

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Rachel, hitherto infertile, became pregnant. Suffering acute pain, "she went to inquire of the Lord" [vatelekh lidrosh et Hashem] (Bereishit 25:22). The explanation she received was that she was carrying twins who were contending in her womb. They were destined to do so long into the future: "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 [ve-rav ya'avod tsa'ir]." (Bereishit 25:23)

Eventually the twins are born—first Esau, then (his hand grasping his brother's heel) Jacob. Mindful of the prophecy she has received, Rebecca favours the younger son, Jacob. Years later, she persuades him to dress in Esau's clothes and take the blessing Isaac intended to give his elder son. One verse of that blessing was "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." (Bereishit 26:29) The prediction has been fulfilled. Isaac's blessing can surely mean nothing less than what was disclosed to Rebecca before either child was born, namely that "the older will serve the younger." The story has apparently reached closure, or so, at this stage, it seems.

But biblical narrative is not what it seems. Two events follow which subvert all that we had been led to expect. The first happens when Esau arrives and discovers that Jacob has cheated him out of his blessing. Moved by his anguish, Isaac gives him a benediction, one of whose clauses is: "You will live by your sword / And you will serve your brother. / But when you grow restless, / You will throw his yoke from off your neck." (Bereishit 27:40)

This is not what we had anticipated. The older will not serve the younger in perpetuity.

The second scene, many years later, occurs when the brothers meet after a long estrangement. Jacob is terrified of the encounter. He had fled from home years earlier because Esau had vowed to kill him. Only after a long series of preparations and a lonely wrestling match at night is he able to face Esau with some composure. He bows down to him seven times. Seven times he calls him "my lord." Five times he refers to himself as "your servant." The roles have been reversed. Esau does not become the servant of Jacob.

Instead, Jacob speaks of himself as the servant of Esau. But this cannot be. The words heard by Rebecca when "she went to inquire of the Lord" suggested precisely the opposite, that "the older will serve the younger." We are faced with cognitive dissonance.

More precisely, we have here an example of one of the most remarkable of all the Torah's narrative devices—the power of the future to transform our understanding of the past. This is the essence of Midrash. New situations retrospectively disclose new meanings in the text (see the essay 'The Midrashic Imagination' by Michael Fishbane). The present is never fully determined by the present. Sometimes it is only later that we understand now.

This is the significance of the great revelation of God to Moses in Shemot 33:33, where God says that only His back may be seen—meaning, His presence can be seen only when we look back at the past; it can never be known or predicted in advance. The indeterminacy of meaning at any given moment is what gives the biblical text its openness to ongoing interpretation.

We now see that this was not an idea invented by the sages. It already exists in the Torah itself. The words Rebecca heard—as will now become clear—seemed to mean one thing at the time. It later transpires that they meant something else.

The words *ve-rav ya'avod tsair* seem simple: "the older will serve the younger." Returning to them in the light of subsequent events, though, we discover that they are anything but clear. They contain multiple ambiguities.

The first (noted by Radak and R. Yosef ibn Kaspi) is that the word *et*, signalling the object of the verb, is missing. Normally in biblical Hebrew the subject precedes, and the object follows, the verb, but not always. In Job 14:19 for example, the words *avanim shachaku mayim* mean "water wears away stones," not "stones wear away water." Thus the phrase might mean "the older shall serve the younger" but it might also mean "the younger shall serve the older." To be sure, the latter would be poetic Hebrew rather than conventional prose style, but that is what this utterance is: a poem.

The second is that *rav* and *tsa'ir* are not opposites, a fact disguised by the English translation of *rav* as "older." The opposite of *tsa'ir* ("younger") is *bechir* ("older" or "firstborn"). *Rav* does not mean "older." It means "great" or possibly "chief." This linking together of two terms as if they were polar opposites, which they are

not-the opposites would have been bechir/tsa'ir or rav/me'at-further destabilises the meaning. Who was the rav? The elder? The leader? The chief? The more numerous? The word might mean any of these things.

The third-not part of the text but of later tradition-is the musical notation. The normal way of notating these three words would be mercha-tipcha-sof pasuk. This would support the reading, "the older shall serve the younger." In fact, however, they are notated tipcha-mercha-sof pasuk-suggesting, "the older, shall the younger serve"; in other words, "the younger shall serve the older."

A later episode adds a yet another retrospective element of doubt. There is a second instance in Bereishit of the birth of twins, to Tamar (Bereishit 38:27-30). The passage is clearly reminiscent of the story of Esau and Jacob: "When her time was come, there were twins in her womb, and while she was in labour one of them put out a hand. The midwife took a scarlet thread and fastened it round the wrist, saying, 'This one appeared first.' No sooner had he drawn back his hand, than his brother came out, and the midwife said, 'What! You have broken out first!' So he was named Perez. Soon afterwards his brother was born with the scarlet thread on his wrist, and he was named Zerah."

Who then was the elder? And what does this imply in the case of Esau and Jacob? (See Rashi to 25:26 who suggests that Jacob was in fact the elder.) These multiple ambiguities are not accidental but integral to the text. The subtlety is such, that we do not notice them at first. Only later, when the narrative does not turn out as expected, are we forced to go back and notice what at first we missed: that the words Rebecca heard may mean "the older will serve the younger" or "the younger will serve the older."

A number of things now become clear. The first is that this is a rare example in the Torah of an oracle as opposed to a prophecy (this is the probable meaning of the word chidot in Bamidbar 12:8, speaking about Moses: "With him I speak mouth to mouth, openly and not in chidot"-usually translated as "dark speeches" or "riddles"). Oracles-a familiar form of supernatural communication in the ancient world-were normally obscure and cryptic, unlike the normal form of Israelite prophecy. This may well be the technical meaning of the phrase "she went to inquire of the Lord" which puzzled the medieval commentators.

The second-and this is fundamental to an understanding of Bereishit-is that the future is never as straightforward as we are led to believe. Abraham is promised many children but has to wait years before Isaac is born. The patriarchs are promised a land but do not acquire it in their lifetimes. The Jewish journey, though it has a destination, is long and has many digressions and setbacks. Will Jacob serve or be served? We do not know. Only after a long, enigmatic struggle alone at night does Jacob receive the name

Israel meaning, "he who struggles with God and with men and prevails."

The most important message of this text is both literary and theological. The future affects our understanding of the past. We are part of a story whose last chapter has not yet been written. That rests with us, as it rested with Jacob. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison, and Rebecca loved Jacob." (Genesis 25:28) The tragedy which haunts Jacob until the end of his life, the transgression which informs the rest of the book of Genesis – indeed, all of subsequent Jewish history until this very day – is Jacob's deception of his father in order to wrest the blessings meant for Esau. In 'measure for measure' fashion, Laban gives Jacob the unloved daughter under the marriage canopy because 'it is not done in our place to give the younger before the elder' – setting the stage for the bitter rivalry of the wives which led to Reuven's heinous crime against his father. Jacob is further deceived by his sons when they present him with Joseph's blood-soaked coat of many colors, leading Jacob to mistakenly conclude, 'he has been torn apart by a wild beast' – which further sets the stage for the subsequent deception of Joseph's brothers by the Grand Vizier of Pharaoh after the sale of Joseph into Egypt. Moreover, the enmity between Jacob's children and Esau's children (Israel vs. Rome) as well as the internal strife and sibling hatred among the children of Israel themselves reverberates throughout Jewish history and plagues us even now.

What would impel the 'wholehearted' Jacob, the studious dweller of tents, to fall prey to an act of deception and pose as his brother in disguise for the sake of the blessings – even if it was his mother who made the suggestion! And what makes the ruse even stranger to comprehend is the fact that it was bound to be uncovered. After all, Esau would appear sooner or later with the venison in hand, and the wrath of father Isaac was certain to fall upon the head of impostor Jacob. So why does he do it?

I believe a fascinating answer may be found within the complexity of the parent-child, father-son relationship, which is so profoundly depicted between the lines and embedded within the parchment folds of the amazing book of Genesis. From the very first verses in our portion of Toldot, the stage is set for the sibling rivalry between the twin brothers Jacob and Esau. It is important to take careful note of how the Bible testifies that Isaac loved Esau because of tzayid b'fiv, which literally means 'because the hunt (or entrapment) was in his mouth,' and Rebecca loved Jacob (Gen. 25:28).

Every child yearns for – and deserves – unconditional love from his/her parents. After all, the child did not ask to be born into the world; the most potent armor he/she can receive as protection against the irrational forces expelled by both environment and society is the protective love – no matter what – of concerned, committed parents. To paraphrase Robert Frost, a home is the place where, when everyone else closes the door on you, they will always welcome you in with a warm embrace. And within the patriarchal society which was Jacob's world, Jacob especially yearned for the warm embrace of his father.

Tragically, he didn't receive it. Rebecca loved Jacob, period; apparently this meant unconditionally. But that was not enough. Jacob felt unloved, rejected, by his father – who did love his brother Esau. Jacob desperately yearned for this love – and there was even a way for him to acquire it. After all, Isaac did not love Esau unconditionally; he loved him because the hunt (entrapment) was in his mouth. Esau fed his father the venison meat he so dearly loved ('Esau's venison meat was in Isaac's mouth'), and the mellifluous speech of the lawyer-politician-trickster was Esau's gift-of-gab ('Esau's entrapment via words was the gift of speech in Esau's mouth'). If only....

Permit me a story to help elucidate the unfulfilled need which caused an emptiness in Jacob's heart, the aching angst with which only the child who feels himself unloved and rejected by the favored parent can ever identify.

My wife and I have a respected and beloved friend, a survivor of the Holocaust, a beautiful and intelligent woman blessed with a strong sterling character, a stunningly frank but generous disposition, and a rare ability to express herself in prose and poetry. During one of our many conversations in which she would reminisce about her childhood, she revealed that one of the happiest recollections of her life was the day in which she was forcibly removed from her family and taken by the Nazis to an extermination camp. Responding to our shocked expressions, she described a family situation in which her older sister was the favored, frum (religious) daughter and she was the rejected, rebellious one. If there was one pat of butter and one pat of margarine, her sister would get the butter and she would get the margarine. "After all," her mother would explain, "Miriam is exhausted from davening with such concentration; you skipped a few corners with the prayer-book in your hand, so you can do with less."

What was even more difficult for her to bear was her mother's complaint whenever she was angered by her younger daughter's conduct: "You probably aren't my own biological daughter! Your sister was born at home, whereas you were born in a clinic. The doctors probably exchanged my real daughter with you..." Obviously, this was not a usual refrain spoken by the mother, but was only engendered by our friend's

occasional rebellion. But as the Yiddish proverb goes "A slap departs, a word still smarts" (A patsch dergeht, A vort bashteht).

In 1942 the Nazis came to her hometown of Bendine, and rounded up the children. Only she and her parents were at home. Her father tried to steady his trembling hands by writing a kvittel (petition) to the Gerer Rebbe; her mother threw herself at the feet of the Nazi beasts, begging them to take her and spare the life of her precious child. Our friend said she felt absolutely no fear, even when they loaded her onto the cattle car; she could feel only joy, joy in the knowledge that her mother truly loved her after all, joy in the confirmation that she was indeed her parent's own and beloved daughter, joy in the discovery that she was at last accepted and not rejected.

I would argue that Jacob desperately wanted to feel his father's love, even if but for a brief period. If he supplied the venison meat, if he truly expressed the words "I am Esau your first-born," then perhaps Isaac would love him just as he loved Esau of the venison, just as he loved Esau of the mellifluous verbal entrapment. Indeed, Jacob yearns to be Esau – because then he could hope to gain paternal acceptance and affection. And so begins Jacob's odyssey, first searching for an Esau identity in Laban's house and business for twenty-two years and then finally succeeding in exorcizing Esau at the River Yabbok in order to become reconciled with his own true self. But Jacob's journey will only be completed, and the Lord will only become his God, when he eventually returns in peace to – and is at peace with – his father's house – and as Jacob-Israel, but not as Jacob-Esau. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBereshit. © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

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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 (*meisit*), 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 BEREL WEIN ZT"l

Wein Online

The frightening thing about the struggle between Eisav and Yaakov is its apparently doomed inevitability. While yet in the womb of their mother Rivkah, they already find themselves opposed to one another. They are not only two different personalities, physically, emotionally and intellectually, but they represent two diametrically opposed worldviews. The only question that remains is one of accommodating one another. If the Lord created them so differently, their freedom of choice in life is centered on how they will deal with one another. And in that respect, the question of accommodation – of the relationship between the Jewish people and the broader, more numerous and powerful non-Jewish world - remains alive and relevant until our very day.

Eisav varies and wavers in his attitude towards Yaakov. Hatred, jealousy, scapegoating frustration are all present in certain aspects of his behavior patterns

towards Yaakov. And yet there is also a grudging admiration and attempts at reconciliation on the part of Eisav. Yaakov is portrayed as reactive towards Eisav with a more passive nature, patiently attempting to wait out the situation and hope that Eisav will calm down and reconcile himself to Yaakov's right of existence - in what Eisav considers to be his exclusive world.

And, the question arises – in reality, the question for all ages – is there room in the world, especially our rapidly shrinking world, for Yaakov and Eisav to coexist peacefully. One would hope so, though history belies this optimistic view of the rivalry between the brothers.

The Torah itself is pretty much noncommittal about the causes for the true source of Eisav's hatred of Yaakov. Even though Yaakov's purchase of the birthright and his subsequent preempting of his father's blessings are ostensibly the cause of Eisav's displeasure with Yaakov, these are only superficialities. The hatred was there from the beginning, from the moment of their conception, even though no incidents between them had occurred.

The Torah just seems to take for granted that this is the way it is going to be. And this accounts to a great degree for the almost traditional Jewish attitude of fatalism regarding the behavior of the non-Jewish world towards the Jews. Rabi Shimon ben Yochai stated in the Talmud that it is a given rule that Eisav hates Yaakov. However, there are other opinions in the Talmud that take a different tack and belie this inevitability of hatred and violence.

After the horrors of the Holocaust were revealed, Jews felt that perhaps Eisav had finally reformed and had seen the evil of the ways of hatred and bigotry. Almost seventy years later we are not so certain about this hopefully sanguine view of Eisav's reconciliation with Yaakov. Though we are certainly less accepting and passive about the situation now than we were a century ago, there are relatively few options left to us as how to deal with the matter.

We should minimize whatever frictions possible but realize that we are dealing with a millennia-old problem that cannot be just wished away or papered over. Faith and fortitude in our own self-worth are the strongest weapons in our arsenal to bring Eisav to reconciliation and harmony. © 2025 Rabbi B. Wein zt"l - 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"He called it Shiva; therefore, the name of the city is Beer Sheva until this very day." (Beraishis 26:33) Yitzchak, like his father before him, dug wells. This is a way of providing for your flocks, and also helping the community. Like Avraham, Yitzchak had to

contend with people denying his right to the water, and he had to stake his claim clearly and publicly. In this case, he named the well, "shiva," as it was the seventh well he'd dug.

The posuk tells us, "...therefore, the name of the city is Beer Sheva until this day." It would seem that it got that name because of the well, but firstly, a few verses earlier, it says, "And he went up from to Beer Sheva." Even if you say that it was a retroactive reference, we find that in the times of Avraham the place was called Beer Sheva because of the "shvua," the covenant and oath, that Avraham made with Avimelech. Why then does the Torah tell us the city got the name from the well, when it already had the name from a previous time?

One very simple answer is provided by the Bechor Shor, that in Avraham's time the region got the name, and now a specific city was referred to as Beer Sheva. Others say that during Avraham's time it only had the name because of the oath, and now it gained an additional meaning of "seven" because of the well.

Another explanation is that after Avimelech and his people violated the covenant they had established with Avraham, they stopped using the name Beer Sheva, as they tried to forget or deny that they had given their word. Now, however, that a new covenant was made, and the seventh well dug, they reverted to the old name and it remained that name for generations to come.

We find that the name of the place had different meanings to different people, yet the name remained the same. There was not just a singular way of looking at something which everyone agreed to, but rather, different people arrived at the same "conclusion" in different ways.

If you had a difficult math problem, one mathematician might solve it using algebra, and another using fractions, but they would both achieve the correct result. If the process is true, the result will be the same regardless of which system is used. Similarly, in Hashem's world, He arranges things so the same thing; a date, a number, a word, can mean much to various people, each according to their own circumstance.

The fact that the place was called Beer Sheva by Avraham for one reason and by Yitzchak for another, enlightens us to the magnificent complexity and simplicity of Hashem's orchestration of the world. We each have our own path, but if we're heading towards the same goal, closeness to Hashem, we will arrive at the same place.

On April 15, 1912, the RMS Titanic sank in the North Atlantic. 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 said. "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 replied. "Do you have any idea what I had to do to get all those people on one boat?!" © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Jealousy

In between the prolonged conflict between Ya'akov and Eisav lies a story that is part of an unfortunate history of the B'nei Yisrael; jealousy of Yitzchak's success causes others to attack his family and his inheritance. The Torah states, "Yitzchak sowed in that land, and in that year he reaped a hundredfold; thus had Hashem blessed him. The man became great and kept becoming greater until he was very great. He had acquired flocks and herds of cattle and much enterprise; and the Philistines envied him. All the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham, his father, the Philistines stopped up, and filled them with earth. And Avimelech said to Yitzchak, 'Go away from us, for you have become much mightier than we!' So Yitzchak went from there and encamped in the Valley of Gerar, and dwelled there. And Yitzchak returned and he dug the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Avraham, his father, and which the Philistines had stopped up after Avraham's death; and he called them by the same names that his father had called them."

There is a continuing section that also deals with these wells, but we will concentrate on the section which we quoted. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch deals with the hundredfold blessing that Hashem gave to Yitzchak. The Rashbam explains that a field that would normally produce a kur (a measure used at that time) of grain, that year produced one hundred kurim of produce. The term for this in the Torah is mei'a she'arim, the same name given to one of the oldest and most religious neighborhoods of Jerusalem that lies just outside of the ancient city. This, even without any further interpretation, would indicate an immense blessing to Yitzchak which would bring him great wealth. HaRav Hirsch points out that the term "she'arim" is used to mean "gate" in most references in the Torah. This is related to the marketplace gate, indicating that the produce that Yitzchak raised that year filled one hundred marketplaces. This was enormously more wealth than our original assessment.

The Torah states that, "The man became great and kept becoming greater until he was very great." The Bal HaTurim explains that the three uses of the word-form "gadol, great" indicate that the three blessings that Hashem made to Avraham at the Binding of Yitzchak were now being fulfilled: "(1)I shall surely bless you and surely increase your offspring like the stars of the heavens and like the sand on the seashore; (2) and your offspring shall inherit the gates of its enemy. (3) And all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your

offspring." The Lekach Tov explains that the three forms of "gadol" indicate that Yitzchak became "great in his good deeds, great in his wealth, and great in his name (famous)."

The Torah states, "He (Yitzchak) had acquired flocks and herds of cattle and much enterprise; and the Philistines envied him." The word used for enterprise is "avudah." Rashi explains that one form of work would be called "avodah," but a combination of forms of work would be called "avudah." The Rashbam states that the different forms of work all had to do with the land (fields or vineyards), because he held that the root word always implied agriculture of some form. The Ramban was troubled by the fact that the description of Yitzchak's new wealth did not include gold and silver. He explains that the Torah did not list these items because the jealousy that came from the Philistines was due to Yitzchak's excessive wealth in his flocks, not gold or silver. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the Philistines were not jealous of Yitzchak's righteousness or even his greatness, but instead were jealous of the numbers of his flocks. This led to their attack on him and his flocks by closing the wells that were dug by Avraham, even though the wells benefitted them.

The Torah states that the Philistines "stopped up, and filled them (these wells) with earth." HaRav Sorotzkin explains that they wished to both cover the wells and then fill them with dirt so that they would lose all signs that they were Avraham's wells which could have gone to Yitzchak. The Ohr HaChaim explains that these wells had already been covered after Avraham's death. Filling these wells now with dirt was further revenge on Yitzchak for his wealth in flocks. Rabbeinu Bachyai indicates that the "servants" of Avraham who originally dug these wells were people whom Avraham had taught about the uniqueness and singularity of Hashem. They became his servants and dug the wells for him. But a "convert" can be easily swayed to believe in one Hashem, and also can easily be enticed away from that belief if it is not strong enough. The wells represented Torah, as water is often used to indicate Torah knowledge. The Philistines not only covered the wells so that the water (Torah) would be hidden, but, after Avraham's death, also filled the wells with dirt to make these "converts" forget all of his teachings. That is also why Yitzchak had them redig the wells, and rename them with the same names given them by Avraham.

The King, Avimelech, said to Yitzchak: "Go away from us, for you have become much mightier than we!" HaKohein HaKadosh explains that the same year in which Yitzchak was blessed with one-hundredfold produce, the rest of the region was in a famine. Yitzchak was able to sell his produce at higher prices because his was the only food available. This not only allowed Yitzchak to accumulate significant wealth, but also diminished the wealth of his neighbors. Rabbah explains that this has always been one of the sources of hatred

towards the Jews; as Hashem blesses the Jews, others tend to lose their wealth and importance.

Yet this new-found wealth created a different problem for Yitzchak. HaRav Hirsch states: Those who watched the Jews in their well-to-do Yitzchak stage of the exile, "and say to them, 'Go away from us, for you have become much mightier than we,' may form not the least of Hashem's method for our salvation." Yitzchak had risen in power because of his wealth, and he may have become lost in the "hustle and bustle of managing his great wealth, and in the prominent civic position he won through it." That is to say that this "jealousy may have been no unimportant medicine added to their good fortune to work against its tempting attractions, and to admonish them again and again as to their real Jewish calling."

We know from Jewish history that many societies have isolated their Jewish populations into ghettos, small villages, and even outright expulsion. We often view these as tragedies, but, perhaps, this isolation was Hashem's way to keep us from the impurities of the world. May we always be able to recognize and appreciate Hashem's gifts, even when we are harmed in the process. We know that Hashem punishes us for our benefit. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Yaakov's middah -- defining characteristic -- is emes, truth, and so Rashi parses Yaakov's misleading words to Yitzchak to make them true on some level. For instance, allowing his father to believe it is Esav to whom he is speaking, Yaakov says "I am Esav your firstborn." Rashi interjects a presumed pause in the sentence, rendering it "I am [the one bringing you food]; Esav is your firstborn" (Beraishis, 27:19).

Yet one misleading phrase still stands out: "Come eat of my hunted [food]" (ibid), says Yaakov, offering his father the goat meat he could mistake for game. But it was neither Yaakov's food -- his mother Rivka had prepared it -- nor had it been "hunted." How was Yaakov not lying?

What occurs is that "hunting" is a word we've seen earlier, in the Torah's description of Nimrod: "a powerful hunter" (ibid 10:9). And there, Rashi explains that what Nimrod "hunted" and captured were people's minds. He used words and subterfuge to mislead, convince and amass followers.

Perhaps here, too, Yaakov was subtly, slyly, subtly "confessing" to his father that he was engaged in a psychological subterfuge, presenting himself as someone he wasn't, offering his "hunting" to Yitzchak, his ability to navigate a tricky and untrustworthy world. Thereby demonstrating that he, Yaakov, too, was capable of dealing with that challenging world no less than his brother, something that, as the Malbim and others explain, Yitzchak had assumed was not true.

And so Yaakov was saying, in effect, "Accept my current subterfuge as proof that I can do what you have assumed only Esav is able to do." © 2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

SICHOT ROSHEI HAYESHIVA

HARAV BARUCH GIGI

Summarized by Aviad Brestel

Translated by David Strauss

Edited by Yair Lichtman

In our parasha, there are two verses that give rise to a question: "And Rivka took the choicest garments of Esav her elder son, which were with her in the house, and put them upon Yaakov her younger son." (Bereishit 27:16)

"And the words of Esav her elder son were told to Rivka, and she sent and called Yaakov her younger son, and said to him: Behold, your brother Esav does comfort himself, purposing to kill you." (Bereishit 27:42)

In both of these verses, Esav is called Rivka's "elder son," whereas Yaakov is called her "younger son." We might expect to find such designations when there is a significant age difference between two brothers, but Esav and Yaakov were twins (and if we accept the words of Chazal, they were 63 years old at the time). How are we to understand such a distinction between two adults, whose age difference was at most a few minutes?

One might offer a simple explanation: that Yaakov is called "the younger son" because he is "a simple man, dwelling in tents" (Bereishit 25:27), a person who is closed off in his own inner and family world, and less adept at dealing with the outside world. He is still dependent on his mother (even in matters of clothing, it is described how Rivka dresses Yaakov), and so he is rightly called "her younger son." Esav, on the other hand, is "a cunning hunter, a man of the field" (ibid.) -- that is, a man of the world. He knows how to deal with the difficulties of this world on his own, and is therefore called "her elder son."

However, in the following parashot we are told that Yaakov was forced to deal with many difficulties: the flight from his brother and the exile from his land, the rolling of the stone from the mouth of the well, his complex relationship with his father-in-law Lavan, and finally his successful confrontation with his brother Esav. Yaakov himself testifies to the difficulties he faced: "Thus I was: in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep fled from my eyes" (Bereishit 31:40). What transformed Yaakov from that "younger son," from that "simple man," into a man who could deal with the external world with all its difficulties?

Chazal, in order to deal with a particular problem in the dating of the stories, split the verse with which the following parasha opens -- "And Yaakov went out from Be'er Sheva, and went to Charan" (Bereishit 28:10) --

into two parts separated by 14 years. Between leaving Be'er Sheva and going to Charan, the Sages teach, Yaakov studied Torah in the beit midrash of Shem and Ever.

This period separates the passive Yaakov, who depends on his parents for guidance and advice, from the Yaakov who confronts challenges and overcomes them. Chazal's choosing to link the period to Yaakov's study in the beit midrash teaches us about their perception that the beit midrash is a place that shapes one's personality. A person enters it in one place, and leaves after a few years in a completely different place.

The Mishna in Avot (4:14) states: "Go as a voluntary exile to a place of Torah." Judaism has always believed that it is necessary to create some kind of disconnect between the external world and the beit midrash. In the yeshivot of previous generations, that disconnect found expression in a more absolute manner. The yeshiva was a kind of "Noah's Ark," closed off from the external world. Most young men had to travel long distances from their homes for extended periods in the yeshiva, and it was difficult to establish contact with the outside world. Today the situation is different, both because it is realistically impossible to create such a disconnect in our time and because our educational outlook is somewhat different, in the sense of "a window shall you make for the ark" (Bereishit 6:16). We do not believe in a complete separation or in erasing everything that preceded the yeshiva, as is described by Hoshea (12:13): "And Yaakov fled to the field of Aram"; but rather we identify more with the version that appears in the Torah: "And Yaakov went out" -- not an escape and a separation from home and the past, but a temporary departure in order to return.

However, even if it is not an escape, the departure should be meaningful. The beit midrash is the best place to reconsider a basic assumption, to examine important matters from a different angle, to build a more correct scale of values. We certainly can and should strive for these things in our generation as well.

Chazal expound the verse, "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law does he meditate day and night" (Tehillim 1:2), as follows: "And Rava said: At the beginning [of this verse] the Torah is assigned to the Holy One, blessed be He, but at the end it is assigned to him [who studies it], for it is stated: 'But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law does he meditate day and night.'" (Avoda Zara 19b)

It is only that period in the beit midrash, that renewed examination of things, which transforms the Torah from God's Torah to the Torah of man. Ha-Rav Amital, ztz"l, used to begin each year with a talk about the statement of Chazal (Berachot 8a): "A person should always enter two doors into the synagogue." He spoke about a person's readiness to detach himself from the external world and immerse himself in the beit midrash; about the aspiration to be a "player" on the field of the

Torah and not a spectator from the sidelines; about the desire to acquire the Torah. This is precisely what David asks of God: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." (Tehillim 27:4)

Even Yaakov was unable to cope with the difficulties of the world. He could not have been called "Yisrael" without that period in the beit midrash. Only after significant study does he become a master of the Torah, forming positions regarding reality and thus acquiring the ability to deal with it. Only after that is he ready to successfully cope with the challenges of the outside world, and after that to return home as a different person. *[This sicha was delivered by Harav Baruch Gigi on Shabbat Parashat Toldot 5777.]*

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

This week's Torah portion begins and ends by contrasting the bedrock values that defined the fundamental differences between Yaakov and Esav. The Torah sums up their radically divergent personalities as evidenced from their earliest years: Yaakov chose to be an Ish Ohalim, "a man of the tent," whose primary pursuit was the fulfillment of Hashem's will, whereas Esav was a man of the field, a hunter who sought out power and dominion.

Throughout the parsha, we see how the two brothers were case studies in opposites: Yaakov was a person with a gentle and sensitive nature, Esav gloried in being tough and coarse. The jealousy and anger that Esav harbored toward his brother stands in stark contrast to Yaakov's forgiving and non-combative nature. Towards the end of the Torah portion, another fundamental difference between the brothers surface—their utterly different ways of dealing with life's challenges and setbacks.

Eisav is angry and disillusioned at having been by-passed when Yitzchok bestowed on Yaakov the Divine blessings of material success and prosperity. His brother had usurped him and gained for himself these precious blessings that Eisav felt should be rightfully his. The Torah describes how Eisav went on the warpath, and would have killed Yaakov were it not for the anguish this would have brought to his parents. Instead he vented his extreme disappointment by rationalizing that it was through no fault of his own but rather the fault of his idol worshipping wives that he had not been granted the blessings by his father.

The parsha relates that in line with this rationalization, Eisav took a third wife, Bosmas, the daughter of Ishmael. The commentaries shed light on his thinking. "By marrying someone from my father's family, a daughter of Ishmael," he reasoned, "I'll surely regain my position of authority in the family, and will once again be able to ingratiate myself to my father."

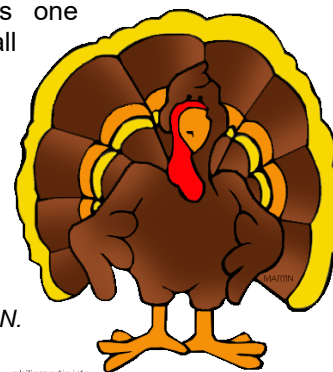
Let us contrast his behavior with the response of Abraham after the Akeidah. HaShem tests Avraham with the most demanding challenge possible. He instructs Avraham to slaughter his own beloved son, the son who guaranteed his legacy would be perpetuated for future generations. Unflinchingly, Avraham takes his son on this fateful journey, leading him to Mount Moriah, where he will carry out Hashem's command. With unfaltering step, he prepares to carry out his mission. Although the angel intercedes before the act can be carried out, and tells him it was simply a test that he passed with flying colors, Avraham is not at peace.

His desire to give away his most precious possession to G-d needed physical expression. He poured this consuming desire into the sacrifice of the lamb that he found nearby. The Heavenly voice then proclaimed that through the merit of this unparalleled act of devotion to G-d, Avraham secured for himself and his future generations an outpouring of Divine blessing; eternal possession of the land of Israel and the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars of the heavens.

One might expect Avraham to leave the site of the Akeidah full of satisfaction at having behaved so nobly. Yet we learn from the commentaries that he felt far from complacent. "Perhaps I could have done something different so that HaShem would have allowed me to sacrifice Isaac," he wondered. "Perhaps I could have married him off at a younger age in which case he would have already had children, and HaShem would have allowed me to carry out the Akeidah literally, not figuratively." The Torah tells us that immediately after this episode, Avraham was told that Rivka, Isaac's designated bride to be, had just been born. He was thus mollified.

Avraham's reaction to the challenge of the Akeidah throws the differences in character between him and Eisav into bold relief. The name "Esav" stems from the word "ah'suy," which means "finished, perfect," for the wicked feel they are perfect products, never in need of improvement or change. They will never accept responsibility for their own shortcomings and are expert at shifting the blame to others. The righteous, by contrast, are always willing to self-reflect, to try to pinpoint where and how they could have behaved better.

That message is one from which we can all benefit. Only when we can admit our weaknesses, and exhibit the strength of character to work on improving ourselves will we be able to grow spiritually to the point of realizing our own spiritual destiny. © 2012 Rabbi N. Reich and torah.org



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