

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Why Isaac, not Ishmael? Why Jacob, not Esau? These are among the most searing questions in the whole of Judaism.

It is impossible to read Genesis 21, with its description of how Hagar and her son were cast out into the wilderness, how their water ran out, how Hagar placed Ishmael under a bush and sat at a distance so she would not see him die, without feeling intensely for both of them, mother and child. They are both crying. The Torah tells us that God heard Ishmael's tears and sent an angel to comfort Hagar, show her a well of water, and assure her that God would make her son "a great nation" (Gen. 21:18) -- the very promise he gave Abraham himself at the start of his mission (Gen. 12:2).

Likewise in the case of Esau. The emotional climax of the parsha occurs in chapter 27, at the point when Jacob leaves Isaac's presence, having deceived him into thinking that he was Esau. Then Esau enters, and slowly both father and son realise what has happened. This is what we read: "Then Isaac trembled with a very great trembling, and said, 'Who then was it who hunted game and brought it to me and I ate it before you came and I blessed him? -- and he will be blessed.' When Esau heard his father's words, he cried an intensely loud and bitter cry, and said to his father, 'Bless me, me too, my father!'" (Gen. 27:33-34)

These are among the most powerful descriptions of emotion in the whole of the Torah, and they are precisely the opposite of what we would expect. We would expect the Torah to enlist our sympathies for the chosen: Isaac and Jacob. Instead it almost forces us to empathise with the unchosen: Hagar, Ishmael and Esau. We feel their pain and sense of loss.

So, why Isaac and not Ishmael? Why Jacob and not Esau? To this there are two types of answer. The first is given by midrash. On this reading Isaac and Jacob were righteous. Ishmael and Esau were not.

Ishmael worshipped idols. He violated married women.. He tried to kill Isaac with his bow and arrow while making it look as if it were an accident. Esau was attracted, even in the womb, to idolatrous shrines. He trapped not only animals but also his father Isaac by pretending to be pious when he was not. God cut short Abraham's life by five years so that he would not live to

see his grandson violate a betrothed woman, commit murder, deny God, deny the resurrection of the dead, and despise the birthright. (See Bereishit Rabbah 53:11, 63,6; Shemot Rabbah 1:1; Tanhuma, Toldot 8; Baba Batra 16b.) Such is the way of midrash. It helps us see Isaac and Jacob as perfectly good, Ishmael and Esau as dangerously bad. That is an important part of our tradition.

But it is not the way of the written Torah itself, at least insofar as we seek what Rashbam called *omek peshuto shel mikra*, the "deep plain sense of Scripture." (Rashbam to Gen. 37:2, 28; Ex. 3:14, 13:9) The Torah does not portray Ishmael and Esau as wicked. The worst it has to say about Ishmael is that Sarah saw him *metzachek* (Gen. 21:9), a word with many meanings, most of them not negative. Literally, it means, "he was laughing." But Abraham and Sarah also laughed. (Gen. 17:17; 18:12) So did Isaac. (Gen. 26:8) Indeed Isaac's name, chosen by God himself, (Gen. 17:19) means, "He will laugh." There is nothing in the word itself that implies improper conduct.

(Robert Alter makes the ingenious suggestion that it means that Ishmael was "Isaac-ing," imitating his younger brother. [The Five Books of Moses: a translation with commentary, Norton, 2004, 103].)

In the case of Esau, the most pointed verse is the one in which he agrees to part with his birthright in return for a bowl of soup (Gen. 25:34). In a staccato series of five consecutive verbs, the Torah says that he "ate, drank, rose, went and despised" his birthright. Yet this tells us that he was impetuous, not that he was evil.

If we seek the "deep plain sense," we must rely on the explicit testimony of the Torah itself -- and what it tells us is fascinating. An angel told Hagar before Ishmael was born that he would be "a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him" (Gen. 16:12). He became an expert archer (Gen. 21:20). Esau, red-haired, physically mature at a young age, was "a skilful hunter, a man of the field" (Gen. 25:27). Ishmael and Esau were at home in nature. They were strong, adroit, unafraid of the wild. In



Take Control of
YOUR MONEY!
tinyurl.com/ffitness5

...probably the best personal
finance training course I've seen! - CPA

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
(973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

any other culture they might have emerged as heroes.

And that is the point. We will only understand the Torah if we recall that every other religion in the ancient world worshipped nature. That is where they found God, or more precisely, the gods: in the sun, the moon, the stars, the storm, the rain that fed the earth and the earth that gave forth food.

Even in the twenty-first century, people for whom science has taken the place of religion still worship nature. For them we are physical beings. For them there is no such thing as a soul, merely electrical impulses in the brain. For them there is no real freedom: we are what we are because of genetic and epigenetic causes over which we have no real control. Freewill, they say, is an illusion. Human life, they believe, is not sacred, nor are we different in kind from other animals. Nature is all there is. Such was the view of Lucretius in ancient Rome and Epicurus in pre-Christian Greece, and it is the view of scientific atheists today.

The faith of Abraham and his descendants is different. God, we believe, is beyond nature, because He created nature. And because He made us in His image, there is something in us that is beyond nature also. We are free. We are creative. We can conceive of possibilities that have not yet existed, and act so as to make them real. We can adapt to our environment, but we can also adapt our environment to us. Like every other animal we have desires, but unlike any other animal we are capable of standing outside our desires and choosing which to satisfy and which not. We can distinguish between what is and what ought to be. We can ask the question "Why?"

After the Flood God was reconciled to human nature and vowed never again to destroy the world (Gen. 8-9). Yet He wanted humanity to know that there is something beyond nature. That is why He chose Abraham and his descendants as His "witnesses". (Isaiah 43:10-12; 44:8)

Not by accident were Abraham-and-Sarah, Isaac-and-Rebekah, and Jacob-and-Rachel, unable to have children by natural means. Nor was it mere happenstance that God promised the holy land to a landless people. He chose Moses, the man who said, "I am not a man of words," to be the bearer of His word.

When Moses spoke God's words, people knew they were not his own.

God promised two things to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: children and a land. Throughout history, most people at most times have taken children and a land for granted. They are part of nature. They constitute the two most basic natural drives: the Darwinian imperative and the territorial imperative. All animals have children, and many have their own territory that they mark and defend.

Jews -- one of the world's smallest people -- have rarely been able to take children for granted. Abraham's first recorded words to God were: "O Lord God, what can you give me seeing that I go childless?" and even today we ask, Will we have Jewish grandchildren? Nor have they been able to take their land for granted. They were often surrounded by enemies larger and more powerful than themselves. For many centuries they suffered exile. Even today they find the State of Israel's very right to be called into question in a way that applies to no other sovereign people. As David Ben-Gurion said, "In Israel, to be a realist you have to believe in miracles."

Isaac and Jacob were not men of nature: the field, the hunt, the gladiatorial game of predator-and-prey. They were not Ishmael and Esau, people who could survive by their own strength and skill. They were men who needed God's spirit to survive. Israel is the people who in themselves testify to something beyond themselves.

Jews have consistently shown that you can make a contribution to humanity out of all proportion to your numbers, and that a small nation can outlive every empire that sought its destruction. They have shown that a nation is strong when it cares for the weak, and rich when it cares for the poor. Jews are the people through whom God has shown that the human spirit can rise above nature, testifying that there is something real that transcends nature.

That is a life-changing idea. We are as great as our ideals. If we truly believe in something beyond ourselves, we will achieve beyond ourselves. *Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**N**ow Isaac loved Esau, because the hunt was in his mouth, while Rebecca loved Jacob" [Gen. 25:28]. The watershed moment in Jacob's life—the repercussions of which surface in every subsequent generation of Jewish history—is the act deceiving his father, Isaac, in order to wrest the blessings of geopolitical family leadership apparently intended for Esau. What led the otherwise

wholehearted Jacob, the studious dweller of tents, to conspire in this act of trickery, posing as his twin brother in disguise?

We cannot really understand the drama of our Torah reading, Toldot, without considering the emptiness in Jacob's heart, the aching angst with which only a child who feels unloved and rejected by a parent can truly identify.

From the very first verses in in the reading, the stage is set for the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau. It is important to take careful note of how the Torah testifies that Isaac loved Esau "because the hunt (or entrapment) was in his mouth".

Based on the Torah's phrasing, our Sages note that Isaac did not know that Esau's entrapment skills extended to interpersonal manipulation. Esau knew how to deceive Isaac with his words, misleading the patriarch to assume incorrectly that his son was scrupulous in his observance of the commandments [Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot 8].

In contrast, although Isaac undoubtedly had feelings for his other son Jacob, the Torah is deafeningly silent on the matter. Every child yearns for—and deserves—unconditional love from his or her parents. After all, a child does not ask to be born into the world. The most potent armor he or she can receive as protection against the forces of both environment and society is protective, unconditional love from concerned, committed parents.

Jacob especially yearned for the warm embrace of his father. Tragically, he did not receive it. As a result, he felt unloved and rejected, by his father, who explicitly loved Esau. Understandably, Jacob craved this love, even if but for a brief period.

But how could he receive it? By supplying Isaac's requested venison meat [ibid., 27:3-4] and expressing the words, "I am Esau your firstborn," perhaps Isaac would love him just as Isaac loved Esau of the venison; just as he loved Esau of the mellifluous verbal entrapment.

Feeling Isaac's love and blessing was a crucial necessity in Jacob's development, even if it entailed deceiving his father to achieve it.

Permit me to conclude with a fascinating anecdote about a beloved family 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, paradoxically, 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.

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 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).

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.

But 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. It was such a moment for which the young Jacob desperately yearned. ©2017 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Our father Avraham was, according to the Mishna in Avot, tested ten times and overcame all of them. It is interesting that most of the commentators that describe and enumerate these ten tests do not identify Avraham as being the son of Terach as one of these tests. One can easily think that this perhaps would have been one of the major tests in his lifetime. But the Torah takes into account a fact of human nature that, in one way or another, every generation strives to be different than the one that precedes it. Sometimes this is for good and sometimes not.

Avraham differed from Terach in a good way. Eisav differed from Yitzchak in a negative fashion. The greater challenge seems to be to emulate and build upon the positive attributes and accomplishments of one's forbearers. The challenge to Yitzchak is to emulate his father Avraham, to spread the idea of monotheism in a pagan and violent world, to dig once again all of the wells that his father had dug, from which the life giving waters of Torah would again flow.

It is easier to rebel and discard than to continue and replenish. The world is always unenthusiastic

about revisiting old wells even if they have been proven to be bountiful and eternal. The prophet Yirmiyahu complained about new wells that do not really contain water and abandoning old wells that are yet bountiful and blessed with water. This would be the great test for Yitzhak and later for his own son Yaakov, in transmitting the legacy of Avraham and creating the Jewish people.

The challenge of continuity in the generations and their relationship one to another has been the internal challenge in Jewish life throughout the ages of our history. We have always longed to be fresh, new and different than our ancestors. Any new idea or ideal in world civilization always had Jewish adherents, even when it was obvious that it was against their own self-interest to advocate that new fad or ideal.

And, we have paid very dearly for those monumental errors of judgment and policy. Jewish history is littered with the wreckage created by these empty wells. And the non-Jewish world is complicit in this debacle. Avimelech, the king of the Philistines repeats the grievous moral error made with the wife of Avraham, and then with the wife of Yitzhak.

When it comes to the Jewish people the attitude of much of society is not to learn from the past. One would think that by now the world would have absorbed the lessons of self-destruction that anti-Semitism brought and continues to bring to its proponents. But, alas, such is not the case.

For centuries on end, the Philistines and others would continually make new peace treaties with the Jews only to revive fresh hatred and violence as a "new" tactic in their enmity towards the Jewish people. We have our challenges but so does the non-Jewish world. Ours is to retain continuity, theirs is to discard it. ©2017 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah states: "And Yitzhak called Ya'akov, and blessed him, and commanded him saying, 'You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan'" (Genesis 28:1)..

What is the connection between Yitzhak blessing his son and then admonishing him?

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, a great rabbi of the last generation, commented that we learn from here the most effective manner in which to reproach someone. Show that you truly care about his welfare; he will more readily listen to your reprimand.

Often people who mean well give reproof in a harsh manner or by yelling -- particularly if the recipient is one's own child. Every person wants to do the right

thing. If we can focus on our love for the other person, our desire to genuinely help and our knowledge that the other person wants to be good, then we can speak softly and give admonition which will be heard. *Dvar Torah based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2017 Rabbi K. Packouz*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion tells of Yitzhak's (Isaac) special love for Esav (Esau) and Rivka's (Rebecca) special love for Yaakov (Jacob). (Genesis 25:28)

One wonders how Yitzhak 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 Yitzhak 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, Yitzhak 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, Yitzhak 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. Yitzhak 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 Yitzhak 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. ©2017 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Voice Discernment

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

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

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

There are still other sages however, that do not accept one's voice, when there are other considerations at stake. A story is told of a man who returned to his town after many years of absence and

was identified based on his voice though his appearance had changed drastically. He then died and some of the sages did not allow his wife to remarry because his only identification was his voice because his appearance had changed so much. On the other hand there were those who permitted it because it is logical that a person's appearance would change over the years and thus the recognition of his voice would be sufficient for his wife to remarry.

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

To this the Marcheshet answers that Yaakov was successful in changing his voice for he was the brother of Esav. Hence one might conclude that if 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 S. LEVIN

Body and Soul

This 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. ©2017 Rabbi D.S. Levin

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Unusual Pregnancy

“The children struggled within her. She said, 'If so, why am I thus?' She went to inquire of Hashem. Hashem said to her, 'There are two nations are in your womb; two regimes shall be separated from your insides; might will pass from one regime to the other; and the elder shall serve the younger.'" (Bereishis 25:22-23)

Rivka's reaction is difficult to understand. Why would a painful pregnancy get her to doubt her existence? What insight did she hope to gain by seeking Divine insight? The forecast of painful pregnancies goes back to Chava! Nothing new or remarkable there. Was there anything so out of the ordinary about the stirrings she felt inside her?

The answers she received don't seem to address her questions. Explanations about the future roles of her two sons do not tell her anything about how to deal with her pregnancy pains. What is the difference between "two nations" and "two regimes?" The two phrases don't match each other, either. Since the first

speaks of two entities that are within her, the second one should speak of two that exit or leave her -- not that "separate" from her. Why did Hashem throw in the information about the older son serving the younger? It may have been important, but had nothing to do with Rivka's question!

Now, we may realize that a number of these questions are behind the position of Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 63:6) that Rivka in fact was not puzzled by the pain or the stirrings, but about the bizarre behavior of the child (at that point she was aware of only a single fetus) within her. She felt the stirrings when she passed a place of kedushah -- but also felt them when near a shrine to avodah zarah. This is where her questions began, but there was more to them than just this confusing and conflicted behavior.

For the rest of the back-story, we need turn to another passage in Chazal. (Sanhedrin 91B) Antoninus asked his friend Rabbenu Hakodosh about the time that the yetzer hora attaches itself to each new person who comes into this world. Is the yetzer hora created alongside the new being, residing, so to speak, in the new fetus as it develops? Or does it first become part of the new child only when it emerges from the womb as an independent being? The gemara's conclusion is that the latter is true. Would the yetzer hora enter any earlier, a fetus would rebel at its confinement, and seek to escape it mother's womb.

This question -- coupled with the unusual phenomena associated with her pregnancy -- plagued the panic-stricken Rivka. Perhaps, she thought, the yetzer hora of the child I carry indeed had an early beginning in its development. If this yetzer hora is there and already acting out, am I going to find myself victimized by an attempt to prematurely escape, which might easily kill me in the process!

It was this question that -- not a search for medical advice -- prompted Rivka to seek the counsel of Shem and Ever. Were the bizarre symptoms that she experienced brought on by a very active yetzer hora -- in which case, it might easily kill her in an attempt to exit and run? If not -- if the yetzer hora simply does not arrive that early -- then how to explain the contradictory tendencies of whatever was inside her, stirring to leave in the vicinity of a beis medrash and also a place of idolatry?

HKBH provided the authoritative answer. Rivka -- you have nothing to fear from a yetzer hora -- driven abortion attempt. The yetzer hora is not a player in your pregnancy. You are most definitely not in mortal danger. The strangeness of your symptoms owes to the most unusual composition of the contents of your womb. While the behavior of the twins seems like they are acting according to their inclinations, this is not because of the active yetzer hora of one of them. The behavior is but a sign, a harbinger of what will play out in their lives years later.

The proof is that at the moment, they are evenly matched. The stirrings are just as likely in front of a shul as near avodah zarah. Know that this will not be the case when they emerge -- at which time the yetzer hora of one of them will indeed become active. In "real life," there will constantly be a struggle between them -- but one will always prevail over the other. There will not be balance, but a shifting of power from one to the other. In time, the older will serve the younger. He will presage this battle between them by holding on to the heel of his brother as they emerge into the world.

At the moment of their birth, they will be twins / tumim. The word is related to tam, complete, whole-hearted. They will come in to the world unafflicted by a yetzer hora that developed in utero. In that regard, they will be like everyone else. Your present fears, Rivka, can therefore be allayed. (Based on Melech Machsheves by R. Moshe Cheifetz 1663-1711) ©2017 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein & torah.org

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN

Translated by Kaeren Fish

"Now therefore take up, I pray you, your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and catch me some venison, and make me savory food (mat'amim), such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die..."

"Go now to the flock, and fetch me from there two good kids of the goats, and I will make them into savory food for your father, such as he loves, and you shall bring it to your father, that he may eat, and that he may bless you before his death...."

"And he went and fetched and brought them to his mother, and his mother made savory food (mat'amim), such as his father loved.... And she gave the savory food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Yaakov..."

"And Yaakov said to his father, 'I am Esav your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Arise, I pray you; sit and eat of my venison (mi-tzeidi), that your soul may bless me...'

"And he said, 'Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son's venison (mi-tzeid beni), that my soul may bless you.' And he brought it near to him, and he ate, and he brought him wine, and he drank." (Bereishit 27:3-25)

A review of these verses leaves the reader (justifiably) troubled by their strong gastronomical emphasis and the idea that the eternal blessing to Yitzchak's descendants, who are destined to rule over Eretz Yisrael, ultimately rests on a plate of food and savory delights. Why does everything here depend on a tasty dinner? Moreover, the Torah portrays Esav in a

negative light for having sold his birthright and all that it entails for a bowl of pottage. But is Yitzchak any better? After all, he too, seemingly sells the birthright and the accompanying blessing in return for venison!

A number of Chassidic teachings address this question. The crux of the resolution they offer concerns the desire to elevate the physical and material dimension: "And the matter of the 'savory food' is likewise to bring the elements of this world closer to God -- and that which is further removed is easier to elevate towards God." (Sefat Emet, Toldot 5631)

In other words, Yitzchak sought to elevate the food and make it part of his Divine service.

How does one transform the desire for tasty food into Divine service? Enjoyment of this world can easily be pure decadence, devoid of any inkling of holiness. Indeed, this is the more prevalent situation. However, it may also be experienced as "a taste of the World to Come." The individual is well aware that the source of his enjoyment is God, and his intention and wish is that God will continue to shower goodness upon him and upon all of humanity. Just as any hostess is pleased when guests enjoy the good food that she serves, so God is pleased when man enjoys the goodness that this world has to offer -- so long as he indeed knows and remembers that he is a guest and shows his appreciation to his "Host" -- God Himself.

The Yerushalmi states: "R. Chizkiyahu R. Kohen taught in the name of Rav: A person will have to give an accounting one day for everything that his eyes saw but he did not eat." (Yerushalmi, Kiddushin 4:12 [66b])

Perhaps Yitzchak was showing an example by acting in the manner recommended in Sefer Kohelet. (Sefer Kohelet proposes a number of different approaches; the one discussed here is not ultimately adopted as the book's conclusion.)

"What profit has the worker from his toil? I have seen the task, which God has given to the sons of the men to be exercised in it. He has made everything beautiful in his time; He has also set the mystery of the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work which God has made from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in his life; also that it is the gift of God that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor. I know that, whatever God does, it shall be forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it, and God does it so that men should fear before Him." (Kohelet 3:9-14)

The argument proposed here is that all of God's handiwork should be accepted as it is, with no attempt to change it. One should fill his heart with confidence that God made and did everything in the best possible way, and that it is not his job to "amend" or "fix" what God has decreed for the world and the way that the world operates. According to this view, man

has no task in the world except to enjoy the good that God gives him in His goodness. A person is in the world like a guest in the home of God, his Host. Enjoyment of the world is negative when a person feels himself to be responsible for the world, or when he allows himself to demand that which he feels he deserves. But when he is filled completely with faith in God and is willing to accept whatever God decides, wholeheartedly and with no second guessing, the enjoyment of God's goodness in this world is viewed in a positive way.

Esav inquired, demanded, and took for himself -- this is negative hedonism. Yitzchak, in contrast, accepted whatever God decided, in any situation, with love, as we will explain. Yitzchak represents the attribute of "din" ("justice") -- in other words, accepting God's decree. A person who lives in a world of acceptance of how God wants things to be may partake of God's goodness and enjoy it.

The fact that Yitzchak is characterized by din would appear to explain his response upon discovering that Yaakov obtained the blessing from him through deception: "And Yitzchak trembled very much, and said, 'Who then is he who hunted venison and brought it to me, and I have eaten of all before you came, and I blessed him? Moreover, he shall be blessed.'" (Bereishit 27:33)

Why does Yitzchak not take back his blessing to Yaakov, realizing that it was conveyed without his intention? If Yitzchak indeed "trembled very much," how is it that he adds the words, "Moreover, he shall be blessed"?

Yitzchak feels himself to be a guest in this world. He sees everything that happens as God's work. It is not proper for a guest to protest his host's actions or to suggest that his host should have behaved differently.

In a number of places, we see that, in certain respects, Yitzchak remains forever bound upon the altar. This idea relates to our discussion. The Zohar, and Kabbala in general, view Avraham as representing the attribute of lovingkindness, which is perceived as positive, while Yitzchak is viewed as representing strict justice, which is perceived as a harsh reality. (See Zohar, Toldot 137a.) Avraham, representing lovingkindness, did indeed treat others in accordance with this trait -- and for this he is praised. But did Yitzchak, representing strict justice, relate to others in accordance with this trait? Is this his praise?

Yitzchak did not treat others in accordance with strict justice. His embodiment of this trait is reflected not in his own active behavior, but rather in his passive acceptance of God's decrees and his view of all that happens to him as the Divine will that he must accept. He accepts the knife at his neck at the time of the akeida; he accepts the wife that God has brought to him by the hand of Eliezer; and he accepts banishment

by the Pelishtim from the wells that he himself had dug.

In our parasha, too, Yitzchak accepts the deception that Rivka and Yaakov have perpetrated, offering no protest. He views what has happened as God's will. Rather than declaring that he was deceived, he declares with acceptance, "Moreover, he shall be blessed."

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat 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.

