

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

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

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**May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We celebrate the return of our living hostages and mourn those of our people who perished during the last two years. May a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.**

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I am writing a week before Thanksgiving (in French, le jour de Merci Donnant). Several of the Devrei Torah below this week focus on eliminating strife among neighbors (individual families or nearby cultures), so the theme of Thanksgiving fits in well with the parsha. Thanksgiving started as a way for the immigrants to the colonies to interact peacefully with the native people and share their appreciation for the bounty of excellent harvest seasons. Economic theory suggests that conditions were ideal for highly productive agriculture. For any given amount of labor resources, the greater the complementary resources available (e. g., plenty of rich farming land), the greater the productivity of labor. When Yitzhak moved into an area that had not been farmed for many years, Hashem blessed him with 100 fold returns – amazing productivity. The colonists had a similar (in type) experience, much greater returns than they would have expected based on experiences in long cultivated land in England.

The colonists faced strife with the native residents. Similarly, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov all faced difficult relations with neighboring Canaanite, Egyptian, and Philistine rulers. In particular, Yitzhak repeated many of the struggles that Avraham faced – for example, protecting his wife from Avimelech and digging the wells that his father had dug a generation earlier (only to have the locals claim the wells as their property). Yitzhak did not thrive until he repeated the lesson that Avraham had learned: God sent him riches only to enable Yitzhak to move around and tell neighboring people about Hashem and how to live a moral life.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel observes that in solidifying Avraham's religious innovations, Yitzhak sometimes succeeded better than his father had. Avraham did not pray to God to send him a son. He waited until Hashem told him that it was time. Yitzhak, however, prays to Hashem for Rivka to be fertile, and God responds immediately. Rabbi Angel adds that Yitzhak asserts grievances to Avimelech, obtains peace, and grants only an oath rather than a full covenant. The Philistines violated their covenant with Avraham, but they observed and obeyed the terms of their peace with Yitzhak. Avraham initiated his religious innovations and relations with his neighbors. Yitzhak solidified his father's innovations and may have been even more successful dealing with neighboring tribes.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander brings the parsha later in history by looking at the legacies of Esav and Yaakov. For most of history, Esav's descendants, Edom and later Rome, considered Jews to be a threat to their religion. For two thousand years, the Catholic Church viewed Jews as a threat to the legitimacy of Christian theology. It was only with the 1965 Nostra Aetate declaration that the Church rejected the view that Jews killed Jesus. The Catholic Church and most Christian sects now recognize that Jews and Christians share a spiritual bond and should continue positive relations.

Rabbi Brander now hopes that the advent of the Messianic era will reunite Yaakov and Esav. Indeed, many of the strongest supporters of Israel are devout Christians – a huge change from two thousand years of history.

Yitzhak and Yishmael reconciled late in their lives and stood together to bury Avraham when he died. While they apparently went separate ways and did not see each other again, they lived in peace as adults. In more modern times, however, Yishmael (Arabs) and Yitzhak have had bloody battles. Arabs in and around Hebron engaged in a massacre on Shabbat Eikev in 1929. Hostility from Arabs convinced England to refuse to permit Jews to enter Palestine (legally) before Israel became a state in 1948. Descendants of Yishmael initiated the bloody massacre of Hamas that started on Simchat Torah in 2023. The official position of virtually every Moslem country is that Israel belongs to the people of Gaza rather than to the Jews. Even this week, the Prince of Saudi Arabia repeated that his country would not join the Abraham Accords or establish peace with Israel until the United States forces our country to set up a “Palestinian state” next to Israel.

While relations with Christians overall have improved greatly over the past sixty years, anti-Semitism is still strong in many pockets of the world. In some European countries, millions of Arab immigrants have moved the political center toward anti-Semitism. However, could one blame the strong anti-Semitism in Ireland on Arabs in the country? Moreover, the woke left elements in the United States, especially in many schools and universities, seems too strong to attribute to Moslems among their groups. More recently, we have seen some ugly anti-Semitism among conservative activists in the United States. To me, we are still fighting dangers from both Yishmael and Esav. Our tradition is that God warned us that our enemies would be coming to our gates to attack us. While anti-Semitism is more obvious and stronger at some times than others, I do not see this evil going away – certainly not in my lifetime.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezl Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, 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; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, 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.

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### **Haftarat Parshat Toldot: Yaakov and Esav, Shoulder to Shoulder**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \*  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

In this week's haftara, the prophet Malakhi opens his prophecy with an expression of divine scorn for Israel's older twin: “*Is Esav not a brother to Yaakov? So says the Lord: Yet I loved Yaakov and hated Esav, so I made his mountains desolate and gave his inheritance over to desert jackals*” (Malakhi 1:2–3). The prophecy, which continues the theme of conflict between the twins that is seen in the parsha, confirms what would become a central theme of Jewish thought from biblical to modern times: The rivalry and discord between the two ancient siblings prefigures a much longer and deeper

saga of conflict and distrust between two civilizations. Throughout history, the Jewish people would find themselves time and again pitted against the physical and spiritual heirs of Esav – first the small neighboring nation of Edom, then the much larger Roman Empire, and finally the titanic world of Christianity that supplanted it.

However, today, after centuries of persecution and suffering, developments in Christian theological thought, and changing attitudes among Jews about engaging with others, we may finally be moving beyond this ancient conflict.

The Christian world, especially the Catholic Church, with its epicenter in Rome, long viewed the tiny Jewish people as a threat – a living challenge to the legitimacy of the Church as the “*new chosen people*.” For this reason, Christian theologians from ancient times have insisted on the Jews being an accursed race. They celebrated the indigence, statelessness, weakness, vulnerability, and poverty of Jews around the world – and often reinforced these desperate conditions – as a putative testimony to what they saw as God’s favor of the Church and rejection of Israel. This stood in direct contradiction to the prophet Malakhi’s words, which favored the future of Yaakov and his descendants – the people of Israel.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, in his famous 1956 address and resulting essay, *Kol Dodi Dofek* (“*The Voice of My Beloved Knocks*”), speaks of several ways in which God, through the founding of the State of Israel, “knocked” or beckoned throughout history to the Jewish people to fulfill its historic destiny. One of these divine “knocks” was the fact that the State of Israel very existence was a repudiation of the two-thousand-year-old Christian narrative of supersession:

*The theological arguments of Christian theologians to the effect that the Holy One has taken away from the Community of Israel its rights to the Land of Israel, and that all of the biblical promises relating to Zion and Jerusalem now refer in an allegorical sense to Christianity and the Christian Church, were all publicly shown to be false, baseless contentions, by the establishment of the State of Israel. One must have a broad familiarity with theological literature from the time of Justin Martyr down to the theologians of our own day to comprehend the full extent of this marvel by which the central axiom of Christian theology was shattered.*  )p. 34(

This crisis of the Christians’ narrative about themselves is evident in many contexts, not least in the major sea change that took place in Catholic theology’s attitude toward the Jews in the second half of the twentieth century. In its 1965 *Nostra Aetate* declaration, the Church rejected the idea that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, and emphasized that Christianity and Judaism shared a spiritual bond and should continue to engage in dialogue. Nevertheless, even today, Israel’s relationship with parts of the Christian world remains fraught. In the complex web of international relations, the Church or the Christian world often exert pressure that is meant to tie the hands of the State of Israel in its fight against its enemies.

At the same time, there remains a hope for a brighter future. **The advent of the Messianic era has the potential to reunite the two brothers, Yaakov and Esav, in the recognition that different peoples possess different legitimate paths to connection with the one true God.** As the Rambam explains, Christianity, though historically challenging to the Jewish people, has also served as a vehicle for the introduction of God’s Scripture and ideas into the global sphere. ]emphasis added[

Ultimately, all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for the Messiah’s coming and the improvement of the entire world, motivating the nations to serve God together, as Tzefanya 3:9 states: “*Then I will transform the people’s language and turn their words into clear, clean speech so that they may call upon the name of the Lord and serve Him shoulder to shoulder*” )*Hilkhot Melakhim*, 11:7(.

The realization of this potential has indeed begun. Today, certain segments of the Christian community are some of the strongest supporters and allies of Israel, speaking a language that recognizes Jewish chosenness and the true ancient connection of our people to our land. With this as a model, we can perhaps begin to envision a time in which the tension and feelings of persecution that have poisoned two millennia of Jewish-Christian relations will be a phenomenon of the

past. Instead, through mutual efforts of dialogue, cooperation, and shared work, **Yaakov and Esav can become partners in building a better global society and healing its ills.** ]emphasis added[

This is a vision that Rabbi Soloveitchik had even before Nostra Aetate. In the early days of the State of Israel, he argued in his essay “*Confrontation*” (Tradition, issue 6.2, 1964, page 26) that the Jewish People may “cooperate with the members of other faith communities in all fields of constructive human endeavor,” on the condition that this does not entail any kind of spiritual, halakhic, or dogmatic compromise of Jewish principles. More than half a century later, as we move from conflict to redemption, we dream of rising even higher, to the level of commonality of spiritual purpose described by Maimonides through the prophecy of Tzefanya. At that time, we will be able to proclaim in truth that God’s will has touched all of the nations; in the words of our haftara: “*The Lord is great beyond the territory of Israel*” (Malakhi 1:5).

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

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## **Toldos: Again and Again Rather Than...**

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5767

*And Essau saw that Isaac blessed Jacob and he sent him to Padan Aram to take for himself from there a wife, and he blessed him and he instructed him saying, “Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan!” And Jacob listened to his father and to his mother and he went to Padan Aram. And Essau saw that the daughters of Canaan were bad in the eyes of Isaac his father. And Essau went to Yishmael and he took Machlas the daughter of Yishmael the son of Avraham the sister of Navayos in addition to his wives for a wife. (Breishis 28: 6-9)*

*That he took in addition to his wives and he did not cast out the bad ones shows that he really cared more for his appetites than he did the will of his father. (Ramban)*

*Essau is compared to the pig in that he extends his hooves saying, “See I am pure!” So the generals of Essau steal and commit violence and portray themselves as Kosher. (Rashi)*

Why is it necessary or productive for us to study the faults of Essau? The global answer may be that we find ourselves for two thousand in the fourth exile under the hegemony of Essau’s descendant Edom – alias “Red.” The more we can understand Essau’s modes of operation the better equipped we will be in recognizing his deceptive tactics in order to defend and distance ourselves.

What a rare window we get into the psyche of Essau. We can easily observe the perverse quality of his value system. Essau had spent his entire life tricking his father and the world that he was a holy roller. Rather than beautifying himself he was devoted to decorating the mirror and manipulating public opinion. Living in proximity to Essau we would have a hard time finding the fault line of his tragic flaw. Ultimately, though we can all observe the utter hollowness of his character. As devoted as he was to his father, supposedly, it was more about his own selfish agenda than anyone could presume. His entire campaign produced a world of sizzle but delivers a paucity of steak.

Whenever a statement in Pirke’ Avos is introduced with the words, “*He used to say*” – *Hu Haya Omer*” there is one approach that explains it to mean that he said it frequently and repeatedly. It was not a one time statement, a quotable moment. Another explanation can be gleaned from the opposite of the following example: A young doctor gave an amazing presentation about the dangers associated with cigarette smoke and everyone left the auditorium inspired, informed, and impressed. The very next day that same doctor was spotted in the street dragging shameless on a cigarette. He was approached with shock and dismay by one of the attendees of his lecture. He responded in a cavalier

fashion, “*What do you want from me? How is the value of my lecture diminished by my behavior?*” Whenever the Mishne says, “*Hu Haya Omer – He used to say*” it may be read more literally “*he was what he said*”!

Sure it was good for Essau to marry from a better family, but it was purely symbolic behavior void of substance. Mitzvos are not fig leaves to cover up violations. If one steals and gives a token donation, does that sanitize the bad behavior? Essau used Mitzvos to sway opinions as if “*perception is reality*” is his sole guide to morality.

The verse testifies that he saw clearly what his father really wanted him to do. He knew what was necessary to gain his father’s graces just like Jacob but he opted out on his own because it would interfere with his life- style. Then, rather than taking responsibility for his own poor choices he dedicates his life to persecuting his brother when it was he that conveniently chose that red- red soup **again and again rather than...**

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5767-toldos/>

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### In Praise of Yitzchak

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021

Who was Yitzchak? What was his life about, and what was the lasting legacy that he left for future generations?

The first verse of Parshat Toldot contains the answer: “*These are the generations of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham: Avraham fathered Yitzchak*” (Gen. 25:19). Yitzchak’s life can be distilled into this one fact: He was the son of Avraham.

The significant events of Yitzchak’s life, as told by the Torah, are those in which he follows in his father’s footsteps, as he repeats and re-lives moments of Avraham’s life. During his life, Avraham had claimed that Sarah was his sister, and so Avimelekh tried to take her as his wife. Yitzchak also claims that Rivka is his sister, and Avimelekh — perhaps somewhat wiser this time — also almost takes Rivka for a wife. Avraham had dug wells in the land of the Philistines; Yitzchak re-digs those same wells and re-dedicates them by calling them by the names that Avraham had given them.

It is hard to feel inspired by Yitzchak’s life. He is not the compelling visionary, the path-breaking pioneer, that his father was. And yet, as a people, we would never have survived and prospered were it not for our forefather Yitzchak and for all the “Yitzchaks” who followed him.

After Avraham, you need a Yitzchak.

After a visionary, you do not want another visionary. After the advent of a radical new religious worldview — a belief in a single, ethical God — the last thing you need is another worldview that is also radical and new. What you need, after all this excitement, is a little normalcy. You need to stop the pilgrimages and the wanderings, and to put down roots and settle the land.

For that first leader’s vision to take hold and get traction, the leader who comes after a visionary must ground that vision in reality. That leader must model how to sustain that vision so that it can continue in the next generation, and in the generations after that one.

Yitzchak took what Avraham did and made it into a fact of life, a structure of how we live. He translated vision into practice, and into the daily rhythms of life. He shepherded the next generation from charisma to custom.

To some degree, Yitzchak is a follower, not a leader. We would do him and ourselves a great disservice, however, to downplay the power of this role. As Derek Sivers teaches in his well-known TED talk, without followers, a leader is just a

kook. It is the followers — and critically, the first follower — who make this would-be kook into a leader, and who transform one person's actions into the start of a wider movement.

In this role as a follower, one can be a great leader. Yitzchak, critically, does not just follow the forms of Avraham's practice. He understands the vision and he works to keep it alive. After Avraham dies, the wells that Avraham had dug — the life-giving, nurturing sources that he uncovered — had become stopped up. It is Yitzchak's task to ensure that these waters — their energy and their power — keep on flowing, even when Avraham, with his magnetic charisma, is no longer around. As a leader, Yitzchak also understands that what inspires and what nurtures the soul for one generation will not necessarily be the same for the next one. For Avraham's legacy not to become ossified, hollow forms and new wells need to be dug. This time, they are new wells, with new names.

A famous scholar once said that tradition is the living religion of the dead, while traditionalism is the dead religion of the living. It is Yitzchak's leadership, his digging of both old and new wells, that ensures that Avraham's religious vision will translate into a living tradition rather than a dead traditionalism.

Thank God, in our millenia-long history as a people, we have had our Avrahams. In fact, we have had a good number just in the last century: Theodore Herzl, Rav Soloveitchik, Rav Kook, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, among others. However, it is the Yitzchaks — the ones who have continued and sustained our tradition, who have treasured it, taught it and passed it down, who have found ways to keep its waters flowing, who have dug new wells so that those wells continues to give life and nourishment to the soul — it is those Yitzchaks, with their follower-ship and their leadership, who have kept our Judaism alive throughout the centuries.

Shabbat shalom.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2021/11/in-praise-of-yitzchak/>

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### **Paired Perspectives on the Parasha: Continuity and Development: Isaac in the Footsteps of Abraham**

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel \*

The Book of Genesis invites readers to compare Abraham and Isaac. Many of Isaac's experiences appear to echo those of his father. Both patriarchs face the trial of a barren wife; both encounter famine and seek sustenance beyond Canaan; both resort to describing their wives as their sisters when faced with foreign rulers; both contend with Philistine shepherds over wells; both forge pacts with Abimelech; and both give the name Beer Sheva to the site of reconciliation.

These striking parallels serve as a literary thread linking the two patriarchs while also raising interpretive questions. What does this pattern teach about the respective roles of Abraham and Isaac? Do these repetitions signal simple imitation, or do they instead reveal development and refinement across generations?

Classical interpreters often note Isaac's posture of continuity. Abraham is the trailblazer of covenantal life, the first to heed God's call, leave homeland, and champion ethical monotheism in a resistant world. Isaac, by contrast, is frequently described as the follower rather than the innovator. His role is to preserve and solidify the legacy that Abraham established. In this view, the Torah's repeated patterns emphasize the transmission of covenantal life across generations: faith is not only born in dramatic breakthroughs but also sustained in steady loyalty.

Contemporary scholarship has also taken note of this phenomenon. Rabbi Amnon Bazak, building on earlier literary readings, observes that the parallels between Abraham and Isaac function not only to demonstrate continuity but also to highlight meaningful differences. By placing similar episodes side by side, the Torah invites the reader to notice subtle shifts that reveal Isaac's distinct contribution. In Rabbi Bazak's formulation, Isaac does not merely retrace Abraham's

steps; he improves the path of his illustrious father. The second generation of the covenant proves not only faithful but also maturing, refining, and strengthening the foundations laid by the first.

### **Prayer for Children**

The first parallel underscores this pattern. Both Sarah and Rebekah initially experience barrenness. Yet Abraham does not petition God on Sarah's behalf (at least not in the recorded narrative), whereas Isaac explicitly prays for Rebekah's fertility, and his prayer is answered immediately (25:21). This moment introduces Isaac not as a passive successor but as an active spiritual figure. Ironically, when Abraham does pray for fertility, it is on behalf of Abimelech's household (20:17), demonstrating Abraham's expansive concern but also highlighting the textual silence regarding his wife.

Isaac's prayer can thus be seen as an advance. He does not rely on inherited promise alone; he turns to God with personal supplication. The covenant matures from unilateral divine assurances to a more reciprocal relationship in which prayer helps bring the covenantal future into being.

### **The Wife-Sister Episodes**

A similar development emerges in the "wife-sister" narratives. Abraham twice preempts danger by presenting Sarah as his sister (12:11–13; 20:1–2). While motivated by fear for his life, these decisions create vulnerability for Sarah and require divine intervention. Isaac faces a similar crisis with Rebekah in Gerar, yet he adopts a more restrained posture. He only claims she is his sister after the Philistines directly question him (26:7).

The Torah's juxtaposition suggests that even within inherited patterns of behavior, small moral and relational improvements matter. Isaac stands in continuity with his father's anxieties, yet he exhibits greater caution and restraint.

### **Treaties and Wells**

The parallels surrounding political treaties are even more pronounced. Both patriarchs engage Abimelech, yet the differences are instructive. Abraham accedes readily to Abimelech's request, responding to the king's oath with a broader covenantal pact (21:23–24). Abraham gives more than was asked, even though Abimelech's men had previously seized his wells and Abimelech had taken Sarah into his household. A Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 54:4) and Rashbam fault Abraham for extending partnership where prudence might have counseled caution. The Philistines later violate this covenant, filling Abraham's wells after his death.

Isaac, by contrast, asserts grievances first, resisting a treaty until the Philistines acknowledge wrongdoing (26:27). When peace is achieved, Isaac grants only an oath rather than a full covenant. Strikingly, the Philistines do not violate their pact with Isaac, suggesting that his careful diplomacy yields greater stability.

Both patriarchs name the site Beer Sheva, but again Isaac's act carries a note of permanence: "*that is its name to this day*" (26:33), whereas Abraham's naming is not described with similar durability. The land itself seems to ratify Isaac's refinement of his father's example.

### **The Theology of the Second Generation**

These narratives reveal a consistent theme. Abraham is the pioneer who carves a covenantal path where none existed. Isaac receives that world and must decide how to live within it. His task is not to create but to strengthen; not to revolutionize but to root. In doing so, he sometimes exceeds Abraham's example. In prayer, diplomacy, and moral courage, Isaac models the holiness of continuation, the quiet heroism of sustaining and improving what one inherits.

Classical tradition and modern scholarship together illuminate this dynamic. The midrashic critique of Abraham's treaty underscores the theological expectation that covenantal leaders must balance openness with discernment. Rabbi Bazak's literary analysis highlights how the Torah uses repetition to teach growth. Together, they reveal a mature portrait of the

second patriarch. Isaac embodies the essential challenge of covenantal life beyond its founding moment: to honor tradition while refining it, to preserve legacy while advancing it, and to transform inheritance into enduring identity.

\*\* Yeshiva University and National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3386>

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## Confronting Hatred: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But no sooner had he re-established himself, Abimelech came after him with the captain of his army. Isaac said: “*Why have you come to me seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?*” Abimelech replies: “*We saw plainly*

*that the Lord was with you...Let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no hurt, as we have not touched you and as we have done unto you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace; you are now the blessed of the Lord."*

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

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

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

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

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

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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

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## **Toldos – The Magic Trick of Life**

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

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

The story of Yakov and Esav is a fascinating one. Although Esav was the firstborn, it is Yakov who wanted to live the righteous legacy of his father and grandfather. At age fifteen, he actually asked Esav to sell him the firstborn status. Esav agreed. From then on, their lives proceeded in dramatically different directions. Esav became a hunter, a warrior, and a robber, while Yakov became the man of sincere devotion and scholarship, and a paragon of moral behavior.

Later in life, Esav made a fascinating statement. He said, "Yakov tricked me; he took away my firstborn status." What was the trick that Esav saw in the selling of the firstborn? Yakov asked to buy it, and Esav agreed. What trick did he perceive in the deal?

I would like to suggest that the "trick" that Esav perceived can be understood through the lesson of a farmer.

A mentor of mine once pointed out that there is a great lesson that we should learn from the farmer. The lesson of the farmer is that you get what you put in. The choices you make in life will predict the results that you will experience. As the farmer knows so well: Planting barley won't produce wheat. Only if you plant wheat will you get wheat.

On a practical level, a person who chooses to specialize in a specific field will find that, with due diligence, he will become knowledgeable in that field. A person who chooses to lay tiles for a living, for example, will become an expert in the craft of his choosing.

The same is true with life skills and relationships. A person who spends an obsessive amount of time at the office (today, maybe a virtual "office") will probably impact his career in a positive way. However, such a decision means that other areas of his life will not flourish. A person who keeps more reasonable hours at work and spends more time with the family will see the result of his decision in increasingly meaningful family relationships.

Perhaps we could call it the magic trick of life. You get to choose what you want out of life. What you choose has a very significant effect on what the result will be.

Indeed, this concept of cause and effect is so obvious that one wonders why we would mention it. Yet, one of the great failings of mankind is that we often lack vision to see the natural consequences of our actions.

For example: when people who yearn for Jewish friends look to buy a house, it would seem that they should choose a house on a block that has Jewish neighbors whom they can befriend. When a person wants to become knowledgeable in Torah, it would seem that he should choose for himself a knowledgeable mentor from whom he can learn. Yet, often in life, we don't take steps toward the goals that are most meaningful to us.

In the story of Yakov and Esav, Esav thinks that Yakov played a trick on him. But what really happened is that Yakov made a different life decision than Esav. Their lives then reflected the consequences of their respective decisions. Yakov didn't play a trick on Esav regarding the birthright. A deal's a deal. But, Yakov did perform a trick... a "*magic*" trick. When Yakov committed himself to the righteous legacy of his father and grandfather, his life took a certain direction. By the time they were older, even Esav recognized the fruit of Yakov's labor. By choosing a life of Torah and morality Yakov had developed into a recognizably noble person, ready to successfully begin the Jewish nation.

Esav's frustration wasn't that a trick had been played on him per se. Rather, a trick was played right before his eyes. By choosing a life of lawlessness, Esav got to live a life of lawlessness. Now, when he looked at his brother's future, he was jealous. Yakov had spent the decades growing spiritually and was now ready to start a noble family. Esav lamented the moment when he rejected the status of the firstborn. In his frustration, he thought he could blame Yakov for his emptiness. In reality he had only himself to blame.

As we read the story of Yakov let us remind ourselves that much of life is a result of the choices that we make. Take a moment to consider what you would like to see for yourself and for your children. Take steps to ensure that the priorities that you have identified are reflected in the choices that you make. Keep in mind that what you do is probably what will happen. You have the power to chart the direction of your life.

A person who spends time with his family will, with time, be known as a person who spends time with his family.

A person who dedicates some time on Sunday to study Torah will be known, with time, as one who studies Torah.

A person who treasures Shabbos will soon be known as one who treasures Shabbos.

Try it. You'll like it.

It is called the Great Magic Trick of Life.

With best wishes 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](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.

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### **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>

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## **Toldos - The Bigger Picture**

By Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and then associated with the Savannah Kollel.

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## **Toldot – Rabbi Ovadia's Midrash on Toldot**

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

[Dear readers, I present here a new Midrash I have written based on my interpretation of Parashat Toledot:]

"*Rivka heard as Yitzhak was speaking to Esau his son*" – this is what is written: "*the days of my life were short and bitter*" (Gen. 47:9). When Joseph took Yaakov to see Pharaoh, Joseph told his father: "*I tried to make my dreams come true.*" Yaakov then told him: "*Tell Pharaoh, short and bitter!*" He was not talking to Pharaoh, but rather to Joseph, who served as translator, telling him that he should have informed his father that he was alive, rather than try to make his dreams come true. The same thing happened with Rivka. She had a prophecy through a foggy mirror (i.e. vague message), that "*the great one will serve the young one*" and did not know for certain who was the great and who was younger, since Yaakov was supposed to be born first. Not only that, the verse could also be read as saying "*the great one will be served by the young one.*"

All her life, that righteous woman was distressed because of this, since she understood the prophecy to be speaking of Yaakov. She saw Yitzhak showing affection to Esau and would voicelessly scream at him. Why didn't she reveal the prophecy to Yitzhak? Because when Abraham's servant came to her father and mother and said "*let the girl go with me,*" they said "*here is Rivka, take her and go,*" and all they cared about was the money, since Abraham's servant took with him to Haran ten camels' burden worth of precious stones and pearls. The only reason they wanted to have her stay [the next day] was that the servant gave them only sweets and pastries, and nothing of the jewelry. At that moment, Rivka thought to herself: no one listens to my voice! If I don't take matters into my hands, no one will!

Yitzhak also did not encourage Rivka to talk to him, since from the time his father put him on the altar, with hands and legs bound as a lamb awaiting slaughtering, he was filled with great fear and always had a harsh expression. He would not talk much with anyone except for his beloved son Esau, as though trying to atone for what his father did to him. Rav

Safrai )the Counter(, who used to count all the words of the Torah, indeed found that Abraham speaks 450 words, while Yitzhak utters only 179.

Rivka was eavesdropping behind the curtain, and she heard that Yitzhak was going to give the blessings to Yaakov. She immediately called Yaakov and told him to go and take the blessings for himself. When Yaakov heard his mother's order, he was terrified, his knees turned to water, and his bones started to clatter. He said: The Torah, which God will give us on Mount Sinai, says: you shall not deceive each other; you shall not steal; you shall not commit perfidy; you shall not stand idly by while one is suffering. How can I deceive my father and cause pain to my brother? Rivka then told him: but doesn't the Torah say "*honor your father and mother*" and "*revere your mother and father?*"

Yaakov was then in great distress. He said: woe to me of my desires and woe to me of my Creator! Woe to me if I speak and woe to me if I don't speak. I cannot disobey my mother since it says , and I cannot deceive my father since it says "*you shall not deceive*" and "*revere your father.*" Rather I will go to my father but will not make an effort to imitate Esau, and I am sure that a righteous man such as he will notice that I am Yaakov. This way I will passively do the right thing.

Yaakov then took meat and wine and went to Yitzhak, and Rivka meanwhile stood at the door. Yaakov was not able to hint to Yitzhak that he was an impostor for fear that Rivka would get upset with him. What did he do? He did not alter his voice or manner of speech ]and that's why Yitzhak kept questioning his identity.[ One should consider this: Esau and Yaakov were twins. How is it possible that one would not be able to pass as his twin? Rather Yaakov was trying to hint to Yitzhak ]that he was an impostor[, but Yitzhak did not get the hint, since the blessing was already ringing in him like a bell and seeking to get out.

Now see how much suffering befell Yaakov and his sons because Rivka did not talk with her husband. Yitzhak knew that Esau was a mighty hunter and that Yaakov was a simple shepherd, and all he wanted to do was bless Esau with sovereignty and Yaakov with Abraham's blessing. For he thought: I will not do as my dad, who drove Ishmael away from him, and caused him to marry in Egypt. I would rather have Esau and Yaakov as two kings wearing one crown. Esau will be the general and Yaakov the spiritual leader. Esau the king, and Yaakov the head of the Rabbinical Court.

Since he believed it was Esau in front him, he gave him none other than the blessing of sovereignty and said "*be a master to your brothers.*" Now Yaakov left and Esau came in, and he told Yitzhak "*let my father get up and eat of his son's game.*" When Yaakov heard these words, he knew right away that the one who just received the blessing was not Esau, since one's manner of speech was not the same as his brother's. He replied to Esau, "*Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.*" YOUR blessing, and not HIS blessing, since the blessing ]destined[ for Yaakov was Abraham's blessing. At that moment, Esau opened his mouth and screamed bitterly, and that scream remained suspended in heaven, waiting for the right time to come back. And when did it come down? At the time of Mordechai and Esther in Shushan, as it is written )Esth. 1:4(: "*He ]Mordechai[ went out to the city and screamed bitterly.*" Because the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves the deprived from the robber, and the gates of scream are never locked, as it is written )Ezek. 18:18(: "*one who deprived his father, robbed his brother, did not do good amongst his people*" and it is written )Ps. 103:6(: "*God delivers righteousness and justice to all who were deprived ]by robbers.[*"

Esau then decided to ask his father for a blessing. His father told him "*I only had one blessing ]for you[, and I have already given it to Yaakov.*" Esau did not rest until his father swore to him that if Yaakov's transgressions outnumber his merits, he will be subdued by Esau. Esau still held a grudge against Yaakov for taking from him the blessing of the abundance of the land and sovereignty over his brethren, and the hatred boiled in his blood as a viper's venom. Esau left his father and went to his mother to tell her the whole story. He said, "*I swear to God that I will take my brother's life, for coming at me with deceit and robbing me, and I only wait for my father to pass away.*" He did not know that she was the one behind the plot.

When Rivka heard that, she went to Yitzhak and told him, "*if Yaakov takes a Hittite woman for a wife, I will lose the desire to live.*" Yitzhak started crying and said "*I wanted to avoid repeating my dad's actions, and now I am just like him, just as he sent his son away and was criticized by his wife, so it happens to me.*" He then called Yaakov and told him to go to Laban. Since he did know what would happen to Yaakov at the house of Laban, he decided to give him Abraham's

blessing at that time, as it is written: “*Yitzhak summoned Yaakov and blessed him.*” And what blessing did he give him? Abraham’s blessing: “*He shall give you the blessing of Abraham; You and your descendants.*”

When Esau saw his father favoring Yitzhak to receive Abraham’s blessing, he was perplexed. He started thinking, saying “*when I was with dad he said that he only has one blessing, and now he gives a blessing to Yaakov? I wonder! Is it possible that the blessing is because he is going to marry within Abraham’s family?*” Esau then decided to marry another wife, in addition to his two wives, and then asked his father for Yitzhak’s blessing. He did know that Yitzhak had two blessings [only], one of sovereignty and one Abraham’s blessing, one for him and one for Yaakov.

Once Yaakov left Be’er Sheba, Yitzhak called Rivka into his tent. He started crying, saying:

“*Woe to the son who was expelled from his father’s table. Woe to you Rivka! Because you did not tell me that you wanted Yaakov to receive my blessing, you have decreed exile on him and on his children.*”

Rivka responded, “*Woe to you Yitzhak! You did not seek to talk to people and be engaged with them. Had you spoken to your wife every day, she would not try to deceive you and Esau, and would not have put her son Yaakov through these travesties.*”

At that time a heavenly call came out and told Yaakov: “*You deceived your father with a garment and a young goat, I swear to you, you will not leave this world before your own sons deceive you with a garment and a young goat, as it is written “they slaughtered a young goat and dipped the robe in the blood.”*

Shabbat Shalom.

\* 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 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.**

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## **A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community: Shalom from the Holy Land of Israel!**

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation \*

Shalom from the Holy Land of Israel! I feel so blessed to be here this week celebrating my brother’s wedding, it was truly amazing.

I want to thank everyone who helped Avital and the kids so that I could make this trip. We appreciate it more than you can imagine.

In this week’s parsha, we read about the birth of Yaakov and Eisav. We know that the hero of our story is Yaakov, our third patriarch. Yet, for reasons that seem puzzling, Yitzchak, our second patriarch, doesn’t see it at first. The Torah tells us that Yitzchak loves Eisav because of his strength, while Rivkah loves Yaakov, the quieter child who dwells in the tents.

Yitzchak understands how hard it is to stand up to the challenges of the world. In his eyes, to carry the future of the Jewish people, one needs to be strong, a “man’s man,” not someone who simply sits and studies. So in his view, Yaakov is good but weak, while Eisav is difficult but strong. Naturally, Yitzchak assumes that the blessings and the lineage should go to the stronger son.

But Rivkah knows that the nation must come from a place of goodness and purity – from Yaakov. Yet she also knows that Yaakov must develop the strength required to face the harshness of the world. The Midrash teaches that Rivkah receives

a prophecy that Yitzchak does not. She understands that Yaakov needs to embody both qualities of Avraham's lineage: the gentleness and kindness of Avraham, and the toughness necessary to survive, represented by Yitzchak.

Thus, when Yaakov goes in disguise to receive the blessing, Yitzchak feels the hairy arms and hears the gentle voice and says, *"The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Eisav."* In that moment, Yaakov embodies exactly what Yitzchak had been waiting for: the sweetness of Yaakov combined with the strength of Eisav. Only such a person is truly worthy of the blessings.

From this we learn that we, too, need a wide variety of tools in our toolbox. At times we must lean into the sweetness and gentleness of Yaakov, and at other times we must draw upon the strength that Yaakov later develops on his journey to becoming Yisrael.

B'Ahavat Yisrael.

]Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message? [

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

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## Rav Kook Torah

### Toldot: Abraham Kept Mitzvot

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

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

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

Abraham kept God's commandments?

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

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

#### Observing Eiruv Tavshilin

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

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

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

### Levels of Holiness

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

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

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

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

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

)*Sapphire from the Land of Israel*. Adapted from Igrot HaRe'iyah vol. I, p. 135 (1908); vol. III, p. 92 (1917).(  
<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/TOLDOT58.htm>

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### Toldot – Was Jacob Right To Take Esau's Blessing? )5774, 5775, 5782(

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

Was Jacob right to take Esau's blessing in disguise? Was he right to deceive his father and to take from his brother the blessing Isaac sought to give him? Was Rebecca right in conceiving the plan in the first place and encouraging Jacob to carry it out? These are fundamental questions. What is at stake is not just biblical interpretation but the moral life itself. How we read a text shapes the kind of person we become.

Here is one way of interpreting the narrative. Rebecca was right to propose what she did and Jacob was right to do it. Rebecca knew that it would be Jacob, not Esau, who would continue the covenant and carry the mission of Abraham into

the future. She knew this on two separate grounds. First, she had heard it from God Himself, in the oracle she received before the twins were born:

*'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 elder will serve the younger.'* Gen. 25:23

Esau was the elder, Jacob the younger. Therefore it was Jacob who would emerge with greater strength, Jacob who was chosen by God.

Second, she had watched the twins grow up. She knew that Esau was a hunter, a man of violence. She had seen that he was impetuous, mercurial, a man of impulse, not calm reflection. She had seen him sell his birthright for a bowl of soup. She had watched while he *"ate, drank, rose and left. So Esau despised his birthright"* (Gen. 25:34). No one who despises his birthright can be the trusted guardian of a covenant intended for eternity.

Third, just before the episode of the blessing we read: *"When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebecca."* (Gen. 26:34) This, too, was evidence of Esau's failure to understand what the covenant requires. By marrying Hittite women, he proved himself indifferent both to the feelings of his parents and to the self-restraint in the choice of marriage partner that was essential to being Abraham's heir.

The blessing had to go to Jacob. If you had two sons, one indifferent to art, the other an art-lover and aesthete, to whom would you leave the Rembrandt that has been part of the family heritage for generations? And if Isaac did not understand the true nature of his sons, if he was *"blind"* not only physically but also psychologically, might it not be necessary to deceive him? He was by now old, and if Rebecca had failed in the early years to get him to see the true nature of their children, was it likely that she could do so now?

This was, after all, not just a matter of relationships within the family. It was about God and destiny and spiritual vocation. It was about the future of an entire people since God had repeatedly told Abraham that he would be the ancestor of a great nation who would be a blessing to humanity as a whole. And if Rebecca was right, then Jacob was right to follow her instructions.

This was the woman whom Abraham's servant had chosen to be the wife of his master's son, because she was kind, because at the well she had given water to a stranger and to his camels also. Rebecca was not Lady Macbeth, acting out of favouritism or ambition. She was the embodiment of loving-kindness. And if she had no other way of ensuring that the blessing went to one who would cherish it and live it, then in this case the end justified the means. This is one way of reading the story and it is taken by many of the commentators.

However it is not the only way.]1[ Consider, for example, the scene that transpired immediately after Jacob left his father. Esau returned from hunting and brought Isaac the food he had requested. We then read this:

*Isaac trembled violently and said, 'Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed!'*

When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, *'Bless me – me too, my father!'*

But he said, *'Your brother came deceitfully ]be-mirma[ and took your blessing.'*

Esau said, *'Isn't he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: he took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!'* Then he asked, *'Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?'* Gen. 27:33-36

It is impossible to read Genesis 27 – the text as it stands without commentary – and not to feel sympathy for Isaac and Esau rather than Rebecca and Jacob. The Torah is sparing in its use of emotion. It is completely silent, for example, on the feelings of Abraham and Isaac as they journeyed together toward the trial of the Binding. Phrases like “*trembled violently*” and “*burst out with a loud and bitter cry*” cannot but affect us deeply. Here is an old man who has been deceived by his younger son, and a young man, Esau, who feels cheated out of what was rightfully his. The emotions triggered by this scene will long stay with us.

Then consider the consequences. Jacob had to stay away from home for more than twenty years, fearing for his life. He then suffered an almost identical deceit practised against him by Laban when he substituted Leah for Rachel. When Jacob cried out “*Why did you deceive me Jrimtanil*” Laban replied: “*It is not done in our place to place the younger before the elder*” )Gen. 29:25-26(. Not only the act but even the words imply a punishment, measure for measure. “*Deceit*,” of which Jacob accuses Laban, is the very word Isaac used about Jacob. Laban’s reply sounds like a virtually explicit reference to what Jacob had done, as if to say, “*We do not do in our place what you have just done in yours.*”

The result of Laban’s deception brought grief to the rest of Jacob’s life. There was tension between Leah and Rachel. There was hatred between their children. Jacob was deceived yet again, this time by his sons, when they brought him Joseph’s bloodstained robe: another deception of a father by his children involving the use of clothes. The result was that Jacob was deprived of the company of his most beloved son for twenty-two years, just as Isaac was of Jacob.

Asked by Pharaoh how old he was, Jacob replied, “*Few and evil have been the years of my life*” )Gen. 47:9(. He is the only figure in the Torah to make a remark like this. It is hard not to read the text as a precise statement of the principle of measure for measure: as you have done to others, so will others do to you. The deception brought all concerned great grief, and this persisted into the next generation.

My reading of the text is therefore this.]2[ The phrase in Rebecca’s oracle, *Ve-rav ya’avod tsair* )Gen. 25:23(, is in fact ambiguous. It may mean, “*The elder will serve the younger*,” but it may also mean, “*The younger will serve the elder*.” It was what the Torah calls a *chiddah* )Numbers 12:8(, that is, an opaque, deliberately ambiguous communication. It suggested an ongoing conflict between the two sons and their descendants, but not who would win.

Isaac fully understood the nature of his two sons. He loved Esau but this did not blind him to the fact that Jacob would be the heir of the covenant. Therefore Isaac prepared two sets of blessings, one for Esau, the other for Jacob. He blessed Esau )Gen. 27:28-29( with the gifts he felt he would appreciate: “*May God give you heaven’s dew and earth’s richness – an abundance of grain and new wine*” – that is, wealth. “*May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you*” – that is, power. These are not the covenantal blessings.

The covenantal blessings that God had given Abraham and Isaac were completely different. They were about children and a land. It is this blessing that Isaac later gave Jacob before he left home )Gen. 28:3-4(: “*May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples*” – that is, children. “*May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now*

*reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham*” – that is, land. This was the blessing Isaac had intended for Jacob all along. There was no need for deceit and disguise.

Jacob eventually came to understand all this, perhaps during his wrestling match with the angel during the night before his meeting with Esau after their long estrangement. What happened at that meeting is incomprehensible unless we understand that Jacob was giving back to Esau the blessings he had wrongly taken from him. The massive gift of sheep, cattle and other livestock represented “*heaven’s dew and earth’s richness*,” that is, wealth. The fact that Jacob bowed down seven times to Esau was his way of fulfilling the words, “*May the sons of your mother bow down to you*,” that is, power.

Jacob gave the blessing back. Indeed he said so explicitly. He said to Esau:

*"Please accept the blessing [birkati] that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need."* Gen. 33:11

On this reading of the story, Rebecca and Jacob made a mistake, a forgivable one, an understandable one, but a mistake nonetheless. The blessing Isaac was about to give Esau was not the blessing of Abraham. He intended to give Esau a blessing appropriate to him. In so doing, he was acting on the basis of precedent. God had blessed Ishmael, with the words "*I will make him into a great nation.*" )Gen. 21:18( This was the fulfilment of a promise God had given Abraham many years before when He told him that it would be Isaac, not Ishmael, who would continue the covenant:

Abraham said to God, "*If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing!*" Then God said:

*"Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation."* Gen. 17:18-21

Isaac surely knew this because, according to midrashic tradition, he and Ishmael were reconciled later in life. We see them standing together at Abraham's grave )Gen. 25:9(. It may be that this was a fact that Rebecca did not know. She associated blessing with covenant. She may have been unaware that Abraham wanted Ishmael blessed even though he would not inherit the covenant, and that God had acceded to the request.

If so, then it is possible all four people acted rightly as they understood the situation, yet still tragedy occurred. Isaac was right to wish Esau blessed as Abraham sought for Ishmael. Esau acted honourably toward his father. Rebecca sought to safeguard the future of the covenant. Jacob felt qualms but did what his mother said, knowing she would not have proposed deceit without a strong moral reason for doing so.

Do we have here one story with two possible interpretations? Perhaps, but that is not the best way of describing it. What we have here, and there are other examples in Genesis, is a story we understand one way the first time we hear it, and a different way once we have discovered and reflected on all that happened later. It is only after we have read about the fate of Jacob in Laban's house, the tension between Leah and Rachel, and the animosity between Joseph and his brothers that we can go back and read Genesis 27, the chapter of the blessing, in a new light and with greater depth.

There is such a thing as an honest mistake, and it is a mark of Jacob's greatness that he recognised it and made amends to Esau. In the great encounter twenty-two years later the estranged brothers meet, embrace, part as friends and go their separate ways. But first, Jacob had to wrestle with an angel.

That is how the moral life is. We learn by making mistakes. We live life forward, but we understand it only looking back. Only then do we see the wrong turns we inadvertently made. This discovery is sometimes our greatest moment of moral truth.

For each of us there is a blessing that is ours. That was true not just of Isaac but also Ishmael, not just Jacob but also Esau. The moral could not be more powerful. Never seek your brother's blessing. Be content with your own.]3[

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

]1[ Critical readings of Rebecca's or Jacob's conduct appear in several midrashic works: *Bereishit Rabbah*, *Tanhuma* )*Buber*(, *Yalkut Reuveni*, *Midrash ha-Neelam* and *Midrash Socher Tov* )to Psalm 80:6(. Among critical commentators are R. Eliezer Ashkenzi, Tzeda le-Derech, and R. Yaakov Zvi Mecklenberg, *Ha-Ktav ve-ha-Kabbalah*. All these interpretations are based on the textual clues cited in what follows.

]2[ For a more detailed explanation, see Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation Genesis: The Book of Beginnings*, Maggid Books, 2009, 153-158, 219-228.

]3[ This later became the tenth of the Ten Commandments.

#### **AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE: Questions to Ponder**

]1[ Do you think Rebecca and Jacob were morally justified in their behaviour in this story?

]2[ What does "We live life forward, but we understand it only looking back" mean? How does Rabbi Sacks use this biblical episode to illustrate this principle?

]3[ Can you think of any examples of this principle from your life?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/toldot/jacob-right-take-esau-blessing/> 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 Devar.

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### **Why and When Did Mourners Start Saying Kaddish Together?**

By Yehuda Shurpin\* © Chabad 2019

Nowadays it is common practice that all mourners recite Kaddish together. But this is actually a relatively new phenomenon.

In the past, only one mourner was honored with the task of saying Kaddish. This makes sense, considering that prayers are generally recited either by the entire congregation or by a single individual representing and leading the congregation. Kaddish is no different. The chazzan recites the Kaddish a number of times throughout the prayers, with the congregation answering "amen." "Mourner's Kaddish," which is essentially the mourner acting as the chazzan for that Kaddish, shouldn't be — and indeed wasn't — any different.

Now, what happens when there are multiple mourners, each vying for the coveted honor to say Kaddish in merit of their loved ones? There is much discussion in halachic literature regarding which mourner gets priority to recite the Kaddish, e.g., a mourner during the first seven days (even if the actual shiva was terminated due to a holiday) takes precedence over a mourner in sheloshim (the first thirty days), etc.

Nowadays, while some retain this original custom, in most communities all mourners recite the Kaddish together.<sup>1</sup> How and when did this happen?

#### **Avoiding Strife**

One of the first to mention the custom to have all mourners recite the Kaddish is Rabbi Yaakov Emden (1697–1776), who writes in his siddur that "with regard to various laws about who takes precedence for Mourner's Kaddish among the Ashkenazim, I will not discuss it, as it is only a custom) and how good and right is the Sephardic custom that if there are many mourners, all merit and recite the Kaddish together, avoiding strife and disagreement( . . ." <sup>2</sup> In other words, Rabbi

Yaakov Emden felt that it would be wise for Ashkenazim to follow the Sephardic custom of reciting the Kaddish together and thereby avoiding strife.

To clarify, there is a key difference between Kaddish recited during the prayers and the Mourner's Kaddish. Kaddish recited during the prayers at specific breakpoints such as before Barechu is considered essential for congregational prayers, while the other Kaddeishim, such as the Mourner's Kaddish, is considered custom, which started later on.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Great Cholera Pandemic**

The shift in this Ashkenazi custom can also be traced to the devastating cholera pandemic in the 1830s, in which hundreds of thousands of people died. Rabbi Akiva Eiger (1761–1838), one of the leading sages and rabbi in Posen at that time, writes:

*In the month of Av 5591 /1831[ when, due to our many sins, the cholera started here in our city, there were many mourners that needed to recite Kaddish. I enacted that the mourners should all recite the Kaddish together. That is how it was for one complete year. When the year was over, on the first of the month of Av in the year 5592 /1832[ and, with the help of G d the epidemic subsided, I established that they should no longer recite all of the Kaddeishim together, except for once each day, meaning that they recite together the Kaddish at the conclusion of the Shacharit prayers . . . ]<sup>4</sup>*

### **The Ashkenazic Cacophony**

Thus, what was once more of a Sephardic custom started becoming more prevalent in Ashkenazi communities as well.

At the same time, there were many who objected to this custom, for a very practical reason: Unlike Ashkenazim, Sephardic communities are used to praying together aloud in unison. So when it comes to Kaddish, everyone is careful to synchronize the prayer, as they would do with all prayers. When Ashkenazim attempt to recite the prayer together, they aren't careful about synchronizing, causing a cacophony of voices, and there is halachic rule that "two voices or sounds aren't heard [properly] at the same time."<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>

### **The Main Thing Is Answering Amen**

Rabbi Moses Sofer, known as the Chatam Sofer (1762–1839), is of the opinion that the main benefit of Kaddish is not the actual recital of the words; rather, it is the great merit of causing the congregation to respond with "amen" or "yehei shmei rabbah." This being the case, it would seem that only the first mourner to cause the congregation to respond, by either being the loudest or by reaching the responsive part first, would actually receive this merit. It follows that the other mourners would not be accomplishing anything by reciting the Kaddish, as they wouldn't be the cause for the responsive "amen." This would result in Kaddish becoming a competition of who could recite it the loudest or fastest, and should therefore not be recited by multiple people at once.<sup>7</sup>

### **One Amen for Many Kaddeishim**

Despite these objections, the widespread custom in most communities has become that all mourners recite the Kaddish simultaneously.

Many explain that according to halachah, even if one recited "amen" after the first mourner reached the responsive part of Kaddish, as long as the others reach that point within a few seconds,<sup>8</sup> that one amen is counted for all of their Kaddeishim.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, although ideally one should hear the actual Kaddish, as long as one is aware of what he is responding to, he can respond with "amen" even if he didn't hear the end.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time they caution that when many are reciting the Kaddish together, extra care should indeed be taken that all recite it out loud<sup>11</sup> together in unison.<sup>12</sup>

May we merit the day when G-d will wipe away our tears, and we will once again be united with our loved ones with the coming of Moshiach. May it be speedily in our days!

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 26: 18; Gesher Hachaim, ch. 30.
2. Siddur Yaavetz, Aleinu v'Kaddish Yotam.
3. See Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 55:1.
4. Pesakim u'Takonot R'Akivah Eiger, p. 63.
5. See, for example, Talmud, Megillah 21b.
6. See Responsum Binyan Tzion (by the Aruch L'ner) 122.
7. See Responsum Chatam Sofer, Yoreh De'ah 345/
8. This time is known as as "toch k'dei dibur," e.g., the time that it takes to say the words *שלום לך רبي רبي*, Shalom alecha rebbi, "Peace unto you, my teacher,"
9. Halochot Ketanot 2:48; Ba'er Ha'itiv on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 55:1.
10. See Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 56:4.
11. See Responsum Binyan Tzion 122; Responsum B'tzel Hachachmah 5:135, quoting the Sefer Hamachkim; see, however, Responsum Rav Pe'elim 2:14.
12. Gesher Hachaim 30:10.

\* Rabbi of the Chabad Shul in St. Louis Park, MN, content editor at Chabad.org, and author of the [Ask Rabbi Y](#) column. Emphasis added.

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### Toldot: Our Protection: The Merit of our Ancestors

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnfsky \*

#### Ancestral Merit

*G-d appeared to him that night and said, "I am the G-d of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bless you and make your descendants numerous for the sake of My servant Abraham." (Gen. 26:24)*

Notwithstanding Isaac's own substantial merits, it was only in the merit of his father Abraham that G-d assured him of success in life.

In the Temple service, the merit of the patriarchs was mentioned every day before the morning sacrifice, and we mention them in the opening paragraph of our daily prayers. This teaches us how important it is to constantly remember that we do not live in a spiritual vacuum; our lives are the continuation and fulfillment of the lives of those who have come before us, paving the way for us with their inspiration and accomplishments. The Torah itself tells us that we will be redeemed in the merit of the patriarchs.

Similarly, when we strive to be worthy descendants of all our holy ancestors – studying their teachings, following their examples of holy behavior, and abiding by their ethical instructions in order to forge our own relationship with G-d – their merit protects us from harm and ensures us of receiving G-d's blessings in the fullest measure.

\* — from *Daily Wisdom #3*

\* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parashat Toldot from our *Daily Wisdom #3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnfsky.

Gut Shabbos,

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

\*\* Rabbi Friedman's posting did not arrive by my printing deadline, so I am running an archive submission.

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## Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

### The Tragedy of Good Intentions

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

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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,

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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.

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

### Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

#### Rebecca's Choice – Deception for the Sake of Heaven

"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 right-

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fully 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 ohelim) 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 bekhorah) 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 leadership, and to the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Menashe – the physical blessings, the double portion of the bekhorah, 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.

### The Person in the Parsha

**Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

#### Do Parents Know Their Children?

It is commonly assumed that parents know their children much better than anyone else knows them. After all, parents have had the opportunity to observe their children from their earliest years, from their infancy, and in most instances observed them daily as they grew.

Many mothers will insist that their acquaintance with their children began long before they were born. Even before the child emerged from the womb, it became apparent to them that this child would be active, stubborn, and rebellious, whereas this other child would be calm, complacent, and cooperative.

As a parent myself and as one who has spent his professional life in the fields of education and child psychology, I have come to a very different conclusion. I now am convinced that relatively few parents really know their children and often are tragically oblivious to their child's strengths and weaknesses.

This week's Torah portion, Toldot (Genesis 25:19-28:9), provides us with a window into the parent-child relationship in general and allows us to analyze and speculate about one particular such relationship. You guessed it – I'm referring to Isaac/Yitzchak and Rebekah/Rivka, parents of the twin boys, Esau/Esav and Jacob/Yaakov.

At first, Yitzchak and Rivka had difficulty conceiving a child. They prayed desperately. Rashi imprints upon us the visual image of them both standing in diametrically opposite corners of a room, beseeching the Almighty for a child.

That image is quite foreboding. It portrays two individuals with diverse expectations of the result of their fervent prayers. One might conjecture that Yitzchak stood in his corner praying for the type of child he would welcome, while Rivka stood "over and against him" in the other corner of the chapel with a very different sort of offspring in her dreams.

Their prayers were answered, and both Yitzchak and Rivka had their dreams fulfilled. Twins were born, and from birth they displayed very different dispositions and behavior patterns. They were named Esav and Yaakov. The former developed into "a man of

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the field" and became a "cunning hunter." The latter became a "quiet person," a homebody.

On this basis alone, one would predict that Rivka's maternal instincts would cause her to favor Yaakov and would cherish his complacent personality. Yitzchak, we would suspect, would find Esav more to his liking since he too spent time in the fields, although he was attracted to the open spaces of nature not in search of hunting grounds but as quiet places, conducive to prayer and meditation.

As we continue to read the text, we soon discover that our suppositions were correct: "Now Yitzchak loved Esav because he did eat of his venison; and Rivka loved Yaakov." (Genesis 25:28, Soncino translation)

We have no trouble accepting that Rivka loved Yaakov, and it doesn't occur to us to ask, "Why?". Her love was based on every mother's unconditional love for her son, especially since he was such a "good little boy."

But we are stumped when we try to understand Yitzchak's love for Esav. Was Yitzchak's love to be gained by an occasional treat of a few slices of venison? Surely, Yitzchak would have higher standards for his child than a serving of delicatessen!

We are not alone when we are confounded by Yitzchak's strange preference for his "cunning hunter" over and above his "dweller in the tents," presumably the "tents of study and spiritual practices." Numerous commentators have been similarly confounded and suggest in a wide variety of responses.

One such response is offered by Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Salant, the Jerusalem teacher and preacher of two generations ago, in his two-volume commentary, *Be'er Yosef*.

The basis of his approach is to be found in Maimonides/Rambam's sixth chapter of his "Eight Chapters" of introduction to Ethics of the Fathers/Pirkei Avot.

There Rambam reflects upon the following theological question: Who stands higher in the ranks of the righteous? Is it the person who is dispassionate, who faces no internal religious doubts or immoral urges? Or is it the person who knows temptation, who is beset by all sorts of illicit desires, but who suppresses them successfully and behaves properly?

Rambam reports that there is a basic argument here between the "philosophers" and the "Torah sources." The former believe that it is the pure soul who never experiences sinful inner tendencies who stands higher than the one who overcomes his nasty evil urges.

The Torah, on the other hand, values the person who controls himself, refrains from acting on his passions, and behaves in a punctiliously correct manner.

I must add that Rambam distinguishes between two types of sinful temptations. However, the eighteenth-century sage Rabbi Yaakov Emden in his gloss upon the "Eight Chapters" (to be found in the appendix to the tractate Avodah Zara in the standard Vilna edition of the Babylonian Talmud) supersedes Rambam's distinctions and simply declares "lefum tzaara agra," the more difficulty a person faces when he tries to act properly, the more the reward for overcoming those difficulties.

After reviewing and explicating Rambam's thesis and Rabbi Emden's perspective, Rabbi Salant returns to our quandary: What was Yitzchak thinking when he favored Esav? What was the motive of his preference for the "cunning hunter" over and above the simple and straightforward Yaakov?

Yitzchak, suggest Rabbi Salant, was aware of the theological question which was the focus of Rambam's treatise. He knew full well that Yaakov was a "pure soul," and Esav had many "hunting" urges of all sorts. But he saw Esav's life choices as attempts to channel his urges in a positive direction. He is the model of the Talmud's analogy of a person who is born under the constellation of maadim/Mars, the epitome of bloody warfare, in modern terms the genetically wired man of violence, who can sublimate his dark inner passions by choosing to be a ritual slaughterer/shochet or a surgeon who sheds blood but as part of medical operation, or a mohel who sheds blood for the mitzvah of circumcision (see Masechet Shabbat, 156a).

Yitzchak interpreted Esav's hunting as his struggle to channel his urges toward violence into the hunt for delicious food for his aging and blind father. From that vantage point, Yaakov took second place. He was thoroughly good and knew no wayward temptations. Fine. But Esav, from Yitzchak's perspective, stood even higher because of his internal struggles.

I leave it to you, dear reader, to ponder Rabbi Salant's ingenious interpretation of Yitzchak's love for Esav and to decide for yourself whether Yitzchak the parent understood his favorite son.

#### Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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

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

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"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 yoshav, 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." (Devorim 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 *voshev 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.

### Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

What is your most favourite outfit of clothing? For what special occasion did you wear it? In Parashat Toldot we are told, "Vatikach Rivka Et Bigdei Eisav Bnah Hagadol Hachamudot – Rivka took her oldest son, Eisav's, favourite outfit, and she placed it on Yaakov." Of course she was preparing Yaakov – we are all familiar with the story – to deceive his father Yitzchak, so that he would receive the blessing of the 'Bachor' – 'the firstborn.'

But if Eisav had a favourite outfit, why wasn't it in his own home? What was it doing in the home of his parents, Yitzchak and Rivka?

Our Sages explain that Eisav kept his favourite outfit in his parents' home so that when he appeared before his father, such was the deep respect he had for him, he would always change into his smartest clothes.

But wasn't Yitzchak blind? If he couldn't see what Eisav looked like, surely his clothes made no difference whatsoever?

The answer is that Eisav's respect for his father was totally sincere. Of course it would be nice

for his father to see that he respected him but that was not why he was doing it.

I believe there are two important messages that emerge from this, for us and for all time.

The first is that when it comes to 'Kibbud Av Va'Eim' – 'the respect we must have for our parents, like that of Eisav, should be natural. Not just to tick the box to let our parents know that we are respecting them but rather, whether we are in their presence, outside of their presence, or well beyond their lifetime, we should continue to respect their wishes and to live according to the values that they taught to us.'

There is a second message. Over Shabbat Parashat Toldot Eisav gets a lot of bad press. Within shuls right around the world we highlight what a 'tzadik' – 'a righteous person, Yaakov was and what a rotten apple Eisav was.'

But right in the midst of this story we highlight the fact that Eisav did excel in one area: the respect that he had for his father. This reminds us of that great teaching in Ethics of the Fathers. "Ein Lecha Adam She'ein Lo Sha'ah – There is not a single person on Earth who doesn't have his or her moment."

We learn something from everyone. As some people say, 'Even a broken clock tells the right time twice a day'.

### Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

#### The Blessing of the Marginalized Efrat Shapira

One of the contentious issues in Jewish tradition is the discrepancy between the plain meaning of the Biblical text [pshat] and the way the Sages chose to interpret it. This tension is especially evident in Parashat Toldot, particularly in the portrayal of Esav. There is no denying that the Esav depicted by the Sages significantly diverges from the figure presented in the Torah.

"And these are the generations of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham: Avraham begot Yitzchak. And Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivkah, the daughter of Betuel the Aramean of Padan-Aram, the sister of Lavan the Aramean, to be his wife."

And Yitzchak entreated the Lord opposite his wife because she was barren; and the Lord allowed Himself to be entreated by him, and Rivkah his wife conceived.

And the children struggled within her, and she said, "If it be so, why am I like this?" And she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her: Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall separate from your insides, and

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one people shall be stronger than the other people, and the elder shall serve the younger. And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red, all over like a hairy mantle, and they called his name Esav. And after that his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esav's heel, and his name was called Yaakov. And Yitzchak was sixty years old when she bore them. And the boys grew, and Esav was a cunning hunter, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a simple man dwelling in tents. And Yitzchak loved Esav, because game was in his mouth, but Rivkah loved Yaakov." (Bereishit 25)

It is challenging to engage in an impartial reading of these verses, seeing that most of us are introduced to the Sages' interpretations and commentary early in life. However, according to the straightforward reading of the text, Rivkah experiences a tumultuous pregnancy. When she seeks Divine guidance, she is informed that the turmoil within her represents a lifelong struggle between two nations growing in her womb. This explanation is neutral, offering no commentary on the character or moral standing of either child.

The Sages, however, preordained the fates of Yaakov and Esav even before their birth: "And the children struggled within her": When Rivkah passed by houses of Torah study or synagogues, Yaakov would struggle to emerge. When she passed by houses of idolatry, Esav would strain to come out, as the verse states, "The wicked are estranged from the womb" (Bereishit Rabbah 63).

"And behold, there were twins in her womb" – The Torah uses the word *בָּנָה* (missing an alef), while in Tamar's story, it is written in full (*בָּנָה וָנָה*). This difference, Rashi explains, signifies that Tamar's twins were both righteous, whereas Rivkah's were not— one was righteous, and the other wicked (Rashi on Bereishit 25:24).

"And the first came out red" – According to Rashi, this was an omen indicating that Esav would be a spiller of blood (Rashi on Bereshit 25:25).

These are just a few examples of how the Sages decisively crafted Esav's image as a wicked individual and a shedder of blood, even before his life's story unfolds. This interpretive inclination intensifies as the narrative progresses. Although Yaakov repeatedly employs cunning tactics—whether following Rivkah's guidance or acting independently—and Esav appears to act innocently and in good faith, fulfilling Yitzchak's requests, the Sages continue to cast Esav in a negative light throughout the Torah portions that follow.

This interpretive trend reaches its zenith in Parashat Vayishlach. After two decades of familial challenges involving his wives, children, and a final escape from Lavan, Yaakov approaches his reunion with Esav filled with dread. He takes every precaution, convinced that Esav seeks vengeance for the deceit and betrayal of years past. One might argue that Yaakov projects his own guilt onto Esav, revealing how he himself interprets the actions he took toward his brother.

However, Esav, true to his character, continues to behave with simplicity and directness. When Yaakov and Esav finally meet after years of separation, Esav embraces Yaakov, kisses him, and, sensing his brother's anxiety, says, "I have plenty, my brother. Keep what is yours" (Bereishit 33:9). Esav's words reflect contentment and a readiness to move forward, suggesting that he harbors no lingering resentment.

For readers raised on the Sages' interpretations, however, it can be challenging to accept this scene at face value. Instead, it is often viewed through the lens of the Midrash from Bereishit Rabbah: "Rabbi Yannai said: Why are there dots above the word [וְקִשְׁתָּה], 'and he kissed him'? This teaches us that he did not kiss him sincerely but sought to bite him. However, the neck of our father Yaakov turned to marble, blunting the teeth of that wicked man. Why, then, does it say 'and they wept'? One wept over his neck, and the other over his teeth." (Bereishit Rabbah 78:9)

At the conclusion of Parashat Toldot, Rashi cites Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's powerful declaration: "It is a well-known principle that Esav hates Yaakov." This assertion, however, feels incongruous with the plain meaning of the text, which depicts Esav parting from Yaakov on seemingly amicable terms.

The Sages' persistent reinterpretation of Esav as a symbol of wickedness is understandable in light of historical and cultural contexts. During the period of Midrashic compilation and even later, Jewish communities often lived under foreign domination, facing existential threats and spiritual challenges. Constructing Esav as a stark foil to Yaakov—embodying the "other"—helped the Sages solidify Jewish identity by promoting a moral and cultural dichotomy with the surrounding non-Jewish world. Interpretation shaped by such circumstances is both logical and, to some extent, inevitable.

Yet, with the passage of time and the evolution of Jewish life, the portrayal of Esav can and perhaps should undergo reevaluation. A fresh reading of the Biblical narrative—relevant to today's realities—might view Esav as emblematic of the marginalized. Yaakov and

Esav were born as twins, in complete equality. Throughout their lives, each of them enjoyed the preferential love of one parent, so that even during these early stages, their equality remained intact. However, Yaakov's sudden favoritism left Esav feeling frustrated and hurt.

Esav's anguished plea, "Have you only one blessing, my father? Bless me also, my father!", resonates deeply with anyone who has felt excluded or marginalized. This cry resonated with me this past Shabbat, when I was asked to go to the women's section of the synagogue as I was learning Torah with my father and grandfather, in much the same way as it resonated with me as a young woman when finding the doors of the Beit Midrash closed to me and encountering a myriad of other barriers as a woman.

The revolution of Torah study for women, pioneered by Midreshet Lindenbaum (formerly known as Midreshet Bruria), flung open the gates of the Beit Midrash and kindled in me a deep and abiding love for Torah. The transformation of inclusive minyanim reintroduced me to the richness of communal prayer and the sacred space of the synagogue. Although the revolution of military service for women did not directly impact my journey, it forged new paths for my daughters, granting them opportunities for equal and meaningful service that were scarcely imaginable just a few decades ago. My cry—and the cries of countless other women—"Have you only one blessing, my father? Bless me also, my father!"—has indeed been heard. We now see that before God, blessings abound, sufficient to embrace everyone, men and women alike.

As I reflect on my years at Midreshet Lindenbaum, I am filled with gratitude for the myriad blessings I received. Moving forward, I hope our society will learn to identify the "Esavs" among us—the unchosen among us who feel left behind—and ensure that we extend the recognition and opportunities they deserve. Let us acknowledge that, both before God and within our communities, there are blessings enough for everyone.

#### **Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org**

**Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky**

**Yitzchak the Son of Avraham**

A theme that permeates Parshas Toldos appears in the opening passuk of the parsha. Yitzchak is identified as the son of Avraham. To emphasize this point, the Torah repeats the relationship, i.e. that Avraham was the father of Yitzchak. Rashi quotes different interpretations from the Midrash to explain the apparent redundancy of this information. Whatever the reason for this repetition, clearly the Torah is introducing the story of Yitzchak's life emphasizing that he is very much the son of Avraham. This is not merely a biological

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fact, rather it attests to many of the challenges Yitzchak faces throughout his lifetime; as we read Parshas Toldos about Yitzchak, it appears that we are reliving aspects of his father's life. There are many similarities between Yitzchak's family life and that of Avraham: firstly, he is not blessed with children for many years. Secondly, his son Esav brings him much pain when he chooses to marry daughters of idol worshipers, which is reminiscent of the suffering Avraham endured when Yishmael had to be banished because of his inappropriate behavior. Lastly, just as Avraham's two sons Yitzchak and Yishmael parted ways, so, too, did Yitzchak watch Yaakov and Esav separate from one another.

Additionally, Yitzchak has almost identical experiences to his father in his relationships with the neighbors that he encounters. Both leave their homes because of famine and are fearful for their lives in their new surroundings. An identical strategy of presenting their wives as their sisters is invoked by both. Although both are saved by Hashem, and Avimelech the King of Gerar treats them with respect, the people of Gerar attempt to steal and damage their property. The wells dug by Avraham and later by Yitzchak become a source of great friction as the Shepherds of Gerar are overcome by envy. The Torah highlights how Yitzchak continued in the path of his father even to the extent of calling the wells by the names given to them by Avraham. Both father and son are eventually acknowledged by Avimelech as holy men and are sought out as partners in a covenant. The similarities that occur in the lifetime of Avraham and Yitzchak are testimony that Yitzchak was the son of Avraham in the fullest sense.

As similar as Avraham and Yitzchak were, there were significant differences between them. Many of the stories the Torah tells us about Avraham highlight his acts of kindness. Welcoming guests, saving Lot from captivity, arguing on behalf of Sodom and burying Sarah all attest to Avraham being the paradigmatic man of chessed. The most significant event in Yitzchak's life is the akeida. It was this unique status of being a consecrated "sacrifice" that distinguishes Yitzchak from his father, and it was this degree of holiness which he attained that prevented him from ever leaving Eretz Yisrael, unlike his father who was permitted to travel to Mitzrayim during a time of famine.

Although Avraham is portrayed primarily as a baal chessed, clearly he is also the model of a servant of Hashem. Following the akeida, Avraham is told by Hashem that he has attained the status of being one who is "yerei elokim". He is the one who spreads the truth about Hashem to the world around him. Notwithstanding Yitzchak being known as the

holy man who became the consecrated sacrifice to Hashem, he also attains greatness in his relationship with his fellow man. Avraham instills in him, "la'asos tzedakka umishpat" (Bereishis 18:19), to follow in the path of displaying charity and justice to mankind. He also calls out in the name of Hashem to others. He very much follows in the legacy of his father in caring about others. He also dedicates much effort to sharing with others the great gift of knowledge of Hashem. Both Avraham and Yitzchak are our role models in how one develops a relationship with Hashem and simultaneously looks to help others. Avodas Hashem must have both components, and since different people have different strengths and personalities, they may emphasize and excel in one of these areas more than the other.

We should never view either of these different examples of avodas Hashem as being inferior to the other. Avraham and Yitzchak were both great even if they were different, and perhaps that is why the Torah is emphasizing time and time again, "Yitzchak ben Avraham." We should never think that Abraham and Yitzchak had different goals; Yitzchak lived his life continuing the legacy of his great father, faced similar challenges, and even called his wells by the names his father had given them. This symbolized that he viewed himself as the heir to the great lessons of avodas Hashem and chessed which Avraham introduced to the world.

We are all part of this dual legacy. Regardless of whether we emphasize the Avraham or the Yitzchak roll in that legacy, we are heirs to both and are all bnei Avraham v'Yitzchak who are faithfully following in their footsteps. We should use the unique combination of gifts granted to each of us and continue to walk in the path of our avos in both the bein adam lamakom and the bein adam lachaveiro aspects of avodas Hashem.

### **Mizrachi Dvar Torah**

**Rav Doron Perez**

#### **How Can We Look But See Nothing?**

How were we so blinded once again? How is it we are able to look but see nothing?

We know that the Agranat Report after the Yom Kippur War found the intelligence at fault - they could not see the lurking dangers. They became blinded by their own perception. And so too, 50 years later. We looked, but once again we couldn't see. How could we be blinded by what we can see in front of us?

The answer is in this week's parsha – the blindness of Yitzchak, which wasn't just a physical blindness, but also a blindness to Eisav's shortcomings. He didn't believe Eisav

was capable of the terrible things that he did, being unable to see him for who he was. We sometimes become entrapped by the way we view people and the world. All of us are, in some way, blind. Only Hashem enlightens us.

Who believed that Hamas were capable of doing what they did on October 7, after all there has been no Jew or army in Gaza for so many years? Wouldn't they want to look after their own lives more than they want to hate and torture and kill Jews? We were blinded by our perceptions and didn't see the world for what it is on our doorstep.

### **Torah.Org Dvar Torah**

**by Rabbi Label Lam**

#### **Living for Toldos**

And these are the generations (Toldos) of Yitzchok the son of Avraham; Avraham begot Yitzchok. (Breishis 25:19)

I walked into a noisy and raucous class this week and silently stood by the door. Immediately the students sat up and began to work quietly. After a short period of time, I sensed that this might be the teachable moment. I told them, "This is the week we learn about two brothers. One brother did his work quietly whether his father was in the room or not. The other brother, when his father was in the room, he acted like an angel, but the minute his father left the room, he went wild. We know their last names. One is Avinu and the other is HaRasha. I'm sure you can guess their first names."

I scanned the room, pivoted, and left. The second I was standing in the hallway the room went wild and I realized a very important lesson. The best way to teach is not just to give a speech. If I really want them to "get it" there is more for me to do. Just because I said it, that doesn't make it so.

My wife and I went to the Carlebach Shul in Manhattan a few years ago for a Shabbaton. It was Parshas Toldos. Shabbos morning the reader of the Torah was late in coming and so the Rabbi was stalling for time by peppering the crowd with brief but interesting Torah thoughts. It was not quite a speech and it was spontaneous so I was looking in a Sefer and listening with half an ear. Then he asked a question that tickled my interest slightly. How come Parshas Toldos is called, "Toldos"? It should rightfully be called "Yitzchok". The Parsha begins, "Eleh toldos Yitzchok... These are the generations of Yitzchok...". After all, Parshas Noach begins the same way, "Eleh toldos Noach... These are the generations of Noach" and the Parsha is titled "Noach". So, either both should be Toldos or one should be Noach and the other should be Yitzchok. Why then is one Noach and the other one Toldos!?

### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

Again, I was tickled by the question. Then the Rabbi dropped a diamond, not a dime, but a diamond! My eyes were opened to a very valuable insight. Noach was a grand historical personality. "These are the generation of Noach, Noach...", but Noach produced Noach, alone! That's a great accomplishment.

He is titled a perfect Tzadik in his time. He was a man, the man of that generation, of his time. So, he is the focus of that Parsha and it is therefore appropriate to call it after him, Noach!

When it comes to the Avos, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov, the story is different. They may be fascinating personalities and it is terribly interesting to learn about them and from them, but it's not about them. They didn't live for themselves. They were walking in wet cement and paving the way for us, for all future generations. It's not about them! It's about Toldos! Good Jewish parents don't live for themselves. They live for Toldos, but how so?

And teach them to YOUR children to speak in them with your sitting in your house and with your going on the way and with your lying down and your rising up... (Devarim 11:19) The Chasam Sofer learns this verse which is scribed and scrolled and affixed to door after door throughout our homes, "And you should teach your children to speak in them" as an instruction in "how to"- accomplish that parental task. Children will learn mostly through observing the manner in which you sit in your house, go on your way, lie down and rise up. Those actions will speak volumes in volume. As one child told his parents, "Your actions are so loud I cannot hear what you are saying!" When both speech and action are congruous, though, then there can be a lasting educational impact.

One of the most valuable tools for teaching our own children and/or for teaching students is through both repetitive practice and by modeling. The teacher/parent has to show the way it's done, and to be a living example of whatever lesson or behavior they would like to impart. I have had parents tell me proudly, "Rabbi, I push my kids!" I tell them, "Don't push them! Pull them! When someone honks his horn behind you, do you want to go faster or slower? When a car zips past you, though, it's hard to resist the temptation to speed up."

So, in many ways, it may be true that more than parents are raising children, children are raising parents. Just that consciousness transforms us from regular characters roaming on the planet into Avos, living for Toldos!



BS"D

To: parsha@groups.io  
From: Chaim Shulman  
<cshulman@gmail.com>

## INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON TOLDOS - 5786

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### Isaac's Two Sons and the Challenges of Parenting Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

The very dramatic first section of the Torah portion of Toldot begins with the word that gives the portion its name, and also sets the tone for much of what we will read about. "These are the toldot of Isaac (Gen.25:19)" – a word that can be translated a number of ways. Literally, it means "these are the descendants" of Isaac, but it can also be read as "this is the story of the life of Isaac." Those two themes, biography and progeny, are deeply interconnected in the portion. We read about the children of Isaac, but we also read about the legacy of Isaac, and about how his sons define and carry – or fail to carry – that legacy.

Legacy is, in fact, the next note the verse sounds. After "Isaac, the son of Abraham," the Torah adds, "Abraham begot Isaac" – a seemingly repetitive statement. Many commentaries suggest that the message is that Isaac followed in Abraham's path, carried on his mission and legacy. The question of who, among Isaac's descendants, would in turn carry on that mission becomes one of the major themes of this section and of the entire portion. The text tells us that Isaac and Rebecca at first struggle to have children, and they pray to God that this be resolved. Their prayers are answered, and they are blessed with twins, already prophesied to be the ancestors of different nations. That future is reflected in their personalities. The Torah (25:27) describes Esau as "a man who knows hunting, a man of the field," while Jacob is described as "a simple man, dwelling in tents," a very different kind of person.

The difference between them became, in the eyes of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the basis for a sharp critique of Isaac and Rebecca's parenting. Among other points, Rabbi Hirsch suggests that one source of their later problems was that, despite the obvious differences between Jacob and Esau, they were given the same education – in violation of the wisdom of the verse in Proverbs, "Train a child according to his way," which teaches that different personalities and inclinations require different styles and approaches.

That reading has great power, and it speaks to a real and urgent truth about education. But it is also possible to read the verses somewhat differently.

It is noteworthy that the Torah tells us: "Isaac loved Esau, because game was in his mouth; but Rebecca loves Jacob (25:28)." Each parent, the text tells us, has a favored child, so to speak. Rebecca's love for Jacob is easily understood given his righteous personality. But Isaac's love for Esau is introduced with a troubling explanation: "because game was in his mouth." On the surface, this sounds as if Isaac was susceptible to being won over by bribery, by what Esau put on the table for him.

On a straightforward reading, Isaac seems to emerge looking rather naïve – either bribed or duped. The Midrash, followed by some later commentators, even portrays Esau as consciously manipulating his father with pious-sounding questions and carefully presented food. Rabbi Hirsch takes those traditions seriously and criticizes both parents. It is hard not to feel the force of that critique. And yet, many later writers sensed that this picture is incomplete. The founding Rosh Yeshiva of Kerem B'Yavneh, Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, and its mashgiach, Rabbi Avraham Rivlin, both suggest a very different way of reading Isaac's perception of his sons. It is not that Isaac understood Esau to be purely materialistic and devoted to the hunt, and Jacob to be purely spiritual and devoted to study. Rather, Isaac saw Jacob as only spiritual – a person of the tents of Torah – while he saw in Esau a certain capacity to bring together the spiritual and the material worlds. Precisely as "a man of the field," Esau might, in Isaac's view, be better positioned to carry the mission of the Patriarchs into the broader world. If so, Isaac's preference did not stem from being taken in by a plate of venison, but from a considered judgment about what the mission required.

Another important nuance emerges from the language the Torah uses to describe the parents' love. Rebecca is described as one who "loves Jacob," in the present tense, suggesting an ongoing, almost instinctive affection. By contrast, the verse says that "Isaac loved Esau," in a way that may imply a more active, deliberate stance. Isaac chose to love Esau. He recognized his more dangerous and materialistic tendencies, and precisely for that reason he directed extra attention and affection toward him. He saw a need to guide Esau's growth, to nurture and develop the spiritual part of his personality so that his worldly inclinations would be merged with a higher purpose. If so, this already diverges significantly from Rabbi Hirsch's interpretation. Rather than presenting one undifferentiated educational approach for both boys, the Torah may be hinting at two distinct educational strategies: Rebecca, with a natural and ever-increasing love for the more obviously righteous son; Isaac, with a consciously cultivated love for the more complicated child.

Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum, in Tiferet Shmuel, points in a similar direction. He suggests that Isaac fully understood Esau's general nature, and was not blind to his profound flaws. What caught Isaac's attention was a specific element embedded within Esau's very attempts to deceive him. The Talmud understands the phrase "game was in his mouth" as alluding to Esau's habit of asking Isaac elaborate halachic questions in order to appear righteous. But, Rabbi Berenbaum notes, even a dishonest attempt to appear righteous can reveal a genuine desire to impress a parent, to be seen as good in the eyes of someone one respects. That desire, misdirected as it was, testified to a latent instinct that could be harnessed for authentic growth.

Accordingly, Isaac "loved Esau" in the sense that he focused his active, intentional love on that kernel of aspiration. He saw a son who, however wayward, still wanted his father's approval. Isaac directed his energy to that point of connection, hoping that it could be nurtured and expanded until it transformed Esau's inner life.

Seen this way, the verse that has long made Isaac look misled may, in fact, be an expression of a deeply sophisticated parental strategy. Isaac is not a naive old man, either bribed or duped; he is a parent making the difficult choice to invest extra love where the risk is greatest and the need is most acute. Rebecca, for her part, may be described as "loving Jacob" in the sense that her love kept growing – some commentators even read the present tense as indicating that the more she heard of Esau's behavior, the more she reinforced and encouraged Jacob's righteousness. This entire tension between parental responsibility and children's choices is echoed in another place in Jewish life: the blessing traditionally recited by a father at his son's bar mitzvah, "Blessed is He Who has now exempted me from punishment on

account of this child.” (Rama OC 225:2). Notably, the Midrash Rabbah associates this practice with the verse that relates that Jacob and Esau “grew up” (25:27).

The classic halachic authority Magen Avraham explains that, before the child reaches the age of thirteen, the father is held accountable for some measure of the child’s sins, because he is obligated to educate and guide him. Once the child becomes personally obligated in the commandments, the father is “released” from that direct responsibility.

A different commentary, Etz Yosef, suggests another layer: before thirteen, a child’s tendencies are not yet fully visible or fixed. That is precisely the window in which parents must be especially attentive, trying to discern who this child is and to guide those emerging tendencies in the right direction. The blessing, on this view, marks the end of that unique, formative stage. A third approach, attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, adds yet another dimension. Before bar mitzvah, a child may need to hear things primarily in the language of reward and punishment: “If you do this, it will be good for you; if you do that, there will be consequences.” After thirteen, the parent is freed – and perhaps obligated – to speak in a more mature vocabulary, appealing to responsibility, meaning, and inner conviction rather than to simple incentives.

All three interpretations circle around the same core: parents are responsible to educate, to notice who their children are, to invest effort, love, and thoughtful guidance. But ultimately, children grow into their own moral independence. The blessing is not a declaration of indifference, but a recognition of the limits of control. This brings us back to Isaac. So why, we might still ask, did he “fail” with Esau?

The beginning of the portion itself complicates that question. Even before the boys are born, Rebecca is told that “two nations are in your womb” and that “the older shall serve the younger.” The rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and the distinct destinies they represent, are woven into the fabric of the narrative from the outset. The Torah does not present the outcome as the straightforward product of parenting success or failure. It is, in some deep way, part of the divine script of history.

Moreover, Esau himself is not without redeeming qualities. The Sages famously highlight his extraordinary fulfillment of the commandment to honor father and mother. Whatever else he became, there was a real relationship with his parents, a genuine connection sustained over years. Isaac’s efforts were not entirely wasted. Even where a child’s larger path diverges painfully from what parents had hoped, strands of the legacy remain: habits of respect, moments of loyalty, residual awareness of the values that were taught.

“These are the toldot of Isaac” thus signals not only a list of names, but a complex, often painful, and yet profoundly instructive story of legacy. Isaac, the son of Abraham, indeed begets Isaac, the one who carries forward Abraham’s mission in his own distinctive way. Isaac then faces the agonizing task of trying to transmit that mission to two very different sons – one transparently righteous, one deeply conflicted. He and Rebecca do not simply repeat a single educational formula; they each respond, in different ways, to the different children in front of them. They love, they guide, they hope, and they do so under the shadow of a destiny that is not entirely in their hands.

For parents and educators, the portion of Toldot offers a sober and consoling message. We are commanded to train each child “according to his way,” to notice, to differentiate, to choose love actively where it is hardest, and to reinforce goodness where it appears. We are indeed responsible for effort, not for outcome. Isaac does not stand here as a cautionary tale of parental failure, but as a model of the complexity, the courage, and sometimes the heartbreak of a life devoted to building a legacy among children who are, ultimately, their own people. Read more from Rabbi Feldman at [riets.substack.com](http://riets.substack.com)

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from: TorahWeb <[torahweb@torahweb.org](mailto:torahweb@torahweb.org)>

date: Nov 20, 2025, 8:34 PM

subject: Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg - The Cry of the Soul

Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg The Cry of the Soul When Esav heard that Yitzchak had already given the brachos to Yaakov, he cried out an exceedingly great and bitter cry (Toldos 27:34), and he asked that Yitzchak bless him as well. Initially, Yitzchak told him that he does not have another bracha for him. But after Esav begged and wept, Yitzchak then gave him a bracha (27:38-40). If Yitzchak did not have another bracha, then why did he change his mind after Esav wept?

The Alshich explains that initially, Esav thought that Yitzchak was the source of the bracha. So he begged Yitzchak to also give him a bracha. But when Yitzchak told him there was nothing else he could do for him, Esav realized that Hashem was the real source of the bracha, and that He had given only one bracha to Yitzchak to bestow upon his children, and that bracha had already been given to Yaakov. At that point, Esav cried and begged that Hashem grant a second bracha to Yitzchak. Hashem agreed and gave Yitzchak an additional bracha for Esav.

Why did Hashem agree to give Yitzchak a second bracha? After all, Chazal say that Esav violated the worst sins (see Midrash Rabbah, Toldos, 63:12). He certainly does not seem to be one who was deserving of a bracha! The Alshich suggests that tears can achieve what a regular tefillah cannot. Chazal comment (Bava Metzia 59a) that from the day the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, the gates of tefillah have been closed, but the gates of tears are still open. When Esav wept, his tears penetrated those gates of tears and were accepted by Hashem, and as a result, Hashem gave Yitzchak the power to bless Esav as well.

What do Chazal mean that even after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, the gates of tears have not been closed? And why were Esav’s tears enough for him to merit receiving a bracha? The Beis Hamikdash, the home of the Shechina, is the universal place for tefillah (see Yeshaya 56:7). After the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, it is harder for a tefillah to be accepted because the gates of tefillah are no longer as welcoming as they used to be. But there still is another place where the Shechina dwells even after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, and that is in the heart of every Jew. The posuk says, “They shall make for me a Mikdash, so that I may dwell among them” (Terumah 25:8.) The Alshich (Ki Sisa 31:13) points out that it says “among them”, not “in it” – b’sochlo lo ne’emar e’la b’socham – to imply that the primary place in which Hashem wanted His presence to dwell was in the hearts of the Jewish people, and from there the Shechina would spread and dwell in the Mishkan as well (see also Nefesh Hachaim 1:4).

The soul of every Jew is an expression of his true essence. Its source is from Hashem Himself, as the posuk says, “He blew in his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being” (Bereishis 2:7.) Hashem infused His spirit, so to speak, into man, into his neshama. It is through this neshama, this God-like essence, that a person connects with Hashem. But usually, it is challenging for a person to connect because his soul is covered in so many layers of physicality. When a person cries, he peels away those external layers and he penetrates to his very essence, his soul. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch is quoted as saying that tears are the sweat of the neshama. This means that tears express the innermost feelings of a person. They could be tears of joy or sadness, tears of anger or stress. But they reveal the essence of a person’s soul.

A tefillah accompanied by tearful crying is one that expresses the deepest emotions in a person’s heart. Through a tearful tefillah, one’s neshama can connect with Hakadosh Boruch Hu in the purest way, and that connection allows the tefillah to be accepted.

In the climax of the Selichos of Ne’ilah on Yom Kippur, we say, “I have placed my reliance on the thirteen attributes (of mercy), and on the gates of tears for they are never closed; therefore I have poured out my prayer to Him Who discerns hearts, I am confident in these, and in the merit of the three Avos.” Why are we so confident that Hashem will answer our tefillos just because we cry out to Him? The answer is that our tears reflect our deep heartfelt desire to have our sins forgiven and to connect with Hakadosh Boruch Hu. Since Hashem discerns the hearts of His people and understands the true meaning of our tears, we are confident that He will answer our tefillos favorably.

This perhaps is why Esav's tears were so effective. Despite the fact that Esav was far from a tzaddik, his tears expressed a sincere desire for Hashem's bracha. They revealed a part of his neshama, however small, that still wanted to feel a closeness to Hashem. It was that part of his essence which through his tears connected with Hakadosh Boruch Hu, and enabled his tefillah to be answered favorably.

Tefillah is not about reciting a formula. It is about connecting with Hashem. When we invest our heart and soul in the process of tefillah, and we cry out to Hashem to draw us close to Him, we can hope that our tefillos will penetrate the gates of tears and that Hashem will respond to us with kindness and mercy. © 2025 by TorahWeb Foundation. All Rights Reserved

## **Lonely, but Certain** **Rabbi Moshe Taragin**

Yaakov endured a far more turbulent life than his two predecessors. He entered this world clutching the heel of his older brother. Though he was better suited to guide our destiny, biology placed him second, and he had to struggle to claim the role meant for him. Twice he was forced to dislodge Esav, who was unfit for leadership or for carrying the mission of our nation. Esav lived for immediate gratification and showed little interest in long-term purpose, public duty, or selfless service. He spent twenty years beyond the borders of Eretz Yisrael in the home of a deceitful father-in-law and later confronted tensions within his own family—conflicts that ultimately led him into exile in Egypt. His journey was marked by instability, pulled between external adversaries and internal turmoil.

Ya'akov's life unfolds in the shadow of struggle. From the moment he grasped Esav's heel, both his name and his experiences reflect a lifetime of navigating conflict.

### Unanswered questions

Perhaps no challenge was as mentally taxing for Ya'akov as remaining committed to his inner conviction when it was not affirmed by those around him. He was forced to secure the berachot through disguise, allowing his father to believe he stood before him as the older son. It must have been unsettling for Ya'akov to receive the berachot of Jewish leadership in such a fraught and morally complex manner.

Esav immediately cast him as a deceiver and pursued him with threats of violence. In Esav's narrative, Ya'akov was the criminal who stole the birthright and then compounded the offense by taking the blessings as well. As Ya'akov arrives in the home of his relatives, his troubles only deepen. After working seven years to marry Rachel, he is deceived by his father-in-law, who swaps Leah in place of the woman he had labored for. This moment must have cut Ya'akov sharply. He now confronts the very pattern he once set in motion: just as he had stepped into Esav's place as the older brother, the older sister is now being slipped into the place of the younger, Rachel—the woman he loved.

The questions that must have flooded him are easy to imagine. Is this my punishment? Is this what comes back to me? Is Hashem signaling that my earlier actions were tainted? Is this a measure of retribution? Over the next twenty years in Lavan's household, the pattern repeats. Lavan alters the terms of employment, shifting agreements and manipulating Ya'akov. Each time he is swindled, Ya'akov must have wondered whether he was encountering human deceit or a deeper accounting for the berachot he secured from Esav.

When he ultimately returns to Eretz Yisrael, Ya'akov confronts discord within his own family. His sons wrestle over succession and status, and once again he is thrust into the painful dynamics that emerge when leadership is contested. The echoes of his own struggle with Esav must have been unmistakable—the same dangers and the same jealousy that accompany the question of who will carry the future.

Painfully, Ya'akov never received explicit affirmation or validation from his father. His father never openly acknowledges that he had misjudged the situation or that Ya'akov's actions, however difficult, were necessary for the future of the nation. Yitzchak dispatched Ya'akov to Aram Naharayim with

heartfelt blessings, yet the Torah records no reconciliation, no healing moment between them. They never meet again.

Ya'akov is left without closure, forced to draw strength from the truth he knows internally—that he acted to secure the destiny he was meant to carry, even when that truth was not confirmed by the person whose approval he most longed to receive.

### The Quiet Power of Conviction

All these experiences could have left Ya'akov doubtful and unsteady. Yet out of this swirl of uncertainty emerges his strength: his courage lies in his faith and inner resilience. Even without his father's endorsement, and even when circumstances seem stacked against him, Ya'akov holds fast to his conviction. His mother had instructed him, and the choice was clear: Esav could not lead a nation meant to live by the command of Hashem and carry a historical mission. Ya'akov's inner clarity sustains him, even when public validation is absent and the path forward is clouded with doubt.

Ya'akov's ability to trust his inner truth becomes a blueprint for moments when a nation must stand firm without applause.

### Our Moment of Conviction

Our people are facing a similar trial. As the war reaches its end—or even a temporary pause—the world has lined up to accuse us with fabricated claims. For some, the hostility began on October 8th, before a single retaliatory shot was fired. For others, their anger toward Israel had been building for two years of manipulated images, false reports, and a global campaign that cast Jews and the Jewish state as criminals even as we were confronting the most brutal assault imaginable.

As the military phase recedes, the struggle shifts to the diplomatic front and to the charged arena of public opinion. Here, too, our resolve is tested, as our principled defense of land and people is distorted and condemned.

We carry the rightness of our cause. October 7th left no alternative. We have fought an excruciating urban war, doing everything possible to spare noncombatants while striving to return our hostages. If parts of the world refuse to acknowledge the moral clarity of that effort, we must still remain attentive to it ourselves.

History's verdict will emerge in time. We stand on firm moral ground—and, ultimately, on the foundations of nevuah as well. The task is to move forward with quiet certainty, holding fast to the truth we bear even when others cannot or will not see it.

What Ya'akov mastered in the realm of destiny, we face in the ongoing demands of ordinary life. His courage reminds us how hard it is to stay rooted in conviction without the comfort of public affirmation.

Modern identity is fragile. We live in a world that makes it difficult to follow our inner convictions when they aren't popular. Social media has left many dependent upon public approval and attention. By broadcasting private lives, we invite others to judge, affirm, or admire the choices we make and the way we live. The more we rely on feedback, the harder it becomes to hear the quiet voice of conscience. This craving for external validation weakens our ability to remain anchored in our own convictions and values. We spend more energy shaping how we appear in the public square than nurturing the inner compass that guides us toward what is right.

When conviction erodes, identity becomes hollow and fragile. If we can no longer name the values we believe in, we lose the cornerstone of who we are. In that vacuum, people grasp for shallower forms of identity—especially political identity. Much of modern identity politics springs from a world in which conviction has been weakened, and values diluted, leaving individuals to build identity not on belief or principle but on ideological affiliation and group alignment.

In our climate of noise and borrowed identities, Ya'akov's story becomes a guide. He held fast to his truth without applause, without consensus, without the reassurance of being understood.

Ya'akov walked with conviction in silence; we must learn to walk with conviction amid the noise.

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<https://www.koltorah.org/halachah/ein-bishul-achar-bishul-part-one-by-rabbi-chaim-jachter-5786>

## **Ein Bishul Achar Bishul – By Rabbi Chaim Jachter 5786**

*Halachah, Volume 35*

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### **Introduction**

A crucial rule permitting us to enjoy hot food on Shabbat is the principle of Ein Bishul Achar Bishul (literally, “there is no cooking after cooking”).

There are several crucial debates concerning this central idea.

### **Liquids**

The Rishonim debate whether Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies only to solids or even to liquids. The Biur Halachah (318:4 s.v. Yeish) notes that the Rambam, Rashba, and Ran adopt the lenient position that Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies even to liquids. However, Rashi, Rabbeinu Yonah, the Rosh, and the Tur are stringent and believe that Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies only to solids. The Acharonim (see *Pri Megadim Eishel Avraham* 254:1 and *Eglei Tal Ofeh* 8:11) explain that the stringent view believes that the effect of the cooking of a liquid is nullified after it has cooled down (*Azil Lei Bishulei*). By contrast, solids retain the impact of cooking even after the food has cooled. The lenient opinion believes that Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies even when its reason is irrelevant.

Many Yemenite Jews follow the Rambam and will reheat liquid (such as the famed Yemenite soup) on Shabbat. Sepharadim follow Rav Yosef Karo, who codifies the strict view (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 318:4 and 15).

According to Rav Karo, one may not reheat liquids that have fallen below *Yad Soledet Bo*. The Rama (O.C. 318:15), however, cites the lenient view. The Rama records the Ashkenazic practice to follow the lenient opinion if the liquid “has not completely cooled.” Acharonim debate how to understand the Rama’s phrase, “not completely cooled down.” The *Eglei Tal* (*Ofeh* 8) explains that it refers to liquid that is less than *Yad Soledet Bo* but is still sufficiently hot that people regard it as a hot drink. The Chazon Ish (O.C. 37:13) indicates that the Rama is lenient if the liquid is not entirely cooled.

Acharonim also debate the reasoning behind the compromise. At first glance, the compromise appears difficult since reheating a liquid that fell below *Yad Soledet Bo* constitutes Bishul according to the strict opinion. On the other hand, the lenient opinion permits reheating a liquid even if it has completely cooled down. The Halacha appears to attach no significance to the liquid not having been completely cooled down.

The Chazon Ish (*ibid.*) explains that the Rama fundamentally accepts the lenient view as the normative position. However, there is concern that if an item is completely cooled down, it will be difficult to distinguish between the cooled liquid and liquid that has never been heated. The common practice seeks to avoid this potential confusion.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (cited by Rav Mordechai Willig, *Beit Yitzchak* 21:181), on the other hand, suggests that the Rama fundamentally accepts the stringent opinion as the normative position. Rav Soloveitchik explains that the strict view believes that when a liquid cools down, no impact remains from the cooking (*Azil Lei Bishulei*). Accordingly, as long as the liquid has not completely cooled down, some of the original cooking effect remains, and one is not considered to be cooking.

### **Defining Liquids and Solids**

Acharonim have debated the definition of liquid and solid in this context for centuries. Some Acharonim (the Bach, Vilna Gaon, and Mishna Berura) believe that a food must be free of any liquid to qualify as a solid. Other Acharonim (including the Taz, *Pri Megadim*, and the *Kaf Hachaim*) believe that if the majority of an item is solid, it is classified as a solid (the opinions are summarized by Rav Shimon Eider, *Halachos of Shabbos*, p. 259 footnote 114).

Rav Yosef Adler ZT”L cites Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, who offers the following practical guidelines. If the food is eaten with a fork, it is solid, and if it is eaten with a spoon, it is liquid. Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Teshuvot Yechaveh Da’at* 2:45) also follows the lenient view. On the other hand, Rav

Moshe Feinstein (*Teshuvot Igrot Moshe* 4:74:Bishul:7), Rav Ben Zion Abba Sha’ul (*Teshuvot Ohr L’Tzion* 2:30:13), and Rav Shalom Messas (*Teshuvot Tevu’ot Shemesh Orach Chaim* 66) are strict. Rav Mordechai Willig advises following the strict view.

Rav Eider (*ibid.*) defends the lenient view based on the Chazon Ish’s understanding of the Rama. The concern of confusing cooled-down liquid with another is not relevant if the liquid is mixed in a majority of food.

### **Practical Application – Tea Refills**

An interesting question arises regarding refilling a cup of tea or coffee. Some Poskim (Rav Aharon Kotler and others, cited in *Halachos of Shabbos*, p. 295, note 423) require wiping the remaining few drops of completely cooled water on the cup’s bottom. Many authorities, though, are lenient.

The Chazon Ish (*ibid.* note 424) rules leniently, arguing that we fundamentally accept that Ein Bishul Achar Bishul applies to liquids. The Ashkenazic custom to follow the strict view if the liquid has entirely cooled down, argues the Chazon Ish, does not apply if one merely reheats a minute amount of water and does not care about reheating the few drops.

Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Teshuvot Igrot Moshe* O.C. 4:74:Bishul:19) argues that one may be lenient because of multiple doubts (*S’feik S’feika*). One lenient consideration is that many Rishonim permit reheating liquids. The second lenient consideration is that one is not concerned about reheating such a minuscule amount of water. This is a situation of a פסיק רישיה לדלא ניחא לה (an unintended side effect) and is permitted by some Rishonim (most notably the Aruch). The combination of these two lenient opinions allows for a lenient ruling. This ruling also applies to returning a ladle to a Kli Rishon if it has a few drops of previously cooked liquid that have cooled completely.

However, Rav Mordechai Willig (Cooking and Warming Food on Shabbat, p.26) follows the strict view, keeping with Rav Soloveitchik’s understanding of the Rama’s compromise.

Ein Bishul Achar Bishul – Part Two By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

*Halachah, Volume 35*

5786/2025

### **Cooked Sugar, Cooked Salt, and Instant Coffee**

The Mishnah Berurah (318:71) notes that if salt was cooked during its processing, we may even place it on food in a Kli Rishon if the Kli Rishon was removed from the fire. The Mishnah Berurah says that the same applies to sugar that was cooked during its processing. He notes, however, that Rav Akiva Eiger (at the end of O.C. 253; and see *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata* 1:note 138) questions this ruling. Rav Akiva Eiger believes that a solid item designated to be melted and turned into a liquid may have the status of a liquid. Accordingly, the Ein Bishul Achar Bishul rule does not apply even to cooked salt and sugar. The Mishnah Berurah concludes that it is best to avoid placing salt and sugar in a Kli Rishon. He permits relying on the lenient opinions regarding a Kli Sheini.

*Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata* (1:49) notes the many applications of this rule. They include instant coffee, instant tea, soup bouillon, powdered milk, and powdered cocoa. The *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata* follows the Mishnah Berurah and recommends avoiding placing any of these items in a Kli Rishon. However, Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Teshuvot Yechaveh Da’at* 2:44) endorses the lenient view as it is supported by leading Poskim such as Rav Zvi Pesach Frank and Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg.

### **Cooking after Baking**

The Beit Yosef (318 s.v. *V’katav Harav Eliezer Mi’Metz*) cites a celebrated dispute concerning Ein Bishul Achar Bishul’s scope. He cites the *Sefer Yere’im* who limits it to identical processes such as cooking after cooking, baking after baking, or roasting after roasting. However, he forbids dissimilar processes, such as cooking after baking or roasting after cooking. The Beit Yosef, though, quotes the Raavya who adopts an expansive view of Ein Bishul Achar Bishul. He rules that it applies even to dissimilar processes, such as cooking after baking. A ramification of this dispute is whether one may place bread in very hot (*Yad Soledet Bo*) soup.

In the Beit Yosef, Rav Yosef Karo cites the many Talmudic texts cited by both the Yereim and the Raavya as proof for their respective opinions. In the Shulchan Aruch (318:5), Rav Karo mentions both the Yereim and the Raavya (Yesh Mi SheOmer and Yesh Matirim) without explicitly endorsing either opinion.

### **Sephardic Practice**

Rav Ovadia Yosef (Livyat Chein 318:49) believes that Rav Karo accepts the lenient opinion since he presents it second. Rav Ovadia notes that when Rav Karo presents both opinions as “there are those who say and those who say”, the second view is primary (since he gives it the last word). Moreover, Rav Ovadia notes that Rav Karo presents the Yereim’s view as Yesh Mi SheOmer in the singular and the Ra’avyah’s opinion in the plural Yesh Matirim, signaling that the Ra’avyah has greater support. Nonetheless, Rav Ben Zion Abba Sha’ul (Teshuvot Ohr L’Tzion 2:30:6) favors stringency, since a Torah prohibition is at stake.

### **Ashkenazic Practice**

However, the Rama records the Ashkenazic custom to refrain from placing bread in Yad Soledet Bo soup even in a Kli Sheini since there would be cooking after baking. Interestingly, the Shemirat Shabbat KeHilchata (1:61) permits placing fried soup croutons or fried noodles into Yad Soledet Bo soup, since deep frying is the Halachic equivalent of cooking (Sanhedrin 4b with Rashi d”h Derech Bishul and Mishnah Berurah 451:65).

The Mishnah Berurah (318:47) rules leniently if the soup is in a Kli Shelishi. He believes that the possibility that cooking does not occur in a Kli Shelishi, in addition to the Ra’avyah’s view, support a lenient ruling. Thus, he permits placing Challah in very hot soup, if the soup is in a Kli Shelishi.

### **Ladle Status**

This Mishnah Berurah combines the possibility that a ladle is a Kli Sheini with the Ra’avyah’s leniency. Poskim debate whether a ladle used to remove hot food from a Kli Rishon is regarded as a Kli Rishon or a Kli Sheni. The Maharil (cited by the Taz, Yoreh Deah 92:30) views a ladle as a Kli Sheni. The Taz (ibid.) sharply challenges the Maharil’s view, arguing that since the ladle was immersed in a Kli Rishon, it assumes the status of a Kli Rishon. The Mishnah Berurah has seemingly contradictory indications regarding this question (compare 318:45 with 253:84 and 318:87). We may resolve the contradiction by saying that the Mishnah Berurah rules leniently regarding a ladle in combination with the Ra’avyah’s lenient view.

The Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata (1:59 with footnote 180) regards a ladle as a Kli Sheini in this context, provided that the ladle was not immersed for a “long period” in the hot pot. A ladle becomes a Kli Rishon if it remains in the hot pot for a significant amount of time. The Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata does not define what he regards as a “long period.”

Mishnah Berurah 318:87 and Yalkut Yosef Orach Chaim 318:87 support the standard of the ladle being a Kli Rishon if it was immersed in the Kli Rishon until steam rises from the ladle’s contents. Rav Willig (Cooking and Warming Food on Shabbat, pp. 76-77) supports this standard.

### **Warming Challah on a Blech**

Rav Shmuel Fuerst permits placing Challah on a pot to warm on Shabbat as long as it does not change color or become crispy. Although there is considerable debate about whether one can make toast on Shabbat, it is permissible to warm up the bread without the intention to make toast.

My wife Malca advises wrapping the Challah in one layer of aluminum foil so that the heat will not dry out the bread and prevent it from becoming meaty.

### **Conclusion**

The best way to avoid this question seems to be to wait to dip the Challah until the soup has cooled below Yad Soledet Bo. Recall from our prior articles that we may regard Yad Soledet Bo as 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Thus, the soup remains enjoyable even at a temperature lower than Yad Soledet Bo.

Similarly, a practical way to avoid the dispute regarding solids containing some liquid is to reheat such items in a way that they will not reach 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

from: Ira Zlotowitz <Iraz@klalgovoah.org> date: Nov 20, 2025, 7:00 PM  
subject: Tidbits • Parshas Toldos 5786

Parshas Toldos • November 22nd • 2 Kislev 5786

The first opportunity for Kiddush Levana is Sunday night, November 23rd. The final opportunity is early Friday morning, December 5th at 12:39 AM Eastern Time.

Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Zevachim 69 • Yerushalmi: Yoma 30 • Mishnah Yomis: Chulin 10:1-2. The siyum is this Friday, mazal tov! Masechta Bechoros begins next • Oraysa (coming week): Chagigah 26b - Yevamos 2b. The siyum on Chagigah and Seder Moed is this Tuesday, November 25th, mazal tov! Seder Nashim begins next with Masechta Yevamos • Kitzur Shulchan Aruch: 20:8-21:2

Make sure to call your parents, in-laws, grandparents and Rebbi to wish them a good Shabbos. If you didn’t speak to your kids today, make sure to connect with them as well!

Chanukah begins Sunday night, December 14th. Shabbos Chanukah is Shabbos Parshas Miketz, December 20th.

TOLDOS: Yitzchak and Rivkah pray for children • Rivkah is expecting a child, experiences pain, receives word of twin children • Birth of Eisav, followed by Yaakov • Eisav sells his firstborn rights for lentil soup • Hashem commands Yitzchak not to leave Eretz Yisrael • Yitzchak settles in Gerar • Fearful for his life, Yitzchak claims Rivkah is his sister • Avimelech becomes aware of their true relationship and assures their protection • Yitzchak prospers and the envious Avimelech sends him away • Avimelech’s men claim Yitzchak’s wells • Avimelech comes to make a treaty • Yitzchak’s men find water at Be’er Sheva • Eisav marries at the age of forty • Yitzchak wishes to bless his son, Eisav • Rivkah commands Yaakov to intercept the blessings • Eisav is bitterly disappointed and vows to kill Yaakov • Rivkah sends Yaakov to stay with her brother Lavan • Yitzchak exhorts Eisav not to marry a Canaanite woman • Eisav marries Yishmael’s daughter in addition to his other wives Haftarah: Despite Eisav being the firstborn, it was divinely ordained for Yaakov to be granted the bechorah and to merit the twelve Shevatim and to build the nation. The nevuah of Malachi (1:1-2:7) speaks of the love of Hashem for Yaakov and His hatred for Edom, the descendants of Eisav. Yet even with His love for our forefathers, each Jew individually must strive to be deserving of inheriting Hashem’s endearment.

Parshas Toldos: 106 Pesukim • No mitzvos listed

וְיַצְחָקָה אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ אָשֶׁר־בָּהּ... וְרִבְקָה אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ... “Yitzchak pleaded with Hashem [for a child] opposite his wife... Hashem accepted his prayers, and his wife Rivkah conceived” (Bereishis 25:21) Rashi quotes the Midrash that notes that although they both davened earnestly for a child, it was Yitzchak’s tefillos, not Rivkah’s, that effected salvation, as Yaakov was the son of a Tzaddik and Rivkah was the daughter of Besuel, a wicked man. One may question that if it was Yitzchak’s tefillos that accomplished a yeshuah and not those of Rivkah, why does the Torah even mention that Rivkah prayed at all? Similarly, we find that the Torah describes that Hagar davened for Yishmael who was deathly ill in the desert. However, the Torah says that Hashem heard “kol hana’ar”, that it was Yishmael’s prayers that were accepted. So why does the Torah tell us about Hagar’s tefillos? Rav Yitzchak Feigelstock zt”l answers that we can derive from here that certainly Rivkah’s prayers played a role in securing their salvation. However, ultimately, it was Yitzchak who secured salvation from Hashem. Hagar’s prayers were vital as well, yet ultimately it was the ill person, Yishmael himself, whose cries accomplished the salvation. Rav Yitzchak zt”l explains that every tefillah is received by Hashem and there is no such thing as a prayer going to waste. Although we may not notice the effectiveness, each and every tefillah brings about a measure of good and salvation.

Halachos of Chanukah: Menorah - What to Light? It is preferable to use olive oil. Other than the shamash, one should use either oil or candles, but not a mix of both. There should be enough oil in the cup at the time of lighting for the Menorah to burn for at least a half hour after nightfall (tzeis hakochavim). If, inadvertently, any of the candles go out before tzeis, it is not necessary to relight them, so long as the original lighting was done from

shekiah and onward. However, it is praiseworthy to re-light them (without a berachah). Unlike Neiros Shabbos, most Poskim say one cannot use an electric Menorah, even under extenuating circumstances.

Please reach out to us with any thoughts or comments at: [klalgovoah.org](http://klalgovoah.org)  
Ira Zlotowitz - Founder | [iraz@gparency.com](mailto:iraz@gparency.com) | 917.597.2197 Ahron Dicker  
Editor | [adicker@klalgovoah.org](mailto:adicker@klalgovoah.org) | 732.581.5830

Rabbi Reisman – Parshas Toldos 5782

### 1 – Topic – A Thought from Rav Chaim Kanievsky on the beginning of the Parsha.

As we prepare for Shabbos [Parshas Toldos](#) and the beginning of Chodesh Kislev. Let's share a number of thoughts on this week's Parsha. Let's start at the beginning of the Parsha with the birth of Eisav and Yaakov. It is interesting that it says in the Parsha by Eisav as is found in [25:25](#) (אֶשְׁנָא שָׂמַח, קָרָא אֶשְׁנָא שָׂמַח) they called him Eisav and by Yaakov it says [25:26](#) (בָּקָרָא שָׂמַח, קָרָא אֶשְׁנָא שָׂמַח) in a Lashon Yachid. Why is that? You may understand because Eisav's name had to do with the way he was born, he was Asa, he was completely made so to speak, he was hairy already, but Yaakov also had to do with way he was born, Eikev. So people called Eisav this and people called Yaakov this. So why is one Lashon Rabbim and one Lashon Yachid?

Rav Chaim Kanievsky in the Sefer Taima Dik'ra (page 33) says something extraordinary. As you know, we have a custom to give a name to a boy at the time of the Bris Milah. That has been the custom by Klal Yisrael at least going back to the time of the Gemara. Where does that come from, what is the Mekor, what does the name have anything to do with the Bris Milah? I think that we have spoken about this once before. I might have mentioned that someone suggested to Rav Pam and he found it a good suggestion, that because Dovid Hamelech had a Yeled born from Bas Sheva and it says that the Yeled died when he was 7 days old as is found in [Shmuel II](#)

[12:18](#) (וְיָהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְׁבִיעִי, נִימְתַּחַד). From there it seems that they didn't give a name until a Bris.

Rav Chaim Kanievsky says the following. The Minhag was to give a name at a Bris. Yaakov Avinu had a Bris (בָּקָרָא שָׂמַח, קָרָא שָׂמַח). However, Eisav was born red and since he looked red they didn't give him a Bris Milah because they thought maybe it is jaundice or another illness that makes him look red. So Chazal say they pushed off the Bris. When he got older he didn't let them do a Bris. So it comes out that Eisav was never given a Bris. So there was no moment that they gave him a name. (שָׂמַח, קָרָא שָׂמַח). They called him Eisav as he was never given a name by his parent's so people called him Eisav. Therefore, it says Lashon Rabbim. By Yaakov when his parent's gave him a name it says (קָרָא) in Lashon Yachid. This is what Rav Chaim Kanievsky says. This is the way to learn up a Posuk in Chumash. Beautiful!

### 2 – Topic – A Thought based on a Yesod of Hashkafa from Rav Pam

I would like to share with you a Yesod in Hashkafa, a Yesod that I heard from Rav Pam and we will see what connection it has to do with this week's Parsha. Rav Pam used to say in the name of the Chazon Ish in Yiddish, "Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos." We don't rip down Mezuzos. What is the context, what is the idea?

The Shaila is a person has a Mezuza that is 100% Kosher. However, you could get a nicer neater Mezuzah that is more Mehudar. Should he replace the Mezuza? To that, the Chazon Ish writes in one of his letters, Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos. The way Rav Pam explained, if the other Mezuza is Kosher according to more Shittos then of course as it is Mehudar in Kashrus, however, if it just a Hiddur Mitzvah in neatness then Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos.

I saw a similar thing in the Igros Moshe in Orach Chaim Cheilek Bais Sof Siman Lamed Zayin (The Teshuvah is on page 225 of Krach Daled) where Rav Moshe writes the same thing about Yerios in a Sefer Torah that if the Yeria is Kosher and just you can get a nicer one you don't replace Yerios. There is a Halachik source for this discussion in the Teshuva Seforim which has to do with the month of Kislev. He brings a discussion between the Shvus Yaakov and the Chacham Tzvi if someone set up his Menorah with candles because he had no oil and later they bring him oil, should he take away the candles and replace it with oil? The Shvus Yaakov held no. Once

you have something that is Kosher you don't replace it, you don't change it. The Chacham Tzvi disagreed as you haven't yet started the process of lighting the Menorah. But everyone agrees that once you started you certainly don't change it to do it more Mehudar if you are doing it correctly. Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos. What you do if it is good, it is good.

I used this as a possible answer to a big Kasha. I had a Kasha which I must have asked. Moshe and Aharon are buried in Eiver Hayarden the same time that the Jews are carrying the bones of the 12 Shevatim to be buried in Eretz Yisrael. When Moshe and Aharon died they were busy carrying the Mitah of Yosef that he should be buried in Eretz Yisrael and then when Moshe Rabbeinu dies they bury him where he is. Why didn't they take him into Eretz Yisrael proper?

It may be the same idea. Yosef died in Mitzrayim so they took him to bury him in Eretz Yisrael. Moshe and Aharon died in Eiver Hayarden which is also Eretz Yisrael. For a bigger Hiddur of going across the Yardein that you don't do. Mir Rai'st Nisht. What you have is also good. What you have in front of you if it is good you do it.

We find a similar idea if a king dies and his oldest son is Rau'i to be king, even if the second son is more appropriate for king. If you do a better job if the first one is suitable and would do a good job, we accept him. The same idea, Mir Rai'st Nisht, you don't go and take something that you have and throw it out because you can get something better. No! If you have something you go with it. In the first place, when you are heading to do things, do it the best way you can. However, if you already have something in front of you don't be Mevaze it, don't embarrass it to get rid of it for something that is better.

Yitzchok Avinu knew that Yaakov is a Tzaddik Gamur, yet, since he thought Eisav was okay he went with Eisav. Everyone wondered did he not know the difference between Eisav and Yaakov? The Teretz is Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos. The Teretz is you don't go shopping, you don't say well this one is good but look at that one. You don't go shopping. You do go shopping before you came to the Mitzvah, but once you are somewhere you do with the Cheftzah of the Mitzvah that you have.

Just like a king goes with his older son even though the second one might be Yaakov Avinu, so too, Yitzchok knew that Yaakov is better but he said look he is the B'chor and I should go with him. Mir Rai'st Nisht Mezuzos, Mir Rai'st Nisht Bechor. That would explain why once Eisav spilled the beans and he said, he took my Bechora and now he took my Berachos. Yitzchok said what? Yaakov is the Bechor then he should certainly get it. 27:33 (וְאֶכְלֶל אָכְלָל בְּטַעַם תְּבָאָה, וְאֶכְרְבָּדָה). Of course Yitzchok understood what was going on, but he felt that if Eisav could do a good job that is adequate to that degree, he was fooled.

### 3 – Topic – A Vort from Rav Schwab

Rav Schwab in his Sefer on Chumash Mayan Bais Hashoeva (page 67-68) (this topic was also discussed in 5771) says a beautiful explanation from the fact that Yitzchok wanted to eat food that Eisav cooked before he gave him a Beracha. Not only that but afterwards when he ate from Yaakov and Eisav came in he said as is found in 27:33 (וְאֶכְלֶל אָכְלָל בְּטַעַם תְּבָאָה, וְאֶכְרְבָּדָה). I ate everything. That is the way a Gadol Hador speaks, I ate everything? That (לְכָל) is Bakol, Mikol, Kol. We consider it to be something that Achila. What is going on with Yitzchok's eating?

Says Rav Schwab, Yitzchok Avinu was able to sense the Kedusha in the food in which a Mitzvah was done. For all his failings, Eisav was really Mekayem Kibbutz Av V'aim, it wasn't a fake. The Gemara says that Tannaim said that my Kibbutz Av V'aim is only a fraction of Eisav's. Eisav was Mekayem the Mitzvah. When Eisav was Mekayem the Mitzvah of Kibbutz Av V'aim with food that food was imbued with the sense, with the Kedusha of the Mitzvah which was done. That is what Yitzchok wanted. He wanted to have the Kedusha of that Mitzvah that Eisav did. Now he says prepare food and I will give you a Beracha, Eisav will certainly do it with a tremendous Cheishek for the Mitzvah, and that will be fantastic with the Cheishek of the Mitzvah so that will be a special Maachal.

Then Rivka tells Yaakov you bring your father food. Yaakov said my food will not have the Kedusha of Kibbutz Av like when Eisav prepares it. So

Rivka tells Yaakov 27:13 (עַלְיוֹ קָלְלָתֶךָ בְּנִי). Go do it for me. Do it with Kibbutz Aim. You will have the Mitzvah of Kibbutz Aim with Mesirus Nefesh because you don't really want to do it. You are afraid as it says in 27:12 (אַיִלְיַיְתָּנִי אָבִי). Why are you doing it? Because your mother told you. That food will have the sense of the Mitzvah of Kibbutz Aim and Kibbutz Av V'aim is the same Mitzvah in the Torah. Mameila it will be Murgesh, it will be felt. That is the explanation of (אָכַל מְפַלִּי). He says I ate it and I felt the Kedusha of Kibbutz Av V'aim and Mameila (גַם-בָּרוּךְ, הַיְהָ). What an insight, a Cheftza D'mitzvah.

You have to know that Tashmishai Kedusha like Mezuzas, Tefillin and Sefarim and things that are used for them are Shaimos. Tashmishai Mitzvah Nizrakin. Certain things you are allowed to throw away. You are allowed to throw away a Shofar, a Lulav, and Schach. You are allowed to throw it away. But Im Kol Zeh, to understand that when you use something for a Mitzvah it becomes a Cheftza D'mitzvah. It becomes something with a very special Chashivus, a special Kedusha. If your home is a home of Mitzvos the whole home gets imbued with the Kedusha of the Mitzvos that you do. With that I want to wish one and all an absolutely wonderful Shabbos, a Chodesh Tov as tomorrow Erev Shabbos is Rosh Chodesh. Let it be a very wonderful and meaningful Shabbos for one and all!

from: The **Rabbi Sacks Legacy** <info@rabbisacks.org>

date: Nov 20, 2025, 11:16 AM

subject: Between Prophecy and Oracle (Toldot)

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

**Between Prophecy and Oracle**

TOLDOT

Written by Rabbi Sacks in 2012

Rebecca, hitherto infertile, became pregnant. Suffering acute pain, "she went to inquire of the Lord" [vatelech lidrosh et Hashem] (Bereishit 25:22). The explanation she received was that she was carrying twins who were contending in her womb. They were destined to do so long into the future: Two nations are inside your womb; Two peoples are to part from you. One people will be stronger than the other, And the older will serve the younger [ve-rav ya'avod tsa'ir].

Bereishit 25:23 Eventually the twins are born – first Esau, then (his hand grasping his brother's heel) Jacob. Mindful of the prophecy she has received, Rebecca favours the younger son, Jacob. Years later, she persuades him to cover himself in Esau's clothes and take the blessing Isaac intended to give his elder son. One verse of that blessing was "May nations serve you; may nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you." (Bereishit 27:29) The prophecy has been fulfilled.

Isaac's blessing can surely mean nothing less than what was disclosed to Rebecca before either child was born, namely that "the older will serve the younger." The story has apparently reached closure, or so, at this stage, it seems.

But biblical narrative is not what it seems. Two events follow which subvert all that we had been led to expect. The first happens when Esau arrives and discovers that Jacob has cheated him out of his blessing. Moved by his anguish, Isaac gives him a benediction, one of whose clauses is:

By your sword you will live, And your brother you will serve; But when you break loose, You will throw off his yoke from your neck.

Bereishit 27:40 This is not what we had anticipated. The older will not serve the younger in perpetuity.

The second scene, many years later, occurs when the brothers meet after a long estrangement. Jacob is terrified of the encounter. He had fled from home years earlier because Esau had vowed to kill him. Only after a long series of preparations and a lonely wrestling match at night is he able to face Esau with some composure. He bows down to him seven times. Seven times he calls him "my lord." Five times he refers to himself as "your servant." The roles have been reversed. Esau does not become the servant of Jacob. Instead, Jacob speaks of himself as the servant of Esau. But this cannot be. The words heard by Rebecca when "she went to inquire of the Lord"

suggested precisely the opposite, that "the older will serve the younger." We are faced with cognitive dissonance.

More precisely, we have here an example of one of the most remarkable of all the Torah's narrative devices – the power of the future to transform our understanding of the past. This is the essence of Midrash. New situations retrospectively disclose new meanings in the text.<sup>[1]</sup> The present is never fully determined by the present. Sometimes it is only later that we understand now.

This is the significance of the great revelation of God to Moses in Shemot 33:23, where God says that only His back may be seen – meaning that His Presence can be seen only when we look back at the past; it can never be known or predicted in advance. The indeterminacy of meaning at any given moment is what gives the biblical text its openness to ongoing interpretation. We now see that this was not an idea invented by the Sages. It already exists in the Torah itself. The words Rebecca heard – as will now become clear – seemed to mean one thing at the time. It later transpires that they meant something else.

The words ve-rav ya'avod tsa'ir seem simple: "the older will serve the younger." Returning to them in the light of subsequent events, though, we discover that they are anything but clear. They contain multiple ambiguities. The first (noted by Radak and R. Yosef ibn Kaspi) is that the word et, signalling the object of the verb, is missing. Normally in biblical Hebrew the subject precedes, and the object follows, the verb, but not always. In Job 14:19 for example, the words avanim shachaku mayim mean "water wears away stones," not "stones wear away water." Thus the phrase might mean "the older shall serve the younger" but it might also mean "the younger shall serve the older". To be sure, the latter would be poetic Hebrew rather than conventional prose style, but that is what this utterance is: a poem.

The second is that rav and tsa'ir are not opposites, a fact disguised by the English translation of rav as "older." The opposite of tsa'ir ("younger") is bechir ("older" or "firstborn"). Rav does not mean "older." It means "great" or possibly "chief." This linking together of two terms as if they were polar opposites, which they are not – the opposites would have been bechir/ta'sir or rav/me'at – further destabilises the meaning. Who was the rav? The elder? The leader? The chief? The more numerous? The word might mean any of these things.

The third – not part of the text but of later tradition – is the musical notation. The normal way of notating these three words would be mercha-tipcha-sof passuk. This would support the reading, "the older shall serve the younger." In fact, however, they are notated tipcha-mercha-sof passuk – suggesting, "the older, shall the younger serve"; in other words, "the younger shall serve the older."

A later episode adds a yet another retrospective element of doubt. There is a second instance in Genesis of the birth of twins, to Tamar. The passage is clearly reminiscent of the story of Esau and Jacob:

When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb. As she was in labour one child put out a hand, so the midwife took a crimson thread and tied it to his wrist, saying, "This one came out first." But he pulled his hand back and then his brother came out. She said, "How you have burst through!" So he was named Peretz. Then his brother came out with the crimson thread on his wrist. He was named Zerah.

Bereishit 38:27-30 Who then was the elder? And what does this imply in the case of Esau and Jacob?<sup>[2]</sup> These multiple ambiguities are not accidental but integral to the text. The subtlety is such, that we do not notice them at first. Only later, when the narrative does not turn out as expected, are we forced to go back and notice what at first we missed: that the words Rebecca heard may mean "the older will serve the younger" or "the younger will serve the older."

A number of things now become clear. The first is that this is a rare example in the Torah of an oracle as opposed to a prophecy (this is the probable meaning of the word chiddot in Bamidbar 12:8, speaking about Moses: "With him I speak mouth to mouth, openly and not in chiddot" – usually translated as "dark speeches" or "riddles"). Oracles – a familiar form of supernatural communication in the ancient world – were normally obscure

and cryptic, unlike the normal form of Israelite prophecy. This may well be the technical meaning of the phrase “she went to inquire of the Lord” which puzzled the medieval commentators.

The second – and this is fundamental to an understanding of Bereishit – is that the future is never as straightforward as we are led to believe. Abraham is promised many children but is 100 years old before Isaac is born. The patriarchs are promised a land but do not acquire it in their lifetimes. The Jewish journey - though it has a destination - is long and has many digressions and setbacks. Will Jacob serve or be served? We do not know. Only after a long, enigmatic struggle, alone at night, does Jacob receive the name Israel meaning, “he who struggles with God and with men and prevails.”

The most important message of this text is both literary and theological. The future affects our understanding of the past. We are part of a story whose last chapter has not yet been written. That rests with us, as it rested with Jacob. [1] Please see, for example the essay ‘The Midrashic Imagination’ by Michael Fishbane.

[2] See Rashi to Gen. 25:26 who suggests that Jacob was in fact the elder.

**Zera Shimshon by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt”l** Published Mantua 1778 Chapter VI: Toldot (Gen. 25:19-28:9) Essay . Righteous descendants and wicked descendants There is a verse: “And these are the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham” (Gen. 25:19). Rashi interpreted: “The parsha is speaking of Jacob and Esau.” [People] question that the words of Rashi are unnecessary, since the Scripture declares forcefully, “There were twins in her womb. The first one emerged red . . . afterward his brother came out” (Gen. 25:24-26). It appears that Rashi felt that since we have established, as Rabbi Abbahu is quoted in Gen. Rabbah 12:3, that “everyplace that the word ‘these are’ [eleh] is said, it interrupts the preceding text, and everyplace that the word ‘and these are’ [ve’eleh] is said, it adds to the preceding text.” Here, at Gen. 25:19, the subject of the preceding text are the sons of Ishmael, so how does it say, ‘and these are’ [ve’eleh]? How are Isaac’s sons the same topic as Ishmael’s sons? Also, as it is said, “And these are the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham,” haven’t we heard up until now that Isaac was the son of Abraham? [Scripture] could have said, “These are the descendants of Isaac,” and nothing more, i.e., omitting the prefatory “and” and omitting “the son of Abraham.” Rather, certainly Scripture added “the son of Abraham” to inform us that the descendants [of Isaac], including some descendants of Esau, were like those of Abraham, because by the same descendants, the holiness found room to take her sparks [nitzotzot] out from the husk [klipa], as we will write further in Essay 3 of this chapter, on the verse, “But the children struggled in her womb” (Gen. 25:22). This question is asked by Rabbi Avi Ezri Zelig Margolios, in Kesef Nivchar (Amsterdam 1711). This is what Rashi interpreted on the verse of, “Two nations are in your womb” (Gen. 25:23): “These are Antoninus and Rabbi.” He did not interpret the verse as referring to the two heads of nations, i.e., as referring to Jacob and Esau, who were the heads and the fathers of the two nations, and who struggled against each other even before they were born. Rather, Rashi highlighted descendants of each who were great men and also great friends of each other. Jacob’s descendant, Rabbi (Rabbi Yehuda haNasi), was very wealthy, the redactor and editor of the Mishnah, head of the Sanhedrin, known for his piety. Esau’s descendant, Antoninus,<sup>2</sup> was a Roman emperor who was according to Avodah Zarah 10b, was a great admirer and supporter of Rabbi. Now it’s fine: [Rashi] identified the two of them, Rabbi and Antoninus, as “the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham,” because these descendants that will come because of the pregnancy of Rebecca—that is, the two nations that were in her womb—will be like Abraham. In any event, it is written “and these are” [ve’eleh] to add the previously mentioned sons of Ishmael. They are included in the same topic with Jacob and Esau because wicked people also descended from Jacob, as we have learned (Sanhedrin page 90a), “And these are the ones who don’t have a portion in the World-to-Come,” with the list including the kings Jeroboam and Ahab (and some add Manasseh). Also, Esau was himself wicked, and thus relevant to the same topic as the sons of

Ishmael. The descendants were called by the name “Abraham” because he was the first of converts (Sukkah page 49b), and because it is written, “for I make you the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:5). That is, Abraham repaired the spirituality of the converts and pulled them from the husk into which they had sunk, as we have written above for parshat Vayeira (essay 2) on the verse, “he was sitting at the entrance of the tent” (Gen. 18:1) and see there. But preparation and thinking were still required in order to take them out entirely. Thus, “And these are” hints at the wicked descendants of both Jacob and Esau, by linking back to the previously mentioned sons of Ishmael, while “the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham,” hints at the righteous descendants of both Jacob and Esau. Two likely candidates were the emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (who lived 121-180), or Caracalla (formally Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who lived 188-217). Alternatively, in a different manner, we will investigate what [Rashi] wrote, that the parsha is speaking of Jacob and Esau, for immediately adjacent to our verse, they are mentioned by Rashi. The next verse, Gen. 25:20, states that Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebecca, the daughter of Bethuel and the sister of Laban. Rashi notes that we already knew her lineage, and that it is repeated in Gen. 25:20 as praise, for even though she was the daughter of a wicked man, and sister of a wicked man, and her native place was one of wicked people, yet she did not learn from their way of life. Nevertheless, her background had an effect, per commentators wrote that here from their union there was one righteous [son], Jacob, and one wicked [son], Esau, because Isaac was a righteous man who was the son of a righteous man, while Rebecca was a righteous woman who nevertheless was the daughter of a wicked man. But there is a question about this, for Abraham fathered Isaac who was a righteous man, and yet Abraham and Sarah were not children of righteous people, for their respective fathers, Terah and Haran<sup>3</sup> were idol worshippers, and nevertheless [Abraham and Sarah] were able to be righteous. Why couldn’t Jacob and Esau both have been righteous? Why was one, Jacob, righteous, and one, Esau, wicked? Rather, it can be said that from the story of the parsha, we learn that the reason that the blessings came to Jacob by deception, even though he deserved them more than Esau, was because the Holy One, Blessed be He, didn’t want the blessings to come to Jacob in the way of tranquility and quiet. G-d preferred that Jacob not enjoy [the tranquility and quiet] so much in this world, in order that he would merit them in the World-to-Come. Because of this, the Holy One, blessed be He, mixed up the events so that Jacob and his seed would only enjoy the blessings with worry and trepidation and with the hatred of Esau, as we will write later in its place, in essay 16 of this chapter. Because of this, [G-d] brought out Jacob and Esau from Isaac, and made them quarrel among themselves such that there would be no peace and quiet for Jacob, and in order to fulfill Abraham’s choice that the children of Jacob would 3 In Gen. 20:12, Abraham tells Abimelech that Sarah is his half-sister, “She is in truth my sister, my father’s daughter though not my mother’s; and she became my wife.” However, Rabbinic tradition is that she is his niece, the daughter of Abraham’s brother, Haran. Thus, Sarah was Abraham’s father’s [grand]daughter. See Sanhedrin 69b, where Rabbi Yitzchak interprets Gen. 11:29 as saying that Sarai was another name for Haran’s daughter Iscah. 4 face exile. This references the midrash, Gen. Rabbah 44:21: “Shimon bar Abba said in Rabbi Yochanan’s name: [G-d] showed [Abraham] four things, Gehenna, the [foreign] kingdoms, the Giving of Torah [at Mt. Sinai], and the Temple, with the promise: As long as your children occupy themselves with the latter two, they will be saved from the former two. [If not,] would you rather your children descend into Gehenna or into the power of the [foreign] kingdoms?” [The rabbis then disagree over what Abraham answered. Some say that he chose subjugation by the foreign kingdoms, while other rabbis says that Abraham answered “Gehenna” but that G-d overruled him.] Israel would not have to face Gehenna, but would be subject to Exile and to subjugation at the hands of Esau. These, then are the words of Rashi, “The parsha is speaking of Jacob and Esau,” as if to say that because Isaac was the “son of Abraham,” and Abraham had chosen exile and subjugation by the foreign kingdoms over a descent into Gehenna, because of this, Jacob and Esau came from [Isaac]. That is, from everything that was written in the

parsha, you learned that Jacob is not able to sit in tranquility because of Esau, to fulfil the words of Abraham, and this is the meaning of “And these are the generations of Isaac,” because he is “the son of Abraham,” and not because Rebecca was the daughter of a wicked man. English translation Copyright © 2021 by Charles S. Stein. <https://zstorah.com>

## Toldot 5786

### When Lying is (Absolutely) Necessary

Rabbi Reuven Mann

This week’s Parsha, Toldot, takes up the life story of the third and final Patriarch, Yaakov Avinu (our forefather). His trajectory was more complicated than that of his predecessors. His task was not merely to sustain and somewhat expand the religious system of Avraham, but to facilitate its transformation into a national movement. The most basic requirement of this endeavor was the establishment of the Twelve Tribes, each of which would be a component of the Chosen Nation. Yaakov and Eisav: Two Paths, Two Natures It should be noted that people, by their very natures, are cut out for different tasks. For example, the Torah clearly delineates the natural differences between Eisav and his twin brother Yaakov. The former was an outdoorsman, who loved to hunt and was apparently very good at it. He was also very solicitous of his father, whom he treated with great respect. The Torah testifies concerning Yitzchak that he loved Eisav because “the hunt was in his mouth” (Bereishit 25:28). What exactly does that mean? On the most straightforward level, it means that Eisav prepared tasty meals from the animals he hunted and served them to his father. This elicited a natural sense of appreciation and love from his father. But is that by itself a sufficient basis to award his father’s blessings? The Rabbis interpret the words “the hunt was in his mouth” (Bereishit Rabbah 63:10) to refer to the mouth of Eisav. They mean that Eisav was a very smooth operator who knew exactly how to convey the impression that suited his interests. Eisav very much wanted the approval of his father, and he knew that great hunting skills alone would not be sufficient to impress Yitzchak—who was raised in the philosophy of Avraham Avinu. So Eisav contrived to present himself as one who engaged in physical conquests purely for the sake of performing Mitzvot. First and foremost, he was meticulous in fulfilling the commandment of honoring one’s father and mother. But that wasn’t all. He knew how effective it was to convey impressions by asking informed and challenging questions—what we would call Shailot (legal Torah inquiry). If you come to your Rabbi every week with a list of detailed and thoughtful Halachic (Torah law) inquiries, which reflect a very deep interest in those areas, the Rabbi will take note. He will assume you are a sincere, meticulously observant individual who is determined to perform the Mitzvot correctly, and it will not occur to him that it’s all a charade to make an impression. The ability of the wicked to effectively pose as Tzadikim (righteous individuals) constitutes a great problem for mankind. This was the challenge faced by Yaakov. He knew that Eisav had succeeded in winning the love of his father, who held a very high opinion of Eisav’s spiritual potential. But Eisav was not successful in fooling everyone. The verse states simply that “Rivkah loves Yaakov” (Bereishit 25:28). Rivkah’s Insight and the Threat to the Abrahamic Mission She recognized and fully appreciated the religious level of her younger son, who was a “wholehearted man, who dwelled in tents” (Bereishit 25:27). As Rashi points out, these were the study houses of Shem and Ever, where Yaakov spent all of his time seeking the Wisdom of Hashem. Both Rivkah and Yitzchak recognized the unique spiritual level of Yaakov, but they disagreed about the true character of Eisav. Matters came to a head when Yitzchak decided to confer the blessings on the elder twin. Rivkah recognized the danger to the Abrahamic movement that this entailed. Throughout history, corrupt demagogues have been able to amass great power by their ability to deceive the masses by posing as their champion. The Jewish people have, unfortunately, suffered greatly from charlatans who distorted Judaism to advance their position. This was a very delicate moment in the process of forming the Jewish Nation. Had Eisav been promoted to be a leading figure of Israel, it would have been a disaster which could have spelled the very end of the Abrahamic religion. But that decision was completely in the hands of

Yitzchak, who instructed his elder son to “...make delicacies such as I love and bring it to me and I will eat; so that my soul may bless you, before I die.” Rivkah overheard Yitzchak’s instructions to Eisav and perceived the great danger that posed for the authentic religious movement of Avraham. She did not want to confront her husband directly as Sarah had done when she decided that Yishmael was a serious threat to the future leadership role of Yitzchak. In order to thwart Yitzchak’s intention, she had to solicit Yaakov to participate in her elaborate scheme of deception in which Yaakov would pose as Eisav and bring his father the tasty dishes, which Rivkah would prepare for him. And perhaps the most challenging aspect of this daring plan was the necessity it created for Yaakov to blatantly lie to his father. Yaakov had considerable resistance to doing what his mother wanted and was most fearful that if Yitzchak discovered the ruse it might gravely harm his relationship with his father. But Rivkah reassured him that if things fell apart she would assume the complete blame, and Yaakov reluctantly agreed to pretend that he was Eisav. The Dilemma of Deception: Was Yaakov Allowed to Lie? The scene that took place was most dramatic. “[Yaakov] came to his father and said, ‘Father.’ [Yitzchak] said, ‘Here I am; who are you, my son?’ Yaakov said, ‘I am Eisav, your firstborn. I did as you told me; please come, sit down, and eat of my game, in order that your soul may bless me.’” (Bereishit 27:18–19) While it seems clear that Yaakov declared a blatant untruth, Rashi seems to take his words differently. Rashi breaks down his statement this way: “I-am the one who is bringing to you, and Eisav—he is your firstborn”. At first glance, this Rashi is perplexing. Does he mean to say that it is permissible to pronounce a falsehood as long as the words can be rearranged to conform with the truth? That certainly is not the way that the listener hears the statement. At the very least, it is a blatant deception to say words that clearly mean that you are declaring yourself to be Eisav. What is the meaning of Rashi’s challenging interpretation? I believe it may be understood as follows: The Torah says, “Distance yourself from falsehood” (Shemot 23:7). This indicates that man’s perfection depends upon his adherence to truth in all matters. Lying is a terrible sin, because it distorts a person’s sense of reality and prevents him from living a truthful life. However, there are circumstances in which one is obligated to falsify certain information in order to prevent a catastrophe or to preserve a vital ideal. Sometimes the truth can be fatally destructive—for example, when a doctor knows that a fragile patient will be crushed by the news that they have a terminal illness. A wise and caring person must be judicious in what he says, and must recognize that there are situations in which he must utter words that are not, in fact, entirely accurate. That was the situation in which Rivkah and Yaakov found themselves. Had Yitzchak conferred the blessings on Eisav, it would have conveyed to the world the falsehood that Eisav was the legitimate spiritual heir of the Abrahamic religious movement. That would have constituted a greater distortion of truth than Yaakov identifying himself as Eisav. It was therefore morally correct to thwart Yitzchak’s intention and for Yaakov to pretend that he was Eisav and thus attest to his father, “I am Eisav your firstborn son”. The Spiritual Cost of Falsehood If it was permitted for Yaakov to lie in this situation, why does Rashi seek to mitigate that fib, by implying that Yaakov did actually speak the truth? I believe that Rashi is saying that Yaakov was concerned that he should not suffer spiritual harm as a result of verbalizing a falsehood. So as he was saying the words, he reviewed in his own mind the actual truth, i.e., “No! I am Yaakov, the one who is bringing you the food. It is Eisav who is your Bechor (firstborn)”. He did not want to allow himself to derive any psychological pleasure from the deception he was forced to perpetrate upon his father. This danger of lying, even when it is warranted, is expressed in a story from the Talmud (Yevamot 63a). The Talmudic sage Rav was married to a woman who would cause him distress by not making the meals he desired. If he asked her to prepare lentils, she would make beans, and if he asked for beans, she would provide lentils. When his son Chiya grew up, he switched around his father’s requests so that she would make him what he actually wanted. Rav told his son that things had improved, but Chiya then told him about the trick he was employing. Rav responded, “Now I understand what people say: ‘You can learn something from your son.’ But you should not continue to do this,

because it says, ‘They train their tongue to speak falsehood, striving to be iniquitous.’” (Jeremiah 9:4) We all confront many situations in which it is tempting to put a spin on things and manipulate the facts so that they are more in line with our interests. Many have a very sophisticated capability to talk their way out of the most challenging situations. This may fill them with a great deal of pride, and they will brag about their verbal “conquests” to their friends. But we should be cognizant that these arts of deception may be harmful to the soul. Rather we must seek, as the title of an important ethical work by Rav Eliyahu Dessler exhorts us, to Strive for Truth! This lofty ideal is incorporated into our daily prayers. “A person should always be G-d-fearing, privately and publicly, acknowledging the truth and speaking it in his heart.” May Hashem assist us in the vital endeavor to attain the true fear of Heaven, whose hallmark is an absolute commitment to truth. Shabbat Shalom.

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## Uncovering Judaism’s Influence on Western Music

by Yhezkel Laing

November 16, 2025 Before Gregorian chant, before Bach, there were the Levites. Explore how ancient Jewish music quietly shaped the entire Western musical tradition.

If we could travel back to the Jerusalem Temple two thousand years ago, we would find ourselves immersed in a breathtaking scene: hundreds of Levites, robed in white, chanting the Psalms of David as the Cohanim (Priests) offered the communal daily sacrifice. Surrounding them, master musicians filled the courtyards with the sounds of flutes, lyres, harps, cymbals, and drums—a musical pageant unmatched anywhere in the ancient world. Could this sacred Temple music have anything to do with the rhythms and harmonies of modern popular music? Surprisingly, the connection may run deeper than most imagine.

### Music’s Evolution

The modern Western music we enjoy today did not emerge suddenly or in isolation. It is the product of a rich, 2,000-year tradition that unfolded gradually, each era adding new layers to what came before. Scholars and music historians widely note that music develops in an organic, cumulative manner, with every new style drawing on earlier forms.

A good example comes from the distinguished American music theorist Professor William Ennis Thomson (1927–2019), former Dean of the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California. In his article “Music as Organic Evolution,” Thomson observes: “Music has long been viewed as an evolving organism, with each stylistic period growing out of the previous one. The modal systems of chant gave rise to tonality, which in turn enabled the harmonic complexity of the Baroque and Classical eras.”

### Gregorian Chant’s Influence on Modern Music

Gregorian chant, or plainchant, is widely recognized as the oldest form of Western music. It is a monophonic, unaccompanied sacred song of the Roman Catholic Church, traditionally sung in Latin. Often called “the DNA of modern music,” Gregorian chant formed the foundation of Western song for a thousand years.

The key features of Gregorian chant include:

Monophony: A single melodic line without harmony or accompaniment Free Rhythm: Not measured by regular beats; it flows with the natural rhythm of the text Sacred Texts: Drawn from the Bible, especially the Psalms, and used in the Mass Modality: Based on ancient scales known as church modes A Cappella: Performed without instruments, typically by male choirs As the oldest form of Western music, chant’s influence was immense. Many scholars argue that much of our modern musical vocabulary originates in chant. More complex forms of Western music developed gradually from chant’s simple, meditative structures.

### A Gregorian chant

Associate Professor of Music at Stanford University and Editor of Sacred Music magazine, William Peter Mahrt, has long maintained that Gregorian chant is the foundation of the Western musical tradition, influencing

everything from Renaissance polyphony to modern music. He emphasizes that chant’s modal systems and rhythmic freedom laid the groundwork for later developments in tonality and phrasing. As Mahrt writes, “Gregorian chant is the foundation of Western music – not only historically, but also structurally and aesthetically. Its modal system, rhythmic flexibility, and integration with liturgical text shaped the development of polyphony and the tonal systems that followed.”

How exactly did chant influence modern music?

**Melodic Structure:** Chant’s melodies move primarily in small, stepwise intervals, creating a smooth, flowing sound still common today. **Harmonic Practices:** Its use of parallel fifths and octaves influenced the earliest forms of polyphony and, eventually, richer harmonic styles. **Rhythm and Free Meter:** Chant’s free, non-metrical rhythm encouraged expressive phrasing. **Notation:** Modern musical notation ultimately descends from systems developed by the Church for notating chant. But above all its effects, chant’s most significant influence was its modes. A mode is a sequence of notes with a specific pattern of spaces between notes. It was these Gregorian modes that evolved into the major and minor scales we use today. Most music scholars agree that modern music owes a profound debt to the ancient church modes, which shaped both melodic contours and harmonic foundations. These modes influenced Renaissance and Baroque music and continue to appear in jazz, rock, film scores, and even video game soundtracks.

Richard Taruskin—one of the most influential music historians of his generation and author of the monumental six-volume *Oxford History of Western Music*—notes: “The church modes provided the tonal framework for virtually all Western music until the rise of tonality. Even after, their melodic and harmonic residues continued to shape musical language.”

Chant ultimately led to tonality. In modal chant, the music is meditative and open-ended; tonal music, by contrast, has direction. We hear tension and release, with melodies and harmonies moving toward resolution, giving the music emotional depth. Bach is widely considered the first fully tonal composer.

In the end, Gregorian chant was the perfect foundation for the growth of modern music. Its very simplicity created a stable musical framework that composers could build upon, experiment with, and ultimately transform into the richly varied musical tradition we know today.

### From Temple & Synagogue to Church

If Gregorian chant forms the foundation of modern Western music, then we must ask: where did chant itself originate?

Many music scholars now recognize that Gregorian chant developed out of the Jewish chant traditions used in the Temple and in ancient synagogues. Eric Werner, Professor of Jewish Music at New York University, was among the first scholars to conduct a systematic comparison of ancient Jewish and early Christian chant. His pioneering research was highly influential in establishing their shared origin in the music of the Jerusalem Temple. Werner’s landmark work, *The Sacred Bridge*, remains foundational in tracing Gregorian chant’s lineage to Jewish psalmody and cantillation. As he writes, “Christianity did not invent its musical forms *ex nihilo*; it absorbed and transformed the rich musical heritage of Judaism, especially in the realm of chant and prayer.”

John Harper, Professor of Music and Liturgy at the University of Bangor (UK), echoes this conclusion in *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy*, noting that “Early Christian worship borrowed heavily from Jewish synagogue practice, including the chanting of psalms and scriptural readings.”

Similarly, Stanford University music scholar William Mahrt observes that “The Christian Psalm tones have their roots in ancient Jewish hymnody and psalmody.”

**Similarities of Gregorian & Jewish Chant** The shared origins of Gregorian and Jewish chant become clear when we examine their many striking similarities.

**Psalm-Based Structure:** Gregorian chant is fundamentally rooted in the Book of Psalms—the same texts that formed the core of Temple worship and later synagogue liturgy.

**Responsive Singing:** Ancient Jewish music employed antiphonal singing in the Temple, with two choirs alternating passages, as well as responsorial singing in the synagogue, where a cantor chanted verses and the congregation replied. Early Christian worship adopted these same techniques, and they became central to Gregorian practice, especially in the chanting of psalms and canticles.

**A Cappella Tradition:** After the destruction of the Temple, a rabbinic decree prohibited the use of musical instruments in the synagogue as a sign of mourning. This helped shape a strong tradition of unaccompanied vocal music that continues in many Jewish communities today. Gregorian chant similarly developed as an a cappella tradition, performed without instrumental accompaniment.

Both traditions also employed recitation tones (fixed pitches used to chant extended texts), melodic cadences (formulaic phrase endings or transitions), and modal centering (anchoring melodies around a central pitch or finalis). **Jewish Music and Church Music** As is well known, Christianity began as an internal Jewish movement in the 1st century CE, and its founders and earliest adherents were all Jews. It is therefore not surprising that Christian liturgy has deep roots in Judaism and the synagogue. The Christian Bible itself acknowledges this connection, noting that Jesus and his disciples sang the traditional Hallel hymn after celebrating the Passover meal (cf. Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26).

Christian chant also inherited its foundational modal systems from Jewish music. Peter Wagner, Professor of Early Christian Music at Freiburg University (Germany) and a leading figure in chant scholarship, conducted influential comparative studies that helped establish the modal continuity between Jewish and Christian chant. As Wagner observed, “The influence of Jewish liturgical music on Gregorian chant is undeniable. The modal systems and melodic contours show clear parallels with synagogue traditions.”

**The Temple’s Levitical Choir** Now that we have traced Western music back two millennia to the Jewish Temple, we can turn to the Temple’s own musical culture.

One of the highlights of the Temple service was the song of the Levites. They performed music twice each day—during the morning and evening daily sacrifice—and on holy days (Shabbat, the New Month, and festivals) they performed three times.

To qualify for Temple performance, Levites underwent rigorous musical training. The Temple itself housed a music academy with an extensive library. At age 25, a Levite was admitted into this academy, where he studied for five years. Only at age 30 did he begin to sing or play in the Temple. According to Chronicles 23:5, during the reign of King David the academy numbered no fewer than 28,000 Levites.

Following the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 CE and its replacement by the synagogue, the Temple’s musical practices were adapted for the synagogue, shifting from animal sacrifices on the altar to one’s centered on prayer and chanting of Scripture.

Many former Temple Levites became teachers, cantors, and sages, helping to shape the prayers, piyyutim, and psalmody that define today’s synagogue worship. The Talmud mentions several Temple Levite musicians who later became contributors to synagogue worship, such as Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah mentioned in the Talmud (Arakhin 11b).

**Cantillation Marks** How central is music to Judaism? The Torah itself calls its teachings a song. “Now therefore,” God says to Moses, “write you this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel. Put it into their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me” (Deuteronomy 31:19–30). It is therefore no surprise that the Torah has always been both studied privately and proclaimed publicly through melody, using a standardized musical tradition.

The practice of chanting sacred texts such as the Torah was preserved through cantillation, a musical system consisting of roughly two dozen special accents placed above or below the words. Many scholars believe the cantillation marks and their melodies originated during Temple or Geonic times. Jewish tradition, however, ascribes them to Mount Sinai, when God gave the Israelites both the Written and Oral Torah.

**What Did the Music of the Temple Actually Sound Like?** After 2,000 years of global exile—during which Jewish communities became scattered across vastly different cultures—many have assumed that the original melodies were lost forever. In foreign surroundings, ancient chants absorbed local musical influences and eventually diverged into many distinct and sometimes bewilderingly different traditions. Over time, this diversity led some to doubt the authenticity of any surviving form.

Into this challenge stepped Professor Abraham Idelsohn, who from an early age dedicated himself to gathering and cataloguing every known strand of Hebrew chant preserved throughout the Jewish world.

Despite centuries of dispersion, Idelsohn argued that certain modal structures, melodic motifs, and cantillation patterns had remained strikingly consistent across communities—from Yemenite, Syrian, Moroccan, and Persian Jews to Ashkenazi and Polish traditions.

After years of tireless research, he completed his monumental *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies* (published in ten volumes between 1914 and 1932). Using the shared musical elements found across these diverse traditions, Idelsohn sought to reconstruct the ancient, pristine melodies of the Temple.

Reviving these great foundational songs—and bringing them back to life for modern ears—may well be the challenge and calling of the musicians of our generation.

**Conclusion** The story of Western music, when traced back through the centuries, may ultimately lead to the footsteps of the Levites in the Jerusalem Temple. From their psalmody and chant emerged the musical practices of the synagogue, which in turn shaped the earliest Christian liturgy and the Gregorian tradition that became the bedrock of Western music.

Far from being a forgotten relic, the Temple’s musical legacy continues to echo through the melodies, modes, and harmonies that define today’s musical world. As modern scholars and musicians uncover these ancient connections, we are reminded that the roots of Western music are far older, deeper, and more intertwined with Jewish history than most ever imagined. And perhaps, as we rediscover and revive the musical language of the Temple, we may yet hear again the timeless songs that once rose daily from Jerusalem’s holy courts.

## 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'rar. 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'rar 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 - '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:

"le-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). If so, can you explain why? [What additional message did Avraham receive after Brit Mila?]
2. 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 "mitzvot chukot v'torot" 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. "mitzvot" 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 mitzvot. 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 Sefer Noah 26:5]

[There remains however a small problem with Sefer Noah'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 Sefer Noah, must we understand this 'pre-mature' success simply an act of God's "chessed" that Yitzchak may not really have deserved!]

## WHAT COMES FIRST?

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

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

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

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

(See

Devarim 12:8-11)

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

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

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

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

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

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

shabbat shalom  
menachem

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

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

First, some questions we will not answer:

1. Our 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 parsha 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 parsha. Although we must answer these local questions in order to understand the parsha, one basic question awaits in the background which makes the events of the parsha 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 parsha 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