechor to mature earlier and take on more mature roles. It is for that reason that on the verse to respect one's parents, the Talmud states that respect must also be given to the eldest child, who takes on a quasi-parent role. Nachmanides specific mentions that the Bechor-First-Born often has to take on the role of the parent (Exodus 2:12, Ketuvot 103a, Nachmanides commentary on Genesis 32:5). Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik writes about he, as a Bechor-first born, had to help his parents physically. It is for that reason only, he claims, the Torah gives a first born a double portion as an inheritance for the physical work and responsibility for the many extra hours a first born must devote to the family (Deuteronomy 21:17). (Unlike in English, Hebrew words are formed from letters that often have a deeper meaning. The three letters of Bechor, Bet, Kaf, Resh, each all double the numerical values of the letters that they follow). The third role of a Bechor (as well as any human being and especially a Jew), is realizing that there are

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others (i.e., parents) in the world. He or she is not alone, is not a beginning to do what he she wishes but is a part of a continuing to previous generations, to parents and grandparents. Later siblings automatically realize this by having older siblings, but a Bechor must come to this unique realization. I am not the beginning but part of a continuity. Finally, Rabbi Soloveitchik says that the role of Bechor is that of a teacher to younger siblings. It is up to him or her to educate younger children, both as a role model and actual teaching when parents cannot do so.

The rivalry of brothers and the First Born does not end with Jacob and Esau. In the very next generation, the brothers feel that as the eleventh child, Joseph, is not special or should be treated as a Bechor-First Born, but Jacob had been deceived. He only wanted to marry Rachel. Thus, in his mind, Joseph, Rachel's first born, should be the first born (it is almost as if Jacob is oblivious to how much pain the concept of first born caused in his past). Jacob gives Joseph a special coat not only as a sign of affection but also to signify that Jacob considers him the first born (Genesis 37:3-4). The brothers are angry. But then it gets worse. When Jacob's dreams are about the brothers bowing down to Joseph and giving him power, they believed that Joseph only understands the non-Jewish concept of Bechor-First Born – power and privilege. It is for that reason that they must get rid of Joseph to establish a proper Jewish family with the proper concept of first born (Genesis 37:6-11, 19-23). We all know the rest of the story. That was never Joseph's intention. The family reunites, and, for the first time, a united Jewish family becomes he Jewish people.

But that is not the end of the story about sibling rivalry in the Torah. At the end of Genesis, when Jacob is supposed to give a blessing to Joseph's first-born son, first Jacob reiterates that Joseph is his first born, by giving each of Joseph's sons a separate share in the Land in Israel – double portion (Genesis 48:5-6). Then, with the actual blessings for Joseph's sons, Jacob intentionally switches his hands, and gives the younger son, Ephraim, the blessing with his right-dominant hand, because, once again, he is more worthy, even though the Torah stresses that he is not the Bechor-First Born (Genesis 48:5-6). But this, too, is not the end of the story. If we look back again at each description of sibling rivalry in Genesis, it is true that in each generation, the younger sibling was "victorious" and more worthy. However, in each succeeding generation, the older brother was less angry and more tolerant of that success. While Cain kills Abel, Sara banishes Yishmael, but he is not killed. Jacob is forced to run away from Eisav but ultimately they reunite as friendly brothers in the end. Finally, all the children of Jacob reunite and leave peacefully. But, after that, when Menashe is slighted Jacob in not receiving the first blessing, we see that Menashe displays no anger and does not even react negatively. And then, this trajectory

continues even into the Book of Exodus. The three leaders of the Jewish people in the remainder of the Torah, are three siblings: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. However, Moses is the youngest. Yet, when the older Aaron is passed over for Moses and God informs Aaron that Moses will be the Jewish leader, not only is Aaron not angry, but the Torah states that Aaron is actually joyous for this brother (Exodus 4:14). Thus, we have come full cycle – from killing a brother who triumphs, to being happy for the younger brother who is victorious.

\* This column has been adapted from a series of volumes written by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values" available from Urim and Amazon. For the full article or to review all the footnotes in the original, contact the author at [nachum@jewishdestiny.com](mailto:nachum@jewishdestiny.com)

## Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

### Rabbi Yaakov Neuberger

#### Worthy of Blessing

It has to disturb us anew every year: how are we to make peace with Yaakov's ascendancy to the station of the Avos in a seemingly duplicitous fashion? How meaningful is a blessing that is snatched in an evidently underhanded manner? Furthermore, the Ramban (Bereishis 27:4) wonders why Rivka did not share the prophecy that she received at the outset of the parsha with her husband. After all, it was this prophecy that mandated Rivka to procure the beracha and its attendant superiority for Yaakov. All it would take is one heart to heart conversation with Yitzchak and they could parent collaboratively, and yet that never happened.

To be sure, the Ramban does suggest numerous narratives that would justify Rivka's surprising silence. Perhaps she thought that Yitzchak received the same prophecy. Maybe it was offensive to Yitzchak that she went to the "competition" for guidance. Possibly the prophecy could drive Yitzchak into non-action altogether. Yet, in apparent resignation that the questions loomed far greater than the answers he concluded, Ramban writes "Perhaps it was all orchestrated carefully by G-d so that Yaakov would be blessed, and Eisav as well with the blessing of the sword, And by Him alone actions are understood". In other words, for years and years Hashem was controlling the conversations of Rivka and Yitzchak in order to bring about the berachos in this surreptitious manner. However, the takeaway of that is beyond our ability to probe.

Nevertheless, Rav Yitzchak Vorkover, long-time friend of the first Gerer Rebbe and antecedent of the Amshinover dynasty, did give us an appreciation. It resonates with me and I am indebted to Rav Yaakov Rackov, son of the beloved rav of Gateshead, Rav Betzalel Rackov zt"l and a rosh kollel in Beitar, for sharing his insight with me.

How can we attach meaning to a definitive and decisive moment that finds Yaakov posing as Eisav dressed in Eisav's clothing? He explained that this is how Hashem lets us know that even if there will be times when Yaakov's offspring wear Eisav's clothing, the beracha will still be totally intact; the legacy of Avraham unequivocally and unquestionably will still define us. In other words, for over sixty years, Hashem orchestrated that there never was the right moment for Rivka to share the mandate that she received during pregnancy; that Rivka would continuously eavesdrop on Yitzchak's conversations; that at all times, Rivka would strategize how she will seize the moment to grab the berachos. All this so that even millennia later and maybe often in between, when Jews would look in the mirror and see all the outward and inward trappings of foreign cultures, they would simultaneously feel embraced by the berachos and missions bestowed by Yitzchak Avinu.

Indeed, the "birchas Avraham", though an inseparable part of the package of the first berachos (see Ramban , ibid), were given separately to Yaakov as he fled from Eisav who was bent on killing his brother. At that time Yaakov was as clearly distinct and as distanced from Eisav as he will ever be, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. That describes how, albeit in comfort and peacefulness, we will always be the best suited heirs for the "birchas Avraham".

May we be granted the wisdom and the courage to distinguish ourselves and carry our legacy forward with absolute pride in peace and health. May we not need to rely on Hashem's patience with His chosen children even if they will resemble, at times, the brother who surrendered his bechora.

## Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

### Yaakov and Esav: Closeness and Alienation Yonat Lemberger

In our portion of Toldot, a relationship is forged – between Yaakov and Esav, between Israel and Edom; a relationship so complex, yet so fascinating. Much like a suspense novel with twists and turns, our story is both sensational and sensual. It is a story that holds true even now, and continues to shape our worldview till this day.

Esav's character, as an idol worshipper and a killer, is well known. The Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 63, 8) says: "...ruddy all over..." – Rabi Aba bar Kahana said: a murderer in his entirety... "And Esav came from the field, and he was faint" – after having killed a man. As is written in Jeremiah (4, 31): "...my soul is faint before the murderers."

Let me suggest another prism through which to view Esav.

The Torah commanded us – "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" (Vayikra 19, 17). The Torah also instructed us – "Thou

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shall not abhor an Edomite for he is thy brother" (Devarim 23, 8). Edom is Esav.

Our Sages expanded on this idea: "You are to pass through the borders of your brethren, the children of Esav" (Devarim 2, 4) – 'your brethren' – these are the sons of Esav. Despite the fact that they are the sons of Esav, they are still your brethren! As is written: 'Your brethren that hate you have said' (Isaiah 66, 5) – although they hate you, they are still your brethren! The same idea is expressed in the following verse: 'For the violence done to your brother Yaakov' (Ovadiah 1, 10) – although he spills your blood and robs you, he is still your brother." (Devarim Rabbah, Otzar HaMidrash, Devarim 2, 4) A brother who murders? What kind of relationship is this?

Let's revert to the beginning of the story. Rivka is barren. God hearkens to Yitzchak's prayers. Rivka conceives and "behold, there were twins in her womb". This Gordian Knot between Yaakov and Esav is described in a very picturesque manner as early on as Rivka's pregnancy.

The twins in Rivka's womb were both the fruits of Yitzchak's prayers. Can there be greater closeness than this? However, right from the outset, the Torah dampens any hope for an idyllic existence and optimism.

"And the children struggled within her" – the Hebrew word, *va'yitrotzatzu* [they struggled], conveys discomfort, dispute and even the desire to be set free. But all of this happens "within her", the struggle is confined to a limited space, from which the twins cannot break away. They hold onto each other inside their mother's womb, and they don't let go even when they emerge – Yaakov's hand "had hold on Esav's heel", and this very heel will be etched into the younger brother's name – "And he was called Yaakov [from the Hebrew word *akev* = heel].

The Midrash foresaw the grim future, the struggles and clashes that would go on for generations yet: "And the children struggled" – Rabi Yochanan said, both run to kill each other. Reish Lakish says, both violate that which the other deems important." (Bereshit Rabbah, 63, 6).

The call or code which guides the conduct of any nation, or by which its identity is defined, is usually determined by the conflicts and clashes with the competing nation. The strife described here is expected to impact the way in which the identity of the sons of Yaakov and the people of Esav are ultimately shaped.

Furthermore, God's words to Rivka do not reflect a real separation or detachment: "And the Lord said unto her: Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger."

This verse, too, depicts the complexity of the relationship between Esav and Yaakov: two distinct nations that will “become separated” the minute they leave the womb. However, the separation is not a complete one, as the Torah immediately adds “and the elder shall serve the younger.” They will always be connected. They might be different nations, but tied to each other nonetheless.

After God’s words to Rivka, the Torah emphasizes the following fact – “and behold there were twins in her womb.” The Hebrew word for twins is written with one letter missing – *tomim* – instead of *te’omim*, and the exegetes saw this as an expression of the separateness within the closeness. The Netziv writes as follows: “It is written *tomim* and not *te’omim* to teach us that it was not as she [Rivka] had thought – that the distinction between them will only be visible upon birth, but in her womb they are like one; rather, even inside the womb they were already *tomim* – the incomplete word, missing the letter alef – to show us how disconnected they were one from the other.”

Twins yet distinct; joined yet separate. One might call it a hybrid reality of sorts: detachment and attachment existing concurrently.

The Torah speaks equivocally in other matters concerning Esav and Yaakov: Each of the brothers shaped his own identity. Yaakov is “a quiet man dwelling in tents” while Esav is “a cunning hunter, a man of the field.” The Torah describes explicitly the parents’ attitude to both: “And Yitzhak loved Esav because he ate of his venison; and Rivka loved Yaakov.”

Our Sages maintained that Esav’s predetermined fate, while still in his mother’s womb, would be that of an idol worshipper and murderer. Interestingly, his father never viewed him as such. Rather confusing.

The ambivalent attitude towards Yaakov and Esav can also be found in the story of Esav’s selling his birthright to Yaakov. We will not elaborate on this matter, but the question remains: Who is ultimately considered the firstborn? Furthermore, how is being the firstborn significant? Is it a mere technicality, nothing more than a description of who emerged first from the womb? Or perhaps it is a legal status that is even tradable; or a social/family rank that can be passed on?

Let’s revert for a moment to Yitzhak’s love for Esav. The Torah describes this love as a profound one, which leads Yitzhak to believing that Esav is the son most deserving of the Blessing of Avraham; Esav is the son that will continue the family line. This can be clearly seen from the way Yitzhak reacts to the trickery used by Yaakov to obtain the blessing. It is quite obvious that Yitzhak’s decision to give the blessing to Esav was not arbitrary, but based on principle. Yitzhak is hardly amused when he realizes he had been deceived: “And

Yitzhak trembled very exceedingly, and said: Who then is he that has taken venison, and brought it me, and I have eaten of all before you came, and have blessed him? Indeed, he shall be blessed.”

And Esav’s response is likewise solemn: “When Esav heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceeding great and bitter cry, and said unto his father: Bless me, even me also, O my father. And he said: Thy brother came with guile, and has taken away thy blessing. And he said: Is not he rightly named Yaakov? For he has supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he has taken away my blessing. And he said: Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

Much like when the birthright was sold, in this matter of the blessing, we are once again left with questions. Indeed, Yitzhak blessed Yaakov with the Blessing of Avraham. However, when he gave the blessing, he was sure he was giving it to Esav, and his intentions were directed to the latter. In such a situation, who is, in fact, the son who is blessed? Who is the ultimate receiver of the blessing – the person standing before the one who bestows the blessing, or is it the person to whom the blesser’s intention was directed?

Prima facie, the Torah seems to give a clear-cut answer: Yaakov is the blessed son. However, it is no coincidence that the Torah creates struggles and complications when depicting the relationship between the two brothers, the latter’s relations with their parents as well as that of the two nations-to-be. Consequently, we are left with a bitter-sweet blessing.

This once again takes us back to the words of God to Rivka during her pregnancy: “Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.” The various exegetes, much like our Sages, are not decisive as to who shall serve whom, who is the master and who is the servant. According to the Midrash, the Torah is deliberately ambiguous:

“God uses an ambiguous formulation deliberately. If He had wished to clearly say that the elder shall be a slave to the younger, He would have used the Hebrew formulation *verav ya’avod la’tza’ir*, and had He wished to say unequivocally that the younger shall be slave to the elder, He would have said – *verav ya’avod ba’tzair*. But the Torah’s formulation, leaves the meaning equivocal – each of the parties may serve the other, depending on the times.” (Ha’amek Davar on Bereshit 25, 23)

The two nations will never become truly separated. The connection between them is perpetual and, according to the Midrash, it is hardly clear who is superior and who is

### Likutei Divrei Torah

inferior; who is the head and who is the tail – it all depends on the times.

Yaakov’s conduct, as well as that of his mother Rivka, remains disputed. After receiving the blessing, Yaakov is forced to flee to Charan, and remain in exile for many years, falling victim to recurring acts of manipulation and trickery, even on the part of his own children.

The blessing attained using slyness; the purchase of the birthright; the Torah’s emphasis on Yitzhak’s love for Esav – all of the above present the Torah’s complex position on Esav himself, on the relationship between Yaakov and Esav and, later on, the relationship between the Israelites and the Edomites. One might even say that the dichotomy between these two nations is intentionally blurred.

In the first chapter of his book titled Two Nations in Your Womb, Israel Yuval identifies the differences between Yaakov and Esav as originating in their parents: Yitzhak was a man of the field: “And Yitzhak went out to meditate in the field at eventide.”

The first encounter with Rivka took place in the field.

When Rivka sees Yitzhak for the first time, it is written of her: “And she took her veil and covered herself.” The veil is much like the covering of the tent, as is written immediately afterwards: “And the servant told Yitzhak all the things he had done. And Yitzhak brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah.” Rivka is brought into the tent, and is concealed within, while Yitzhak is a man of the field.

Same holds true for their sons: “And Esav was a cunning hunter, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.”

Hence, it is clear why “And Yitzhak loved Esav (because he ate of his venison); and Rivka loved Yaakov.” Yitzhak’s love for Esav and Rivka’s love for Yaakov is not whimsical. The love of both was profound because it reflected their values and worldview.

Yitzhak the farmer, the man of the field, sees his son Esav, a man of the field himself, as his successor. Rivka, who is hidden in her tent, loves her son Yaakov, “the dweller of tents”, and views him as the successor.

Esav is the son of Yitzhak: “And it came to pass, that when Yitzhak was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called Esav his elder son, and said unto him: My son; and he said unto him: Here am I.” Yaakov is Rivka’s son: “And Rivka spoke unto Yaakov her son, saying: Behold, I heard thy father speak unto your brother...”

But ultimately, the separation between the two brothers, Yaakov and Esav, is not so extreme and final; they remain connected, tied in a Gordian Knot that cannot be untied. Furthermore, Esav’s world cannot be looked

upon as being all-bad. After all, Esav's core traits, as a man of the field, are rooted deeply in Yitzhak. Esav is Yitzhak's beloved son. This is not a superficial love; rather, a love that penetrates the very essence of Esav's soul.

The intricate relationship between the two brothers is further manifested during their encounter upon Yaakov's return from Charan, after many years in exile. This is how the Torah describes the crux of this meeting: "And Esav ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept."

On the above verse, the Midrash says as follows: "Rabi Shimon bar Yochai says: It is a known fact that Esav hates Yaakov, why then did he kiss him? Because at that moment, his [Esav's] heart was filled with compassion and he kissed him [Yaakov] with his whole heart." (Sifre on Beha'alotcha, 69)

The Midrash on the portion of VaYishlach says thus: "The word vayishakeihu [and he kissed him] has punctuation markings above it. Rabi Shimon ben Elazar explained it thus: This teaches us that his heart was filled with compassion at that moment, and he kissed him with his whole heart. Rabi Yanai responded and said: If this be so, why do we need special markings [above the word]? The reason must be that he did not really intend to kiss him, but approached in order to bite him. However, Yaakov's neck turned into marble and Esav's teeth broke. Why then is it written 'And they wept'? One [Yaakov] wept for his neck; Esav [wept] for his teeth." (Bereshit Rabbah, 78, 9)

Our Sages deliberate on this sibling relationship, focusing especially on Esav's attitude to Yaakov and what this might teach us about Esav's personality. Who then is Esav? What is his true nature? One thing is clear – the Torah depicts a warm and loving encounter between the two: "And Esav ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept." But immediately following this description, we are told of a cautious separation: "And Esav returned that day on his way to Seir... and Yaakov journeyed to Sukkot..."

This encounter comes to a close with the extraordinary words uttered by Yaakov: "Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found favor in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand; forasmuch as I have seen thy face, as one sees the face of God, and you were pleased with me."

Yaakov says to Esav that looking at his face – the face of a hunter and idol worshipper – is like "one who sees the face of God".

The Talmud (tractate of Sotah 41) and various Torah exegetes (like Rashi) discuss this exceptional verse and try to tone it down by saying that these are either words of flattery uttered in fear, or else they are a threat. Be it as it may, these words were uttered. Yaakov

could have chosen less powerful words, be they flattery or threat. This could only mean that the words Yaakov chose to describe his experience when looking into Esav's face are meaningful, if only for the fact that they were uttered by Yaakov.

Esav, the twin brother who sold his birthright and went on to lose his blessing, never lived to see Yitzhak's sincere love for him truly materialize. Esav, the murderer, the idol worshipper, is nonetheless – a brother. "Although he spills your blood and robs you – he is still your brother." (ibid.)

The brothers struggled within their mother's womb, and this strife will forever lie heavy on the two nations, walking side-by-side along the path of history, jointly and separately.

### Mizrachi Dvar Torah

#### Rav Doron Perz

#### A People and A Land

There is a remarkable connection between the Land of Israel and the People of Israel – a connection, a chemistry, an alchemy unlike the connection between any other people to a land. And it is rooted in this week's Parasha.

We know that in the last 150 years or so since the agricultural settlements were built by the pioneers, this land has yielded impossible results. Israel has been able to grow incredible fruit and vegetables, exported globally, out of places that were thought impossible – arid land, deserts, even the air using hydroponic technology. Drip irrigation, cloud seeding, desalination – Israel has also turned places with so little water into those with useable water and even a surplus.

A water and agricultural marvel.

Both of these things are rooted in the original pioneers – our forefathers, as we find in this week's Parasha. Wherever Yitzchak went, he found wells – he goes to the land of Gerar where the Philistines couldn't find water and yet everywhere he went and dug, he found water. Yitzchak was in this area, in today's Negev Desert, during a famine. Yet we are told that when Yitzchak planted in that land, during a time of famine, he was blessed by Hashem with a one hundred-fold yield.

Since time immemorial until today, there seems to be an alchemy, a marvelous marvel of a connection between the land and the Jewish people. May this continue to grow and flower, because it is not only a blessing for Israel but for all of humanity.

### ***PARSHAT TOLDOT - 'the chosen son'***

Are Yitzchak and Rivka playing 'favorites'? Indeed, a cursory reading of Parshat Toldot certainly leaves that impression.

Furthermore, why does Yitzchak choose to bless only **one** of his children? Would it have been so terrible had he planned to bless both Esav and Yaakov?

In the following shiur, we search for the deeper meaning of these events by considering the distinction between what we will refer to as 'bechira' and 'beracha'.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Our shiurim thus far on Sefer Breishit have focused on its theme of "bechira" - i.e. God's designation of Avraham and his offspring to become His special nation. We made special note of the numerous times that God had promised Avraham that his offspring ('zera') would become a great nation in a special land ('aretz'). Even though each promise added a unique dimension to Avraham's destiny, they all shared an element of the same phrase:

"Ie-ZAR'ACHA natati et ha-ARETZ ha-zot...  
 - to your OFFSPRING, I have given this LAND."  
 [See 12:7, 13:15, 15:18, 17:8]

However, despite these numerous blessings suggesting that this nation will emerge from **all** of Avraham's offspring, God later informs Avraham that specifically Sarah's son - Yitzchak - to the exclusion of all other offspring - has been chosen to fulfill this destiny:

"For it is [only] through Yitzchak that there shall be called for you ZARA [your offspring]." (21:12)

Parshat Toldot opens as God Himself confirms this blessing to Yitzchak, when He forbids him to leave the land during a famine:

"Reside in this land and I will bless you... for I will assign all this LAND to YOU and to YOUR OFFSPRING." (26:2-5)

What will happen when Yitzchak has children? Will only **ONE** of his children be chosen, as was the case with Avraham, or will **ALL** his offspring be chosen?

Considering that the reason for God's 'bechira' (selection) of Avraham was for his offspring to become a NATION (see 12:1-2), obviously this 'filtering' process of choosing only **ONE** son over the others could not continue forever. Should only one 'favorite son' be chosen in each generation, a nation could obviously never develop. Sooner or later, this 'filtering process' must end, and an entire family must be chosen.

Thanks to our 20/20 hindsight, we know that this process ends after **THREE** generations (Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov). However, the Avot themselves may have been unaware of when this 'bechira' process was to end.

Let's consider this possibility in regard to Yitzchak.

#### **ALL IN THE FAMILY**

A priori, Yitzchak has no reason to assume that only **ONE** son would be chosen and the other rejected. Unlike Yitzchak and Yishmael, who had **DIFFERENT** mothers, both Yaakov and Esav are born from the same mother. What more, they are twins! Therefore, it is only logical for Yitzchak to assume that **BOTH** Yaakov and Esav will join the 'chosen family'.

Furthermore, even if there is some divine reason to choose only one son, it should be **GOD's** choice and NOT Yitzchak's! After all, God alone had been involved in this BECHIRA process heretofore. He had chosen Avraham and He alone had chosen Yitzchak over Yishmael. Without a specific divine command, why

would Yitzchak even consider making such a bold decision?

Thus, Yitzchak most likely believed that both Yaakov and Esav were included within the divine promise to Avraham's progeny. So why does Yitzchak intend to bless only **ONE** of them?

#### **'BRACHA' OR 'BECHIRA'?**

To answer this question, we must differentiate between **TWO** basic types of blessings found in Sefer Breishit. For the sake of convenience, we will refer to one as BECHIRA and the other as BRACHA. Let's explain:

#### **BECHIRA\***

We use the term BECHIRA (selection) to describe God's blessing of 'ZERA va-ARETZ' to the Avot, the privilege of fathering God's special nation. BECHIRA implies that only one son is chosen while the others are rejected. As we explained, this process began with God's designation of Avraham Avinu and continued with His choice of Yitzchak over Yishmael. It is not clear, however, when this bechira process will end.

#### **'BRACHA'**

We will use the name BRACHA to describe a father's blessing for the personal destiny (e.g. prosperity, power) of his sons. Noach, for example, bestows a BRACHA on each of his three sons (9:24-27). He does not choose one son over the others to become a special nation. Rather, he blesses (or curses) each son based on his individual potential.

The classic example of BRACHA (as opposed to BECHIRA) is Yaakov Avinu's blessings to his twelve sons prior to his death, in Parshat Vayechi (see 49:1-28). Clearly, Yaakov does not choose one or several of his children to become God's special nation. Rather, he bestows a blessing of personal destiny upon each son, according to his understanding of each son's individual character and potential (see 49:28).

Thus, according to these definitions - BRACHA is bestowed by a father, while BECHIRA is established by God.

#### **YITZCHAK'S BRACHA TO ESAV**

With this distinction in mind, we return to our opening question regarding the kind of blessing that Yitzchak intends to bestow upon Esav. Is it a blessing of BRACHA or BECHIRA?

Considering that Yitzchak has no apparent reason to choose only one son, we should expect that his intended blessing to Esav was one of BRACHA (and not BECHIRA).

To determine if this assumption is indeed correct, let's examine the content of the actual blessing that Yitzchak bestowed - intended for Esav but deceptively seized by Yaakov:

"May God give you of the dew of heaven  
 and the FAT of the land,  
 and an abundance of GRAIN and WINE.  
 Other nations shall SERVE you and bow down to you;  
 be MASTER over your brother,  
 and let your mother's sons bow down to you..."  
 (27:28-29)

Note how this blessing focuses on prosperity and leadership, and hence would fall under our category of BRACHA. It cannot be BECHIRA, as it does NOT contain the phrase of 'ZERA va-ARETZ'. In fact, this blessing strongly resembles the blessings of prosperity and leadership which Yaakov himself later bestows upon Yehuda (see 49:8) and Yosef (see 49:25-26).

But if indeed if this is a blessing of BRACHA, why does Yitzchak (intend to) bestow this blessing only on Esav? Would it not have made sense had he blessed both sons?

#### **THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE JOB**

As we suggested above, Yitzchak expects that both his children will be chosen. Realizing that this nation (that will ultimately evolve from his two sons) will require leadership,

Yitzchak must appoint **one** of his sons to take family leadership. But which son should he choose for this responsibility?

One could suggest that Yitzchak concluded that Esav - the "ish sadeh" [a man of the world (see 25:27)] - was the more suitable candidate for this job.

Considering that Yaakov & Esav are over sixty years old, note that Esav is married with children, has a job, and can take care of himself and others. Yaakov, on the other hand, is still single and 'living at home'. It is readily understandable, then, why Yitzchak chooses Esav to become the family provider and leader.

We can even presume that Yitzchak has a blessing in store for Yaakov as well - most probably one that involves spiritual leadership. Yaakov - the "ish tam yoshev ohelim," a man of the book (see 25:27) - can provide the family with spiritual guidance.

[This 'theoretical blessing' to Yaakov resembles the ultimate responsibility of shevet Levi (see Devarim 33:10).] However, without FIRST establishing a nation (with the help of Esav), there would be no one around for Yaakov to guide. ]

The fact that Yitzchak had called upon Esav to receive his blessing FIRST, does not rule out the possibility that he may have intended to bless Yaakov afterward. Note that in Parshat Vayechi, Yaakov FIRST blesses Yosef before proceeding to bless all twelve children.

So what went wrong? Why does Rivka intervene? Why must Yaakov 'steal' Esav's BRACHA? Or, to put it more bluntly, is Rivka simply standing up for her 'favorite son' or did she perceive the situation differently?

To answer this question, we must return to the beginning of the Parsha.

## RIVKA KNOWS BEST

Apparently, Rivka knows something that Yitzchak doesn't. Recall that Rivka suffered from an unusually difficult pregnancy and seeks God for an explanation (see 25:22).

Note how God's answer to HER (and not to Yitzchak!) already alludes to the fact that the BECHIRA process has not yet ended:

"And God answered HER saying: There are TWO NATIONS in your womb, and TWO SEPARATE PEOPLES shall issue from your body. One people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the YOUNGER." (25:23)

Rivka here learns that her twins are destined to become TWO NATIONS, and as such, only ONE - the younger one (see 25:23, "ve-rav ya'avod tza'ir") - can be chosen. Thus, Rivka knows that YAAKOV is destined to receive the BECHIRA, and not Esav. Yitzchak, however, is unaware of this prophecy. [Note 25:23: "va-yomer Hashem LAH" - to HER, and not to him!]

It is unclear why Rivka never informs Yitzchak of this prophecy. She may assume that Yitzchak also knows, and only later realizes that he doesn't (see Ramban 27:4). Alternatively, she may have thought that God specifically wants ONLY HER to know, and NOT Yitzchak. Whatever the reason may be, each parent has a different perception of their children's destiny as they grow up. Yitzchak ASSUMES that both Yaakov and Esav are chosen, while Rivka KNOWS that it will only be Yaakov.

## RIVKA'S DILEMMA

After overhearing Yitzchak's intention to bless Esav (27:5), Rivka now faces a serious dilemma:

\* Does Yitzchak plan to bless Esav with the BECHIRA (or that God should grant him the BECHIRA)? If so, she must act quickly, as the future of "Am Yisrael" rests on her shoulders.

\* Does Yitzchak think that BOTH children are chosen? Is he giving a BRACHA of leadership to Esav? The result of this blessing could be disastrous!

\* Can Rivka just tell Yitzchak that he is making a mistake? Is it too late? Will he listen? Would he be willing now, after so many years, to change his perception?

Rivka has limited time to act, yet feels responsible to the prophecy she had received and hence obligated to rectify the situation. In her eyes, this may have been the very reason why God had originally granted her this information. Unfortunately, however, Rivka must resort to trickery to ensure that Yaakov receives the blessing.

Now that we have explained Rivka's course of action, we must explain Yitzchak's, as the plot thickens.

## YITZCHAK'S BLESSINGS

After Yitzchak grants Yaakov (whom he thought was Esav) a BRACHA of prosperity and leadership, the real Esav arrives and begs his father for another blessing (see 27:34,36). Yitzchak's initial response is that the special blessing intended for Esav (prosperity and power) had already been given to Yaakov (27:35,37). Hence, Esav cannot receive any other BRACHA, since the BRACHA of spirituality, originally intended for Yaakov, is unsuitable for Esav. However, after Esav pleads with him, Yitzchak grants Esav a different BRACHA of prosperity. In fact, in light of our explanation, this second blessing is quite understandable. Let's explain why.

Review this blessing of: "tal ha-shamayim u-shmanei ha-aretz" (27:38-39), noting how it also speaks of prosperity in a manner very similar to the first blessing. This makes sense, because 'prosperity' can be shared by both brothers. However, the second half of the original blessing - that of political leadership ("hevei gvir le-achicha - see 27:29) - can only be given to one son. Yitzchak therefore blesses Esav that - should Yaakov's leadership falter - he shall take his place (see 27:40).

At this point of the story, it appears that Yitzchak still understands that both sons will be chosen. When does he find out the 'truth' that the 'bechira' process is not over yet?

## CLEARING THE AIR

Even though the Torah never reveals the details, it would be safe to assume that Rivka must have finally explained her actions to Yitzchak after the incident of the 'brachot'. Upon hearing the details of God's earlier prophecy to Rivka, Yitzchak finally realizes that only ONE son, Yaakov, is to be chosen. To his dismay, he must now accept the fact that the BECHIRA process must continue into yet another generation.

This explains the final blessing that Yitzchak grants Yaakov, before he embarks on his journey to Padan Aram (in search of a wife). Review this blessing, noting how it obviously relates directly to the blessing of BECHIRA:

"May God grant the BLESSING OF AVRAHAM [i.e. BECHIRA] to you and your OFFSPRING, that you may inherit the LAND which Elokim has given to Avraham..." (28:4).

Note once again the key phrase - "zera va-aretz" - of the BECHIRA blessing! In contrast to the BRACHA of prosperity and power discussed earlier, this blessing involves the familiar concept of God's special NATION inheriting a special LAND. Clearly, Yitzchak now understands that the 'bechira' process is not over yet.

Note as well that Yitzchak does not actually grant this blessing to Yaakov, rather he blesses him that **God** should grant him the 'bechira' - "ve-Kel Sha-kai yevarech otcha..." (28:4). As we explained earlier in our shiur, the 'bechira' process is God's decision. Yitzchak is now 'rooting' for Yaakov that he receive the BECHIRA, but that decision must ultimately be confirmed by God - and that's exactly what takes place a few psukim later, at the beginning of Parshat Vayetze!

## MA'ASEH AVOT, SIMAN LA-BANIM

Despite our 'technical' explanation for Yitzchak and Rivka's behavior in this Parsha, a more fundamental question remains: Why must the BECHIRA process be so complex? In other words, why is it that at the very inception of our national history, trickery must be employed for us to arrive to our divine destiny?

Although this is a very difficult question to answer, one could suggest that this entire episode may carry an important message concerning how the spiritual goals of our nation relate to the necessities of entering the physical world and prosperity and political leadership.

Indeed, to become a nation, there are times when the 'aggressive' qualities of an Esav type individual are needed. However, there is a popular notion that these physical responsibilities should be delegated to the 'ish sadeh', the son who is expert in the physical realm, but ONLY in that realm [the 'chiloni' son]. Similarly, the spiritual realm should be delegated to the Yaakov type individual, the delicate 'ish tam' who knows only how to study in the tents of Torah [the 'dati' son].

Yitzchak's original intention to bless Esav may reflect this notion, as Esav will be the provider, 'serve in the army', and enter the political realm; while Yaakov will dedicate his life immersed in the tents of Torah. Separating these responsibilities between two sons may reflect the notion that spirituality cannot be found in the physical world of establishing a nation.

To negate this notion, despite its simplicity and logic, the Torah presents it as Yitzchak's original plan. However, the other option (possibly Rivka's original plan), that Yaakov - the 'ish tam' - alone can manage both realms remains equally unacceptable.

At the time of these 'brachot', Yaakov himself is not yet ready to take on the responsibilities of the 'ish sadeh', but sooner or later it will become incumbent upon him to do so. To establish God's special nation, there are times when it is necessary for the 'ish tam' to take on the responsibilities of the 'ish sadeh'.

To solve this 'dialectic', it was necessary for Yaakov to first don the 'hands of Esav', i.e. to pretend to act like Esav, but not actually become an Esav. It remains significant that the primal character of Am Yisrael is that of Yaakov, the 'ish tam'.

[Note that later in his own life (upon his return to Eretz Yisrael), Yaakov must finally confront the 'angel of Esav', this time without trickery, to prove that he is indeed worthy of that leadership task.]

Even though many situations in our history will arise when we must don the 'hands of Esav' - i.e. when we must act as an 'ish sadeh' - our dominant trait must always remain that of an 'ish tam'. For when God provides Am Yisrael with prosperity and political leadership, it is towards the purpose that they serve mankind with personal example and spiritual guidance.

Throughout our history, even though we must periodically 'don the hands of Esav', our voice must always remain 'the voice of Yaakov' [see 27:22]!

shabbat shalom  
menachem

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## FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. See Ramban (on 27:4), noting how he would basically disagree with the entire approach presented in the above shiur. From the very beginning, he understands that Yitzchak's intention is to bless Esav with the BECHIRAH.

1. How does Ramban understand why Rivka doesn't tell Yitzchak about her nevua? How, if at all, does this affect his understanding of the entire parsha?
2. With which basic assumption of the above shiur does Ramban disagree?
3. Does Ramban (see 27:28) find any hint to "zera va-aretz" in Yitzchak's first bracha to Yaakov/Esav?
4. How does Rashi understand this sugya?
5. Try to relate this issue to the klal of MA'ASEH AVOT, SIMAN LA-BANIM. [ly'H, this will be the topic of a future shiur.]
6. See also Radak on 27:4, noting how he explains that Yitzchak knew all along that Yaakov would receive the 'bechira'. Nonetheless, he still wanted to grant Esav a 'bracha'.

B. Towards the beginning of the Parsha, Esav sells his birthright to Yaakov and makes a striking statement:

"Hinei anochi holeich lamut, ve-lama zeh li bchora?"

Esav seems very practical. He sees no reason to have the 'bchora', as he lives only for the present with no dreams or goals for the future.

1. Relate this to the above shiur and the reason why Esav is rejected.
2. Could it be that this attitude, a lack of appreciation of his destiny and purpose, leads to his ultimate rejection?
3. Can this explain why Yaakov is interested in buying the birthright?
4. Does Yitzchak know about this incident? If so (or even if not), how may this affect the blessing that he later intended to give his children?

C. The blessing of BECHIRAH to Yaakov in 28:3-5 contains several key phrases found in earlier blessings to Avraham Avinu. Try to find these parallels.

1. Are most of them from the parsha Brit Mila? (see Breishit 17:1-10).
2. If so, can you explain why? [What additional message did Avraham receive after Brit Mila?]
3. When did Hashem actually confirm this blessing? (See 35:9-13!)

## PARSHAT TOLDOT - shiur #2

What mitzvot did the Avot keep? Rashi, commenting on a pasuk in this week's Parsha, claims that the Avot kept the entire Torah - even the Oral Law and later Rabbinic prohibitions. Most other commentators disagree.

In Part One, we discuss this pasuk by delving into a little 'parshanut appreciation'. In Part Two, we'll take the Seforno's commentary on this pasuk as a point of departure to discuss the significance of 'digging wells' in life of the Avot.

## INTRODUCTION

Recall that during a time of famine, God had instructed Yitzchak to stay in Eretz Canaan (rather than leaving to Egypt / see 26:1-5). At that time, God also affirmed His promise that Yitzchak would be the 'chosen son of Avraham ["bechira"]', and then concluded His remarks with a brief explanation concerning why Avraham was chosen. Let's take a look at this closing pasuk, noting God's lengthy description of Avraham Avinu's obedience:

"ekev asher shama Avraham b'koli... - because Avraham had listened to Me, and he kept: MISHMARTI, MITZVOTEI, CHUKOTEI, v'TORATEI." (see 26:5)

When reading this pasuk, the obvious question arises: What is the precise meaning of each of these words (that describe how Avraham obeyed God)? I.e. what is the specific meaning of:

- a) SHAMA B'KOLI
- b) MISHMERETI
- c) MITZVAH
- d) CHUKAH
- e) TORAH

As we should expect, each of the classical commentators contemplates this question, but to our surprise, each commentator presents a very different answer. Hence, an analysis of the various

commentaries to this pasuk will provide us with an excellent opportunity for an insight into the exegetical approach of each commentator.

As usual, before we turn to the commentaries, let's first consider what we should expect to find.

### THREE APPROACHES

To identify the meaning of these five words (in the above pasuk), one can take one of three basic approaches:

#### 1) One to one correspondence – a 'word match'

This is the simplest approach. We simply assume that each of these words relates to a specific act of Avraham Avinu. To determine what each word means, we look for that specific word within the story of Avraham Avinu in Chumash.

#### 2) One to correspondence – a match by 'topic'

This is a similar approach, but instead of looking for the specific word in the life of Avraham, we first define the concept behind that word based on its usage elsewhere in all of Chumash. Based on that understanding of the word, we then look for an act of Avraham Avinu that fits within the category of that concept.

#### 3) Generalization

In this approach, we don't expect that each word necessarily relates to a specific act. Instead, we understand this pasuk as a general description of Avraham's entire way of life.

### WOULDN'T IT BE NICE...

Ideally, if we could find an example of each one of these words in the Torah's description of Avraham's life from Parshat Lech L'cha through Chaya Sarah, then the first approach would work best.

However, a comprehensive search only provides us with specific examples for the first three of these words, i.e. "shama b'kol", "mishmeret", and "mitzvah"; but not for the last two words: "chukah" and "torah".

Hence, to explain this pasuk, we have one of two options: We can either employ the 'word match' for the first three words, and then the 'topic match' approach to explain "chukah" and "torah". Alternately, we can assume that if the 'word match' approach doesn't work for each word, then we must use 'topic match' approach for the entire pasuk.

With this in mind, let's take a look at what each of the "parshanim" have to say.

### RASHBAM - 'simple' pshat

Rashbam presents what we refer to as 'simple' pshat. As we explained above, his approach will be to search for each word within the Torah's presentation of the story of Avraham Avinu.

For the first three words, Rashbam is quite 'successful', for we find a precise 'match' for each word:

#### a) SHAMA B'KOL - at the Akeyda

"...EKEV asher shamata b'kol" (see 22:18)

#### b) MISHMERET - to perform BRIT MILAH

"v'ata et briti TISHMOR... himol kol zachar" (see

17:9)

#### c) MITZVAH - The BRIT MILAH of Yitzchak on the EIGHTH day

"And Avraham circumcised Yitzchak his son when he was

eight days old - ka'asher TZIVAH OTO ELOKIM" (see 21:4)

However, for the last two words - CHUKAH & TORAH he is less successful, for there is no 'exact match'. Therefore, Rashbam employs a more general definition for "chukah" and "torah", understanding that they refer to all of the 'ethical' mitzvot that Avraham most certainly have kept. Even though God did not command these mitzvot explicitly, it is quite implicit from Chumash that God expected Avraham (and all mankind) to act in an ethical manner (see Breishit 18:18-19!).

Let's quote the Rashbam, noting how he defined this as "ikar pshuto shel mikra":

"CHUKOTEI V'TORATEI: According to IKAR PSHUTO [simple pshat], all of the 'obvious mitzvot' [i.e. ethical laws] like stealing, adultery, coveting, justice, and welcoming guests; these applied BEFORE Matan Torah, but were renewed and expounded in the covenant [of Matan Torah]." (Rashbam)

Note how Rashbam understands CHUKIM & TORAH as general categories for the ethical mitzvot, without providing a more precise definition. However, because according to 'pshat' CHUKIM & TORAH must include specific mitzvot that AVRAHAM himself had kept - Rashbam is 'forced' into this more general definition.

[Note however that each of his examples of ethical mitzvot actually relates to a specific event in the life of Avraham:

stealing - "asher GAZLU avdei Avimelech (see 21:25!!)

adultery & coveting / Pharaoh & Avimelech taking Sarah

justice - w/ Melech Sdom & Shalem, after war of 5 kings  
welcoming guests - the 3 angels & story of Lot & Sdom!]

### CHIZKUNI - even 'better' than Rashbam

As we noted above, in his attempt to find a specific example for each word, Rashbam is only '3' for '5'. However, Chizkuni doesn't give up so quickly, and attempts to identify '5' for '5'!

After quoting the same first three examples as Rashbam, Chizkuni also finds specific examples for CHOK & TORAH as well, but to do so, he must employ some 'textual' assistance from Sefer Tehilim. In other words, he will identify a commandment that Avraham Avinu fulfills, that is later referred to as either a CHOK or TORAH in Sefer Tehillim. Let's take a look:

In regard to CHUKAH (d), Chizkuni claims that this refers to keeping BRIT MILAH for all future generations, based on 'word match' with a pasuk in Tehillim:

"zachar l'OLAM BRITO... asher karat et Avraham... v'yamideha l'Yaakov l'CHOK, l'Yisrael BRIT OLAM..." (see 105:8-10 / or "hoydu" in Psukei d'zimrah!)

Considering that at Brit Milah, Avraham is commanded: "v'hayta briti b'vsarchem l'BRIT OLAM" (see 17:13), Chizkuni concludes that "chukotei" in 26:5 refers to yet another aspect of "brit milah".

In regard to TORAH (e), Chizkuni claims that this refers to God's opening commandment to Avraham of "lech l'cha". Once again, Chizkuni bases his conclusion on a 'word match' with a pasuk in Tehillim: "askilcha v'ORECHA b'derech zu TAYLECH" (see Tehillim 32:8). In that pasuk we find the verb "orecha" which stems for the same root as "Torah", and the word "telech" which stems from the same root as "lech l'cha"!

This attempt by Chizkuni to identify a specific 'word match' for each word is simply ingenious, however he himself admits that he is 'stretching' pshat a bit too much (by going to Tehillim to find the match). Therefore, he concludes his commentary by suggesting that a more simple "pshat" for "mitzvotai chukotei v'toratei" would be to include the seven laws given to the children of Noach, which Avraham himself also kept.

[How these seven mitzvot break down according to these three categories of "mitzvot", "chukim", and "torot" will be discussed by Radak & Ramban.]

#### **IBN EZRA - a different brand of "pshat"**

Ibn Ezra, himself a strict follower of "pshat", takes a very different approach. Unlike Rashbam & Chizkuni, he makes no attempt to find a specific example to match each of the five words. Instead, Ibn Ezra follows the generalization approach, explaining that MISHMERETI is a general category that includes three sub-categories of MITZVOTEI CHUKOTEI and TORATEI; and they themselves can also be understood as general categories (that he will explain their nature later on in his pirush of Chumash).

In closing, Ibn Ezra 'admits' that it may be possible to identify a specific example in Avraham's life for each of these sub-categories:

- c) MITZVAH = "Lech L'cha..." i.e. Avraham's ALIYA
- d) CHUKAH = Avraham's 'way of life' ('engraved' in his heart)
- e) TORAH = Fulfilling the mitzvah of Brit MILAH

Note that Ibn Ezra makes no attempt to find a 'word match' for each word in this pasuk. This is quite typical of his approach to "pshat", as he often takes into consideration the 'bigger picture'.

#### **RADAK - 'widening the pool'**

Radak's approach is quite similar to Ibn Ezra's, for he also understands each of these words as general categories. However, Ibn Ezra seems to limit his examples to those mitzvot that Avraham himself was commanded, while Radak 'widens the pool' by including ALL of the mitzvot of Bnei Noach (assuming that Avraham was commanded to keep them). Then, within this pool of mitzvot, Radak differentiates between "mitzvot", and "chukim" etc. based on the definition of these categories later on in Chumash (e.g. "mitzvotai" refers to the "mitzvot sichliyot" [the laws that man can arrive at using his own intellect - like stealing and killing etc.].

#### **RASHI - The Midrashic approach**

Next, read Rashi, noting how he employs the second approach, but in a very special way. Not only does Rashi define each word based on its usage later on in Chumash, he also claims that these words refer to those very same mitzvoth. Therefore, Rashi concludes (from this pasuk) that Avraham have kept all of the mitzvot of the entire Torah (even though it had not been given yet)!

Hence, Rashi categorizes these different words based on their definition later on in Chumash, and cites an example for each word from the entire spectrum of Halacha, from the Written Law, to the Oral Law, and even to later Rabbinic ordinations.

- a) SHAMA B'KOL - when I tested him (at the Akeyda/ 22:18)
- b) MISHMERET - Rabbinic laws that protect the Torah laws
- c) MITZVAH - the 'logical' and ethical laws of the Torah

- d) CHUKOT - the Torah laws that have no apparent reason
- e) TOROT - the Oral law, and "halacha l'Moshe m'Sinai" [Rashi can explain in this manner, for he maintains that the Avot kept the entire Torah.]

One could suggest a reason in "pshat" why Rashi may prefer this more "midrashic" type approach. The fact remains that we find in this pasuk specific categories of mitzvot that are never mentioned in Sefer Breishit (such as CHUKIM & TOROT), yet are found after Matan Torah! This leads Rashi to assume that these two words must refer to mitzvot that Chumash itself later describes as "chukim" & "torot" after Matan Torah. [See Yomah 67b & 28b.] [This is typical of Rashi's approach, quoting a Midrash that itself is based on a solution to a problem that arises in pshat.]

#### **RAMBAN**

As usual, Ramban begins his pirush by taking issue with Rashi. Realizing that Rashi's interpretation implies that the Avot kept the entire Torah, Ramban begins by questioning this very assumption. After all, if the Avot kept the entire Torah, how did Yaakov marry two sisters, and erect a MATZEYVA, etc.?

Ramban first attempts to 'patch' Rashi's interpretation, by explaining that when Chazal say that the Avot kept the entire Torah, they refer merely to the fact that the Avot kept SHABBAT. [This is based on another Midrashic statement that the mitzvah of Shabbat is equal in value to keeping all the mitzvot of the Torah.]

Hence, Avraham kept the mitzvah of shabbat as well as the seven mitzvot of Bnei Noach. From this 'pool' of Avraham's mitzvot, Ramban goes on to explain how each word in the pasuk relates to a category of mitzvot within this pool.

Note that Ramban also follows the second approach, understanding each word as a topic, as will be defined later on in Chumash. He simply identifies them from a wider pool of examples including the seven Noachide laws, and not only from God's special commandments to Avraham Avinu.

[Afterward, Ramban returns to Rashi's Midrashic interpretation [adding his usual dose of 'zionism']. He resolves the original problem that he raised, explaining the Avot's obligation to follow the ('future') laws of the Torah applied ONLY in Eretz Yisrael.]

Ramban concludes his pirush employing once again the second approach, but this time bringing examples only from Avraham's own life. As God is speaking to Yitzchak, explaining to him why his father was chosen, it would make more sense that each word would relate to Avraham's special 'way of life' or to a specific event during his lifetime, i.e.:

- b) MISHMERETI - Preaching and teaching his belief in God [including "likro b'shem Hashem"].
- c) MITZVOTEI - every specific commandment by God e.g. "Lech L'cha", the Akeyda, sending Hagar away...
- d) CHUKOTEI - acting in God's way, being merciful & just
- e) TOROTEI - actual mitzvot, e.g. Brit Milah & Noachide laws

Note how Ramban's approach is most comprehensive, attempting to tackle pshat, while taking serious consideration of the Midrash, and looking for overall thematic significance.

## SEFORNO

We conclude our shiur with Seforno, as his approach is quite unique, and it also will serve as an introduction to Part Two.

Seforno, like Ramban & Radak, understands these words as general categories relating to the "seven mitzvot of Bnei Noach". However, Seforno adds that not only did Avraham keep these laws, he also taught them to others. God is not proud of Avraham for any specific mitzvah, but rather praises him for his daily 'way of life'! Why does Seforno take this approach?

Seforno, unlike the other commentators thus far, takes into consideration the primary theme of Sefer Breishit, as well as the local context of this pasuk, i.e. the story that follows! Let's explain how.

Note how our pasuk (i.e. 26:5) does not conclude a 'parshia'; rather, it introduces a set of stories in which Yitzchak must deal with Avimelech (see 26:6-33/ note how 26:1-33 is all ONE 'parshia', thus implying a thematic connection between all of its psukim).

Seforno understands that this pasuk serves as a bit of "musar" [rebuke/ or at least encouragement] to Yitzchak. God explains to Yitzchak that being blessed with the "bechira" is a two-way street. After Avraham was chosen, he spent his entire life preaching and teaching God's laws - calling out in God's Name, and setting a personal example by pursuing "tzedek u'mishpat". [See also Ramban & Seforno on 12:8!]

However, up until this point in Chumash, Yitzchak himself had not yet done so. However, God now expects that he should take an example from his father, and begin to become a bit more 'active'!

In this manner, Seforno explains why Yitzchak suffered so much strife with Avimelech and his servants in the story that follows (i.e. the arguments at "esek" & "sitnah"). However, later in this same 'parshia', we find that Yitzchak himself finally "calls out in God's Name" (see 26:25-29). From that time on, Yitzchak becomes successful, and develops a positive relationship with his neighbors. God is finally with him, but only after he fulfills his responsibilities.

As usual, Seforno's pirush is the thematically significant, as it focuses both on overall thematic "pshat" as well as the "musar" that we can learn from.

With this in mind, we continue in Part Two with a discussion of that confrontation between Yitzchak & Avimelech.

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## PART TWO - WHAT'S IN A WELL

Before we begin, a short explanation of the difference between a "bor" (pit or cistern) and "be'er" (well) which will help us understand the story of Yitzchak and the Plishtim.

There are two basic methods of water storage in ancient times:

### I. THE "BOR"

The most simple method was to dig a "bor" - a cistern - into the bedrock to collect the rain water as it falls (or flows in from the surrounding hills). To increase its efficiency, the "bor" must be covered with "sid" [plaster] to stop the water from seeping out.

### II. THE "BE"ER:

A "be'er" (a well) is quite different, for instead of collecting rainwater (from above), it taps the underground water table (from below). To reach that level [better known as an aquifer]

one must dig a hole into the ground to reach it. Once opened, the well will supply water as long as water remains in the aquifer. [The aquifer receives its water from accumulative rainfall that seeps through the ground until it reaches a non-porous rock level.]

So what does any of this have to do with Torah?

## AN ANCIENT "WATER FIGHT"

This background explains the quarrel between Yitzchak and the Plishtim over the "be'erot" (see 26:17-26). Since ancient times there have always been disputes concerning the rights to the underground water table. For example, Avraham dug wells and thus staked his claim to their water supply. After his death, the Plishtim plugged those wells and opened their own tap to that same water supply (see 26:18). Yitzchak attempted to re-open the same wells that his father had dug. Upon doing so, the Plishtim protested claiming that the water belonged to them (26:20-21). [See Ramban 26:17-18!]

[Btw, this argument continues until this very day. According to the Oslo accords, a special committee is set up to reach an agreement over conflicting claims to the rights to the valuable water table that stretches under most of Yehuda & Shomron.]

Instead of fighting, Yitzchak tries again and again until he finally opens a well that no one else has a claim to - naming it "Rechovot" (see 26:22).

So why does the Torah discuss such mundane issues?

## PEACE & THE MIKDASH

Ramban on 26:20-22 asks this very same question! He claims that if we follow only the "pshat" of these stories, they appear to carry very little significance. Instead, Ramban claims that this story represents FUTURE events of Am Yisrael's history in regard to the first, second, and third Temples. ["maase Avot siman l'banim/ see Ramban inside.]

One could suggest that the story that follows provides additional support for Ramban's approach.

Note that immediately after this incident, Yitzchak ascends to Be'er Sheva, God appears unto him, and once again promises him that he will continue the blessing of Avraham (see 26:23-24), but again for the 'sake of Avraham'. In response to this "hitgalut", Yitzchak builds a MIZBAYACH and CALLS OUT in God's Name (compare with similar act by Avraham in 12:8, 13:4 at Bet-el and 21:33 at Be'er Sheva).

Recall our explanation in Parshat Lech L'cha how 'calling out' in God's Name' reflected the ultimate purpose for God's choice of Avraham Avinu [note "ba'avur Avraham avdi" in 26:24!]. Now, for the first time, Yitzchak himself accomplishes this goal in a manner very similar to Avraham Avinu.

What took Yitzchak so long to act in a manner similar to Avraham? As we mentioned above, Seforno explains that once Yitzchak 'called out in God's Name', the Plishtim no longer quarreled with him (see Seforno on 26:25). In fact, immediately after Yitzchak builds his mizbayach, another well is dug without a quarrel (26:25), and afterward Avimelech himself offers to enter a covenant with Yitzchak, thus ending all future quarrels.

According to Seforno, by fulfilling his divine purpose, Yitzchak reached a level of 'peace and security' with his neighbors. The first two disputes began because Yitzchak had not done so

earlier! [See also Seforno 26:5]

[There remains however a small problem with Seforno's pirush. The first time Yitzchak achieves peace is when he digs the well of RECHOVOT - which took place BEFORE he calls out in God's Name. According to Seforno, must we understand this 'pre-mature' success simply an act of God's "chessed" that Yitzchak may not really have deserved!]

## WHAT COMES FIRST?

One could suggest a slightly different reason why Yitzchak did not 'call out in God's Name' until after digging his third well. Recall, that even before the incidents with the wells the Plishtim and Yitzchak did not get along so well. [See 26:6-14, especially 26:14 - they became jealous of Yitzchak and his wealth.]

Because the first two wells led to serious disputes, under those conditions, Yitzchak was not able to 'call out in God's Name', for most likely - no one would listen! It is only after Yitzchak digs a third well, and this time without any dispute with his neighbors, does he ascend to Be'er Sheva to build a mizbayach and follow his father's legacy of 'calling out in God's Name' to those who surround him.

We can infer from these events that before Am Yisrael can fulfill its ultimate goal of building a Mikdash open for all mankind, it must first attain a certain level of stability and normalized relations with its neighbors. This 'prerequisite' can be inferred as well from the Torah's commandment to build the Bet Ha'mikdash as described in Sefer Devarim:

"... and you shall cross the Jordan and settle the land... and He will grant you safety from your enemies and you will live in security, THEN you shall bring everything I command you to HA'MAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM - the place that God will choose to establish His NAME [i.e. the Bet ha'Mikdash]"

(See

Devarim 12:8-11)

This prerequisite is actually quite logical. If one of the purposes of the Mikdash is to provide a vehicle by which all nations can find God (see I Melachim 8:41-43!), then it should only be built once we achieve the status of a nation that other nations look up to. [See also Devarim 4:5-8!]

[Of course, Bnei Yisrael need to have a MISHKAN - for their own connection with God - immediately after Matan Torah. However, the move from a Mishkan to a Mikdash only takes place once Am Yisrael is ready to fulfill that role.]

In the history of Bayit Rishon [the first Temple], this is exactly the sequence of events. From the time of Yehoshua until King David, there is only a Mishkan, for during this time period, Am Yisrael never achieved peace with their enemies, nor did they establish a prosperous state that other nations could look up to. Only in the time of David did Am Yisrael reach this level of prosperity, peace, and security - and this is exactly when David ha'melech asks to build the Mikdash. God answers that indeed there is an improvement, but Am Yisrael must wait one more generation until a fuller level of peace and stability is reached - only once Shlomo becomes king and both internal and external peace is achieved. [Read carefully II Shmuel 7:1-15, especially 7:1-2 - "acharei asher haniyach Hashem m'kol oyveyhem m'saviv".]

[The popular reason given for why David could not build the

Temple - because he had 'blood on his hands' - is not found in Sefer Shmuel, rather in Divrei Ha'yamim in David's conversation with Shlomo - but this is a topic for a later shiur. That reason also reflects a certain lack of stability in David's time, due to both the civil wars and external wars. See I Divrei Ha'yamim 17:1-20, & 22:2-15!]

In summary, we have shown how the sequence of events between Yitzchak and the neighboring Plishtim may not only 'predict' what will happen in Am Yisrael's history, but can also serve as guide for us to understand how to prioritize our goals.

shabbat shalom  
menachem

## Parshat Toldot: Ya'akov the "Smooth Man"

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

First, some questions we will not answer:

1. Our parasha records many events in the life of Yitzhak which closely parallel or exactly duplicate events in the life of his father. This link between father and son is made explicit in the Torah, which not only records these events, but also notes that Avraham engaged in the same activities (and promises Yitzhak good things in the merit of his father). Perhaps Yitzhak never emerges from the long shadow of his father to accomplish new goals, yet the Torah takes the trouble to repeat all of these events for our edification. What is Yitzhak all about, and what does he teach us?

2. In the same verse in which the Torah tells us that Yitzhak and Rivka are unable to bear children, and that they turn to prayer (25:21), the Torah also tells us that Hashem responds and grants them children. How long does it take Hashem to respond? What does this teach us?

Questions we will answer:

1. Our parasha introduces Ya'akov and Eisav, who battle each other in the womb, conduct commerce for the rights of the first-born, and compete for their father's blessing.

2. What kind of person is Ya'akov? What does the Torah's description of him, "Ish tam, yoshev ohalim" (25:27), mean?

3. Is it proper for Ya'akov to demand the rights of the first-born from the hungry Eisav, in return for the stew Ya'akov has made? And what are these rights of the first-born anyway?

4. Ya'akov's mother, Rivka, comes up with the scheme for her son Ya'akov to lie and trick Yitzhak, his father, into giving him the blessing meant for Eisav. Why does Rivka advise Ya'akov to do something dishonest? Is Ya'akov right to follow her instructions and deceive Yitzhak?

5. Yitzhak, we know, prefers Eisav to Ya'akov. Could Eisav truly be worthy of this preference, or has he fooled Yitzhak into admiring him? What does Yitzhak admire about Eisav anyway?

6. We would expect Yitzhak to be furious once he realizes Ya'akov has tricked him by taking the berakha (blessing) meant for Eisav. If so, why does Yitzhak give Ya'akov yet ANOTHER blessing shortly before Ya'akov runs away to escape Eisav's wrath? Also, since Yitzhak has already blessed Ya'akov (mistakenly), why bless him again?

### INTRODUCTION:

Until Parashat Toledot, some of the narratives we have seen have been clear and some subtle, but by and large we have been able to find coherent solutions to our questions. This week's parasha is the most challenging so far, since the evidence available for solving our problems is so scanty or contradictory. All stories in Tanakh have certain gaps which must be filled, but sometimes that task is particularly hard. On the other hand, one of the most rewarding activities in learning Torah is filling these gaps.

Most of the questions above are "local" -- questions about specific events in the parasha. Although we must answer these local questions in order to understand the parasha, one basic question awaits in the background which makes the events of the parasha meaningful as more than just a complex narrative:

One of our the main motifs we encounter as we move through this sefer (book) is the question of who will be chosen to build the the nation to maintain a special relationship with Hashem (God). We have thought a lot about what makes Avraham special, and, among his sons, what about Yishmael makes him unfit for leadership as Avraham's successor. (We have not talked about what makes Yitzhak an appropriate successor; perhaps in the future.) Now we come to Ya'akov and Eisav: what makes Ya'akov better than Eisav? Since the Torah spends so much time unfolding the saga of the relationship between Ya'akov and Eisav, it is clearly one of our jobs to figure out what the difference is between these twins, why one is chosen to found the nation and the other rejected.

One problem with answering this question during this shiur is that we don't yet have a lot of the information we need. Our parasha gives us only our first glimpse of Ya'akov, but Ya'akov is a complex figure whose development stretches over a number of parshiot. We are not yet ready to decide who Ya'akov is, what his strengths are. This limits us to doing what analysis we can and suspending judgment about the rest until we get there.

[I have written an article-type analysis spanning Toledot, VaYetze, and YaYishlah, focusing on the Ya'akov-Eisav relationship. If you are

interested, and you have Microsoft Word Hebrew version, drop me a line at emayer@ymail.yu.edu and I will send it to you as an attachment to an email message -- but only on the condition that you send me your comments! If you don't know what an "attachment" is, ask a computer-wiz friend.]

## MEET THE BROTHERS:

In the very beginning of the parasha, the Torah introduces the brothers. Eisav is an "ish yode'a tzayyid, ish sadeh," "A man who knows hunting, a man of the field." Eisav is a hunter, comfortable with the physically demanding life of the outdoors, trained to channel his aggression, accustomed to the danger of the hunt, skilled in using weapons.

Ya'akov, on the other hand, is an "ish tam, yoshev ohalim" -- "A 'tam' man, a dweller of tents." "Tam" in Tanakh (the Bible) usually parallels the word "yashar" and means the same thing or something similar -- "straight," "upright," "righteous." It is related to the word "tamim," "perfect," "having no blemish."

## \*THAT'S\* WHAT YOU CALL 'RIGHTEOUS'?

The problem with this description of Ya'akov is that just after the description, the Torah tells us that Ya'akov pulls off a deal with his brother to buy the birthright from him for a bowl of soup! Now, let's assume Eisav was stupid enough to agree to this deal: does it seem 'tam' (righteous) for Ya'akov to take advantage of that stupidity by offering a bowl of soup in exchange for something so important? To make matters worse, later in the parasha Ya'akov lies to his father, tricking Yitzhak into giving him the berakha (blessing) meant for Eisav by impersonating Eisav. Is this what a 'tzaddik' would do? Does this sound 'yashar' to you?

We may have to look for another interpretation of the word 'tam,' since Ya'akov's activities hardly seem 'yashar.' Even if there might be some way to justify his actions, they could hardly be described as "straight"! What else could 'tam' mean?

If you look at the way the Torah describes the brothers, it is clear that the Torah intends to parallel the two brothers so that we can appreciate the contrast between them:

Eisav Ya'akov  
A) yode'a tzayyid ----> ish tam

B) ish sadeh -----> yoshev ohalim

The second pair in this parallel is pretty clear: Eisav is a man of the field, prepared to deal with the outside world, while Ya'akov prefers to be alone among his tents, tending the sheep. What about the first parallel? The Torah contrasts the two brothers: while Eisav has trained his aggressive instincts and has become a 'yode'a tzayyid,' someone who knows how to pursue, confront, and subdue, Ya'akov has not developed these abilities; as Rashi comments, "tam" means he is "not expert in all these." He is not a hunter; his aggressions are untrained. What the Torah is really telling us by using the word 'tam' is not that Ya'akov is a saint, but that he is unaggressive, that he avoids direct conflict. At this point, it is not clear whether this is good or bad, but it sets the stage for many of the events ahead in Ya'akov's life.

['Yoshev ohalim,' by the way, is a phrase we have already come across: we read in Parashat Bereishit that one of Lemekh's wives, Ada, had a son named Yaval, who, the Torah tells us, is "avi kol YOSHEV OHEL u-mikneh," the first to pasture his flock on a sort of nomadic basis, moving his tent to a new pasture whenever the local pasture has been consumed by the flock. So Ya'akov is a nomadic shepherd, moving his tent with the flock (see Rashbam).]

## PASS ME THE LENTIL SOUP . . . FOR TOMORROW WE MAY DIE

So Ya'akov buys the birthright from Eisav for some stew. What is the birthright -- to what does it entitle the first-born?

Ibn Ezra and Rashbam suggest that it is the right to collect a double portion of the estate of the father once he has died. (This is clearly the meaning of birthright later in the Torah, when the Torah tells us that a person must give his firstborn son a double portion, but it's not obvious that it means that here.) Ibn Ezra adds that some say that the birthright also entitles the firstborn to the respect and honor of the rest of the brothers. In any event, there is no question that the birthright is of great significance.

If so, how we understand Eisav's willingness to trade the birthright for stew? True, Eisav claims to be so famished that he is "dying," but a careful look shows that Eisav is only exaggerating, as the Torah describes his state as 'ayef,' simply 'tired' -- not quite dying. But if Eisav is not dying, why does he agree to sell the birthright to Ya'akov? What kind of negotiator is this Eisav to sell his birthright for a song (well, for a stew)?

Eisav is a man of action -- but not a man of foresight. He knows how to behave when arrows fly at him, when a mountain lion bares its fangs, when a gazelle leaps across his path. But that is exactly the point: Eisav is a man with a hair trigger, gifted with quicksilver reflexes and jungle-tuned intuition, brave and bold . . . but he's not too subtle. He does not understand (or can't discipline himself to

obey) the first principle of investment: delaying enjoyment in the present to guarantee greater enjoyment in the future (i.e., "save up"). You have to forego spending some of your money today so you can invest it and turn into more money. Eisav cares only that he is hungry and that he has a valuable commodity -- his birthright. He focuses on today, on the empty feeling in his belly, ignoring tomorrow, when he will regret having squandered the birthright on something so silly.

But Eisav is no moron; he must rationalize this obviously boneheaded decision, so he exaggerates -- "Here I am dying, what good will the birthright do for me!" Even Eisav knows this is nonsense as he says it, but every one of us has been in Eisav's shoes and can understand his thoughtlessness. [You just started a diet -- green vegetables and tofu -- and some evil tempter offers you ice cream cake. In a flash, your creative faculties proffer ten arguments to justify 'making an exception this time.' A moment's rational thought would shatter the arguments, but with the food right there, the strength of the arguments becomes irrelevant.]

Given Eisav's personality, it does seem wrong for Ya'akov to offer this deal to him. Ya'akov must know that Eisav is a live-for-the-moment kind of person. In fact, that seems to be precisely why he offers Eisav this deal, for who but someone like Eisav would even contemplate Ya'akov's offer? Ya'akov's salesmanship, then, seems underhanded.

Neither brother comes out of this story looking very sympathetic: Ya'akov has gotten the better half of a less-than-fair deal, and Eisav has demonstrated irresponsible impulsiveness. As we go on, we will see that both brothers continue to display these qualities.

#### **RIVKA'S SCHEME:**

Rivka commands Ya'akov to do something dishonest: to take advantage of his father Yitzhak's blindness to trick him into blessing him with the blessing meant for Eisav, Yitzhak's favorite. Why doesn't Rivka try to speak to Yitzhak instead of advising Ya'akov to deceive him; more troubling, what justifies the lie she places in Ya'akov's mouth? And is it right for Ya'akov to obey her instructions?

When Rivka was pregnant with Ya'akov and Eisav and felt the two fetuses jumping around inside her, she was worried and consulted Hashem. She was told that two nations were struggling within her, but that "rav ya'avod tza'ir," the elder would serve the younger. Now, to her chagrin, she sees that Yitzhak is planning to give the berakha (blessing) of family leadership to Eisav -- the wrong son, according to what she had been told during her turbulent pregnancy -- so she decides to 'correct' the mistake.

This raises another question: why doesn't Rivka correct the mistake the easy way, by just telling her husband about her prophetic pregnancy? It's not clear, but maybe the next answer to our first question -- what motivates Rivka to plan this trickery -- will answer this as well.

Rivka prefers Ya'akov to Eisav, the Torah tells us, and Yitzhak prefers Eisav; there is a deep conflict between the parents over their affection for their children. This conflict might not be explicit, as Yitzhak and Rivka do not necessarily state which son they each prefer, but people have many ways of communicating their preferences and understanding the unspoken preferences of others. Rivka must have seen Yitzhak often giving preferential treatment to Eisav, so she understands that Yitzhak prefers his elder son. And Yitzhak probably understands the same about Rivka's feelings for Ya'akov. In this context, Rivka may suspect that Yitzhak will not believe her if she tells him of her prophecy that Ya'akov, the younger, will rule over his older brother; Yitzhak might think she is only trying to promote her favorite son. Since she cannot be open with her husband, she feels compelled to trick him in order to follow the prophecy she has received.

#### **"YES, MOTHER":**

But does Ya'akov do the right thing in executing his mother's instructions? Why, after all, does he agree to her plan? Perhaps because:

- a) . . . his mother commands him to do it; he obeys her without thinking. (This seems unlikely because he does indeed question his mother -- not about whether tricking his father is the right thing to do, but whether it will work -- so he is not blindly obedient.)
- b) . . . he knows that his mother has received the prophecy of "rav ya'avod tza'ir," and he sees that since his father prefers Eisav, he himself will never get his father's blessing, never become head of the household, and never rule over his brother. So the only way to make sure that the prophecy comes true is to do something dishonest.
- c) . . . he has bought the birthright from Eisav, and one of the privileges of the birthright is that the son who has it receives his father's blessing of riches, along with assuming the leadership of the rest of the family. If so, why does Ya'akov need to trick his father in order to get the berakha? Why not go directly to Yitzhak and tell him straight out that he deserves the berakha because he bought it from Eisav? Well, put yourself in Ya'akov's place: imagine you have taken advantage of your foolishly impulsive brother and gotten him to agree to a ridiculous deal because you know he looks only at what's in front of him and doesn't really plan much for the distant future. How would you feel about going to your dad and telling him about it? "Well, dad, the berakha is really mine because I bought it from Eisav for, uh, well, for some stew." What would your dad think of you and the deal you made? Ya'akov feels he deserves Eisav's blessing since he has bought the privileges of firstborn from Eisav, but he cannot simply tell the story of the sale to his father. Yitzhak would be aghast at Ya'akov's behavior, or worse, he would nullify the deal on the grounds that Ya'akov had taken unfair advantage.

Whatever Ya'akov's reason for doing it, it is difficult to justify his lying and tricking Yitzhak based on any of the above rationales:

Rationale "a": [This possibility was questioned as unlikely in its own right, see above.]

Rationale "b": The Lord can figure out just fine how to make His plan work out, thank you very much! No one has an excuse to break a moral rule in order to take care of Hashem's plan unless they receive a direct command to do so (as in the case of the Akeida, the near-sacrifice of Yitzhak by Avraham). Rivka is never instructed to lift a finger in order to make sure that "rav ya'avod tza'ir." When Hashem wants help, He asks for it. Otherwise, no one is above the law.

Rationale "c": Lying to hide something you've done which would embarrass you is a tough one to justify!

## WHAT DO YOU SEE IN HIM, YITZHAK?

The Torah observes without comment or explanation that Yitzhak prefers Eisav over Ya'akov. What is it about Eisav that Yitzhak admires, or which attracts him? What is it that Ya'akov is lacking, that Eisav has? Has Yitzhak been blinded, or has he blinded himself, to Eisav's faults? Doesn't he know that his elder son is the kind of person who will trade the birthright for a bowl of soup? How do we understand his preference for Eisav?

Let's hold these questions for a moment and combine them with the following related questions:

Once Ya'akov has tricked Yitzhak into blessing him with the blessings of the firstborn, and Yitzhak realizes what has happened, he seems very angry with Ya'akov for lying to him and deceiving him. If so, why does he give Ya'akov \*another\* berakha soon afterward, just before Ya'akov's flight to Haran?! And even if, for some reason, Yitzhak is not angry, what need is there to give Ya'akov a second berakha, if he has already received one through the deception he has just carried out?

Let's first look at Yitzhak's preference for Eisav. The Torah says that Yitzhak prefers Eisav because "tzayyid be-fiv" -- "hunting was in his mouth." Whose mouth is this hunting in? The possibilities:

1) Hunting is in \*Yitzhak's\* mouth: he likes Eisav best because Eisav brings him all kinds of exotic game to eat! Of course, this interpretation makes Yitzhak seem pretty superficial. Can food really be so important to Yitzhak that he is ready to pass the leadership role to Eisav because Eisav is the best game-catcher and chef? "My kingdom for some good venison"?

2) Hunting is in \*Eisav's\* mouth: Yitzhak likes Eisav because hunting is instinctive for Eisav; it is a part of him. Later on, in Parashat Nitzavim (in Sefer Devarim), we see this word, "be-fiv," used to mean that something is an integral part of someone's personality or part of his most basic characteristics. In that context, Moshe is winding down his 'pep talk' to Bnei Yisrael, encouraging them to keep the Torah. Lest they despair of their ability to understand and keep the Torah, Moshe urges them to be strong, insisting that "**BE-FIKHA**\* ubi-lvavka la-asoto" -- "It is IN YOUR MOUTH and in your heart to do it." Hunting is in Eisav's "mouth" as observance of the mitzvot of the Torah is in Bnei Yisrael's "mouth."

This second possibility seems intriguing, but how does it explain why Yitzhak prefers Eisav? Let's look a little further at the evidence about Yitzhak's admiration for Eisav, reading the section where Yitzhak, feeling death approaching, instructs Eisav to hunt and prepare food for him. After Eisav presents Yitzhak with this meal, Yitzhak will give Eisav his berakha.

Yitzhak instructs Eisav to "lift your weapons" -- "your quiver and arrows" - and to "go out and hunt game," and prepare the meat for him as he likes it, "so that my soul shall bless you before I die."

Now, if Yitzhak simply wants a good meal, i.e., if the reason he loves Eisav is because Eisav places hunting "in his mouth" quite literally, he really could have left out many of these elements:

1) "tzayyid" - Yitzhak seems to want specifically something hunted; an animal from the sheep-pen will not do, it seems.

2) "keilekha" -- "your weapons" -- "telyekha ve-kashtekha" -- "your quiver and bow." Now, Eisav certainly knows how to hunt and which weapons to take. Why does Yitzhak specify that Eisav should take weapons, even specifying \*which\* weapons?

Does Yitzhak just want a good meal so he can feel thankful to Eisav for filling his belly and then give him the berakha . . . or is there some more substantial reason why he wants Eisav to use his weapons and hunt something in order to qualify for the berakha?

Let us look a bit further, at the scene where Ya'akov is dressed up in Eisav's clothing. His father asks him to come close, and then Yitzhak smells him to see if he smells like Eisav. When he smells the clothes of Eisav, how does he characterize the smell? "Re'ah beni ke-re'ah SADEH ASHER BERKHO HASHEM" -- "The smell of my son is like the smell of the field, which God has blessed." He smells of the field, the outdoors, which Yitzhak sees as divinely blessed!

## What does all this add up to?

Yitzhak seems fascinated by Eisav as a man of trained, channeled aggressive action. He admires Eisav as someone for whom hunting is natural -- "be-fiv." He takes particular pleasure in the weapons Eisav knows how to use, even in the smell of the field, the arena where Eisav is master. Yitzhak doesn't want just any food, he wants \*hunted\* food to inspire him to transfer the berakhot to Eisav. Why? What does trained and channeled aggression -- hunting skill -- have to do with blessings? To answer this, we need to look at the blessings themselves:

"May Hashem give you from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the land, and much grain and wine. Nations shall serve you, and countries bow to you; be master to your brother, and may the sons of your mother bow to you . . . ."

These are berakhot of physical plenty, leadership, and power. Eisav, master of the physical environment, skilled with weapons, trained to wield power, has exactly the leadership skills necessary to receive these berakhot. His trained aggression can be channeled into controlling the power of leadership and will guarantee the safety and survival of the whole family in a hostile environment. Yitzhak has not been fooled about Eisav's leadership qualities -- Eisav really does have them.

Ya'akov, on the other hand, is the "ish tam," the tent-dweller, who avoids engaging the world and prefers to tend his sheep off by himself. Yitzhak looks at him and knows he may not be able to depend on Ya'akov's ability to confront the family's enemies and its challenges. Instead of facing his challenges, he will try to avoid them. Yitzhak is attracted to Eisav and his face-to-face approach to his challenges.

Yitzhak knows that Eisav is a bit impulsive, that he doesn't always think through his decisions. He knows that Eisav's strength is also his weakness, that his courage in facing his challenges face-to-face also means that he may find it difficult to face a challenge which is not right in front of his face. Eisav is undone by subtlety, his brother's specialty. But Yitzhak doesn't really appreciate the degree of Eisav's shortsightedness and poor judgment until after he discovers Ya'akov's theft of Eisav's blessing. To appreciate this, we need to look at the conversation between Yitzhak and Eisav after Ya'akov has stolen the berakha. Raising his voice bitterly in tearful, anguished complaint, Eisav pauses to curse the subtle Ya'akov: "Is his name indeed 'Ya'akov' [literally, 'heel' or 'trickster']?! He has tricked me ['va-ye-akveini,' a play on "Ya'akov"] now twice -- he took my birthright, and now he took my blessings!"

Eisav shoots his mouth off just a little more than he should! Until now, Yitzhak had thought of Eisav as a strong leader, a person of courage who confronts his challenges, if perhaps also a bit hasty, a little impulsive. But now Yitzhak knows about the sale of the bekhora, the sale where Eisav agreed to sell his leadership rights for a bowl of soup when he was hungry! Suddenly, Yitzhak realizes that he has been deeply mistaken about Eisav. No one with real leadership instinct would ever have sold the bekhora, the leadership of the family . . . not for \*anything,\* and certainly not for a bowl of soup! A person who would do that is a person with little understanding of leadership at all. Suddenly, Yitzhak sees that all the leadership he thought he saw in Eisav was really just aggression; all the courage he saw was really just thoughtless incaution.

#### **A RELUCTANT CHANGE OF HEART:**

This brings us to our next question: Why is Yitzhak, who has just been the victim of Ya'akov's deception, willing to give Ya'akov \*another\* berakha at the end of the parasha? And since Ya'akov has already received a berakha from Yitzhak, why does he need another one?

Let's add another question: we saw that when Eisav shows up and realizes that Ya'akov has stolen his berakha, he becomes distraught. He begs his father to bless him, too; in fact, he begs three times. Yitzhak insists that he has no blessings left, but in the end he gives Eisav a watered-down version of the same berakha he had given to Ya'akov just before. The problem is that Yitzhak does \*indeed\* have another berakha besides the one he gave to Ya'akov: he still has the berakha which he is going to give to Ya'akov at the end of the parasha. If he has another berakha, why doesn't he give it to Eisav?

To understand the questions surrounding this last berakha, we have to take a look at the berakha itself:

BERESHIT 28:3-4 --

"May Hashem bless you and increase you . . . you shall become a throng of nations. May He give to you the blessing of Avraham your father, to you and your children with you, that you shall inherit the Land in which you dwell, which Hashem gave to Avraham."

How does this compare to the berakhot that Yitzhak had given earlier in the parasha?

This latter berakha is the Birkat Avraham, the promise of the holy land and the promise that Ya'akov will become "a throng of nations." Unlike the berakha meant for Eisav, this is not a berakha of physical wealth or political leadership; this berakha transforms its recipient into the spiritual heir of Avraham, into the one who will inherit the holy land and found the nation which will have a special relationship with Hashem.

It is now clear why Ya'akov gets this berakha even though he has already gotten a berakha -- the two blessings are as different as can be! The previous berakha was for physical success and temporal leadership, while this berakha grants spiritual leadership.

But isn't Yitzhak still angry at Ya'akov for lying and stealing the previous berakha? How can he be willing to bless Ya'akov (especially as

a spiritual leader!) after being tricked by him? And why isn't Yitzhak willing to give this blessing to poor Eisav when Eisav plaintively begs for a blessing? Why does Yitzhak make it seem that he has nothing left to offer to Eisav?

Things are a lot more complex than we thought when we started! We sometimes like to think of characters in the Humash as simple -- he's one of the good guys, he's one of the bad guys. But in our real lives, the people are not simple at all. No one is all good or all evil. The same is true of the Humash, but some of us have been trained to think of the characters of the Humash in simplistic terms.

At the end of his life, Yitzhak faces the reality that neither of his sons is perfect. Eisav has shown that he doesn't have much leadership potential, while Ya'akov has shown that he is less than completely honest. But Yitzhak does have to pass spiritual leadership, the Blessing of Avraham, to someone. He doesn't have any perfect choices: each candidate has serious weaknesses. Ya'akov seems to understand the value of leadership and makes efforts to achieve it, but he has been dishonest. Yitzhak does not know about Eisav's plan to murder Ya'akov, which is nicely in line with Eisav's impulsive, judgment-free nature (he's hungry, he sells the birthright; he's angry, he murders his opponent), but Yitzhak has seen enough to make him even more uncomfortable with Eisav than he is with Ya'akov. Yitzhak does not know what to do. To whom should he give the spiritual leadership of the future nation? Who should get the final berakha? He doesn't know, so he delays by giving Eisav a watered-down version of the physical berakha.

#### **RIVKA SAVES THE DAY:**

But then one other element enters the scene and convinces Yitzhak that Ya'akov is his man. This element is supplied by the crafty Rivka.

She knows that Yitzhak still hasn't given anyone the Birkat Avraham, the mantle of spiritual leadership. And she wants Ya'akov to get it. So instead of telling Yitzhak that Eisav is a bum and that he is planning to murder Ya'akov, she does a very sly thing: she pretends to be concerned that Ya'akov will marry one of the local Hittite women, who are clearly evil characters in the Torah's view. (The Hittites are among the Cana'anite nations which the Torah says live lives of abomination and idol worship; they are the people from whom Avraham insisted that a wife not be taken for Yitzhak. In other words, they stand for everything immoral and evil that the morality and monotheism of the Torah come to challenge.) Now, let us remember -- who is it who has already married \*two\* of these Hittite women? Eisav, of course! And remember that Yitzhak and Rivka, the Torah says, found these women "a bitterness of spirit."

What Rivka is really doing at this crucial moment by accenting her fear that Ya'akov might take a Hittite wife is subtly reminding Yitzhak that his favorite son Eisav is not worthy of spiritual leadership at all. He has married women from a culture which will in time reach such depths of evil that Hashem will consider it nation worthy of destruction at the hands of the Bnei Yisrael as they emerge from Egypt and conquer Israel. This son is simply not an option as a spiritual leader; his marital choices have already spoken volumes for his future as a spiritual leader. In this context, the only choice left is Ya'akov. On the one hand, he has not done much to show that he can be a spiritual leader. And he has been dishonest. But Yitzhak has no better choice, so he chooses Ya'akov.

We will see as we follow Ya'akov through his development that Yitzhak was right. As Ya'akov grows, he proves himself worthy of the spiritual blessings.

[It is also worth noticing that Eisav suddenly wakes up at this point and sees that Ya'akov has been commanded not to marry a native (Cana'anite) woman, and that Ya'akov has therefore received the birkat Avraham. It is too late for him, but Eisav still tries to show he is worthy by taking one of Yishmael's daughters (i.e., a non-Cana'anite woman) as a wife!]

Shabbat Shalom

## Masters and Servants – The “Chaff” of the Avot, Part I

by Rabbi Yitz Etshalom

### I. "I AM ESAV YOUR ELDEST"

One of the seminal stories in B'resheet occupies the latter half of this week's Parashah: Ya'akov's successful "masquerade" by which he gains Yitzhak's primary blessing, the one which he (apparently) intended to grant to Esav.

There are many profound and significant issues raised in this narrative, including (but not limited to):

- a) Why did Yitzhak only "have" one B'rakhah to give, such that when the real Esav showed up, he seemed to be "out of B'rakhot";
- b) Why does a B'rakhah given to the "wrong person" have any validity;
- c) Was Yitzhak really unaware of who the recipient was,
- d) Why did Yitzhak request venison, prepared according to his taste, in advance of the B'rakhah?
- e) What are we to make of the exclamation: "The voice is the voice of Ya'akov but the hands are the hands of Esav"
- f) What is the relationship between the pair of B'rakhot relating to the "fat of the land" (27:28-29 and 27:39-40) and the Avrahamic blessing clearly intended for Ya'akov (28:3-4).

We will not investigate any of these (except, perhaps, tangentially); instead, we will focus on both the roots and the results of Ya'akov's masquerade (including Rivkah's role in this deception). When Ya'akov dressed up in hairy clothes, brought goat-meat seasoned (by Rivkah) to taste like venison and declared "I am Esav, your eldest", he successfully received the blessing which was evidently intended for Esav. This act of cunning (\*Mirmah\*) had both early roots in the Avrahamic family - and significant and powerful ramifications within the Ya'akovian clan.

In this analysis, we will endeavor to discover the origins of this type of behavior (and various analogues), along with identifying the difference between appropriate (and morally justified) utilization of these traits and the unacceptable excesses which are found in some of the less savory characters in Sefer B'resheet.

By way of introduction, I'd like to pose a question on a well-known - but not well-understood - Midrash.

At the beginning of the Bikkurim recitation, the worshipper avows: "My father was a wandering Aramean" (D'varim 26:56). All "p'shat-driven" commentaries identify this "father" as either Avraham or Ya'akov; both of whom were wanderers and both came from Aram (although Ya'akov was not born there, that was the terminus of his wandering). The well-known Midrash which introduces one of the two core sections of the Haggadah, identifies this "Aramean" as Lavan, Rivkah's brother and Ya'akov's father-in-law. (In order to do this, the Midrash must change the grammatical sense of \*Oved\*, but we'll save that for another essay).

What is the connection between our wandering father (Avraham or Ya'akov) and Lavan? Why would we possibly want to substitute Lavan for one of the Avot?

In order to answer this, we'll have to investigate the chain of events leading up to - and resulting from - Ya'akov's successful deception of Yitzhak.

### II. \*MIRMAH\* IN AVRAHAM'S FAMILY

What is the earliest example of deception in Avraham's family? Although the Midrash suggests such behavior on the part of Haran in Avraham's pre-Aliyah days (see B'resheet Rabbah 38:13), the T'nakh itself presents the first episode near the beginning of the Avraham narrative:

[as Avraham and Sarah are about to enter Egypt:] "Say, I beg you, that you are my sister; that it may be well with me for your sake; and my soul shall live because of you." (12:13)

This scene is, of course, repeated in Avraham's later sojourn to Philistine territory:

And Avraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister"; and Avimelekh king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah. (20:2)

Unlike his interaction with Pharaoh, Avraham provides a defense for his misleading Avimelekh:

"And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is your kindness which you shall show to me; at every place where we shall come, say of me, "He is my brother"!'" (20:12-13)

Avraham held that deception in such a case was not only ethically defensible - it was a moral obligation (in order to preserve life - his own). This position was validated by God Himself in the interaction with Sarah regarding her reaction to the tidings of the miracle birth of Yitzhak:

Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I am grown old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" (18:12)

[yet, when God raises this with Avraham, He only says:] And Hashem said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old'?" (v. 13)

The Gemara is sensitive to this shift and notes:

One may modify a statement in the interests of peace...at the School of R. Yishma'el it was taught: Great is the cause of peace. Seeing that for its sake even the Holy One, blessed be He, modified a statement; for at first it is written, "My lord being old", while afterwards it is written, "And I am old". (BT Yevamot 65b)

In other words, God Himself misled Avraham, omitting Sarah's concerns about his age, in order to maintain peace in the household (\*Shalom Bayit\*). If so, it was certainly appropriate for Avraham to mislead Pharaoh and Avimelekh - in order to protect himself - about the nature of his relationship with Sarah. [I refer to this as "misleading" or "deceptive" as opposed to "lying" since, as we see from Avraham's defense, his story was not untrue - it was just (significantly) incomplete].

We find one more instance of "modifying words" in the Avraham narrative - although it isn't Avraham himself who does so.

### III. CHAPTER 24: WHAT HAPPENED...AND ELIEZER'S VERSION

Chapter 24, the longest chapter in B'resheet (and the core of last week's Parashah), is the story of Eliezer's mission to find a wife for Yitzhak.

[Although the text does not refer to him by name, instead calling him "the slave of Avraham" - which is relevant to our analysis, Rabbinic tradition identifies him with the Eliezer mentioned in 15:2. For the sake of brevity, we will utilize this identification here.]

This story is presented in a loquacious manner; first we are told about Avraham's oath, administered to his slave (vv. 2-9); then we hear about the servant's journey to Aram and his prayer at the well (10-14); immediately, Rivkah comes out and proves to be the realization of that prayer (15-25). Subsequently, the slave is brought to her house (26-33) and he retells the entire story, beginning with some background about himself, Avraham, Sarah and Yitzhak (34-36), repeating the terms of the oath (37-41), retelling the story of his prayer (42-44), and retelling Rivkah's kindness to him and his animals (45-47).

Why is this story repeated? Rashi (v. 42), quoting the Midrash (B'resheet Rabbah 60:8), notes that "the idle chatter of the slaves of the Patriarchal homes is dearer than the Torah of their children", but does not explain why this is the case.

Nearly all classical commentators (Acharonim as well as Rishonim - including Rashi himself), note the repetition of Avraham's oath and of the interaction between the slave and Rivkah at the well, pointing to one or more of the variations between the versions. For example, Rashi notes that even though the slave gave her the jewelry before finding out her name or family:

And it came to pass, as the camels finished drinking, that the man took a golden ear ring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold; And said, "Whose daughter are you?" (vv. 22-23; note, however, Ramban at v. 22);

The report was a bit different:

"And she hurried, and let down her water jar from her shoulder, and said, 'Drink, and I will give your camels drink also'; so I drank, and she made the camels drink also. And I asked her, and said, 'Whose daughter are you?' And she said, 'The daughter of Betu'el, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him'; and I put the ear ring on her face, and the bracelets on her hands." (vv. 46-47)

Rashi explains that Eliezer modified his words so that he wouldn't "catch him in his words, saying 'Why did you give these to her before you knew who she was?'".

[Interested readers are directed to the Netziv and Malbim for fascinating analyses of the variations between the Torah narrative and Eliezer's version.]

In sum, we find that Avraham (and members of his household), utilized their words judiciously when there was a life-threatening situation or when there was an overriding interest at stake - which was not self-directed. According to the Midrash, Eliezer was interested in the failure of his mission, as he wanted to have his own daughter marry Yitzhak; in any case, it wasn't his own interests which were being promoted via his altered statements.

Perhaps this is why the slave is referred to, throughout Chapter 24 (where he is one of the two central figures) as *\*Eved Avraham\**, rather than by name (which we don't ever learn - see last week's posting); it is truly his ability to utilize this skill learned in Avraham's household which assists in the success of his mission.

#### IV. BACK TO YA'AKOV

In addressing the focal story of our Parashah - the "masquerade", we have to take two things into account:

1) Rivkah, who was the force behind the deception, was privy to information about her sons which, evidently, she did not share with Yitzhak:

And the children struggled together inside her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of Hashem. And Hashem said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger." (25:22-23) Ya'akov was destined to rule over Esav - to which end she wanted to ensure that he received the preferred blessing. (Again, it is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze the role of these blessings in family position and power).

2) Rivkah was the sister of Lavan, the master deceiver. Note how the Midrash comments on her identification, at the beginning of our Parashah, as

"the daughter of Betu'el the Aramean of Padan-Aram, the sister to Lavan the Aramean":

This teaches that her father was a deceiver (a play on the close relationship between the word *\*Rama'i\** meaning "deceiver" and *\*Arami\** - "Aramean"), her brother was a deceiver and the people in her locale were like that, and this righteous woman came out from there. (B'resheet Rabbah 63:4)

It is not surprising that Rivkah utilized this talent to ensure that the Divine Mandate - Ya'akov receiving the favored blessing - took place. This was certainly not a case of self-interest, as the result of this deception was Ya'akov's forced exile for twenty years; according to the Midrash, Ya'akov never saw his beloved mother again (see Rashi at 35:8).

It is prudent to point out that Yitzhak also engaged in this type of behavior - once:

And Yitzhak lived in Gerar; And the men of the place asked him about his wife; and he said, "She is my sister"; for he feared to say, She is my wife; lest, said he, the men of the place should kill me for Rivkah; because she was pretty to look upon. (26:6-7)

Although Yitzhak was prepared to act deceitfully in a situation similarly dangerous to those of his father, Rivkah was still able to mislead him (twice - look carefully at 27:42-46). Why wasn't Yitzhak more attuned to guile?

#### V. *\*VAYAGOR\** AND *\*VAYESHEV\**

In Avraham's defense of his misleading Avimelekh, there is a phrase which may clarify something about the Avot and those rare circumstances when they were prepared to act deceptively:

And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is your kindness which you shall show to me; at every place where we shall come, say of me, "He is my brother".'";

In other words, Avraham was only willing to act this way when he was in a state of wandering. The natural vulnerability experienced by the stranger necessitates the occasional use of deception to survive (witness the thousands of Jews who were saved by forged papers, sham marriages, made-up adoptions etc. while escaping the horrors of the Sho'ah).

Note that roughly half of Avraham's post-Lekh-L'kha life was lived "on the run" (see our shiur on Parashat Vayera regarding the journey's of Avraham); nevertheless, the only two incidents of deception were in specific "traveling" situations - in Egypt and G'rар. Similarly, Avraham's elder slave was a stranger in Aram when he spoke so "carefully" - and this was the case with Yitzhak, who only deceived once: When he was in G'rар and afraid for his life.

Once Yitzhak - who was the only one of the Avot who was "settled" during most of his life - was back home, there was no need to operate in this fashion.

It took Rivkah, who, like Avraham, (see our shiur on Hayyei Sarah) was a transplant in K'na'an and who had the inside information on Ya'akov and Esav, to set up the necessary circumstances to successfully deceive Yitzhak into giving Ya'akov the blessing.

## VI. LATER ON...

Let's take a quick look at several later incidents of \*Mirmah\* in the family of Ya'akov:

1) Ya'akov's entire relationship with his uncle and father-in-law was one of deceit - Lavan cheated Ya'akov out of his promised wife (Rachel) and then, changed his salary ten times:

"Thus have I been twenty years in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your cattle; and you have changed my wages ten times." (41:31) (There is much more for us to investigate regarding the nature of their relationship and the claim of "20 years" - but we'll leave that for another year)

Yet, our Rabbis note that there is an affinity between Lavan and Ya'akov:

And Ya'akov told Rachel that he was her father's brother, and that he was Rivkah's son; (29:12) - In deception, "he was her father's brother"; In righteousness, "he was Rivkah's son". (B'resheet Rabbah 70:13)

The Rabbis take this affinity even further and note that Lavan's behavior was something of a "payback" to Ya'akov for his deception:

...all night Ya'akov called "Rachel" and Leah responded; in the morning: "Behold she was Leah". He said to her: "O deceptive one daughter of a deceptive one: All night didn't I call Rachel and you responded?" Leah answered: "Is there a barber without students? (i.e. even the best barber needs a student who will cut his hair; likewise:) Didn't your father cry out 'Esav' and you responded?" (ibid. 70:19) (more on this a bit later)

2) When Ya'akov returns to Eretz K'na'an, following Avraham's footsteps, his first stop is Sh'khem. The terrible events which occurred there can be found in Chapter 34 - but note how Ya'akov's sons (all born in Aram!) respond:

And the sons of Ya'akov answered Sh'khem and Hamor his father deceitfully (\*b'Mirmah\*, and said, [because he had defiled Dinah their sister]; And they said to them, "We can not do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised; for that would be a reproach to us; But in this will we consent to you; If you will be as we are, that every male of you be circumcised; Then will we give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for us, and we will live with you, and we will become one people." (34:13-16)

The problems inherent in this Parashah are many; note, however, Ya'akov's protest against his sons' behavior:

And Ya'akov said to Shim'on and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the K'na'ani and the P'rizi; and I being few in number, they shall gather together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house." (34:30)

In other words, acting deceitfully as a tactic - when justified - is only acceptable when in a temporary place (e.g. Egypt, G'rar, Avraham's slave in Aram or Ya'akov at Yitzhak's knee); but you must maintain a reputation for forthrightness among the inhabitants of the land (\*Yoshev ha'Aretz\*).

Although space limitations mitigate against continuing here, I'd like to use the information presented up to this point to suggest an answer to our question about the Midrash on \*Arami Oved Avi\* -

When Avraham and Ya'akov were wandering (the "pshat" meaning of the verse), they had to utilize a survival tactic which was morally correct and ethically justified - but only for those circumstances. That behavior - deceit - was personified in one Biblical character - Lavan. Whereas Avraham and Ya'akov (and, in one case, Yitzhak) utilized deceit, Lavan WAS deceit.

Hence, Lavan is the truest example of \*Arami Oved Avi\* - even in the comfort of home, even when faced with nothing more than the possible gain of a few dollars, he behaved in a way only acceptable for survival - and, then, only when wandering.

## VII. There are two additional points relating to this issue which we must address:

a) How do we understand the unpleasant (to say the least) consequences of "justified deceit" which weave their way through the rest of Sefer B'resheet (and, in a more Midrashic vein, through the rest of Jewish History)? If Ya'akov was justified in masquerading as Esav in order to deceive Yitzhak and gain the premier B'rakhah, why does it bear such a heavy personal and historic cost (as we will see further on)?

b) How is it that Lavan is related to Ya'akov? How can Esav be the son of Yitzhak? In other words, why do the great and grand Patriarchs and Matriarchs of our holy nation give birth to such antagonistic characters and have the dubious honor of kinship with the likes of Lavan?

### **VIII. THE "TRAIL OF DECEPTION"**

The Mishna (Sotah 1:7) states: "According to one's behavior, they (Heaven) behave with him." This kind of retribution is known as \*Midah k'Neged Midah\* (measure for measure).

This is nowhere exemplified as clearly and consistently in our literature as in the book of B'resheet. The same Lavan who fooled Ya'akov into marrying Leah and then working another 7 years for Rachel was fooled by that same Rachel when she stole his idols. The same Ya'akov who deceived his father in the dark was deceived in the dark when he thought that his new bride was Rachel. Note the comment of the Midrash cited above

...all night Ya'akov called "Rachel" and Leah responded; in the morning: "Behold she was Leah". He said to her: "O deceptive one daughter of a deceptive one: All night didn't I call Rachel and you responded?" Leah answered: "Is there a barber without students? (i.e. even the best barber needs a student who will cut his hair; likewise:) Didn't your father cry out 'Esav' and you responded?" (B'resheet Rabbah 70:19)

I'd like to outline the "trail of deception" which dogs the family of Ya'akov throughout Sefer B'resheet. Since we already dealt with the "modified words" of Avraham, his servant and his son, Yitzhak in part I (last week), we'll begin with Ya'akov himself:

- a. Yitzhak is deceived by Ya'akov who is prompted and aided by Rivkah (Ch. 27)
- b. Yitzhak is deceived by Rivkah, who claims that she wants to send Ya'akov away for marriage purposes (when it's really to save his life - 27:46)
- c. Lavan fools Ya'akov into marrying Leah before Rachel - thus getting her married off and gaining 7 more "free" years of labor from Ya'akov (29:23-27)
- d. Rachel lies to her father about the idols she stole from his house (31:19)
- e. Lavan manipulates Ya'akov's wages "ten times" (31:41)
- f. Ya'akov misleads Esav about his plans to join him in Se'ir (33:14)
- g. The sons of Ya'akov dupe the citizens of Sh'khem into a mass circumcision - and then pillage the town in revenge for the rape of Dinah (34:13)
- h. The brothers fool their father into thinking that Yoseph has been killed by an animal (37:31)
- i. Tamar fools Yehudah into thinking that she is a \*K'deshah\* (38:14-15)
- j. Potiphar's wife lies to her husband, getting Yoseph thrown into the court jail (39:14-20)
- k. Yoseph maintains his disguise with his brothers, not revealing their relationship until Yehudah's bold stand (44:18-34)
- l. Yoseph (evidently) has his brothers lie to Pharaoh about their livelihood (46:33-34)
- m. The brothers (apparently) lie to Yoseph about Ya'akov's deathbed wishes (49:17)

### **IX. "MEASURE FOR MEASURE"**

In the spirit of the Midrash quoted above - and following the notion of \*Midah k'Neged Midah\*, it seems clear that at least some of these episodes of deception are causally interrelated. As promised in last week's essay, we will find that the impact of some of these acts was felt well beyond the chronological parameters of B'resheet - to the furthest ends of Biblical history:

"'When Esav heard his father's words' (27:34): R. Hanina said: Anyone who claims that God totally forgoes debts will himself be lost; rather, He waits patiently and collects that which is His. In recompense for the one cry that Ya'akov caused Esav to cry out, as it says: 'When Esav heard his father's words, he cried out', he was punished. Where was he punished? In Shushan, as it says: 'And [Mordechai] cried a great and bitter cry' (Esther 4:1) (B'resheet Rabbah 67:4)

Before examining the reason behind this causal relationship, I'd like to demonstrate that that relationship indeed exists within these particular instances within Sefer B'resheet.

a) We have already seen that Ya'akov's masquerade was linked, in the Midrash, to Lavan's successful deception regarding his daughters. Besides the additional, far-reaching impact felt in the days of Mordechai and Esther, this seems to have set Ya'akov up for not properly recognizing the nature of the relationships between his sons, leading to the Yoseph tragedy. Note how the same animal used to fool Yitzhak into thinking he was eating venison ("for the taste of goat meat is similar to that of venison" - Rashi at 27:9) is used to replicate human blood on Yoseph's tunic ("[goat's] blood is similar to that of a human" Rashi at 37:31).

[Parenthetically, and this is an important caveat for the whole topic, we see the Yoseph story as tragic - even though it is not necessarily tragic from every perspective. As Yoseph himself states: "But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it to good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." (50:20) In other words, even though the sale of Yoseph was a tragedy from an internal family perspective, it was a component of salvation and necessary history from the Divine perspective. See B'resheet Rabbah 85:1 - "the tribes were engaged in the sale of Yoseph, Yoseph was engaged in his sackcloth and fasting, Re'even was engaged in his sackcloth and fasting, Ya'akov was engaged in his sackcloth and fasting, Yehudah was engaged in finding himself a wife - and haKadosh Barukh Hu was engaged in creating the light of the anointed king (David).]

b) The direct result of Rivkah's "official version" of the reason to send Ya'akov away (to find a wife) is that Esav married into Yishma'el's family (28:8-9). Note Rashbam's comments here: "Esav thought that it was on account of his marrying K'na'ani daughters that Ya'akov successfully stole the blessing of Avraham from me. He married the daughter of Yishma'el from the family of Avraham, thinking that now he will merit the legacy of Avraham." In other words, Rivkah's misleading statement regarding the reason for sending Ya'akov away motivated Esav to erroneously think that he could get the favored blessing by following that directive in his next marriage.

c) This one is somewhat obvious: By fooling Ya'akov into marrying Leah, The order of Shivtei Kah was inverted so that the eldest was not the son of Rachel, which led to all of the inter-fraternal troubles in Ya'akov's family (especially regarding Yoseph).

The Midrash explicit links the deception of that fateful night with the deception practiced by the brothers on their father regarding Yoseph's "disappearance". (B'resheet Rabbah 84:10).

In addition, this one night of deception (in which both Rachel and Leah were complicit) also kept Ya'akov from returning to K'na'an for anywhere between 7 and 13 years (7 which he worked for Rachel and 6 which he worked to make his own fortune).

d) Rachel's lie to her father regarding the idols: Note how Ya'akov unwittingly curses his beloved Rachel: "With whom you will find your gods, let him not live. Before our brothers point out what is yours with me, and take it with you. For Ya'akov knew not that Rachel had stolen them." (31:32). Rashi (ad loc.) cites the Midrash which points to this statement as the curse which led to Rachel's tragic death.

e) This is actually the "odd man out" on the list; whereas the other instances are exactly that - instances - this is a record of ongoing behavior.

f) Ya'akov implies that he will follow Esav to Se'ir (although note Ramban's approach at 33:14). Hazal seem to be bothered by this promise, as it is clear that Ya'akov didn't intend to go to Se'ir at all. As such, they interpret it as a "long-range" promise; Ya'akov will fulfill it in the messianic era: "And saviors shall ascend Mount Tziyyon to judge the Mount of Esav; and the kingdom shall be Hashem's." (Ovadiah 21) There doesn't seem to be a negative repercussion to this misleading statement anywhere throughout B'resheet or later Biblical history.

g) The deception of Sh'khem has implications both forward and backward in history. The first place where Avraham set up an altar when he entered the Land was Sh'khem (12:6); Rashi notes that he prayed there for the welfare of his great-grandchildren who would fight at that place. More significantly, Sh'khem is the location where the brothers cast Yoseph into the pit, which is (as noted above) an act tied up in deception. (Note BT Sanhedrin 102a where this connection is made, albeit linked to the rape, not the deception).

h) The deception of Ya'akov by his sons, which, as we have pointed out, is the consequence of Ya'akov's deception, becomes the next causal link in the chain: When the brothers sent Yoseph's tunic, covered with goat's blood, to father Ya'akov, they declared: "This have we found; \*Haker Na\* (discern, I beg you) whether it is your son's coat or not" (37:32).

When Yehudah (generally assumed to be the one who engineered that deception; see 37:26-27) was fooled by Tamar, she revealed herself with that selfsame phrase: "When she was brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, 'By the man, whose these are, am I with child; and she said, \*Haker Na\* (Discern, I beg you), whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff.' " (38:25)

The Gemara ties these two together in the context (and within the discussion of) \*Midah k'Neged Midah\*:

" 'Discern, I pray thee'. R. Hama b. Hanina said: With the word 'discern' [Yehudah] made an announcement to his father, and with the word 'discern' an announcement was made to him. With the word 'discern' he made an announcement : 'Discern now whether it be thy son's coat or not'; and with the word 'discern' an announcement was made to him : 'Discern, I pray thee, whose are these'." (BT Sotah 10b)

- i) Tamar's successful deception actually bears fruit (pun intended) which is all positive - but, keep in mind that Yehudah being fooled in this story is the result (as the Midrash attests) of his role in an earlier deception.
- j) Although this is not, strictly speaking, within the context of the Ya'akov family, there is an interesting consequence to Mrs. Potiphar's duplicitous behavior: Yoseph, whom she so desired, marries her daughter (41:45). Although one could argue that this is the "next best thing" for her - at least her daughter is married to Yoseph - from a perspective of T'nakh law, it is the one marriage which renders a future relationship with Yoseph out of reach. By lying and sending Yoseph to jail, she catalyzed a sequence of events which led to his marriage to her daughter - and her permanent relegation to the role of mother-in-law.
- k) The Midrash Tanhuma (Vayyigash #3) makes a startling observation: All of Yoseph's glory was overshadowed by Yehudah (ultimately, "Mashiach ben Yoseph" will be outlived and overshadowed by "Mashiach ben David" from Yehudah). The Midrash seems to link this with the comparison of Yoseph's deception as against Yehudah's forthright stand in his plea for Binyamin. In any case, at this point in B'resheet, most of the episodes are on the "result" end of the chain and Yoseph's behavior is the direct outgrowth of the brothers' deception of their father as noted above.
- l) This ploy had an unintended but tragic result: By convincing Pharaoh that the brothers were all shepherds, he located them together in Goshen. This was, admittedly, Yoseph's goal - to keep the family together. Several generations later, however, this made the Egyptian oppression that much easier to enforce: The children of Ya'akov were now identifiable as "them" (as against "us") - and their "Goshen ghetto" conditions certainly didn't help in this regard.
- m) This last lie is an interesting one. Although not clearly bound within the causal chain which we have identified, it is enlightening and informative from another perspective. The Midrash (D'verim Rabbah 5:14) comments:

Resh Lakish said: Great is peace, for the Torah reported false words in order to establish peace between Yoseph and his brothers. When their father died, they became afraid lest Yoseph take vengeance from them. What did they say? "Your father commanded, before his death, saying: 'Thus shall you say to Yoseph [Forgive, I beg you now, the trespass of your brothers, and their sin; for they did to you evil];'" and we never find that Ya'akov commanded this, rather, Scripture stated false words for the sake of peace.

In other words, here we find a second example of Divine validation of the questionable behavior which sits at the core of this analysis. As noted last week, God Himself reported inaccurate information to Avraham in order to spare his feelings - and, here, at the end of B'resheet, we find that the Torah validates untrue words which, again, come to promote \*Shalom Bayit\*.

## SUMMARY

We have noted an intricate series of deceptions orchestrated by or against members of Ya'akov's family. We have pointed to Midrashic or scriptural connections which seem to bind them together in a causal sequence.

At this point, we are, perhaps, more aware of the tangled web which is woven throughout the Sefer - but are no wiser as to how to understand it. Our two original questions remain unanswered:

- a) If Ya'akov's behavior in following his mother's advice and masquerading in order to gain the B'rakhah intended for Esav was justified, why are there such horrible and far-reaching consequences? [If it was not justified, then we have to understand how God could reward and support a blessing gained under the shadow of a crime. We will take the position that his behavior was just and justified - and perhaps leave the other lemma for another discussion.]
- b) How do we distinguish between Lavan and Ya'akov? Why are we proud to carry the names of \*Beit Ya'akov\* and \*B'nei Yisra'el\*, yet shudder at the name of Lavan?

## X. JUSTIFIED, BUT NEVERTHELESS...

Regarding our first question, we can find the answer in a broad area of Halakhah: Hilkhot Sh'gagot. The Torah mandates that if a person sins unknowingly, in such a manner that he either wasn't aware of all of the facts (this really is a piece of \*Helev\*) or of the law, he must, upon finding out that it was a violation, bring an expiation offering - a Korban Hatat. Why must he bring such an offering? We find an even further expression of this: A person who is guilty of manslaughter, with absolutely no harm intended, is obligated to go into exile at one of the cities of refuge. The Gemara (BT Makkot 10b) understands that this exile is a form of expiation - but from what evil act does he need cleansing?

A full treatment of this issue is well beyond the space allotted for this shiur; suffice it to say that Rabbinic literature, Talmudic as well as post-Talmudic, addresses this issue comprehensively. The many answers are all forms of saying the same thing: That which we do, even unintentionally, leaves a stain on who we are. By way of example, a person could be kidnapped and kept in seclusion with dastardly people for a number of months - clearly against his will. Nevertheless, the time that he spends in the company of these criminals will almost assuredly affect him - his values, how he spends his time, his language and so on. Even though he never meant to

share the space of these felons, the reality is that the environment they generate is noxious - and he must, perforce, breathe that same poisonous air.

An example of this is the Halakhah (BT Berakhot 32b) that a Kohen who commits manslaughter may never again perform the Birkat Kohanim, based on the verse: "Your hands are full of blood" (Yeshaya 1:15). This holds even if the killing was unintentional - his hands are stained, nonetheless.

When Ya'akov deceived his father, he was following his mother's advice, based on a prophecy she received about his destiny. Although his act was justified (see above), it left its mark. He was forced to dip into the world of deception in order to gain what was his by Divine fiat; yet, that descent left its mark and the consequences were felt for the ages. In other words, just because an act is permissible or, better yet, the proper response to a given situation, does not absolve the actor of the consequences of that act. Ya'akov continued the justified and successful manipulation of the truth within the family - but he paid a dear price for it for many years.

## XI. YA'AKOV AND LAVAN

And now we come to our final question - how do we distinguish between Ya'akov and Lavan? What gives Ya'akov a higher moral ground?

Perhaps the Midrash, once again, will enlighten and help resolve:

"'And Haman said in his heart (Esther 6:6)' Wicked people are enslaved to their hearts; 'Esav said in his heart' (B'resheet 27:41)...but the righteous are the masters of their hearts, as it says: 'And Hannah was speaking to her heart' (Sh'muel I 1:13)...and they are similar to their Creator: 'Hashem said to His heart'. (B'resheet 8:21)" (Esther Rabbah 10:3)

When we note all of the instances where Avraham, his servant, Yitzhak, Rivkah, Ya'akov and Yoseph lied - it was always for an overriding cause, one which was not motivated by self-interest. Ya'akov had more to lose (his life) by deceiving his father to gain the B'rakhah; Yoseph had much to gain by immediately revealing himself to his father etc. Those instances where we understand the act to be morally justified are when a righteous person, in control of his own moral rudder, utilizes deception to promote an overriding good (such as preservation of life, Shalom Bayit or the fulfillment of a prophecy).

Lavan is a very different creature; he is not just "more deceptive"; as pointed out last week, he is deception. In other words, whereas Ya'akov is a free man, able to use deception when warranted, Lavan is shackled by his own deceiving heart. How do we know the difference? What is the litmus test of "appropriate" deception?

Note that the Avot never used it for self-promotion or gain; Lavan's deception was always for his own financial benefit. Just as the moral high ground is claimed by the one who has the least to gain from the argument, so it is held by he who knows how to lie, but will never do so for his own self-promotion. He will only manipulate words to promote the greater good, be it familial, communal, national or universal.

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