

Potomac Torah Study Center

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Two Day Rosh Hodesh Kislev starts Motzi Shabbat

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.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

As Israel's primary focus turns from Hamas to the evils of Iran, Gaza, Hezbollah, and their allies, we pray that Hashem will protect us during 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the cease fire with Lebanon start us on the road to peace.

The Torah devotes three parashot to Avraham Avinu and even more space to Yaakov (much of it also including stories involving his children). In contrast, Toldot is the only parsha devoted primarily to Yitzhak. The only stories exclusively about Yitzhak involve his experiences during a famine, when God tells him not to go to Egypt but to stay in Gerar (Philistine territory). Yitzhak, like Avraham before him, digs wells. The Philistines object, claim rights to the first two wells, and Yitzhak must move until he finally finds land (Rechovot) where he may dig his wells without problems from the neighbors. Where in our parsha does the Torah tell us why Yitzhak is worthy to be one of our Patriarchs?

Chazal consider the love between Yitzhak and Rivka to be the ultimate love between a husband and wife. Even so, Rivka feels Yitzhak's spirituality immediately, and she wears a veil when Eleazar brings her to meet Yitzhak. Rivka can see that Yaakov deserves Hashem's bechura (religious leadership) and Esav does not – but she cannot discuss her insights with her husband. Instead, Rivka instructs Yaakov to take two goats from the family flock, bring them to her to prepare, and dress up as Esav to have his father bless him instead of his older brother. Yitzhak does not realize Yaakov's potential to merit Hashem's blessing until Rivka reminds him that Esav has married two Canaanite wives – and his in-laws risk keeping Esav and his descendants as idol worshipers. This incident does not explain why Yitzhak merits being one of the Avot.

With little in the Torah about him, what makes Yitzhak worthy of being one of the three Patriarchs? To me, one cannot evaluate Yitzhak without including perhaps the most important experience of his life. When God tells Avraham to take Yitzhak to be a burnt offering (olah) at a place He will show him, Yitzhak accompanies his father without objection. After walking for three days, when they go up a mountain with Yitzhak carrying fire wood on his back, he asks his father where the animal (for the olah) is. Yitzhak at this point realizes that he is apparently to be the sacrifice. Even so, Yitzhak continues as his father had requested of him. At this time, Avraham is 137 years old and Yitzhak is 37 years old – presumably well able to overcome his father if he wished to do so. The experience of the Akeidah transforms Yitzhak – gives him a spiritual aura that makes it difficult for him to relate at the same level as other people. Yitzhak is now Kadosh – he has the status of a korban. After the Akeidah, Avraham and Yitzhak return together.

Rabbi David Fohrman and his scholars at alephbeta.org look closely at the stories about Yitzhak's wells in Gerar. God tells Yitzhak to wait out the famine in Gerar rather than going to Egypt. (As a korban, Yitzhak is holy and must stay within the land of Israel.) Yitzhak builds a home, digs a well, and plants crops. Despite the famine, Yitzhak's land yields a crop

of a hundred times what he plants – enough to make Yitzhak wealthy. Yitzhak decides to settle in Gerar. The Philistines come to Yitzhak and claim that the land and thus the well belong to them. Yitzhak moves and repeats the experience. The people of Gerar return and claim to own the second well. Yitzhak moves further away, and finally the people of Gerar stop claiming to own the land and wells (Rechovot).

After the negative experiences in Gerar, Yitzhak moves again, this time to the Negev. Hashem appears to Yitzhak and promises him His protection. Yitzhak builds an alter, erects a tent, and his workers dig a well. Yitzhak names the well Shebah, and the city becomes Beer-Sheba. Yitzhak finally learns his father's lesson – he is to move around and advocate for Hashem. God blesses him with wealth to enable him to travel, build alters to Hashem, and teach people in various areas about God. The blessings of children, land, and wealth are tools to enable our Avot to instruct the people of the world about Hashem. We are not to remain at home and enjoy a quiet life – we are to work to make the world a better place. Once Yitzhak internalizes this lesson, he has no more problems with his neighbors. Yitzhak follows the path of his father and teaches these lessons to Yaakov. (Esav, although a devoted son, does not learn the lesson of tikkun olam.)

Yitzhak's experience as a korban transforms his life and ability to relate to others. One cannot evaluate Yitzhak without accounting for this aspect of his persona. Avraham is great during his lifetime, but he can only have a maximum impact with followers. Yitzhak solidifies Avraham's accomplishments and passes them along to Yaakov. Chazal say that Sarah's traditions die with her until Rivka marries Yitzhak and re-establishes them. Presumably Yitzhak passes along his mother's traditions to Rivka so she can continue making a Jewish home and teaching these traditions to Yaakov, and thereby to Leah and Rachel.

Yitzhak and Rivka have the enormous challenge of raising two very different twin boys who probably fight often. As parents, they do not have access to medications for ADHD or depression. Is Esav a worthy son of Yitzhak, or is he evil? The Devrei Torah below provide some sample interpretations. Yitzhak finds Esav to be a devoted son who dotes on his father while Rivka considers him devious and dangerous. Yitzhak hopes that the boys will work together – Esav to provide for the family and protect them from enemies and Yaakov to learn Torah and carry on Hashem's mandate for the family to teach chesed and promote tikkun olam. As always, we humans plan, then Hashem laughs and nudges the world in His own way.

I am writing on Thanksgiving Day. Rabbi Marc Angel discusses the long history of Jewish observance of this holiday, and Art Buchwald, z"l, explains the meaning of the holiday to those from French speaking areas. We Jews should give thanks for living in a modern country with many blessings (both from our democratic tradition and support for Israel) – and especially for living in a time when Israel is free and working to make the world a better place. My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, who was born during the Nazi era and studied during a period of active anti-Semitism, was very grateful for living in America and being alive during the founding and early days of Israel. I remember his Torah discussions of what made Yitzhak great – and could also give a Dvar Torah on what made Rabbi Cahan great. May we bring these blessings and memories alive for our children and grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom.

Hannah and Alan

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. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe

ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah, Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

Haftarat Parshat Toldot: Struggling to Become a Rosh Chodesh Jew

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * © 5785 (2024)
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.

At first glance, this week's haftarah for Erev Rosh Chodesh has little of note to tell us. Its choice as the reading for the day before the start of the new month seems to derive from the phrase "*machar chodesh*," (Tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh,) which Yehonatan says to David in the opening verse (1 Samuel 20:18), in the context of a broader narrative of family and national dynamics.

Rosh Chodesh, marking the start of the Jewish month, is a time of renewal, reflection, and spiritual alignment. Yet perhaps the depiction of Rosh Chodesh appearing in this story can shed some light on how we are meant to think about the start of a new month.

In the story, Shaul awaits the arrival of those close to him for the celebration of Rosh Chodesh, which was observed by way of a large, festive meal. David, who is attempting to keep away from Shaul, does not arrive at the palace, which concerns Yehonatan, who forewarns David that Shaul will notice his absence.

Nonetheless, David does not arrive, leading Shaul to be enraged not only with David, but with his own son, Yehonatan, whom he (rightly) fears is siding with David.

This dramatic episode, in which Shaul's position in his own home begins to teeter as Yehonatan commits himself to David, is cast against the backdrop of Rosh Chodesh.

Rosh Chodesh is not a festival that is dressed in much external pomp and circumstance – yet it sets the stage for all the other festivals in our calendar and enables all of our annual spiritual and ritual experiences. It reflects the authority vested in us by God to oversee the calendar, to manage our experience of time and shape our communities.

After all, the sanctification of the month happens through the conversation and engagement between strangers: two observers and a court of three who have seen the new crescent moon. This demonstrates how holiness in Judaism is never created in a vacuum, but through the capacity for conversation and connection.

Shaul's animosity towards David and his inability to communicate with him contribute directly to his downfall; while Yehonatan's friendship with and commitment to David, even in the face of political risk, are what allow the new king to eventually rise to power.

The breakdown of the relationship between Shaul and David, and the solidifying of the bond between Yehonatan and David, are framed in the context of Rosh Chodesh. For that is precisely what the day celebrates: the ability to use time to forge meaningful relationships which transform the world around us. One might say that Yehonatan, who is the critical enabler to this transition in Jewish history despite being a muted character in Tanach, is the paradigmatic 'Rosh Chodesh Jew.'

With this backdrop in mind, and as we are facing unprecedented, existential challenges as a people, I must share my struggle to emulate being a Rosh Chodesh Jew. For the first time, I find it challenging to reconcile with some of my Haredi co-religionists who seem to ignore the call to defend our nation during this time of existential threat.

How can we reconcile the values of mutual responsibility and unity when segments of our community refrain from fulfilling the biblical mandate to defend our people during this *milchemet mitzvah* and ignoring the principle of not standing idly by while your neighbor's blood is being spilt?

As we enter the month of Kislev, I wonder: how can one celebrate the heroism of the Maccabees without embracing the responsibilities they exemplified? How do we reconcile the burdens borne by some, while others disengage from the collective responsibility? Why should my students, who are in the Beit Midrash, lose their learning and miss their families for hundreds of days of miluim, when tens of thousands of others not only don't serve, but also don't actually learn in a dedicated manner? This dissonance calls for introspection and dialogue – not to alienate, but to inspire a renewed commitment to shared values.

As we approach this and every new month, may we be reminded of Rosh Chodesh's lesson: to prioritize meaningful dialogue and relationships, even – especially – when challenges arise. Only through understanding and connection can we fulfill our shared purpose as a people.

* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsny.org or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

Toldos: The Jewish Hall of Fame

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2005 (5766)

And HASHEM said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; two regimes from your insides will be separated; the might shall pass from one regime to the other, and the elder shall serve the younger.")Breishis 25:23(

How do we make sense of this story? Why was the negative prophecy about Essau revealed to only one parent? Why did Rivka not inform her husband about the future difficulty? How could Rivka allow her husband to be continually tricked by Essau? Why did she wait for the very last moment before intercepting the blessing aimed at Essau? How could Isaac be so deceived? Who was it that Isaac thought was in the room when he felt the hands of Essau and yet heard the voice of Jacob?

The Rambam states a principle that a negative prophecy need not be realized. The classic example was with Yona and his mission to Ninveh. Once they got the message and responded appropriately then the threat of imminent doom was eased. If a doctor warns his patient not to eat a certain food because it may have hazardous consequences, then as long as doctor's orders are followed, tragedy need not occur.

Similarly, if Essau would have adopted a healthier and more submissive attitude toward Jacob; if he would have internalized the Torah he learned; if he could have transcended his ego, then both Jacob and Essau would have been co-equal founders of the Jewish Nation. Jacob would have been as the roots of the tree mining deep water of council and Essau would have been as the branches that bear the message to the world.

How did Isaac remain blind towards Essau's faults and why he was kept in the dark until the very end? The story is told about a school teacher who received an apology from the principal in the middle of the school year, "I'm sorry for sticking you with the slow class." The teacher was shocked. "Slow class?" he wondered aloud. Taking out the original roster, he pointed to the numbers next to each name, "134, 125, 142, 151...This is the brightest academic group I have ever had the privilege to teach! Look at these IQ scores!" The principal took a long look at the page and declared, "These are not the IQ scores. These are the locker numbers!"

Sometimes it's important that only the administrator know what's in a student's file while the teacher remains blissfully unaware, if a child is to grow beyond limiting expectations. However the administrator is watching carefully to see that by the time diplomas and licenses are handed out, the credentials are there.

Isaac was bribed by a parental desire to see that his child makes it. Any slight display of progress and effort is already a foreboding of success. There's a part of every parent that never gives up on his child, and rightfully so! Even at the last moment, he had a hope that Essau would adjust himself to be more compatible with Jacob. So when he felt "the hands are the hands of Essau" while "the voice is the voice of Jacob," he naturally assumed that Essau had finally softened and "got it."

Rivka understood that by that time it was too late and dramatic intervention was necessary. Rivka did her job as the administrator waiting patiently, while Isaac worked with his son Essau hoping continuously and bribed daily by the desire not to lose his child. Rivka was anxious too for Essau to display more than a manipulative pandering to Isaac, getting the grades to please the system but never getting the real message.

In the end only Essau caused Essau to fail. By feeding lies to his father, he tricked himself, playing into the illusion of success without ever having honestly changed. While he toyed with his father's hope, he actually betrayed his trust. Even though Essau continually faults Jacob for his own failures, there is really only one person to blame why he remains a character of infamy and why his uniform was not enshrined in **The Jewish Hall of Fame!**

* <https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5766-toldos/>

Toldot: It's Hard to Be a Yitzhak

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2013

Yitzchak had it rough. He was the son of a great man. His charismatic father, Avraham, spread God's name throughout the land. He fought wars against mighty kings, he went from being a stranger and sojourner in Canaan to a "prince of God" known and revered by all. Who could follow such an act?

This week's parasha opens with a seemingly innocuous sentence: "*These are the generations of Yitzchak the son of Avraham; Avraham begat Yitzchak*" (Breishit 25:19). Although functioning as an introduction to the stories that follow, this one verse practically sums up Yitzchak's life. What is Yitzchak's identity? What is, as some translate the opening phrase, the "*story of Yitzchak the son of Avraham*"? Just that: Avraham begat Yitzchak. He is destined to live in his father's shadow, to struggle with defining his own, unique identity, to go through life always being known as "Avraham's son."

This opening verse stands in stark contrast to the opening verse of Noach. There we read: "*These are the generations – or this is the story – of Noach; Noach was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noach walked with God.*" Noach's story is his own. Yitzchak's story belongs to his father.

Even God sees it that way. When God first appears to Yitzchak, God reaffirms the covenantal promise and its passing from Avraham to Yitzchak. It is to be expected that his status as Avraham's child would be underscored in this context. And so: "*I will establish the oath that I swore to Avraham your father*")26:3(. But then the Torah continues, explaining why the covenant is being reaffirmed with Yitzchak: "*Because Avraham listened to My voice and kept My charge...*")26:6(. It is all because of Avraham, not because of Yitzchak.

It could be argued that this is to be expected. Yitzchak has yet to have done much worth recording. His relationship with God at this stage is still young, and will perforce be framed in terms of Avraham. Later in Yitzchak's life, we could hope, things will be different.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. For when God appears a second time to Yitzchak, now after so much of Yitzchak's story has already been told, it is the same old story. "*And the Lord appeared to him that night and said: I am the God of Avraham, your father. Do not fear, for I am with you and will bless you... for the sake of Avraham, My servant*")26:24(. Again about Avraham; always about Avraham.

Yaakov had it better. He did not have to work to escape his father's shadow. He could establish his own identity; he could write his own story. When God first appears to Yaakov, God first reaffirms the covenant and Yaakov's status as a link in the chain: "*I am the Lord, the God of Avraham your father and the God of Yitzchak*")28:13(.]Even at this stage it is worth pausing to notice that Avraham is described as Yaakov's father, and not Yitzchak. Yitzchak, it would seem, is only a way of connecting Avraham to Yaakov[. But God's communication does not end there. For Yaakov, God also offers a personal relationship and a personal promise: "*And behold I am with you, and will guard you wherever you go... for I will not abandon you until I have done all that I have promised you*")28:15(. Yaakov goes wherever he will go, charts his own journey, and God will always be with him. Yitzchak follows in the footsteps of Avraham, and God is with him only "*because of Avraham your father.*"

Yitzchak in many ways did not have a choice. He was destined to live his life as Avraham's son. His story was destined to be a continuation of Avraham's story – redigging the same wells, establishing the same alliances. Had he chosen to break free from Avraham's shadow, we would not have a Jewish People today. He had to sacrifice his individuality for the greater good. It is thus no surprise that the attribute that is associated with Yitzchak is that of din, or justice. Justice is about setting limits, it is about tzimtzum, contracting oneself to give space for others, restraining your own ambitions to do what is necessary. Don't go into Egypt. Stay in the land. Color within the lines. Do what you have been chosen to do.

To serve God and to see the Divine promise fulfilled, not only did Avraham sacrifice Yitzchak, Yitzchak sacrificed Yitzchak.

Today, a person who grows up in the shadow of a great father or a great mother has a choice. He or she can choose to follow in their path, continuing the good work that they have done, ensuring that it continues to the next generation, at the cost of likely not being able to establish an independent identity. Or they can set out on their own, leave the land, discover themselves, and write their own story at the cost of not continuing in the important work, in the mission and the vision that has been handed down to them.

The challenge of being a child of a great man or woman is not just the possible loss of an independent identity. It can often also be the loss, to a greater or lesser extent, of a personal, intimate relationship with one's father or mother. When Avraham was out calling in the name of God and building alliances, he wasn't spending much time at home. His was a public persona, not a private one. Outside of the akeida we never see him interacting with Yitzchak. While the verse tells us that Avraham loved Yitzchak)22:2(, we never see him giving outward expression of this love. It is Sarah who rejoices when Yitzchak is born; it is Sarah who bursts out in praise to God.

Avraham wanted a son, needed a son, for sure. But that need for a son was to a great degree a need for an heir: "*O Lord, God, what can you give me, and behold I go childless... and one born in my house my servant(shall be my heir*")16:2(. That's why when God told him that he would have a son with Sarah, Avraham came to Yishmael's defense. Why risk

pinning your hopes on an unborn son if he already had an heir? Avraham's relationship with Yitzchak often appears to be more one of founder and heir than one of father and son.

Avraham did not only attempt to sacrifice Yitzchak at that one fateful moment on Mount Moriah. Every day, Avraham sacrificed some of his fatherly relationship to Yitzchak for the sake of his mission, for his calling. Some people will say that the cost is never worth it. That Avraham should have stayed home more and been a better father. But nothing comes without a cost. There are many people who are amazing parents, and have built a nurturing home. Their stories, however, are usually not the ones that get written in the Torah, that get recorded for history. If Avraham had been a better father to Yitzchak, he would not have been Avraham Aveinu. Avraham sacrificed being a father to become our forefather.

A famous story is told of the Vilna Gaon. He had not seen his sister in over twenty years, One day, his sister arrived in Vilna after a long and arduous journey, and came to see him. When he was told of her arrival, he came out of his study, said hello, and then walked back into his study to continue learning. His sister was apoplectic. *"I came all this way to see you and you can't even spend any time to talk?!"* He replied, *"We will have plenty of time to talk in the World-to-Come. Now we have to learn Torah."*

Most of us, on initially hearing that story, might be appalled. *"What type of answer is this? I would never do such a thing!"* we would say. Yes, it would be wrong for us to act this way. But was it wrong for the Vilna Gaon? If he were more of a family man, he might never have become the Vilna Gaon.

Those born to great figures have a choice whether to follow in their footsteps and continue a great cause or to set out on their own at the expense of that. Those born with the potential to be great figures have a similar choice. To single-mindedly pursue their cause at the expense of their family, or to invest more in their family at the expense of the cause.

The answers are not obvious in either case. These are some of the most challenging life decisions a person may have to make. What we have to remember is that most of us are not Avrahams or the Vilna Gaon, and most of us are not children of such figures. The greatest tragedy is when a person imagines himself as an Avraham, and makes sacrifices in his personal life that he should not have made. Or when a person imagines himself as a child of such a person, and feels himself trapped in his role as heir to a founder, when in fact he really can choose how to best lead his life.

In the end, it is for us to choose what sacrifices we must make and what sacrifices we must not make. It is up to us to decide what will be our *"these are the generations,"* what will be the story that we will write for ourselves.

Shabbat shalom!

Note: copied from my archives

Explaining Thanksgiving to the French

by Art Buchwald, The Washington Post *

This confidential column was leaked to me by a high government official in the Plymouth colony on the condition that I not reveal his name.

One of our most important holidays is Thanksgiving Day, known in France as le Jour de Merci Donnant.

Le Jour de Merci Donnant was first started by a group of Pilgrims (Pèlerins) who fled from l'Angleterre before the McCarran Act to found a colony in the New World (le Nouveau Monde) where they could shoot Indians (les Peaux-Rouges) and eat turkey (dinde) to their hearts' content.

They landed at a place called Plymouth (now a famous voiture Américaine) in a wooden sailing ship called the Mayflower (or Fleur de Mai) in 1620. But while the Pèlerins were killing the dindes, the Peaux-Rouges were killing the Pèlerins, and

there were several hard winters ahead for both of them. The only way the Peaux-Rouges helped the Pèlerins was when they taught them to grow corn (mais). The reason they did this was because they liked corn with their Pèlerins.

In 1623, after another harsh year, the Pèlerins' crops were so good that they decided to have a celebration and give thanks because more mais was raised by the Pèlerins than Pèlerins were killed by Peaux-Rouges.

Every year on the Jour de Merci Donnant, parents tell their children an amusing story about the first celebration.

It concerns a brave capitaine named Miles Standish (known in France as Kilomètres Deboutish) and a young, shy lieutenant named Jean Alden. Both of them were in love with a flower of Plymouth called Priscilla Mullens (no translation). The vieux capitaine said to the jeune lieutenant :

"Go to the damsel Priscilla (allez très vite chez Priscilla), the loveliest maiden of Plymouth (la plus jolie demoiselle de Plymouth). Say that a blunt old captain, a man not of words but of action (un vieux Fanfan la Tulipe), offers his hand and his heart, the hand and heart of a soldier. Not in these words, you know, but this, in short, is my meaning.

"I am a maker of war (je suis un fabricant de la guerre) and not a maker of phrases. You, bred as a scholar (vous, qui êtes pain comme un étudiant), can say it in elegant language, such as you read in your books of the pleadings and wooings of lovers, such as you think best adapted to win the heart of the maiden."

Although Jean was fit to be tied (convenable à être emballé), friendship prevailed over love and he went to his duty. But instead of using elegant language, he blurted out his mission. Priscilla was muted with amazement and sorrow (rendue muette par l'étonnement et la tristesse).

At length she exclaimed, interrupting the ominous silence: "If the great captain of Plymouth is so very eager to wed me, why does he not come himself and take the trouble to woo me?" (Où est-il, le vieux Kilomètres? Pourquoi ne vient-il pas auprès de moi pour tenter sa chance ?)

Jean said that Kilomètres Deboutish was very busy and didn't have time for those things. He staggered on, telling what a wonderful husband Kilomètres would make. Finally Priscilla arched her eyebrows and said in a tremulous voice, "Why don't you speak for yourself, Jean?" (Chacun à son goût.)

And so, on the fourth Thursday in November, American families sit down at a large table brimming with tasty dishes and, for the only time during the year, eat better than the French do.

No one can deny that le Jour de Merci Donnant is a grande fête and no matter how well fed American families are, they never forget to give thanks to Kilomètres Deboutish, who made this great day possible.

* I believe that Art Buchwald first wrote this column in the 1950s, when he was on the staff of the European edition of a New York newspaper. At some time, he started running the same column, but with a new introduction (first paragraph) each year. I believe that he ran this column for more than fifty years. It is a classic account of the origin of this American holiday. Some high school level French helps one maximize the impact of his research.

<https://www.democraticunderground.com/10181009038>

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 degreee 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.

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/remembering-rabbi-dr-david-de-sola-pool>

Blessings: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The rivalry between Jacob and Esau came to a head when it was time for Isaac to give his blessing. As things turned out, Jacob received the blessing through a ruse. Esau was enraged and demanded a blessing also; but although Isaac did bless Esau, he did not revoke the main blessing he had given to Jacob.

Receiving Isaac's blessing was obviously of great importance. The recipient would thereby be anointed as Isaac's successor. We might have imagined that the blessing would have focused on Isaac's prayer that his son carry on the faith of Abraham, be successful in teaching others about the One God, and generally be a role model of righteousness.

But the actual blessing was quite different: *"May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fat places of the earth and plenty of corn and wine. Let peoples serve you and nations bow to you...Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you."* The blessing focuses entirely on worldly matters — prosperity, power, victory over enemies.

We gain insight into Isaac's thinking when we consider his words of blessing to Jacob later in the parasha. *"May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful, and multiply you that you may be a multitude of people; and give you the blessing of Abraham to you and to your seed with you that you may inherit the land in which you are a sojourner and which God gave to Abraham."* In these words, Isaac invokes God's covenant with Abraham, that Abraham's message will reach multitudes of people, that Abraham's seed will dwell in their own land in strength and peace.

Isaac's blessings are twofold: first, he focuses on worldly matters; and then he speaks of the spiritual mission of Abraham and descendants. Peace and prosperity provide the physical foundations for spiritual growth.

The interconnection of physical and spiritual health is reflected in Maimonides' teachings on the messianic era (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:5): *"In that era, there will be neither famine or war, envy or competition, for good will flow in abundance and all the delights will be freely available as dust. The occupation of the entire world will be solely to know God. Therefore, the Jews will be great sages and know the hidden matters, grasping the knowledge of their Creator according to the full extent of human potential, as Isaiah 11:9 states: 'The world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the ocean bed.'*" With the blessing of peace and prosperity, people will be able to devote themselves more effectively to spiritual matters.

In *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik stresses Judaism's rootedness in the realities of this world. He writes that halakha "fixes its gaze upon concrete, empirical reality and does not allow its attention to be diverted from it. *Halakhic man...brings down eternity into the midst of time*" (p. 92). Jewish spirituality is not an escape into the heavenly realms but a way of bringing the holy into the very real physical world in which we live.

Isaac's blessings to Jacob reflect this general approach. He prays for prosperity, power and worldly success; these are the frameworks for a healthy spiritual life and for the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham. Concern for material

well-being should be linked to concern for spiritual well-being.

We pray for peace and prosperity. We pray for spiritual elevation. We pray that God's covenant with Abraham will continue to resound in our generation and for many generations to come.

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

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Toldos – Marriage Conversations

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine *

Dedicated in Memory of Mr. David Rhine Sholomo Dovid ben Avraham Yitzchak z.l.

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel

Conversations are important, especially in marriage.

When we examine the conversations of couples in the Torah, we discover do's and don'ts that can help us in our relationships.

For example: When first man is called to task for his wrongdoing, he blames his wife. While his response is understandable — husband and wife are fused and influence each other in a dynamic way — our tradition is that first man's response of victimhood and blaming his spouse is something we must strive to grow away from. Husband and wife should recognize the influence they have on each other but must still take responsibility for their own moods and behaviors.

The relationship of Avraham and Sorah is one of true bonding. Besides lifelong commitment, Avraham and Sorah were partners in founding the Jewish people. The Torah relates a conversation of disagreement that they had. Sorah noticed that Yishmoel was having a bad influence on Yitzchak and informed Avraham that Yishmoel must be sent out of the house. The Torah informs us how difficult this perspective was for Avraham. It was only through [Divine] intervention that this difficult and unusual matter was settled. Hashem instructed Avraham to indeed send Yishmoel away. Sometimes only outside intervention can assist in resolving disagreements.

Yakov and Rochel have a conversation which is most instructive. When Rochel remains childless, she approaches Yakov forcefully to intervene for her in heaven to be blessed with children. Yakov responded that this was something that she needed to do. Yet, our tradition teaches us that as great as Yakov was and as right as he might have been, he did miss an opportunity to join with Rochel in her pain. Hashem declared that she would indeed achieve the child she craved (Yosef), and Yakov's children would bow before him. A great lesson is that even if we think we can't solve the other person's problems, we still are to strive to lean in, join in their pain, and be a part of their journey to resolution.

In contrast, in this week's Parsha, the conversation between Yitzchak and Rivka is most noticeably lacking. The dramatically different perspectives that they held regarding their children Yakov and Esav is presented early in the Parsha. Yet, this couple, so bonded and loyal to each other, do not have a direct conversation on the topic.

The Netziv (24:65) explains that from the moment that Rivka met Yitzchak, she was overcome with awe and reverence for him. As such she was unable to engage Yitzchak in healthy debate in the way Avraham and Sorah and Yakov and Rochel did. The commentaries suggest reasons why this disagreement was best unresolved until after the blessings were given. But what does emerge is that healthy and respectful disagreement between husband and wife assists them in charting out a good path together. Not having such conversations is typically unhealthy and regarded as an oddity.

We stand in reverence of people who were so great that their lives deserved to be recorded in Torah and analyzed for generations. The Torah does not whitewash their mistakes or hide their challenges. Instead, the Torah invites us in for an intimate conversation to see how we can learn from them. In doing so the Torah sets the tone for our relationships. We need not hide our weaknesses, mistakes, or challenges. Instead, we can engage in an intimate conversation and learn from them.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos.

* 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 and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com. **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Parshas Toldos – It's The Thought That Counts

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2020 (5781)

The Torah generally does not give extensive historical details on the lives of the righteous, and less so on the lives of the wicked. Yet, the Torah clearly states that Eisav married at the age of forty.)Bereishis 26:34(The Medrash)Bereishis Rabbah 65:1(explains that the Torah was actually telling us about Eisav's conduct and how he wanted to emulate his father. He saw how Yitzchok had married at age forty, and therefore Eisav married when he turned forty, as well.

Surprisingly, though, rather than praising Eisav for this decision, the Medrash presents this as a criticism of Eisav, comparing him to a pig. A pig has split hooves, yet is not kosher as it does not chew its cud. As if to pretend they are kosher, pigs lie down with their hooves stretched out before them, while other animals lie with their feet tucked under them. In a similar fashion, Eisav was marrying at age forty to show off his righteous attributes. Although he had been taking other men's wives for years, when he turned forty he said *"My father got married at age forty, so I will too in order to be like him."*

This criticism is difficult to understand. While it is true that Eisav had acted wickedly until now, how does that detract from his current efforts to emulate his father? If Eisav wanted to change his ways and correct his character, wouldn't emulating his father and following his father's example be one of the first things he should do? The comparison to a pig, is also difficult to understand. A pig is non-kosher, and having split hooves won't lead the animal to start chewing its cud and become kosher. A human being is dynamic, and always changing and growing or falling spiritually. The actions we take and the choices we make are two of the main determinants of whether we will grow or fall in our spirituality. Eisav's action to emulate his father could have had a positive impact on him and led him to improve in other ways, as well.

This Medrash highlights one of the most fundamental concepts of Torah Judaism. The intention behind an action can be far more significant than the action itself. In fact, the very same action under the very same circumstances could be a great merit with one intention, but a great sin with a different intention. While Eisav's choice to emulate his father was certainly a wise decision, his reasoning and intent were lacking. His intention was no different than that of a pig. Just as a pig is not working to chew its cud, so too Eisav had no intention to grow. He was showing off his respect for his father,

only intending to misrepresent himself. As such, no matter how great the external action of emulating Yitzchok may be, his intentions made it a grave sin.

We find the same is true in reverse from the Purim story. The Medrash *)Bereishis Rabbah 76:1(* tells us that the Jews at the time of Haman's decree sinned grievously fearing that Hashem had abandoned them and losing faith that G-d was watching over them and would save them. This sin was so grave that they deserved to be destroyed. However, G-d spared them because their intentions were good. They thought this was an appropriate fear that G-d would approve, because Yaakov had also feared for his life when he heard that Eisav was coming to meet him with four hundred men upon his return to Israel. *)Bereishis 32:8(* They were mistaken in that Yaakov's fear was one that energized him to repent and increase his connection with G-d, while their fear led them to despair and give up their efforts to improve. Nonetheless, since their intentions were to follow the example of Yaakov, despite their grievous error, they were spared and survived.

It is often said that G-d does not focus on the size of one's actions but on the size of one's devotion and intention. We see from these examples that even when we err in our understanding of a particular action or decision, it is ultimately not the action itself that matters most but how we made our decision. We must always ask ourselves *"Am I striving to improve in my service of G-d?"* If we are, then we are already on solid footing.

* Rosh Kollel, Savannah Kollel, Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Toldot – Don't Balk, Talk

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

Parashat Toledot opens a new chapter in the intriguing saga of Bereshit, the book referred to by Rabbi Moshe Ben Nahman as *"The Book of Individuals."* It is the story that Bereshit tells us about these individuals that inspires and motivates us until today. From the onset of the appearance of the totally non-identical twins, Esav and Yaakov, on the biblical scene, the plot becomes twisted and complicated. The protagonists act with deceit and duplicity, failing to communicate directly. The Torah tells us that as the boys were growing up, they took separate ways. Esav became a hunter and Yaakov a tent dweller. We tend to think of Esav as a violent, rash and physically strong man and of Yaakov as a naïve, gentle weakling whose pale skin attests to his staying in closed quarters studying Torah. We therefore also assume that the fact that Yitzhak loved Esav, while Rivka's favorite was Yaakov, stems from the twins' different character traits. Yitzhak, who was blind, fell for the fake religiosity of his son Esav, a trust further enhanced by the delicious meals he provided for his father. Rivka, however, who grew up in a family that saw nothing bad in distorting or hiding the truth every now and then, was therefore able to see through Esav and recognize him for the brute he was.

This theory presents a number of questions. Most importantly, why didn't Rivka tell Yitzhak how she felt regarding Esav? Some suggest that she was at awe because of his higher spiritual level, but if she truly revered her husband why would she deceive him? And was Yitzhak really that naïve? Doesn't the Torah say that he disapproved of Esav's Hittite wives?

Moving on to the famous story of Yaakov dressing up as his brother to receive the blessing, a very pressing question emerges. After giving Yaakov the blessing that was meant for Esav, he tells Esav that he has no more blessings for him, but as he sends Yaakov to find a bride in Haran, he prays that Hashem will give him Abraham's blessing and thus appoint him the family's spiritual successor. So where did this blessing come from?

The answer is simple and painful. Yitzhak knew all along the true character of Esav, which was not as bad as we perceive him today, but still disqualified him from being his spiritual heir. He showed him greater affection than Yaakov because he felt that Esav needed special attention. Meanwhile, Yaakov's behavior and achievements were not acknowledged by his father, so his mother took over. But the disparity between Yitzhak and Rivka ended there. When the time came to give the

blessings, it was clear for Yitzhak that he would give Esav the material bracha and Yaakov the spiritual blessing. That is why after he gave the material blessing to Yaakov by mistake, he told Esav he has no more blessings for him. When Yaakov goes to find a bride, though, Yitzhak grants him Abraham's blessing. The perplexed Esav thinks that the blessing is related to the forthcoming wedding and marries a third wife, thus turning from a bigamist to a polygamist, hoping to get his father's blessing.

Now imagine. If Rivka told Yitzhak that she thought that Yaakov deserved the spiritual blessing, what would he say? He would say: *"this is exactly what I had in mind."* A simple conversation could have saved the distrust, contempt and hatred that came to dominate the twins' life. All of Yaakov's suffering, his escape to Haran, the kidnapping and disappearance of Yosef and the great pain inflicted on the whole family, all these could have been avoided.

The lesson is a simple one, but unfortunately also one that is constantly ignored by spouses, siblings and friends. If we disagree with close friends and relatives, it would be much better to speak up and try to reconcile differences than to try and achieve our goals and defend our point of view by means of deceit and duplicity.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD). Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets>**. The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.

Ends Signify New Beginnings

By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

Ends signify new beginnings. When we finish a book, we are free to start a new one. When we finish ascending a mountain, we begin our descent. When we celebrate a bar/bat mitzvah, we end our Jewish childhood and begin our Jewish adulthood.

The journey never stops. But we do have stopping points, when we look back to see what we have done and gaze to our future horizons. That is what bar and bat mitzvah celebrations are. Not ends but celebratory pauses, where we recognise our amazing accomplishments and anticipate the future, when we hope our potential will continue to actualise in adulthood.

Our portion hints to this distinction in the names and actions of our forefather Yaakov and his brother Esav. Esav in Hebrew means to be done, to finish completely. But Yaakov means a heel, the bottom-most part of our bodies, hinting that Jacob always looked up and saw life always in growth mode. No matter where he was, he always saw himself as being at the bottom ready to climb again.

Throughout Toldot, Esav never changes. He is the same from beginning to end and refuses to grow or see potential in new opportunities. This quality hampers and blinds him into making mistakes like selling his birthright for a bowl of lentils.

But Yaakov always grows. In every story from buying the birthright, to taking his father's blessing, to travelling to far away lands, Yaakov always learns and grows and never says, "Ok, I'm done now."

We have a full celebratory Shabbat this week with Noa Tierney's Bat Mitzvah on Friday night and Elliot Markman's Bar Mitzvah on Shabbat morning. Both come from esteemed and honoured families in our congregation, and both have exhibited exemplary qualities thus far.

My blessing to you both is that you take after our forefather Jacob and never stop growing, learning and actualising the powers inside of you. There are beautiful things on the horizon waiting for you both to journey to, and we know you will make us and yourselves proud.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera)Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel)Birmingham, AL(.

Rav Kook Torah **Toldot: Jacob's Hand on Esau's Heel**

The account of Jacob stealing blessings from his father raises many perplexing questions. How could Isaac not be aware of the true nature of his twin sons? Why did he insist on blessing his apparently wicked son Esau? And why was it necessary for Jacob to get the blessings that his father intended for his brother?

The Rights of the First-Born

We need to first analyze the concept of bechorah, the right of the first-born. Why should the family inheritance be determined by order of birth, without taking into account the relative merits of the heirs? The Talmud in Baba Batra 133b discusses this issue, advising against switching the inheritance, even if the first-born is wicked and his sibling is righteous. Why? The commentators explain that we should not make decisions based on the current situation; in the future, worthy children may come from the evil son.

Still, why not give preference to the son whom we know to be righteous and will use the inheritance for proper objectives? Why let the evil son utilize this wealth for corrupt purposes, just because of a possibility that he may have upright children?

Segulah Selection

Twelfth-century philosopher Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi explained the concept of segulah – how a particular people is chosen by God. The process of divine selection is beyond human understanding and occurs in a hidden manner. The kernel of light and good is concealed in an enveloping darkness, just as the spiritual greatness of Abraham could not be foreseen in the wickedness of his idolatrous father Terach. Only in the time of Jacob was the segulah nature of his children revealed to all. At that time it became apparent that his entire family was a “seed blessed by God.”

Why should this kernel of future good be concealed in evil and wicked people?

Even negative character traits have their place in the world. Ultimately, they too will serve the greater good. In order to perfect righteous traits and straight paths, these bad traits and convoluted ways must be uplifted. This occurs when the righteous are able to utilize them for their true purpose.

Isaac's Love for Esau

The process of divine selection must be free to progress according to God's design, without human intervention. Only God knows the path by which the pure will come forth out of the impure. Therefore, we should not disrupt the inheritance of the first-born according to what seems to us reasonable and logical.

Isaac felt that, despite Jacob's obvious spiritual and moral superiority, it was not up to him to decide who will carry on

Abraham's spiritual legacy. Isaac assumed that the separating of the segulah was not yet complete. Perhaps from the cruel and brutal traits of Esau, his first-born son, would come an even greater heir, capable of utilizing and elevating those destructive traits.

Furthermore, Isaac knew that the world may be mended in different ways. It could be gently uplifted, as people stream from every corner of the earth to learn Israel's teachings of kindness and truth. Or the world could be rectified through the complete destruction of those corrupt and violent elements from which no good will come)as we see in the obligation to destroy Amalek and the nations of Canaan(. Jacob, the gentle scholar in the tents of Torah, did not possess the temperament necessary to wage wars and fight against cruel and vicious opponents. How could the segulah of Israel come from him? True, Jacob was righteous — but many righteous individuals lived before him whose progeny did not continue in their path.

Jacob appeared to totally lack these necessary traits of dominance and power. And Esau was anyway the firstborn, a sign that he was chosen by God. Isaac valued Esau's potential to forcibly correct the entire world. The Torah thus explains Isaac's love of his firstborn son: "*Isaac loved Esau, for his hunt was in his mouth*")Gen. 25:28(. Isaac appreciated Esau's ability to hunt and dominate the beasts, the trait needed to dominate bestial peoples.

The Torah contrasts the different ways in which Isaac and Rebecca loved their sons. On the one hand, it says, "*Isaac will love Esau*")with the conversive Vav switching it to the past tense(. Isaac valued Esau's future, his progeny, not his present state which even Isaac could see was savage and violent. But for Rebecca, the Torah uses the present tense: "Rebecca loves Jacob." She loved and appreciated Jacob's current state of righteousness.

Esau Under Jacob's Hand

In fact, Jacob did have a connection to his brother's traits of cruelty, but these traits were not an integral part of his soul. This is the significance of Jacob's hand holding on to Esau's heel when they were born. The heel represents instinctive nature)the Hebrew words for 'foot' and 'habit,' regel and hergel, share the same root(, while the hand indicates willed and planned action. Jacob had a hold onto Esau's heel, i.e., a connection to those savage traits that were an intrinsic part of Esau's nature. For Jacob, however, these traits were not wild and undisciplined, but under the control of his hand and mind.

)We find a similar idea with regard to King David. The Midrash states that Samuel was reluctant to anoint David as king after he saw David's ruddy complexion. Samuel feared this was a sign that David would spill blood like the reddish Esau. But God responded, "*He has beautiful eyes.*" Esau killed for his own pleasure, but David will kill according to the dictates of the Sanhedrin)the high court(, which is called the "eyes of the people."(

Jacob will be capable of performing the same brutal actions as Esau, albeit out of necessity and judicious choice. He will be distressed by the need to utilize his brother's characteristics, but will recognize their usefulness in achieving the final goal.

Acquiring Esau's Blessings

Now we understand why Isaac preferred Esau. But why did Jacob need to take his brother's blessing?

Jacob realized that he was the true spiritual heir, and he needed the blessings of rule and sovereignty — "*nations will serve you*," "*you will be a like a lord over your brother.*" But it was important that his father think that fierce Esau was the object of the blessing. These blessings require strength and leadership. They helped Jacob utilize Esau's traits when necessary, even though they were not part of his inner nature. Therefore, his mother clothed him in Esau's garments. For the sake of the blessings of stable rule and firm reign, Jacob's outer appearance needed to be like that of ruthless Esau.

When Jacob announced to his father, "*I am Esau your first-born,*" he did not truly lie. Jacob had truly acquired his

brother's traits. He had become Esau, only in a better fashion. Most certainly, his father had spoken to him in the past about the need to acquire these negative traits for the sake of serving God. Jacob could now proudly report to his father, "*I have done as you have requested*," And afterwards, Isaac was able to declare, "*I have eaten of all. All that I desired to taste, I have found in Jacob. Yes, he shall be blessed.*"

)*Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 60-64. Adapted from *Midbar Shur*, pp. 265-272(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/TOLDOT63.htm>

Toldot – The Tragedy of Good Intentions (5772, 5785)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former UK Chief Rabbi,*

It is the deep, reverberating question at the heart of Toldot. Why did Rebecca tell Jacob to deceive Isaac and take Esau's blessing? Her instruction is brisk and peremptory:

"Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies." Gen. 27:8-10

Rebecca's swift action is extraordinary. The situation had only just arisen – she could not have known in advance that Isaac was about to bless Esau, or that he would request some venison first – yet her plan was immediate, detailed and complete. She had no doubts or hesitations. She was determined to seize the moment. When Jacob raised concerns)What if Isaac is not deceived? What if he touches my skin and knows immediately that I am not Esau?(, her reply is brief and blunt.

"My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me." Gen. 27:13

Our question tends to be, how could Jacob deceive his father? Yet the real question is about Rebecca. It was her plan, not his. How did she consider it permissible]1[to deceive her husband,]2[to deprive Esau of his father's blessing, and]3[to order Jacob to commit an act of dishonesty? Jacob on his own would not have conceived such a plan. He was an ish tam, meaning "*a simple, straightforward, plain, quiet, innocent man, a man of integrity*")Gen. 25:27(? How then did Rebecca come to do what she did?

There are three possible answers. The first: Rachel loved Jacob)Gen. 25:28(. She preferred him to Esau, but she knew Isaac felt otherwise. So she was driven by maternal instinct. She wanted her beloved son to be blessed.

This is an unlikely answer. The patriarchs and matriarchs are role-models. They were not driven by mere instinct or vicarious ambition. Rebecca was not Lady Macbeth. Nor was she Bathsheba, engaging in court politics to ensure that her son, Solomon, would inherit David's throne)see 1 Kings 1(. It would be a serious misreading to interpret the narrative this way.

The second possibility is that she believed strongly that Esau was the wrong person to inherit the blessing. She had already seen how readily he had sold his birthright and "*despised*" it)Gen. 25:31-34(. She did not believe a "*hunter*" and "*a man of the field*" fitted the template of the Abrahamic covenant. She knew that this was one of the reasons why God chose Isaac not Ishmael, because Ishmael was destined to be "*a wild ass of a man*")Gen. 16:12(. She knew that Isaac loved Esau but felt – for various reasons, depending on which commentary one follows – that he was blind to his son's faults. It was vital to the future of the covenant that it be entrusted to the child who had the right qualities to live by its high demands.

The third possibility is simply that she was guided by the oracle she had received prior to the twins' birth:

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” Gen. 25:23

Jacob was the younger. Therefore, Rebecca must have assumed, he was destined to receive the blessing.

Possibilities two and three make sense, but only at the cost of raising a more fundamental question. Did Rebecca share her thoughts with Isaac? If she did, then why did Isaac persist in seeking to bless Esau? If she did not, then why not?

It is here that we must turn to a fundamental insight of the Netziv)R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, 1816-1893(. What is fascinating is that Netziv makes his comment, not on this week's parsha, but on last week's – the first time Rebecca set eyes on her husband-to-be. Recall that Isaac did not choose his wife. Abraham entrusted that task to his servant. Servant and bride-to-be are travelling back by camel, and as they approach Abraham's tents, Rebecca sees a figure in the distance

Now Isaac had come from Beer Lahai Roi, for he was living in the Negev. He went out to the field one evening to meditate, and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. Rebecca also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel and asked the servant, *“Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?”* *“He is my master,”* the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself. Gen. 24:62-65

On this Netziv comments,

“She covered herself out of awe and a sense of inadequacy as if she felt she was unworthy to be his wife, and from then on this trepidation was fixed in her mind. Her relationship with Isaac was not the same as that between Sarah and Abraham or Rachel and Jacob. When they had a problem they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rebecca.” Commentary to Gen. 24:65

Netziv understood that in this description of the first encounter between Rebecca and Isaac, nothing is incidental. The text emphasises distance in every sense. Isaac is physically far away when Rebecca spots him. He is also mentally far away: meditating, deep in thought and prayer. Rebecca imposes her own distance by covering herself with a veil.

The distance goes deeper still. Isaac is the most withdrawn of the patriarchs. Rarely do we see him as the initiator of a course of action. The events of his life seem to mirror those of his father. The Torah associates him with *pachad*, “fear”)Gen. 31:42(. Jewish mysticism connected him with *gevurah*, best understood as “self-restraint.” This is the man who had been bound as a sacrifice on an altar, whose life had been reprieved only at the last moment. Isaac, whether because of the trauma of that moment or because of the inhibiting effect of having a strong father, is a man whose emotions often lie too deep for words.

No wonder, then, that he loves Rebecca on the one hand, Esau on the other. What these two very different people have in common is that they are so unlike him. They are both brisk and action-oriented. Their *“native hue of resolution”* is not *“sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought.”*¹ No wonder, too, that Rebecca hesitates before speaking to him.

Just before the episode of the blessing, another scene takes place, apparently unrelated to what follows. There is a famine in the land. Isaac and Rebecca are forced into temporary exile, as Abraham and Sarah had been twice before. On God's instructions, they go to Gerar. There, just as Abraham had done, Isaac passes off his wife as his sister, afraid that he might be killed so that his wife could be taken into the royal harem. Something happens, however, to disclose the truth:

“When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing]metzachek[his wife Rebecca. Gen. 26:8

We tend to miss the significance of this scene. It is the only one in which Isaac is the subject of the verb *tz-ch-k*. Yet this is

the root of Isaac's name – Yitzchak - meaning “he will laugh.” It is the one scene of intimacy between Isaac and Rebecca. It is the only episode in which Isaac, as it were, is true to his name. Yet it nearly brings disaster. Abimelech is furious that Isaac has been economical with the truth. It is the first of a series of disputes with the Philistines.

Did this reinforce Isaac's belief that he could never relax? Did it confirm Rebecca's belief that she could never be unequivocally intimate with her husband? Perhaps so, perhaps not. But Netziv's point remains. Rebecca felt unable to share with Isaac the oracle she had received before the twins' birth and the doubts she had about Esau's suitability for the blessing. Her inability to communicate led to the deception, which brought a whole series of tragedies in its wake, among them the fact that Jacob was forced to flee for his life, as well as the counter-deception perpetrated against him by his father-in-law Laban.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Torah is telling us that communication is vital, however hard it is. Rebecca acts at all times out of the highest of motives. She holds back from troubling Isaac out of respect for his inwardness and privacy. She does not want to disillusion him about Esau, the son he loves. She does not want to trouble him with her oracle, suggesting as it did that the two boys would be locked into a lifelong struggle. Yet the alternative – deception – is worse.

We have here a story of the tragedy of good intentions. Honesty and openness are at the heart of strong relationships. Whatever our fears and trepidations, it is better to speak the truth than practice even the most noble deception.

FOOTNOTE:

]1[From Hamlet's 'To Be or Not To Be' soliloquy, Act 3, Scene 1.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:

]1[Do you believe there are times when lying is acceptable?

]2[Where else in the Tanach has someone lied - or deceived - for the sake of good?

]3[If you were Rivka, what might you have done differently in this situation?

* <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/toldot/the-tragedy-of-good-intentions/> 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.

Life Lessons from the Parsha: Sweet and Sour Isaac

By Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l * © Chabad 5785

The Torah portion of Toldot begins with a powerful message of hope and empowerment for the Jewish People throughout the ages:

*And these are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham; Abraham begot Isaac.*¹

Rashi explains:

“Generations” refers to Jacob and Esau who are mentioned in this parshah.

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the story of the patriarchs knows that Jacob and Esau were Isaac's children. What, then, does Rashi convey with his seemingly elementary comment?

The Rebbe explains that these words actually teach us a profound lesson: “*Esau*” refers to our enemies throughout history. We may become overwhelmed and discouraged when we face threat after threat from our enemies, but this verse reminds us that both Jacob and Esau owe their very existence to the fact that they are “*mentioned in the parshah*.” Esau exists because that is what the Torah dictates.

The Torah is G d’s blueprint for creation. Nothing exists outside of G d, and everything is a part of His Divine plan. Der Aibershter firt di velt, “*G d runs the world*.” We need only to connect to His Torah, and we will have no reason to fear the Esaus of the world.

Digging Wells

What distinguished the Divine service of our patriarch Isaac from that of his father, Abraham, and his son, Jacob? We can gain insight into this from the story of Isaac digging wells and the resulting conflict with the Philistines.

Chassidic teachings, drawing from Kabbalah, delineate the unique modes of service of our forefathers. Abraham exemplified the attribute of *chesed*, all-encompassing kindness, benevolence, and flow of good. Isaac embodied *gevurah*, representing severity, contraction, or restriction. Jacob personified *tiferet*, denoting beauty or harmony — the perfect balance of kindness and severity.

Abraham served G d through his kindness and hospitality. Isaac, representing the attribute of severity, became a well-digger, symbolically serving G d by digging and plumbing the depths of self and soul, striving to attain perfection.

Beyond the deep symbolism of Isaac’s well-digging, there is a fundamental message for us, his descendants. Isaac’s unwavering determination to extract inherent goodness from any situation empowers us to follow suit. When we go out into the world, we must also dig, searching for the “*water*,” the goodness that is always there. The question is only how deep we will need to dig. Sometimes, a little digging yields water, and goodness is easily discovered; other circumstances demand deeper excavation.

Even when the Philistines plug the wells we dig — when the forces of evil attempt to prevent or undo our spiritual achievements — we persist, digging again, forging onward, never giving up.

The act of digging, breaking through the ground, emanates from the attribute of *gevurah*, signifying fierce strength. Isaac, embodying this attribute, believed he could bring out the inherent goodness in every person, even attempting to unearth the dormant good hidden deep within Esau.

Goodness Within Esau?

Toward the end of our Torah portion, we read the riveting narrative of Jacob intercepting the blessings that were intended for Esau. Isaac instructs Esau: “*Go forth to the field and hunt game for me, and make for me tasty foods as I like... and I will eat, in order that my soul will bless you before I die.*”²

What exactly is “*tasty food*”? Is it sweet? Is it sour? Is it a combination of sweet and sour? Could this be the first order of Chinese food recorded in Jewish history?

In Chapter 27 of *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad, explains:

There are two types of food that are delicacies: one is sweet, and the other is sharp, or sour. The latter is often unpleasant to eat as-is, but when properly prepared with the right spices and accompaniments, becomes a delicacy.

Likewise, explains the Alter Rebbe, there are two kinds of spiritual “*delicacies*” when it comes to combating the sitra achra (lit. “*the other side*,” i.e., anything that does not overtly represent holiness) such as the evil inclination and our desire to sin.

The first “*delicacy*” is characterized by the complete eradication of the evil inclination, a process comparable to converting bitterness to sweetness and darkness to light. This can only be accomplished by the perfectly righteous person, the tzaddik, who no longer harbors even a desire to sin.

The second “*delicacy*” is when the evil inclination is not eliminated, but subdued. This is accomplished by the average person, the beinoni (lit. “*intermediate one*”), who, through intense spiritual effort attains perfection in thought, speech and deed, despite an ongoing desire to sin. In other words, the beinoni does not actually sin, even though the desire to do so is still there.

The Alter Rebbe explains that G d loves this “*sour*” delicacy. G d favors the repentance of the baal teshuva, the penitent. It’s the baal teshuva, the beinoni, who takes sour elements and transforms them into the palatable, even the delightful.

That’s what Isaac said to Esau: Prepare food for me the way I like it – take that which is sour and make it delicious. Take the negativity that you have and transform it into positivity. Do a mitzvah! Repent! Engage in the transformational service of the baal teshuvah. Bring me some sweet and sour.

Mending Shattered Vessels

In Kabbalah, the world we live in is called the world of *tikkun*, meaning “*order*” or “*rectification*.” Before our world existed, though, there was another world, a higher, more spiritual realm known as the world of *tohu*, “*chaos*.” *Tohu* (not to be confused with *tofu*) earned its name because G d’s Divine energy, or light, was too great for the vessels and overwhelmed them, resulting in the “*shattering*” of that world.

Consequently, fragmented pieces of holiness “*fell*” into the lower worlds, ultimately reaching our world — the lowest one — and settling into its lowest places. “*The higher you are, the lower you fall.*” Thus, these shards of holiness descended into our material world, into the lowest realms of negativity and even the forbidden.

Esau embodies these Divine fallen energies of *tohu*. Isaac’s intention was to elevate, redeem, and liberate these Esau energies by transforming him into a servant of G d. Rooted in the Divine attribute of severity, Isaac believed that if he bestowed a tremendous blessing upon Esau, it would reveal his inherent goodness. He saw only the good — the Divine potential — in Esau.

Don’t See the Weeds

The late Rabbi Dovid Edelman, shliach of the Rebbe and director of Lubavitch Yeshiva Academy in Springfield, Mass., for over six decades, was once interviewed alongside one of his supporters, Jeffrey Kimball.

Mr. Kimball related the following story: One day, he, his wife, and their young daughter visited the school building he helped fund. Upon arrival, Mr. Kimball noticed that the once-beautiful flowers at the front were now overrun with weeds. Turning to the rabbi, he expressed his disappointment that the garden was not properly looked after. “*Why are the weeds overrunning the flowers?*” he asked. “*You must speak to the gardener! This place has to look good.*”

Witnessing this exchange, Mr. Kimball’s daughter, quite confused, ran to her mother in the car and asked, “*Why is daddy yelling at the rabbi?*”

Calming her down, his wife asked if she had seen the beautiful flowers and the weeds. Confirming that she had, the girl’s mother then explained, “*Daddy sees the weeds and wants them removed. But the rabbi only sees flowers, not the weeds. That’s why Daddy got upset.*”

This is what the Rebbe wanted us all to do — to look at a person and see only the flowers, their positive traits, and not the weeds, their flaws.

When Isaac looked at Esau, he only saw the flowers. He didn't want to see the weeds. That is why he wished to bestow his blessing upon Esau. It turns out that G-d said, "*No. Esau is not ready for that.*" Isaac's strength — even in the form of a blessing — would not elevate Esau, but would actually break him. Isaac's mission would have to be accomplished by Jacob, which is why Jacob ultimately received the blessing that Isaac had intended for Esau.

Peace from Strength

The coming of Moshiach and the ultimate Redemption will usher in an era of peace and prosperity. Our sages say that at that time, Isaac will take a special place among the patriarchs, attributed to his contribution to ultimate peace.

Let us embrace these profound life lessons from our patriarch Isaac. Be relentless in your pursuit of positivity. Keep digging wells; strive to uncover the inherent goodness in others, choosing to focus on the flowers amidst life's challenges, rather than getting bogged down by the weeds. May we remain steadfast and resolute in the face of any opposition we encounter — channeling Isaac's gevura — and may we usher in the ultimate redemption, speedily in our days. Amen!

FOOTNOTES:

1. Genesis 25:19.

2. Genesis 27:2.

* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6158963/jewish/Shrouds-Dont-Have-Pockets.htm

Toldot: Self Value

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

Ancestors and Ancestors

Rebecca convinced Isaac to send Jacob away to Rebecca's brother Laban in Aram, in order to find a wife. Although Laban was wicked, his daughters Leah and Rachel were righteous.

Jacob obeyed his father and mother and went to Padan Aram.)Gen. 28:7(

It is indeed important to be proud of our holy ancestors and evoke their merit daily. But it is equally important to recall that their ancestors were pagans, and that G-d mercifully removed us from that environment, enlightening us with His Torah and enabling us to lead truly meaningful and purposeful lives.

Along these lines, the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yosef would always celebrate the holiday of Shavu'ot, the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah, with a lavish meal, saying, "*Were it not for this day, I would be like any other Yosef walking in the marketplace!*"

— from *Daily Wisdom 3*

May G-d grant resounding victory and peace in the Holy Land.
Good Shabbos.

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

* A Chasidic insight by the Rebbe on parshat Ma'sei, selected from our *Daily Wisdom*, by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Why Did Isaac Love Esau?

Even before they were born, Jacob and Esau struggled in the womb. They were destined, it seems, to be eternal adversaries. Not only were they different in character and appearance. They also held different places in their parents' affections: The boys grew up, and Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebecca loved Jacob. Gen. 25:27-28

We know why Rebecca loved Jacob. Before the twins were born, the pains Rebecca felt were so great that "she went to inquire of the Lord." This is what she was told: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." Gen. 25:23

It seemed as if God were saying that the younger would prevail and carry forward the burden of history, so it was the younger, Jacob, whom she loved.

But why, in that case, did Isaac love Esau? Did he not know about Rebecca's oracle? Had she not told him about it? Besides, did he not know that Esau was wild and impetuous? Can we really take literally the proposition that Isaac loved Esau because "he had a taste for wild game," as if his affections were determined by his stomach, by the fact that his elder son brought him food he loved? Surely not, when the very future of the covenant was at stake.

The classic answer, given by Rashi, listens closely to the literal text. Esau, says the Torah, "knew how to trap [yode'a tzayid]." Isaac loved him "because entrapment was in his mouth [ki tzayid befv]." Esau, says Rashi, trapped Isaac by his mouth. Here is Rashi's comment on the phrase "knew how to trap": He knew how to trap and deceive his father with his mouth. He would ask him, "Father, how should one tithe salt and straw?" Consequently, his father believed him to be strict in observing the commands. Rashi to 25:27

Esau knew full well that salt and straw do not

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require tithes, but he asked so as to give the impression that he was strictly religious. And here is Rashi's comment on the phrase that Isaac loved him "because entrapment was in his mouth": The midrashic explanation is that there was entrapment in the mouth of Esau, who trapped his father and deceived him by his words. Rashi 25:28

The Maggid of Dubnow adds a perceptive comment as to why Isaac, but not Rebecca, was deceived. Rebecca grew up with the wily Laban. She knew deception when she saw it. Isaac, by contrast, had grown up with Abraham and Sarah. He only knew total honesty and was thus easily deceived. (Bertrand Russell once commented on the philosopher G. E. Moore, that he only once heard Moore tell a lie, when he asked Moore if he had ever told a lie, and Moore replied, "Yes").

So the classic answer is that Isaac loved Esau because he simply did not know who or what Esau was. But there is another possible answer: that Isaac loved Esau precisely because he did know what Esau was.

In the early twentieth century someone brought to the great Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, the following dilemma. He had given his son a good Jewish education. He had always kept the commands at home. Now, however, the son had drifted far from Judaism. He no longer kept the commandments. He did not even identify as a Jew. What should the father do? "Did you love him when he was religious?" asked Rav Kook. "Of course," replied the father. "Well then," Rav Kook replied, "Now love him even more."

Sometimes love can do what rebuke cannot. It may be that the Torah is telling us that Isaac was anything but blind as to his elder son's true nature. But if you have two children, one well-behaved, the other liable to turn out badly, to whom should you devote greater attention? With whom should you spend more time?

It may be that Isaac loved Esau not blindly but with open eyes, knowing that there would be times when his elder son would give him grief, but knowing too that the moral responsibility of parenthood demands that we do not despair of or disown a wayward son.

Did Isaac's love have an effect on Esau? Yes and no. It is clear that there was a special bond of connection between Esau and Isaac. This was recognised by the Sages: Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: No man ever honoured his father as I honoured my father, but I found that Esau honoured his father even more. Devarim Rabbah 1:15

Rabbi Shimon derives this from the fact that usually people serve their parents wearing ordinary clothes while they reserve their best for going out. Esau, however, had kept his best clothes in readiness to serve his father the food he had gone out to hunt. That is why Jacob was able to wear them while Esau was still out hunting (Gen. 27:14).

We find, much later in the Torah, that God forbids the Israelites to wage war against Esau's descendants. He tells Moses: "Give the people these orders: 'You are about to pass through the territory of your brothers the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. They will be afraid of you, but be very careful. Do not provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land, not even enough to put your foot on. I have given Esau the hill country of Seir as his own.'" Deut. 2:4-5

And later still Moses commands the Israelites: "Do not abhor an Edomite [i.e. a descendant of Esau], for he is your brother." Deut. 23:8

The Sages saw these provisions as an enduring reward to Esau for the way he honoured his father.

So, was Isaac right or wrong to love Esau? Esau reciprocated the love, but remained Esau, the hunter, the man of the field, not the man to carry forward the demanding covenant with the invisible God and the spiritual sacrifices it called for. Not all children follow the path of their parents. If it was Isaac's intent that Esau should do so, he failed.

But there are some failures that are honourable. Loving your children, whatever

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they become, is one, for surely that is how God loves us.

The Person in the Parsha

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Friday Night with Grandpa

Veteran readers of this column are familiar with my paternal grandfather, Chaim Yitzchak Weinreb. He was an old-school Jew, with roots in the region of eastern Poland known as Galicia. He had studied under renowned Talmudists back in the old country, and his fervent wish was to see his grandchildren grow up to be dedicated Talmud students.

I was his oldest grandchild and discovered from a very early age just how determined he was to steer me in what he was convinced was the right direction. I particularly remember the time he visited my parents' home when I was in the seventh or eighth grade. I had just received my report card and proudly showed it to him. I felt it was a pretty good report card, but for him, anything less than perfection was inadequate. After one glance, he noticed just how uneven my academic performance was.

He spoke to me in Yiddish, unadulterated by English phrases — pure, old-fashioned Yiddish. He protested that my grades were spotty. "You did very well in Chumash, Bible, but not nearly as good in Talmud. How can one truly know the Bible if he is ignorant of Talmud?"

I responded defensively by saying that I saw no connection between the Bible portions of Bereshit that we were then studying and the tractate of Bava Metzia, our Talmud text that year. "The Chumash is full of great stories, but the Talmud is only about legal arguments, some of which are over my head."

He smiled and said that if I would give him an hour on the upcoming Friday night, he would give me kugel and soda, teach me a song, and demonstrate how the Talmud elucidates the Bible, in an "amazing" way. Only he didn't say "amazing," he said "vunderbar."

That Friday, true to his word, and he was always true to his word, he personally served me the kugel and soda, taught me a song that he had learned from the old rabbi of his now-extinct shtetl, and asked me to review with him a short passage in this week's Torah portion, Parshat Toldot (Genesis 25:19-28:9).

You know the story. Esau, the older brother, comes in from the field, famished. He finds his younger brother, Jacob, cooking a pot of stew and asks for some of it. Jacob is willing to give it to him, but for a price. He demands that Esau first sell him his birthright; that is, the material and spiritual privileges that come with being

the first-born. Translated literally, he says: "Sell me your birthright, kayom, like today!"

Whereas nowadays, kids will call their elderly grandfather Zaidie or Saba, we called ours Grandpa. Despite his old-fashioned demeanor, in many ways he was as American as apple pie. He asked me if I found anything problematic with the story.

I did. "The phrase 'kayom' seems strange, Grandpa. Why does Jacob insist that the sale should be 'like today'?"

He responded, "Good! Maybe you have a Gemara kopp [a Talmudic intellect] after all! But let's see if you can ask a question on the whole transaction based on the Talmud texts you are now studying in school. Here's your volume of Talmud. I'll give you ten minutes to come up with a really good question."

To say that I was frustrated would be putting it mildly. Not only was I going to be stuck studying all Friday night—I was actually being asked to think!

But one did not say no to Grandpa. So I opened the large book, pored over it and focused on the task with great concentration. I was searching for a connection between a fascinating story and what I then experienced as some very boring rules and regulations.

After some time, probably much more than the allotted ten minutes, I had an "aha" experience. I really got excited. "Grandpa! It can't be! How could Jacob purchase the birthright from Esau? The privileges of the birthright are way off in the future. They include privileges like a dual portion of their inheritance of their father Isaac's estate, and Isaac was alive, if not entirely well, at that time. We studied in the Talmud that one cannot buy or sell objects or privileges which do not yet exist!"

My grandfather was thrilled, but no more than I was. Finally, I saw a connection between my Bible stories and the legal terminology of the Talmud that I had begun to resent.

He then sat back, asked me to relax, and took the role of the teacher. "If you reached page 16 of the tractate you are studying, you know this scenario. A fisherman wishes to sell the fish he will catch that today to a customer. He doesn't have the fish yet. Can he sell them? Yes, answers the Talmud. He can sell them if he desperately needs the money to feed himself that day. But if he wishes to sell the fish he will catch in thirty days or in a year, he cannot do that. If one is desperate, he can sell even objects that he does not yet possess, even fish that are still in the sea."

Likutei Divrei Torah

There is a logical rationale for this legal principle, which I will omit from this column in the interest of brevity. Suffice it to say that I now saw the connection between the story and the Talmudic principle:

"Of course Jacob said kayom. Sell me your birthright even though its privileges will not be realized until the distant future, but do so in your current state of desperation. Do so because you are famished, and in your desperation have the legal ability, much like the fisherman, to sell something which is now non-existent, because you need it for your urgent immediate needs. Sell me the birthright kayom."

Grandpa was proud of me that day, but I was even prouder of myself. He told me that the concept that I had discovered on my own was to be found in the commentary Ohr HaChaim, which he studied assiduously every Friday night.

He then leaned back, stared at me with his gentle blue eyes and said, "I am trying to think of a prize, a reward for your willingness to sit with me for a few hours on a Friday night, for exerting your young intellect, and for seeing the connection between the Written Torah, Scripture, and Oral Torah, Talmud."

I sat there imagining all sorts of possible rewards, certain that he would ask for my input. Kugel and soda would have been acceptable, but lowest on my list of suggestions. I was thinking big bucks, or at least tickets to a baseball game.

Then he told me his idea. "From now on, every time I visit you, we will study together. And we will make it our business to discover connections. Our motto will be the verse in Psalms that says that God's Torah is perfect, soothes the soul and brings joy to the heart."

What a disappointment for a twelve-year-old. But today, many decades later, each time I sit down before a folio of Talmud, I experience Grandpa's reward. I can now appreciate Grandpa's willingness to risk his popularity with his grandchildren, instead using every means at his disposal to get us to sit and learn with him.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

A Person Can Get Used to Anything – An Advantage and a Disadvantage

The pasuk says "When Esav was forty years old, he took as a wife Yehudis daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a provocation of the spirit to Yitzchak and Rivka." (Bereshis 26:34-35). The Medrash notes the fact that the Torah points out that the daughters-in-law behavior was painful to Yitzchak and to Rivka

('Yitzchak u'l'Rivka) rather than merely stating that their behavior was painful to Yitzchak and Rivka ('Yitzchak v'Rivka) – without the second "to". The Medrash states that the nature of the Yitzchak's pain differed from that of Rivka's pain. Rivka, having grown up in the house of idolaters, was better able to handle pagan daughters-in-law than was her husband, who grew up in the house of Avraham and Sora.

Rivka was a tzadekes and of course avodah zarah bothered her, but having experienced it at home, she did not have the same visceral reaction to it as did Yitzchak. Dr. Abraham Twerski, zt"l, makes the point that a person who is exposed to negative phenomenon on a daily basis can lose their sensitivity to it. I once saw a statistic that the average child growing up in America has seen 300 murders (on television, movies, etc.). This was in the days BEFORE video games, in which killing people happens ALL THE TIME. Do you think that murder means the same thing that it meant 100 years ago? If you see something day in and day out, you can get used to it. You can get used to anything.

The truth of the matter is that this is the only way people were able to survive in the concentration camps. It was because "they got used to it." You can get used to anything. That can be a tremendous advantage but it can be a horrible disadvantage as well – if someone loses his sensitivity to evil.

Giving A Boost to the Efficacy of the Tefilla of a Tzadik ben Rasha

In the beginning of the parsha we read "Yitzchak entreated Hashem opposite his wife, because she was barren. Hashem allowed Himself to be entreated by him and his wife Rivka conceived." (Bereshis 25:21). Rivka was barren. Both she and her husband, Yitzchak, davened that she should have children. The pasuk says that Hashem listened to Yitzchak and Rivka became pregnant.

Rashi points out that the pasuk emphasizes that Hashem listened to him – and not to her! It was Yitzchak's prayers that were answered, not Rivka's. Rashi explains that this was because "The (power of the) prayers of a tzadik (righteous person) who is the child of a rasha (wicked person) is not comparable to the (power of the) prayers of a tzadik son of a tzadik."

Yitzchak and Rivka were both righteous, but he was the son of Avraham and she was the daughter of Besuel. Therefore, his prayers were superior. The Brisker Rav (Rav Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik) infers from this statement of Rashi that had Rivka been a tzadekes the daughter of a tzadik, the power of her prayers would be equal to that of Yitzchak and the

Ribono shel Olam could have listened to either of them or to both of them.

The Brisker Rav is bothered by this inference: Does that mean that aside from their ancestry, Rivka was on the same level of righteousness as Yitzchak? Yitzchak went through the Akeidah. He was moser nefesh. He was an olah temima (an unblemished sacrifice). Rivka was a very fine woman but how can we compare her righteousness to his? He was also much older than Rivka, as he was sixty years old at this time and Rivka was much younger.

The Brisker Rav says that we see from here that a righteous woman who is the daughter of a rasha and the sister of a rasha, who was able to overcome her environmental disadvantages and emerge as a righteous woman is on the same level as a Yitzchak. To remain steadfast in her beliefs as a young girl in a house full of avodah zarah and full of reshaim is a monumental spiritual accomplishment, comparable to that of Yitzchak, who went through the Akeidah.

This brings us to our next subject:

Why in fact does HaKadosh Baruch Hu accept the prayers of a tzadik ben tzadik more than those of a tzadik ben rasha? The tzadik ben rasha has a lot going for him. He has been able to raise himself above his corrupt environment. That is an extraordinary spiritual accomplishment! So why does Hashem favor the prayers of a second generation tzadik over that of a first generation tzadik? The opposite should be the case: "In a place where a baal teshuva stands, completely righteous individuals cannot stand." (Brachos 34b).

I saw an approach to answer this question by a Rabbi Dovid Zucker, a Rosh Kollel in Chicago. He explains that the fact that prayer works is not something logical. It is something spiritual, something that sometimes defies regular logic. Better said, it has its own set of logic. There are laws of nature and there are metaphysical laws. In Hilchos Tefilla there are certain situations and conditions that make a person's prayer more accepted than other situations and conditions.

For example, there is a principle that "The Holy One Blessed be He does not reject the prayers of the masses" (Brachos 8a). In other words, a person has a better chance of having his prayers answered if he davens with a minyan. This is one of the metaphysical-spiritual laws of Tefilla. Not only that, if someone cannot daven with a minyan, he should at least try to daven at the same time that the tzibur is praying. (ibid.) Why does that work? The answer is that there is such a thing as an "eis ratzon" (a time of favor). There are

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such things as favorable times and favorable places to daven!

Why do you think people go to kivrei tzadikim (the graves of the righteous) to pray? What is behind that? Part of what is behind that is that a kever tzadik is a makom kodosh (holy place). If a person davens in a holier place, it makes his prayer better and more effective. That is why even if someone misses minyan, there is an advantage to daven in a Beis haKnesses (synagogue) or a Beis haMedrash (study hall). Why? It gives the prayer a boost. It takes advantage of the fact that the prayer is recited in a Beis haKnesses or a Beis haMedrash.

What is the logic behind that? In the privacy of my own home, I can have the greatest focus and dedication, while in shul there are more distractions. The answer is that these are parts of the metaphysical laws of Tefilla. There are certain things that make prayer more accepted.

Prayers are accepted during the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur better than they are during the whole year. Why? It is an eis ratzon.

Rabbeinu Bechaye writes that it is customary throughout the Jewish world that women recite a prayer that they should be blessed with good children at the time they light Shabbos candles. He explains that this is done because the time of Hadlakas Neiros Shabbos is an eis ratzon. By virtue of the fact that the woman is fulfilling the mitzvah of lighting Shabbos candles, it makes her tefilla then more effective. It becomes a favorable time.

Rabbi Zucker writes that one of these metaphysical laws of prayer is that the prayer of a tzadik ben tzadik is more effective than that of a tzadik ben rasha. The tzadik ben rasha has overcome great odds and has proven his closeness to Hashem by emerging righteous from a house of wickedness, but nevertheless, in the laws of prayer, which have a logic of their own, the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a righteous person, trumps the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a wicked person.

This brings us to an interesting question. We have all occasionally davened in a beis avel (a mourner's house). It is a big mitzvah to help the mourner make a minyan during his week of shiva. Yes, but let us ask – why are you forgoing the mitzvah of davening in a shul? The Gemara says that davening in a shul is much more acceptable than davening in a house – so how can someone give that up by going to a beis avel?

The answer is that while davening in a beis avel, you are also doing a chessed for someone. That makes your tefilla more

acceptable. That makes it into an eis ratzon because while I am davening, I am doing a chessed for those who are alive and those who are dead. This is also what the Rabbeinu Bachaye meant – when a woman davens at the time of lighting Shabbos candles, it is more acceptable.

If that is the case, the prayer of a “tzadik ben tzadik” is also more effective. That is just the way it works. That is the “law.”

The Rosh was asked a ‘shaylah’ (halachic question). The congregation wanted to know who should be appointed as its shliach tzibbur. One candidate was a tzadik personally but he came from a disgraced family. The other candidate was a tzadik from a distinguished family.

Someone might say “I don’t need a Rosh to answer that question. It is a Rashi in Parshas Toldos!” Rashi says explicitly in our parsha that the prayer of a second generation tzadik is superior to that of a tzadik whose father was wicked. However, the Teshuvas HaRosh ruled otherwise. He pasked that it is preferable to take the tzadik from the disgraced family over the tzadik with a more impressive pedigree.

Why? The Rosh writes that by taking this candidate from the disgraced family, the congregation is “drawing close those who are far” (being me’karev rechokim). The act of kiruv and chessed of the congregation will bring them merit in the Heavenly Court and will help the prayers of their shliach tzibur to be accepted.

This is common. People who are ba’alei teshuva have a certain inferiority complex. “My friend here is a me’yuchas – he can trace his ancestry back to Dovid HaMelech and look where I come from! What am I?” The Rosh quotes the pasuk “...Shalom, Shalom, to the ‘rachok’ and to the ‘karov’ ...” (Yeshaya 57:19), in which the person who is distant (rachok) is given precedence over the person who is near (karov). That is the why the Rosh paskens to take the tzadik from a disgraced family. It gives their prayers the added boost called “kiruv rechokim” just like we can daven in a mourner’s house rather than in a synagogue because of the added mitzvah of Nichum Aveilim. That chessed-boost equates the prayers of the tzadik ben rasha with that of a tzadik ben tzadik.

There is no contradiction between the psak of the Rosh and the Rashi in our parsha because in our parsha, no one is appointing Yitzchak to be the shliach tzibur and no one is appointing Rivka to daven. They each daven to Hashem independently on their own initiative. In that situation, with all other factors being equal, the Ribono shel Olam gives priority to the prayers

of a tzadik ben tzadik. That is just the way it is. Those are the laws of tefilla.

The Rosh’s case is not like that. There, the shul comes and asks “Who should we appoint?” There the Rosh says “Tell the shul to appoint the tzadik ben rasha because it will give them the merit of being m’karev this Jew with the inferiority complex.” That equates with the tefilla of a tzadik ben tzadik.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yakov Haber

The Great Partnership

Questions abound concerning the enigmatic episode of Yitzchak Avinu’s desire to bestow blessings of historic significance upon his son Esav and Ya’akov’s subsequent securing of those blessings through disguise and seeming deception. If Rivka viewed Esav as unworthy of receiving blessing or if she felt compelled by the prophecy she had received of “the elder with serve the younger” (Bereishis 25:23), why didn’t she discuss her concerns with her husband, Yitzchak? How could Yitzchak not have known that Esav was not worthy of blessing? How can blessings received via deceptive means be effective? How could Ya’akov Avinu, known for his quality of truth, seemingly lie to his father by identifying himself as Esav? Why did Yitzchak, upon finding out that Ya’akov had received the blessings instead of Esav, definitively declare, “gam baruch yihye - he shall indeed be blessed!” (27:33)? Many diverse approaches have been suggested by both classic and more recent commentaries. Here we present one classic approach (see Malbim among others) with a suggested connection to current events.

The Creator of the cosmos created a world of opportunity to discover and utilize the spiritual dimension hidden within it. The pinnacle of creation, man, possessing a G-dly soul, although contained within a physical body with its needs, drives and desires, would be capable of moving beyond being mired in physicality and - despite the physical world and often precisely with its tools - of cleaving to his Maker driven by his inner soul. Not all would achieve this lofty goal, but both the tzadikim who would and the common folk who would not but who would provide for the physical needs of the tzadikim would earn eternity as a result of partnering together toward the accomplishment of this central goal of avodas Hashem.

Realizing that Esav’s restless and even violent characteristics would not likely suit him for a life of spirituality, Yitzchak intended to bless him with physical bounty (“dew of the heavens,” “an abundance of grain and wine”) and military prowess (“nations will serve you”). Through Esav’s descendants utilizing this wealth to sustain not only themselves but

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also the descendants of his brother Ya’akov - who would devote themselves more exclusively to avodas Hashem, matters of the spirit - both would gain eternity. Similarly, Esav would hopefully use his military strength to subdue enemies threatening his brother. Indeed Chazal teach us, “greater is the one who causes or facilitates positive actions than the one who actually does them” (Bava Basra 9a). According to this approach, Yitzchak knew all along that Ya’akov was suited for the “blessing of Avraham” (28:4), entailing matters of the spirit. But Rivka knew that this experiment would fail. Esav would use the physical blessings exclusively for satisfaction of his desires and would not share with his brother; he would utilize his military prowess and conquests for self-aggrandizement and empire building, not to defend himself and his brother from enemies. Therefore, both aspects - the physical and the spiritual, the farming and the soldiery coupled with the study of Torah, prayer and fulfillment of other Divine commandments - would all have to be incorporated within the descendants of one son, Ya’akov. Indeed, this blessing was fulfilled as some tribes descending from Ya’akov would more exclusively devote themselves to direct avodas Hashem, notably Levi and Yissachar; others would be more involved in worldly pursuits and would support the former tribes by giving them the gifts of terumos, ma’asros and parts of Temple offerings as well as sharing their acquired wealth to facilitate the study of Torah, avodas hamikdash and other aspects of avodas Hashem. The famed partnership of Yissachar and Zevulun serves as a prominent example of this. The progeny of only one son would thus have to incorporate within his descendants both “the voice of Ya’akov,” the voice of Torah and prayer, as well as the “hands of Esav” (27:22), physical engagement in the world.

This was the meaning of Ya’akov’s disguise; it represented Rivka’s model of the necessary combination of two different pursuits within one son in contrast to Yitzchak’s model of the division of labor among his two sons. Malbim interprets that ultimately only when Ya’akov’s descendants utilize this “voice” will they be blessed with success concerning the “hands of Esav.” Consequently, when Ya’akov stated, “I am Esav, your firstborn” he was telling his father that I have assumed the role you had initially thought Esav would play. Some explain that Rivka did not tell her husband about her concerns as, due to their age gap and Rivka’s idolatrous family background, she felt it would be disrespectful to directly raise this issue with her consummately righteous, senior husband. By presenting Ya’akov as Ya’akov-Esav to him, she was presenting as a fait accompli the model of combination, the correctness of which she hoped her esteemed

husband would realize. Ultimately he indeed did so by declaring, "gam baruch yihye."

King David was born with a ruddy complexion (Shmuel I 16:12). His appearance is reminiscent of that of Esav (25:25). Indeed, Shmuel was hesitant to crown him as king viewing his appearance as reflective of a violent, Esav-like personality. Hashem tells him, "His eyes are beautiful!" Yes, he will be a ruthless warrior, but he will only kill in battle according to the dictates of the "eyes of the community," the Sanhedrin. (See Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel 124.) King David's battles were always fought with total reliance on Hashem. In addition, David poured his heart and soul into his intense prayers to G-d bequeathing to the Jewish people the legacy of Tehillim. He tirelessly rose at midnight each night engaging in Torah study and song to his Creator (See Berachos 3b). Thus, King David incorporated within himself both the "voice of Ya'akov" and "the hands of Esav."^[1]

Our era has seen the remarkable rebirth of the "kol Ya'akov" both in the Diaspora and in the land of Israel. The yishuv in the Holy Land has been especially blessed with an explosive development of this "kol Ya'akov," with hundreds of yeshivos and kollelim and thousands devoted to full-time Torah study. Oral and published chiddushei Torah and piskei halacha are produced by the thousands every year. Many are in serious morning learning programs pursuing their professions in the afternoons or evenings. The promised blessing of "ki mitzion teitzei Torah udvar Hashem mirushalayim" (Yeshaya 2:3) is being fulfilled before our eyes. But the Land of Israel has also been blessed with "the dew of the heavens" and "bountiful grain and wine"^[2] becoming a worldwide exporter of agricultural produce and technology. G-d has also granted the Jewish people a Jewish army ready constantly to defend the yishuv against its many ruthless enemies. This last explosion of war and the methodical, heroic defensive and offensive actions of our brave chayalim against cruel enemies expresses the "hands of Esav" being utilized properly in defense of the Jewish people.^[3] But Klal Yisrael has not forgotten about the "voice of Ya'akov." It is so heartening to see the Jewish people worldwide unite in heartfelt prayer, fasting, and increased Torah study, both of the general kind and with specific soldiers in mind. Recently, a secular woman walked into a grocery store. Seeing a young, religious child with a note pinned to his sleeve, she curiously inquired what that was. The child answered, "That's my soldier!" "What do you mean, 'your soldier?'" she asked. "I pray and learn Torah that he should be safe," came the reply. The woman called the Israeli Board of Education to track down the boy's school and contacted his teacher to tell him what a fantastic education the religious are

giving their children, something she didn't see happening in the secular world!

But many of our brave soldiers are combining both the "voice of Ya'akov" and the "hands of Esav" simultaneously. Rav Elyada Goldwicht recounted that a commander sent a WhatsApp to his soldiers poised for battle on the border of Gaza: "מִ רְצָה יְשָׁרְפִּים?" Immediately, several chayalim answered, "I need a Shulchan Aruch; I need this Gemara." The commander wrote back: "Not sefarim (books), saparim (barbers)!" A soldier finished maseches Kiddushin and started maseches Bava Kamma following the Daf Yomi cycle while preparing to enter Gaza starting a class for his fellow soldiers including several not-yet religious ones who for the first time got a taste of Torah study. I personally had the bittersweet merit to join with others in making a joint siyum on maseches Shabbos in memory of Yosef Malachi Guedalia 7' who had committed to finishing this masechta before finishing his army service. He heroically gave up his life as part of the elite Duvdevan Unit in the initial defense against the savage Arab marauders on that fateful Simchas Torah day. Fortunate is Israel to have soldiers such as these! Fortunate is Klal Yisrael who have seen the "great partnership" manifest itself in such a glorious way!

In the messianic era (may it be soon!) Yitzchak's original plan - that of the division of labor between the nations of the world, led by Esav's descendants, focusing on the physical aspects of the world and assisting his brother Ya'akov's descendants in their spiritual pursuits - will come to fruition. "And strangers will arise and shepherd your sheep, and sons of foreigners will be your farmers and vintners" (Isaiah 61:5). A past historical foretaste of this new futuristic reality is alluded to by Chazal, quoted by Rashi. The prophet tells Rivka "שְׁנַיִם בָּבִנְךָ" - two nations are in your womb." However, the word "גְּנִים" is written as "גְּאִים" or "proud ones" (25:23). Chazal state that these "proud ones" are a reference to R. Yehuda the Prince, a descendant of Ya'akov, and Antoninus Caesar, a descendant of Esav. It can be suggested that Chazal are alluding to the fact that the latter befriended the former, partnering with him to create a peaceful environment in the Land of Israel, which, although under Roman rule, was free from persecution and harsh taxation. This environment fostered the magnificent, historical compilation of the Mishna.^[4] Thus, Rome or Edom-Esav partnered with Ya'akov to produce the foundational recording of the Oral Law!

May Hashem accept the collective efforts of the Jewish people to contribute to its defense from its cruel enemies, each group in its own complementary way, some physical and some

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spiritual and speedily bring about an era of peace and an era of teshuva culminating with the era of total redemption!

[1] My esteemed Rebbe, the founding Rosh Hayeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, Rav C. Y. Goldwicht zt"l, suggested that since belligerent characteristics, while necessary for war, were not inherent within the Jewish people, King David had to descend from Moav through the convert, Rus. These qualities for waging war had to be "imported" from the other nations. It would appear according to Malbim that this was in order to fulfill the blessings of Yitzchak.

[2] Against the anti-Israel tendencies of the French government, wines produced in Judea and Samaria consistently win blind wine contests taking place in that country!

[3] The danger is always present that the existence of a powerful Jewish army might lead to an attitude of "כְּחֵי וּכְעֵצֵם יְדֵי עַשָּׂה לִי אֶת הַחַלִּיל הַהִ" and "taking one's fate into our own hands!" forgetting the crucial truth of "לֹא 'אָם שָׂא שְׁקָד שׁוֹמֵר עַיר" and with all the negative ramifications of such an untrue and spiritually harmful approach. Several have noted that the current horrendous massacre which took the government and the IDF by surprise gives us pause to reflect and internalize that fact that the most powerful army in the world will not succeed without Divine guidance and assistance. (See also Yishmael: Reflections on Origins and Current History for further elaboration on this point.) Nonetheless, the Divine blessing, after centuries of helplessness, of once again having a significant, physical means to defend the Jewish people must be both appreciated and utilized properly. (See, for example, Rav Soloveitchik's Kol Dodi Dofeik.)

[4] In my humble opinion, the economic and military support that the United States provides Israel to the tune of tens of billions of dollars a year and the recent sending of aircraft carriers to defend against a widening conflict, even if done out of self-interest as well, also are harbingers of messianic times in which this partnership will be even more manifest.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

The Last Laugh of History

And he (Esav) said, "Is he not rightly called Yaakov? Since he has gone behind me these two times, he took my birthright and see now he took away my blessing..." (Breishis 27:36)

This is a lightning bolt from the deep past. Esav for the first time betrays his woefully mistaken impression of the sale of the birthright that had occurred fifty years earlier. Sure, Yaakov under executive orders from his

mother had just usurped his blessing. Rivka had observed his lack of readiness for those blessings. Why had his character stagnated and even worsened over the next five decades? Who was to blame for that? Let us appreciate the relevance of that false accusation he launched at his brother in his hour of disappointment.

The verse openly testifies that after the sale of the birthright Yaakov had given him not only the beans, he so desperately requested but bread and apparently some drink too because it is written, "And he ate and he drank and he got up and he left and he despised the birthright!" (Breishis 25:34)

If it is true that Yaakov had taken advantage of him in a vulnerable state and not that he was tricked into forfeiting the birthright then he should have protested then and there when his stomach was full. Why should he leave the scene of the crime silently? That proved how little he valued the birthright. After fifty years Essav is telling himself the story that he was a victim of deception. For fifty years he tricked himself, playing the blame game.

Essav is caught here not just telling a lie but living a lie. He is couching himself as a victim of something he did and he openly agreed to. It would be enough if it lasted a year or even a lifetime but this anger towards Yaakov has lasted thousands of years. Essav thinks Yaakov is the cause of his problems. He refuses to face the reality that he is the author and sole owner of his problems. His hatred is based on faulty thinking. Eliminating Yaakov won't make him happier or more worthy of blessing.

The 2nd Chapter of Tehillim, our sages tell us, is a foretelling of the times when Moshiach's arrival is imminent. It certainly feels like that now. The verse states, "Why are the nations in commotion, and why do the peoples speculate in vain. Kings of the earth rise up and rulers together have set themselves principles against HASHEM and His anointed (His Moshiach) We wish to tear their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us. He Who sits in Heaven laughs; My master mocks them."

Rav Hirsch writes poetically and almost prophetically: "They all, consciously or unconsciously, have one common goal; namely to emancipate themselves from the sovereignty of the one supreme principle, that of dutiful obedience to the moral Law of G-d, which came to their awareness through the historical fact of the existence of His people and of His anointed. Only to His law did G-d promise His aid and furtherance. Upon this law did G-d build His world order and only through the observance of this law can nations attain enduring peace in their domestic and foreign relationships.

The refusal to swear allegiance to this moral law because of considerations of personal interest, power, fame, and wealth is the reason for the unhealthy internal and external relationships in the lives of the nations. Instead of seeking a cure for this state of affairs upon the only path that leads to the true goal, all the leaders of the lives and the activities of the nations are perversely engaged in a fight against the sole principle of salvation. The cure actually lies precisely there where they think that they can find the cause for their troubles, while they seek a cure in that which only aggravates the lingering evil."

This gigantic struggle persists until this very day. Our best consolation is the Talmudic statement, "Truth endures and falsehood is ultimately unsustainable." Time will tell, and hopefully we shall see who has the last laugh of history.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

I. Avraham begot Yitzchak - Our *parasha* opens with a surprising verse, that appears to repeat itself unnecessarily: And these are the generations [or: descendants] of Yitzchak son of Avraham: Avraham begat Yitzchak. (*Bereishit* 25:19) Why was it necessary to tell us twice that Yitzchak was the son of Avraham? Many of the commentators were troubled by this question. Many are all familiar with Rashi's explanation, based on a *midrash* (*Tanchuma Toldot* 3): Because the cynics of the generation said that Sara conceived from Avimelekh, for she had lived for many years with Avraham without conceiving from him. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He formed Yitzchak's facial features similar to those of Avraham's, so that everyone attested that "Avraham begat Yitzchak." This is [the meaning of] what is written here: "Yitzchak son of Avraham," for there is evidence that "Avraham begat Yitzchak." (Rashi, *Bereishit* 25:19)

While this *midrash* is novel and creative, it has no real basis in the plain meaning of the text. The Rashbam, who prefers to explain in accordance with the plain sense of Scripture, suggests that the verse comes to emphasize that Yitzchak is the primary element of Avraham's descendants.¹¹ He offers proof from a verse in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, where we find a similar redundancy: According to the plain meaning of the text, [this was necessary] because it was stated earlier about Yishmael son of Avraham, "whom Hagar the Egyptian bore to Avraham" (25:12). But here, Yitzchak is Avraham's principle son, for he begot Yitzchak from his full-fledged wife, as it is written: "for in Yitzchak, shall seed be called to you."

And similarly in *I Divrei Ha-Yamim*, after it is written that the sons of Avraham were Yitzchak and Yishmael (1:28), and the sons of Ketura (32-33), it is written once again simply: "And Avraham begat Yitzchak" (34). (Rashbam, *Bereishit* 29:19)

=The *Or Ha-Chaim*, in his typically original way, offers eight different explanations. We will focus on three of them, which revolve around a

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fundamental and fascinating question regarding the service of God.

II. A *tzaddik*, son of a *tzaddik* - As an introduction to our discussion, let us examine the exposition in *Midrash Bereishit Rabba* on our verse: "These are the generations of Yitzchak son of Avraham." "The father of the righteous will exult with happiness [gil yagil], and the begetter of the wise will rejoice in him" (*Mishlei* 23:24) – happiness after happiness, when a righteous man (*tzaddik*) is born.... Rabbi Levi said: From where do you say that anyone who has a son who diligently engages in Torah study, that he becomes filled with benevolence upon him? The verse states: "My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will rejoice" (*Mishlei* 23:15). Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya says: I have derived only the heart of his father of flesh and blood. From where is it derived that even the Holy One, blessed be He, becomes filled with mercy upon him when he diligently engages in Torah study? Therefore, the verse states: "My heart too will rejoice." Happiness after happiness – when he is a righteous man, son of a righteous man. "And these are the generations of Yitzchak son of Avraham." (*Bereishit Rabba* 63, 1)

The *midrash* relates that the birth of a son who is a *tzaddik* (righteous) to a righteous father brings happiness both to his father in this world and to God in the upper worlds. It also seems to imply, without saying so explicitly, that the verse comes to emphasize the fact that Yitzchak was in fact a *tzaddik*, son of a *tzaddik*.

The significance of this fact may be familiar from the well-known passage in tractate *Yevamot*, which differentiates between the prayer of a righteous child of a righteous parent and that of a righteous child of a wicked person, with respect to the prayers of Yitzchak and Rivka: Rabbi Yitzchak said: Our father Yitzchak was barren, for it is stated: "And Yitzchak entreated the Lord opposite [*le-nokhach*] his wife" (*Bereishit* 25:21). It does not say: "for [al] his wife," but "opposite his wife." This teaches that both were barren. If so, "And the Lord let Himself be entreated of him" (*ibid.*) should have read: "And the Lord let Himself be entreated of them"! Because the prayer of a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *tzaddik* is not like the prayer of a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a wicked man (*rasha*). (*Yevamot* 64a)

According to Rabbi Yitzchak, it was specifically Yitzchak's prayer that God answered, because he was a righteous son of a righteous man and his prayer was therefore superior to the prayer offered by Rivka, who was righteous herself but whose father was wicked.

Chazal use this idea, of the superiority of a righteous son of a righteous man, to answer one of the greatest questions arising in Jewish thought – a question posed by none other than Moshe to God: He [Moshe] asked that He should show him the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it was granted to him. For it is stated: "Show me now Your ways" (*Shemot* 33:13). Moshe said before Him: Lord of the Universe, *why is it that some righteous men prosper and others suffer, some wicked men prosper and others suffer?* He replied to him: Moshe, the *tzaddik* who prospers is the *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *tzaddik*; the *tzaddik* who suffers is a *tzaddik* [who is] the son

of a *rasha* (wicked man). The *rasha* who prospers is a *rasha* [who is] the son of a *tzaddik*; the *rasha* who suffers is a *rasha* [who is] the son of a *rasha*. (*Berakhot* 7a)

The idea that seems to emerge from these *midrashim*, that a person is treated preferentially based on his lineage, raises a difficult spiritual-moral question: Why is a person measured not only by his own actions but also by the actions of his ancestors? After all, the Torah states explicitly: The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin. (*Devarim* 24:16)

Why should it be different here, when it comes to prayer or spiritual punishments?! The distinction between a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *tzaddik* and a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha* underlies three explanations that the *Or Ha-Chaim* proposes for our verse. Each explanation sheds additional light on the relationship between the two types of righteous people and leads us to a more precise understanding.

III. Wholly righteous or penitent? In the first explanation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* follows the Gemara in *Yevamot* that we just mentioned. He suggests that the generations of Yitzchak are ascribed to Avraham because if it were not for Avraham, God would not have answered Yitzchak's prayer and given him children: It further wishes to say, along the lines of what they said (*Yevamot* 64a): "And the Lord let Himself be entreated of him" – because the prayer of a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *tzaddik* is not like [the prayer of a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha*]. Thus you learn that because of his having a righteous father, God let Himself be entreated of him and gave him sons. This is what it says: "Avraham begat [Yitzchak]," meaning, *by means of the merit of Avraham* begetting [Yitzchak]. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 25:19)

This explanation does not take a position regarding the superiority of the righteous son of a *tzaddik* himself over the righteous son of a *rasha*, and therefore it does not add very much to the discussion in the Gemara. In the next two explanations, however, the *Or Ha-Chaim* takes a clear, albeit somewhat contradictory, position.

The next explanation implies that it is actually a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *wicked* man who enjoys superiority: It is further alluded in the words, "Avraham begat Yitzchak," that even though Yitzchak's "generations of good" matched those of Avraham, as is hinted to by the words, "and these" [ve-eleh], with the addition of a *vav* ("and") – nevertheless, his standing does not compare to that of Avraham, because he, the father, transferred goodness to him. This is what it says: "Avraham begat Yitzchak" – the attribute of goodness in him came from his procreator. This was not the case with Avraham, whose father was an idolater, and he strengthened himself to comprehend his Creator, and [therefore] Avraham's standing is exalted. For this reason, he is called (*Yeshayahu* 41:8), "Avraham, who loved Me." That is to say, *he initiated love towards his Creator; before God shed the light of His love for him upon him, he pursued Him with amazing intensity – which was not the case with Yitzchak*, for Avraham instilled

him with a love of the good, and as soon as he opened his eyes in the world, the spirit of God already rested upon him. (*Ibid.*)

Avraham did not grow up with a "religious education," but in the house of idolaters. In contrast, Yitzchak already came from a "good home," and was educated in the right way and in the right institutions. Therefore, argues the *Or Ha-Chaim*, even though the actions of Yitzchak and Avraham are similar, only about Avraham is it said that "he loved Me," because his love for God came from deep within him, without education and direction from his parents.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* highlights here the great virtue of a *tzaddik* who is born to a *rasha*, who successfully contends with his environment, with social pressure, and with the differences that distinguish him from those around him. Dealing with these things is not at all a simple task! According to this explanation, the Torah comes here to set Yitzchak apart from Avraham and say that despite all his righteousness, he would never reach Avraham's level.^[21]

However, in his next explanation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* adopts an approach that at first glance appears to be the complete opposite: It also alludes that the generations (descendants) of Yitzchak were loftier than the generations of Avraham, because a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *tzaddik* is not like a *tzaddik* [who is] the son of a *rasha* (*Yevamot* 64a), like Avraham the son of Terach... The actions of a wicked father cast darkness on the spiritual light of the son, and in this sense, Yitzchak's actions are greater. This is what it says: "And these" – adding to what was before. And it offers a reason, saying: "Avraham begat Yitzchak." (*Ibid.*)

Here, suddenly, the son of a *tzaddik* is the superior type of *tzaddik*, and therefore Yitzchak is "more" righteous than Avraham. How can we hold the rope at both ends?

To a great extent, this contradiction in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* is reminiscent of the famous dispute in tractate *Berakhot* regarding who is better – a *tzaddik gamur* (a wholly righteous person) or a penitent (i.e., one who was not always righteous):

Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: All the prophets prophesied only on behalf of penitents; **but as for the wholly righteous: "No eye has seen, O God, except You"** (*Yeshayahu* 64:3).^[22] He differs in this from Rabbi Abahu. For Rabbi Abahu said: **In the place where penitents stand, even the wholly righteous cannot stand**, as it is stated: "Peace, peace to him that was far and to him that is near" (*Yeshayahu* 57:19) – to him that was far first, and then to him that is near. (*Berakhot* 34b)

On the one hand, the rank of the *tzaddik gamur* is clear. When a person grows up in a bad home, despite all his desire and investment, something from the home and family sticks to him. On the other hand, it is clear that the process of repentance, which involves breaking away from one's home and family and heeding the call of "lekh lekha" that has accompanied the Jewish people since the days of Avraham, is much more difficult than continuing on the same path in which one's ancestors walked.

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It seems, then, that each side has a certain superiority. Let us try to be more precise.

IV. Who do we choose to pray? The relationship between the two types of *tzaddikim* is not only a philosophical or ethical issue; it has practical ramifications. We can clarify the virtues found in each type of *tzaddik* by examining a halakhic discussion in this context.

In *Responsa Ha-Rosh*, the Rosh was asked about the prayer customs in a certain place, after the questioner became angry that a cantor of inferior lineage was asked to lead services. The Rosh answered that he too was angry about the cantors in that area, but for a different reason: From the day of my arrival here, I too have been annoyed about the cantors in this land; but my annoyance was not the same as yours, seeing that you have hung the matter on family lineage. It is not so in the eyes of God; of what advantage is lineage before God? If he comes from a non-Jewish family, but is righteous – peace, peace to him that is near from the seed of those that are far. But I am annoyed about the fact that the cantors in this land are appointed for their pleasure, to hear a sweet voice. Even if he is absolutely wicked, they are not concerned – he should only be a good singer. And the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "She has uttered her voice against Me; therefore have I hated her" (*Yirmeyahu* 12:8). (*Responsa Ha-Rosh*, *kelal* 4, no. 22)

The Rosh maintains that a person's pedigree has no implications in matters of prayer. But is this really the case? After all, we have just seen the Gemara in *Yevamot* state that God answered Yitzchak's prayer because of his lineage – is this not an advantage? The Maharshal addresses this issue with a distinction between personal prayer and communal prayer: But you must say that the son of a *tzaddik* has an advantage over the son of a *rasha* only concerning personal prayer, regarding which the merit of his ancestors helps him. But one who prays on behalf of others, and there is no injustice or deceit in him – on the contrary, [the son of a wicked man] is more esteemed before God, for he abandoned the actions of his ancestors, and walks in the ways of God, and about him it is stated: "Peace, peace to him that was far and to him that is near."

(*Maharshal*, *Yam shel Shlomo*, *Chullin* 7, 17)

These words provoked disagreement among the *Acharonim* regarding practical law. The *Magen Avraham* (OC 53:8) writes in the name of the *Bach* that it is preferable to seek a cantor who is a *tzaddik* and is the son of a *tzaddik*. In contrast, the *Taz* (*ibid.*, no. 3) disagrees and cites the words of the Rosh, though he explains them differently than the Maharshal.^[23] In his understanding of the Rosh, the son of the *rasha* is given preference because his appointment to serve as a cantor will bring him closer to the service of God. The Maharshal, as opposed to the *Taz*, relates more to the actions of the penitent and his spiritual capabilities. So also writes Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein, author of the *Torah Temima*, relating precisely to the special virtues of a *tzaddik* whose father is a *rasha*: But it seems to me that one who is of particularly good character, even if he is the son of a *rasha*, is to be preferred over a son of a *tzaddik* who does not have the good qualities

of the son of the *rasha*. (*Torah Temima, Bereishit* 25, note 14)

Rabbi Epstein also adduces proof for his position from the Gemara in *Ta'anit*: We see proof for this in *Ta'anit* 25b, where it is related that Rabbi Eliezer descended before the ark and rain did not fall, and [then] Rabbi Akiva descended, and it rained. When the Rabbis began to murmur about Rabbi Eliezer, that his prayers were not answered, a Divine Voice issued forth, saying: It is not that this one [Rabbi Akiva] is greater than that one [Rabbi Eliezer], but that this one is forgiving [Rabbi Akiva] and that one [Rabbi Eliezer] is not. Now, we know that Rabbi Akiva was the son of converts, and thus Rabbi Eliezer in relation to him was a righteous man the son of a righteous man – and nevertheless, Rabbi Akiva was answered, because of a good quality that he had in excess of Rabbi Eliezer. (*Ibid.*)

The Maharshal distinguishes between a righteous man's prayer for himself and his prayer for the community. One might ask: How is a prayer for one's personal needs different from a prayer for the community? If we pay close attention to the aforementioned words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* and his siding with each type of *tzaddik*, it is possible to understand more clearly.

A *tzaddik* who is the son of a *tzaddik* is holy and pure; his sins are few, his merits are many, and he walks in the ways of his ancestors. Thus, when he prays for his personal needs, he comes with his merits and the merits of his ancestors. In contrast, a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha* has only his own merits. Therefore, the personal prayer of a righteous son of a righteous man is heard, since it comes with the force of two *tzaddikim*. On the other hand, when it comes to communal prayer, the cantor's main role is "that his heart be whole in prayer" (*Ta'anit* 15a).⁴¹ Wholeness of the heart in prayer is connected to the ability to repent, to step out of one's comfort zone and perform an act of turning to and drawing closer to Heaven. This is the characteristic of a penitent – a righteous person who grew up in a wicked environment and managed to rise above it.

V. A *tzaddik* who suffers - The above also connects to the Gemara in *Berakhot* (7a), where Moshe is answered that a *tzaddik* who suffers is a *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha*. What was the *tzaddik*'s crime if his ancestors were wicked? On the contrary, he deserves greater reward for having successfully freed himself from the deeds of his ancestors! Rav Kook explains:

Good deeds are divided into two categories, some completely by choice and some implanted by nature. As for those implanted by nature, even though it is possible to change them by power of choice, nevertheless, in most cases a person is drawn to them. Therefore, the righteous son of a *tzaddik*, owing to the deeds instilled in him, does not have to be refined by way of afflictions, because his nature is inclined to goodness and he is usually wholly righteous; therefore, he prospers. And a righteous son of a *rasha*, since his nature is not [already] proper, even though he overcomes his [evil] inclination, therefore he needs to be refined through afflictions, and then he will be able to actualize his good will, and therefore he suffers. (*Ein Aya, Berakhot* 1, para. 73)

In the case of a righteous son of a *tzaddik*, good deeds are almost a part of his nature. In contrast, a righteous son of a *rasha* has undergone a process. He emerged from wickedness into a world of justice. In order to ensure that this will not be a transitory change, but permanent and solid, he must make a great investment and demonstrate readiness to sacrifice and bear suffering for the sake of God.

Rav Kook's words are clearly evident in the difference between Avraham and Yitzchak. Avraham was put through ten trials and considerable suffering, from the command to leave his home to the *Akeida* (*Avot* 5:3). In contrast, Yitzchak's life, was marked, more or less, by peace and quiet. He is portrayed not as a hero, but as one who continued the deeds of his ancestors.⁴²

Both of these *tzaddikim* are therefore deserving of great honor – each for his own virtue – "And Your people shall be all righteous" (*Yeshayahu* 60:21).

We will conclude with the apt words of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, who in his greatness explains to us that whatever we do today – whether we are righteous children of righteous men or of wicked men, whether we are wholly righteous or penitent – must only draw us closer to God's service:

A person should really not concern himself with this. A *tzaddik* who is the son of a *tzaddik* should not concern himself with the merits of his ancestors, saying that the merits of his ancestors will stand for him, and therefore he need not exert himself in the service of the Creator. Rather, he needs great exertion and strength in his service of God. And the *tzaddik* who is the son of a *rasha* should not despair, saying that since he does not have the merit of his ancestors to help him, he cannot reach the service of the Creator. He should not say this, but rather he should serve God in truth, and he who comes to purify himself will be helped from Heaven.⁴³ (*Noam Elimelekh, Parashat Lekh Lekha*) (Translated by David Strauss)

⁴¹ A similar explanation is offered by the *Chizkuni* and, with a slight variation, by the *Ramban*.

⁴² Similar to what we find regarding Noach, according to the view that he was "a righteous man in his generations."

⁴³ For those interested in an expanded discussion, see also *Responsa Maharshal*, no. 20; *Mishna Berura* and *Elya Rabba* and *Zuta*, no. 53; *Teshuvot ve-Hanhagot*, vol. IV, no. 19.

⁴⁴ See Rambam, *Hilkhot Ta'aniyot* 4:3. His words imply that only on fast days are we particular about the identity of the cantor.

⁴⁵ Digging the wells that had been dug by Avraham's servants, going down to Gerar and behaving in a manner very similar to Avraham, and more.

⁴⁶ *Yoma* 38b.

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which is purely imaginary -- and frighteningly real. It reads, RACE, HUMAN. Beloved father of science and technology, adored mother of the arts and culture. Departed this earth, suddenly, but not without warning. Survived by no one.

What makes this obituary so very pertinent is the series of hair-raising events which, during the past month, took humanity to the very brink of annihilation. The Cuba crisis brought not only Americans but all human beings to the sharp edge of universal catastrophe, face to face with the ultimate terror.

The question that we must ask ourselves is, what was or should be our reaction? We who have tottered on the rim of total horror, and we have won a reprieve, we who have stared into the dumbness of the atomic abyss -- what view do we now take of life? Have we undergone any inner transformation as a result of this experience? Do we view things any differently now?

For assuredly the brink represents a unique psychological situation. The knowledge of impending disaster, for mankind as well as for individual men or women, evokes a reaction which reveals all our inner qualities: personality, principles and purposes -- or lack of them. The more intensely we are aware of the end of the limitation of life, the more we concentrate our essential character and aspirations into the time left to us.

Our Sidra provides us with a clear contrast between two biblical characters in their reactions to the proximity of the end. They are for us an indication of what Death tells us about Life. Father and son, Isaac and Esau, were both concerned over the finiteness of life. Both based their lives on the fact that it ends. Both acted out of the knowledge that man is mortal and soon must pass on. Yet the same cause resulted in effects which were worlds apart. Listen to Isaac, the old father: "And he said, hinei na zakanti, lo yadati yom moti, Behold now I am old, I know not the day of my death. Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons... and make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, ba-avur tevarekhkha nafshi be'terem amut, that my soul may bless thee before I die" (Gen. 27:2-4). Life is so short, says Isaac, and I am going to die any day now. There is so much left undone. I have taken care of Jacob--he is the sort of person who will always be a credit to me. But what of Esau? Must he always be condemned to play the savage, unwanted and unloved, feared and hated? Must he be eternally estranged from his Heavenly Father? Shall it not be said of him that he did something noble in all his life? And so--because of his impending death--Isaac takes action, and sends Esau off on an errand which he can perform with competence, not for selfish purposes, but rather for a higher goal, that of mitzvat kibbutz av. Something for others, something which can result in a berakha. Isaac is in a hurry to teach Esau to do something unselfish for him who was spiritually inferior to his brother.

Esau was motivated by the same consideration of the brevity of life and his eventual death. But look at how different a construction he places on this inevitable fact: Va-yomer Esav, hinei anokhi holekh la-mut, ve'lamah zeh li bekhorah. "And

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

The View From The Brink

In a recent book by Norman Cousins, *In Place of Folly*, there appears a most improbable obituary

Esau said, Behold I am going to die, what profit shall the birthright be to me?" (Gen. 25:32). Since life is short and must end, who needs and who wants the spiritual mission implied by the bekhorah or birthright?

For Isaac the imminence of death was an incentive to leave a blessing. For Esau it was a reason to feast on lentils. For Isaac death was a signal to reinforce the spiritual worth of a child. For Esau it was an excuse for forfeiting a birthright. This is how death clearly defines the essence of personality, by making a man choose between a Last Blessing and a Last Fling. All of us are acquainted with such cases of approaching disaster acting as the test to distinguish between the Isaacs and the Esaus. Two young men who seem remarkably alike in personality and background go off to war. One can achieve dignity and spiritual wholesomeness from this same experience which leads the other to immorality and a completely nihilistic outlook on life. One has found G-d in the foxhole--and one has lost Him in the hail of front-line fire. The awareness of death has made one choose a Last Blessing and the other a Last Fling. That is why the last war turned some religious youngsters into cynical adults, and flighty youngsters into serious, dedicated, and pious adults. "Behold I am going to die" has forced upon them the ultimate choice of their lives--how to live in the face of death. It is the most fateful choice a man can make.

Indeed, the Talmud indicated that the same is true of old age in general--for advanced age is, in a manner of speaking, a euphemism for the sharpened awareness of the impending end. As we advance in years, we begin to concentrate on the time left to us, on what we regard as truly significant and enduring, whether good or bad. So the Rabbis taught: talmidei chakhamim kol zeman she'mazkinim, chokhma nitosafet ba-hem, scholars and learned people, the older they grow the wiser they become, but amei ha-aretz kol zeman she'mazkinim tipshut nitosafet ba-hem, with the ignorant, the older they grow, the more does their foolishness increase (Shabbat 152b). This is the Talmud's geriatric test of character. What a man does with his old age is an expression of his whole life's values. If a man dreams of his retirement in the manner of most moderns--fishing, golfing, endless card-playing--then it tells you something about his whole life, from the beginning and on. If his ambition is to retire so he can devote himself to voluntary work for Yeshivot or hospitals or Israel, then it tells you something quite different about the meaning of his life. Most of a man's essential qualities, whether those of chokhma (wisdom) or tipshut (foolishness) are concentrated in old age.

The Halakhah also reveals this insight. Thus, the Talmud (B. Batra 175a) tells us that under normal circumstances if a man makes a public announcement acknowledging a debt to another, if he does not immediately appoint witnesses and instruct them to record his confession, the announcement is meaningless and the debt is not collectible. The reason is, that he may argue meshateh ani bakh, I was merely joking, I was not serious. However, if a critically ill person makes such an acknowledgement, even in the

absence of an appointment of witnesses, the debt is regarded as real and collectible: divrei shekhiv me-ra ki'ketuvin u-ki'mesurin dami, the words of a seriously ill person are regarded as written and transmitted. The reason?--ein adam meshateh be'shaat mitah, a man does not dissemble when death approaches. At a time of this sort, one is deadly serious. Then life itself is placed on the line, and all artificiality and empty conventionalism is discarded.

The Chafetz Chayyim once said that all of life is like a post-card. When we first begin to write, we use big, broad strokes, and fritter away valuable space on empty, tired cliches: "how are you," "how is the weather," "wish you were here".... But as we approach the end of the card, and realize that we still have not said anything of importance which we originally intended, we no longer squander our valuable resources of space, but we write sparingly, in small letters, conserving our language, and sticking only to what is truly essential. So it is in life itself. When we suddenly realize we are approaching the end of the card, we begin to abandon the petty and the trivial, and take up only that which we, in accordance with our basic character and in our hearts of hearts, consider as truly significant and abiding.

Perhaps in this manner we can understand an otherwise startling passage in the Talmud. We are told that nistakel David be'yom ha-mitah ve'amar shirah (Berakhot 10a). David contemplated the day of his demise--and began to sing! How strange. One would think that entertaining this kind of morbid thought would result in sorrow or dejection, not song. Yet the Rabbis have here given us a valuable key to the personality of King David. For he presents us with a historical paradox. Scripture describes him to us as possessing apparently two totally different personalities. Which of these is the real David: the triumphant soldier, or the tender singer? - the man of the sword or the man of the Psalms? - the General of the Army? Or the saint of the Almighty? - the conqueror of Goliath, or the champion of God? - he whose saber penetrated to the heart of the enemy, or he whose sweet singing reached the very heart of heaven? And the answer is: look at David when he realizes that the end is near, that life is so very limited. At that time you will find him revealing his true colors. And what do we find when David contemplates his yom ha-mitah? He does not plan a military campaign, but rather--another song to our Father in Heaven! It is the song, not the sword that symbolizes the real David. The essential, authentic David is the one of the book of Psalms, not the one that appears to us in the Second Book of Samuel.

Like David, we have stared death in the face. We have confronted the awesome possibility of universal apocalyptic cataclysm. The Cuba incident was only a single incident. Our world shall never again be the same. During our lifetime, we shall have to live with that terror constantly. Henceforth all mankind shall have to walk and plod its way through the valley of the shadow of death. Psychologically, the new generation accepts the possibility of no tomorrow, no future, as matter-of-factly as our accepted automobiles and automobile accidents.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Our generation is even more aware of the End than that of 20 centuries ago when the Kingdom of G-d was expected momentarily. The H-Bomb has made the possibility of universal destruction an immediate reality. The end of the world is no longer a matter of theological speculation. It is an overwhelmingly real threat, made possible by science and engineering and hanging on thin threads of diplomacy and politics. "Behold I am going to die" is of immediate importance even to a young man in the prime of health. The diplomats and statesmen are concerned with controlling the possibility of cosmic catastrophe and eliminating it.

The overarching problem for each and everyone of us is, how shall we react to this dread[ful] threat of the End? Shall we dedicate ourselves to that which is important and sacred in life and try for a Last Blessing like Isaac; or shall we conclude that since Death is near, nothing is any longer of importance, and hence sell our birthrights and take a Last Fling at a banquet of self-indulgence in the manner of an Esau? Shall we follow the Rabbis who counseled shuv yom echad lifnei mitatekha, return to God one day before you die, and since you do not know which day that is, then return to Him every day; or that of the cynics quoted by Isaiah; "eat meat and drink wine, eat and drink, ki machar namut, for tomorrow we die?" Shall we emulate Moses who, before he died, left a ve-zot ha-berakhah; or a Don Quixote who, expressing the sentiment of his age, advised us to "make hay while the sun shines." Shall we turn to Shakespeare who informed us that "life is full of sound and fury signifying nothing"; or the Baal Shem Tov who, as his disciple the Koretezer Rebbe related, when he realized he had only a short time left to live, turned his eyes to Heaven and said, "Almighty God, I make a gift to Thee of my remaining hours?" Shall we continue our wonted ways--of complaining that our luxuries are too few, of treating friends and family lightly, of pampering ourselves and grasping for more status; or shall we thank God for every new sunset and peaceful sunrise, for every clear horizon unstained by a mushroom cloud, for the security and comfort of familiar faces, for the privilege of striving for true stature rather than mere status? Which view shall we take back from the brink: that of Esau, and try to pack in all the "fun" we can in whatever time remains, or that of Isaac--and leave a blessing in the form of more Torah, more yiddishkeit, more human decency and morality--and thus perhaps avoid the ultimate plunge over the edge of the Brink?

It is a crucial, fateful question. On our answer depends the future of humanity and our very selves. May we opt for blessing, for return to God, for creativity. And from this choice may we emerge with the hope, the faith and the confidence that there will indeed be a tomorrow, and a tomorrow after that. In the words of Malachi in today's Haftorah, "My covenant was with him for life and for peace and I gave them to him for fear, and he feared Me, and he bowed low before My Name." If we wish to survive, and not only survive with life, but also attain true peace, then it must be through fear--not the fear of the Bomb, but the fear of G-d. For only when man

fears God can he have true confidence in and hope for his own future and his inner self; and only when man bows low before the Name of the Almighty can he rise to the full stature of his noble humanity. *[December 1, 1962]*

Home Weekly Parsha TOLDOT

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

Rashi, quoting Midrash, interprets that Eisav, “haunted” his father with his pious speech and cunning conversation. Yitzchak is fooled by Eisav and believes that Eisav, the man of the world and the physically powerful figure is better suited to carry on Avraham’s vision than is Yaakov, the more studious and apparently more simple of the brothers.

The other opinion, more popular among the later commentators to the Torah, is that Yitzchak is aware of the shortcomings of behavior and attitude of his elder son. His desire to give the blessings to Eisav is due to his wish to redeem and save his son, and to enable Eisav to turn his life around and become a worthy heir to the traditions of his father and grandfather. He thinks that by somehow giving the blessings to Eisav, Yaakov will not really suffer any disadvantage in his life’s work, while Eisav will find his way back to holiness through the blessings that he has now received.

These two divergent attitudes towards the wayward child in Jewish families is one that is enacted daily in Jewish family life. Later Yitzchaks either willfully allow themselves to be deluded regarding the behavior and lifestyle of children or they are aware of the problem and attempt to solve it with a giving nature and a plethora of blessings.

Rivkah, Eisav’s mother, is not fooled by her son’s apparently soothing words nor does she believe that granting him blessings will somehow accomplish any major shift in his chosen lifestyle. To a great measure she adopts a policy of triage, saving Yaakov and blessing him while thus abandoning Eisav to his own chosen wanton ways.

The Torah does not record for us the “what if” scenario – what if Eisav had received the blessings would he then have been different in behavior and attitude, belief and mission. However, from the words of the later prophets of Israel, especially those of Ovadiah, it appears to be clear that God somehow concurred with Rivkah’s policy and holds Eisav to be redeemable only in the very long run of history and human events.

The verdict seems to be that one must be clear eyed and realistic about the painful waywardness and misbehavior of enemies of Yaakov, be they from within or without our immediate family and milieu. There are many painful choices that need to be made within one’s lifetime and especially in family relations.

There are few pat answers to varying and difficult situations. Perhaps that is why the Torah itself does not delve too deeply into the motives of Yitzchak and Rivkah but is content merely to reflect the different emotional relationships each had with their two very different sons. The Torah emphasizes the role that human emotions play in our lives and does not consign all matters to rational thought and decision-making.

Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Toldos

Yitzchak Learned the "Art" in His Father's House

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1313 – An Orthodox Minyan in a Conservative Shul: Is there A Problem with Ma’aris Ayin? Good Shabbos!

The pasuk in Parshas Toldos says, “And Yitzchak entreated Hashem opposite his wife, because she was barren...” (Bereshis 25:21). Chazal say that Yitzchak stood in one corner and Rivka stood in another corner and they both davened. However, the pasuk continues “...Hashem listened to him, and his wife conceived.” Rashi comments on the fact that the pasuk does not say that “He listened to them,” but rather, “He listened to him.” Rashi notes: There is no comparison between the prayers of a tzadik (righteous person) who is the son of a tzadik, and the prayers of a tzadik who is the son of a rasha (wicked person).

On the face of it, this teaching of Chazal, which Rashi quotes, contradicts a well-known Gemara. The Talmud states: “In a place where ba’alei teshuva (people who were not originally religious and “returned”

to religious Judaism) stand, completely righteous people cannot stand.” (Berachos 34b). This teaching seems to clearly say that a tzadik who is the son of a rasha is on a higher spiritual level than a second generation tzadik. According to that, Rivka’s prayers that she should become pregnant should have been more readily accepted than the prayers of her husband Yitzchak.

How do we reconcile these two teachings? I saw a very important principle of prayer in a sefer called Me’Orei Ohr.

There is a fellow here in Baltimore who is an expert glass blower from Italy. His works appear in museums. He is a seventh-generation glass blower. Glass blowing is in his veins. He saw it done in his parents’ house. He saw it done in his grandparents’ house. It is an art. If I would try it, all I would get is broken glass. Even if I would take lessons and learn how to do it, I would never reach this fellow’s level of expertise, simply because I am starting from scratch without any prior exposure to this art form.

Similarly, sometimes people are natural born athletes. The person’s father played in the NFL. He played in the NFL. When such people live it their entire lives, something rubs off. They have a leg up on other people, who may try to become professional athletes without such a background.

L’havdil, tefilla is also an art. Tefilla is not just opening a siddur and mouthing the words of Shemoneh Esrei. It is a skill, an art form. So, in terms of spiritual level, perhaps Rivka was on a higher spiritual level by virtue of her being a ba’alas teshuva, than Yitzchak who was born into a spiritually inclined family. However, in terms of the efficacy of tefilla – how to go about davening – what emotions a person employs, etc., Yitzchak lived that in his father’s house. His prayers were not accepted because he was on a “higher madreigah” than his wife, but simply because he was more aware of the art and science of how to daven, a skill he learned in his family’s home. He knew “the art of glass blowing,” except that it wasn’t glass blowing, it was the power of tefilla. Yaakov Maintained the Enthusiasm of “Day One”

I saw the following interesting observation in Rabbi Buchspan’s sefer. The pasuk says, “The lads grew up, and Eisav became a man who knows trapping, a man of the field; but Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents.” (Bereshis 25:27).

Chazal say that the expression “abiding in tents” indicates that Yaakov learned in yeshiva. He learned in Yeshivas Shem v’Ever. This pasuk ostensibly describes Yaakov and Eisav. However, shouldn’t the pasuk say that Yaakov yashav b’ohalim (i.e. – he sat in the yeshiva), in past tense? Yoshev ohalim means he is sitting there, in the present.

There are two other places in Sefer Bereshis where the Torah uses the word yoshev instead of yashav, both times indicating something significant. For instance, the pasuk in Parshas Vayera says, “And the two Angels came to Sodom and Lot was sitting (yoshev) in the Gates of Sodom.” (Bereshis 19:1). The fact that the present tense was used rather than the historical past teaches us (as Rashi comments) that it was specifically that day that Lot was appointed to a judicial position in Sodom. Yoshev means that today was his first day.

A second example is in last week’s parsha: Efron was sitting (yoshev) in the midst of the children of Ches.” (Bereshis 23:10). Rashi there as well comments that it was just that day that Efron was appointed as a judge over the children of Ches. Thus, when the pasuk writes yoshev rather than yashav, it means that he just started today.

So, what are we going to do about the pasuk “Yaakov ish tam, yoshev ohalim”? It can’t mean that this was his first day! The Medrash (on the pasuk “and the lads grew up” (Bereshis 25:27)) writes that this is reminiscent of two flowers that sprouted up next to one another – a myrtle and a thorn-bush. At the beginning of their sprouting, they look similar. However, when they grow up, one emits its beautiful aroma and the other one gives off thorns. So too, the first thirteen years of their lives, both Yaakov and Eisav attended school each day. After thirteen years, this one went off to the house of study and this one went off to the

house of idolatry. They both went to the same cheder, but after their Bar Mitzvahs, Yaakov took one path and Eisav took another path.

So what does it mean “yoshev ohalim”? After all Yaakov was in cheder since age three or perhaps age five. The answer is that the special attribute of Yaakov was that it was as if it were his first day in yeshiva. Yaakov’s quest for learning was such that each day felt like it was “day one.” Each day feeling like “day one” indicates a special level of enthusiasm and excitement.

Rashi says on the pasuk “And these words that I command to you today shall be upon your heart.” (Devarim 6:6) – that they should not be upon you like an old edict but rather like a new one. This is one of the great challenges of life. It is one of the great challenges of every yeshiva bachur and of everything we do in life. It is very common that everything we do becomes “Same old; same old.” It is just another day. If a person had this ability to treat every day as if it were new, like the first day, then our attitude would be quite different. This is a very appropriate message to any Bar Mitzvah boy. On the first day that a boy wears tefillin, it is amazing how carefully and meticulously he wraps the retzuos around his arm and puts the shel rosh on his head. The same is true on the first day of a new school year or of attending a new yeshiva. I remember the first day that I attended Ner Yisrael. It is seared into my memory for the rest of my life.

Unfortunately, that original enthusiasm wears off. It does not take too long to become “Same old; same old. Day in, day out.” The greatness of Yaakov Avinu was that he was a yoshev ohalim. Each day was a new day, like day one in yeshiva! It is hard for us to duplicate that, but the more we can appreciate every day in yeshiva (which does not last forever), the more successful we will be in yeshiva.

The Tragedy of Good Intentions

Toldot

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

It is the deep, reverberating question at the heart of Toldot. Why did Rebecca tell Jacob to deceive Isaac and take Esau’s blessing? Her instruction is brisk and peremptory:

“Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies.”

Gen. 27:8-10

Rebecca’s swift action is extraordinary. The situation had only just arisen – she could not have known in advance that Isaac was about to bless Esau, or that he would request some venison first – yet her plan was immediate, detailed and complete. She had no doubts or hesitations. She was determined to seize the moment. When Jacob raised concerns (What if Isaac is not deceived? What if he touches my skin and knows immediately that I am not Esau?) her reply is brief and blunt.

“My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me.”

Gen. 27:13

Our question tends to be, how could Jacob deceive his father? Yet the real question is about Rebecca. It was her plan, not his. How did she consider it permissible [1] to deceive her husband, [2] to deprive Esau of his father’s blessing, and [3] to order Jacob to commit an act of dishonesty? Jacob on his own would not have conceived such a plan. He was an ish tam, meaning “a simple, straightforward, plain, quiet, innocent man, a man of integrity” (Gen. 25:27)? How then did Rebecca come to do what she did?

There are three possible answers. The first: Rachel loved Jacob (Gen. 25:28). She preferred him to Esau, but she knew Isaac felt otherwise. So she was driven by maternal instinct. She wanted her beloved son to be blessed.

This is an unlikely answer. The patriarchs and matriarchs are role-models. They were not driven by mere instinct or vicarious ambition. Rebecca was not Lady Macbeth. Nor was she Bathsheba, engaging in court politics to ensure that her son, Solomon, would inherit David’s

throne (see 1 Kings 1). It would be a serious misreading to interpret the narrative this way.

The second possibility is that she believed strongly that Esau was the wrong person to inherit the blessing. She had already seen how readily he had sold his birthright and “despised” it (Gen. 25:31-34). She did not believe a “hunter” and “a man of the field” fitted the template of the Abrahamic covenant. She knew that this was one of the reasons why God chose Isaac not Ishmael, because Ishmael was destined to be “a wild ass of a man” (Gen. 16:12). She knew that Isaac loved Esau but felt – for various reasons, depending on which commentary one follows – that he was blind to his son’s faults. It was vital to the future of the covenant that it be entrusted to the child who had the right qualities to live by its high demands.

The third possibility is simply that she was guided by the oracle she had received prior to the twins’ birth:

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”

Gen. 25:23

Jacob was the younger. Therefore, Rebecca must have assumed, he was destined to receive the blessing.

Possibilities two and three make sense, but only at the cost of raising a more fundamental question. Did Rebecca share her thoughts with Isaac? If she did, then why did Isaac persist in seeking to bless Esau? If she did not, then why not?

It is here that we must turn to a fundamental insight of the Netziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, 1816-1893). What is fascinating is that Netziv makes his comment, not on this week’s parsha, but on last week’s – the first time Rebecca set eyes on her husband-to-be. Recall that Isaac did not choose his wife. Abraham entrusted that task to his servant. Servant and bride-to-be are travelling back by camel, and as they approach Abraham’s tents, Rebecca sees a figure in the distance

Now Isaac had come from Beer Lahai Roi, for he was living in the Negev. He went out to the field one evening to meditate, and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. Rebecca also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel and asked the servant, “Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?” “He is my master,” the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself.

Gen. 24:62-65

On this Netziv comments,

“She covered herself out of awe and a sense of inadequacy as if she felt she was unworthy to be his wife, and from then on this trepidation was fixed in her mind. Her relationship with Isaac was not the same as that between Sarah and Abraham or Rachel and Jacob. When they had a problem they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rebecca.”

Commentary to Gen. 24:65

Netziv understood that in this description of the first encounter between Rebecca and Isaac, nothing is incidental. The text emphasises distance in every sense. Isaac is physically far away when Rebecca spots him. He is also mentally far away: meditating, deep in thought and prayer. Rebecca imposes her own distance by covering herself with a veil.

The distance goes deeper still. Isaac is the most withdrawn of the patriarchs. Rarely do we see him as the initiator of a course of action. The events of his life seem to mirror those of his father. The Torah associates him with pachad, “fear” (Gen. 31:42). Jewish mysticism connected him with gevurah, best understood as “self-restraint.” This is the man who had been bound as a sacrifice on an altar, whose life had been reprieved only at the last moment. Isaac, whether because of the trauma of that moment or because of the inhibiting effect of having a strong father, is a man whose emotions often lie too deep for words.

No wonder, then, that he loves Rebecca on the one hand, Esau on the other. What these two very different people have in common is that they are so unlike him. They are both brisk and action-oriented. Their “native hue of resolution” is not “sicklied o’er by the pale cast of thought.”[1] No wonder, too, that Rebecca hesitates before speaking to him.

Just before the episode of the blessing, another scene takes place, apparently unrelated to what follows. There is a famine in the land. Isaac

and Rebecca are forced into temporary exile, as Abraham and Sarah had been twice before. On God's instructions, they go to Gerar. There, just as Abraham had done, Isaac passes off his wife as his sister, afraid that he might be killed so that his wife could be taken into the royal harem. Something happens, however, to disclose the truth:

"When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing [metzacheck] his wife Rebecca.

Gen. 26:8

We tend to miss the significance of this scene. It is the only one in which Isaac is the subject of the verb tz-ch-k. Yet this is the root of Isaac's name – Yitzchak - meaning "he will laugh." It is the one scene of intimacy between Isaac and Rebecca. It is the only episode in which Isaac, as it were, is true to his name. Yet it nearly brings disaster. Abimelech is furious that Isaac has been economical with the truth. It is the first of a series of disputes with the Philistines.

Did this reinforce Isaac's belief that he could never relax? Did it confirm Rebecca's belief that she could never be unequivocally intimate with her husband? Perhaps so, perhaps not. But Netziv's point remains. Rebecca felt unable to share with Isaac the oracle she had received before the twins' birth and the doubts she had about Esau's suitability for the blessing. Her inability to communicate led to the deception, which brought a whole series of tragedies in its wake, among them the fact that Jacob was forced to flee for his life, as well as the counter-deception perpetrated against him by his father-in-law Laban.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Torah is telling us that communication is vital, however hard it is. Rebecca acts at all times out of the highest of motives. She holds back from troubling Isaac out of respect for his inwardness and privacy. She does not want to disillusion him about Esau, the son he loves. She does not want to trouble him with her oracle, suggesting as it did that the two boys would be locked into a lifelong struggle. Yet the alternative – deception – is worse.

We have here a story of the tragedy of good intentions. Honesty and openness are at the heart of strong relationships. Whatever our fears and trepidations, it is better to speak the truth than practice even the most noble deception.

[1] From Hamlet's 'To Be or Not To Be' soliloquy, Act 3, Scene 1.

Divination, Tarot Cards, and Coffee Reading

Revivim

The use of divination, tarot cards, or coffee reading to predict the future, or uncover hidden truths, is prohibited by the Torah * One should not attempt to foresee the future using magic or trickery; instead, we must confront challenges through the natural means provided by God * Consulting true prophets for guidance about the future is permitted, as their words are truthful, and intended to guide us along the path of Torah

* Reservists and active-duty soldiers should recite the Birkat HaGomel blessing after every period of combat service

"Peninei Halakha" Daily Study

On Thursday, the 20th of Cheshvan, as part of the "Peninei Halakha" daily study program, which approximately 6,000 people follow by studying two sections from "Peninei Halakha" books each day, a new book, Brachot, will be started. Initially, I thought this learning schedule was too limited, as it would be more fitting to study halachot at a faster pace—perhaps ten sections a day, to cover the entire series in a year. However, I realized that even studying two sections daily is meaningful, as small increments add up to significant accomplishments. By year's end, with God's help, we will complete the volume on Brachot, and the two volumes on the laws of Shabbat. A notable benefit of focusing on just two sections a day is the opportunity to reflect on them throughout the day, making the learning more impactful. For example, by studying Brachot, one becomes more mindful of each blessing, imbuing life with deeper meaning.

Birkat HaGomel for Soldiers

Q: Should our brave soldiers, defending our people and land, recite Birkat HaGomel each time they return home for a short leave?

A: The general rule for Birkat HaGomel is that it is recited only after the danger has passed. This applies to someone who travels in a caravan for several months, or sails on a months-long voyage, which historically were fraught with danger. After completing the journey, Birkat HaGomel has to be recited.

In practice, a reservist should recite Birkat HaGomel at the end of each reserve duty period, even if they know they will be called again in a month. The blessing should be recited after each completed period. Similarly, active-duty soldiers should recite Birkat HaGomel after completing each period of frontline service. For instance, someone deployed in Lebanon for an indeterminate period of weeks or months, should recite the blessing after that combat period ends. Even a week-long leave (regila) or training session could mark a break between combat periods, warranting the recitation of Birkat HaGomel.

Additionally, even though operations in Judea and Samaria are currently considered less dangerous, Birkat HaGomel should still be recited after each service period in those areas (see, Peninei Halakha: Brachot 16:9). May God grant our soldiers the strength to vanquish all our enemies, protect them from harm, and bring them home safely. In the merit of the great mitzvah they fulfill—equal to all other mitzvot—they, and their families, will be blessed with abundant goodness.

Divination Practices

Q: Is it permissible to use divination, tarot cards, or coffee reading to predict the future, or uncover hidden truths?

A: These practices are forbidden by the Torah. Before explaining the prohibition, let us briefly describe these methods:

Divination (Goralot)

Divination involves casting lots, such as rolling dice, to predict the future. Some forms answer simple yes-or-no questions, while others are more complex, based on astrology. Practitioners interpret a person's fate based on their birth date, and cast lots to determine personality traits, future events, and potential challenges. All forms of divination are prohibited by the Torah.

Tarot Card Reading

Similar to divination, tarot card reading involves shuffling a deck of cards, laying them face down, and drawing cards at random. The cards are then interpreted to predict the future or offer advice, based on the belief that random selection aligns with the questioner's fate, and inner world. Predicting the future using tarot cards is also forbidden.

Coffee Reading

Coffee reading involves interpreting the residue left by a beverage of coffee. Proponents believe that when someone drinks, their spirit interacts with the liquid, and their subconscious knowledge of the future is transferred to the residue. The patterns left in the cup are said to reveal these insights. Predicting the future through this method is likewise forbidden.

The Prohibition of Divination

The Torah explicitly forbids these practices under the commandment "You shall be wholehearted with the Lord your God" (Devarim 18:13; Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De'ah 179:1). This mitzvah teaches us to trust that all events occur under divine providence, guiding us toward truth and goodness. Even when hardships arise, they are intended to prompt personal growth. Seeking to predict the future through magical means violates this commandment, and distracts from the natural methods God has given us to address life's challenges. These natural efforts lead to personal improvement.

However, consulting true prophets is permitted, because their words are truthful, and intended to guide us according to Torah principles.

The Prohibition of "Kossem" and "Menachesh" (Soothsaying and Divination)

Additionally, there is room to say these practices are also forbidden due to the Torah's prohibition against "kossem" (soothsaying) and "menachesh" (divination), as it is written:

"There shall not be found among you... one who practices divination, soothsaying, or witchcraft... For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord... You shall be wholehearted with the Lord, your God" (Deuteronomy 18:10-13).

Definition of “Kossem” (Soothsayer)

A kossem is someone who performs various actions to predict the future.

Examples include:

Repeatedly striking a stick while uttering strange sounds.

Stirring sand to form patterns.

Handling stones or sand.

Long contemplation of a mirror or a flame in a lamp.

Bowing to the ground in strange movements.

All these actions aim to achieve a meditative or hypnotic state to connect with “supernatural” forces, enabling them to predict the future, or reveal hidden matters (see Rambam, Avodah Zarah 11:6; Sefer HaChinuch 510).

Definition of “Menachesh” (Diviner)

The term menachesh stems from the idea of “hastening” (Ramban). Naturally, a person does not know what will happen in the future, but a diviner seeks to hasten knowledge of future events through current occurrences, even if there is no logical causal connection. For instance:

Someone sees a piece of bread fall from their hand, or their walking stick drop, and they interpret this as a sign to abandon plans for the day (Sanhedrin 65b).

Similarly, those who cast lots, read tarot cards, or interpret coffee grounds use certain actions like a kossem to predict the future. Based on random outcomes from lots, cards, or coffee shapes, they predict events or offer guidance, which falls under the prohibition of menachesh.

The Lenient Halachic View

Among those inclined to the worlds of mysticism and Kabbalah, some Torah scholars have used casting lots. Their rationale is as follows:

The prohibition of lots arises when one connects with impure forces to obtain worldly benefits. However, casting lots in the context of repentance, reverence for Heaven, and prayer to God—seeking Divine guidance for future actions—does not violate the prohibitions of kossem or menachesh.

Even so, they agree that when lots are cast by individuals lacking reverence for Heaven, or performed without repentance and prayer, impure forces become involved, rendering the practice forbidden (see Rema and Levush, Yoreh De’ah 179:14).

Regarding the commandment to be “wholehearted with God” (tamim tihyeh), these lenient authorities argue that predicting the future with absolute certainty is prohibited. Since they believe in repentance and prayer to alter the future, they do not make definitive predictions, thus avoiding a violation of tamim tihyeh.

A similar claim could be made by those reading coffee grounds, or using tarot cards: as long as they act with reverence for Heaven, accompanied by prayer and inspiring their questioners to repentance, they believe no prohibition is transgressed.

Did our Sages of Old Use Lots?

According to lenient opinions, some great figures of earlier generations utilized lots. This argument is based on Jewish books of lots and mystical remedies written in Hebrew, attributed to giants of Jewish scholarship such as Rav Saadia Gaon, Rav Tzemach Gaon, Ibn Ezra, and others.

However, the majority of halakhic authorities reject this claim. Since the vast majority of our Sages explicitly stated that using lots is prohibited, it is unlikely that these practices originated from great Jewish scholars. Additionally, many lots described in Jewish mystical texts were previously recorded in gentile Greek, Roman, and Muslim texts, and rooted in pagan and magical traditions.

The lenient authorities counter that ignorant copyists inadvertently included lots and mystical remedies from idol worshipers and magicians in ancient Jewish books. They claim to have refined these works, only using lots rooted in authentic Jewish teachings.

Practical Halakha

Even if we accept the lenient position that one acting solely for the sake of Heaven does not violate the prohibition of kossem or menachesh, the practice remains prohibited due to the mitzvah of tamim tihyeh (wholeheartedness with God). This is as codified in the Shulchan Aruch regarding casting lots (Yoreh De’ah 179:1).

The lenient argument that guidance derived from lots, or similar methods, is akin to advice from a rabbi or psychologist, is flawed. A rabbi or psychologist offers advice after deep acquaintance with the individual, basing their guidance on logic. This allows the recipient to critically evaluate the advice, and ultimately make their own decisions. Such a process adheres to tamim tihyeh, as it utilizes the natural faculties God provided.

In contrast, advice derived from supernatural or obscure methods is challenging for a person to rationally dismiss, even if flawed. This can lead to misguided life decisions, such as pursuing an unsuitable career based on a mistaken perception of talent, or deciding to marry (or not marry) someone based on flawed advice.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is prohibited to predict the future or offer guidance for future actions using lots, tarot cards, or coffee ground readings.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

Parshat Toldot: Rebecca’s Choice – Deception for the Sake of Heaven

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

“And Rebecca spoke to her son Jacob, saying...And now, my son, obey my voice according to which I command you...” (Genesis 27:5, 7)

One of the many glories of the Bible is that it recognizes the complex personality especially of great individuals, and the fact that strength and weakness, virtue and vice, can sometimes both reside in the very same soul. Even more significantly, that which may superficially appear to be dishonest – an act of deception – may very well provide the necessary ingredient which ultimately creates grandeur. It is this understanding which supplies the real motivation for what appears to be Rebecca’s deception according to the profound interpretations of the Malbim and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

The most obvious question which strikes us, as we read the Torah portion, is why Rebecca had to deceive her husband by dressing her younger son Jacob in the garb and in the skins of her older son Esau? Why could she not merely have explained to her husband that Esau, although he was the elder brother, was simply not worthy of the birthright? From a textual perspective, this doesn’t seem to have been a difficult task at all. After all, right before Isaac summons Esau requesting venison meat as the hors d’oeuvre of the blessing, the Bible specifically records that Esau had committed the one great sin of the patriarchal period: he married two Hittite women, which was ‘a bitterness of spirit to Isaac and to Rebecca’ (Genesis 26:35).

Moreover, Rebecca could certainly have argued that the son who had been willing to sell his birthright to Jacob for a mere bowl of lentil soup, could not possibly be worthy of the mantle of Abrahamic leadership. Furthermore, Rebecca had heard from the Almighty that ‘the elder son would serve the younger’ (Genesis 25:23) during her frighteningly difficult pregnancy. So why didn’t she make her convincing case to her husband after coffee one evening rather than resort to an act of trickery? Malbim suggests that indeed such a conversation between husband and wife did take place. And after Rebecca marshalled her arguments, Isaac then explained to his wife that he was as aware of Esau’s shortcomings as she was. In fact, he understood that the spiritual blessing of family leadership, the blessing of Abraham which we know as the birthright, must certainly go to Jacob; indeed when Jacob is later forced by the wrath of his deceived brother Esau to leave his home and go into exile with Laban, after his father warns him not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan, he is blessed with the messianic dream of becoming a congregation of nations and he is given the blessing of Abraham, to inherit the land of Israel [Gen. 28:3, 4]. But, argues Isaac, he must make a split between the birthright of spiritual leadership which rightfully belongs to Jacob and the physical blessing of material prosperity and political domination which he has decided to give to Esau:

“May the Lord give you from the dew of the heavens and the fat [oil] of the land and much grain and wine...Be the political master over your

brother and may the daughters of your mother bow down to you." (Genesis 27:28–29)

The more spiritual brother must receive the religious-spiritual birthright (bekhora) and the more physical brother must receive the material-political blessing (berakha). After all, argues Isaac, the bookish, naive, and spiritual Jacob (ish tam, yoshev ohalim) would not begin to know how to maneuver in an economically driven, militaristically guided society. Give Esau the oil and the sword; give Jacob the books and the Temple.

Rebecca strongly disagrees. She understands that the world at large and the human nature of individuals dare not be so simplistically divided between the spiritual and the material, God and Caesar. If religious leadership is to emerge supreme, it requires the infrastructure of economic stability; in an imperfect world of aggression and duplicity, even leading spiritual personalities must sometimes reluctantly wage war against evil in order for the good to triumph. Rebecca understands the world of reality; after all, she comes from the house of Laban and Bethuel, two masters of deceit and treachery.

It is fascinating that, in the next generation, Jacob's wife, Rachel, alongside her great spiritual gifts of kindness and humility (remember that she gave the secret signs to her sister under the nuptial canopy in order not to embarrass Leah), also had the practical ability to steal the household gods. In the ancient world of Mari and Nuzu – ancient peoples contemporaneous with the patriarchs – these gods belonged to the inheritor of the birthright. When Rachel stole the gods she was securing her husband's rights, because after all it was Jacob who was responsible for Laban's material success. She also knew how to cover up her actions when her father began his search. It is no accident that her son Joseph rises to greatness not only because of his great moral qualities but also because of his practical wisdom and his ability to take advantage of every situation.

We should also remember that the King Messiah, the progenitor of whom is King David, is both the sweet singer of songs with a voice of Jacob as well as the great warrior of Israel with hands of Esau. Indeed, when Samuel the prophet anoints David, the young shepherd-singer is described as 'a red-faced man (admoni) with beautiful eyes and goodly appearance' [I Sam. 16:12]. Edom is also another name for Esau, who was also born an admoni (ruddy-complexioned) and who ate the red lentil pottage. King David's strength as well as his weakness apparently was derived from that aspect of Esau which was part of his personality. Every Jacob must learn to utilize, tame and ultimately sanctify the necessary hands of Esau, without which it is impossible to triumph.

But the profound complexity of our Torah continues its lessons. Yes, Jacob justifiably received both blessing and birthright (berakha and bekhora) from his father, but we cannot – and he cannot – forget that this occurred as a result of his act of deception. Jacob, therefore, has to pay a heavy price. He must flee from his parents' home in order to escape Esau's wrath, and is thrust into exile with the treacherous Laban. And in addition to all of the problems faced by someone on the run, Jacob has the added dilemma of looking at himself in the mirror. His deception was orchestrated by his mother, perhaps even ordained by God, but, nonetheless, something inside him has been forever tainted. This feeling of guilt never leaves him. Twenty years later, when Jacob is about to return to his birthplace as a mature older man – as a husband and a father – he realizes that unfinished business between Esau and himself still remains.

Conscience-stricken, he acts totally subservient and obsequious, beseeching his brother, 'kah na et birkhati' (Genesis 33:11) which literally means 'take my blessing,' as he hands over a large portion of his material acquisitions. After all these years, Jacob wishes to make amends by returning the very blessings he undeservedly had received from his father. 'And one must restore the stolen object which one has taken' (Leviticus 5:23), demands biblical morality.

But Jacob even goes one step further. He is so remorseful about his youthful act of deception that when presenting his final will and testament to his children, Jacob himself acts according to his father's intention. He grants Judah the spiritual blessings of the nation's leader-

ship, and to the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Menashe – the physical blessings, the double portion of the bekhora, the fat of the land, physical increase, material prosperity.

However, perhaps children are generally doomed to repeat the mistakes of their parents. What Jacob does is certainly understandable: in his search for forgiveness, he feels he must return to his father's original place and reject his mother's vision of unity. But in principle, Rebecca was right. This split of the blessing and birthright between Judah and Ephraim planted the seeds of division in the Jewish people, between Judah's concentration on religion and the Holy Temple, and Ephraim's celebration of luxury and lawlessness. However, Rebecca dreamt of a different world of unity, where Torah and technology, yeshiva and military service, could dwell together.

Shabbat Shalom

Let the Good Times Role by Jonathan Rosenblum

Mishpacha Magazine

Let the Good Times Roll

By Yonoson Rosenblum | November 20, 2024

Whatever the next four years have in store, they will not be boring

President Trump was as surprised as anyone by his election victory in 2016. He had little background in Washington, D.C., and as a consequence, he came into office after a hastily-put-together transition, unfamiliar with many of those he would be appointing to key positions. Beyond the southern border wall, his priorities in office were unclear.

That is not the case this time. He has been announcing key appointments at a historically rapid pace. Having already spent four years in the White House, he has a much better idea of where the pitfalls lie, after having experienced frustration with many of those he appointed and having been preoccupied by the ongoing Russian collusion investigation in his first two years in office. He has a much clearer vision of what he hopes to achieve and the obstacles that must be removed.

Though never known for his attention to the details of policy, as long ago as December 2022, Trump already detailed a plan to prevent government agencies — e.g., the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security — from colluding with social media companies, as they did in 2020 to stifle the story of Hunter Biden's laptop and the ways in which Joe Biden was implicated in Hunter's influence peddling.

Trump has proposed to rewrite Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which immunizes social media platforms from suit for material posted on their sites, to require strict rules of transparency and neutrality as a condition for protection. In addition, he has proposed financial penalties for universities involved in identifying disinformation on social media, as did Stanford — one of the world's leading research institutions — in 2020, in conjunction with government actors and social media platforms.

In a similar manner, he has taken aim at the huge DEI bureaucracies entrenched in almost every university, and proposed to hold universities accountable for the harassment of Jewish students with a loss of government funding. He has posted that on day one of his administration, he will notify every university president that continued anti-Semitic propaganda will result in loss of accreditation and federal funding. (Execution of that threat will no doubt result in numerous First Amendment challenges.)

The woke obsessions and emphasis on DEI will also be uprooted, root and branch, from the armed services. Doing so is at the top of the agenda of Secretary of Defense-designate Peter Hegseth.

THE PRESIDENT-ELECT'S first announced appointments were almost exclusively members of his foreign policy team. And those appointments were repeatedly labeled Israel's "dream team." They were not merely "pro-Israel" in the sense of having voted for appropriations bills with aid for Israel. They are ardent supporters of Israel.

Senator Marco Rubio, who will be secretary of state, responded angrily to a question about Gazan casualties by telling the reporter that Hamas is a group of vicious criminals whom Israel must destroy wherever they can. And Trump's chosen national security advisor, Congressman Mike

Waltz, terms Israel the greatest ally the United States has ever known. The new US ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, rejects the terminology of the "West Bank" in favor of Judea and Samaria and says that Jews cannot be "settlers" in their historic homeland.

The new UN ambassador, Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, has been an unrelenting critic of the organization and its anti-Israel bias. She first came to prominence with her congressional questioning of the presidents of Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, and MIT as to whether calling for genocide against Jews violated their university policies. The failure to answer forthrightly resulted in the resignations of the first two out of the three.

Steve Witkoff, Trump's golf buddy and fellow real estate magnate, will be the latter's special envoy to the Middle East, to build upon the Abraham Accords, in which task he will be assisted informally by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who was instrumental in the negotiation of the first Accords.

Moreover, each of those appointees supports the "maximum pressure" approach to Iran of Trump's first term in office. (Brian Hook, who oversaw that campaign, is in charge of the State Department transition team, and is expected to reprise his former role.) The new CIA director, John Ratcliffe, advocates putting one's foot on the throat of terrorist regimes like Iran, as Israel has been doing. And Peter Hegseth, the secretary of defense-designate, has even gone so far as to say that the United States should be prepared to bomb the Iranian nuclear sites.

That latter comment is especially significant, as it is very much an open question whether Israel alone can destroy those sites buried deeply underground. The urgency of doing so, however, has been lessened by news this week that the most recent Israeli attack on Iran destroyed the site where all its research on creating a nuclear warhead was located.

Even before he takes office, the world has reacted strongly to Trump's election. The Iranian rial plunged to its lowest rate ever. And the Iranian regime has also announced that its plans to strike Israel again have been shelved pending discussions with Trump. With Supreme Leader Khamenei on his deathbed, and the leadership likely to pass to his inexperienced son, the regime of the mullahs is highly vulnerable. That is especially so with the likely loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in oil revenues, if Trump reimposes the sanction regime from his first term in office, as expected. Elsewhere, manufacturers are moving their production from China in anticipation of Trump's threatened tariffs against China.

BUT LET US not get carried away. Both Israel and the United States may have dodged a bullet with the defeat of Kamala Harris. But that defeat hardly cures all the world's problems — and may bring others in its wake.

It should be noted that the campaign just completed was one of the least substantive in American history. Much of the discussion was over things that should not be issues at all — biological men in women's sports, for instance, or the use of proper pronouns. Meanwhile, the doom star waiting America in the form of ever-growing debt went unaddressed. Kamala Harris's only contribution was to accuse Republicans of planning to cut Social Security benefits. To which Republicans responded by denying any such intent and airily pronouncing trillion-dollar deficits curable by cutting government waste. Indeed, they even proposed large new tax cuts, like exempting income from tips (a Trump proposal immediately endorsed by Harris).

Charles Cooke of the National Review noted accurately, "Trump has no plan for our endless deficits, he has no interest in reducing the debt, and he is allergic to discussing the entitlement reform that will be necessary to fix both problems. Worst of all, when he is pushed on any of these questions, he asserts that everything will be magically magnificent or that he will fix each and every problem the country faces by collecting large across-the-board import tariffs."

It is possible to roughly calculate the depletion of the Social Security fund at current rates; present recipients, like me, have little more than a decade to go, while younger workers now paying into the fund may never receive their benefits. Yet every politician in America would

prefer to ignore the inevitable and the threat to our currency posed by galloping debt service.

At the same time, we devote enormous energy to worrying about climate change, about which all predictions have proven wrong. The ruinous policies proposed by Western governments to combat climate change have caused enormous increases in manufacturing and food costs, and yet will have, at best, little impact in the absence of buy-in from the world's two most populous countries — India and China. Here, at least, the Trump administration has a clear plan to ramp up production of oil and natural gas, and to revive the nuclear power industry, source of the only truly clean energy.

Trump speaks about tariffs as if they were King Arthur's magical sword Excalibur — the answer to all problems. At times, he gives the appearance of thinking tariffs are checks written by importers to the American taxpayer and could even obviate the need for income taxes. Nor does he appreciate that it is difficult to reconcile large tariffs with bringing down consumer prices, which was one of his winning issues on November 5. While it is true that not all tariffs will be passed on in full to the consumer, to some extent they will be. And they may not help American manufacturers as much as hoped, since they inevitably invite retaliation from nations whose products have been slapped with tariffs. Another issue the candidates barely touched upon was how they would respond to a Chinese effort to conquer Taiwan, which could trigger a full-scale war between the world's two most powerful militaries. Their thinking on the issue — if indeed they have thought about it at all — remains unknown.

FINALLY, DONALD TRUMP remains very much Donald Trump: transgressive, impulsive, narcissistic, and grudge-bearing. One would have to go back over a century to President Warren Harding's appointment of his poker-playing buddy Harry Daugherty as attorney general to find someone as ill-suited for the task as Congressman Matt Gaetz. For one thing, he is as likely to be the subject of a criminal investigation as he is to head one. Indeed, Gaetz quickly resigned from the House, in the wake of the announcement of his pending appointment, to avoid the issuance of a House Ethics Committee report on him, believed to be highly unflattering. (The contents of that report, however, will no doubt see the light of day, and may even push mainstream news outlets to once again engage in investigative reporting.)

Gaetz is as reviled by Republicans as Democrats for his lead role in bringing down Speaker Kevin McCarthy, and four Republican votes will likely be found in the Senate to deny him confirmation. Even in the unlikely event that he is confirmed or receives a recess appointment, he will surely not be able to muster the required Senate support for the massive restructuring of the Justice Department, in general, and the FBI, in particular, that Trump envisions. Moreover, he is almost completely lacking in the legal experience required for the sweeping reorganization of Justice Department.

Trump's choice of Gaetz is best seen as a deliberate thumbing of his nose at his various opponents, along the lines of the apocryphal appointment by the Roman emperor Caligula of his horse *Invictus* to serve as a consul, as an expression of his contempt for the Roman Senate.

But here the president-elect would be well-advised to remember that as surprising as the magnitude of his victory was, it was not exactly a total rout, comparable to Lyndon Johnson's defeat of Barry Goldwater or Richard Nixon's defeat of George McGovern, and there is still room for building on the coalition he assembled rather than reviving the doubts of all those who voted for him with extreme reluctance. Nor was it wise to taint all his excellent foreign policy picks with a choice for attorney general that signals that Tucker Carlson and Donald Jr. still have his ear. True, Trump's willingness to ignore conventional wisdom has, on occasion, been his greatest strength. That is what made it possible for him to move the American embassy to Jerusalem, in the face of decades of warnings that doing so would ignite the Arab street. The so-called two-state solution was the North Star of American Middle East policymaking for decades, and it was argued that solving the Palestinian

problem was the key to all regional peacemaking. The Abraham Accords provided a conclusive refutation of that conventional wisdom. Another example of Trump's rejection of the conventional wisdom was his cutting off of funding to UNRWA. Who knows, he may one day decide that the United Nations, as currently constituted, serves little function, and should be sent packing from Manhattan.

Whatever the next four years have in store, they will not be boring, though hopefully not in fulfillment of the ancient Chinese curse, "May you live in exciting times."

Rabbi YY Jacobson

We Fed the Crocodile for Too Long: Israel's Mission Today
Rivkah Didn't Want to Deceive Her Husband, She Just Wanted Jacob to Display Another Side

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

Touched to the Core

The bloodbath orchestrated by Hamas and Iran on Saturday, Simchat Torah, 5784 (October 7, 2023) in Southern Israel has woken up a part in every single Jew that was dormant. The glee of the enemy in slaughtering Jewish babies reminded us that this has nothing to do with occupation, colonization, apartheid, or any other myth. This was a manifestation of visceral evil which craves to destroy every single Jew. Had Hamas had its way, it would joyfully perform this mini-Holocaust daily, until all 6.6 million Jews in Israel lay lifeless.

Every Jew living today feels the need to respond. Of course, we must defend ourselves in every possible way; we must support Israel and our soldiers with every fiber of our being—encouraging them to fulfill their moral historic duty of eliminating every vestige of bloodthirsty evil. Of course, we must lift the morale of our brothers and sisters in Israel and the world over through an unprecedented outpouring of support, love and oneness, like never before.

But there is something more.

Taking the Blessings

The twin brothers Jacob and Esau (Yaakov & Eisav) occupy the leitmotif of this week's Torah portion, Toldos.

Rebecca (Rivkah) loves Jacob (Yaakov), the child dwelling in the tents; while Isaac (Yitzchak) loved Esau (Eisav), the "skilled hunter, the man of the field." As the story progresses, Isaac grows old and his eyes become dim. He expresses his desire to bless his beloved son Esau before he dies. While Esau goes off to hunt for his father's favorite food, Rebecca summons her son Jacob and instructs him to go take his father's blessings. She dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes, covers his arms and neck with goatskins to simulate the feel of his hairier brother, prepares a similar dish, and sends Jacob to his father with the food. The Torah quotes her saying:[1]

And now my son, listen to my voice, to what I am commanding you.

Go now to the flock, and take for me from there two choice kids, and I will make them tasty foods for your father, as he likes.

So Jacob drew near to Isaac his father, and he felt him, and he said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau."

Jacob receives his father's blessings for "the dew of the heaven and the fat of the land" and mastery over his brother. Once Esau returns with the food, it is too late. Jacob has already obtained the blessings.

The Mysteries

This is a deeply complex narrative, or to paraphrase Winston Churchill who said of Russia, "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

Here are five of the most thundering questions. How did Isaac and Rebecca allow themselves to grow so far apart in their perception of their children, to the point that Isaac favored Esau, and Rebecca insisted that Jacob receive the blessings? Why would she deceive her husband rather than speak to him? Why did Jacob employ cunning and stealth to deceive an unsuspecting brother? When Isaac discovers the trick, he seems shocked and bewildered. Why did he never chastise his wife or son?

Finally, when Jacob entered Isaac's chamber, and his father felt him, Isaac declared: "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." Clearly, Isaac identified this man as having Jacob's

voice. So why did he give him the blessings? Why did he not investigate who is the person standing before him?

Dozens of interpretations have been offered. Today I wish to present one perspective (of many possible ones)—it is an extraordinary insight presented by the late Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993).[2] The Ashes of Isaac

Isaac was the first person to be born a Jew. At the most defining moment of his life, he lay on the altar, bound up, about to be sacrificed. He was moments away from death. Only in the eleventh hour did the angel command Abraham: "Do not lay your hand on the lad."

It was, at that moment when he lay on the altar, that Isaac understood the magnitude of sacrifice that Jewish existence would require.[3] He knew that to be a Jew would be far from a simple feat. His people will endure fire and water. "Fire will not burn us; water will not drown us," goes a famous Russian Chassidic song. But fire and water it is! Jewish survival ought never to be taken for granted. "In each generation they rise up against us to annihilate us," we say in the Passover Haggadah, "and G-d saves us from their hands."

The Mission

That may be one reason Isaac had a special affinity for Esau: "And Isaac loved Esau because [his] game was in his mouth," the Torah states.[4] "Esau was a man who understood hunting, a man of the field, whereas Jacob was an innocent man, dwelling in tents," the Torah tells us.[5] Isaac understood that for the Jew to survive he will need to "dwell in the tents" of study and prayer,[6] to reside in the citadels of the spirit, in the mansions of moral contemplation and ethical explorations, aligned with G-d, the source of life, but he will also need to learn how to hunt in the field, how to take a weapon in his hand and battle with vicious aggressors in the killing fields of a harsh terrain. In the worlds of the Talmud: "He who comes to kill you, kill him first."[7]

It's not only about security. The mission of the Jew is to transform the physical and material world into a divine abode. To achieve this, he must enter into the real world and impact it. He must enter the open fields of society and live proudly as a Jew, to bring sanctity and holiness into the mundane, to integrate heaven and earth.

A Perfect Partnership

In Isaac's mind, a partnership between the twins Esau and Jacob will guarantee an eternal people. Jacob will grant the people its soul, spirit, conscience, and moral GPS, its Divine core, but Esau will be in charge of the "field," he will become the facilitator of Jacob's spiritual light and love in our physical world, standing guard against the enemy that craves to destroy goodness, morality and holiness in our world.[8]

The tragedy, of course, was that Esau did not see himself as a partner of Jacob. His material prowess, hunting skills, and field-maneuvers have become divorced from his spiritual, soulful core. His body was severed from his soul.

"And Esau came from the field, and he was exhausted." His soul was exhausted because it felt empty. He craved to conquer the entire "field," to own the world, but he did not own himself; he remained internally worn out, emotionally exhausted, detached from his own spiritual roots. His internal universe was chaotic, distraught, and frenzied.

Isaac yearned that Esau's enormous strength be harnessed to facilitate his soul, becoming a partner with Jacob. He wants to bless, empower and sublimate Esau.

Rebecca's Vision

It is Rebecca, the Jewish mother, who understands the calling of the moment—and the calling of history. "Now my son, listen to my voice, to what I am commanding you. Go now to the flock, and take for me from there two choice kids, and I will make them tasty foods for your father, as he likes."

My dear Jacob! It is time to leave your tents of study and go out to the field (where the goats are).[9] It is time for you to learn how to garb yourself in Esau's cloaks and gear—to confront the enemy that might come to kill you. Sure, your tents of study and prayer will remain your eternal compass; they will guide your direction in the field and navigate your movements in the outside world; your faith and spiritual authenticity will be the bedrock of your success. But to be anchored in

G-d means that at times you must go out and protect your children, standing up to your enemies with unwavering resolve.

You must never apologize for your moral duty to crush your enemy, and you must never allow your hyper sense of fake morality and ethics to turn you into the punching bag of the world. If there is even the slightest chance that one of your children is in danger, you must go on the offensive and let your enemy be frightened for his life.

My dear Jacob! You despise violence, loathe conflict, and never give up on the dream of peace. We are the people of the book, not of the sword. But Jacob, there is a time in history when you must wage war, so that your children live. David will need to stand up to a Goliath; in the Persia of old, during the edicts of Haman, Jews will need to engage in moral violence to fight off their blood thirsty foes. In the days of Chanukah, the Jews will once again need to take up arms to save their people and faith. Time and time again, Jews will need to learn how to fight back.

In June of 1967, and numerous times before and after, Israel will need to wage war to save a beleaguered people from the enemy's quest for our annihilation. After Simchas Torah 5784 it is clear that the restrain Israel demonstrated over the last decades, and all the compromises it made, have invited only war and violence. The words of Churchill in 1940 about the Nazis are applicable to Israel's terrible lack of vision in regard to its neighbors: "Each one hopes that if he feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last. All of them hope that the storm will pass before their turn comes to be devoured. But I fear greatly that the storm will not pass. It will rage and it will roar ever more loudly, ever more widely."

Do we want dead Jews who are seen as ethical, or living Jews whom the UN and other clueless Jew haters will forever condemn?

My dear Jacob—said his mother—one day, Esau and Yishmael will become your partner. One day, the Moshiach will come—and may it be very very speedily in our days—and you will return to your tents of spiritual ecstasy, as the "spirit of impurity will be removed from the world," and the entire "earth will be filled with Divine consciousness as the waters covers the sea." There will be a time when, in the words of Isaiah (2:4), "He [G-d] shall judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

But till that glorious day, my dear Jacob, you -- a prince of G-d, a man of wisdom, integrity and faith -- must dress like Esau, you must don his gear. For your enemy is brutal, ruthless, and bloodthirsty. As long as you duck, the international community empathizes with his murderous plans. The world respects Jews who respect themselves, their faith, their history and their Torah; the world admires Jews who are not afraid of doing everything it takes to stop immoral violence and bloodshed. The world wants a strong Israel who demonstrates unwavering moral clarity to eliminate every last vestige of evil and terror.

A Radiant Field

Jacob obeys. He learns to enter the field. He learns to don the clothes of Esau. And when he enters the chambers of his father, something remarkable happens.

And he [Isaac] said, "Serve [it] to me that I may eat of the game of my son, so that my soul will bless you." And he served him, and he ate, and he brought him wine, and he drank.

And his father Isaac said to him, "Please come closer and kiss me, my son."

And he came closer, and he kissed him, and he smelled the fragrance of his garments, and he blessed him, and he said, "Behold, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field, which the Lord has blessed!"

Isaac tells his son that his fragrance is one of a field blessed by G-d. Esau was a man of the field. Jacob was not. But when Jacob was forced to enter the field—to enter into the material, physical and earthy reality where Esau lives and succeeds; when Jacob is forced to learn how to use a rifle and drive a jeep; when Jacob is compelled to battle a war for survival; when Jacob is compelled to live and function in the larger world—it has "the fragrance of a field, which the Lord has blessed!"

It is not a field which causes exhaustion and loneliness; it is a field that mirrors the radiance of the Divine. Jacob's field is filled with sanctity, harmony, and spiritual depth. Jacob imbues Esau's cloaks and vocation with holiness. Jacob's field is not a place of vulgarity and bruteness; it is a garden of G-d.

Jacob holds his book in one hand, and his plow in the other; his book in one hand and his sword in the other—realizing that the material too belongs to the oneness of the Divine. As Moses tells his people:[10] "For the Lord, your G-d, goes along in the midst of your camp, to rescue you and to deliver your enemies before you. Therefore, your camp shall be holy..."

An Integrated Jacob

Isaac, at lasts, acknowledges the possibility of Jacob fulfilling his mission, even while Esau is not yet ready to serve as a partner. "So Jacob drew near to Isaac his father, and he felt him, and he said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." At this moment, Isaac experienced that wondrous synthesis in his child.

His voice is the voice of Jacob—a voice of Torah, of wisdom, of spiritual truth, of justice, compassion, ethics, sacred nobility, and moral values. It is the "Yiddishe Shtime," the voice of Yiddishkeit. "But the hands are the hands of Esau"—this same boy is capable of standing up to a cruel enemy with unapologetic resolve, unwavering moral clarity, unrestrained determination, and undeterred strength to preserve its life. His mind, heart and soul will be defined by Torah, and when the moment calls for it, he will know how to go out and change the world. Of course, when the Jewish country has enough manpower to fight the enemy on the battlefield, it is an awesome and Divine merit for the army and the community to allow Jews to be dedicated completely to Torah study—the lifeline of our people. Those Jews who sit and study Torah day and night grant spiritual protection and Divine blessing to the army, the people, and the land. But if more manpower is needed, it is a grand mitzvah for every single capable Jew to don arms and go fight when the enemy attacks. And concerning war, the Torah states, "Your camp shall be holy," as your rifle is part and parcel of your spiritual holiness.[11] Indeed, the opening of Isaac's blessings to Jacob is: "And may the Lord give you of the dew of the heavens and [of] the fatness of the earth and an abundance of grain and wine." He blesses him not only with the heavenly dew but also with the fatness of the earth. He empowers him not only to be holy in heaven, but also to bring holiness to the earth. Not to shy away from his power to conquer the earth and bring G-d into the earth.[12]

Wake Up!

The relevance to our times is clear. The Jewish people are facing yet again a sworn enemy. What Hamas and its supporters targeted was not just a piece of land, but an entire people. We have once again been confronted by the force of evil and diabolical hatred that craves to destroy G-d's eternal people.

At such a time, our response must be: Let's be Jewish like never before in history, and let's be united like never before! The voice of Jacob remains our greatest power—the voice of Torah study, the voice of prayer, the voice of celebrating Mitzvos and Judaism. This is why we are here today, 3300 years after our inception and 3300 years after almost every Empire tried to get rid of us.

Let us become the greatest Jews ever, by studying what it means to be a Jew and living it. 16 million Jews are waiting for marching orders. Each of us ought to use his or her influence to inspire our brothers and sisters to start living Judaism in their daily life, beginning with one mitzvah.

And at this moment let us not forget our moral duty to use the "hands of Esau." Israel's moral obligation is to eliminate terror with unwavering might, without endangering our soldiers. We must protect ourselves. Every synagogue, every school, every Jewish center, and every Jewish community must guarantee the highest level of physical and spiritual security. Not minimal security, but the maximum level of safety.

While we do not look for wars, we are a nation which loves peace, searches for peace, and respects and loves all people, if someone attacks us, we ought to respond with all our might. "One who is merciful to the cruel becomes cruel to those who deserve mercy," say our sages.[13]

Meir Uziel, an Israeli comedian (and grandson of former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ben Tzion Uziel), once quipped: In the competition for Ms. Ethical among the 200 nations of the world, we always come in last place, since we are the only ones who show up!

Lessons from the Holocaust

The late Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin once wrote:

"I believe the lessons of the Holocaust are these. First, if an enemy of our people says he seeks to destroy us, believe him. Don't doubt him for a moment. Don't make light of it. Do all in your power to deny him the means of carrying out his satanic intent. (Note: one month later, Begin dispatched Israel's Air Force to destroy the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirak.)

"Second, when a Jew anywhere in the world is threatened or under attack, do all in your power to come to his aid. Never pause to wonder what the world will think or say. The world will never pity slaughtered Jews. The world may not necessarily like the fighting Jew, but the world will have to take account of him.

"Third, a Jew must learn to defend himself. He must forever be prepared for whenever threat looms.

"Fourth, Jewish dignity and honor must be protected in all circumstances. The seeds of Jewish destruction lie in passively enabling the enemy to humiliate us. Only when the enemy succeeds in turning the spirit of the Jew into dust and ashes in life, can he turn the Jew into dust and ashes in death. During the Holocaust it was after the enemy had humiliated the Jews, trampled them underfoot, divided them, deceived them, afflicted them, drove brother against brother, only then could he lead them, almost without resistance, to the gates of Auschwitz. Therefore, at all times and whatever the cost, safeguard the dignity and honor of the Jewish people.

Begin missed one point, which sadly proved to cause such weakness in Israel. For Israel to retain its deterrence power, it must be convinced of its moral right, of its spiritual mission in this world, of its destiny as G-d's people. Every Jew must know the truth that the entire land of Israel is our eternal home, G-d's gift to the Jewish people. Only when the voice is the voice of Jacob, will his hands be able to deliver the punch it needs to. Without it, Jacob become apologetic, weak, frail and perceived as someone who can be defeated with enough pressure, lies, and terror.

Today Jacob must increase his voice and must don the gloves of Esau to eliminate through absolute strength and deterrence every vestige of terror in its midst.

May G-d bless Israel and the entire Jewish nation; may G-d protect and free our hostages; may G-d protect our holy soldiers; may G-d give us the resolve we need to stop ducking and start demonstrating authentic strength. And may G-d bring redemption to our people, our land, and our world, now, Amen!

[1] Genesis 27:8-18.

[2] The Rav shared this at a convention of the Mizrachi movement, in Atlantic City, in 1961. You can read the original insight here: <http://hebrewbooks.org/2813>. Go to pp. 12-14. I included some other ideas to clarify some details.

[3] The end of Vayikra (26:42) reads: "V'Zocharti es brisi Yaakov, v'af es brisi Yitzchok, v'af es brisi Avraham ezkor. I will remember My covenant with Yaakov; also my covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember." The term Zechirah, the word for Remembering is mentioned in connection with Yaakov, and it is mentioned again with Abraham, but it is not mentioned with Yitzchak. Why? The great Biblical commentator, Rashi, offers the midrashic insight (Rashi to Lev. 26: 2): "Why does Hashem use the term 'Remembering' for Abraham and Yaakov but not when he speaks of Yitzchak? Because in the case of Yitzchak, 'Remembering' is not necessary. The ashes of Yitzchak always appear before Me, gathered up and placed on the Altar!" Yitzchak remains the symbol of Jewish sacrifice, the readiness of the Jewish people to dedicate their lives as an offering for G-d. Yitzchak's symbolic ashes stand before my eyes every single day, says G-d. The sages define Yitzchak as an "olah temimah"—a wholesome offering, whose sanctity required he never leave the borders of the Holy Land.

[4] Genesis 25:28.

[5] Ibid. 25:27.

[6] See Rashi to Genesis 25:27.

[7] Sanhedrin 72a.

[8] See at length the commentary of Netziv to the story.

[9] Esau is represented by the goat, "saeir," while Jacob by the sheep, "hakvasim hifrid Yaakov." (Or HaTorah Vayishlach vol. 1).

[10] Deut. 23:15

[11] See the address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, 6 Tishrei 5728 (1967), a few months after the Six Day War. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsADqkXyALk>

Rabbi Yitzchak Zaler, in his commentary Minchas Yitzchak to the Talmud ibid. adds a nice hint in their names: The second letter of our three forefathers are: אברם ('צ'ח'ק), and ב'עקב ('ע'ק'), alluding to the Hebrew terms: "בוקר" (morning), "צהרים" (afternoon), and "ערב" (evening). These correspond to the time of day at which each one instituted a different prayer.

[12] What is fascinating is that Jacob beloved's son Joseph, will dream up, years later, a storm. "And Joseph dreamed a dream and told his brothers... 'Listen now to this dream, which I have dreamed: Behold we were binding sheaves in the middle of the field, when, behold! -- my sheaf arose and also remained standing; then behold! -- your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf.' "So his brothers said to him, 'Will you reign over us? Will you dominate us?'. And he again dreamed another dream, and he related it to his brothers, and he said: 'Behold! I have dreamed another dream, and behold, the sun, the moon and eleven stars were prostrating themselves to me'... His brothers envied him, but his father awaited the matter." Joseph's double dreams take him from the plane of agriculture to the realm of the celestial. First, he dreams of himself—and his brothers—embodied as sheaves of a field where their sheaves bow to his. Yet as his dreams progress, he views himself and his family as heavenly lights: the sun, the moon and the stars. Joseph defines here two roles for himself and his family: He will be the great economist, leading a nation to a prosperous agricultural future, sustaining the land with earthly food. But simultaneously he sees himself guiding the sun, moon and stars—granting vision, light, and direction to the planet. The two are not contradictory in his world—as Jacob was given both the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth. The voice must be the voice of Jacob, and the hands must employ the skills of Esau.

[13] Tanchuma, Parashat Metzora 1. Yalkut Shimoni Shmuel 1 #121.

Lentil Soup

By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Question #1: Lentil Soup?

What beracha should Eisav have recited on his lentil soup?

Question #2: Apple Sauce?

I am sitting down to a snack of apple sauce and coffee. Does it make any difference how I recite the beracha?

Question #3: Candied Ginger?

What is the correct beracha to recite on candied ginger?

Introduction:

The Torah teaches us that Yaakov gave Eisav bread and lentil soup, and, according to the old Jewish tradition, Eisav did not recite a beracha when he ate his meal. If Eisav had skipped the bread and made a beracha on the soup, what beracha should he have made? It might depend on the recipe that Yaakov used when he made the soup, and it might also depend on the consistency of the soup. So, although I know that some people assume that the beracha on all soups is shehakol, this is certainly not an accurate rule. As always, the goal of our column is not to provide definitive halachic ruling; that is the role of each individual's rav or posek. The goal of our article is to educate about the halachic principle. Let us begin with the Gemara, where it states that "the water of beets is treated like beets, and the water of turnips is treated like turnips, and the water of all cooked items is like the cooked item" (Berachos 39a). This means that if someone cooked beets, and then drank the liquid without

the vegetable, he should recite the beracha of ha'adamah on the liquid, notwithstanding that he is not even eating the vegetable itself. This Gemara is teaching us an interesting application of the Mishnah, which states, "This is the rule: Whatever is primary, ikar, and is accompanied by something secondary, tafeil, one recites the beracha on the primary and absolves the secondary item" (Berachos 44a). According to the rule in this Mishnah, someone eating cooked beets does not recite a beracha on the liquid in which they were cooked, even should he drink some of the liquid by itself. A similar case is someone eating breakfast cereal and has some milk left in his bowl; he does not recite a beracha on the milk that is left. However, the Gemara extends the Mishnah's ruling, teaching that even without eating any beets, the beracha on the water in which the beets were cooked is the same beracha as that of the beets, because the beets are still considered the ikar.

The Rambam (Hilchos Berachos 8:4) qualifies the ruling of the Gemara: "For vegetables that are commonly cooked, the beracha on the liquid is borei pri ha'adamah, provided that he cooked them in order to drink the liquid, because, when it is common to drink the water of cooked vegetables, the liquid has the same law as the vegetables." The Shulchan Aruch quotes this ruling of the Gemara, although he omits the stipulation of the Rambam: "On the water in which vegetables were cooked, one should recite the same beracha that one would recite on the vegetables themselves, notwithstanding that you are consuming only the flavor of the vegetables" (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 205:2). Then he adds a different stipulation: "This is true only if the vegetables were cooked without any meat; if some meat was added, the beracha on the liquid is shehakol."

Ikar and tafeil

To explain this ruling of the Shulchan Aruch, we need to examine the laws of ikar and tafeil.

There are two general categories of situations included in the halachos of ikar and tafeil: (1) enhancers and (2) mixtures.

(1) Enhancers: This category includes food items where the tafeil food makes the ikar food tastier. Some common examples include: Cereal with fruit and milk; eating latkes with apple sauce; stirring herbal tea with a cinnamon stick; breading fish or meat (schnitzel). In all of these cases, one recites the beracha for the ikar; that is, the cereal, latkes, tea, or meat; and the tafeil is included.

(2) Mixtures: This category includes cases where one food is not specifically enhancing the other, but both foods are important. For example, someone eating macaroni and cheese, blintzes (they always contain a filling), cholent, kugel, or stew is interested in eating all the different foods that comprise the dish. The same halacha applies when eating soups, which may contain vegetables, meat, noodles or barley. In these cases, all the food items eaten are important and none of these ingredients serve only to enhance the rest. Although these are mixtures, they are considered one complete food item and therefore have only one beracha. Thus, the concept of ikar and tafeil is very different here -- it determines which beracha we recite on this food. The beracha of the ikar, usually the majority item, is the beracha on the entire item.

We will return to the concept of mixtures, but first I want to explain the concept of enhancers and how it affects the halacha regarding the water in which vegetables were cooked. The reason that the beracha prior to drinking the "water" of beets or turnips is ha'adamah, is because this is considered the enhancer of the water. In other words, the beet water (also known as borscht) is being drunk primarily because of its beet flavor. Therefore, if someone added meat to the borscht, the beracha becomes shehakol, since the meat flavor is now considered the ikar and the beracha on meat is, of course, shehakol.

Having noted how the Rambam understood the Gemara that taught that the beracha on "beet water" is ha'adamah, I will note a question on this passage of Gemara raised by other rishonim. An earlier passage of Gemara rules that the correct beracha to recite on the liquid squeezed out of dates, called date honey or silan, is shehakol. That passage then explains that this ruling is dependent on a dispute between the tanna'im

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, whether or not date honey is still considered "fruit" germane to the laws of terumah. The Gemara

concludes, in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua, that the honey squeezed out of dates has lost the status of fruit and is shehakol. This leads the rishonim to question what is the difference between date honey, on which the beracha is shehakol, and beet or turnip soup, on which the beracha is ha'adamah. The Ba'al Halachos Gedolos (usually abbreviated Bahag), who predicated the rishonim, writes that when the Gemara rules that the beracha on date honey is shehakol, it refers to date honey that was watered down, but the beracha on pure date honey is ha'etz. The rishonim explain that since the =posuk that praises Eretz Yisrael as the land of the seven special fruits refers to dates as devash, , the Bahag assumes that pure date honey must have the prominence of dates, presumably for the berachos both before and after eating it. Nevertheless, most rishonim reject the Bahag's approach and rule that the beracha before eating date honey is shehakol. There is also another opinion that the beracha before eating date honey is ha'adamah (see Hagahos Ashri, Berachos 6:12).

This returns us to our question: What is the difference between honey and beet soup? The rishonim and poskim suggest several possible distinctions, each of which results in a different halachic conclusion. Some understand that there is a difference between the flavor cooked out of a fruit or vegetable and that which is squeezed out. When cooking, a greater degree of the flavor is removed, and in the case of a fruit or vegetable that is eaten cooked, the beracha on the liquid extract is ha'etz or ha'adamah (Rosh, Berachos 6:18, as explained by the Tur and the Bach, Orach Chayim 202).

Another approach is that the beracha ha'etz or ha'adamah is recited on the liquid extract or soup of the fruit or vegetable only when the fruit or vegetable is usually eaten this way (Chiddushei Harashba, Berachos 38a s.v. Devash). There are fruits that are commonly eaten cooked, such as apples, quince, peaches and prunes, but few of these are eaten most of the time in the cooked state together with their liquid. Although the Bach (Orach Chayim 202 s.v. Ve'im bisheil) concludes that the beracha on the cooked liquid extract of any of these fruits is ha'etz, this is not the conclusion of most acharonim. Based on their understanding of the Rashba, they conclude that the beracha of ha'adamah was recited on the liquid of the beets and turnips only because these vegetables were usually served cooked with their liquid. However, for vegetables that are often served cooked without the liquid, the beracha on the liquid is shehakol. According to this approach, the correct beracha on the lentil soup that Yaakov served would be ha'adamah if (1) there were pieces of lentil still in the soup or (2) lentils were usually served with the liquid in which they were cooked. However, if the lentils were removed from the soup (or already eaten) and it was unusual to serve lentils with the liquid in which they were cooked, the beracha on the lentil soup would be shehakol. In either case, if there were still significant quantities of lentils in the soup (enough to say that the person was eating lentils and not just their liquid), the beracha would be ha'adamah.

Mixture Berachos

Above, I mentioned that there are two rules governing the laws of ikar and tafeil, types of mixtures, one governing the laws of ikar that are enhancers and another governing foods that are true mixtures. I have already explained the rules of the enhancers germane to vegetable soups. Now I will explain the rules that determine the beracha of a mixture.

There are three rules to establish which beracha to recite on a mixture:

1. If one of the items is clearly the most important, it determines the beracha (Pri Megadim, Orach Chayim, Pesicha Koleles, Hilchos Berachos s.v. Hatnai; Mishnah Berurah 212:1). For example, the beracha on chicken or meat soup with vegetables is shehakol, since the chicken or the meat is the most important flavor component in the soup.
2. When there is no most important ingredient, the beracha is usually determined by the majority item in the product. Thus, the beracha on a peanut bar containing peanuts, honey, and sugar is ha'adamah, since peanuts are the major ingredient. The beracha on a tzimmes consisting of prunes and sweet potatoes depends on which item is the major ingredient.
3. However, when the mixture contains one of the five grains, the beracha is usually mezonos, unless the flour or grain is included only to

provide texture (Shulchan Aruch 204:12; 208:2, 3). For example, flour added to thicken soup is tafeil.

Because grains are important, they are the ikar of the mixture even if they are a minority ingredient. For this reason, the beracha on vegetable-barley soup is usually mezonos. However, if the barley is completely dissolved, the beracha on the soup will be ha'adamah. Also, if you do not want the barley but a few pieces ended up in your bowl anyway, the beracha is ha'adamah, and the barley will be considered tafeil (Mishnah Berurah 212:1).

Similarly, the beracha on a trifle containing cake and ice cream is mezonos even if there is more ice cream than cake, since the cake is a grain product. However, the beracha on potato kugel that contains flour, bread crumbs, and/or matzoh meal to provide texture is ha'adamah (when there are visible pieces of potato). Since the grain product here functions only to hold the kugel together, it is tafeil and does not affect the beracha.

These rules are only for the five grains whose beracha is hamotzi when they are made into bread. The beracha regarding other grains and starches, such as millet, sorghum, tapioca, arrowroot, manioc and quinoa, is that if they are cooked or ground until there are no pieces left, the beracha is shehakol, even if they are the ikar. The same rule is true if these starches are tastier eaten raw rather than when they are cooked (Rema, Orach Chayim 208:8). Thus, a porridge or hot cereal made of kasha or millet will be shehakol if there are no pieces of the grain left, and ha'adamah if there are. The beracha on quinoa is, in most cases, ha'adamah, because it is usually not ground or cooked until the pieces completely dissolve.

Purees

What is the correct beracha to recite prior to eating fruit and vegetable products that no longer have their original consistency, such as apple sauce, jam, fruit puree, mashed potatoes, tomato paste and peanut butter? Is the correct beracha on these items borei pri ha'eitz/ha'adamah or shehakol?

The rishonim dispute this question, many contending that even a completely pureed fruit is still borei pri ha'eitz; a minority rule that the beracha on a fruit or vegetable that no longer has its original consistency is shehakol.

What do we conclude?

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 202:7) rules that the beracha is ha'eitz, and this is the ruling followed by most Sefardim. Ashkenazim follow the ruling of the Rema, who contends that one should recite shehakol, because of the safek as to which opinion we should follow. In practice, Ashkenazim usually recite borei pri ha'eitz when eating a product that has some of the consistency of the original product, as is the case of jam with recognizable fruit pieces in it or "chunky" or "natural" apple sauce, but recite shehakol before eating a completely smooth apple sauce or a smooth jam, where the fruit has completely lost its consistency (Mishnah Berurah 202:42).

However, since the reason we recite shehakol is because it is a safek, several halachic differences result. For example, someone having a snack of apple sauce and a beverage should make sure to recite the shehakol on the apple sauce rather than on the beverage. If they recite the shehakol on the beverage without specifically including the apple sauce, they have created a safek whether the obligation to make a beracha on the apple sauce has been fulfilled. This is because, according to the opinions that the beracha should be ha'eitz, they did not fulfill the beracha by reciting shehakol on something else.

Similarly, someone eating a fruit and apple sauce at the same time who recited ha'eitz on the fruit should not recite shehakol (and certainly not ha'eitz) on the apple sauce. This is because the poskim who contend that apple sauce is ha'eitz rule that he has already fulfilled his duty by reciting ha'eitz on the other fruit. In this situation, he should first recite shehakol on the apple sauce and then ha'eitz on the other fruit (Ben Ish Chai, Parshas Pinchas 1:16).

Some authorities rule more strictly, contending that you should not eat an item that is definitely borei pri ha'eitz together with an item that is questionably borei pri ha'eitz, such as apple sauce. This is because there

isn't any way to fulfill the need for reciting a beracha on both items without creating an unnecessary beracha. If one recites the beracha on the fruit first, then one has a safek as to whether he can recite a beracha on the safek item. However, if you recite the shehakol on the safek item first, then, according to the opinions that the beracha is ha'eitz, you have now recited an unnecessary beracha (Maamar Mordechai 203:3).

Candied ginger?

At this point, we will discuss the third of our opening questions: What is the correct beracha to recite on candied ginger?

The Mishnah Berurah (202:44) rules that if you dry and grind up ginger until it is not identifiable and mix it with sugar, the beracha is ha'adamah. Based on several earlier authorities (Terumas Hadeshen #29; Shulchan Aruch Harav; Chayei Adam), he explains that since this is the usual way that ginger is eaten, it requires the same beracha it would receive were it eaten as a fresh spice. Since ginger is a root, that makes its beracha ha'adamah.

This ruling is even more obvious relative to the candied ginger that is commonly made today, which is usually dried pieces of ginger topped with a sugary glaze.

Conclusion

The Gemara (Bava Kamma 30a) quotes three approaches for someone to follow should he want to develop into a true chassid, meaning someone who acts exemplarily beyond the requirements of the halacha. The first approach recommends that he become expert in the rules of damages and torts; the second approach recommends that he become expert in the themes of Mesechta Avos; and the third that he study carefully the laws of Berachos. The Maharsha (ad loc.) explains that there are three aspects essential to growing as a mensch – one must be good to Hashem, good to others and good to yourself. Becoming expert in the rules of damages influences someone to focus on being good to others; becoming expert in the study of Avos results in the individual understanding himself well; and becoming an expert in the laws of Berachos is a way to train himself to appreciate what Hashem does for us. Our attempts to observe the halachos of Berachos correctly demonstrate a small expression on our part to praise Hashem for even His seemingly small kindnesses to us.

Parsha Insights

By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

Parshas Toldos

The Power of the Voice

This week we read the parsha of Toldos. "V'ailed Toldos Yitzchak ben Avrohom {And these are the generations of Yitzchak the son of Avrohom}. [25:19]" The parsha then goes on to tell us about the birth of Yaakov and Esav.

During pregnancy, Rivkah was experiencing much difficulty, as the child seemed to be trying to run right out of the womb. As this was her first pregnancy, she asked other women who had already experienced pregnancies if this was normal [Even Ezra]. Upon being told that it was certainly not typical, she approached the prophet Shem to find out what was happening. Shem told her that she was carrying twins who would each father a nation. These two nations would be engaged in a constant struggle throughout history and ultimately, "V'rav ya'avod tza'ir," the older will serve the younger.

This prophecy that was revealed to Rivkah (but not to Yitzchak) proved to be a guiding light for Rivkah in understanding her sons. She was not fooled by the superficial righteousness of Esav. She understood that the continuity of Avrohom and Yitzchak would be through Yaakov. This understanding continued throughout their development but reached its climax when Yitzchak wanted to give the brachos {blessings} to Esav.

Upon hearing Yitzchak instruct Esav to prepare a meal during which he would confer upon him the blessings, Rivkah quickly called Yaakov. "Go and bring to me two goats and I'll prepare them for your father. You will bring them to your father in order that he'll bless you before his death. [27:9-10]"

Yaakov was afraid that Yitzchak would realize that he was being deceived. "My brother Esav is a hairy man whereas I am smooth (skinned). Perhaps my father will feel me and I'll be in his eyes as an

impostor. I'll bring upon myself a curse in the place of a blessing! [27:11-13]"

Rivkah confidently responded to Yaakov's worries: "A'lai {upon me} kil'lascha b'ni {will be your curse, my son}. [27:13]" The simple meaning being that any curse that might be given will fall upon me. I'll absorb it instead of you. However, the Targum Onkelos explains that Rivkah was actually revealing to Yaakov the reason why she was so confidently sending him to receive the blessings. "A'lai"—to me it was said through prophecy that there would not be—"kil'lascha b'ni" -a curse upon you, my son. The Rashbam explains that her confidence was based on the fact that she had already heard, while she was pregnant with them, that "V'rav ya'avod tza'ir," the older would serve the younger. The blessings therefore were clearly meant for Yaakov and not Esav.

When Yaakov brought the food to Yitzchak in order to receive the blessings, Yitzchak was a bit unsure. "Draw close so that I may feel you, [27:21]" he demanded. Rivkah had anticipated this and had placed wooly hide on Yaakov's hands and neck. Yitzchak felt the hands and exclaimed: "Ha'kol kol Yaakov {the voice is the voice of Yaakov} v'ha'yadayim y'day Esav {and the hands are the hands of Esav}. And he blessed him. [27:22-23]"

On a simple level, Yitzchak decided that the hands were a clearer indicator than the voice and he therefore went ahead and gave the blessings.

The Medrash explains that these words were actually a prophecy that came unknowingly from the mouth of Yaakov. When the voice of Yaakov is strong in his learning of Torah and t'filah {prayer} then the hands of Esav are weak and useless against him. However, if Yaakov's voice becomes weak (the first word, ha'kol, is spelled without the letter vav, thereby assuming the additional meaning of hakail, meaning light and weak) then the hands of Esav have the ability to rule over him.

The Medrash also offers an additional meaning. The power of Yaakov lies in his voice. The voice is that of Yaakov. Esav's power, however, lies in his hands.

This is illustrated very clearly later on in the Torah. As we were on our way to Eretz Yisroel, Moshe sent messengers to Edom (the descendants of Esav) asking for permission to pass through their land. He told them a bit of history, that they had been afflicted in Egypt and when they had called out to Hashem, "He heard our voices [Bamidbar 20:17]." Moshe was impressing upon them the fulfillment of our blessing/prophecy that our power lies in our voices uplifted in prayer.

Edom's response was not long in coming. "Do not pass or else we'll come out against you with our swords." You're flouting your blessing, we'll flout ours. The hands are the hands of Esav.

When I was a teenager, I was once walking along a main street near my neighborhood when a guy sitting on the stoop gave me a look. I returned the look, which prompted him to look even harder. When I didn't back away with my eyes he stood up and sauntered over to me. "I see you want to fight," he said to me. "Tell you the truth, I'd just as well pass," I responded. "No, you really want to fight," he said drawing closer. "No, I'm really quite fine without fighting," I answered. "No, we're going to fight," he prophesized, and started swinging. Well, we stood there like two idiots for about ten minutes, punching each other in the face until I guess he realized what I had realized right from the start—there was really no point in punching each other in the face for ten minutes.

What really amazed me and gave me a glimpse into a whole different mindset was what happened afterwards. It seems that during our slugfest, his ring had slipped off his finger. Realizing that, he turned to me with a friendly smile, congratulated me on a good fight and asked me to help him find his ring. I was incredulous. "Do you really think I could care less about you and your ring?" I told him in French and stomped away.

I thought it out and realized that for him fighting was a sport. It was fun. The same way my friends and I would enjoy really going at it in a tough game of basketball, he enjoyed punching and getting punched in the face.

Ha'yadayim y'day Esav {the hands are the hands of Esav}. An entirely different mindset. An entirely different blessing. An entirely different nation.

Let's remember who we are and where our power lies.
Good Shabbos,
Yisroel Ciner

Drasha

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Toldos

Death Wish

Esav. He represents so much evil. We know him as the hunter, the ruthless marauder, murderer of Nimrod and stalker of Yaakov. Yet, believe it or not, he had some saving grace. He is even considered a paradigm of virtuous character at least in one aspect of his life honoring parents. The Torah tells us that Yitzchak loved Esav. And Esav loved him back. He respected his father and served him faithfully. In fact, the Medrash and Zohar talk favorably about the power of Esav's kibud av, honor of his father. They even deem it greater than that of his brother Yaakov's. And so Yitzchak requested Esav to "go out to the field and hunt game for me, then make me delicacies such as I love, and I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die" (Genesis 27:3-4). Yitzchak wanted to confer the blessings to him. Esav won his father's regard. And even when Esav found out that his brother, Yaakov beat him to the blessings, he did not yell at his father, in the method of modern filial impugnation, "How did you let him do that!?" All he did was "cry out an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me too, Father!" (ibid v.34). Yitzchak finds some remaining blessing to bestow upon his older son, but the grudge does not evaporate. What troubles me is not the anger of defeat or the desire for revenge, rather the way Esav expressed it. "Now Esau harbored hatred toward Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau thought, "May the days of mourning for my father draw near, then I will kill my brother Jacob."

"May the days of mourning for my father draw near" Think about it. How did the love for a father turn into the eager anticipation of his death? The seventh grade class of the posh Harrington Boy's School, nestled in the luxurious rolling hills of suburbia, was teeming with excitement. The winter had begun, and they were rapidly approaching the beginning of the holiday season. The children had been talking about their wishes and expectations for holiday presents and were telling the class what they were going to get.

Johnny had been promised that if he finished his piano lessons, he'd get a new 800-megahertz computer. Arthur had asked for a real drum set and was promised it on the condition he gets grades of 100 on two consecutive math tests.

Billy had not been so lucky. He had begged his dad for a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, to which his father replied, "Over my dead body!" He settled. If he would write a weekly letter to his uncle in Wichita, he would get a motorized scooter.

The day came and all the kids had the chance to share their expectations with their peers.

"When I get two hundreds in a row, I'm getting a real drum set!" shouted Arthur.

"When I finish piano lessons, I'm getting the latest computer!" exclaimed Johnny. And so it went. Each child announced his goal and the prize that awaited him upon accomplishment.

Finally Billy swaggered up to the front of the class. "If I write my uncle I'm gonna get a scooter." He quickly continued, "but that's nothing! 'Cause when my daddy dies, I'm getting a Harley-Davidson motorcycle!"

Passions overrule sanity. They even overtake years of love and commitment. When one is enraged, he can turn against his best friend, his closest ally, and even his own parents! Esav, who spent his first 63 years in undying adulation of his father, changed his focus in a burst of emotion. Now, instead of worrying about his father's fare, he awaited

the day of his farewell. All in anticipation of the revenge he would take on Yaakov.

When passions perverse our priorities, and obsessions skew our vision, friends become foes and alliance becomes defiance. In the quest for paranoiac revenge, everyone is an enemy even your own parents. But mostly your own self.

Dedicated lezecher nishmat our zeida Avraham Yehoshua Heshel ben Yehuda Hacohen – 7 Kislev sponsored by Miriam, Josh, Tamar & Shlomo Hauser

Thanksgiving: Wholesome Holiday or Chukos HaGoyim?

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

One of the interesting aspects of being American and living in the 'Medina shel Chessed' is dealing with secular holidays. A day off of work, more time to learn, and suspended Alternate Side parking rules are always appreciated. Of these holidays, Thanksgiving is by far the most popular among Yidden, with many keeping some semblance of observance, generally as a way of saying 'Thank You' and showing a form of Hakaras HaTov to our host country. Although all agree that showing Hakaras HaTov is prudent, on the other hand, it is well known that there were contemporary Poskim who were wary of any form of actual Thanksgiving observance. This article sets out to explore the history and halachic issues of this very American holiday.

Why Thanksgiving?

Americans commonly trace the holiday of Thanksgiving to the 1621 Pilgrim celebration at Plymouth Plantation, Massachusetts. The Pilgrims were expressing gratitude to G-d for a successful harvest after surviving a particularly harsh winter, mainly due to the aid of Squanto, the English speaking Native American, and the Wampanoag tribe, who taught them how to hunt (turkey) and plant (maize, a.k.a. corn) in the New World, and shared food supplies with them. A second Thanksgiving was observed on July 30th, 1623 in appreciation of an abundant harvest after a refreshing 14-day rain following a nearly catastrophic drought. Similar sporadic celebrations occurred locally throughout the New England area for the next century or so, but never on a national level until 1777, during the Revolutionary War, when 'The First National Proclamation of Thanksgiving' was given by the Continental Congress. In 1782, John Hanson, the first United States president under the Articles of Confederation (and mysteriously somehow forgotten from the history books), declared the fourth Thursday of every November was to be observed as Thanksgiving. Several years later, first U.S. President George Washington issued 'The First National Thanksgiving Proclamation' (under the Constitution), designating November 26th 1789, as a day of Thanksgiving. He did so again in 1795. Yet, it was not until 1863, in the midst of the Civil War [a.k.a. 'The War Between the States' or 'The War of Northern Aggression' (for the Southerners out there)], when the holiday as we know it was formally established by President Abraham Lincoln, at the urging and behest of Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of Godey's Lady Book, who was lobbying for a national day off from work. Thanksgiving has since been observed annually as a national holiday across the United States.^[1]

Although we can all appreciate the history lesson, nevertheless, our focus remains determining how Thanksgiving observance is viewed via the lens of halacha.

Chukos HaGoyim?

In Parshas Acharei Mos, we are exhorted not to follow in the ways of the local non-Jewish populace, "U'Vichukoseihem Lo Selechu."^[2] According to the Rambam and later codified by the Tur and Shulchan Aruch, this prohibition includes manners of dress, haircuts, and even building styles.^[3] Tosafos mentions that this prohibition includes two distinct types of customs: idolatrous ones, and those that are nonsensical; implying even if they are not done l'sheim Avodah Zarah, with specific idolatrous intent, they would still be prohibited to practice.^[4]

However, other Rishonim, primarily the Ran, Maher'i Kolon / Cologne / Colon (known as the Maharik), and Rivash, define the prohibition differently.^[5] They maintain that a nonsensical custom of the Goyim is only prohibited when it is entirely irrational, with no comprehensible reason for it, or when it has connotations of idolatrous intent. Likewise, following a custom that would lead to a gross breach of modesty (pritzus) would fit the category. On the other hand, they maintain, observing a simple custom of the Goyim that has no reference to Avodah Zarah, especially if there is a valid reason for its performance, such as kavod, giving proper honor or respect, would indeed be permitted.

Although the Vilna Gaon rejects their understanding of the prohibition, and the Gilyon Maharsha seems to follow Tosafos,^[6] nevertheless, the Rema explicitly rules like the Maharik and Ran, as does the Beis Yosef.^[7] Accordingly, they hold that as long as a custom is secular, with no connection to Avodah Zarah, such a custom may still be observed.^[8]

Most authorities over the generations, including the Mahari Kastro, the Imrei Aish, the Shoel U'Meishiv (Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson), the Ksav Sofer, the Maharam Schick, the Maharsas (Rav Shalom Mordechai Schwadron), the Mahara"tz Chiyus, and more contemporarily, the Seridei Aish (Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg), and Rav Ovadiah Yosef, zichronam levrachah,^[9] all rule in accordance with the Rema's ruling, that as long as one has valid reasons for performing a specific custom, it does not necessarily get classified as the problematic Chukos HaGoyim, unless its origins are rooted in idolatrous practice.^[10] [11]

Thanksgiving: Religious or Secular?

But to understand how this affects us and possible Thanksgiving observance, we must first ascertain whether Thanksgiving is truly a religious holiday or a secular one. Of the aforementioned Thanksgiving observances, all were declared as a unique day expressly designated to thank G-d for all of his 'gracious gifts.' This implies that it is meant to be a religious holiday. Yet, only the Continental Congress's proclamation made reference to the Christian deity. Additionally, there is no actual religious service connected with the day at all. Furthermore, nowadays, the vast majority of Americans simply associate Thanksgiving with food (mainly turkey), football, and family, and take the day off. This implies that its observance is strictly secular. Which is the real Thanksgiving?

Contemporary Rulings

As with many issues in halacha, there are different approaches to Thanksgiving observance. In fact, Rav Moshe Feinstein alone has written four different responsa on topic, spanning several decades.^[12] Although in the earlier teshuvos he seems to be against the idea of a Thanksgiving celebration (there possibly was more religious connotations involved in the early 1960s celebrations than in the 1980s), nevertheless, in his later teshuvos he does allow a Thanksgiving observance (he notes that it is not a religious celebration) with turkey being served, as long as it is not seen as an obligatory annual celebration,^[13] but rather as a periodical 'simchas reshush.' All the same, Rav Moshe concludes that it is still preferable not to have a celebration specifically for Thanksgiving.

Other contemporary poskim who allowed eating turkey on Thanksgiving include Rav Eliezer Silver, Rav Yosef Dov (J.B.) Soloveitchik,^[14] the Rivevos Efraim,^[15] and Rav Yehuda Herzl Henkin.^[16] They explain that Thanksgiving is "only a day of thanks and not, Heaven forbid, for idol celebration." They therefore maintain that merely eating turkey on Thanksgiving cannot be considered Chukos HaGoyim.

On the other hand, other contemporary authorities disagree. Rav Yitzchok Hutner, Rosh Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, is quoted as maintaining that the establishment of Thanksgiving as an annual holiday that is based on the Christian calendar is, at the very least, closely associated with Avodah Zarah and therefore prohibited.^[17] He explains that its annual observance classifies it as a 'holiday' and celebrating Gentile holidays is obviously not permitted.

It is well known that Rav Avigdor Miller was a strong proponent of this view as well, as Thanksgiving's origins belie that it was actually established as a religious holiday.^[18]

Similarly, Rav Menashe Klein ruled that it is a prohibited to celebrate Thanksgiving.^[19] Aside from citing the Vilna Gaon's opinion, which would outright prohibit any such celebration, he mentions that although the Thanksgiving holiday was originally established by Pilgrims rejoicing over their own survival, that they didn't starve due to their finding the turkey, and might not be considered Chukos HaGoyim, nevertheless there is another prohibition involved. The Shulchan Aruch, based on a Mishnah in Maseches Avodah Zarah, rules that if an idolater makes a personal holiday for various reasons (i.e. his birthday, was let out of jail, etc.) and at that party he thanks his gods, it is prohibited to join in that celebration.^[20]

Rav Klein posits that the same would apply to Thanksgiving, as it commemorates the original Pilgrim Thanksgiving, thanking G-d for the turkey and their survival, and would be certainly prohibited, and possibly even Biblically.

An analogous ruling was given by Rav Feivel Cohen zt"l (author of the Badei HaShulchan) and yiblich't Rav Dovid Cohen shlit'a (of Gevul Ya'avetz), albeit for different reasons.^[21] Rav Feivel Cohen takes a seemingly extreme position, maintaining that not only is it forbidden for a Jew to celebrate Thanksgiving, it is even prohibited for a Gentile to do so as well!^[22]

Rav Dovid Cohen, on the other hand, writes that for a Jew to eat turkey on Thanksgiving expressly for the sake of the holiday should be prohibited by the rule of Tosafos, as it would be deemed following an irrational rule of theirs that is improper to follow. Yet, he concedes that it is not prohibited for a family to get together on a day off from work and eat turkey together, as long as they do so not to celebrate Thanksgiving, but rather because they like turkey. Even so, he concludes that it is still preferable not to do so.

Trotting Out the Turkey?

With several differing major approaches to Thanksgiving advanced by contemporary authorities, which is the prevailing custom? Should turkey be on our plates this Thursday? The answer is that it depends. As shown, there are many authorities who maintain that Thanksgiving dinner should be avoided at all costs. However, many people do eat turkey on Thanksgiving, albeit many with non-Thanksgiving related intent. (Remember, even kosher turkey prices drop for the holiday!) Yet, it certainly seems preferable not make an 'exclusively for Thanksgiving' party. With Thanksgiving falling out on Rosh Chodesh Kislev some years, perhaps turkey may be served at a Rosh Chodesh Seudah.^[23] As is usually the case, everyone should follow his community practice and the lead of their knowledgeable halachic authority.

Anecdotally, my own grandmother, Mrs. Ruth Spitz a'h, would buy a turkey, but instead of serving it for Thanksgiving dinner, would rather save it and serve it l'Kavod Shabbos on the Shabbos immediately following Thanksgiving. This way one is not compromising on tradition nor halacha, and additionally receives the benefits of kavod and oneg Shabbos (as well as gaining the 'Mitzva' of saving money by buying said turkey on sale).

Although nowadays for many in Yeshivish and Chassidic circles the idea of observing even some semblance of Thanksgiving may seem an anathema, it is interesting to note that many authorities of the previous generation did not seem overly concerned. In fact, as is widely known, the annual Agudas Yisrael Convention, attended by many Gedolim, was traditionally held over Thanksgiving weekend for many decades, with turkey on the menu.^[24] Additionally, Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin's authoritative Eras Torah calendar (with halachos for the whole year) noted Thanksgiving along with other secular holidays.

Come what may, with Chanukah on the way, we can concentrate on the upcoming days of true thanksgivings, lehodos u'lehalach. In fact, although there generally is no need to be talking turkey while giving our thanks, nonetheless, this past year (5783/2022), due to a calendar quirk, turkey actually merited an honorable mention. You see, during Hallel on this past Thanksgiving - due to it being Rosh Chodesh Kislev - we all proclaimed "Hodu Lashem Ki Tov!"^[25] [26]

Postscript: Turkey - Fowl Territory?

As an aside, and although widely eaten among Klal Yisrael, the turkey's acceptance as kosher fowl is an interesting inyan unto itself, as well as a halachic and historic seeming anomaly.

The Torah enumerates twenty-four various non-kosher "birds."^[27] Since so many thousands of avian species exist, Chazal specify four necessary anatomical indicative features (simanim) that identify a specific type of fowl as kosher: an extra toe, a crop, a peable gizzard (meaning the gizzard's inner lining can be peeled from the outer muscle wall), and being non-predatory (doreis).^[28]

However, as the exact translation of the non-kosher birds listed in the Torah is unknown, as well as the fact that we cannot be assured of the absolute non-predatory nature of any given species of bird, many early authorities contend that we do not rely on our understanding of these simanim, but rather we only eat fowl when we have a tradition (mesorah) that this specific species is indeed kosher. Indeed, Rashi cites precedent from the case of the "Swamp Chicken" (Tarnegola D'Agma), with which even Chazal made a mistake, not realizing at first that it is truly predatory in nature (doreis) and therefore non-kosher.^[29] He therefore maintains that since we are not experts, we additionally need a mesorah to allow fowl to be eaten. The Rema, in fact, and concurred by virtually all halachic authorities, definitively rules this way lemalesha, that we may not eat any species of bird without a mesorah.^[30]

The issue is that our ubiquitous turkey is the quintessential as well as symbolic New World fowl,^[31] and yet, is eaten by the vast majority of world Jewry, even though a mesorah pre-Columbus would be a seeming impossibility. One solution, proposed by the Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, venerated Rosh Yeshivas Volozhin, permitting turkey to be eaten, is on the basis that it has been eaten by Frum Yidden for several centuries and is now considered as having a mesorah.^[32] Although there are certain prominent families, including descendants of the Tosafos Yom Tov and the Shlah, as well as the Frankel and Kamenetsky families, who are known to be personally stringent with partaking of turkey, nonetheless, it is widely considered not having any kashrus concerns and is indeed consumed by Klal Yisrael.^[33]

Additionally, and quite interestingly, we find that several Acharonim, including the Bach, Magen Avraham, Ateres Zekeinim, Ba'er Heitiv, Aruch Hashulchan, and Mishnah Berurah,^[34] understand the Yerushalmi's 'Red Chickens' (Tarnegolim Aduma),^[35] which we must distance ourselves from its excrement while davening,^[36] (as opposed to the understanding of red excrement from a chicken) to be referring to a turkey; giving implicit consent that it is indeed a kosher bird. (However, accordingly, and quite interestingly, it remains unclear how an American New World fowl was seemingly extant in Eretz Yisrael at the time of the writing of the Yerushalmi.)

In fact, the Chazon Ish ate turkey, based on a teshuva of his father's, Rav Shemaryahu Yosef Karelitz.^[37] Obviously, the mainstream opinion that turkey is considered an acceptable fowl is also seen by the contemporary poskim who allowed it being eaten on Thanksgiving, as otherwise there would be nothing to debate.

Come what may, at least, from a kashrus perspective, it seems that turkey, the All-American fowl, is here to stay.^[38]

This article was written L'Iluv Nishmas my beloved Bubby, Mrs. Ruth Spitz a'h,

Chana Rus bas Harav Yissachar Dov.

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[1]However, until 1942, when it was changed by a joint resolution of Congress, Thanksgiving was observed on the last Thursday in November, not the fourth Thursday. (The only practical difference is if there happens to be five Thursdays in November; otherwise, Thanksgiving remains the last Thursday).

[2]Vayikra (Ch.18: verse 3).

[3]Rambam (Hilchos Avodah Zara Ch. 11: 1- 3), Tur and Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 17: 1), based on the Sifra (Parshas Acharei Mos, Parshata 9, Ch. 13: 8).

[4]Tosafos (Avodah Zara 11a s.v. v'ee); answering the seeming contradiction between the Gemara in Avodah Zara ad loc. and Sanhedrin 52b).

[5]Rav Avoda Zara 2b s.v. Yisrael, Chiddushei HaRan (Sanhedrin 52b), Shu't Maharik (Mahar'i Kolon/ Cologne/ Colon Shoresh 88, Anaf 1), and Shu"t Rivash (vol. 1: 158 s.v. v'yesh and v'im).

[6]Birur HaGr'a (Yoreh Deah 178: end 7) and Gilyon Maharsha (ad loc. 1). The Gr'a is bothered by the fact that the sugya in Sanhedrin seems to imply differently than the views of the Maharik, Ran, and later, the Rema, that a Chok Goyim, even one that is not a Chok Avodah Zarah should still be prohibited. Others who ask this question and conclude tzarich iyun on the Maharik's shittah include the Minchas Chinuch (Mitzvah

262: 2) and the Maharam Bennet (Divrei HaBris; cited in Shu”t Imrei Aish, Yoreh Deah 55). However, there are those who do resolve the Gr”a’s difficulty, such as the Maharam Schick (Shu”t Yoreh Deah 165).

[7]Darchei Moshe and Rema (Yoreh Deah 178: 1). Although he does not cite either side of this machlokes in his Shulchan Aruch, nevertheless, in his Beis Yosef commentary, Rav Yosef Karo elucidates the shittah of the Maharak at great length and does not even cite Tosafos. Although one may infer that the Rambam (and later the Shulchan Aruch who codified his words as halachah) actually meant similar to Tosafos’s understanding, as the implications of the prohibition of not copying actions of the Goyim, is seemingly unrelated to actions smacking of idol worship (and that is what the Ra’avad was arguing on and ruling akin to the Maharak), nonetheless, from the lashon of many other authorities, including the Maharak himself (*ibid.*), Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzva 262), Mabit (Kiryas Sefer on the Rambam *ibid.*), Meiri (Sanhedrin 52b), Bach (Yoreh Deah 178), and Divrei Chaim (Shu”t Yoreh Deah vol. 1: 30), it is clear that they understood that the Rambam himself was only referring to actions that had some relation to Avodah Zarah. See Shu”t Seridei Aish (old print vol. 3: 93; new print Yoreh Deah 39, Anaf 1: 5-14) who explains this at length. See also Shu”t Melamed L’Hoyel (Orach Chaim 16), Shu”t Igros Moshe (Yoreh Deah vol. 4: 11), Shu”t Minchas Yitzchak (vol. 1: 29, 3 and 31), Minchas Asher (vol. 3, Vayikra, Parshas Emor, 33, pg. 197-205), and the Aderes’s recently published Ovar Orach (Shema Eliyahu, 275, pg. 271-272; 2003), who discuss the parameters of the prohibition of “U’Vichukoseilem Lo Selechu” and its nuances at length.

[8]Perhaps the most famous manifestation of this machlokes is the well-known one regarding festooning shuls with grass and/or trees on Shavuos. While the Rema (Orach Chaim 494:3) and Magen Avraham (ad loc. 5, s.v. nohagin) cite precedence for this widespread minhag from earlier authorities, the Vilna Gaon (as cited in Chaye Adam, vol. 2, 131:13, Chochmas Adam 89:1, and Maaseh Rav 195) maintained that this minhag should be banned due to potential violation of Chukos HaGoyim. For an extensive discussion of the topic, see previous article titled ‘Adorning the Shul with Greenery on Shavuos: Minhag Yisraelor Chukos HaGoyim?’ (see also Mishpacha Magazine’s Kolmus, Shavuos 2016, “Festooning with Foliage.”) Another interesting contemporary machlokes regarding flowers is whether planting flowers around a grave, ostensibly for kavod hameis, is considered a violation of Chukos HaGoyim. On this topic, see the Rogatchover Gaon’s Shu”t Tzafnas Panach (vol. 1:74), Shu”t Minchas Elazar (vol. 4: 61, 3), Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman’s Shu”t Melamed L’Hoyel (Yoreh Deah 109; also citing the opinions of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rav Ezriel Hildesheimer), Shu”t Minchas Yitzchak (vol. 1:31), Rav Betzalel Zolty’s maamar printed in Kovetz Noam (vol. 2: pg. 170), Shu”t Seridei Aish (new print, Yoreh Deah 108), Shu”t Yaskil Avdi (vol. 4, Yoreh Deah 25), and Shu”t Yabia Omer (vol. 3, Yoreh Deah 24).

[9]Erech Lechem L’Maharikash (Glosses to Yoreh Deah 178:1; he adds that in his opinion we may not categorize instances not mentioned by Chazal as potential ‘Chukos HaGoyim’), Shu”t Imrei Aish (Yoreh Deah 55), Yosef Daas (Yoreh Deah 348 s.v. v’hinei), Shu”t Ksav Sofer (Yoreh Deah 175), Shu”t Maharam Schick (Yoreh Deah 351), Duras Torah (Orach Chaim 494 s.v. v’nohagin and glosses to Orchos Chaim ad loc. 8), Shu”t Mahara”tz Chiyus (6), Shu”t Seridei Aish (old print vol. 3:93; new print Yoreh Deah 39, Anaf 2), and Shu”t Yabia Omer (vol. 3 Yoreh Deah 24: 5). Also of note, see Hagahos Maimoniyos (on the Rambam ad loc.) who maintains that we cannot categorize new items as “Chukos HaGoyim,” as those explicitly enumerated by the Chachamim are specifically due to a Kabbalah they had to include them as such.

[10]Rav Asher Weiss, the renowned Minchas Asher, in a recent maamar on the subject (“Shechitas Asavim B’Chag HaShavuos”; available here), adds that several Acharonim, including the Chasam Sofer (Shu”t, Orach Chaim 159; in a teshuva to the Maharatz Chiyus) and Beis Shlomo (Shu”t Yoreh Deah vol. 1:197) made an important distinction – ruling that even if a custom started due to goyim (i.e., a specific style of dress), once it is common for Jews to act similarly, it can no longer be considered Chukos HaGoyim. Rav Weiss illustrates this salient point with the minhag of Kaparos. Although the Beis Yosef (O.C. 605) cites the Orchos Chaim (Erev Yom Kippur) quoting the Ramban, that “shluggung Kaparos” is considered Darchei Ha’Emori, with the Tur and Rema (ad loc.); and in Darchei Moshe (ad loc. 5) defending this practice as a kosher common one, would anyone nowadays think that Kaparos is Darchei Ha’Emori? Has anyone ever heard of a single, solitary non-Jew waving a chicken around his head on an October morning? Quite assuredly not. Hence, even if a minhag may have started out as a non-Jewish custom, it possibly may no longer be considered as such.

[11]Furthermore, it must be noted that the Seridei Aish (Shu”t old print vol. 3: 93; new print Yoreh Deah 39, Anaf 2) at length proves that the Gr”a’s shittah actually runs contrary to the vast majority of Rishonim who conclude that unless there is at least a ‘shemetz’ of Avodah Zarah in their actions, copying them would not be a violation of Chukos HaGoyim. See also Shu”t Bnei Banim (vol. 2: 30) who writes that the minhag ha’olam is to follow the Rema in this dispute, as even according to those who generally follow the Gr”a’s psakim, that is only when it is a machlokes Acharonim. Yet, he posits, when the Gr”a argues on both Rishonim and Acharonim, then the normative halachah does not follow his shittah. However, there are recent Acharonim who seem to disagree with this assessment. For example, see Shu”t Mishnah Halachos (vol. 10: 116) who does take the Gr”a’s opinion into account (in his specific case) and seems to side with him. The Minchas Yitzchak (vol. 1: 29, 3), as well (in his specific case) implies that if all factors were equal, it would be preferable to be machmir for the Gr”a’s shittah. Rav Betzalel Zolty (maamar printed in Kovetz Noam vol. 2; see pg. 170) as well, regarding military funerals ostensibly performed for “kavod hameis,” after citing many poskim and rationale why it should not be a violation of “Chukos HaGoyim,” nonetheless concludes that according to the Gr”a it most certainly would be, and therefore such ceremonies should be prohibited.

[12]Shu”t Igros Moshe (Even HaEzer vol. 2:13; Orach Chaim vol. 5:20, 6; Yoreh Deah vol. 4:11, 4; and Yoreh Deah vol. 4:12).

[13]See also Shu”t Igros Moshe (Yoreh Deah vol. 4:57, 11) where Rav Moshe reiterates this klal not to add new dates and observances to the calendar. The Chazon Ish as well (Kovetz Igros Chazon Ish vol. 1:97), and echoed by the Minchas Yitzchak (Shu”t vol. 10: end 10) and Rav Ovadiah Yosef (Shu”t Yabia Omer vol. 6, Orach Chaim 41:6), famously wrote very strongly against setting new dates and obligatory observances into our Jewish calendar. A similar sentiment is expressed by Rav Moshe Sternbuch (Shu”t Teshuvos V’Hanhagos vol. 2:721), quoting the Brisker Rav, as well as by Rav Yosef Dov (J.B.) Soloveitchik (as stressed numerous times throughout his *Mesorah HaRav Kinnos*). An opposing viewpoint regarding commemorating the Holocaust was given by Rav Aryeh Leib Spitz (no relation to this author), former Av Beis Din of Riga, and later Newark, NJ, and renowned talmid of Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski in a maamar published in Kovetz Hamaor (vol. 262, May-June 1981).

[14]Nefesh HaRav (pg. 231). This author has heard from several talmidim of Rav Soloveitchik’s that he would go home early on Thanksgiving, but only after making sure to give shiur, which sometimes lasted several hours. Apparently, he wanted to show his talmidim that a secular holiday is by no means an excuse to take a day off from Torah.

[15]Rav Silver’s and Rav Greenblatt’s opinions appear in the RJ Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society (vol. 30, pg. 59).

[16]Shu”t Bnei Banim (vol. 3:37).

[17]Pachad Yitzchak - Igros U’Michtavim shel HaRav Hutner (109). Interestingly, Rav Hutner does not specify Thanksgiving by name.

[18]Aside from hearing this from several people who heard from Rav Miller directly, including my father-in-law, Rabbi Yaacov Tzvi Lieberman, Rav Miller publicly averred this in his famous Thursday night shiur (#529; titled ‘The Mitzvah of Happiness’): “What’s my opinion of Jews eating turkey on Thanksgiving? What’s my opinion of going to church on Thanksgiving? I’ve consulted three encyclopedias... Each one states as follows. Thanksgiving is a church holiday. Forget about a legal holiday, forget about an American holiday. It’s a church holiday. And it’s made for the purpose of going to church and holding services... I don’t ask Gedolim about Thanksgiving. I ask goyim what Thanksgiving is. And three kosher goyim wrote in encyclopedias that Thanksgiving is a church holiday, they’re my poskim.”

[19]Shu”t Mishnah Halachos (vol. 10:116). He does however concede on one point and clarifies that having a Thanksgiving seudah is not b’geder ‘Yaharog V’al Yaavor,’ notwithstanding what was written in his name on a Kol Koreh!

[20]Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 148:7), based on a Mishnah in Maseches Avodah Zarah (8a).

[21]The Rabbi Cohen’s opinions appear in the RJ Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society (vol. 30, pg. 59). Many of these Rabbonim have written letters on topic to the author of this extensive article, Rabbi Michael J. Broyde of Atlanta, Georgia.

[22]The Badei Hashulchan’s reasoning is based on his understanding of the Rambam (Hilchos Malachim Ch. 10:9), referring to the prohibitions of a Gentile to make for himself a day of rest akin to Shabbos or a Yom Moed. Rav Cohen posits that such a day is Thanksgiving which in essence, is an attempt by Gentiles to create a special day of festivities, and is therefore prohibited. However, it is not clear to this author why Thanksgiving should be considered similar to a Moed or Yom Tov, as there is no shevisas melacha involved with anyone’s observance of the day. In fact, there is no actual observance of the day. The Rambam’s intent regarding inclusion in the category of Goyim establishing a new Yom Tov would surely not incorporate the mere actions of sitting down to eat a specific food. As Rav Asher Weiss explains (Minchas Asher on Bereishis, Parshas Noach 11, pg. 66-67), according the Rambam, in order for a Gentile’s actions to qualify for this prohibition it needs to be a ‘sheviva l’shein chiddush das,’ and not just for rest (menucha); an example being where he would create a ‘Moed Gamur’ with its own version of Kiddush, Tefillah, and Mitzvos of the day, akin to a Yom Tov. This would certainly preclude Thanksgiving, which its observance meets none of this criteria. Perhaps this explains why the other machrim do not make use of this halachic rationale to prohibit Thanksgiving celebrations.

[23]See Tur and Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 419:1) and main commentaries: “Mitzvah L’Harbos B’Sedas Rosh Chodesh.”

[24]See, for example, Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetsky’s ‘Streets of Life’ column in Ami Magazine (#143, October 2, 2013, pg. 94, titled ‘Tagging Along’ and in Ami Magazine #195, December 3, 2014, pg. 100, titled ‘Let’s Talk Turkey’). This author has also heard this tidbit from noted historian Rabbi Berel Wein. Parenthetically, Rabbi Kamenetsky also mentions that his grandfather, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky z”l did not partake of the turkey, due to issues of mesorah. For more on this topic, see the postscript, as well as a previous article titled ‘Buffalo Burgers and the Zebu Controversy’ (see also Yated Ne’eman 19 Adar II 5774 | March 21, 2014).

[25]Aside from ‘Hodu’ meaning “Give thanks”, as well as referring to the country of India, in Modern Hebrew it actually refers to “turkey.”

[26]Interestingly, there may more to this minhag, even when Thanksgiving does not coincide with Rosh Chodesh. As related to this author by R’ Avi Brummer, as told to him directly by Rav Yitzchok (Irving) Chinn, longtime Rav of the Cong. Gemilas Chessed of McKeesport, Pennsylvania [see Shu”t Igros Moshe (Y.D. vol. 2:54) for a fascinating teshuva from Rav Moshe Feinstein to Rav Chinn regarding the permissibility of a erecting a JFK statue in tribute to the fallen president] and talmid muvchak of Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, that Rav Shraga Feivel was of the opinion that one should say Hallel with a brachah on Thanksgiving. This is due to the fact that the settlement of North America by Europeans allowed numerous Jewish lives to be saved over the centuries, and thus the celebration of such an event was worthy of being considered a Neis. Although this was not the official minhag of Torah V’Daas, Rav Chinn recounted that several talmidim did take it upon themselves personally after hearing Rav Mendlowitz discuss it. In the concluding words of Rabbi Brummer, “I’m not sure if it was meant as a full Hallel or a Chetzi Hallel. Now, Rav Chinn did say that this was a severely minority opinion, but it does further add to the discussion.”

[27]Vayikra (Parshas Shemini Ch. 11:13-24) and Devarim (Parshas Re’eh Ch. 14:11-21).

[28]Mishnah and following Gemara (Chulin 59a-61b). There is much debate among the Rishonim how to properly define these simanim, especially a “non-doreis,” as well as if the Gemara’s intent was that all four features are necessary to render a bird kosher, or if the three physical characteristics are sufficient proof that the fowl is non-predatory and therefore kosher.

[29]Gemara Chulin (62b) and Rashi (ad loc. s.v. chazyuha).

[30]Rema (Y.D. 82:3). The Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 82:2) actually rules this way as well, but allows several more leniencies (see ad loc. 82:3) than the Rema’s stronger language.

[31]It is told that Benjamin Franklin even wanted the turkey to be the official bird / National Symbol of the USA, and not the Bald Eagle. It seems he lost that vote. See <http://birdnote.org/show/national-symbol-turkey-vs-eagle>.

[32]Shu”t Meishiv Davar (Yoreh Deah 22).

[33]For more on the topic of the kashrus status of turkey, and its more kashrus-wise complicated companion fowl, the Muscovy Duck, Posen Hen, Guineafowl, and/or Cochin, and how they are/were viewed from a halachic perspective through the ages, see Nachal Eshkol (on the Sefer Ha’Eshkol, Hilchos Beheimah, Chaya, v’of 22:10; he understands there to be an Indian mesorah on the turkey), Knesses HaGedolah (Y.D. 82:31), Shu”t Shoel U’Meishiv (Mahadura Telita’ei vol. 1:149 and Mahadura Chamisha’ah vol. 1:69), Shu”t Chasam Sofer (Y.D. 74), Shu”t Divrei Chaim (O.C. 9 and Y.D. vol. 2:45-48), Shu”t Maharam Schick (Y.D. 98-100), Shu”t Tuv Taam V’Daas (Mahadura Telita’ei 150-152), Shu”t Ha’Elef Lecha Shlomo (Y.D. 111), Shu”t Beis Yitzchak (Y.D. vol. 1:106), Shu”t Yehuda Yaaleh (vol. 1, Y.D. 92-94), Shu”t Tzelosa D’Avraham (7), Shu”t HaRim (Y.D. 8), Shu”t Tzemach Tzedek (Y.D. 60), Shu”t She’elos Shalom (Y.D. 22), Arugas Habosem (Kuntress HaTeshuvos 16), Shu”t Ori V’Yishi (vol. 1:11), Damesek Eliezer (51:84 and Ch. 4, 12:73), Shu”t Binyan Tzion (vol. 1:42), Shu”t Dvar Halacha (53), Rav Yissachar Dov Ilowy’s Shu”t Milchemos Elokim (pg. 162-165; also citing teshuvos from Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rav Nosson Adler, the first Chief Rabbi of England; regarding the Muscovy Duck), Shu”t Avnei Nezer (Y.D. 75), Shu”t Michtav Sofer (Y.D. 3), Shu”t Melamed L’Hoyel (vol. 2-Y.D. 15), the Maharam’s Daas Torah (Y.D. 82:3), Shu”t Mei Be’er (19; who opines that the turkey actually came from India and even has a mesorah dating back to Moshe Rabbeinu), Zivchei Tzedek (Y.D. 82:17), Darchei Teshuva (Y.D. 82:26), Rav Yehuda Leib Tsirelsohn’s Maarchei Lev (Chelekh HaTeshuvos, Y.D. 30; regarding the Posen Hen), Shu”t Divrei Malkiel (vol. 4:56), Rav Yosef Aharon Teren of Argentina’s Zecher Yosef (pg. 1a-6b; regarding the Muscovy Duck), Shu”t Nishmas Chaim (Y.D. 63), Kaf Hachaim (Y.D. 82:21), Shu”t Igros Moshe (Y.D. vol. 1:34; also citing the opinions of Rav Naftali Carlebach and Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin; regarding the Posen Hen), Shu”t Har Tzvi (Y.D. 75; regarding the Muscovy Duck), Shu”t Minchas Yitzchak (vol. 5:31), Kovetz Mesorah (vol. 3, pg. 60-65; in a maamar from the Beis Avi, Rav Yitzchak Isaac Liebes, regarding Rock Cornish Hens), Rav Yisroel Belsky’s Shu”t Shulchan Halevi (Ch. 19:1; pg. 169-170; regarding the turkey and vis-à-vis the Muscovy Duck), Rav Shmuel Salant’s recent posthumously published Aderes Shmuel (222; pg. 225-228), Sichas Chulin (pg. 429, on Chulin 63a; who astoundingly posits that the turkey mesorah possibly came from the Ten Lost Tribes who might have been early Native Americans, as per Rav Menashé ben Yisrael’s unsubstantiated theory (in his seminal Mikveh Yisrael), who then contacted Indian and English Poskim!), and Rav Yaakov Yedidyah Adani’s fascinating halachic history of the Muscovy Duck, published in Kovetz Eitz Chaim (vol. 26; Elul 5776, pg. 430-455). The mainstream opinion that turkey is considered an acceptable fowl is also seen by the contemporary Poskim who allowed it being eaten on Thanksgiving.

[34]See Bach (O.C. 79, s.v. kasav Beis Yosef), Magen Avraham (ad loc. 14), Ateres Zekeinim (ad loc.), Ba’er Heitiv (ad loc. 12), Aruch Hashulchan (ad loc. 16), and Mishnah Berurah (ad loc. 26).

[35]Yerushalmi (Eruvin Ch. 3, Halacha 5).

[36]See Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 79:6).

[37]This teshuva was recently published in Shu”t V’Chiddushim Chazon Ish (132); see also Orchos Rabbeinu (new edition - 5775; vol. 4, pg. 9, 1).

[38]See Rabbi Ari Zivotofsky’s excellent and thorough treatment of the Turkey at Kashrut.com. Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L’iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R’ Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R’ Boruch Yehuda.

There Is No Other Hand

By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Can I deny everything I believe in?

On the other hand, can I deny my own child?

On the other hand how can I turn my back on my faith, my people? If I try to bend that far I will break.

On the other hand...

There is no other hand.

-- Fiddler on the Roof

If you are familiar with my speeches, classes, and writings, you know I am a big believer and fierce advocate of the importance of nuance and using more careful language in our conversations, debates, and dialogues. Much of our divisiveness and disunity is the result of speaking in absolutes with too much confidence, too little nuance, and the inability or unwillingness to look at other perspectives.

And yet, there are certain issues, events, and people that are clear as day, and the introduction of nuance or the use of a tolerant approach isn't noble or righteous, it is cruel and irresponsible. As Tevye memorably puts it, there is no other hand.

Most of the time we should strive to live in the gray, to respect that there are opinions and approaches we may vociferously disagree with but are still legitimate, within bounds, and espoused by those who genuinely believe in the safety, security, unity and eternity of our people. One can disagree determinedly with the Satmar philosophy and its approach to the State of Israel, but you can't argue that they work against the future or fate of our people. The Satmar community has said Tehillim daily since the start of the war and I personally witnessed the Rebbe gave a member of our community a beracha that his son serving in the IDF be safe, secure and successful in defending our people.

But there are also rare times that call for a black-and-white view, to recognize that being open, thoughtful, respectful of other opinions and approaches doesn't mean tolerating or accepting the opinions and activism of those who are working against our people, who don't share in our fate, who aren't consumed by our safety and well-being, even if they are Jewish.

While Israel is fighting a war on seven fronts, seeking to defend millions of innocent civilians against evil enemies who seek the destruction of Israel and the death of all Jews, Senator Bernie Sanders, who is Jewish, sponsored and led a campaign in support of a resolution aiming to block \$20 billion in sales of U.S. arms to the Jewish state. While he stopped short of declaring Israel of perpetrating a genocide (though he had no problem calling Israel's actions "atrocities"), he asserted that military aid to Israel violates U.S. law prohibiting weapons sales to "countries that violate internationally recognized human rights."

Despite the Biden administration rejecting the claim and actively lobbying against the resolution, nearly half the Senate majority caucus voted in favor, smearing Israel's war of self-defense and casting Israel as a villain on the world stage. This group included two Jewish senators: Sanders and Jon Ossoff.

I have spoken and written about not using my pulpit or platform to campaign for or against political officials. Again, there are times that call for a different approach. Remember these senators' names, work to ensure they are not re-elected, and hold them accountable for slandering the Jewish state and compromising the safety and security of our people around the world:

Sens. Dick Durbin (D-III), Martin Heinrich (D-NM), Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii), Tim Kaine (D-Va.), Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM), Ed Markey (D-Mass.), Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), Jon Ossoff (D-Ga.), Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Tina Smith (D-Minn.) Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), Peter Welch (D-Vt.), George Helmy (D-NJ) as well as Angus King (I-Maine) and Sanders each voted in favor of at least one of the three bills, while Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.) voted "present." Is it a coincidence that soon after the vote got the support of more than one third of the democrats in the Senate, the illegitimate International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, and Yoav Gallant, Israel's former defense minister, for war crimes committed in Gaza? Is it random that a few days after a prominent Jew holding high political office led an effort to demonize the Jewish state a Chabad Rabbi in the UAE, Rabbi Zvi Kogan Hy'd was kidnapped and brutally murdered by emboldened

agents of Iran? Is it a stretch to draw a line connecting the dots between prominent Jews not only failing to support but working against Israel, and enemies of Israel acting in outrageous and despicable ways?

There must be no nuance in recognizing that Bernie Sanders, Jewish or not, is dangerous and his views are entirely illegitimate. In fact, one can make a reasonable argument that his Jewishness actually provides cover for non-Jewish antisemites and other bad actors, who can (and often do) point to Sanders and say, "he's Jewish and he agrees with me." Failure to call things as they are would be putting ourselves in danger.

This danger is not limited to secular Jews. Neturei Karta, Aramaic for "guardians of the city," are anything but protectors of our people. Despite their external religious garb and presentation as observant Jews, they are dangerous extremists whose behavior—meeting with and hugging world leaders who seek Jewish blood, rallying in the streets to support perpetrators of evil, to name a few lovely examples—has excluded them from our people and ensured they have no portion in the World to Come. They, too, use their Jewishness in dangerous ways and provide useful cover for antisemitism. There is no nuance in rejecting, disassociating and marginalizing them.

There is no other hand when it comes to the extreme progressive groups like Jewish Voice for Peace and Rabbis for Ceasefire. These groups don't claim to be Orthodox and certainly don't look it but they are no less dangerous and illegitimate than Neturei Karta. They use their Jewishness as a convenient tool to advance their goals of supporting Hamas and their enablers. Like Neturei Karta, they provide terrific cover, as evidenced by Rashida Tlaib and other members of the Squad being all-too-happy to rally with them, meet with them, and attend their disingenuous prayer services.

J-Street, a self-described "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization, has advocated for the Biden administration to withhold weapons from the Jewish state, arguing that the United States needs to hold Israel accountable for alleged human rights "violations" before President-Elect Donald Trump takes office in January. Instead of educating the world about how Israel has gone to unprecedented lengths to avoid civilian casualties, this "pro-Israel" organization, led by "proud Jews," has been among the loudest voices of disinformation, miseducation, and distortions about Israel in the world.

Peter Beinart, a prominent writer and observant Jew who keeps kosher and learns Daf Yomi, has written shocking and shameful anti-Israel articles and columns for years, most recently taking to the New York Times to slander and attack Israel, describing the war as, "Israel's slaughter and starvation of Palestinians—funded by U.S. taxpayers and live-streamed on social media." He went so far as to blame the election results on Israel and by extension the Jews.

To be clear, I am not interested in name-calling. There has been endless debate since October 7 (and of course before then, too) about who is a "self-hating Jew," whether certain politicians are "kapos," and the like. To engage in those debates is to miss the forest for the trees. Coming up with the right term or label, and arguing whether or not Bernie Sanders is a self-hating Jew, an antisemite, or neither, is time not well spent. The focus should be in recognizing the behavior, calling it out, and working hard to counter any influence or voice these people have.

Since there have been Jews, there have been traitors to the Jewish people, including famous converts who led disputations and defectors who collaborating with enemies. In her article, *The Jews Who Fought for Nazi Germany*, Ellen Feldman writes: "What was the safest place for a Jew in Hitler's Germany? A cellar or an attic? A forest? At home with a well-connected Aryan spouse? The answer was in Hitler's military—in the Wehrmacht, the Kriegsmarine, or the Luftwaffe—at least until the tide of war turned and all three began to suffer staggering losses." She documents Jews who fought alongside the Nazis against the Jews for diverse motivations and for different reasons.

While their behavior is inexcusable, Jews who conspired with or aided the Nazis could at least argue they were trying to save their lives. What could Bernie Sanders, Jon Ossoff, Neturei Karta, J-Street, Rabbis for Peace, or Peter Beinart say compels them to vilify of the Jewish state and justifies their efforts to hamper its ability to defend its people? It is

disingenuous and dangerous for these people and groups to blame Israel for the suffering—including the suffering inflicted on the Palestinian civilians whom they claim to care about—that is caused by Hamas, who started this war with a heinous, bloodthirsty pogrom, and can end it immediately by returning hostages and laying down their guns.

We read every Friday night, “ohavei Hashem sin’u rah,” those who truly love Hashem hate and reject evil and wrongdoing. Dovid HaMelech does not encourage us to hate the individual, but rather his choices. However, there are times when we can’t and shouldn’t separate the person from the choices they make and if we truly love Hashem, justice, and the Jewish people then we cannot and must not tolerate or accept the perpetration of that wrongdoing. There are times for nuance and balance and time for moral clarity and clear lines.

In the days of Rabban Gamliel, Jewish traitors posed a threat to the nation. Shmuel HaKatan was recruited to author a prayer, a 19th blessing to be added to the Amidah that their nefarious and slanderous plans be unsuccessful. Shmuel was called “HaKatan” because he maintained his childlike innocence, purity and love. He was chosen to write this blessing because he had no ulterior motive or agenda in doing so. It didn’t serve him politically, financially, or socially. Indeed, he is the one quoted in Pirkei Avos who most embodied the dictum in Mishlei (24:17), “Do not take joy in the downfall of your enemies.” He was chosen because his intent was pure and unblemished.

We must remain committed to nuance in our discussions, conversations, debates, and dialogues with one another. Indeed, Shlomo HaMelech taught (Mishlei 18:21), “Maves v’chaim b’yad lashon, Death and life and in the power of the tongue.” Our language matters and it can be the difference between life and death.

But in these times when the future and wellbeing of our people is at stake, we must also have moral clarity, to hate evil, call it out, work against it, even when it is from within our people. To recognize when there is no other hand.

When you say V’lamalshinim, mean it.

Toldot: Jacob Rescued Abraham

Rav Kook Torah

According to an intriguing Midrash (Tanchuma Toldot 4), Abraham would not have made it out of his hometown of Ur Casdim alive were it not for the intervention of his grandson Jacob. King Nimrod ordered Abraham to be thrown into a fiery furnace because of Abraham’s rejection of idolatry. But Jacob came to the rescue, as it says:

“So said God to the House of Jacob who redeemed Abraham: Jacob will not be ashamed, nor will his face become pale.” (Isaiah 29:22)

Even given the poetic license of Midrashic literature, Jacob could not have literally rescued his grandfather in an incident that took place before Jacob was born. Rather, the Sages wanted to teach us that Abraham was saved due to some special merit or quality his grandson Jacob possessed. What was this quality?

Two Paths of Change

There are two paths of spiritual growth that one may take. The first path is one of sudden, radical change, usually the result of some external catalyst. One example of such a transformation may be found in the story of King Saul. The prophet Samuel informed Saul that he would meet a band of prophets playing musical instruments. This encounter, the prophet told Saul, will be a turning point in your life. “The spirit of God will suddenly come over you, and you will prophesize with them. And you will be transformed into a different person” (I Samuel 10:6). The second path is one of slow, deliberate growth. We attain this gradual change through our own toil; it does not require an external stimulus and thus is always accessible.

But why are there two different paths of change available to us? If God provided us with two paths, then clearly both are needed. We should first prepare ourselves and advance as much as possible through our own efforts. After we have attained

the highest level that we are capable of reaching, we may then benefit from unexpected inspiration from the inner recesses of our soul.

Abraham was a spiritual revolutionary, initiating a revolt against the idolatry of his generation. Abraham is the archetype of radical change. The defining moments of his life were dramatic events of astonishing dedication and self-sacrifice, such as his brit milah (circumcision) at an advanced age, and the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac. In the merit of Abraham’s far-reaching spiritual a his descendants inherited those soul-qualities which foster sudden transformation. Future generations, however, cannot rely solely on Abraham’s style of radical change. As a normative path for all times, we need the method of gradual spiritual growth. The model for this type of change is Jacob. Unlike his grandfather, Jacob never underwent sudden transformations of personality or direction. Rather, the Torah characterizes him as “a quiet, scholarly man, dwelling in tents” (Gen. 25:27). Jacob’s place was in the tents of Torah. He worked on himself step by step, growing through perseverance and diligence in Torah study.

Two Names for Jerusalem

The Midrash teaches that the name Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) is a combination of two names, indicating that the holy city possesses qualities represented by both names. Abraham called the city Yireh, while Malki-Tzedek called it Shalem. Not wanting to offend either of these righteous men, God combined both names together, naming the city Yeru-shalayim (Breishit Rabbah 56:10).

What does the name Yireh mean? The holy city, particularly the Temple, had a profound impact on all who experienced its unique sanctity. This profound spiritual encounter is described as a form of sublime perception — “Your eyes will see your Teacher” (Isaiah 30:20). This elevated vision inspired visitors to reach beyond their ordinary spiritual capabilities. Due to the spiritual transformation effected by perceiving Jerusalem’s holiness, Abraham named the city Yireh — “he will see.”

Malki-Tzedek, on the other hand, referred to the city’s qualities which assist those who seek to perfect themselves in a gradual fashion. Jerusalem is a place of Torah and ethical teachings, “For Torah shall go forth from Zion” (Isaiah 2:3). Therefore, Malki-Tzedek named the city Shalem (perfection), referring to this incremental approach towards achieving spiritual perfection.

Jacob to the Rescue

Returning to our original question: how did Jacob rescue his grandfather from Nimrod’s fiery furnace? In what way will Jacob “not be ashamed”?

The Kabbalists explain that the goal of humanity — the reason why the soul is lowered into this world — is so that we may perfect ourselves through our own efforts. This way, we will not need to partake of nehama dekisufa (the “bread of shame”), a metaphor for benefiting from that which we did not earn.

While this explanation fits the path of gradual change, it would appear that the path of radical transformation is an external gift that we do not deserve. Is this not the undesired nehama dekisufa that we should avoid?

Not necessarily. If we are able to take this unexpected gift and use it to attain even greater levels of spiritual growth through our own efforts, then there is no shame in accepting it. We can compare this to a father who gave his son a large sum of money. If the son simply lives off the money until it is finished, then the father’s gift is nehama dekisufa, an embarrassment for the son, reflecting no credit upon him. If, however, the son uses the money to start a new business, and through his efforts doubles and triples the original investment, then the son has certainly pleased his father and brought honor to himself.

This is exactly the way that Jacob “rescued” his grandfather Abraham. Left on his own, the most natural path for Abraham — whose revolutionary soul called for sudden, drastic change — would have been to achieve complete and absolute self-sacrifice in Nimrod’s fiery furnace. It was Jacob’s trait of gradual change that saved Abraham from the fate of martyrdom. Abraham adopted the path of measured spiritual change which his grandson Jacob exemplified. Abraham left the furnace, and over the years worked diligently to attain the spiritual elevation that he had relinquished inside Nimrod’s furnace.

Why bother with the slower path? “Jacob will not be ashamed.” By growing slowly through our own efforts, the spiritual gifts of radical change are no longer an embarrassing nehama dekisufa, but an honorable gift which we have utilized to the fullest.

לע”נ

שרה מושא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביליא בת (אריה) ליב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל

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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Parshat Toldot: Ya'akov the "Smooth Man"

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

First, some questions we will not answer:

1. Our parsha 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 parsha 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

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