

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

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 Rebecca right in conceiving the plan in the first place and encouraging Jacob to carry it out? These are fundamental questions. What is at stake is not just biblical interpretation but the moral life itself. How we read a text shapes the kind of person we become.

Here is one way of interpreting the narrative. Rebecca was right to propose what she did and Jacob was right to do it. Rebecca knew that it would be Jacob, not Esau, who would continue the covenant and carry the mission of Abraham into the future. She knew this on two separate grounds. First, she had heard it from God Himself, in the oracle she received before the twins were born: 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger.' (Gen. 25:23)

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

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

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

marriage partner that was essential to being Abraham's heir.

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

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

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

However it is not the only way.¹ Consider, for example, the scene that transpired immediately after Jacob left his father. Esau returned from hunting and brought Isaac the food he had requested. We then read this: Isaac trembled violently and said, 'Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed!'

When Esau heard his father's words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father,

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

Happy birthday Uncle Scott!

Love,
Eitan and Nomi

'Bless me – me too, my father!'

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

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

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

Then consider the consequences. Jacob had to stay away from home for more than twenty years, fearing 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 Rebecca's oracle, Ve-rav ya'avod tsair (Gen. 25:23), is in fact ambiguous. It may mean, "The elder

will serve the younger," but it may also mean, "The younger will serve the elder." It was what the Torah calls a chiddah (Numbers 12:8), that is, an opaque, deliberately ambiguous communication. It suggested an ongoing conflict between the two sons and their descendants, but not who would win.

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

The covenantal blessings that God had given Abraham and Isaac were completely different. They were about children and a land. It is this blessing that Isaac later gave Jacob before he left home (Gen. 28:3-4): "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples" – that is, children. "May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham" – that is, land. This was the blessing Isaac had intended for Jacob all along. There was no need for deceit and disguise.

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

Jacob gave the blessing back. Indeed he said so explicitly. He said to Esau: "Please accept the blessing [birkati] that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." (Gen. 33:11) On this reading of the story, Rebecca and Jacob made a mistake, a forgivable one, an understandable one, but a mistake nonetheless. The blessing Isaac was about to give Esau was not the blessing of Abraham. He intended to give Esau a blessing appropriate to him. In so doing, he was acting on the basis of precedent. God had blessed Ishmael, with the words "I will make him into a great nation." (Gen. 21:18) This was the fulfilment of a promise God had given Abraham many years before when He told him that it

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

would be Isaac, not Ishmael, who would continue the covenant:

Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under Your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation." (Gen. 17:18-21)

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

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

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

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

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

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

content with your own.³ *Covenant and Conversation 5775 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l © 5775 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd Isaac loved Esau, because the game was in his mouth; but Rebekah loved Jacob" (Gen. 25:28). Of all the myriads of questions which rise up from this week's portion of familial intrigue, sibling rivalry, filial deception and maternal manipulation, perhaps the one that gives rise to all the others is why the Patriarch Isaac prefers the more aggressive, extroverted hunter Esau over the wholehearted, introspective and studious Jacob.

I believe it is superficial, even a bit crass, to suggest that it was because Esau provided his father with his favorite dish of food, venison; after all, what is at stake at this moment is who was to continue the Abrahamic legacy, who would be the standard bearer of "the blessing to all the nations of the earth," commanding his progeny and his future household to guard the pathway of the Lord by living a life dedicated to compassionate righteousness and moral justice (Gen. 18:18-19).

Who was the more likely candidate for that task: the burly and materialistic Esau or the gentler and more bookish "tent dweller" Jacob? So why does Isaac favor Esau? In order to properly respond to this query, we must take another look at Abraham's legacy. Yes, he was so inspired, "inspired" if you will, with the Divine pathway of compassionate righteousness and moral justice that with missionary zeal he would erect altars wherever he went, not in order to offer sacrifices, but rather to call humankind to the service of God (see Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 1-3 and Book of Commandments, Positive Commandment 3). To this end, he functioned like a Chabad emissary, opening his tent to dislocated wanderers, hosting them and teaching them about ethical monotheism; and because of his passion, he even castigates God Himself for punishing all the inhabitants of wicked Sodom and Gomorrah: "Will God then destroy the righteous together with the wicked...? Far be it from You, the moral judge of all the world, not to act with moral justice" (Gen. 18:23, 25).

But there is also another side to the leadership of Abraham, another aspect to the legacy which must be perpetuated by Abraham's heirs. One cannot enthrone compassionate righteousness without denuding cruel corruption; the good can never hope to triumph if the evil is quietly countenanced.

And so the Bible records – within the context of

³ This later became the tenth of the Ten Commandments.

Lot leaving the more ethical and spiritual Abraham for the greener pastures of materialistic Sodom – how four marauding kings attacked the other five kings within the Fertile Crescent (Gen. 14). Chedorlaomer, the king of Elam (Persia) – apparently the most powerful of the four aggressors – subjugated the conquered five for twelve years.

For the next thirteen years, the enslaved kingdoms rebelled; in the fourteenth year, Chedorlaomer struck back with a vengeance and the five kings fled, three to nearby mountains with the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, falling into bitumen pits. The four aggressor kings went into Sodom and seized all their assets and took their people captive including Lot, Abraham's nephew—a weak act of terrorism, abusing the weak and unprotected.

Abraham sprang to action against the four terrorist kings—together with 318 men from his household (apparently his converts). He won a resounding victory, returned all the captives and refused to take any of the booty. Melchizedek the king of Shalem (Jerusalem) greeted Abraham with bread and wine, “blessing Abraham to God Supreme, Possessor of heaven and earth, and blessing God Supreme who delivered Abraham's enemies into his hands” (Gen. 14:19-20). Abraham emerged a great international military hero—who fought together with God against the enslaving terrorist kings to free the captives. After this second legacy, the battle against terrorism, comes chapter 15 containing Abraham's Covenant with God.

Now let us return to patriarch Isaac. Abraham's legacy was that of the spirit as well as the sword. Could Isaac ever measure up? Could anyone ever measure up? One more piece remains before we can answer our initial question; we must read between the lines of the Bible. Our portion of Toldot deals with familial strife in the struggle to appoint the right successor to Isaac. Chapter 25 concludes with Esau spurning the legacy of the first-born; chapter 27 opens with an aged and blind Isaac, who requests venison from his beloved Esau before he gives him the blessing of the firstborn. Chapter 26 seems to be completely misplaced, totally interrupting the storyline and harking back to an earlier incident between Isaac and Abimelech, the Philistine king of Gerar. Now Abraham had also encountered Abimelech, made a treaty with him, received permission for him and his progeny to dwell in Gerar and dig wells in Gerar. All of this seemed forgotten when Isaac now meets Abimelech.

Abimelech stopped up Abraham's wells, and as soon as Isaac prospered, Abimelech tells him, “Go away from us, because you have become more powerful than us”—or “your power has come from what you have taken from us” (Gen. 26:16).

Isaac leaves quietly. Abimelech again confronts Isaac, desirous of making another treaty; he now claims

that, after all, he had only done well to Isaac; he did not harm him and he allowed him to leave (sent him away) intact, be'shalom. And Isaac concludes another treaty. The chapter ends with Esau marrying two Hittite wives, and the next chapter begins with Isaac's request of Esau to bring him venison so that he may give him the blessings.

I believe the Bible is explaining to us in this chapter 26 why Isaac prefers Esau over Jacob. The legacy of Abraham demands military prowess alongside ethical integrity; if “Abrahamism” is to succeed, we must teach ethical monotheism and defend it militarily.

Since the latter ability was lacking in Isaac, he is drawn to the more aggressive Esau. He understands that Jewish survival—and ultimate triumph—requires power alongside piety. ©2021 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's Torah reading begins with the recounting of the generations of Abraham and Isaac. It is titled "Toldot," which literally means the children, as it relates to genealogy, and generations. The Torah reading of a few weeks ago also recounted for us the genealogy and generations of Noah and his sons. But that portion of the Torah was titled "Noach" and not "Toldot."

The opening verse in both instances is practically identical, but the names of the Parshiyot are different. Is there any reason why the previous Torah reading should be called based on the name of person involved, and our Torah reading this week should be called based on the generations and genealogy being described? The Torah reading of this week should have been titled Yitzchak, like the Torah reading of Noach.

Although this is hardly the most pertinent observation regarding this week's Torah reading, it has bothered me for several years, and I have found relatively few explanations from the great commentators, who usually have many observations in answer to obvious questions such as this in our eternal Torah. I gave the matter some concentrated thought this past week, and as is usual when one concentrates upon a Torah subject, a glimmer of understanding concerning this matter came to me. It is this idea that I wish to share with you in this week's article regarding the weekly Torah reading.

There is an inherent difference between the generations and genealogy of Noach and that of Yitzchak. Both are survivors of great events of danger and trauma. It would be impossible to survive seeing the entire world destroyed, as in the case of Noach, or being sacrificed willingly by one's own father, as was the case with Yitzchak, without these events having a lasting impact upon the survivors who witnessed and

experienced them. But it is the reaction itself that differentiates between these two righteous people.

Noach, as a survivor, attempts to wipe out the memory of what happened from his conscious mind and behavior. That is why he plants a vineyard, produces wine (to possibly,) becomes drunk, and is shamed and violated by his own progeny. It is understandable that he would want to forget what happened and what he witnessed, and not burden future generations with the memories of the trauma that remains buried within his subconscious. The key to further survival is to forget the past and not transmit it to the later generation. Therefore, the Torah reading involving his life is called only by his name, since there is no intention to transmit to future generations what transpired and why it occurred. In addition, since Noah's shame came specifically through his children and grandchildren, his "toldot," it would have been improper to call the Parsha by their name, calling attention to Noah's trauma.

However, in the case of Yitzchak, far from attempting to forget his being bound on the altar by his father, he desires to transmit that memory and trauma to his descendants, the Jewish people, until this very day. We revere the experience of our father Yitzchak, and his willingness to sacrifice himself for the sake of the God of Israel. This experience has become a hereditary hallmark of Jewish life, and we remember it as a symbol of continuity of generations, and not just as the experience of one individual, no matter how great that individual may have been. ©2021 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Voice Identification

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The voices of Yaakov and Esav were different and distinct, yet Yitzchak was unable to discern the difference between the two. According to Ramban (Nachmanides), Yaakov intentionally disguised his voice so that he would sound like his brother. Based on this, some halachic authorities (*poskim*) conclude that one may not testify to a person's identity based solely upon voice. Thus if someone overheard someone else giving instructions to write a bill of divorce (*get*) for his wife, and he identified the husband based on his voice, we do not rely upon this testimony. The Torah specifically defines a witness as one who saw or knew about something that happened (*Vayikra* 5:1). This means that we can rely only on what someone has seen. It may also explain why we cannot accept testimony from someone blind.

In contrast, Rambam (Maimonides) does not seem to agree with this exegesis. He maintains that the

reason a blind person's testimony is not accepted is because the verse requires a witness to be able to see. However, someone sighted may identify someone else by voice. Thus we may carry out the death penalty for someone who curses G-d (*mekallel*) or someone who persuades people to worship idols (*meisif*), based on the testimony of someone who heard them. Additionally, a husband is permitted to be intimate with his wife based on his recognizing her voice, even if the room they are in is dark (or the husband is blind) and he cannot see her.

Nevertheless, some rule that one should not rely upon voice identification if there are reasons to doubt the identification. A story is told of a married man who returned to his town after many years of absence. He was identified based on his voice, though his appearance had changed drastically. He then died. Some rabbinic authorities ruled that his wife should not be allowed to remarry, because of the possibility that he had been misidentified based on his voice, leaving open the possibility that her husband was still alive. Others permitted her remarriage because they felt that the change in appearance could be reasonably attributed to aging, so the identification of the husband based on his voice could be relied upon.

If voices are unique to individuals and can be used to identify them, how was Yaakov able to change his voice so that he sounded like his brother Esav?

The *Marcheshet* suggests that Yaakov was able to do this successfully only because he and Esav were brothers. It would seem, then, that if we wish to permit a woman to remarry based on testimony about her husband's voice, we would need to verify that the voice heard could not have been the voice of her brother-in-law. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Rebecca and Isaac were blessed with twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Isaac had a special love for Esau, while Rebecca had a special love for Jacob (Genesis 25:28). One wonders how Isaac could have been so naive as to prefer his eldest son Esau over the younger Jacob. After all, Esau was a hunter, while Jacob was a student of Torah (*Bereishit Rabbah* 63:10).

It has been noted that, on some level, Isaac seems to be attracted to his opposite. As a more passive personality, he is drawn to Esau, his more aggressive son. Some even suggest that parents especially struggle with children who are most similar to them, explaining why Isaac may have originally stepped back from Jacob.

But here we focus on a different approach. Perhaps it can be suggested that Isaac knew that Esau was physically strong. Having experienced the Akeidah

(the Binding of Isaac), that moment when a knife was literally on his neck, Isaac favored physical strength. He sensed that, throughout Jewish history, his descendants would often be in danger – bound with a knife to our necks, facing death, as Elie Wiesel explores in his book *Messengers of God*. Bodily fortitude would be necessary to overcome those struggles. What the Jewish People needed, Isaac thought, was bipartite leadership. Esau would be the physical heir. He would defend the Jewish People against all attacks. Jacob, on the other hand, would be the spiritual heir who would teach Torah and soulful principles to his people.

Rebecca did not share this view. She insisted that there could only be one heir. The body and the soul should not be separated but integrated. The soul needs the body to exist in this world, and the body needs the soul to give meaning and direction to its existence. She therefore insisted that Jacob, the Jew of the spirit, the student of Torah, could learn to be physically strong (Malbim, Genesis 27:5).

Thus, Rabbi Ahron Soloveitchik teaches, Rebecca pushes Jacob to develop courageous traits by insisting that he challenge Esau by taking the blessing from him and putting his life on the line. We know that Jacob eventually learns this lesson, for later in his life he successfully wrestles with a mysterious man and is given an additional name, Israel, meaning one who is able to fight and be strong (Genesis 32:25–29).

Isaac may have first sensed that Rebecca was correct when Jacob stood before him wearing Esau's clothes. There, Isaac declares, "Hakol kol Yaakov, v'hayadayim yedei Esav" (The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau; 27:22). The phrase poetically synthesizes the inner kol (voice) associated with soul, and the yadayim (hands), associated with physical ability.

Indeed, when Esau arrives for the blessing and Isaac realizes the courage Jacob needed to deceive him, Isaac declares, "Gam baruch yihyeh" (And he shall be blessed; 27:33). Jacob had proven to his father that he could fuse soulful striving with physical strength.

The bifurcation of body and soul has been debated and discussed for many centuries across religions and cultures. This debate certainly exists in the modern State of Israel. Many yeshivot refuse to allow their students to join the army, insisting that they protect Israel spiritually through their learning and that physical protection should be handled by others.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, however, thought differently. He was the spiritual father of yeshivot hesder, whose students enlist in the army and fight, gun in one hand, Talmud in the other. Aligned with Rebecca's thinking, they become children of both Jacob, the student of Torah, and Israel, the strong fighter, integrating body and soul in the service of God.

And so it is, on some level, with all Israeli

soldiers. As they are formally inducted into the army – as I've been blessed to see with my grandchildren – they receive a Tanach and an M16, symbolizing the IDF motto of tohar haneshek (purity of arms), integrating physical strength with moral values: the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau. ©2021 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 DAVID LEVIN

Yitzchak & Rivka's Choice

The conflict between Rivka and Yitzchak concerning their sons, Ya'akov and Eisav, can be misunderstood as an indication of a dysfunctional family. Immediately after the birth of the twins, one could see their differences in character. "The lads grew up and Eisav became a man who knows trapping, a man of the field, but Ya'akov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents. And Yitzchak loved Eisav for trapping was in his mouth, but Rivka loved Ya'akov." This character difference was also mentioned when Rivka was still pregnant. "And Hashem said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb; and two regimes from your insides will be separated; and one regime shall become strong from the other regime, and the elder shall serve the younger.'" Later this conflict became even more pronounced when Rivka insisted that Ya'akov appear to be Eisav and steal the blessing that Yitzchak had intended for Eisav. Still, this was not a case of a dysfunctional family. This was a machloket l'sheim Shamayim, a fundamental disagreement for Heavens' sake in search of truth.

The Rabbis differ in determining the meaning of the words "and the children agitated within her", the problem which caused her to seek an explanation from Hashem. Even the explanation given by Hashem to her in a dream or by prophecy lacked complete clarity. The Talmud points out that the word "goyim" is written "geiim", meaning that there were not just two nations but two rulers inside of her, and the fighting may not have been, as Rashi suggested, the desire of one for the house of idols and the other for the study halls. The implication of geiim is that the fight was over who would rule which space within the womb and who would be the master of whom. This interpretation plays out in the Gemarah's statement that we never Eisa vrules, Yaakov is subservient, and vice versa. This is not only a battle between good and evil, but also a battle over leadership of the world.

It is only because we are aware of the entire story of Eisav and Ya'akov, that we question why Yitzchak loved such an evil person as Eisav. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that this is the reason why the Torah gives an explanation for Yitzchak's love but no explanation for Rivka's love. "For trapping (the hunt)

was in his mouth” can be understood as Yitzchak’s mouth (Eisav brought him food from his hunt) or Eisav’s mouth (Eisav’s words were filled with deceit). HaRav Sorotzkin explains that there are rabbinic opinions that Eisav did not show signs of his evil behavior until the selling of the birthright. Only by Midrash are we informed of Eisav’s other shortcomings, including his major sins on the day that he sold his birthright. The Torah itself is silent on these matters. The Torah only lists two of Eisav’s sins, the selling of the birthright and the desire to kill his brother when his father’s blessing was stolen from him. Without the Midrash, we cannot look upon Eisav at this early time of his life as the great sinner that we know him to become.

Yitzchak was not entirely fooled by Eisav. He understood that Eisav was not like Ya’akov; he could not sit in the Yeshiva of Shem and Eiver to learn Torah all day. He had to be in the field, experiencing the danger and the cunning of the hunt. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that Eisav even modified his behavior, perhaps not out of deceit but out of a genuine desire to be accepted by Yitzchak. He saw that Yishmael was Avraham’s firstborn, yet when he did not follow the ways of his father, he was sent away, and Avraham gave all of his inheritance to Yitzchak. Eisav knew that he did not fully follow in Yitzchak’s path, and he was worried that the same fate of Yishmael would now repeat itself in his life. The Ramban negatively points out that Eisav was a hunter, constantly involved in deceit. HaRav Sorotzkin disagrees: Eisav was so concerned that he would end up like Yishmael, that he modified his behavior towards Yitzchak, bringing him delicacies from his hunting and asking halachic questions. His actions were not to deceive, but were for the purpose of solidifying his relationship with his father.

One could find sources that explain Yitzchak’s love of Eisav as naivete. Yitzchak is described as an olah temima, a pure offering who could be fooled, one who never saw trickery or deceit in his father’s house. One can also find sources that say that Yitzchak understood Eisav perfectly and saw both the good and the bad in his son. Yitzchak hoped that if channeled correctly, even Eisav’s bad qualities could become positive and useful for his family’s survival. Certainly, Eisav’s ability to survive and his cleverness are qualities which would become crucial for the Jewish people in later generations. Yitzchak held out hope that Eisav would mature and be a true leader for his people within the framework of the Torah. Rivka, however, grew up in a household of deceit. She was introduced in the parasha with an emphasis on her family, repeating the word Arami, an Aramite, to describe each member of her family. The Ohr HaChaim explains that the word Ha’arami, the Aramite, can be read Haramai, the trickster. Rivka, the sister of Lavan Ha’arami, had more experience with Eisav’s character and was not

influenced by his apparent moderation of behavior. She placed her hopes on Ya’akov.

There is one more fundamental reason for the difference in approach of Yitzchak and Rivka. If we reexamine the conflict within Rivka when she was pregnant, the Torah tells us that the agitation inside her womb was so great that she sought an explanation from Hashem. The Midrash tells us that one child agitated when she passed a place of idol worship while the other child agitated when she passed a place of Torah study. She was afraid that her “one child” would be drawn to idols and Torah, a conflict which could not coexist successfully. When Hashem told her that there were twins inside her, and that the elder would serve the younger, she understood that to be a prophecy of their future: the younger son would become the leader and the one to identify with Hashem and His Torah. Yitzchak understood Hashem’s response differently. Yitzchak did not see Hashem’s words as prophecy. In the womb, each child struggled to be the firstborn, the “ruler” of the next generation. This was the agitation that Rivka experienced. After Hashem’s words, the children no longer struggled to be the elder since he would serve the younger. Yitzchak viewed Hashem’s words, not as prophecy, but as a way to alleviate her pain.

There is no question that Yitzchak and Rivka loved both of their children. The Torah’s statement is only to emphasize that each placed faith in the child whom he believed to offer the best future for the Jewish people. Their only argument was whether this was prophesied or not. Each “loved” a different son, and each believed that his choice would provide the qualities most needed by future generations of the Jewish People. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And the boys pounded inside her and she said, “If so, why is it that I am? And she went to inquire of G-d.” (Genesis 25:22) The tumultuous wrestling of Yaakov and Esav even before their birth was greatly distressing to Rivka. Rashi explains that she went to the Bais Midrash of Sheim to inquire what would happen to her in the end. It sounds like she was looking for a prophecy for the future, to tell her whether she and her child would be alright. Ramban questions this explanation, as we don’t generally find the term “drisha, seeking” of Hashem to be anything other than prayer.

The Midrash tells us when Rivka walked past a Beis Midrash, Yaakov would struggle to exit her womb but Esav restrained him. When she passed a temple of idolatry, Esav pushed to leave, and Yaakov restrained him. This was the source of her great pain. However, it was not the physical pain she was concerned with, but the spiritual pain of knowing her son would be

constantly flipping between serving Hashem and not.

This is because she thought there was only one child, pushing towards holiness and also towards impurity. So she went to Sheim for guidance. Just what guidance she was looking for is clarified by a striking Klei Yakar. He says that when she felt her unborn child surging to serve Hashem AND idolatry, she was afraid that Chas V'Shalom this meant there were two authorities in Heaven, two powers – Hashem and also something else.

What could she do about this? She could go to the Beis Midrash to learn about Hashem and cement in her mind that there is no other power but Him. She realized that she had to actively seek out Hashem in the world, much as Avraham had done, if her child was to stand any chance in life. Her strength and convictions would transfer to her child and protect him.

Now back to Rashi's comment. Tzaddikim are able to withstand pain and hardship because they know there is a greater good coming to fruition through them. When Rashi says she went that he might tell her "what would happen to her at the end," he may have meant Rivka was seeking perspective on the purpose and benefit of what she was going through.

By learning more about Hashem as the Klei Yakar suggests, she would be in a better position to see the Divine reasons for what was happening and thereby better withstand the travails of her pregnancy. She wished to be saved not from a negative situation, but from the negativity that such a situation might arouse in a person.

On April 15, 1912, the RMS Titanic sank. Supposed to be "unsinkable," there weren't enough life boats and over 1500 people died in the frigid waters. A man who heard the news of the tragedy prayed to G-d asking how He could let such a thing happen.

"Al-mighty G-d," the man prayed. "You are all-powerful. You control the sea and the dry land, the heavens and the earth. Why did you let this tragedy occur? How is it that you did not stop the Titanic from sinking, and allowed all those people to perish?"

"Are you kidding?!" G-d retorted. "Do you have any idea what I had to do to get all those people on one boat?!" © 2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

In this week's parsha, the Torah introduces us to Yaakov Avinu and describes him as, "a wholesome man residing in tents" (Bereishis 25:27). While Rashi explains that the tents referred to here are the tents of Sheim and Eiver, Rav Wolbe (Shiurei Chumash, Daas Shlomo) cites the mekubalim who explain that the Torah is referring to the tents of Avraham and Yitzchak. Avraham personified the attribute of chessed and Yitzchak personified the attribute of yir'ah/din (fear of Hashem/strict judgment).

In essence, these are two contradictory middos, since chessed implies overflowing kindness even to the undeserving, while din implies sticking to the letter of the law, and possibly even punishing those undeserving of kindness. Yaakov is referred to as the chosen of our three Avos because he took the attribute found in the tent of Avraham and the attribute found in the tent of Yitzchak and blended them together thereby creating within himself the middah of emes.

When Yaakov, disguised as Eisav, entered Yitzchak's tent in order to receive his blessings, Yitzchak declared, "The fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed". Rashi explains that the fragrance of a field refers to the delicious smell of an apple orchard. How did the smell of apples personify Yaakov? Rav Wolbe explains that an apple is red on the outside and white on the inside. Red symbolizes din while white represents chessed. An apple combines both chessed and din into a single entity, thus it parallels Yaakov who combined both these middos into a single middah of emes.

The mixture of both chessed and yir'ah is imperative in a person's daily avodas Hashem. The Mesillas Yesharim writes that all aspects of this world are in reality various different trials to determine a person's level of Torah adherence: "Poverty poses a test and affluence poses a test, as Shlomo Hamelech stated, 'Lest I become satiated and declare 'Who is Hashem?' and lest I become impoverished and steal'...

Thus whichever way one turns he is faced with a test. If he is a warrior and victorious on all fronts, he has achieved his goal and reached perfection."

Accordingly, perfection is a result of prevailing over the many challenges that come a person's way. How does one accomplish such a feat? He achieves this goal by employing both the middah of chessed and the middah of yir'ah. Chessed -- kindness -- affects all of one's interpersonal relationships. A kind person will not steal from others -- the test which faces the impoverished. On the other hand, yir'ah is the key to mitzvos bein adam laMakom since one who fears Hashem will do everything possible not to rebel against Him -- the test which faces the affluent.

Unbridled chessed can be dangerous. Helping another person at the expense of one's bein adam laMakom, such as offering to shop for someone in a store which compromises one's religious standards, is not a true chessed. Conversely, yir'ah which prompts someone to double park in order to get to mincha, on time thereby causing another person aggravation, is not true yir'ah. The middah of Yaakov is truth because a combination of chessed and yir'ah is the truest manifestation of both of these middos. We all have the ingredients needed, we just have to create the perfect blend. ©2015 Rav S. Wolbe & The AishDas Society

