

The Moral Dimension of the Story of Yitzchak's Blessings

By Rav Elchanan Samet

The moral problems which we addressed in earlier parshiot pale in comparison to those which arise this week in the tale of Yitzchak's blessings. This story presents two thorny problems: first, the tricking of a blind old man, using his vulnerability in order to deceive him into blessing the son whom he had not intended to bless; second, the taking of a blessing which was intended for the older twin by the younger, an act which causes deep pain and impotent anger on the part of the swindled brother. Two people are responsible for this deception: Rivka, who instigates, directs and abets this act, and Ya'akov, who despite his initial hesitation, executes this act to its completion. How does the Torah assess the questionable behavior of Rivka and Ya'akov? In order to answer this question, we will analyze both the text of the story, as well as what precedes and follows it, and glean what we can.

BLESSING, HERITAGE, DESTINY

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We must note two ideas before examining the text itself.

1) The concept of "berakha" (blessing) is understood by our contemporaries, who inhabit a world of rationalism, as a wish put into words. However, the Torah and the characters in it have a different understanding. Is it a simple verbal pronouncement that motivates a man to deceive his elderly, blind father - and to risk the exposure of that deception? Is it for a father's good wishes to his son that a mother would set into motion an act that could tear a family apart? Is it for stealing such a thing that one brother would try to kill another? The narrative of Ya'akov's taking of the blessings is a critical juncture in the life of Yitzchak's family. Everyone in the story realizes that it will determine historical destinies, and their actions in the present are performed with an eye to the distant future, far beyond their lifetimes.

2) In our analysis of Parashat Vayera, we mentioned that the characters in the Patriarchal narratives have a double consciousness. On one plane, they act in accordance with their setting, attached to the time and place which they inhabited. Their other consciousness is attached to their far-off divine destiny, as God's chosen, founders of His nation and inheritors of His land. This consciousness of destiny changes many of their actions into the foundations of the future and the determinants of history.

This higher consciousness does not find explicit expression in the actions of those in the story; they are engaged in mundane activities, with Yitzchak seeking "delicacies as I love them" and Rivka and Ya'akov plotting a foolproof plan. However, this is an optical illusion. The struggle for the blessing indeed involves very "earthly" actions, but the object for which all of the characters are striving - the blessing - is, by its very definition, tied to the consciousness of divine destiny. Its promise will not manifest itself with the individual recipient of the blessing, but rather with the nation which will emerge from him after many generations. Yitzchak's blessing is an elaboration of God's blessing to Avraham, determining the character of the possession of the Promised Land by Avraham's seed, whether in economic terms (abundant agriculture) or political terms (dominion over neighboring nations).[1] Ya'akov, who receives this blessing, does not see any of its elements fulfilled in his lifetime; they refer, rather, to his descendants.

The moral judgment of an individual concerned with the destiny of the coming generations, motivated by a feeling of responsibility toward them, and characterized by a willingness to pay a heavy price in the present, is very different from the judgment of someone acting for his or her own personal benefit. So one must relate to the actions of Rivka and Ya'akov: they are prepared to disregard their current lives due to a feeling of obligation toward the distant future. Accepting Esav's receiving of the blessings would be a particularly reckless form of apathy, which might allow their lives to continue pleasantly by going along with the current, but would manifest moral torpor toward future generations.

THE BROTHERS' BIRTH AND YOUTH AS A PROLOGUE

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How did Ya'akov and Rivka know that the younger son was to be the heir to Avraham's legacy? The narrative of the birth and

youth of the twins, which opens Parashat Toledot (25:19-34), provides the impetus for their later subterfuge.

Already in her pregnancy, Rivka feels the struggle between the brothers in her womb. When she consults God, she is told (25:23):

Two peoples are in your belly,

And two nations will issue from your innards;

One nation will overpower
the other,

And the elder will serve the
younger.

The normal order of things is that the elder brother reigns over the family and inherits its possessions. Because of the reversal of the brothers' positions foretold here, the younger will have to struggle to attain superiority, but the firstborn will not go along with this quietly. This is the reason for the turmoil within Rivka's womb.

The thematic and stylistic relationship between these words and Yitzchak's blessing is clear. Yitzchak too knows that one of his sons must serve his brother (27:29); but in his eyes, the question of who will serve whom remains open.

The first verification of Rivka's prophecy is given at the time of the brothers' birth (25:26): "After that, his brother came out, and his hand was grasping Esav's heel..." The symbolism is striking, and this signals the beginning of the struggle.

We see this again as the youths reach adolescence (25:27): "Esav was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; and Ya'akov was a simple man, a dweller of tents." The hunting of wild animals by Esav and the shepherding of Ya'akov (this is the meaning of "dweller of tents") are sharply opposed to each other. Even though these two occupations are tied to living things, the relationship of the hunter to the animal is the opposite of that of the shepherd. Furthermore, the hunter represents a pre-civilized aspect of the human race.

Even the division of their parents' love prepares us for the story of the blessing: Yitzchak loves Esav "for game was in his mouth;" Esav makes sure that his father's mouth is always full of delicacies. This argument astounds us: is this a reason to prefer the hunter over his "simple" brother? On the other hand, "Rivka loved Ya'akov" - for no explicit reason. This is because it is obvious that he should be worthy of her love (and her protection, due to his fathers' preference for Esav). She loves him for who he is, not because of any benefit she receives from him. Perhaps, we wonder, it is also because of the secret that was revealed to her prophetically?

The story of Esav's sale of the right of the firstborn is also important. If the sale was legally valid, then perhaps the blessings belonged by right to Ya'akov. Indeed, it appears that Yitzchak intends to bless Esav as his FIRSTBORN son (see verses 19 and 32). Yet Scripture consistently calls Esav "the OLDER son" (verses 1, 15, 42), and not "the FIRSTBORN son," perhaps to hint that Esav has lost his firstborn status. Esav himself alludes to the connection between the birthright and the blessing (v. 36): "He tricked me twice - he took my bekhora (birthright), and now he has taken my berakha!" The play on the words "bekhora" and "berakha" (which differ only in the order of their letters) further strengthens this link.[2] It is clear that neither Ya'akov nor Esav told Yitzchak the story of the sale of the bekhora, and each one had his own reasons. Perhaps when Ya'akov takes the blessing of the firstborn, he does so with the knowledge that he purchased the birthright from Esav, who had forsaken it.

Yet even if the sale had no legal standing, it is still meaningful to us: it reveals Esav's unfitness for either the birthright or the blessing. What motivates Ya'akov to purchase the birthright? He acquires no immediate economic benefit over Esav (and does not even bother to have witnesses or documentation), but rather acts on the basis of his higher, historical consciousness. Why does Esav agree to sell the birthright for bread and lentils? His values are the opposite of Ya'akov's: for Esav, only the present is important, and he is willing to forsake long-term goals for it. Compare Esav's words, "Here I am going to die, so of what use is a birthright to me?" (25:32) with the verse ([Yishayahu 22:14](#)), "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." This aspect of Esav's nature is highlighted in the conclusion of the episode: "He ate and drank and rose and went; and Esav mocked the birthright." Has Esav not disqualified himself from the birthright through such hasty and thoughtless actions?

It turns out that both Rivka and Ya'akov have knowledge to which Yitzchak is not privy. Whether or not they share this knowledge with each other, it is clear to each of them (and to the reader) that only Ya'akov is worthy of the blessing, and it would be a fatal error, jeopardizing God's plan, were Esav to receive it.

Why didn't Rivka simply say something to Yitzchak? Why did she not decide now to inform him of what God had told her during her pregnancy? Why trick her husband?

The Netziv (Ha'amek Davar 24:64-65) offers an incisive analysis of the relationship between Rivka and Yitzchak. When the couple first meet, Rivka falls off her camel and covers her face with a veil. The Netziv interprets these as signs of her fear of this mysterious saint who is her fiance:

From this point onward, the terror was fixed in her heart, and she was not with Yitzchak as Sara was with Avraham or Rachel with Ya'akov, who, when they had any concerns, did not hesitate to speak forcefully in front of their husbands... This episode is a prelude to Parashat Toledot, where Yitzchak and Rivka had different opinions [of their sons], yet Rivka was unable to tell Yitzchak her view in clear terms... So too at the time of the blessings... Had Rivka's relationship with her husband been similar to Sara's and Rachel's, the matter of the blessing would not have transpired thus.[3]

The Ramban (v. 4, s.v. Ba'avur) explains differently:

"Originally, she did not tell [Yitzchak about the prophecy] for reasons of morality and modesty, because 'SHE went to seek God,' without Yitzchak's permission... At this point, she also did not want tell him about it, because she suspected that, because of his great love for [Esav] he would still not bless Ya'akov, and he would leave everything in the hands of Heaven. She knew that because of this [subterfuge], Ya'akov would be blessed with a full heart and a desirous soul."

In other words, Rivka believed that the blessing which Yitzchak had designed for Esav had to be given to Ya'akov; thus, she had to turn that feeling of love which Yitzchak had for Esav towards Ya'akov by any means necessary.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE NARRATIVE ITSELF

1) What is Missing

Nowhere does Scripture indicate that there is something morally reprehensible about the actions of Rivka and Ya'akov, and this is striking. Indeed, Ya'akov's only objection seems to be a fear of being discovered, "and I will have brought upon me not a blessing, but a curse" (v. 12).

In our story, Rivka is defined by her intense resolution, brooking no delay to execute her plan. This resolution eventually defeats Ya'akov's hesitation, and he follows his mother's command. When he stands before his father, he finds no easy way to attain the blessing; Yitzchak's suspicion is aroused, and he cross-examines Ya'akov via all of the senses at his disposal. This scene (v. 18-27) touches the heart with its description of Yitzchak's impotence in uncovering the truth. Ya'akov, however, does not hesitate throughout this interrogation, and perseveres until he achieves his goal. Rivka's resoluteness is now manifested in him. This flows from their realization that this is the proper act, and it must be followed to the end, despite the moral difficulty involved. Even Yitzchak's "very great trembling" when deception is revealed, and Esav's "very great and bitter cry" and his heartrending sob, do not cause Rivka and Ya'akov to go back on their plan or to apologize. Once more, we see here the inner peace, with no qualms, that defines their actions.

2) The Double Exposition

Our narrative ends at the close of Parashat Toledot, with Ya'akov setting out for Charan at his parents' command, and with the marriage of Esav to Machalat the daughter of Yishma'el - two direct results of Ya'akov's taking of the berakhot. Where, however, is the beginning of our narrative? It seems to lie in the verses describing Esav's marriage to two Hittite women (26:34-35), who were a source of bitterness to Yitzchak and Rivka. These two verses have nothing at all to do with what precedes them; however, their relationship to the end of our narrative is clear, as the Rashbam notes: "Since it will later state (27:46): 'If Ya'akov takes a Hittite wife LIKE THESE...' it had to explain this first." In the contemporary literary lexicon, this technique is known as "exposition" - an introduction or background to a narrative.

However, it is possible that this exposition has an even greater significance. It may indicate that Esav, in marrying Canaanite women, broke with the tradition of his forebears Avraham and Yitzchak, who opposed with all their strength such a union. Consequently, he has demonstrated that he is unfit to receive the blessing of Avraham. Thus, at this section's very beginning, the narrative already records a hint justifying the actions of Rivka and Ya'akov.

In addition, there is a second exposition to our narrative (27:1): "It was when Yitzchak had grown old and his eyes were too dim to see..." Of course, this explains how it was possible to trick Yitzchak; but there is something deeper in its proximity to the story of Esav's misbegotten marriage. One must wonder: if Esav's wives so embitter Yitzchak, why does he want to bless him?

It appears that Scripture hints to an answer to this: "His eyes were too dim to see." This is not only a technical explanation that prefaces the episode; it also serves as a moral critique. Similarly, in Sefer Shemuel, the depiction of Eli's physical blindness also alludes to his inability to recognize his sons' true nature (compare [I Shemuel 3:2](#) to 3:13). Indeed, blindness is used many times in Scripture as a metaphor for a lack of moral discrimination: "For the bribe blinds the eyes of the wise" ([Shemot 23:8](#)). In fact, the midrash ([Bereishit Rabba 65:5](#)) explicitly links Yitzchak's blindness to his poor judgment, and hints that the delicacies Esav regularly brought Yitzchak constituted a bribe which blinded him.

3) Yitzchak's Reaction

In comparison with Rivka's resolution and Ya'akov's confidence, Yitzchak's hesitation and impotence are striking. One cannot say that he blessed Ya'akov in complete confidence that he was Esav; after all, "the voice is the voice of Ya'akov" (27:22), and how could Yitzchak resolve the contradiction between the voice and the other evidence? It appears that Yitzchak should have waited a little, until his suspicions could be addressed. Why did he decide nevertheless to bless the man who stood before him? It would seem that Yitzchak took into account the possibility that it was Ya'akov whom he was blessing, and nevertheless decided to proceed.

Anyone who doubts this need only read the continuation of the story. Esav returns from his hunt, and the subterfuge is revealed. The following is Yitzchak's reaction (27:33):

"Yitzchak was seized with a very violent trembling and said: Who was it then who hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it before you came and I blessed him; moreover, he shall be blessed!"

There is a clear contradiction between the opening of the verse and its conclusion, and the Ramban notes this:

"It is not the way of one who is 'seized with a very violent trembling' and cries, 'Who tricked me into blessing him?' to say immediately after, 'Moreover, he shall be blessed!' Rather, it is appropriate to curse him..."

Yitzchak's question, then, is a rhetorical one, intended to express his lasting wonder concerning Ya'akov's action, which still receives his stamp of approval.

If so, what is the meaning of Yitzchak's trembling? This is simply the trembling of a father who discovers his prolonged mistake in evaluating his sons, who understands the implications as regards his family. This is the basis of Yitzchak's continued refusal to provide Esav with another blessing; even what he finally gives him does not have the status of a blessing.

Yitzchak's eyes, which at the start of the narrative were described as "too dim to see," become progressively clearer as the story goes on. At first he blesses Ya'akov because of a misapprehension as to his identity; later on, he authorizes his blessing to Ya'akov. In the finale, he calls Ya'akov, and of his own initiative gives him a new blessing (28:3-4): that of Abraham, encompassing the blessing of seed and the blessing of land. If Yitzchak himself seems to admit his mistake in wanting to bless Esav and retroactively justifies Ya'akov's course of actions, who are we to second-guess him?

THE STORY'S ENDING

There is no doubt that the story of the taking of the blessing is a dramatic event that had a definite influence on Yitzchak's family and on the personal lot of Ya'akov from this point forward. Ya'akov leaves his parents' house for many years, and when he returns he will not merit to find his mother alive; between the twin brothers will be a deep abyss, and their rift will never be repaired.

However, note that when we reach the end of the story, the place where these changes in the family structure are first presented, the narrative does not give a feeling of a traumatic family watershed, but rather, on the contrary, provides a picture of appeasement and calming, a sort of "happy ending" that serves as a counterpoint to the intense drama of the story.

Even though Rivka orders Ya'akov "to flee" to Lavan "until your brother's wrath subsides" (27:43-45), it is never said that Ya'akov "flees;" rather, Ya'akov "goes" to Lavan as his father commands him (28:2): "Rise, go to Padan Aram... and take for yourself a wife from the daughters of Lavan." The reason for his going is positive: to realize the blessing of Avraham by finding an appropriate partner with whom to build the family that will inherit it.

Even Esav does not see Ya'akov's departure as flight, but rather as fulfilling their father's command and blessing (28:6-7). Esav does not now object to the blessing that Yitzchak has given Ya'akov, but rather he appears to understand the link between the blessing and marriage to a kinswoman, as well as the unworthiness of anyone who would marry a Canaanite. In order to appease his father, Esav follows in Ya'akov's footsteps by marrying a kinswoman (although he still keeps his Canaanite wives - see 28:9). The overall impression at the end of the story is that everyone has returned to his proper place, and there is even a sense of relief at the mistake that had been averted. Even Esav accepts his place in the new order of things.

YA'AKOV'S DEBT TO ESAV

Esav's "very great and bitter cry" at the moment he learns Ya'akov has taken his blessing, and his bitter weeping after that, touch the heart and bring the reader to identify with his pain. Esav is not guilty of anything; he is simply a victim of the tragic situation into which he was thrown against his will. Our sympathy is therefore justified. However, is there something in this that impinges on the rightness of Ya'akov's actions? Not necessarily.

It is true that the midrash ([Bereishit Rabba 67:4](#)) links Esav's "very great and bitter cry," inspired by the treachery of Ya'akov, to the "great and bitter cry" of Mordekhai, Ya'akov's descendant, inspired by the treachery of Esav's descendant Haman. However, in light of the many statements of the Sages justifying Ya'akov's deceit, it appears that the intention of this midrash is more complex than a simple condemnation. Ya'akov indeed did what he did because he was thrown into a situation against his will; otherwise, his deceit would have been unacceptable. Nevertheless, his action seriously injured an innocent, Esav. Therefore, a debt devolves on the agent of that injury, even though no moral claim may be made against him.

The proper moral decision is not always between good and evil; sometimes it is between a greater and a lesser evil - but

this does not exempt the one who commits the lesser evil from his debt.[4]

ESAV'S CHANGE OF HEART

Our story ends as it began: detailing Esav's marriages. At the beginning, he took Hittite women who displeased his parents; at the end, Scripture relates that Esav learnt from Ya'akov's example and "took Machalat, daughter of Yishma'el son of Avraham ... to him as a wife" (28:9). The Sages dispute whether this is to be seen in a positive or a negative light. I believe that the simple meaning of the text indicates that this was a positive development, indicating Esav's desire to mend his ways (in line with the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshu'a ben Levi in [Bereishit Rabba 67:7](#), and that of the beraita in [Yerushalmi Bikkurim 3:3](#)).

Now we must ask: why does Esav change between the opening and the closing of the narrative? We must approach this from the end and work backwards. Esav's penitence emerges from his seeing Ya'akov going to Charan by his father's command to take a kinswoman as his wife. But why did Ya'akov go now specifically? Because Rivka motivated his departure, even persuading Yitzchak to command him to do so. Why did Rivka initiate this? Because she heard the words of Esav, who was consoling himself with the thought of murdering his brother. Why did Esav contemplate this? Since Ya'akov took his berakha, and so in reverse until we reach the beginning: "It was when Yitzchak grew old..."

It turns out that if we analyze the narrative in light of its opening and closing, the purpose of the main body of the narrative is to answer the question: how did Esav's character undergo this paradigm shift? How did he become a penitent? (Of course, this reading of the story presents only one facet of its meaning.) The answer is not simple and not easy: the pain and anguish which Esav suffered as a result of the taking of his blessings led to the purification of his personality. It is not Esav's anger and will to vengeance that are expressed at the story's end, but rather his walking in the footsteps of his brother, attempting to please his father by marrying Machalat the daughter of Yishmael.

NOTES:

1] The link to Avraham's blessing is revealed at the end of Yitzchak's words: "Those who condemn you are condemned;

those who bless you are blessed" (27:29) parallels "And I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will condemn" (12:3).

2] Chazal also make this connection - see [Bereishit Rabba 67:2](#), Tanchuma (Buber) 23, and Rashi 27:36.

3] According to the Netziv's explanation, we can also understand Rivka's silence throughout her twenty-year barrenness, as well as the fact that she turned to God and not to Yitzchak when her pregnancy became painful. However, Rivka's turning to Yitzchak at the end of our story (regarding her desire that Ya'akov not marry a Hittite - 2:46) does not dovetail with his explanation.

4] This may be compared to David's inability to build the Temple because "You spilled much blood" (I Divrei Ha-yamim 22:8) in fighting "God's wars" (I Shemu'el 18:17, 25:28); or to the Talmudic requirement that one may fast on Shabbat in the wake of a disturbing dream, yet he must then fast again during the week to compensate for his impinging on the "delight of Shabbat" ([Shabbat 11a](#), [Berakhot 31a](#)).

[Translated and adapted by Yoseif Bloch]

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