

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

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 Rivka 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. Rivka was right to propose what she did and Jacob was right to do it. Rivka 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 G-d 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 G-d.

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 Rivka" (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 Rivka 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 G-d and destiny and spiritual vocation. It was about the future of an entire people since G-d 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 Rivka 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. Rivka was not Lady Macbeth. She was the embodiment of loving-kindness. She was not acting out of favouritism or ambition. 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.'

¹ Critical readings of Rivka'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-derekh, and R. Yaakov Zvi Mecklenberg, Ha-Ktav v'ha-Kabbalah. All these interpretations are based on the textual clues cited in what follows.

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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 Rivka 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 stay with us long in the memory.

Then consider the consequences. Jacob had to leave home for more than twenty years in fear of 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 [rimitani]” 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 Rivka's oracle, Ve-rav yaavod 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 chidah (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: wealth and power: “May G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d has been gracious to me and I have all I need” (Gen. 33:

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

11). On this reading of the story, Rivka 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. G-d had blessed Ishmael, with the words "I will make him into a great nation" (Gen. 21: 18). This was the fulfilment of a promise G-d 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 G-d, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Then G-d 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 Rivka 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 G-d 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. Rivka 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 recognized 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 ©2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Rebecca [Isaac's wife] conceived. And the sons within her struggled (or agitated..." (Genesis 25:21-22) The next three Biblical portions deal with the jealousy, enmity and strife unto death between Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca. The "bad blood" which sullied their fraternal relationship seems to have begun prenatally, while they were still in their mother's womb. And the ramifications of their discord will extend at least into the next generation, with the enmity between Joseph and his tribal brothers, the sons of Jacob.

Rashi extends their struggle down through the generations: "Another interpretation: they strove against each other and they argued about the inheritance of both worlds. In other words, this was the fight between Rome [Edom] and Jerusalem, Israel and Christendom, a religious battle for supremacy in this world as well as the world to come."

Towards the end of their conflict in the Book of Genesis, the true historical identity of these brothers is even more precisely identified. After Esau has spurned the birthright and married Hittite wives, after Jacob has deceived blind father Isaac and received the blessings under false pretenses, after Jacob was forced to leave his father's house lest he be murdered by Esau, and after Jacob is on the way back from 22 years with Uncle Laban to return to his ancestral home in Israel, Jacob meets his estranged brother: "And Esau ran towards him, and he embraced him, and he fell on his neck and he kissed him; and they wept." (Gen. 33:4) Here, too, Rashi comments: "And he [Esau] kissed him [Jacob]; the word 'he kissed him' has dots above it [in the Masoretic text]....Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai says: 'it is a known law that Esau (forever) hates Jacob....'" The Rabbis throughout the generations have identified Esau with Christendom, employing the connection between Esau and Edom (36:9), Edom and Rome (Titus), Rome and the Vatican.

And so it was for almost two millennia: the Catholic Church led a steady program of Inquisitions, autos da fé, forced conversions and crusading death by the sword, especially targeting the Jews (but not

³ This later became the tenth of the ten commandments.

exclusively; Lutherans as well were occasional targets). During that time, Catholicism adhered to its doctrine of supersessionism, that the Church had replaced Israel as G-d's chosen people. The Holocaust could never have taken hold throughout Europe as it did, with nation after nation in large measure happily partnering with the Nazis in the cruel extermination of 6,000,000 Jews - had it not been for the accusations of deicide instigating murderous pogroms emanating from the churches for almost 2000 years.

But within the last five decades, a sea-change has occurred within the Church. Perhaps this came about as a result of the many decent Churchmen who were sincerely shocked by the murderous outcome of church anti-Semitism; perhaps because the miraculous rebirth of the State of Israel completely trumped the Church's prior theological position that the Jews were doomed to wander stateless because they rejected the divinity and messiahship of Jesus. Perhaps it was because the hierarchy recognized that the Church could not have become the substitute Jews in G-d's eyes because, since the eternal G-d "does not repent of His covenants" (see 1 Sam. 15:29). For whatever reason-probably for all three-the Second Vatican Council under Pope Paul VI issued its landmark *Nostra Aetate* ("In our time") encyclical in 1965, repudiating anti-Semitism, rejecting the charge of deicide, and denying supersessionism by declaring that "Israel remains a chosen people". Moreover Pope John Paul II begged forgiveness of the Jews for all the atrocities committed against them by the Church, and visited the Jewish State in the year 2000, when he met with our President and Prime Minister and prayed at the Western Wall for "the Jewish nation, his elder brother who remains the nation with whom G-d made His covenant."

The fast-growing Evangelical Christian Churches, which developed in America rather than in Europe, were always very close to the Hebrew Scriptures and therefore to the Jews. They never had a history of anti-Semitism and they have proven to be the best friends we have. Pastor John Hagee of San Antonio, Texas, has initiated Christians United for Israel, through which thousands of churches throughout the world support our State financially and politically in a Christian "AIPAC". Pastor Robert Stearns sends thousands of Christian university students to Israel in a kind of Christian "Birthright." The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem serve as Christian ambassadors for Israel throughout the world. Ohr Torah Stone has an Institute of Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation through which we teach many thousands of Christians the Hebraic roots of Christianity and spread our united mission to bring a G-d of love, morality and peace to a world threatened by a god of power, suicide bombers and jihad.

Our Bible mandates that "we remember history,

understand the differences in each generation", and respond accordingly (Deut. 32:7).

Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv, Dean of famed Volozhin Yeshiva) comments on our previously cited verse, "And Esau ran towards him [Jacob], embraced him, and fell on his neck, kissed him- and they wept," differently from Rashi: "This comes to teach that Jacob too was aroused with compassion at that moment for Esau. And so it will be in the future, when the seed of Esau will be aroused with a spirit of purity to recognize the seed of Israel and their value, then we too must be aroused to recognize Esau. After all, he is our brother." ©2014 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Perfect parents do not always produce perfect children. This week's parsha is a perfect illustration of this truism of life and family. There apparently was very little that Yitzchak and Rivka could do to reclaim Eisav to their way of life and level of morality. He was, perhaps, incapable of moral improvement the moment he was born.

There existed, and perhaps still exists, a great debate about whether genetic makeup or social and family environment determine a child's personality and behavior patterns. But no matter how we judge this question, it still is perplexing, if not even unthinkable, that Yitzchak and Rivka parented Eisav and raised him in their holy home.

It is one of the Torah's prime examples of the power of freedom of choice that children and all human beings possess. Parents naturally berate themselves over the bad behavior of their children. Yet, in my admittedly limited experience, these parents are hardly ever to be blamed for the free-will wickedness of their offspring.

We ascribe too much power to parents in raising children. Of course family and environment are important, but a child's choices will trump all other factors and circumstances. And thus we have an Eisav emerging from the house and family of Yitzchak and Rivka.

The Torah's message to us in this matter is direct and blunt -- there are no guarantees or perfect successes in raising children. One could say that though Avraham fathered Yishmael, perhaps it was Hagar's influence that formed him. But what can we say about the house of Yitzchak and Rivka that could produce an Eisav?

The Torah poses for us the unanswerable questions of life that we encounter daily. And it never truly provides us with satisfying answers. Such is the nature of life itself -- its mystery, uncertainty and unpredictably. The great question as to why the righteous suffer and the evil person apparently

prosperity lies at the root of the struggle for belief and faith. And as we read in the book of Iyov, the Lord chooses, so to speak, not to answer that question.

The Torah does not explain to us how an Eisav can arise from the house of Yitzchak and Rivka. Apparently it is satisfied just to notify us that it occurred and, by inference, to teach us that other inexplicable things will occur throughout Jewish and human history.

Eisav, whether genetically or environmentally influenced, was a free agent -- as we all are -- to choose between good and evil, peace and violence, compassion and cruelty. These choices were his and his alone to make. Somehow, Heaven also must have taken into account the heartbreak of Yitzchak and Rivka over the behavior of Eisav. But that is certainly secondary to the judgment regarding Eisav himself.

There is a tendency in our modern world to try and understand and sympathize with the evil one at the expense of the good and decent victims of that evil. The Torah is not a fan of such misplaced compassion. Rivka makes the painful decision to abandon Eisav and save Yaakov. By so doing she ensures the civilization of the human race. ©2014 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As Ya'akov (Jacob) leaves his parents' home at the behest of his mother Rivka (Rebecca), the Torah declares that Rivka 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 Rivka 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, Rivka convinces Ya'akov to fool his father and take the birthright from Esav. For Rivka the future was with Ya'akov. He was to be the third patriarch. Rivka 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, Rivka 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).

Rivka'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, Rivka's beloved son, be dead, but Esav the murderer, would also have "died" in Rivka's eyes. This fear of losing both children is clearly reflected when Rivka points out, "why should I lose both of you (both of my children) in one day" (Genesis 27:45). Rivka 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 Rivka 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 Rivka'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. ©2012 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And [Yitzchok] said [to Eisav], 'who, then, hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate from everything before you came, and I blessed him?' (B'reishis 27:33). After Yaakov brought food to Yitzchok and received his blessing, Eisav showed up with the food he had hunted/prepared, expecting to be the one Yitzchok would bless. Initially puzzled, Yitzchok asked Eisav who had brought him food and received his blessing before he came, including the seemingly superfluous "and I ate from everything" in his query. Why did it matter that Yitzchok had already eaten if the point was that the blessing had already been given? More specifically, why did Yitzchok say he ate "from everything" rather than just saying he had already eaten? Also, why was the expression

“before you came” stated at all? Wasn’t it obvious if Eisav is told that his father had already been served a meal that it had happened before he got there?

Rashi, apparently trying to explain why Yitzchok said he had eaten “from everything,” says that Yitzchok was telling Eisav that he was able to experience any and all kinds of tastes in the food he had eaten. While this may address the meaning of the word “mi’kol” (“from everything”), it doesn’t explain what such a statement adds. Why does it matter how good the food was, or that Yitzchok could taste whatever he wanted? It’s doubtful that he was trying to rub it in Eisav’s face, telling him that not only did someone else bring him food first, but that it was really, really good.

The word “mi’kol” is given special significance in our literature. The Talmud (Bava Basra 17a) tells us that all three of our forefathers were able to get a taste of the next world in this world, as regarding Avraham it says “ba’kol” (“with everything”), regarding Yitzchok it says “mi’kol,” and regarding Yaakov it says “kol.” The words “ba’kol,” “mi’kol” and “kol,” the Talmud continues, also teach us that our forefathers were free from Satan’s influence, did not die at the hands of the Angel of Death, and that their corpses were not eaten by worms (as opposed to almost every other corpse). These three words (“ba’kol,” mi’kol” and “kol”) are referenced whenever we bless/thank G-d after eating a meal, as we ask Him to bless us (and others who helped us with the meal) the same way He blessed our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov; “ba’kol, mi’kol, kol.” However, the word “mi’kol,” at first glance, doesn’t seem to belong in the same category as “ba’kol” and “kol,” as its context (the meal Yitzchok ate) is rather mundane, especially when compared with the contexts of the words “ba’kol” and “kol.” We are told (B’reishis 24:1) that “G-d blessed Avraham with everything,” which certainly implies a full and complete blessing that encompasses everything. Yaakov told Eisav he didn’t want his massive gift back, as he has “everything” (33:11), so doesn’t need it, which also implies having everything he needs for a full and complete spiritual existence. How does Yitzchok being able to taste whatever he wanted in the food Yaakov served imply anything similar? (I enjoy a good steak as much as, or perhaps more than, the next guy, but that indicates little, if anything, about my ability to pay all my bills or about my spiritual status.)

One of the focal questions asked about Yitzchok’s blessing is why he wanted to bless the wicked Eisav rather than the righteous Yaakov. He certainly knew that Yaakov frequently attributed things to G-d while Eisav didn’t (see Rashi on 27:21), and that Yaakov was more courteous than Eisav (see Rashi on 27:22). He was aware that Eisav had intermarried (26:34-35) and that he had even refused to be circumcised (see Tosfos on 25:25). Besides, if Avraham lost five years of his life to avoid having to see

Eisav’s wickedness (see Rashi on 25:30), Yitzchok must have seen it firsthand! As I have previously explained (see <http://tinyurl.com/odoqa9g>), Yitzchok knew all along that Yaakov would take over the spiritual needs of the family’s mission, with his descendants fulfilling the roles of the Kohanim and Levi’im, but thought that Eisav was better suited to take care of its physical needs, including supporting Yaakov’s descendants. [The Midrash (Shir HaShirim Zuta 1:15) phrases it as Kohanim descending from Yaakov, and kings, who take care of the societal structure needed for Kohanim to flourish, from Eisav.] The blessing itself (27:28-29) was only for material things, which was precisely what Eisav would have needed to fulfill the role Yitzchok had hoped he would have (as opposed to the blessing Yitzchok had inherited from Avraham, which Yitzchok gave over to Yaakov before he left for Charan, see 28:4). Unfortunately, Eisav wanted no part of the family’s spiritual mission; he only wanted Yitzchok’s blessing for the material wealth it would bring him. Realizing this, Rivka had Yaakov bring the food Eisav was asked to prepare to Yitzchok so that Yaakov would receive the blessings for material wealth instead of Eisav, thereby ensuring that the nation that the family would grow into would have their physical needs taken care of.

One of the reasons Yitzchok thought Eisav could fulfill the “Z’vulun” role, supporting Yaakov’s “Yisachar” role, was the benefit he himself had received through Eisav’s hunting skills (see 25:28); just as Eisav, through his extreme fulfillment of honoring his father, had helped facilitate Yitzchok’s continued spiritual growth, so too (Yitzchok thought, and hoped) could he support Yaakov’s spiritual growth. Therefore, as a prerequisite for giving Eisav the blessings of physical prosperity, Yitzchok had him prepare a sumptuous meal for him, hoping to be able to sense an increased level of spirituality through Eisav’s physical support. And, lo and behold, after eating the meal he thought Eisav had provided, Yitzchok was able to “taste whatever he wanted to taste,” i.e. he was able to sense that the person who had brought him the meal was the one to whom the blessings for material wealth should be given, as through him the spiritual mission would be physically supported.

When Eisav showed up, after Yitzchok had already experienced “tasting everything,” Yitzchok realized that he had been mistaken, and Eisav would have no part in the family’s mission. [When Eisav asked if there was any blessing left for him (27:36), Yitzchok thought he was asking if there was any way he could still be part of that mission, so he responded that there was nothing left to give him. After realizing that Eisav only wanted a blessing so that he could be rich, not because he wanted to support the family’s spiritual mission, Yitzchok gave him such a blessing.] It was precisely because Yitzchok was able to “eat from

everything" i.e. sense the physical and spiritual benefit the person who brought him the meal could provide, "before you arrived," i.e. even without Eisav's help, that he knew that "he (the one who had brought him the food earlier) will be blessed," i.e. even the blessing for material wealth was appropriately given to him and not to Eisav.

The only way Yitzchok could know that he was able to "taste everything," both the spiritual value and the physical value inherent in what Yaakov had brought him, is if he had already experienced "everything" beforehand. (How can anyone know if a Coke Slurpee really tastes like Coke without ever having had any Coca-Cola to compare it too?) Therefore, by telling Eisav that he had eaten "from everything" ("mi'kol"), we know that Yitzchok had experienced "everything," and could take his place alongside Avraham's "ba'kol" and Yaakov's "kol." © 2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

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Avraham is described in Parshas Toldos (26:5) as one who observed the Torah of Hashem. Chazal (Kiddushin 82a) explains that this passuk is teaching us that Avraham observed the entire Torah even before it was given. The Ramban in his commentary on this passuk elaborates on this statement of Chazal. Yaakov also observed the mitzvos prior to them being given but only did so in Eretz Yisroel. This was the justification for Yaakov marrying two sisters, and as such Rachel actually died as he returned to Eretz Yisroel. The Ramban adds that although mitzvos are binding outside of Eretz Yisroel, the primary place for mitzvah observance is in Eretz Yisroel. Thus, the voluntary observance of the avos was limited to when they were present in Eretz Yisroel.

This premise of the Ramban, that there is a fundamental distinction between mitzvos performed in Eretz Yisroel and those performed outside of Eretz Yisroel, appears difficult to understand. Agricultural mitzvos such as terumah, ma'asros, and shemitah are linked to the land and do not apply in Chutz La'aretz. Mitzvos which are chovas haguf, those performed with one's body, have to be observed outside of Eretz Yisroel and yet the Ramban understands them to be on a higher level if done in Eretz Yisroel. Why should mitzvos which are not connected to the agriculture of Eretz Yisroel still take on an additional dimension when done in Eretz Yisroel?

Chazal (Keilim, chapter 1) delineate the ten level of geographic kedusha that exists in the world. The place with the most intense kedusha is the Kodosh haKodoshim. Different areas of the Beis Hamikdash and Yerushalayim are each endowed with various degrees of kedusha. The tenth and final area mentioned is Eretz Yisroel. Each area has its own halachos that differentiates it from the other areas. The

kedusha of Eretz Yisroel which separates it from the rest of the world is the fact that the korbanos of the omer and the shte'i halechem offered on Pesach and Shavuos can only be brought from grain that was grown in Eretz Yisroel. Rather than the obvious halachik distinctions between Eretz Yisroel and Chutz La'aretz such as terumah, ma'asros, and shemitah, why do Chazal highlight the halachos that are related to korbanos?

The mefarshim explain that the theme of these mishnayos which differentiates between different levels of kedusha is the gradations of kedusha emanating from the Beis Hamikdash. Beginning with the Kodosh haKodoshim and ending with Eretz Yisroel, there are ten levels of kedushas ha'aretz. It would be irrelevant for the mishna to highlight the agricultural mitzvos that apply only in Eretz Yisroel as the mishna is not focusing on those distinctions. The omer and the shte'i halechem are korbanos that must come from an area endowed to some degree with kedushas ha'aretz. Eretz Yisroel has sufficient kedushas ha'aretz to enable these korbanos to be brought from grain grown in its borders.

Eretz Yisroel is distinct from Chutz La'aretz in two ways. It is agriculturally different which results in a practical difference concerning mitzvos pertaining to the land and it is also different in that it has kedushas ha'aretz which Chutz La'aretz does not. It is this second dimension of Eretz Yisroel that results in its unique status concerning all mitzvos. The primary location for the performance of all mitzvos is in the Beis Hamikdash, the place dedicated for avodas Hashem. The outermost precincts of the Beis Hamikdash end at the borders of Eretz Yisroel. Thus, the entire land is the primary location for mitzvah observance. Although the Torah clearly obligates us to fulfill mitzvos even in Chutz La'aretz, the Ramban understands this to mean that these mitzvos are still not at the level of mitzvos performed in Eretz Yisroel.

The avos who volunteered mitzvah observance only did so in Eretz Yisroel where the highest level of fulfillment of the mitzvos could be achieved.

This aspect of Eretz Yisroel as an extension of kedushas ha'aretz explains another halacha that does not apply in Chutz La'aretz. Chazal teach us that the declaration of Rosh Chodesh must be done by a beis din in Eretz Yisroel. The Rambam elaborates upon this theme by applying this even to our observance of Rosh Chodesh today. In the absence of the process of witnesses testifying that they saw the new moon and the subsequent declaration of Rosh Chodesh by beis din, Rosh Chodesh today is "declared" by the Jewish people observing it as Rosh Chodesh. The Rambam states that it is this observance-declaration of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisroel that determines the day of Rosh Chodesh which establishes Rosh Chodesh worldwide. Why is Eretz Yisroel so central to the observance of Rosh Chodesh, given that Rosh

Chodesh has nothing to do with the agricultural uniqueness of Eretz Yisroel?

The declaration of Rosh Chodesh emanates from the Beis Hamikdash, as all Torah ultimately comes from the Beis Hamikdash which housed the aron and was the seat of the Sanhedrin. From Eretz Yisroel, the outermost area endowed with kedushas ha'aretz, goes forth the declaration of Rosh Chodesh. Whether by the formal announcement of beis din or the observance of the people, the new moon is sanctified in Eretz Yisroel. As we are about to observe Rosh Chodesh this coming week, we turn to Eretz Yisroel and realize its centrality in our lives. From the days of the avos until today, Eretz Yisroel remains the primary location for mitzvah observance. Even as we follow the commandment of the Torah to continue performing mitzvos in Chutz La'aretz, we look forward to the day when mitzvos will be performed in their complete glory in Eretz Yisroel blessed with the Beis Hamikdash rebuilt in its midst. ©2014 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

The Search for Blessings

This week's parsha begins the saga of the long, almost endless struggle between Yaakov and Esav. Yaakov buys the birthright from a hungry Esav and then, coached by his mother, Rivka, he dresses like Esav and receives blessings from his father Isaac. I have received numerous letters throughout the years pondering those actions. Indeed, Yaakov himself is wary of acting in a seemingly devious manner and is reassured by his righteous mother who accepts full responsibility for his actions.

When Esav arrives for the blessings, his father tells him that his younger brother cleverly took all the blessings, but Esav, despondent as he may be declares to his father, "He (Jacob) took away my birthright and see, now he took away my blessing!" He adds, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me? Isaac answered, and said to Esau, "Behold, a lord have I made him over you, and all his kin have I given him as servants; with grain and wine have I supported him, and for you, where -- what can I do, my son?". And Esau said to his father, "Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!" And Esau raised his voice and wept. (Genesis 27:36-38).

I often wondered about the lesson of this repartee. Esav, clearly angered by Yaakov's cunning, still has clarity of mind to ask for a blessing. Yitzchak seems to demur, inferring that there is nothing left. But Esav prevails by pleading, even crying for a blessing. And only then does his father acquiesce and bless him as well.

Was there a blessing left or not? Can pleading with the saintly patriarch produce a previously non-existent blessing? Maybe Esav's tears taught a lesson even for the children of Yaakov?

In the summer of 2001 30,000 Boy Scouts joined together in Virginia for a national Boy Scout Jamboree. Among the myriad groups of scouts who attend this event that occurs every four years are many Jewish Scouts as well. Mike Paretsky, a Vice Chairman of the GNYC Jewish Committee on scouting, was the kosher food liaison to the jamboree. Special food was ordered from O'Fishel caterers of Baltimore, so that the Jewish scouts would be able to nourish their bodies as well.

One of the scoutmasters, a Jewish man caught a glimpse of the kosher offerings. He had never eaten a kosher meal in his life, yet when he saw the special meals, something stirred. He and his troops were being served pork-this and bacon-that for breakfast, lunch and supper, and all of a sudden this man decided he was sick of the monotonous treif stuff. He wanted to eat kosher. Scoutmaster Paretsky gladly let him partake in a meal, but that was not enough for the fellow. The man decided to keep kosher during the entire jamboree!

Mr. Paretsky agreed to accommodate the neophyte kosherphile, but a skeptic approached him. "Mike," he said, "why are you wasting your kosher food on this fellow? He is not going to eat kosher after this is over, and he observes absolutely nothing! Why waste the food on him?"

Mike answered with an amazing story of the Chofetz Chaim. When Russian soldiers entered the town of Radin, Jewish townsfolk prepared kosher meals for the Jewish soldiers in the Czar's army. Soon their acts of charity seemed to fly in their face as they saw the soldiers devour the food and then stand on line to receive the forbidden Russian rations.

When they complained to the Chofetz Chaim and threatened to stop preparing kosher food, he reflected with an insight that must be passed on to generations. "Every mitzvah that a Jew does, every good deed and every bit of kosher that he eats is not a fleeting act. It is an eternity. No matter what precedes or ensues, we must cherish each proper action of a Jew."

The wayward son, Esav is at first told by his father that there are no blessings. But he cries bitterly and cannot fathom that fact. "Is there nothing left?" He asks. It cannot be. And he was right. There is always some blessing left to be found. No matter how far one has strayed, no matter how bleak a situation looks. There is always blessing. We must pursue it, even cry for it, and when we receive the tiniest blessing it may seem trivial, even fleeting, but it is with us for eternity.

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