

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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 G-d to Moses in Shemot 33:33, where G-d 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

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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 G-d 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. © 2012 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

One of the most innovative and fascinating creations of Religious Zionism is the educational institution known as "yeshivat hesder." This refers to yeshivot which have an "arrangement" (hesder) with the IDF allowing observant high school graduates to fulfill their three-year compulsory draft obligation by attending a yeshiva for a year and a half, followed by a year and a half of serving in the army and then a final two years of Torah learning.

This was a creative compromise between secular Israeli society, whose members are expected to enter the IDF for three full years after high school, and the ultra-Orthodox (haredim), who are automatically exempted from the IDF as long as they are registered as full-time yeshiva students. I would submit that the "spiritual mother" of the yeshivat hesder model was none other than the Matriarch Rebecca of this week's biblical portion - but we must read between the lines to understand this analogy.

Our analysis begins with the very troubling act of deception that Rebecca persuades her son Jacob to perpetrate against her husband Isaac. She informs her beloved younger son that his elder brother Esau is about to receive the blessings/birthright from the blind and aged Isaac, and convinces him to dress and pose as Esau so as to preempt his brother and receive the blessing himself. How could a righteous matriarch pit one brother against the other in an act of subterfuge against her husband? And didn't Rebecca realize that her deception would be discovered? After all, in only a few hours, Esau would return with the venison, present the dish to his father and expect to receive the blessing, and Isaac would understand what had happened. She and Jacob would be disgraced, at least in the eyes of

Isaac - perhaps irreparably. Why go through such a flimsy masquerade? I maintain that Rebecca certainly understood the seriousness of deception and the certitude of discovery, but was playing for very high stakes. The son who would receive the blessings was to be the heir to the Covenant of Abraham, the carrier of a vision of ethical monotheism which would eventually bring blessing and redemption to all the families on earth. If the wrong son had received the patrimony, the history of Israel would have ended almost before it had begun.

The Abrahamic mission of bringing ethical monotheism to the world required profound faith, commitment and intellectual acumen. It would also require courageous physical prowess to defeat enemies of a G-d of love, morality and peace (witness Abraham's almost single-handed defeat of the four enemy kings).

Rebecca knew her husband very well. The effect of being the son of an ambitious, path-breaking and aggressive father - consummately successful in all his endeavors - is to withdraw from competing, to flee from military conflict, as he does with Abimelech, and to live a more passive, but no less dedicated, life.

But Isaac was also obsessed with the aggressiveness of his elder brother Ishmael, who made him feel inadequate and unworthy of the Abrahamic patrimony. He feared that his father really favored this "wild ass of a man" ("Would that Ishmael live before Thee" had been Abraham's response to G-d's message of Isaac's birth), that his father was only too anxious to take him, Isaac, to the akeda (binding) and get him out of the familial picture. And so Isaac constantly wandered back and forth from Be'er Lahai Ro'i, the place where the angel of G-d rescued and blessed Ishmael, consumed with jealousy toward his elder brother.

Then Isaac and Rebecca are blessed with twin sons: the elder - ruddy red, hirsute and aggressive - a man of the fields and of the hunt; the younger - wholeheartedly naïve - an introspective and studious dweller of tents. Isaac is immediately drawn to his older and more aggressive son; he realizes that the heir to the Abrahamic Covenant requires physical courage, strength and fortitude.

The wiser Rebecca, however, understands that the essence of the patrimony is compassionate righteousness and moral justice, spiritual strength and fortitude in faith. She also remembers how Jacob - even in the womb - grabbed Esau's heel, attempting to overcome and surpass this physically aggressive first-born.

Rebecca realizes that all that Jacob requires are the hands of Esau, the external garb of Esau - and he will be capable of acquiring the essence of the Covenant which is the voice of Jacob, the message of ethical monotheism.

Rebecca never sets out to deceive Isaac. She merely wants to prove to him that Jacob has enough of

the external virtues of Esau to champion the cause of compassionate righteousness and moral justice even on the battlefield, if need be.

Thanks to the yeshivot hesder, Rebecca's children have emerged victorious in the IDF even as they realize that their essence lies in the words and love of the Divine Vision. © 2012 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The name of this week's parsha - Toldot - is taken from the opening verse of the parsha - these are the toldot, the offspring and generations of Yitzchak. It is therefore understandable that the parsha should be named and remembered as the parsha of Toldot since that it is the key operative word. However, there is an exactly similar series of words that begin parshat Noach - these are the toldot of Noach. Yet that Torah parsha is not Toldot but rather it is named for Noach.

For the sake of consistency either our parsha should be named for Yitzchak or the parsha of Noach should be called Toldot as well. Even the naming of the parshiyot of the Torah teaches us important lessons about life and history.

Both Noach and Yitzchak had righteous offspring. Noach had Shem and Yitzchak had Yaakov. Both also had offspring that were less than righteous. Noach had Ham and Canaan, and Yitzchak had Eisav as a son. Yet there was a fundamental difference between Noach and Yitzchak.

Yitzchak possessed a heritage to transmit to Yaakov. The blessings that he bestowed upon his son were those that he had received from his father Avraham. It is heritage, family and national memory and traditions that create toldot, a continuity and connection to generational bonding and unity.

Noach was without such a background - he was a righteous individual, but still only an individual, who did not see himself in the role of being a nation builder. He did not possess a father who imbued him with a sense of tradition, family and nationhood. Avraham on the other hand was described by G-d, so to speak, as someone who would create a nation after him that would follow G-d's ways and commandments.

It was this heritage that Yitzchak received. He was also engaged not only in creating individuals as was Noach but rather in raising toldot - national eternal generations - that would continue the heritage and holy tradition that he had received from his father. Thus Yitzchak's parsha is named Toldot while Noach's parsha remains only on his name alone.

The Torah itself emphasizes this point by immediately describing Yitzchak as being the son of Avraham whereas in the parsha of Noach, the name of the father of Noach no longer appears. The Jewish

people as a whole has toldoteven as individual Jews may or may not be so blessed.

The toldot of the Jewish people are based upon shared memory and historical experience, Torah knowledge and observance, a sense of mission and a strong national identity. The thread of idealism, of helping others, of goodness and compassion - in short, the blessings of our father Avraham, run through the Jewish story of the ages.

We often think that material goods and wealth are the stuff of human inheritances. But that is a false reading of life's truths. It is the ideals and beliefs and traditions of holiness and G-dly service that are the true heritage of Israel and guarantee that the people of Israel will always have toldot. © 2012 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

As Ya'akov (Jacob) leaves his parents' home at the behest of his mother Rivka (Rebecca), the Torah declares that Rivka was the mother of both Ya'akov and Esav (Esau) (Genesis 28:5). At first blush this seems to be an unnecessary statement. Anyone who had been reading the portion certainly knows this fact.

Even Rashi, the greatest of commentators, writes that he does not know why the Torah mentions this. Rashi's admission of "I do not know" teaches an important lesson. People should be prepared to admit lack of knowledge rather than deceive others into assuming they know when they do not.

Yet, there are commentators who try to understand why the text here includes the fact that Rivka was the mother of Ya'akov and Esav. The most appealing view is that of Tzedah Laderekh, (Issachar Ber Parnas, Italy, 16c) quoted by Nehama Lebowitz. Before pointing out his comment, a little background on the story is necessary.

In our portion, Rivka convinces Ya'akov to fool his father and take the birthright from Esav. For Rivka the future was with Ya'akov. He was to be the third patriarch. Rivka viewed Esav as unworthy, no more than a hunter; a rebel who strayed and even married out of the family (Genesis 26:34).

Once Ya'akov had taken the blessings, Rivka overhears that Esav, outraged that he had been short-changed, has plans to eventually kill Ya'akov. She therefore arranges that Ya'akov leave home (Genesis 27:41-43).

Rivka's concern was clearly for Ya'akov's well being-but, it is crucial to understand that she was equally concerned for Esav. If Esav would kill Ya'akov, not only would Ya'akov, Rivka's beloved son, be dead,

but Esav the murderer, would also have "died" in Rivka's eyes. This fear of losing both children is clearly reflected when Rivka points out, "why should I lose both of you (both of my children) in one day" (Genesis 27:45). Rivka loved Esav as well. She feared that if Esav would kill Ya'akov her love for Esav would no longer be.

Hence, Tzedah Laderekh concludes, the Torah states that Rivka was Ya'akov and Esav's mother. In other words the reason she insists Ya'akov leave was not only because she loved Ya'akov but also because of her love and concern for Esav. She was, after all, the beloved mother of both.

An important message. Often it is the case that our children rebel. They abandon values and priorities that are held dear. Many leave the faith or do all kinds of things that upset and even outrage parents. While parents should certainly point out their feelings to their children, the Torah teaches no matter the nature or the actions of the child, a parent is a parent and love for a child must be endless and unconditional.

Like Rivka's love for Esav. As evil as he was, and as much as we know that the Torah points out her love for Ya'akov, she still had great love and concern for her eldest son and sends Ya'akov away not only to protect Ya'akov but to protect Esav as well. © 2012 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI 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 Eisav 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, Eisav gloried in being tough and coarse. The jealousy and anger that Eisav 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 Akeida 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

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

A "b'racha" (blessing) can take several forms. There are b'rachos directed towards G-d (such as those made on food), b'rachos that come from G-d (the good He bestows upon us), and b'rachos that are given from one person to another. As Abarbanel points out, the b'rachos we make to G-d are praise, while the b'rachos we "wish" upon each other are a form of prayer (i.e. "may G-d grant you good health").

However, the b'racha that Yitzchok wanted to give Eisav, and ended up giving Yaakov, cannot be described as a prayer. For one thing, why would Yitzchok's b'racha/prayer for Eisav eliminate the possibility of praying for Yaakov as well? Asking G-d to help one person does not preclude asking Him to help other people. Even after the b'racha is mistakenly given to Yaakov, why was it so difficult for Eisav to convince his father to pray for him too? Additionally, if Yitzchok's intent was to pray for Eisav, why would Yaakov being there (instead of Eisav) affect who would benefit from the prayer? Yitzchok knows whom he is praying for, and G-d knows whom Yitzchok wants to pray for. How could a b'racha said to the wrong person by mistake help that person? At the very least it should be considered a "mekach ta'os," a transaction occurring under misleading circumstances, and therefore null and void. Why was Yitzchok's b'racha irreversible?

Ralbag adds that this b'racha cannot be considered prophecy either, as Eisav's future cannot become Yaakov's just by directing the b'racha to the wrong person. If the prophetic vision is that the person before Yitzchok will get these blessings, that b'racha could not have been given to Eisav. Had it been Eisav standing there instead, it would have had to be a different prophecy, and thus a different blessing. How could Eisav have had any complaints about Yaakov "stealing" his b'racha if that b'racha could only apply to Yaakov?

Therefore, Ralbag explains that this b'racha (and that of every prophet) had elements of both prayer and prophecy. The Navi (prophet) "sees" what should happen, and "prays" that it be accomplished to its fullest extent. For example, if an individual is supposed to be a servant, one can pray that his master puts him in charge of everything, overseeing his entire estate. There is no point in praying that this "servant" become king, only that he excel in his role as servant. Similarly,

Ralbag continues, one who is destined to rule can rule over a small province or over an entire empire. Yitzchok knew, because he was a Navi, that the person before him was destined to continue the legacy of Avraham, and become a patriarch of the chosen people. Based on that, he gave him a b'racha that his potential be fulfilled to the extent that all others—including his brother(s)—be subservient to him.

Based on this, it was not the nature of the b'racha that prevented Yitzchok from giving a different one to Eisav, but its scope. That Yaakov would inherit the Land of Israel and carry on the Abrahamic mission was uncontested. It was the inclusion of Eisav being subjugated to him that made it impossible to give Eisav a similar blessing (and what provoked Eisav's anger). But there is more to the story.

The substance of the b'racha has little, if anything, to do with spiritual growth and accomplishment, and contains no reference to being the father of the nation that would be given the responsibility to fulfill G-d's mission. That b'racha was given to Yaakov before he left for Aram to find a wife (28:2), as Yitzchok explicitly mentions giving him "the blessing of Avraham" and inheriting the Promised Land (28:3-4). The b'racha that was intended for Eisav was about material success (27:28-29); Yitzchok's intent was to have Eisav support Yaakov, to take care of the nation's physical needs while Yaakov focused on its spiritual needs (see <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5767/toldos.pdf>, pg. 7, and <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5768/vayeitzei.pdf>, pg. 2). Unsure that Eisav was really worthy of this, Yitzchok asked him to prepare a scrumptious meal, which would allow him to see if the physical support Eisav would provide could enhance spirituality. Yitzchok did experience a heightened spiritual sense after consuming the meal, and was able to see (prophetically) that the person who brought him this meal should oversee the economic needs of the nation. He therefore gave this over to the person in front of him. Although he thought it was Eisav, once he found out that it was really Yaakov, Yitzchok realized that Yaakov must be the one worthy of this b'racha as well, and that he had to oversee all aspects of the nation's needs (not just its spiritual well-being).

As far as why Yitzchok would make Eisav the boss, with his brother(s) serving him (27:29), if "all" he was overseeing was the material needs of the nation, there are several possibilities. First of all, Yitzchok might have, as part of his prophetic vision, seen that the person in front of him should be in charge. This would match the prophetic message that Rivkah had received before the twins were born (25:23), that the younger would serve the elder; since (unbeknownst to Yitzchok) the younger one was standing before him, it makes sense that his prophecy would include that the other brother should be subservient to him. It is also possible that Yitzchok understood that in order for anyone to have real financial success, they have to be in charge,

be the boss, rather than working for someone else. (I don't think it's necessary to discuss the details, at least here, of why this is so.) Another possibility is that Yitzchok didn't want Yaakov, or his successors, to have to get involved in the business operations. If Eisav would have to answer to Yaakov regarding money matters, one of the main advantages of not having to oversee the financial needs would be lost. Just as the Tribe of Levi didn't get any land and were supported by the other Tribes without having to oversee how the produce was grown, harvested, etc., Yitzchok didn't want Yaakov to be distracted by these things either.

In the end, Eisav only wanted the b'racha for the financial success that came along with it. He successfully fooled his father into thinking he wanted to support spiritual growth, so Yitzchok was prepared to give that to him. But Rivkah knew that the spiritual mission would suffer greatly if Eisav held the financial keys, and when Yaakov presented his father with the meal she had prepared, Yitzchok knew that the b'racha for material wealth belonged to the person who was standing before him. © 2012 Rabbi D. Kramer

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Adapted by Dov Karoll with Avi Shmidman

“**A**nd Yaakov gave Esav bread and lentil soup, and he [Esav] ate, drank, got up and left, and Esav despised the bekhora (birthright).” (Bereishit 25:34)

The verse lists five different verbs in describing Esav's actions in this incident. Presumably, the verb that provides the most insight into understanding his behavior here is the last one, "va-yivez," generally translated "he despised."

Ibn Ezra explains that Esav arrived at "va-yivez" as a result of his assessment that the bekhora was not really worthwhile, because Yitzchak was not so rich anyway. Accordingly, he determined that giving up the bekhora did not constitute a major loss.

Ramban cites a different practical consideration: Esav thought that he would not attain the benefits of the bekhora in his lifetime, for he was a hunter, and he expected to die before Yitzchak.

Rashi, on the other hand, sees a more basic problem in Esav's behavior here, explaining that he disdained the priestly service of G-d that comes along with the bekhora.

This disagreement between the commentators reflects a difference of opinion regarding the nature of the bekhora. What is it that Esav is giving up? Is it a question of property and wealth, or is it the priestly service?

Regarding Rashi's explanation, there are actually conflicting sources regarding the issue of

whether the firstborn were meant to serve as kohanim at this stage in history. On the one hand, there are sources that seem to indicate that the unique position of the bechor (firstborn) stems from their salvation during the plague of the firstborn in Egypt. "For all the firstborn are Mine, from the day I smote all the firstborn of Egypt, I set aside every firstborn of Israel, from man to animal, they shall be Mine, says G-d" (Bemidbar 3:13). On the other hand, along the lines of Rashi's view here, the Rambam (Mishna commentary to Zevachim 14:4) states that from the time of Adam until the time of Moshe, priestly service was performed by the firstborn.

Returning to Esav: what is the nature of his disdain for the bekhora? The noun form of the verb "va-yivez" could be either "buz" or "bizayon." "Buz" is a relatively neutral, subjective noun, expressing one's personal feelings toward the object. "Buz" refers to the person and not to the object. The person does not accord the object great significance; perhaps he does not afford it the recognition it deserves. This is the approach taken by Ibn Ezra and Ramban. On this approach, Esav did not relate to the bekhora as significant; he did not value it sufficiently.

"Bizayon," on the other hand, is a more negative approach, and is directed at the object itself. "Bizayon" toward an object undermines the object itself. This is reflected in Rashi's explanation of Esav's behavior: Esav despised the service of G-d, and undermined its value.

What was Yaakov's motivation and justification for this seemingly questionable behavior? Yaakov and Esav had different, indeed opposite, understandings of the nature of the bekhora. Is bekhora a matter of giving or receiving? Is it an honor and privilege one receives, or a responsibility and an investment? Esav was looking at what he stood to gain from the bekhora, arriving at the conclusion that it was not worthwhile, based on the practical assessment described by the Ibn Ezra or Ramban. Yaakov, on the other hand, wanted to take the responsibility upon himself. He sought the zekhut, privilege, as well as the responsibility of service and servitude to G-d.

From Yaakov's perspective, Esav's attaining the bekhora would have disastrous consequences, for it would diminish and damage the bekhora.

Looking back at the significance of the bekhora in the aftermath of Yaakov receiving it, we can understand this perspective. G-d refers to the Jewish people as "beni bechori Yisrael," Israel, My son, My bechor (Shemot 4:22). While this bekhora is accompanied by certain privileges, it is primarily a matter of commitment and responsibility. The term "am segulla," a chosen nation, comes together with "am kadosh," a holy nation, in several places in the Torah (Devarim 6:7, 14:2, 26:18-19), indicating that the special status of the Jewish people is contingent on proper behavior. At the foot of Mount Sinai, before the receiving of the Torah, G-d tells the people, "If you listen

to My voice and observe My covenant," then "you shall be segulla, chosen to Me from among all the nation... and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a goy kadosh, a holy nation..." (Shemot 19:5-6).

Being G-d's chosen nation provides the Jewish people with a tremendous responsibility, and only upon the fulfillment of these duties do the privileges of "am segulla" follow. Only if we are an "am kadosh" are we worthy to be the "am segulla." As descendants and successors of our patriarch Yaakov, we need to show the willingness to accept this responsibility and commitment, and then we can reap the benefits of the bekhora as well. We should not approach this special status of bekhora from the perspective of receiving honor and wealth, whether physical or spiritual. Yaakov desired to be the one to carry out the service in the Temple as a responsibility, fulfilling G-d's will, and not as a privilege. We also need to look to serving G-d, continuing the path of our patriarch Yaakov, as fulfilling our duty and responsibility to G-d. (*Originally delivered on leil Shabbat, Parashat Toledot 5762 [2001].*)

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah warns us to cherish our relationship with Hashem and never take advantage of it. Although the Jewish people enjoy a special closeness with Hashem, they are reminded to approach Him with reverence. The prophet Malachi addressed them shortly after their return from Babylonia and admonished them for their lack of respect in the Bais Hamikdash. He said in Hashem's name, "I love you...but if I am your father where is My honor? The kohanim disgrace My name by referring to My altar with disrespect." (1:2,6) Rashi explains that the kohanim failed to appreciate their privilege of sacrificing in Hashem's sanctuary. Although they had recently returned to Eretz Yisroel and the Bais Hamikdash it did not take long for them to forget this. They quickly acclimated themselves to their sacred surroundings and viewed their sacrificial portions like ordinary meals. When there was an abundance of kohanim and each one received a small portion he responded with disrespect. (ad loc) Even the sacrificial order was treated lightly and kohanim would offer, at times, lame or sick animals displaying total disrespect to their sacred privileges.

Malachi reprimanded them for their inexcusable behavior and reminded them of the illustrious eras preceding them. The kohanim in those generations had the proper attitude towards Hashem's service and conducted themselves with true reverence. Hashem said about such kohanim, "My treaty of life and peace was with him, and I gave him (reason for) reverence. He revered Me and before My name he was humbled." (2:5) These verses particularly refer to Aharon Hakohain, the earliest High Priest to serve in the

Sanctuary. They speak of a man so holy that he was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies. Yet, he always maintained true humility and displayed proper reverence when entering Hashem's private quarters. The Gaon of Vilna reveals that Aharon's relationship extended beyond that of any other High Priest. He records that Aharon was the only person in history allowed access to the Holy of Holies throughout the year, given specific sacrificial conditions. But, this privilege never yielded content and never caused Aharon to become overly comfortable in Hashem's presence.

Parenthetically, Malachi draws special attention to the stark contrast between the Jewish nation's relationship with Hashem and that of other nations. Their relationship with their Creator is one of formal respect and reverence. Malachi says in Hashem's name, "From the east to the west My name is exalted amongst the nations...But you (the Jewish people) profane it by referring to Hashem's altar with disgrace." Radak (ad loc.) explains the nations exalt Hashem's name by recognizing Him as the supreme being and respectfully calling Him the G-d of the gods. (1:12) They afford Him the highest title and honor and never bring disgrace to His name. This is because they direct all their energies towards foreign powers and false deities and never approach Hashem directly. Their approach allows for formal respect and reverence resulting in Hashem's remaining exalted in their eyes. The upshot of this is because their relationship with Him is so distant that it leaves no room for familiarity or disgrace.

The Jewish people, on the other hand, enjoy a close relationship with Hashem. We are His beloved children and the focus of His eye. We are permitted to enter His sacred chamber and sense His warmth therein. This special relationship leaves room for familiarity and content, and can lead, at times, to insensitivity and disrespect. During the early years of the second Bais Hamikdash this warmth was so tangible that the kohanim lost sight of their necessary reverence and respect. This explains Malachi's message, "Hashem's says, 'I love you... but where is My honor?'" The Jewish people are always entitled to His warm close relationship but are never to abuse it. Malachi therefore reminded them to be careful and maintain proper respect and reverence for the Master of the universe.

This contrast between the Jewish and gentile approach to Hashem finds its origins in their predecessors' relationship to their venerable father. The Midrash quotes the illustrious sage, Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel bemoaning the fact that he never served his father to the same degree that the wicked Eisav served his father, Yitzchok. Rabban Shimon explained, "Eisav wore kingly robes when doing menial chores for his father, but I perform these chores in ordinary garments." (Breishis Rabba 65:12) This proclamation truly expresses Eisav's deep respect and reverence for his father. However, there is a second side to this. This

week's sedra depicts their relationship as one of formality and distance. We can deduce this from the Torah's narrative of Eisav's mode of speech when addressing his father in pursuit of his coveted bracha. The Torah quotes Eisav saying, "Let my father rise and eat from the provisions of his son." (Breishis 27:31) Eisav always addressed his father like a king in a formal and distant-albeit respectful-third person. Yaakov, on the other hand, did not serve his father with such extraordinary reverence. He undoubtedly showed his father utmost respect but related to him with closeness and warmth. His association was too internal to allow for formal speech. The Torah therefore quotes Yaakov's words to his father during his bracha, "Please rise and eat from my preparations..." (27:19) Even when attempting to impersonate Eisav, Yaakov could not bring himself to speak to his father in any other tone than warm and love. (comment of R' Avrohom ben HaRambam ad loc.)

We, the Jewish people follow the footsteps of our Patriarch Yaakov and relate to our Heavenly father with warmth and closeness rather than coldness and distance. Although Yaakov never reached Eisav's ultimate levels of reverence he showed his father true respect through love, warmth and deep appreciation. We approach Hashem in a similar manner and relate to Him with our warmth and love and deep appreciation. The nations of the world follow their predecessor and approach the Master of the universe in a very different way. They maintain their distance and relate to Him in a formal and cold- albeit respectful and reverent way.

This dimension expresses itself in our approach towards our miniature Bais Hamikdash, the synagogue. Although it is truly Hashem's home wherein His sacred presence resides a sense of warmth and love permeates its atmosphere. We, the Jewish people are privileged to feel this closeness and enjoy His warmth and acceptance. However, we must always remember Malachi's stern warning, "Hashem says, 'I love you like a father does his son, but if I am your father where is My honor?'" We must always follow in our forefather Yaakov's footsteps and maintain proper balance in our relationship with our Heavenly father. We should always approach Him out of warmth and love, yet never forget to show Him proper respect and reverence.

Our turbulent and troubling times reflect Hashem's resounding wake up call. They suggest that Hashem seeks to intensify His relationship with His people. Hashem is calling us to turn to Him and realize that all existence depends on Him. Let us respond to His call and show our loyalty to this relationship. Let us show Him our true appreciation by affording Him proper respect and reverence in his sacred abode. Let it be Hashem's will that we merit through this to intensify our relationship with Him and ultimately bring the world to the exclusive recognition of Hashem. ©2012 Rabbi L. Lam and torah.org