

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

How can we possibly understand Rebecca's motivation in convincing her beloved younger son Jacob to pose as his elder brother Esau and thereby wrest the blessing, from their blind father, Isaac? After all, the deception had to eventually be discovered-as soon as Esau would arrive with the venison meat his father had asked him to bring as a prelude to his receipt of the blessings. And why didn't she have a conversation with her husband, pointing out to him the unworthiness of Esau, the Hittite wives whom he had married no less than an act of intermarriage in Biblical times! Had Rebecca convinced rather than deceived Isaac, the chances for a permanent establishment of Jacob, and not Esau as the torchbearer of the Abrahamic vision would have been far more likely.

I would argue that a true understanding of Rebecca's role hinges upon our realization that there were two separate and disparate aspects to the inheritance which Isaac had to bequeath: the birthright (bekhorah), which related to the leadership of the family, the universal mission of ethical monotheism which had to be communicated to the world, and the blessings (berakhot), which related to the extra double portion of land and property as an inheritance; The birthright had to do with spiritual direction whereas the blessings had to do with material superiority.

When the Almighty "elected" Abraham, both of these elements were included in the Divine charge: "I shall make you a great nation, I shall bless you and I shall make your name great" (Gn 12:1) refers to material success, which is the most fundamental definition of "blessing" (berakhah) and which certainly wins fame and respect for the owner of much land and many flocks; when G-d continues to say, "I shall bless those who bless you and those who curse you, 'a'or'" (Gn 12:2) -- usually translated as "I shall curse," but translated by the Vilna Gaon as "I shall show the light" (ohr means light) -- and then "and through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth"(ibid), it is clear that

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 Rabbi Arthur Lavinsky
 in loving memory of his mother
 Lillian D. Lavinsky

G-d is speaking of the moral mission of Israel to bring about a world of harmony and peace. After all, in line with the Vilna Gaon's interpretation, it is Israel who must be a light unto the nations, communicating to them G-d's desire that they all "turn their swords into ploughshares and the spears into pruning hooks, so that nation will not lift up sword against nation and mankind not learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2, Micah 4). There can be no greater blessing to the world than that!

These two elements of Isaac's inheritance are delineated in our Biblical portion of Toldot. Esau, as the first-born son, seems to have been slated for both bekhorah as well as berakhah, birthright as well as blessing. The Bible then records that Jacob, the indoor, wholehearted student of the tents, prepared lentil soup; Esau enters the home, exhausted and hungry after his hunt, and asks that the red bean soup be poured into his mouth. Jacob, understanding that the fulfillment of Israel's mission depends on patience and process, delayed gratification, insists that he receive the birthright in exchange for the soup. Esau couldn't care less about the birthright: "here I am, about to die of starvation (I'm sure he had eaten a hearty breakfast that morning and tasted a little raw meat from the hunt), so of what use is the birthright to me?" (Gn 25:32). Clearly, Esau "spurned, scorned" the birthright (ibid. 34). For Esau, the most important part of the inheritance-and all that he was really interested in-was the berakhah, the double portion of land and property. And according to the Malbim, the great Biblical commentary at the time of the Reformation (Haskalah), Rebecca did speak to her husband regarding the twins, and clearly explained to Isaac why she believed that Jacob-and not Esau-was deservant of the inheritance.

Isaac reminded his wife of the two elements he had to bequeath, the birthright and the blessings; he certainly planned to give the birthright, the role of religious and spiritual torchbearer, to Jacob. Had not Esau spurned and scorned the birthright? Besides, the materialistic, hedonistic womanizing Esau wouldn't begin to know what to do with a spiritual birthright. But Isaac insisted upon giving the blessings, the material success, to Esau. That aspect of the inheritance belonged to Esau; Jacob would not begin to know about, or care about, drilling for oil, mining for gold, or fighting battles over land.

Rebecca strongly disagreed. The blessing and birthright belong together; there was a reason why both

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were included in the charge to Abraham. The spiritual message desperately needs the material infrastructure and even the military protection which is critical if the prophetic vision of ethical monotheism is to be realized by the world of nations. Even Esau seems to understand that they both belong together, when he rails against Jacob: "is it because his name was called Jacob (literally to get around, to outwit, to deceive) that he deceived me twice? He took away my birthright and see, now, he took away my blessing!" (Gn 27:36)

But Isaac insisted upon maintaining his position, certain that the studious, spiritual, out-of-touch Jacob could never manage the materialistic, political and military machinations involved in blessing. It is at this point that Rebecca conceives her scheme of "deceiving" Isaac by convincing Jacob to demonstrate that, if necessary, he could do admirably well in assuming the "hands of Esau". And when Isaac realizes that Jacob's capability can extend to the materialistic world of Esau as well, he concedes to his wife that "indeed, he (Jacob) shall have the blessing (as well as the birthright)!" (Gn 27:33) © 2005 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi?

The parsha tells of the birth and development of Isaac's sons, Jacob & Esau, and two pivotal events in their lives: (a) Esau selling the birthright to Jacob for a bowl of porridge, and (b) Jacob fooling Isaac and taking Esau's blessing and the ensuing hatred between them. Let's look at a Rashi on the selling of the birthright.

"And Jacob gave Esau bread and porridge of lentils and he ate, he drank, he rose up and went. And Esau despised the birthright." (Genesis 35:24)

"And Esau despised"-RASHI: "The verse testifies to his (Esau's) evil, in that he despised the service of G-d."

What would you ask on this simple comment? A Question: Rashi seems to tell us the obvious. We see how Esau traded in the birthright (which meant the service in the Temple in the future- which originally was to be the privilege of the firstborn) for a bowl of porridge. This was clearly evidence that Esau despised the birthright. What has Rashi added to our

understanding with his comment? An Answer: Precisely! It is obvious, so why must the Torah add the words that Esau despised the birthright? The phrase is superfluous since the whole story reeks with his low opinion of the value of the birthright.

This is what Rashi is referring to-why the need for the added phrase? How does his comment deal with this? An Answer: Rashi points out that the verse stresses Esau's belittling attitude towards the significance of the birthright. Esau himself had said, "I am going to die-so what good is the future privilege?" But actually we might have thought that Esau was forced to sell the birthright, not because he despised it but because it was "pikuach nefesh." He was in a life-threatening situation-he was dying of hunger-and had no choice.

So Rashi tells us not to be fooled by Esau's statement of despair. He really sold it because it was valueless in his eyes. This, Rashi says, is the reason the Torah adds the phrase of Esau's despising the birthright.

Can you find support for Rashi's comment, that Esau sold it, not under duress but because he really despised it? An Answer: The Torah tells us in machine-gun style, "He ate, he drank, he rose and he went" rat tat tat.

If Esau sold the birthright purely out of duress, we would expect some expression of regret from him once he had sated his appetite. This is totally lacking. "He went" without looking back. So Rashi says this is the evidence of his true motivation-the birthright had absolutely no value for him for he despised it. We would add another insight here. Granted that Esau saw no religious or other value in the birthright. It was worthless in his eyes. But "despise"! Why the extreme expression of "despise"?

I would say that, psychologically, Esau needed this defense mechanism in order to completely abandon the heritage of his forefathers. He was hungry. He was even, we could say, a glutton. But this wasn't enough even for Esau's weak conscience. Remember: he was raised in Isaac's home and also Abraham was alive during his youth.

He needed even more justification to throw away such a heritage than just hunger. So, psychologically, he had to belittle the birthright even more- even to despise it-in order to quiet his conscience and allow him to slurp the porridge to his heart's content.

For those interested, we find a similar psychological message in Megillas Esther (3:6) where it says: "It was despicable in his (Haman's) eyes to lay a hand on Mordecai alone." We see the same phrase-and the same psychological need on Haman's part to justify killing one Jew for his inflated ego. For more insights, see the new "What's Bothering Rashi?" on Megillat Esther. © 2005 *Dr. A. Bonchek & aish.org*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd all of the wells that his father's had dug-in the days of Avraham his father-the Pelishtim closed up, and they filled them with dirt” (Beraishis 26:15). When did they close them up, and why? There is much discussion about this, especially in light of what the Torah tells us just three verses later: “And Yitzchok went back and he dug the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Avraham—that the Pelishtim had closed up after Avraham's death; and he gave them names, like the names his father had given them” (26:18). It seems, then, that these wells had been closed up shortly after Avraham had died, for why else would the Torah mention that they were closed up after his death? Besides (as the Maysiyach Ilmim points out), if they were first closed up shortly before Yitzchok re-dug them, why point out that Yitzchok used the same names that Avraham did? Only if it had been years since they were operating as wells would using the same names become significant. The fact that the Torah separates the information into two verses (repeating some of the information) also indicates that the closing of the wells took place at a much earlier, unrelated time. Otherwise, just tell us (in one verse) that the Pelishtim closed up the wells that Avraham had dug and Yitzchok went and reopened them!

On the other hand, the context of the verses indicates that the wells were closed up precisely because of the jealousy the Pelishtim felt towards Yitzchok. First we are told how successful Yitzchok was (26:12-14), and that this brought about their jealousy (26:14). This is followed by the information that the Pelishtim closed up the wells that Avraham had dug, and then by Yitzchok being asked to leave the vicinity (26:16). It sure seems as if their jealousy caused both the filling of the wells and the expulsion, making the former a recent event, not something done years prior.

Rashi says us that the reason the Pelishtim closed the wells was “because they said they (the wells) are a problem for us because of the armies that will come up against us.” There is a discussion among the commentators as to whether Rashi is telling us that it was not jealousy that caused the closing of the wells (which would be consistent with the approach that it was done much before Yitzchok's success aroused any), or whether Rashi would agree that jealousy was the cause, and is only telling us the excuse the Pelishtim gave Yitzchok for why they closed them. Either way, whether they had a real reason to close them up or just gave one, how could Yitzchok have gone and re-dug the wells anyway? Didn't the reason given still apply?

The source of Rashi's reason for the closing of the wells is the Tosefta (Sotah 10:2). “As long as

Avraham was still alive, the wells flowed with water; once Avraham died, what does it say? ‘And all the wells that [he] had dug the Pelishtim closed up.’ They (the Pelishtim) said, ‘since they no longer have water flowing, they are nothing but a problem for us because of the armies,’ so they closed them up. Yitzchok came and they [once again] flowed with water, as it says, ‘and Yitzchok went back and he dug the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Avraham’ and ‘the servants of Yitzchok dug, etc.’”

There are several things we can learn from this Tosefta. First of all, we see that these wells had dried up before they were closed up. Secondly, we see that Yitzchok had nothing to do with their being closed up, and that the fear of invading armies (who could hide and store supplies in the now dried up wells) was the real reason. We also see that they had been closed well before Yitzchok's success; as a matter of fact, his causing the water to once again flow removed the fear they once had that the open and exposed dry wells could be used in an ambush (see *Minchas Bikurim*).

The Talmud (*Pesachim* 112a) advises us to latch onto those who are experiencing a period of success, but to avoid doing business with them. Rashi and the Rashbam explain that since his “luck” is on such an upswing, his gains may come at the expense of others. This, the *Nachalas Yaakov* explains, is what the Pelishtim accused Yitzchok of doing. His success was at their expense (they thought), so asked him to leave, figuring that they would now get the things that Yitzchok had been taking away from them. This is only true of “luck” (“mazel”), though. Yitzchok was blessed by G-d, and if anything, brought more blessing to those around him.

The *Ohr Hachayim* suggests that the double-expression of “closing up” the wells and then “filling them with dirt” refers to two different stages. They were “closed up” (with stones covering the tops) after Avraham died, but after they became jealous of Yitzchok, went a step further and “filled them with dirt” in an attempt to erase any connection with his father's wells. It was this second step that caused Yitzchok to have to “re-dig” the wells, as opposed to just uncovering them.

Using these clues, we can attempt to piece together what may have occurred: After Avraham died, the wells he had dug dried up. The Pelishtim feared that these empty wells could be used in an ambush by invading armies, so covered them up, thus preventing the hollow wells from being used as hiding places. Years later, when Yitzchok is told by G-d to stay in this area rather than continuing down to Egypt (26:2), his success causes the Pelishtim to become jealous, blaming him for taking away from them. They now fill in the previously covered wells, in an attempt to hint that they want him to leave without saying so explicitly (see *Nachalas Yaakov*). When he doesn't take the hint

(because G-d had told him to live there and because he knew that they were mistaken in thinking that his success was at their expense), they overtly tell him to leave. In order to prove that his success had no bearing on their plight, and that, if anything, his presence helped them, he now re-digs the wells that they had (previously) closed up and (just) filled in, which begin to flow once again. Realizing that he was right, they travel to Be'er Sheva to make amends, admitting that his success was because G-d was with him (26:28), not because he was taking what should have been theirs for himself.

The upshot? While the Pelishtim had covered the wells years earlier because of their fear of an invading army, they recently filled them with dirt because of their jealousy, in order to get Yitzchok to move away. Re-read the verses (26:13-18), and you'll see how well they flow! © 2001 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

How many times has it occurred that a piece of paper or another type of item that you may have believed to be unimportant at the time and thus carelessly misplaced or thrown out, turns out to be the one important item necessary for your records or accomplishments? What is unimportant and of little consequence at one moment in life may assume great value at a later stage of life. This is pretty much the obvious lesson that Eisav's sale of his birthright to Yaakov, as recorded in this week's parsha, imparts to us.

The Torah tells us that when Eisav sold the birthright to Yaakov he had no regrets and no hesitation in so doing. The birthright was then of no value to him. The pot of lentils, the good time, the night out with the boys, his sexual conquests, these were the important things in his life. So he throws away the item that in later life he will most crave and long to find his birthright, his soul, his very being. He later implores his father for the blessing that has already been given away to Yaakov, the blessing that is the right of the birthright to obtain. Have you only one blessing, father? he roars and entreats. And Yitzchak answers him that the blessing of Yaakov is part of the birthright. There are other blessings that Eisav will receive but the one blessing that he wishes to have, now later in his life when the passions have cooled and the millions have been banked and he searches for eternity and serenity, that blessing he cannot obtain. He threw it away with his birthright when he felt that the latter was worthless to him.

In Jewish national life and in the personal lives of countless individual Jews, the birthright of Israel the Torah and all of holy traditions, customs and ways has often been discarded in favor of seemingly certain gain and progress. Every time that this has happened it has

turned out badly for individual Jew and for the Jewish people as a whole. The pot of lentils, of all of the isms of the Jewish world over the past century and a half, turned out to be of little value in comparison to the squandered birthright.

Eisav's cry of: Have you no other blessing for me? is heard from the depths of the souls of countless Jews today. All of the alternate forms of Judaism, the phony kabbalists and the guitar-playing, kitsch prayer services are a symptom of this deep longing for spirituality, meaning and self-worth in life. But having sold out and discarded the birthright, many times without even realizing that there was once a birthright that was abandoned by their grandparents for a pot of lentils, all of the new blessings somehow turn out to be unsatisfying and non-propagating. Even though those who created and support Operation Birthright to bring American youth to visit Israel were unaware of this profound article of mine, I nevertheless find it heartening that they chose to name the program Birthright. Only by treating our Torah birthright seriously and respectfully can we hope to achieve the blessings of our father Yitzchak in our personal and national lives.

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As Ya'akov (Jacob) leaves his parents' home at the behest of his mother Rivkah (Rebecca), the Torah declares that Rivkah was the mother of both Ya'akov and Esav (Esau). (Genesis 28:5) At first blush this seems to be an unnecessary statement. Anyone who had been reading the portion certainly knows this fact.

Even Rashi, the greatest of commentators, writes that he does not know why the Torah mentions this. Rashi's admission of "I do not know" teaches an important lesson. People should be prepared to admit lack of knowledge rather than deceive others into assuming they know when they do not.

Yet, there are commentators who try to understand why the text here includes the fact that Rivkah was the mother of Ya'akov and Esav. The most appealing view is that of Tzedah Laderekh, (Issachar Ber Parnas, Italy, 16c) quoted by Nehama Lebowitz. Before pointing out his comment, a little background on the story is necessary.

In our portion, Rivkah convinces Ya'akov to fool his father and take the birthright from Esav. For Rivkah the future was with Ya'akov. He was to be the third patriarch. Rivkah viewed Esav as unworthy, no more than a hunter, a rebel who strayed and even married out of the family. (Genesis 26:34)

Once Ya'akov had taken the blessings, Rivkah overhears that Esav, outraged that he had been short-changed, has plans to eventually kill Ya'akov. She therefore arranges that Ya'akov leave home. (Genesis 27:41-43) Rivkah's concern was clearly for Ya'akov's well being-but, it is crucial to understand that she was equally concerned for Esav. If Esav would kill Ya'akov, not only would Ya'akov, Rivkah's beloved son, be dead, but Esav the murderer, would also have "died" in Rivkah's eyes. This fear of losing both children is clearly reflected when Rivkah points out, "why should I lose both of you (both of my children) in one day" (Genesis 27:45). Rivkah loved Esav as well. She feared that if Esav would kill Ya'akov her love for Esav would no longer be.

Hence, Tzedah Laderekh concludes, the Torah states that Rivkah was Ya'akov and Esav's mother. In other words, the reason she insists Ya'akov leave was not only because she loved Ya'akov but also because of her love and concern for Esav. She was, after all, the beloved mother of both

An important message. Often it is the case that our children rebel. They abandon values and priorities that are held dear. Many leave the faith or do all kinds of things that upset and even outrage parents. While parents should certainly point out their feelings to their children, the Torah teaches no matter the nature or the actions of the child, a parent is a parent and love for a child must be endless and unconditional.

Like Rivkah's love for Esav. As evil as he was, and as much as we know that the Torah points out her love for Ya'akov, she still had great love and concern for her eldest son and sends Ya'akov away not only to protect Ya'akov but to protect Esav as well. © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah warns us to cherish our relationship with Hashem and never take advantage of it. Although the Jewish people enjoy a special closeness with Hashem, they are reminded to approach Him with reverence. The prophet Malachi addressed them shortly after their return from Babylonia and admonished them for their lack of respect in the Bais Hamikdash. He said in Hashem's name, "I love you... but if I am your father where is My honor? The kohanim disgrace My name by referring to My altar with disrespect." (1:2,6) Rashi explains that the kohanim failed to appreciate their privilege of sacrificing in Hashem's sanctuary. Although they had recently returned to Eretz Yisroel and the Bais Hamikdash it did not take long for them to forget this. They quickly acclimated themselves to their sacred surroundings and viewed their sacrificial portions like ordinary meals. When there was an abundance of kohanim and each one received a small portion he responded with

disrespect. (ad loc) Even the sacrificial order was treated lightly and kohanim would offer, at times, lame or sick animals displaying total disrespect to their sacred privileges.

Malachi reprimanded them for their inexcusable behavior and reminded them of the illustrious eras preceding them. The kohanim in those generations had the proper attitude towards Hashem's service and conducted themselves with true reverence. Hashem said about such kohanim, " My treaty of life and peace was with him, and I gave him (reason for) reverence. He revered Me and before My name he was humbled." (2:5) These verses particularly refer to Aharon Hakohain, the earliest High Priest to serve in the Sanctuary. They speak of a man so holy that he was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies. Yet, he always maintained true humility and displayed proper reverence when entering Hashem's private quarters. The Gaon of Vilna reveals that Aharon's relationship extended beyond that of any other High Priest. He records that Aharon was the only person in history allowed access to the Holy of Holies throughout the year, given specific sacrificial conditions. But, this privilege never yielded content and never caused Aharon to become overly comfortable in Hashem's presence.

Parenthetically, Malachi draws special attention to the stark contrast between the Jewish nation's relationship with Hashem and that of other nations. Their relationship with their Creator is one of formal respect and reverence. Malachi says in Hashem's name, "From the east to the west My name is exalted amongst the nations.... But you (the Jewish people) profane it by referring to Hashem's altar with disgrace." Radak (ad loc.) explains the nations exalt Hashem's name by recognizing Him as the supreme being and respectfully calling Him the G-d of the G-ds. (1:12) They afford Him the highest title and honor and never bring disgrace to His name. This is because they direct all their energies towards foreign powers and false deities and never approach Hashem directly. Their approach allows for formal respect and reverence resulting in Hashem's remaining exalted in their eyes. The upshot of this is because their relationship with Him is so distant that it leaves no room for familiarity or disgrace.

The Jewish people, on the other hand, enjoy a close relationship with Hashem. We are His beloved children and the focus of His eye. We are permitted to enter His sacred chamber and sense His warmth therein. This special relationship leaves room for familiarity and content, and can lead, at times, to insensitivity and disrespect. During the early years of the second Bais Hamikdash this warmth was so tangible that the kohanim lost sight of their necessary reverence and respect. This explains Malachi's message, "Hashem's says, 'I love you... but where is

My honor?" The Jewish people are always entitled to His warm close relationship but are never to abuse it. Malachi therefore reminded them to be careful and maintain proper respect and reverence for the Master of the universe.

This contrast between the Jewish and gentile approach to Hashem finds its origins in their predecessors' relationship to their venerable father. The Midrash quotes the illustrious sage, Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel bemoaning the fact that he never served his father to the same degree that the wicked Eisav served his father, Yitzchok. Rabban Shimon explained, "Eisav wore kingly robes when doing menial chores for his father, but I perform these chores in ordinary garments." (Breishis Rabba 65:12) This proclamation truly expresses Eisav's deep respect and reverence for his father. However, there is a second side to this. This week's sedra depicts their relationship as one of formality and distance. We can deduce this from the Torah's narrative of Eisav's mode of speech when addressing his father in pursuit of his coveted bracha. The Torah quotes Eisav saying, "Let my father rise and eat from the provisions of his son." (Breishis 27:31) Eisav always addressed his father like a king in a formal and distant-albeit respectful-third person. Yaakov, on the other hand, did not serve his father with such extraordinary reverence. He undoubtedly showed his father utmost respect but related to him with closeness and warmth. His association was too internal to allow for formal speech. The Torah therefore quotes Yaakov's words to his father during his bracha, "Please rise and eat from my preparations..." (27:19) Even when attempting to impersonate Eisav, Yaakov could not bring himself to speak to his father in any other tone than warm and love. (comment of R' Avrohom ben HaRambam ad loc.)

We, the Jewish people follow the footsteps of our Patriarch Yaakov and relate to our Heavenly father with warmth and closeness rather than coldness and distance. Although Yaakov never reached Eisav's ultimate levels of reverence he showed his father true respect through love, warmth and deep appreciation. We approach Hashem in a similar manner and relate to Him with our warmth and love and deep appreciation. The nations of the world follow their predecessor and approach the Master of the universe in a very different way. They maintain their distance and relate to Him in a formal and cold- albeit respectful and reverent way.

This dimension expresses itself in our approach towards our miniature Bais Hamikdash, the synagogue. Although it is truly Hashem's home wherein His sacred presence resides a sense of warmth and love permeates its atmosphere. We, the Jewish people are privileged to feel this closeness and enjoy His warmth and acceptance. However, we must always remember Malachi's stern warning, "Hashem says, 'I love you like a father does his son, but if I am your

father where is My honor?'" We must always follow in our forefather Yaakov's footsteps and maintain proper balance in our relationship with our Heavenly father. We should always approach Him out of warmth and love, yet never forget to show Him proper respect and reverence.

Our turbulent and troubling times reflect Hashem's resounding wake up call. They suggest that Hashem seeks to intensify His relationship with His people. Hashem is calling us to turn to Him and realize that all existence depends on Him. Let us respond to His call and show our loyalty to this relationship. Let us show Him our true appreciation by affording Him proper respect and reverence in his sacred abode. Let it be Hashem's will that we merit through this to intensify our relationship with Him and ultimately bring the world to the exclusive recognition of Hashem. © 2005 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

The story of Yitzchak's blessings to Yaacov and Eisav (Bereishit 27:1-28:5) appears in the Torah between two passages on the subject of Eisav's wives. At the end of Chapter 26 we are told that Eisav married two women from Chet, "and they were upsetting for Yitzchak and Rivka" [26:35]. After we are told about the blessings, we are told about a new wife for Eisav, Machalat, daughter of Yishmael. What is the connection between Eisav's wives and the blessings?

Evidently, the Torah is interested in showing us that Yitzchak was in fact well acquainted with the problematic aspects of Eisav's personality. From the description of the blessings we might have thought that Yitzchak, who was old and could no longer see well, was not aware of Eisav's nature and therefore fully intended to bless him. The Torah therefore emphasizes that Eisav's actions were indeed upsetting to Yitzchak. However, Yitzchak decided to give him worldly blessings in spite of this. While these are not part of "Avraham's blessing," which Yitzchak had earmarked at the outset for Yaacov (see 28:4), he felt that they were appropriate for the unique traits of Eisav, whom he loved ("And Yitzchak loved Eisav, because he spoke of hunting" [25:28]).

In the end, the events surrounding the blessings opened up Eisav's eyes to the truth. When Eisav saw that even though Yaacov took his blessings Yitzchak still gave Yaacov "Avraham's blessing" and sent him to find a wife in Aram and not in Canaan, repeating what Yitzchak himself had done, Eisav understood that Yitzchak saw Yaacov as the one who would continue the heritage, in spite of his love for Eisav. "And Eisav saw that Yitzchak blessed Yaacov and sent him to Padan Aram to take a wife there, when he blessed him, telling him not to take a wife from

among the women of Canaan" [28:6]. Now, for the first time, Eisav began to understand how upset his father was with him. "And Eisav saw that the women of Canaan were bad in Yitzchak's eyes" [28:8]. This understanding caused Eisav to make an attempt to mend his ways, at least with a small gesture. "And he took Machalat daughter of Yishmael, son of Avraham, sister of Nevayot, in addition to his wives, as a wife" [28:9].

It is important to note the details: Eisav's first wives were "upsetting to Yitzchak and Rivka." But what caused him to change his ways was the understanding that "the women of Canaan were bad in Yitzchak's eyes"-Yitzchak alone. Evidently Eisav was not bothered by the attitude of his mother Rivka, who in any case always showed a preference for Yaacov. Rather, it was Yitzchak's love which caused Eisav to improve his ways somewhat, even though Eisav now understood that this great love was not a reason for his father to show him a preference. The father's love is what led to an improvement by the son who had strayed from the proper path.

"And Yitzchak loved Eisav'-Did Yitzchak not know how ugly were the actions of Eisav? It is written, 'G-d, I will hate those who hate you' [Tehillim 139:21]. Why did he in fact love him? Evidently he showed love for him only outwardly, in order to bring him closer and to draw him close. The situation can be understood with a logical inference: If Eisav's deeds were bad when Yitzchak loved him, how much worse would they have been if Yitzchak had pushed him away! As our sages said, 'One should always draw a sinner close with the right and reject him with the left hand,' as is written, 'And Yitzchak loved Eisav'" [Midrash Hagador, Bereishit, 25:26].

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

The Sfas Emes takes us back to the subject-and the reality-of "hester." That is, HaShem is at all times present, but is "hiding" behind nature and chitzoniyus (superficial appearances). Last week, in Parshas Chayei Sara, the Sfas Emes discussed hester in the context of zeman (time); i.e., in viewing history and current events. This week, the Sfas Emes discusses hester in more general terms. He also focuses on the responsibility that hester brings with it for us, namely, the task of penetrating the Hester to be aware of HaShem's Presence-despite the hester.

Where in Parshas Toldos does the Sfas Emes find the issue of hester? He finds it in Bereishis, 26:18-22. Avraham Avinu had dug wells to give people access to water. Chazal see these wells, not only as real-life wells, but also as a metaphor for Avraham Avinu's activity in giving people access to HaShem, Whose Presence is manifest in the water of the wells.

After Avraham was niftar, the Plishtim-the original Palestinians- filled in the wells with earth. Again, viewing this real-world experience in metaphoric terms, we see this action of the Plishtim as blocking access to HaShem. I.e., they actively tried to block access to HaShem. Now came Yitzchok Avinu. He removed the earth that the Plishtim had used to close the channels to-and from-HaShem. Thus, the Sfas Emes sees Yitzchok's removal of the earth to reach the water in the wells as an act of penetrating the hester to renew contact with HaShem.

Why does the Sfas Emes return so often to the theme of hester? In his constant reference to HaShem's being hidden, the Sfas Emes may be addressing his own personal question of: where is HaShem? And out of his personal experience with this problem, the Sfas Emes drew a crucial insight. As he has often told us: the purpose of Creation is to give us the challenging task of penetrating the Hester; and thus to finding HaShem in nature (ma'aseh breishis). That is, our key responsibility is to make ourselves aware that despite appearances to the contrary, all existence comes from HaShem.

After Yitzchok Avinu encountered strife and hatred from the Plishtim in the matter of the wells, he dug a new well, over which there was no conflict. Accordingly, Yitzchok called that well "Rechovos," a name which connotes expansiveness and repose. The name Rechovos evokes for the Sfas Emes a posuk in Mishlei (1:20): "Chochmos bachutz barona, baRECHOVOS titein kolah." (ArtScroll: "Wisdom sings out in the streets; it gives forth its voice in the squares.") The message is clear: Once we remove the outer shell which hides HaShem, an awareness of His Presence will expand and permeate the world.

Continuing with this theme, the Sfas Emes tells us that the agent for this permeation is Torah Shebe'al Peh (the Oral Law). How does this process work? The Sfas Emes explains. By extending HaShem's accessibility to all our activities, Torah Shebe'al Peh enables us to experience HaShem's Presence more thoroughly in our daily lives. Thus the posuk in Mishlei is telling us that by giving forth its voice (an allusion to Torah Shebe'al Peh), wisdom-Torah-expands its domain.

The Sfas Emes continues. This specification of our role in life-to expand awareness of HaShem's Presence-helps answer a puzzling question. Why- and how-did Yitzchok Avinu misjudge his son Esav?

A posuk (Bereishis 24:62) tells us: "Vayeitzei Yitzchok lasuach basadeh." (That is: Yitzchok went out (ArtScroll: "to supplicate;" Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan: to "meditate") in the field.) As you see, translation of the word "lasuach" is not obvious. The Sfas Emes sees this word as related to the word 'sicha' -- spoken words. Thus, he reads 'lasuach' as; "to speak." Why did Yitzchok Avinu go out "to speak" in the field? The Sfas

Emes answers: To expand awareness of HaShem in the world. Thus, the Sfas Emes sees Yitzchok Avinu as being engaged in kiruv (outreach).

Further, the Torah tells us (Bereishis, 25:27) that Esav, too, was known to be an "ish sadeh" (a person of the field). But for Yitzchok Avinu, the sole reason for going out 'to the field' was kiruv. Yitzchok thought that Esav, too, was engaged in kiruv. Thus Yitzchok Avinu misperceived his son Esav, viewing him as "a chip off the block." "Like father, like son."

Finally, Esav played on his father's misperception. He did this by asking Yitzchok Avinu questions that implied that he, too, was concerned to extend awareness of HaShem's Presence. Thus he asked his father: How does one give ma'aseir (tithe) from salt? How does one give ma'aseir from straw? The former question conveyed the impression that he (Esav) wanted to extend our awareness of HaShem even to the inanimate world (salt); and the latter question, even to the relatively unimportant part of the world (the chaff).

Three suggested take-home lessons from this Sfas Emes. Bear in mind: 1. The sheer evil of the Plishtim, expending resources to block access to HaShem. 2. The Sfas Emes's novel interpretation of why Yitzchok favored Esav; i.e., ish sadeh. 3. The fact that hester is not something that happens accidentally or that we bring upon ourselves. The Sfas Emes is telling us that HaShem built hester into creation-to give us the challenge of seeing Him despite the hester!

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RABBI LABEL LAM

Project Genesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the end only Essau caused Essau to fail. By feeding lies to his father he tricked himself, playing into the illusion of success without ever having honestly changed. While he toyed with his father's hope he actually betrayed his trust. Even though Essau continually faults Jacob for his own failures, there is really only one person to blame why he remains a character of infamy and why his uniform was not enshrined in The Jewish Hall of Fame! © 2005 Rabbi L. Lam and torah.org