

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he boys grew up. Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed at home among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob" (Gen. 25:27-28). We have no difficulty understanding why Rebekah loved Jacob. She had received an oracle from God in which she was told: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23).

Jacob was the younger. Rebekah seems to have inferred, correctly as it turned out, that it would be he who would continue the covenant, who would stay true to Abraham's heritage, and who would teach it to his children, carrying the story forward into the future.

The real question is why did Isaac love Esau? Could he not see that he was a man of the outdoors, a hunter, not a contemplative or a man of God? Is it conceivable that he loved Esau merely because he had a taste for wild game? Did his appetite rule his mind and heart? Did Isaac not know how Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of soup, and how he subsequently "despised" the birthright itself (Gen. 25:29-34). Was this someone with whom to entrust the spiritual patrimony of Abraham?

Isaac surely knew that his elder son was a man of mercurial temperament who lived in the emotions of the moment. Even if this did not trouble him, the next episode involving Esau clearly did: "When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah" (Gen. 26:34-35). Esau had made himself at home among the Hittites. He had married two of their women. This was not a man to carry forward the Abrahamic covenant which involved a measure of distance from the Hittites and Canaanites and all they represented in terms of religion, culture and morality.

Yet Isaac clearly did love Esau. Not only does the verse with which we began say so. It remained so. Genesis 27, with its morally challenging story of how Jacob dressed up as Esau and took the blessing that had been meant for him, is remarkable for the picture it paints of the genuine deep affection between Isaac and

Esau. We sense this at the beginning when Isaac asks Esau: "Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die." This is not Isaac's physical appetite speaking. It is his wish to be filled with the smell and taste he associates with his elder son, so that he can bless him in a mood of focused love.

It is the end of the story, though, that really conveys the depth of feeling between them. Esau enters with the food he has prepared. Slowly Isaac, and then Esau, realise the nature of the deception that has been practiced against them. Isaac "trembled violently." Esau "burst out with a loud and bitter cry." It is hard in English to convey the power of these descriptions. The Torah generally says little about people's emotions. During the whole of the trial of the binding of Isaac we are given not the slightest indication of what Abraham or Isaac felt in one of the most fraught episodes in Genesis. The text is, as Erich Auerbach said, "fraught with background," meaning, more is left unsaid than said. The depth of feeling the Torah describes in speaking of Isaac and Esau at that moment is thus rare and almost overwhelming. Father and son share their sense of betrayal, Esau passionately seeking some blessing from his father, and Isaac rousing himself to do so. The bond of love between them is intense. So the question returns with undiminished force: why did Isaac love Esau, despite everything, his wildness, his mutability and his outmarriages?

The sages gave an explanation. They interpreted the phrase "skilful hunter" as meaning that Esau trapped and deceived Isaac. He pretended to be more religious than he was.

(He would ask him questions such as, "Father, how do we tithe salt and straw?" knowing that in fact these were exempt from tithe. Isaac thought that meant that he was scrupulous in his observance of the commandments (Rashi to Gen. 25:27; Tanchuma, Toldot, 8).)

There is, though, a quite different explanation, closer to the plain sense of the text, and very moving. Isaac loved Esau because Esau was his son, and that is what fathers do. They love their children unconditionally. That does not mean that Isaac could not see the faults in Esau's character. It does not imply that he thought Esau the right person to continue the covenant. Nor does it mean he was not pained when Esau married Hittite women. The text explicitly says he

was. But it does mean that Isaac knew that a father must love his son because he is his son. That is not incompatible with being critical of what he does. But a father does not disown his child, even when he disappoints his expectations. Isaac was teaching us a fundamental lesson in parenthood.

Why Isaac? Because he knew that Abraham had sent his son Ishmael away. He may have known how much that pained Abraham and injured Ishmael. There is a remarkable series of midrashim that suggest that Abraham visited Ishmael even after he sent him away, and others that say it was Isaac who effected the reconciliation. (See Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 107-124.) He was determined not to inflict the same fate on Esau.

Likewise he knew to the very depths of his being the psychological cost on both his father and himself of the trial of the binding. At the beginning of the chapter of Jacob, Esau and the blessing the Torah tells us that Isaac was blind. There is a midrash that suggests that it was tears shed by the angels as they watched Abraham bind his son and lift the knife that fell into Isaac's eyes, causing him to go blind in his old age. (Genesis Rabbah 65:10) The trial was surely necessary, otherwise God would not have commanded it. But it left wounds, psychological scars, and it left Isaac determined not to have to sacrifice Esau, his own child. In some way, then, Isaac's unconditional love of Esau was a tikkun for the rupture in the father-son relationship brought about by the binding.

Thus, though Esau's path was not that of the covenant, Isaac's gift of paternal love helped prepare the way for the next generation, in which all of Jacob's children remained within the fold.

There is a fascinating argument between two mishnaic sages that has a bearing on this. There is a verse in Deuteronomy (14:1) that says, about the Jewish people, "You are children of the Lord your God." Rabbi Judah held that this applied only when Jews behaved in a way worthy of the children of God. Rabbi Meir said that it was unconditional: Whether Jews behave like God's children or they do not, they are still called the children of God. (Kiddushin 36a)

Rabbi Meir, who believed in unconditional love, acted in accordance with his view. His own teacher, Elisha ben Abuya, eventually lost his faith and became a heretic, yet Rabbi Meir continued to study with him and respect him, maintaining that at the very last moment of his life he had repented and returned to God. (Kiddushin 36a)

To take seriously the idea, central to Judaism, of *Avinu Malkeinu*, that our King is first and foremost our parent, is to invest our relationship with God with the most profound emotions. God wrestles with us, as does a parent with a child. We wrestle with him as a child does with his or her parents. The relationship is sometimes tense, conflictual, even painful, yet what

gives it its depth is the knowledge that it is unbreakable. Whatever happens, a parent is still a parent, and a child is still a child. The bond may be deeply damaged but it is never broken beyond repair.

Perhaps that is what Isaac was signalling to all generations by his continuing love for Esau, so unlike him, so different in character and destiny, yet never rejected by him -- just as the midrash says that Abraham never rejected Ishmael and found ways of communicating his love.

Unconditional love is not uncritical but it is unbreakable. That is how we should love our children -- for it is how God loves us. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* © 2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd Rebecca spoke to her son Jacob, saying... And now, my son, obey my voice according to which I command you..." (Genesis 27:5,7) One of the many glories of the Bible is that it recognizes the complex personality especially of great individuals, and the fact that strength and weakness, virtue and vice, can sometimes both reside in the very same soul. Even more significantly, that which may superficially appear to be dishonest – an act of deception – may very well provide the necessary ingredient which ultimately creates grandeur. It is this understanding which supplies the real motivation for what appears to be Rebecca's deception according to the profound interpretations of the Malbim and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

The most obvious question which strikes us, as we read the Torah portion, is why Rebecca had to deceive her husband by dressing her younger son Jacob in the garb and in the skins of her older son Esau? Why could she not merely have explained to her husband that Esau, although he was the elder brother, was simply not worthy of the birthright? From a textual perspective, this doesn't seem to have been a difficult task at all. After all, right before Isaac summons Esau requesting venison meat as the *hors d'oeuvre* of the blessing, the Bible specifically records that Esau had committed the one great sin of the patriarchal period: he married two Hittite women, which was 'a bitterness of spirit to Isaac and to Rebecca' (Genesis 26:35). Moreover, Rebecca could certainly have argued that the son who had been willing to sell his birthright to Jacob for a mere bowl of lentil soup, could not possibly be worthy of the mantle of Abrahamic leadership.

Furthermore, Rebecca had heard from the Almighty during her frighteningly difficult pregnancy that "the elder son would serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23) during her frighteningly difficult pregnancy. So why didn't she make her convincing case to her

husband after coffee one evening, rather than resort to an act of trickery?

Malbim suggests that indeed such a conversation between husband and wife did take place. And after Rebecca marshalled her arguments, Isaac then explained to his wife that he was as aware of Esau's shortcomings as she was. In fact, he understood that the spiritual blessing of family leadership, the blessing of Abraham which we know as the birthright, must certainly go to Jacob; indeed when Jacob is later forced by the wrath of his deceived brother Esau to leave his home and go into exile with Laban, after his father warns him not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan, he is blessed with the messianic dream of becoming a congregation of nations and he is given the blessing of Abraham, to inherit the land of Israel (Genesis 28:3,4).

But, argues Isaac, he must make a split between the birthright of spiritual leadership which rightfully belongs to Jacob, and the physical blessing of material prosperity and political domination which he has decided to give to Esau:

May the Lord give you from the dew of the heavens and the fat [oil] of the land and much grain and wine...Be the political master over your brother and may the daughters of your mother bow down to you.

The more spiritual brother must receive the religious-spiritual birthright (bekhora) and the more physical brother must receive the material-political blessing (berakha). After all, argues Isaac, the bookish, naive, and spiritual Jacob (ish tam, yoshev ohalim) would not begin to know how to maneuver in an economically driven, militaristically guided society. Give Esau the oil and the sword; give Jacob the books and the Temple.

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

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

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

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

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

However, ultimately – and even in our days – the unified dream of Rebecca is truly coming to pass, when Israel has been miraculously restored to its homeland as a result of its military victories over the aggressive Palestinian forces. Indeed, the true mother of the Yeshivat Hesder of Modern Orthodoxy in Israel is none other than Mother Rebecca, whose vision of sanctifying the hands of Esau has proven successful in our blessed period of the beginning of the sprouting of our redemption. ©2022 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

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

By blaming Jacob for what was his own short sidedness, Esau compounds the original error of judgment on his part. After having tasted all the immoral pleasures of life, and after a career of violence,

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

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

The cry of Esau reverberates through the halls of world history. And, what makes it most pathetic is that what Esau is searching for can easily be found in what he himself has previously discarded and denigrated. But, it is always the egotistical hubris of humankind that prevents it from seriously and logically examining its situation and thoughts. One has to admit to past errors and to restore oneself to the path of goodness and righteousness, which alone can lead to a lasting feeling of happiness and accomplishment in this world.

Esau would like to be Jacob, but without having to behave with the restraint and outlook on life that is the most central point of reference in the life and behavior of Jacob. It is as Justice Brandeis once put it: "I would like to have the serenity and peace of the Sabbath but without its restraints." It is dealing with that fallacy of thought that makes Jacob Jacob and Esau Esau. ©2022 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**S**tanding before his father Isaac, Jacob claims that he is his brother Esau (Genesis 27:19). While some commentators rationalize Jacob's behavior, others insist that, for the rest of his life, he is punished for this act of deception.

For example, after Laban tricks his son-in-law, Jacob, giving him Leah instead of Rachel, Laban states, "It is not done in our place, to give the younger before the firstborn" (29:26). Here, Laban criticizes Jacob by implying that perhaps in his home, the younger brother may have taken blessings from the older, but in Laban's community, the eldest takes precedence (Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, quoted by Nehama Leibowitz).

The pattern of the deceiver being deceived continues. After the sale of his favorite son, Joseph, Jacob's other sons take Joseph's garment of many colors and dip it in goat's blood, convincing their father that Joseph has been devoured. As a young man, Jacob deceived his elderly father into blessing him while wearing the goatskin of his brother Esau, and now Jacob's sons turn the tables: with goatskin dipped into blood, they fool their elderly father (Genesis 27:16; 37:31, 32).

Because he is constantly tricked, one wonders if Jacob was ever forgiven for deceiving his father. Maimonides argues that true repentance lies in finding oneself in the same circumstance where one sinned and not making the same mistake (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:1). But what happens if the second chance never arises? Perhaps it can be suggested that in such cases, repentance can be realized through one's children. This generational forgiveness may have occurred to Jacob, as reflected in the life of his favorite son, Joseph.

When Joseph brings his children before Jacob to be blessed, Jacob reverses his hands, placing the right hand on Ephraim, the younger, and the left on Manasseh, the elder. Alarmed, Joseph attempts to correct his father. Joseph exerts himself to ensure his father is not deceived, making clear which is the older and which the younger son. Although Jacob declares awareness of what he is doing, Joseph's wish not to fool his father is significant as a corollary to Jacob's own youthful deception of his father (Genesis 48:17-19).

Often, children sense the remorse of parents for having committed a wrong. Even if parents are never given the opportunity to correct that mistake, their children may resolve to do the right thing if they are ever placed in that situation. In that sense, the failings of parents can be corrected by their children.

In this narrative, Joseph is the tikkun (repair) for Jacob. Jacob deceived his father and suffered for that misstep all his life. Only when Joseph rejects deception has Jacob come full circle. His sin has finally been fixed; he has seen his children repair his wrong. Hopefully, with that correction, he finally feels truly shalem (whole). ©2022 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 Identification

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**T**he 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 AVI SHAFRAN

## Cross-Currents

**"I**'m forty years old." Esav said to himself (Beraishis 26:34). "Father was 40 when he got married," he rationalized, according to Rashi. "I should do the same." (The pasuk itself just notes Esav's age and marriage, not the rationale.)

The Mei Marom (R' Yaakov Moshe Charlop) notes the cognitive dissonance evident in Esav's aspiring to follow his father Yitzchak's matrimonial path. Ever since his teenage years, after his grandfather Avraham had died, Esav's proclivities had included murder and rape (Bava Basra 16b). And now, decades on, he sees himself as properly following in his father's footsteps?

That seems indeed to be the case, and that fact, says Rav Charlop, reveals a strange but real psychological truth: People can live lives entirely devoid of holiness and yet convince themselves that, somehow, by merely mimicking holy people, they thereby achieve some holiness.

We see that in, for example, the adoption of personal customs associated with revered figures when the adopters have nothing in common with the lives of those customs' originators.

Reciting a special group of Tehillim each morning, kissing the Torah three times or insisting on a particularly rarified level of kashrus are fine things to do. But not if they are seen as meaningful in-and-of-themselves, even in the absence of true effort to achieve a higher level of actually required observance. Not if they are thought of, so to speak, as "get out of jail free" cards.

How astonishing, remarks Rav Charlop, is this element of human psychology. And how important is the real work required to achieve truly meaningful, not illusory, growth.

Esav had every right to seek a wife. Just like a pig, to which he is compared, has every right to present his split-hooves credentials. But neither the wife nor the hooves make either one kosher. ©2022 Rabbi A. Shafran and *torah.org*

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

**"A**nd Hashem told her, "Two nations are in your belly..." (Beraishis 25:23) After nearly twenty years of heartfelt prayers, Yitzchak and Rivka are blessed and she conceives. However, not all is well with the pregnancy. She feels pain and discomfort. Those she could tolerate, but when the baby exhibits

unusual behavior, thrashes about as if trying to escape her womb when she passes the Yeshiva, and also when she passes places of idolatry, Rivka is concerned and must do something about it.

Presumably, because she doesn't want to sound ungrateful or cause him pain, she doesn't approach her husband, who is the tzaddik and gadol of the generation. Instead, she goes to the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever and there she presents her concerns before Hashem. The answer Hashem gives Rivka is that she is bearing twins, and one will be a tzaddik who wishes to head towards the sanctity of the study hall, and one will be otherwise inclined, attracted to the houses of idolatry. Exactly how this is a consolation is another discussion which the commentaries have, but it's not our focus.

The Midrash states, "Only once did Hashem speak to a woman, and it was to the righteous Sarah." It asks, "But we find that this posuk says, "And Hashem said to [Rivka] two nations are in your belly...?" The Midrash answers, "Hashem spoke to her through an intermediary, either an angel or through Shem (son of Noach.)"

This begs the question: If Hashem did not speak to her directly, why does it say that He did? If, as the Midrash says, she was spoken to through another, why not say that directly? Since the Midrash asked the question, that Hashem had spoken to Rivka, responding and explaining that this was through Shem and not directly only seems to insult her. Why mention it at all?

The posuk tells us that when Rivka was concerned, "She went to ask of Hashem." Did she stand and pray and ask a question, which was later answered by the Rabbi? No. When she wanted to "seek Hashem," she went to the Bais Midrash, to the Yeshiva. She spoke to the greatest scholar available, and understood that his answer would be the word of G-d.

This appreciation of Talmidei Chachamim and respect for them would serve as a merit for her own child to seek Hashem's wisdom from good teachers. Indeed, when he ran away from Esav, Yaakov spent fourteen years ensconced in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever, learning Torah from them and girding himself with fear of Heaven. Where did he learn this? From his mother, who went to seek Hashem from Torah Scholars.

When the Torah tells us that Hashem spoke to her, it wanted us to know that because she trusted the men of Torah, and sought Hashem from those who spent their days and nights seeking Him as well, Hashem, himself, answered her – through Shem. Emunas Chachamim, trusting in sages, is a powerful force. The answers and advice of Daas Torah, these leaders whom we ask questions, are Divinely inspired by our merit. The Torah wants us to realize how

meritorious was our mother, Rivka, so it writes what it does.

At the end of Birchas HaMazon, we say "V'Dorshei Hashem Lo Yachsiru Kol Tov", those who seek Hashem will not lack any good. But why do we see many great tzadikim who not only don't have excessive good, but in fact have almost nothing at all? The Shela HaKadosh explains it doesn't mean they will have all abundance at their disposal, but rather they will not feel deprived of any good for they have no use for the world's pleasures and luxuries. Their lives are complete without them.

*R' Elya Lopian zt"l offers a parable of a person who leaves his friend's house and sighs in sadness for his friend, noting that he didn't see even a single medicine in his home. This man is a fool. If his friend was sick and didn't have the proper medication it would be sad, but his friend is in perfect health and has no need for medicines! Instead of feeling sorry for his friend he should be happy for him and his health. So it is with the righteous. They can make do with very little because they have no need for "things." Their health and happiness come from closeness to the Al-mighty.*

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#### RABBI DAVID LEVIN

### Entreat

**T**he Torah is a complex document with many layers of meaning. In some cases, this is made even more difficult by the fact that the Torah is written without vowels which can lead to confusion as to the meaning and pronunciation of a word. Most of the time one can use context to determine the best possible meaning. One such incident occurs within one sentence our parasha, a case where a word is used twice but with different meanings and vocalizations.

The Torah tells us, "Yitzchak entreated (vayetar) Hashem opposite his wife, because she was barren, and Hashem allowed Himself to be entreated (vayei'ater) by him, and his wife, Rivka, conceived." The two Hebrew words are pronounced differently and according to ibn Ezra, one (vayetar) has an active and one (vayei'ater) a passive meaning even though the words have exactly the same letters (vav, yud, ayin, taf, resh). Rashi tells us that the three-letter root (ayin, taf, resh) always indicates abundance; as Yitzchak prayed abundantly for Rivka to become pregnant. According to Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Yitzchak took Rivka to the sight of his own close encounter with Hashem, namely, Har HaMoriah, the place of the Akeida (Binding of Yitzchak), so that his and her prayers would reach Hashem from a Holy place.

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch presents us with a different interpretation of our root word. He compares our root to the root chet, taf, resh, meaning "to bore into". "Sailors who steer their ship and, by strength and skill, overcome storm and waves, are

called 'chokri'im'. Atar (our root), then, means: penetrating entreaty and prayer." Both Rashi and Rav Hirsch quote the other times our root is used in the Tanach (Bible). From Yechezkel (Ezekiel) we find the phrase, "va'atar anan haketoret," which speaks of the cloud of the incense. Rashi described this in terms of the abundance of smoke, whereas HaRav Hirsch describes this as a strong pillar that rose straight up. From Mishlei (Proverbs), we find the phrase, "v'na'atrot n'shikot soneh," which refers to the kisses of an enemy. Rashi speaks of the increase of an enemy's kisses as a means of fooling his enemy. The Siftei Chachamim indicates that a better interpretation might be that the enemy kisses only once but that it seems like many kisses. HaRav Hirsch explains that an enemy's kisses do not come from his heart but must be forced out of him. HaRav Hirsch quotes from another place in the Torah where our root is found with a similar meaning. Paroh tells Moshe, "he'etiru ba'adi, Let your prayer force its way up to Hashem, make it a strong, influential advocate for me."

One could ask why it seemed necessary to Yitzchak and Rivka to have an abundance of prayer in this situation. Sforno explains that, although Avraham was promised that through Yitzchak he would have his descendants, this promise did not mention that it would be through Rivka. When Yitzchak brought Rivka to his mother's tent and saw that the miracles that had occurred there for Sarah now returned through Rivka, he believed that his seed must pass through Rivka. Yet Rivka was an akara, a barren woman. Yitzchak prayed "l'nochach ishto," which could be translated as both "opposite his wife" or "on behalf of his wife." Rashi says that they prayed in separate corners of the tent. The Rashbam says on her behalf.

Another explanation of the need for an abundance of prayer is mentioned by the Or HaChaim. He reminds us that Rivka's brother was the evil Lavan. When Eliezer came to choose Rivka at the Well, he later had to convince Lavan and his mother to accept the marriage. After a long and detailed story of the scene at the Well, Lavan still wished to delay the marriage, perhaps to see how much more money and gifts Eliezer would bring. In the end, it was Rivka who made the decision to go with Eliezer but not before Lavan blessed her by saying, "Achoteinu, at hayi l'alpei r'vava, our sister, you should come to be thousands of myriads." The Or HaChaim explains that Hashem made Rivka barren so that it would be clear that this blessing from an evil man would not be the cause of her offspring. Her children would only come because of the intensive prayer of both Yitzchak and Rivka.

Another reason for Yitzchak and Rivka's prayers also concerns her brother, Lavan. Lavan means white, and our Rabbis tell us that his name was the only thing about him that was pure. We learn from

the marriage of Aharon to his wife, that she is listed as Elisheva the daughter of Aminadav, the sister of Nachshon. Rashi explains that when one wishes to marry, he should look at the girl's brothers, as they will have an influence on one's children. Yitzchak and Rivka both prayed that her children would not resemble the wicked Lavan. The Rabbis explain that a majority of the children will resemble the brother's behavior. Since Eisav was born first, as the bechor he was entitled to a double portion. In this way, Eisav was the majority and Ya'akov the minority of the children.

The Torah says that "Hashem allowed Himself to be entreated by him." Our Rabbis indicate that this means that Hashem listened to Yitzchak's prayer but not to Rivka's. Rashi quotes Gemara Yevamot (64a) which explains, "to him and not to her, that the prayer of a righteous man, the son of a righteous man, is not the same as the prayer of a righteous man who is the son of a wicked man." This does not mean that a person who is descended from an evil person will not be heard in his prayers. It is saying that a person who comes from a righteous person and continues in that path has a closer relationship with Hashem and his prayers are valued by Hashem. We also learn that a person who breaks with his past and returns fully to Hashem is considered a more righteous person than one who has never faced temptation.

One of the lessons that one can glean from this episode is that our prayers have a definite effect in our lives. Our prayers are always answered but not necessarily in a way that we desire. Yitzchak and Rivka prayed that their children would not resemble Lavan, but they were only partially granted their request. Hashem had His own plan for the world, namely, that Yitzchak's children would represent two opposing cosmic forces in the world, Edom (Rome) and Yisrael. Our Rabbis tell us that these two forces would not rule simultaneously. When one light shone, the other would be diminished. Our prayers for the sick are answered, but sometimes the peace that we seek for those in pain will be answered by their passing. Still, those prayers are recorded and saved as a reward to that person in the World to Come. May we all seek out prayer, both in thanks and in supplication, and may we learn to recognize Hashem's answer to those prayers.

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### SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

**O**ur Parashah assigns two missions to Yaakov Avinu, writes R' Yehoshua Kaniel z"l (1895-1970; Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Israel): First, "After that his brother emerged with his hand grasping on to the heel of Esav, so he called his name 'Yaakov'" (25:26), and, second, "Yaakov was a wholesome man, residing in tents" (25:27). R' Kaniel explains:

Yaakov's first mission is to hold on to Esav's

heel, i.e., to ensure that Esav and his descendants do not stray off the proper path, thereby filling the world with impurity, theft, wickedness, and moral degradation. Yaakov's descendants are meant to accomplish this mission by serving as examples of what a human being can be. This is Yaakov's outward-looking mission.

Yaakov's second mission is inward-looking -- to "reside in tents," i.e., the "tents of Torah study." Pirkei Avot (1:2) teaches that the world stands on three things: Torah, Avodah / prayer, and Gemilut Chassadim / acts of kindness. Each of these pillars parallels one of the Patriarchs, with Yaakov being the pillar of Torah. Yaakov is "a Sulam / ladder set earthward and its top reaching heavenward" (28:12). Notably, the Gematria of "Sulam" equals that of "Sinai," where the Torah was given thanks to Yaakov's efforts, R' Kaniel observes.

Torah is the most important pillar, R' Kaniel writes. He explains: If Divine service and acts of kindness are not rooted in the Torah, then they are merely the product of man's intellect. But, as the 20th century demonstrated, intellect alone cannot save the most well-mannered nation from degenerating into barbarism. Only Torah can guarantee the perpetuation of charity and justice. (Divrei Yehoshua II p.797)

"And these are the Toldot / offspring of Yitzchak son of Avraham -- Avraham fathered Yitzchak." (25:19)

The Gemara (Berachot 8a) teaches: "If one occupies himself with Torah study, performs acts of kindness, and prays with the congregation, Hashem views it as if that person has redeemed Hashem and his 'sons' -- the Jewish People -- from among the nations." [Until here from the Gemara]

The Zohar asks: Many people have occupied themselves with Torah study, performed acts of kindness, and prayed with the congregation, yet the Shechinah and the Jewish People have not yet been redeemed! [Our "redeeming the Shechinah" may be understood as our creating the conditions for the full revelation of Hashem.] The Zohar answers: One must occupy himself with Torah study with the intention of connecting it with Hashem -- not as an intellectual pursuit -- and one must perform acts of kindness for Hashem, so-to-speak -- meaning that one performs Mitzvot with the intention of "redeeming the Shechinah" -- with the aim of bringing about the revelation of Hashem. [Until here from the Zohar]

R' Yaakov Yosef z"l (1738-1791; rabbi and Chassidic Rebbe in Ostroh, Ukraine; known by the acronym "Rav Yeivi") writes: The Zohar's lesson is alluded to in our verse. "These are the Toldot / offspring (or history)" of the Jewish People: "Yitzchak" -- rejoicing, i.e., they will leave the exile joyously, as it is written (Yeshayah 55:12), "For with joy you shall go out." (The name "Yitzchak" comes from the word for laughter.) How will we merit this joy? "The son of

Avraham" -- i.e., when all our deeds are done with Avraham's trait, kindness -- in this case, kindness for Hashem, so-to-speak, as explained above. Only the trait of Avraham, i.e., kindness, will father "Yitzchak" -- i.e., the joy of the redemption. (Sefer Rav Yeivi)

"Esav said to Yaakov, 'Pour into me, now, some of that red, red stuff for I am exhausted.' (He therefore called his name 'Edom.'). Yaakov said, 'Sell, as this day, your birthright to me'." (25:30-31)

R' Yosef Yitzchak Feigelstock z"l (1931-2021; Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta of Long Beach, N.Y.) writes: Rivka was told by a prophet that her two sons each had a mission, which was to compete to determine the nature of the world: good or evil. Presumably, Rivka passed this prophecy on to Yaakov, and he understood that his task required him to take the birthright from Esav.

Still, how could Yaakov seemingly take advantage of his exhausted and starving brother?

R' Feigelstock explains in the name of R' Yaakov Kamenetsky z"l (1891-1986; rabbi in Lithuania, Seattle, and Toronto; Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, N.Y.): The trials from which the Patriarchs grew the most were those that required them to act contrary to their natures -- like the Akeidah, at which Avraham, the paradigm of Chessed / kindness, was called upon to offer his beloved son Yitzchak as an offering. So, too, Yaakov -- whose defining attribute, say our Sages, was Emet / truth -- was called upon repeatedly to act in ways that seem devious. The Patriarchs understood that using one's natural tendencies to serve Hashem is admirable, but the real test of one's devotion occurs when he is called upon to act against his nature for the sake of Hashem. (Yehegeh Chochmah)

"See, now, I have aged; I do not know the day of my death. Now, please sharpen your gear -- your sword and your bow -- and go out to the field and hunt game for me. Then make me delicacies such as I love and bring it to me and I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die." (27:2-4)

R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (the Reisher Rav; killed in the Holocaust) writes: It is natural that parents wish to bless their children even when they are aware of those children's faults. Yitzchak was well aware of Esav's wild nature, and he wanted to elevate his son's deeds. Therefore, he said to Esav, "For once, do not hunt for your own pleasure. Instead, do what you enjoy, but do it for my sake." Indeed, Yitzchak's words can be translated literally as: "Please elevate your gear." (Ha'drash Ve'ha'yun) © 2022 S. Katz & torah.org

