

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

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

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

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

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

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

Esau knew full well that salt and straw do not require tithes, but he asked so as to give the impression that he was strictly religious. And here it is Rashi's comment on the phrase that Isaac loved him "because entrapment was in his mouth" "The midrashic explanation is that there was entrapment in the mouth

of Esau, who trapped his father and deceived him by his words." (Rashi 25:28)

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

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

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

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

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

Did Isaac's love have an effect on Esau? Yes



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and no. It is clear that there was a special bond of connection between Esau and Isaac. This was recognised by the sages "Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: No man ever honoured his father as I honoured my father, but I found that Esau honoured his father even more." (Devarim Rabbah 1:15)

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

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

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

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

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

But there are some failures that are honourable. Loving your children, whatever they become, is one, for surely that is how G-d loves us.

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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd they said, we saw indeed that the Lord was with you and we said: let there now be

an oath between us, between us and you, and let us make a covenant with you." (Gen. 26:28)

On what basis, and with which types of people, can we make peace treaties? A careful reading of the relationships between Abraham, Isaac and Avimelekh – and especially a study of Parshat Toldot – provides a significant answer to these questions, and contains a crucial message for the government of Israel in our time.

Some background: We first meet Avimelekh in Parshat Vayera, when Abraham wandered over to Gerar, the area where Avimelekh ruled. Gerar was the land of the Philistines, which is part of the Divinely-promised borders of Israel. Abraham referred to Sarah as his sister, and she was immediately taken into Avimelekh's harem – without anyone asking her or her 'brother's' permission [Gen. 20:2].

Clearly, Avimelekh was a lascivious and cruel despot, who certainly would have murdered any husband of Sarah. After he was given a dire warning in a dream sent by G-d, Avimelekh played the innocent victim, asserting that the fault lies with Abraham since he [Avimelekh] acted 'with purity of heart and innocence of hand' [ibid. 20:5]. Abraham correctly explains: '...there is no fear of G-d in this place, and I would have been murdered because of my wife' [ibid. 20:11].

Despite Avimelekh's apparent duplicity as a woman-snatcher and well-stealer [ibid. 26:25], Abraham nevertheless makes a treaty with him. Abraham gives him sheep and cattle, as well as seven more ewes as a sign that he dug the well at Be'er Sheva (literally 'the well of the oath'). It is remarkable that it is Abraham who does the giving: he receives nothing, although the covenant, the oath, is taken by both of them.

This context brings us to Toldot, where the most important thing we learn from history is that we never learn from history. Now, it is Isaac, Abraham's son, who is forced by famine to go to 'Avimelekh, the King of the Philistines, to Gerar' [ibid. 26:1]. Immediately, the people of the area ask about his wife and – for self-protection – he, too, refers to Rebecca as his sister. We discover that Avimelekh is also a voyeur; he looks into Isaac's window and sees him 'playing' with his wife! Yet again, Avimelekh feigns innocence, calling Isaac the deceiver. 'What is this that you did to us by claiming she was your sister? One of my people almost slept with your wife!' [ibid. 26:10]

Isaac goes on to amass a vast accumulation of wealth, including cattle, sheep and servants. He is still living in Gerar, 'And the Philistines were jealous of him' [ibid. 26:14]. This is the same Avimelekh and these are the same Philistines with whom Abraham made his covenant. Nevertheless, 'the Philistines stopped up all of the wells which were dug by the servants of his father,' and Avimelekh forces Isaac to move away

because 'his wealth was amassed from them' [ibid. 26:16]. Isaac leaves, but nevertheless insists upon re-digging the wells of his father which had been destroyed.

To add insult to injury, Isaac now digs two new wells in his new location – only to have the Philistines arguing with him over the ownership of the water. The finale of this incident is difficult to imagine. After all that has transpired, Avimelekh comes to Isaac flanked by his general Pikhol and “ahuzat me-re'ehu” – a group of friends – in order to sign another treaty with him. Isaac is understandably surprised, seeing that they have hated him and exiled him.

The fork-tongued Avimelekh argues, 'we have done only good towards you because we sent you away in peace.' The Philistine king apparently believes that if a Jew is banished – but is permitted to flee with his life intact – the Jew ought to be grateful! And, despite Avimelekh's history, Isaac has a feast with him and they swear yet another oath together. Isaac now renames the place Be'er Sheva in honor of this second oath-treaty.

Is the Torah teaching us to continue to make treaties, even though our would-be partners have a history of duplicity and treachery? I believe the very opposite to be the case. 'The actions of the ancestors are repeated in the lives of their children.' Unfortunately, Jews are always over-anxious to believe that their enemies have become their friends and the leopard has changed his spots.

Just as Abraham is punished for his treaty with Avimelekh, so is Isaac punished for his treaty with Avimelekh. The Land of Israel is too important – and the preservation of a Jewish future is too vulnerable – for us to take risks and make treaties with unconscionable and dishonest rulers. A treaty is only possible when it is made with a partner who, like us, lives in awe of G-d. ©2016 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The lives of our ancestors Yitzchak and Rivkah, the educational direction that they gave to their sons and their differing views of their household, are the subjects of biblical commentary throughout the ages. In our time a more intense psychological examination has dominated modern commentary, even traditional rabbinic commentary. The reason for this is the perplexing dichotomy of life and behavior represented by their twin sons, Yaakov and Eisav.

There always exists a tendency to somehow visit the faults of the parents on the bad behavior of their progeny. This attitude has been reinforced by theories of psychiatry and psychology proposed over the last century. Because of this, there exists a somewhat distorted picture of the narrative that is

recorded for us in this week's Torah reading.

Over the ages, the lives, attitudes and words of Yitzchak and Rivkah have been thoroughly dissected and analyzed. But as is so often in life, the microcosm does not always reflect the macrocosm. And looking for the answer as to what made Eisav, Eisav and Yaakov, Yaakov need not necessarily be found in the educational and family techniques of their parents.

Individuals are individuals and are given free will. We are all born with certain natural tendencies and the task of our life is to exploit them if they are positive and to control them if they are otherwise. Just as the twins were born with different physical characteristics, their natural tendencies in life also differ from the moment of their very birth.

The natural tendency of Eisav was to become a man of the field, a hunter, and a person given to physical strength and necessary violence. This natural tendency of virility, activity driven behavior and a narcissistic view combined to make Eisav the person that he was. He had many choices to control and direct his personality and activities into productive channels that would have benefited him and his society. Here is where freedom of choice and free will enters the picture and takes center stage.

The world needs people of the field. Not everyone can or should be an exclusive tent dweller. However, being such a person of the field requires the ability to abstain from violence and not to injure others. It was in this respect that Eisav failed. It was not his parents will that enabled him but rather him himself, who was fully responsible for his choices and his behavior. King David was also a man of the field, a hunter and champion of wild animals and enemies. But his physical strength and active nature were entirely controlled by his moral powers and his search for spirituality and eternity.

It could be that one's personal nature, which is implanted within us from the moment of birth, is difficult if not impossible to change. However every person's nature can be controlled and directed towards positive goals. In that path lies the great difference between the twins who dominate the narrative of this week's Torah reading. ©2016 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. ©2016 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

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ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Voice Discernment

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

The voices of both Yaakov and Esav were different and distinct yet Yitzchak was unable to discern the difference between the two. According to Nachmanides (the Ramban) Jacob actually changed his voice so that he would sound like his brother. Thus many of our sages conclude that one may not bear witness against one's neighbor based only on the sound of their voice. This applies as well if one heard a husband give instructions to write a bill of divorce to his wife because the testimony is based on the voice of the husband which is difficult to rely upon. The Torah specifically states "and he is a witness for he saw or Knew" which includes only instances of seeing or knowing- having seen with one's own eyes and not hearing. For this reason as well a blind person's testimony is excluded.

However according to the Rambam we can infer that only a blind person would be excluded as a witness because of a specific heavenly decree, (gezeirat hakatuv). But someone else may bear witness based on their discernment of a voice. Thus we may carry out the death penalty for someone who curses G-d (mekallel) or one who influences people to idle worship, (Maycit) based on hearing their words. Anyone therefore, is permitted to be with their wife when it is dark based on his discerning of her voice.

There are still other sages however, that do not accept one's voice, when there are other considerations at stake. A story is told of a man who returned to his town after many years of absence and was identified based on his voice though his appearance had changed drastically. He then died and some of the sages did not allow his wife to remarry because his only identification was his voice because his appearance had changed so much. On the other hand there were those who permitted it because it is logical that a person's appearance would change over the years and thus the recognition of his voice would be sufficient for his wife to remarry.

Given the above, that one's voice can be used to identify someone, how was Yaakov able to change his voice so that it appeared as the voice of his brother Esav?

To this the Marcheshet answers that Yaakov was successful in changing his voice for he was the brother of Esav. Hence one might conclude that if he would allow a woman whose husband had died to remarry and the only proof of his identification prior was from his voice, we would need to verify as well that the voice was not the voice of his brother. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And the servants of Yitzchak (Isaac) dug in the valley and found there a well of fresh water" (Genesis 16:19). Why does the Torah elaborate on the wells Yitzchak found?

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, explains that this teaches us that we should not give up in frustration when we start something and run into difficulties. Do not despair. When Yitzchak dug and did not find water, he kept digging in other places until he finally found what he was seeking. When others quarreled with him and took over his wells, he still did not become discouraged. He continued his digging until he finally found a well with water that he was able to use in peace and he called the area Rechovot.

This, teaches the Chofetz Chaim, is a practical lesson for all areas of our lives. This applies to spiritual and material matters; to Torah studies and to business. Be persistent when things do not at first work out the way you wish. Especially when beginning to study Torah, do not give up if you find it difficult at first. People often fail because they give up too soon.

There are three rules for success in life: 1) Initiative -- you have to try 2) Perseverance -- you have to keep trying 3) The Almighty smiles upon your efforts. Keep trying and you will, G-d willing, succeed. *Dvar Torah based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2016 Rabbi K. Packouz*

HARAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

When Yitzchak wished to give a bracha to Eisav, he first instructed him "Prepare for me delicacies such as I love and bring it to me and I will eat, so that I may bless you before I die" (Bereishis 27:4). Why did Yitzchak feel the need to eat supper before blessing his son?

The Drashos HaRan explains that Yitzchak wished to confer upon Eisav a bracha achieved specifically through prophecy to ensure that it would come to fruition. In order to reach a state of prophecy, a person must first achieve an extremely high spiritual level. However, the body opposes this rapid ascension into the spiritual realm since it suppresses the physical aspects of the body. To combat these feelings of resistance, the prophet must first pacify his body. While some prophets achieved this state after listening to music, Yitzchak accomplished this through the consumption of delicious food.

Rav Wolbe writes that this is a concept that every person must reckon with regarding their avodas Hashem. A person should try as much as possible to refrain from causing direct clashes between the soul and the body. Thus, one should take care to eat at scheduled times and to sleep well so that his body will

not protest any strides taken toward greater levels of spirituality. Additionally, one should avoid any situation that provokes and arouses bodily desires.

Much of our avodas Hashem depends on how we prepare ourselves in advance. First of all take proper care of your body's needs. Additionally, for Heaven's sake, don't knowingly put yourself into a situation where you must force yourself to overcome the temptations of the yetzer hara! A little foresight makes our mission in this world so much easier.

The parsha ends with Yitzchak instructing Yaakov not to take a Canaanite woman as a wife, but rather to take one of Lavan's daughters. Eisav overheard the conversation and thus, he too, refrained from marrying a Caaninite woman and instead married one of the daughters of Yishmael.

The Ramban comments (Bereishis 28:5) that although he heeded his father's instructions not to marry a Canaanite woman, he did not follow them as he should have since he did not marry one of Lavan's daughters. Furthermore, he used his father's request of Yaakov as an excuse to indulge his desires: he took yet another wife in addition to his previous wives, while he should have taken her instead of his wicked wives.

Rav Wolbe explains that Eisav fulfilled the words of his father's commandment, but he failed to fulfill the intent behind those words. Yitzchak did not want his son to marry a Canaanite woman because he was disgusted by them. That being the case, in Yitzchak's eyes, certainly the daughter of Yishmael was not in the running as a prospective bride for his sons. Yet, Eisav took the instructions and ran with them toward a lifestyle of self indulgence.

A wise man gleans a lesson from everyone -- even from the wicked Eisav. One must take care when fulfilling the mitzvos of Hashem, not to focus merely on performing the literal mitzvah while disregarding the purpose behind the mitzvah. One such example is the mitzvah of Shabbos. One can refrain from all the various prohibitions and yet spend the day shooting hoops. He thereby completely disregards the intent behind these prohibitions: to spend the day in the pursuit of spirituality. The level of one's spirituality depends to a great degree upon the amount of "spirit" he includes in the performance of the mitzvos! ©2016 Rav S. Wolbe z"l and The AishDas Society

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"And Yitzchok trembled greatly" (Beraishis 27:33). "Why was Yitzchok, our father, so shaken at that moment? Because of the Day of Judgment. For when Yitzchok was going to bless Aisav, he didn't know that he was bad - as Aisav would come and ask his father whether water and salt needed to be tithed, and Yitzchok would say that if he wants to tithe water and salt, certainly he is tithing everything

else! Once [Aisav's] actions became known to him, [Yitzchok] was afraid of the Day of Judgment" (Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 32). If Yitzchok hadn't realized Aisav's true nature, we can understand how he could have attempted to give him the blessings. However, there are numerous things that should have made Yitzchok aware that the promises made to him and to Avraham would be fulfilled through Ya'akov, and not Aisav, including things that should have made it obvious that Aisav was very far from being a righteous person.

We know that Avraham knew that Aisav was unworthy, as G-d had told him that not all of Yitzchok's children will be called his (Avraham's) children (see Nedarim 31a) Additionally, Avraham was afraid to bless Yitzchok because doing so would also have to include the "poisonous" Aisav (see Rashi on 25:11). It is hard to imagine that Avraham didn't share this information with Yitzchok.

Even when Rivka was expecting, it was evident that one child was inclined to do evil while the other was inclined towards good (see Rashi on 25:22). G-d informed her that the two children will be different from the moment they are born, one being righteous and the other wicked (see Rashi on 25:23) and that "the elder will serve the younger" (25:23), i.e. Aisav will be secondary to Yaakov. It would be similarly difficult to say that Rivka never had a conversation about this with her husband.

Rashi (25:29) tells us G-d shortened Avraham's life by 5 years so that he wouldn't see his grandson's wicked ways. If Avraham couldn't be around because it would become obvious that Aisav was wicked, how could Yitzchok not have known his true nature? Didn't he see the same things Avraham would have seen if he were still alive?

Rivka and Yitzchok were distraught about Aisav's marriages (26:35) as his wives were idolaters (see Rashi on 26:35 and 27:1). It is clear that Yitzchok was well aware of the fact that his son married idol worshippers and remained with them.

When Yaakov, pretending to be Aisav, thanks G-d for helping him succeed, Yitzchok immediately becomes suspicious that it is not really Aisav. After all, Aisav never talks that way, nor is he ever as courteous as Yaakov was (see Rashi on 27:21 and 22). It sure seems that Yitzchok knew which son was the righteous one!

Tosfos (25:25) brings a midrash that says that because Aisav was so red, Yitzchok was afraid that he wouldn't survive a circumcision. Because he wasn't circumcised on the eighth day, even after realizing that Aisav was naturally red (and therefore healthy enough to be circumcised) Yitzchok decided to wait until he was 13 (the same age Yishmael was) to circumcise him. However, when he turned 13, Aisav refused. Obviously, Yitzchok knew that Aisav never had a circumcision, and couldn't be righteous.

(There are other midrashim that indicate that Aisav was circumcised (and only refused to circumcise his own sons), but we still need to explain how Yitzchok could have believed that Aisav was worthy enough to receive the blessings instead of Yaakov.)

When Avraham sent his other sons away (25:6), the commentators ask how he could have gone against the Torah's wishes of how a person's belongings are to be inherited. The Taz says that G-d must have explicitly told Avraham to do so, while others suggest that because the other sons were not from Sara (the Torah calls them "sons of the concubines"), they were not considered part of his inheritance. Since Yitzchok was not told explicitly to exclude Aisav, and both of his sons had the same mother, this wouldn't have applied to Aisav. Yitzchok therefore thought that not only should Aisav inherit him, but (because he was the firstborn) he should receive twice as much as Yaakov. The righteousness of Aisav was not relevant to this issue, so even if Yitzchok knew he was wicked, he would have to allow Aisav to remain the firstborn heir.

Chazal tell us that Aisav did have one good quality, the extent to which he honored his father. Yitzchok knew this, and also experienced first hand his own spiritual pursuits being enhanced by the scrumptious meals that Aisav provided. He was confident that Aisav was providing kosher meals, as he even asked whether the water and salt had to be tithed before they were served. That Aisav was personally wicked, giving in to his physical desires, was known to Yitzchok. Nevertheless, he envisioned Aisav's role to be the provider that allows the righteous to concentrate on spiritual growth without having to worry about the physical necessities (see Mishnas Rebbe Aharon). The Kesav Sofer suggests that Aisav led his father to believe that he wanted that role, as the tenth he took off from his food would be given directly to Yaakov, and wanted so much to support him that he asked if he could/should give him even from things like salt and straw that are not really required to be tithed.

It seemed like a perfect solution. His eldest son could have a share in serving G-d by supporting Yaakov, and he could give Aisav a blessing to be extremely prosperous so that he could maintain that support. Rivka, however, understood that Aisav was only trying to fool his father. Sure he wanted the prosperity the blessings would bring, but he didn't really want, or intend, to support Yaakov. She therefore convinces Yaakov to take on the responsibility of the learning and the fundraising by "stealing" the blessings for prosperity. Yaakov's only hesitation is that the plan might backfire, if Yitzchok figures out who he is before giving the blessing. He is not afraid that he will find out after the blessing is given (when Aisav will surely tell him) as by that time Yitzchok will realize that this was what needed to happen.

Sure enough, Yitzchok blesses Yaakov thinking

that it was Aisav, and can tell that the blessing was given to the right person. When he finds out that it wasn't Aisav, he realizes that he was mistaken. Not that he gave the blessing to the wrong person, but mistaken in believing that Aisav could (or would) take on the role as a Torah supporter. And that scares him, for two reasons. First of all, he had believed that the meals Aisav provided were helping his spiritual growth. If, however, this was not what Aisav could do, then perhaps they were having the opposite affect. "And Yitzchok trembled greatly," because he was afraid that on judgment day he would have to answer for accepting all of those meals. Could he even trust Aisav's kashrus if his "salt and water tithe" questions weren't real questions? Secondly, he had just given the blessing to the younger son, rather than to the firstborn. This concern was soon alleviated, as Aisav admits that Yaakov bought the firstborn rights (see Yalkut Shimoni 115).

Yitzchok had to know all along that Aisav was wicked, but thought that he had a redeeming quality of being able to support Torah (his father's and his brother's). Perhaps this is what the Pesikta d'Rav Kahana meant, telling us that he believed this up until the time that it became known that the blessing was given to Yaakov, not Aisav. It then became apparent that even in this regard, Aisav was not worthy. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

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?

This past summer 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 townfolk 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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RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

What would you think if you saw a luxury car being offered for sale for a ridiculously low price? You would undoubtedly wonder what was wrong with it. The price a seller demands reflects his opinion of the object he is selling. It would take a large sum to make him part with a cherished possession. As for his children, who are more precious than anything else in the world, he would not sell them for any sum at all. But something he holds in low regard he would give away for a pittance.

In this week's Torah portion, we encounter the struggle over the firstborn birthright of Israel between Esau and Jacob, Isaac's two sons. As it turns out, it is not much of a struggle. This firstborn birthright signifies the privilege of becoming the chosen people of Hashem, and Esau, being the older of the two sons, holds first claim to it. It is Jacob, however, who yearns for this birthright with all his heart. One day, Esau returns from his exertions in the field thoroughly famished, and he agrees to sell the birthright to Jacob for a bowl of red lentil soup. And so, the Torah concludes, Esau ate, drank, rose and left, having disgraced the birthright.

Let us think for a moment. At which point did Esau disgrace the birthright? When he actually ate the soup or when he agreed to sell the birthright for a bowl of soup? It would seem that as soon as he agreed to give it away for a pittance he had already shown his utter contempt for the spiritual birthright of Israel. Why then does the Torah accuse him of disgracing the birthright only after he ate, drank, rose and left?

Our Sages explain that Esau might have been so famished that his behavior could be excused. It is quite possible that his discomfiture caused him to lose his sense of proportion momentarily and agree to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup. Perhaps he was not thinking clearly at the time and agreed to do something on the spur of the moment that went against his better judgment.

But if so, what happened later when his hunger was sated and his thirst assuaged? Did he protest that his agreement had been made under duress and that the transaction was null and void? Did he rant and rage at what Jacob had done to him?

Not at all. He just gulped down the soup, stood up and stomped out. This was when he demonstrated his disdain for the birthright. Had he shown any regret he would have defined himself as an upright person, but he didn't. Therefore, the Torah records this moment for posterity as the act of contempt for the birthright.

A rich man once visited the town's poorest man late one night.

"Listen, my good fellow," said the rich man. "You know I have everything a person could possibly want. I have estates and carriages and the finest horses. But one thing I do not have is a child. Your situation is the exact opposite of mine. You live in this little hovel and you cannot even put a few crusts of bread on the table. But you do have children. Ten of them." The rich man paused.

The poor man looked at the rich man curiously. "So what is the point?"

"I want to propose a deal," said the rich man. "You give me one of your ten children, and I will give you one tenth of everything I possess. What do you say?"

The poor man was taken aback. He stood up and looked at the faces of his sleeping family behind the partition. Which child could he give away? This one? Surely not. That one? Impossible. And thus he looked at the faces of all his children and finally decided he could give none of them away. He had no choice but to reject the rich man's offer.

The next day, overcome with remorse for even having considered the arrangement, he poured his heart out to his wife.

"Do not tear yourself down," she told him. "It was the pressure of our poverty to drove you to think about it. But when it came right down to it, you couldn't do it. You are a good man."

In our own lives, we all know full well how we are driven by impulse, by the spur of the beguiling moment. But what do we do when the moment passes? Do we listen to that little voice of guilt that Hashem has so kindly implanted deep in our brains, showing ourselves to be essentially good people? Or do we plunge on ahead, heedless and thoughtless, the helpless captives of our impulses? It is this moment, when we have had the chance to pause and reflect, that truly defines who we are and what we are worth.

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