

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

There is a strange passage in the life of Isaac, ominous in its foreshadowing of much of later Jewish history. Like Abraham, Isaac finds himself forced by famine to go to Gerar, in the land of the Philistines. There, like Abraham, he senses that his life may be in danger because he is married to a beautiful woman. He fears that he will be killed so that Rebecca can be taken into the harem of king Avimelekh. The couple pass themselves off as brother and sister. The deception is discovered, Avimelekh is indignant, explanations are made, and the moment passes. Genesis 26 reads almost like a replay of Genesis 20, a generation later.

In both cases Avimelekh promises the patriarchs security. To Abraham he said, "My land is before you; live wherever you like" (Gen. 20:15). About Isaac, he commands, "Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall surely be put to death" (Gen. 26:11). Yet in both cases, there is a troubled aftermath. In Genesis 21 we read about an argument that arose over a well that Abraham had dug: "Then Abraham complained to Avimelekh about a well of water that Avimelekh's servants had seized" (Gen. 21:25). The two men make a treaty. Yet, as we now discover, this was not sufficient to prevent further difficulties in the days of Isaac: Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him. The man became rich, and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him. So all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the time of his father Abraham, the Philistines stopped up, filling them with earth.

Then Avimelekh said to Isaac, "Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us."

So Isaac moved away from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar and settled there. Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he gave them the same names his father had given them.

Please keep in mind  
בנימין שמחה בן עדינה מניה  
for a refuah shelaima

Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there. But the herdsmen of Gerar quarrelled with Isaac's herdsmen and said, "The water is ours!" So he named the well Esek, because they disputed with him. Then they dug another well, but they quarrelled over that one also; so he named it Sitnah. He moved on from there and dug another well, and no one quarrelled over it. He named it Reivot, saying, "Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land." (26:12-22)

There are three aspects of this passage worthy of careful attention. The first is the intimation it gives us of what will later be the turning point of the fate of the Israelites in Egypt. Avimelekh says, "you have become too powerful for us." Centuries later, Pharaoh says, at the beginning of the book of Exodus, "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are greater in number and power than we are. Come on, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply and it come to pass, when there befall any war, that they join also with our enemies and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land" (1:9-10). The same word, *atzum*, "power/powerful," appears in both cases. Our passage signals the birth of one of the deadliest of human phenomena, antisemitism.

Antisemitism is in some respects unique. It is, in Robert Wistrich's phrase, "the world's longest hatred". No other prejudice has lasted so long, mutated so persistently, attracted such demonic myths, or had such devastating effects. But in other respects it is not unique, and we must try to understand it as best we can.

One of the best books about antisemitism, is in fact not about antisemitism at all, but about similar phenomena in other contexts, Amy Chua's *World on Fire*. Her thesis is that any conspicuously successful minority will attract envy that may deepen into hate and provoke violence. All three conditions are essential. The hated group must be conspicuous, for otherwise it would not be singled out. It must be successful, for otherwise it would not be envied. And it must be a minority, for otherwise it would not be attacked.



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All three conditions were present in the case of Isaac. He was conspicuous: he was not a Philistine, he was different from the local population as an outsider, a stranger, someone with a different faith. He was successful: his crops had succeeded a hundredfold, his flocks and herds were large, and the people envied him. And he was a minority: a single family in the midst of the local population. All the ingredients were present for the distillation of hostility and hate.

There is more. Another profound insight into the conditions that give rise to antisemitism was given by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (the section has been published separately as *Anti-Semitism*). Hostility to Jews becomes dangerous, she argued, not when Jews are strong, but when they are weak.

This is deeply paradoxical because, on the face of it, the opposite is true. A single thread runs from the Philistines' reaction to Isaac and Pharaoh's to the Israelites, to the myth concocted in the late nineteenth century, known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It says that Jews are powerful, too powerful. They control resources. They are a threat. They must be removed.

Yet, says Arendt, antisemitism did not become dangerous until they had lost the power they had once had: "When Hitler came to power, the German banks were already almost *Judenrein* (and it was here that Jews had held key positions for more than a hundred years) and German Jewry as a whole, after a long steady growth in social status and numbers, was declining so rapidly that statisticians predicted its disappearance in a few decades." (*Ibid.*, 4)

The same was true in France: "The Dreyfus affair exploded not under the Second Empire, when French Jewry was at the height of its prosperity and influence, but under the Third Republic when Jews had all but vanished from important positions." (*Ibid.*, 4-5)

Antisemitism is a complex, protean phenomenon because antisemites must be able to hold together two beliefs that seem to contradict one another: Jews are so powerful that they should be feared, and at the same time so powerless that they can be attacked without fear.

It would seem that no one could be so irrational

as to believe both of these things simultaneously. But emotions are not rational, despite the fact that they are often rationalised, for there is a world of difference between rationality and rationalisation (the attempt to give rational justification for irrational beliefs).

So, for example, in the twenty-first century we can find that (a) Western media are almost universally hostile to Israel, and (b) otherwise intelligent people claim that the media are controlled by Jews who support Israel: the same inner contradiction of perceived powerlessness and ascribed power.

Arendt summarises her thesis in a single, telling phrase which links her analysis to that of Amy Chua. What gives rise to antisemitism is, she says, the phenomenon of "wealth without power." That was precisely the position of Isaac among the Philistines.

There is a second aspect of our passage that has had reverberations through the centuries: the self-destructive nature of hate. The Philistines did not ask Isaac to share his water with them. They did not ask him to teach them how he (and his father) had discovered a source of water that they -- residents of the place -- had not. They did not even simply ask him to move on. They "stopped up" the wells, "filling them with earth." This act harmed them more than it harmed Isaac. It robbed them of a resource that would, in any case, have become theirs, once the famine had ended and Isaac had returned home.

More than hate destroys the hated, it destroys the hater. In this case too, Isaac and the Philistines were a portent of what would eventually happen to the Israelites in Egypt. By the time of the plague of locusts, we read: Pharaoh's officials said to him, "How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?" (*Exodus* 10:7)

In effect they said to Pharaoh: you may think you are harming the Israelites. In fact you are harming us.

Both love and hate, said Rabbi Shimon bar Yocai, "upset the natural order" *mekalkalet et hashurah* (*Bereishit Rabbah* 55:8). They are irrational. They make us do things we would not do otherwise. In today's Middle East, as so often before, those intent on destroying their enemies end by doing great harm to their own interests, their own people.

Third, Isaac's response remains the correct one today. Defeated once, he tries again. He digs another well; this too yields opposition. So he moves on and tries again, and eventually finds peace.

How fitting it is that the town that today carries the name Isaac gave the site of this third well, is the home of the Weizmann Institute of Science, the Faculty of Agriculture of the Hebrew University, and the Kaplan hospital, allied to the Medical School of the Hebrew University. Israel Belkind, one of the founders of the settlement in 1890, called it *Reovot* precisely because

of the verse in our parsha: "He named it Reivot, saying, Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land."

Isaac is the least original of the three patriarchs. His life lacks the drama of Abraham or the struggles of Jacob. We see in this passage that Isaac himself did not strive to be original. The text is unusually emphatic on the point: Isaac "reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he gave them the same names his father had given them." Normally we strive to individuate ourselves by differentiating ourselves from our parents. We do things differently, or even if we don't, we give them different names. Isaac was not like this. He was content to be a link in the chain of generations, faithful to what his father had started. Isaac represents the faith of persistence, the courage of continuity. He was the first Jewish child, and he represents the single greatest challenge of being a Jewish child: to continue the journey our ancestors began, rather than drifting from it, thereby bringing the journey to an end before it has reached its destination. And Isaac, because of that faith, was able to achieve the most elusive of goals, namely peace -- because he never gave up. When one effort failed, he began again. So it is with all great achievements: one part originality, nine parts persistence.

I find it moving that Isaac, who underwent so many trials, from the binding when he was young, to the rivalry between his sons when he was old and blind, carries a name that means, "He will laugh." Perhaps the name -- given to him by God Himself before Isaac was born -- means what the Psalm means when it says, "Those who sow in tears will reap with joy" (Ps. 126:5). Faith means the courage to persist through all the setbacks, all the grief, never giving up, never accepting defeat. For at the end, despite the opposition, the envy and the hate, lie the broad spaces, Reivot, and the laughter, Isaac: the serenity of the destination after the storms along the way. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2018 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd Rebecca spoke to her son Jacob, saying... And now, my son, obey my voice according to which I command you..." (Genesis 27:5,7) One of the many glories of the Bible is that it recognizes the complex personality especially of great individuals, and the fact that strength and weakness, virtue and vice, can sometimes both reside in the very same soul. Even more significantly, that which may superficially appear to be dishonest -- an act

of deception -- may very well provide the necessary ingredient which ultimately creates grandeur. It is this understanding which supplies the real motivation for what appears to be Rebecca's deception according to the profound interpretations of the Malbim and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

The most obvious question which strikes us, as we read the Torah portion, is why Rebecca had to deceive her husband by dressing her younger son Jacob in the garb and in the skins of her older son Esau? Why could she not merely have explained to her husband that Esau, although he was the elder brother, was simply not worthy of the birth-right? From a textual perspective, this doesn't seem to have been a difficult task at all. After all, right before Isaac summons Esau requesting venison meat as the hors d'oeuvre of the blessing, the Bible specifically records that Esau had committed the one great sin of the patriarchal period: he married two Hittite women, which was 'a bitterness of spirit to Isaac and to Rebecca' (Gen. 26:35). Moreover, Rebecca could certainly have argued that the son who had been willing to sell his birthright to Jacob for a mere bowl of lentil soup, could not possibly be worthy of the mantle of Abrahamic leadership. Furthermore, Rebecca had heard from the Almighty during her frighteningly difficult pregnancy that 'the elder son would serve the younger' (Gen. 25:23) during her frighteningly difficult pregnancy. So why didn't she make her convincing case to her husband after coffee one evening rather than resort to an act of trickery?

Malbim suggests that indeed such a conversation between husband and wife did take place. And after Rebecca marshaled her arguments, Isaac then explained to his wife that he was as aware of Esau's shortcomings as she was. In fact, he understood that the spiritual blessing of family leadership, the blessing of Abraham which we know as the birthright, must certainly go to Jacob; indeed when Jacob is later forced by the wrath of his deceived brother Esau to leave his home and go into exile with Laban, after his father warns him not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan, he is blessed with the messianic dream of becoming a congregation of nations and he is given the blessing of Abraham, to inherit the land of Israel (Gen. 28:3,4). But, argues Isaac, he must make a split between the birthright of spiritual leadership which rightfully belongs to Jacob and the physical blessing of material prosperity and political domination which he has decided to give to Esau: May the Lord give you from the dew of the heavens and the fat [oil] of the land and much grain and wine...Be the political master over your brother and may the daughters of your mother bow down to you.

The more spiritual brother must receive the religious-spiritual birthright (bekhora) and the more physical brother must receive the material-political blessing (berakha). After all, argues Isaac, the bookish,

naive, and spiritual Jacob (ish tam, yoshev ohalim) would not begin to know how to maneuver in an economically driven, militaristically guided society. Give Esau the oil and the sword; give Jacob the books and the Temple.

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

We should also remember that the King David, the progenitor of the Messiah of Peace, is both the sweet singer of Psalms with a voice of Jacob as well as the great warrior of Israel with hands of Esau. King David's strength as well as his weakness apparently was derived from that aspect of Esau which was also part of his personality. Every Jacob must learn to utilize, tame and ultimately sanctify the necessary hands of Esau, without which it is impossible to triumph.

But the profound complexity of our Torah continues its lessons. Yes, Jacob justifiably received both blessing and birthright (berakha and bekhora) from his father, but we cannot – and he cannot – forget that this occurred as a result of his act of deception. Jacob, therefore, has to pay a heavy price. He must flee from his parents' home in order to escape Esau's wrath, and is thrust into exile with the treacherous Laban.

And in addition to all of the problems faced by someone on the run, Jacob has the added dilemma of looking at himself in the mirror. His deception was orchestrated by his mother, perhaps even ordained by God, but, nonetheless, something inside him has been forever tainted. This feeling of guilt never leaves him. Twenty years later, when Jacob is about to return to his birthplace as a mature older man – as a husband and a father – he realizes that unfinished business between Esau and himself still remains.

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

However, ultimately – and even in our days – the unified dream of Rebecca is truly coming to pass, when Israel has been miraculously restored to its

homeland as a result of its military victories over the aggressive Palestinian forces. Indeed, the true mother of the Yeshivat Hesder of Modern Orthodoxy in Israel is none other than Mother Rebecca, whose vision of sanctifying the hands of Esau has proven successful in our blessed period of the beginning of the sprouting of our redemption. ©2018 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

## Wein Online

In the competition between the brothers Esau and Jacob, Esau originally downplays any long-range view of the situation. He demands immediate gratification and is therefore more than willing to relinquish his birthright -- which is only a long-range asset -- in favor of an immediate bowl of hot lentils. As the Torah dutifully records for us in this week's reading, Esau will come to regret this youthful decision later in life. But, like almost all of us, he will put the blame for the mistake on others -- on the shrewdness of Jacob taking advantage of him -- rather than on his own error and weakness.

By blaming Jacob for what was his own short sidedness, Esau compounds the original error of judgment on his part. After having tasted all the immoral pleasures of life, and after a career of violence, Esau remains unfulfilled, unhappy and frustrated. He now longs for the blessing and approval of his old father, a person who he has long treated as being completely irrelevant to him. His shout of anguish, when he realizes that the spiritual blessings of his father have already been bestowed on his brother Jacob and that what is left for him are the fleeting blessings of temporal existence and power, reverberates throughout human history. He realizes that the blessings given to Jacob are those of eternity and lasting memory while all physical blessings in this world are merely temporary and always subject to revision. The Torah always deals with eternal standards and never bows to current themes and ideas no matter how attractive they may seem at the time.

Every generation feels that it discovers new ways to propel humanity and civilization forward. Somehow, we always feel ourselves to be wiser than our elders, smarter than our ancestors. But, if one makes an honest review of human history, it becomes clear that the true principles of civilization -- morality, kindness, education and individual freedom -- remain constant throughout the story of humankind. Deviations from these principles, in the hope of achieving a utopian society, have always resulted in tragedy and destruction.

The cry of Esau reverberates through the halls of world history. And, what makes it most pathetic is that what Esau is searching for can easily be found in what he himself has previously discarded and

denigrated. But, it is always the egotistical hubris of humankind that prevents it from seriously and logically examining its situation and thoughts. One has to admit to past errors and to restore oneself to the path of goodness and righteousness, which alone can lead to a lasting feeling of happiness and accomplishment in this world.

Esau would like to be Jacob, but without having to behave with the restraint and outlook on life that is the most central point of reference in the life and behavior of Jacob. It is as Justice Brandeis once put it: "I would like to have the serenity and peace of the Sabbath but without its restraints." It is dealing with that fallacy of thought that makes Jacob Jacob and Esau Esau. ©2018 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

### **RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## **Butter Battles**

**T**his week the Torah tells us of the great dichotomy of character between Yaakov and his older brother Esav. Yaakov sat and studied while Esav hunted. Though it is difficult to understand the roots of this great divide, their parents' reaction to this diversity is even more confusing. The Torah tells us that "Yitzchak loved Esav for there was game in his mouth, and Rivka loved Yaakov." (Genesis 25:28)

The variance in their opinions manifested itself in the fight over the blessings. Yitzchak intended that Esav receive his blessings for worldly goods, intending to save the spiritual ones for Yaakov. Rivka pushed her son Yaakov to attain the blessings for the worldly goods, too.

What was the fundamental difference between Yitzchak's and Rivka's view of their children? Why was there such a diverse notion as to who should inherit the wealth of this world? How is it possible that Yitzchak, who epitomized the very essence of spirituality, favored Esav, a man steeped in worldly desires?

Vice President Al Gore tells a story about outgoing Senator Bill Bradley. Senator Bradley once attended a dinner at which he was a guest speaker. The waiter set down a side dish of potatoes, and placed a pat of butter upon them. The Senator asked for an extra portion of butter.

"I'm sorry sir," the very unyielding server replied tersely, "one pat per guest."

With a combined expression of shock, scorn, and disbelief, Senator Bradley looked up at the formal steward. "Excuse me," he said. "Do you know who I am? I am New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley." The Senator cleared his throat. "I am a Rhodes scholar and a former NBA star. I currently serve on the International Trade and Long-Term Growth Committee, and the Debt

and Deficit Reduction Committee, and I am in charge of Taxation and IRS Oversight. And I'd like another pat of butter on my potatoes."

The waiter looked down at the Senator.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"I am the one in charge of the butter."

Yitzchok understood the great contrariety between his children. However, he felt that Esav, the hunter-child, understood the mundane world much better. So it was only fitting that Esav be gifted with the blessings of a mundane world. Esav would then supplement Yaakov's needs, and a true symbiosis would emerge. Rivka, on the other hand, was pragmatic. She felt that putting Esav in charge of the material world would lead to selfish hoarding that would hardly give Yaakov a portion.

She understood that while Yaakov's sustenance was basically from spirituality, he still needed a little butter to survive. And she could not rely on Esav controlling the butter: she knew the personality all too well. There would be no parity or sharing. Esav would take it all.

Everybody has a job, whether it be spiritual or menial, and each job must be executed with a sense of responsibility and mission. The argument between Rivka and Yitzchak was complex, but it was simple too. Esav may be more astute in churning the butter; however, will he make sure to give Yaakov his fair share? Rivka knew that the world would be a better place if we all shared our respective portions. But she wouldn't count on it. ©2018 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & [torah.org](http://torah.org)

### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**his week's portion tells of Yitzchak's (Isaac) special love for Esav (Esau) and Rivka's (Rebecca) special love for Yaakov (Jacob). (Genesis 25:28) One wonders how Yitzchak could have been so naive to prefer his eldest son Esav more than the younger Yaakov. After all, Esav was merely a hunter while Yaakov was a student of Torah.

Perhaps it can be suggested that Yitzchak knew that Esav was physically strong. Having just experienced the Akedah (the binding of Isaac), that moment when a knife was literally on his neck, Yitzchak favored this trait. He sensed that throughout Jewish history we would be similarly bound with a knife on our neck-facing near death. Physical strength would be needed.

What the Jewish people needed, Yitzchak thought, was a two headed leadership. Esav would be the physical heir. He would defend the Jewish people against all attacks. Yaakov on the other hand, would be the spiritual heir who would teach Torah and soulful principles to his people. Yitzchak was not fooled by Yaakov's disguise and therefore blessed Yaakov, with

blessings that were physical in nature. "May God give you your due of heaven and plenty of corn and wine." (Genesis 27:28) The blessings Yitzchak gives to Yaakov just before Yaakov leaves home were the covenantal blessings. "May the Lord give you the blessings of Avraham (Abraham) and may you inherit the land of your sojournings." (Genesis 28:4)

Rivka did not see things that way. She insisted that there could only be one heir. The body and the soul should not be separated. Rivka understood that we are not human beings who are disjointed. The body and soul must work in harmony. The soul needs the body to exist in this world and the body needs the soul to give meaning and direction to its existence. For Rivka, the pathway to spirituality is not to separate it from the body, to denigrate the body but rather to sanctify it. She therefore insisted that Jacob, the Jew of the spirit, the student of Torah, could learn to be physically strong as well.

Thus, as my Rebbe the saintly Rav Ahron Soloveitchik of blessed memory points out, Rivka pushes Yaakov to have courage by insisting that he challenge Esav by taking the blessing from him and putting his life on the line. We know that Yaakov eventually learns this lesson for later in his life he successfully wrestles with a mysterious man, (Genesis 32:25) and is given an additional name-Yisrael which means one who is able to fight and be strong.

The body-soul issue is one that has been debated and discussed for many centuries and in many religions and cultures. It is certainly present in the modern State of Israel. Many Yeshivot refuse to allow their students to fight in the army. They insist that they are protecting Israel spiritually through their learning and physical protection should be taken care of by others.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, however, thought differently. He was the father of Yeshivot Hesder whose students enlist in the army and fight; gun in one hand, and Talmud in the other. In tune with Rivka's thinking, they become almost like two children of the third patriarch, Yaakov, the student of Torah, and Yisrael, the strong fighter, for they integrate both body and soul in the service of God. ©2018 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 SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

**P**arshat Toldot tells the story of Yaakov (Jacob) and Esav, two brothers that couldn't be any more different. When their father Yitzchok (Isaac) decides that it's time to bless his two sons, Yaakov ends up getting the better of the two blessings. In comparing the two blessings, though, the Chafetz

Chaim points out a very interesting observation: When Yaakov gets the blessing, the Torah says "And may G-d give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth" (27:28). However, when Esav gets his blessing, Yitzchok says "Behold, of the fatness of the earth shall be your dwelling and of the dew of the heavens from above" (27:39). Why was the order of the fatness and the dew reversed?

The Chafetz Chaim explains that since Yaakov preferred the spiritual to the physical, his blessing came from heaven (dew) to earth (fatness of the earth). On the other hand, since Esav valued the physical more, his blessing was customized to his desires by focusing on the physical first. Although that's a nice explanation, there's a much deeper lesson to be learned: Because Yaakov focused on heaven and the chain of where things come from, he realized that he's being GIVEN of the dew of the heavens, which produces the fatness of the earth, and consequently thanked the source, G-d. Contrarily, as the verse adds, Esav's fatness was simply his "dwelling", as if it were there all along, with no connection to where it came from. Yaakov was blessed with the ability to see beyond what was in front of him, and therefore appreciated it (and G-d) more. We too are given that same opportunity every day. And all we have to do is stop and think about what we have (as opposed to what we don't have), and where it really came from. Only then will we ever truly be content, fulfilled, and most importantly, blessed. ©2013 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Voice Discernment

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**T**he 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 we 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 DAVID LEVIN**

### **Accepting vs. Condoning**

**O**ur parasha discusses the struggles between Ya'akov and Eisav. The Torah speaks of the aftermath of the two blessings that Yitzchak gave, one to Eisav's impersonator (Ya'akov) and one to Eisav himself. "And Eisav hated Ya'akov because of the blessing in which his father blessed him and he said in his heart, the days of mourning for my father are near, and I will slay Ya'akov my brother. And Rivka was informed of the words of Eisav her elder son and she sent and she called for Ya'akov her younger son and she said to him, Esav your brother is having second thoughts toward you to kill you. And now my son, listen to my voice flee to my brother Lavan to Charan. And you will dwell with him for a few days (a short time) until your brother's wrath subsides."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that it is unclear whether the phrase, "because of the blessing in which his father blessed him" refers to the b'racha given to Ya'akov by mistake or the consequent b'racha given to Eisav. He could have been angry that Ya'akov received the first b'racha or he could have been angry because within the second b'racha it foretold of "his whole future position would be subordinate to that of the future House of Ya'akov." Eisav did not like the fact that "his importance in the

world was only for the benefit of Ya'akov." This latter opinion is confirmed by the Malbim who feels that Eisav was upset with his father for acknowledging Ya'akov's superior status.

Let us look carefully at Eisav's words: "The days of mourning for my father are near, and I will slay Ya'akov my brother." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin describes Eisav's hatred for Ya'akov: "It appears that his (Eisav's) hatred for Ya'akov was greater than his love for his father. Even though he did not wish to kill Ya'akov while his father still was alive, in order not to cause Yitzchak pain, but in his heart he wanted 'the days of mourning for my father are near,' in order to hurry the time of the killing of Ya'akov." HaRav Sorotzkin cites a Midrash in Tehillim that says that Eisav's plot was even deeper. He did not wish to kill his father to hasten the death of Ya'akov but instead he thought that he might convince Yishmael to murder Yitzchak so that he would then be free to murder Ya'akov. Then (in revenge) he could safely murder Yishmael and inherit all of the land for himself. What was Eisav's fear? According to the Midrash it would appear that he was concerned with what had happened to Yishmael. Yishmael was the elder but he was sent away because he strayed from Avraham's teaching. Eisav understood the concept of ma'asei avot siman labanim, the actions of the fathers are a sign to the children. Eisav understood that Ya'akov followed in the ways of his father, Yitzchak, yet he, Eisav, was more involved in the pleasures of life. Eisav firmly believed that he would soon be sent away just as Yishmael had been and he would lose any inheritance from his father. It would be better for him if his father died before he could be sent away and then he would kill Ya'akov and inherit everything.

Rashi believes that Eisav is still respectful of his father and proves this by his obedient actions after hearing that Yitzchak was disappointed with his two wives. He immediately took a wife from among the descendants of Avraham, namely, Yishmael's daughter. The question of the Aznayim L'Torah is why he did not divorce his first wives if they were causing his father such grief. The Malbim attributes sinister motives in marrying Machalat bat Yishmael. Eisav wanted to kill Ya'akov first which would cause his father pain. He interprets the first words of the pasuk as "soon will come the time when my father is in mourning, for I will kill Ya'akov." The Raibag views the translation similarly: "Even if it accelerates my father's death, I will kill my brother Ya'akov." The Or HaChayim, however, agrees with Rashi that Eisav did not wish to cause his father anguish. He indicates that Eisav would wait until after the burial and the days of mourning because the person who died would still know what was happening until he was fully buried and mourned for.

The Kli Yakar explains that Eisav's plan was even more elaborate than what we have seen. Eisav

understood that everything hinged on the mourning for his father. A person who is in mourning may not study Torah, as that would give him joy with his gathered knowledge of Hashem and His ways. Mourning must be devoted entirely to the remembrances of the one who has passed. Yitzchak had explained in his b'racha, "yet it will be that when you are aggrieved you may remove his yoke from upon your neck." Rashi explains this to mean that you will be able to fight back over your aggrievement only when Ya'akov abandons his study of Torah. Eisav took this to mean that he could attack Ya'akov immediately after this week of no Torah study.

Yitzchak was not really fooled by Eisav into believing that he was righteous, but he hoped that Eisav would be able to channel his energy in that direction and would change. Rabbi Herschel Welcher confirms that Yitzchak was not fooled, noting that in neither b'racha given to Eisav was there mention of the inheritance of the land that flowed through Avraham to Yitzchak and would be given to the proper son at the correct time. Rivka also understood Eisav's failings but she still loved her son. One of the difficult tasks of every parent is watching his child choose a different and sometimes dangerous path in life. He wonders how he has failed yet it is clear from the Avot that even in the best of families, children can still go off the derech. We are not able to control all of the input that affects our children's lives. We cannot determine our child's personality for him. We give the best we can, we show our love, and we do not diminish that love when we are disappointed with his choices. We do not have to demonstrate acceptance of those choices, but we must demonstrate acceptance of our children as our children. This perhaps was the ultimate test of both Ya'akov and Rivka, a test which we often find in our own lives. ©2018 Rabbi D. Levin

#### RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

### RavFrاند

**W**e read in this week's Parsha "And it was when Yitzchak became old his eyes dimmed and he summoned Esav his older sun..." [Bereshis 27:1] We know the rest of the story. As a result of his blindness, he was not able to discern whether he was talking to Yaakov or Eisav. Therefore, Yaakov was able to receive the blessing destined for his brother, Eisav.

The Medrash tells a story that Avraham requested an elderly appearance. Avraham said: "Master of the universe, a father and son will come into a town and people will not know who the father is and who is the son, in order to give proper respect to the elder of the two." Up until the time of Avraham, people did not show their age. No one had gray hair, no one had arthritis, and no one had to walk with a walker. It was not apparent



that people were aging. Avraham complained about the situation and demanded, as it were, that G-d institute a new phenomenon in the world-that of old age. Avraham argued that if an older person was crowned with the physical signs of old age, then people would give him the respect he deserves vis a vis his son.

The Almighty acquiesced to Avraham's request and told him that this phenomenon would begin with him. The first place where "ziknah" is mentioned in the Torah is the pasuk "And Avraham was old (zaken), coming of days" [Bereshis 24:1].

As we get up there in years and we see and feel the signs of old age, we might begin to wonder-was this such a great idea that Avraham came up with after all? Obviously, it was a good idea because the Almighty responded to Avraham "You have asked for something worthwhile." (Davar tov ta'va'ta). Why is it so important that old age be recognizable? Why would it not have been sufficient if the world had continued as it began-with no difference in appearance between one who was 17 and one who was 75?

Rav Simcha Zissel notes the following: The Torah is replete with the concept of "Ask you father and he will tell you; your elders and they will relate it to you" [Devorim 32:7]. It is taken for granted that a certain wisdom comes with old age. This is so axiomatic that the Gemara in Kidushin teaches in the name of Isi ben Yehduah that the principle "You shall get up before an old person" [Vayikra 19:32] applies to any old person. The great Amora, Rabbi Yochanan, used to get up when an elderly Gentile would pass him by. Why? The Gemara explains that even such a person has witnessed many events in his lifetime. A person with many decades of life experience has been through so much that inevitably he achieves a degree of wisdom. The Torah wants us to recognize that wisdom which accrues only through old age.

As a young man, when I have a question what to do, I am directed to consult with an elderly person. Now if everybody looks like they are 20 years old, how will I know who to ask? The Torah wants us to recognize elderly people easily. The Torah wants us to honor elderly people and in order to do so, it is necessary to recognize them first. This is so important for the welfare of society that G-d instituted the concept of old age, that had not existed at the beginning of Creation. "It is a good idea, Avraham. It is an INDESPENSIBLE idea!"

With all of our complaints about old age and all the troubles associated with it, it is worthwhile for society that the younger generation be able to recognize the elders. This is important so that they can give the elders the respect and courtesies they deserve by virtue of the fact that they have experienced so much. They can give the new generation insights that they would not otherwise possess. ©2011 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org