

"And the Children Strove Within Her"

By Rav Elchanan Samet

A. THE TWO HALVES OF THE STORY, AND THE PARALLEL BETWEEN THEM

There can be no doubt that the beginning of our parasha (25:19) represents the start of a new story. "And these are the generations of Yitzchak...." According to the traditional division of parashiot, the story concludes at the end of chapter 25. The account of the birth and youth of Yaakov and Esav must therefore be regarded as a single story.

Two halves make themselves immediately apparent, each comprising 8 verses.

Section 1 (verses 19-26) – Birth:

This story also includes the background: the marriage of Yitzchak and Rivka, Rivka's infertility and her eventual pregnancy, the difficulties of her pregnancy, and finally the description of the unusual birth and the names given to the infants.

Section 2 (verses 27-34) – Growing Up:

The opening words of this section – "And the boys grew up" – skips over a period of several years, and places before the reader two youths who have chosen their respective occupations. This section also includes the description of the parents' attitudes towards their children (28) and the scene of the selling of the birthright (29-34).

Only four characters appear throughout the story as a whole, in two pairs: Yitzchak and Rivka, and Yaakov and Esav. In each half of the story one of the pairs plays the central role. In the first half, the main active characters are Yitzchak and Rivka, the parents. The names of the brothers, Esav and Yaakov, appear only at the end of this half: Esav's name appears twice, and Yaakov's – once.

In the second half of the story, the central characters are Yaakov and Esav, while Yitzchak and Rivka are mentioned only once, in the description of their respective preferences with regard to their sons (28). In this half Esav's name is mentioned seven times, while Yaakov's name appears eight times, thus balancing the advantage of Esav in the previous half.

The equality in the number of appearances of the brothers' names – nine times each – also testifies to the unity of the story

as a whole. This type of phenomenon is common in biblical stories that present a conflict between two characters, as in our case.

Is there any parallel between the two halves of the story, and if so, what is its nature?

It would appear that verses 19-21 in the first half (the marriage of Yitzchak and Rivka, and Rivka's barrenness up until her eventual pregnancy) have no parallel in the second half; they represent an introduction to the story as a whole. These verses connect the second couple of our forebears to the first: Rivka, like Sarah her predecessor, is barren. But most importantly, the story of Rivka's barrenness serves as a preparation for a special birth, and for sons who are unusual. Twenty years of waiting precede the arrival of these twins, and from that moment onward they fill the lives of their parents as only children.

The other two subjects discussed in the first half would seem to have a parallel in the second half. Let us compare the issues as they appear in each half, one against the other, and then explain the parallel between them:

A. Section 1 (v.22-23): Rivka's difficult pregnancy, and its explanation by God's word

Section 2 (v.27-28): The different professions chosen by the brothers, and the division of their parent's love for them

B. Section 1 (v.24-26): birth of the twins, the description of each as the reason for the name given to him

Section 2 (v.29-34): sale of the birthright

A. FIRST PARALLEL: Section 1 describes how, during Rivka's pregnancy, "the children strove within her" and how she was prophetically told, upon inquiring: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will separate from your insides." Section 2 describes the continuation of this struggle and the beginning of the parting of ways between the two brothers who are so different from one another. Now the struggle takes place not within Rivka's womb, but rather in their parents' home.

Like Kayin and Hevel before them, Esav and Yaakov divide the world between them. Esav chooses the field – agriculture and hunting, while Yaakov chooses shepherding – the sitting of the shepherd in tents (Rashbam, Ibn Ezra). This differentiation in the choice of professions contains within itself the great conflict that existed in the ancient world between the two branches of human culture: workers of the land vs. shepherds, or stationary people vs. nomads.

The struggle between the brothers since before their birth spreads to those around them – their parents: "And Yitzchak loved Esav for the hunt was in his mouth, and Rivka loved Yaakov." The division in the parents' love for their two children is one reflection of the "struggle" between Esav and Yaakov.

Yitzchak's love for Esav is based on the latter's choice of profession – "for the hunt was in his mouth;" Ibn Ezra explains: "He brought the [animals trapped in the] hunt to [Yitzchak's] mouth." Rivka's love, on the other hand, is given no explicit reason. The Rashbam proposes two possible explanations: one is related to section 1, "She recognized his integrity," the other to section 2 – "and also because of what God had told her (verse 23), 'the elder will serve the younger.'"

B. SECOND PARALLEL: What Yaakov does unwittingly in section 1 – holding on to Esav's foot as they are born – is a symbol of the relationship between the brothers as it finds expression in several events during the course of their lives. In section 2 Yaakov again "follows" or "stalks" Esav, but this time both parties are fully conscious of what is taking place.

Even Esav's name – "Edom," the reason for which is hinted at in section 1 on the basis of his external appearance – "ruddy" – is given a more profound basis in section 2, based on his behavior: his appetite for "this red, red [porridge]."

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORY BASED ON THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ITS TWO PARTS

What is the contribution of our study thus far – definition of the boundaries of the story as a whole, and the exploration of its structure as a story composed of two equal halves that parallel one another in a straightforward manner – to the definition of the subject of the narrative as a whole?

We defined above the complex subject of our narrative: the story of the birth and the youthful years of Yaakov and Esav. But what connects these two components? Is it merely the chronological dimension – that both deal with the initial stages of the lives of the two characters? The nature of the parallels between the two parts of the story, as analyzed above, suggests a different answer to the question of the connection between the two parts.

The special circumstances of the birth and what preceded it, as described in the first half of the story, are what determine the characteristics and the deeds of the children who are born, as becomes evident in the story of their youth in the second half. The scene of the pregnancy and the scene of the birth are the key to the main events of the lives of Esav and Yaakov. This does not mean to suggest that they are denied free choice in their mutual interrelations, but the story of their lives from the very start nevertheless contains, with implicit symbolic brevity and an explicit prophetic vision, all that is destined to happen to them, both in their personal relations as brothers and in the relationship between the nations they are destined to father.

The function of the story of their youth – i.e., the second half – is to begin describing the realization of what was symbolized in the first half, in the pregnancy and the birth, as part of this story

itself. But this points principally towards what is to come. The premature realization of what was hinted at in the first half teaches that "this thing is truly from God, and God will hasten to perform it." That which is revealed in our story, already in the early years of the brothers, will be revealed increasingly during the course of their lives, and even afterwards, in the chronicles of the nations of Israel and Edom throughout biblical history. Our story, and particularly its first half, is a sort of "genetic code" (almost literally) for the complex tissue of life that will form later on.

C. "THE ELDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER"

We have mentioned that the story of the birth and youthful years of Yaakov and Esav serves as the basis for what we are told about them later on. This is particularly true in relation to the longest and most important episode describing their relationship – the story of the blessings in chapter 27. In the following sections we shall examine the way in which our story prepares the way for a proper understanding of the episode of the blessings, in a profound and most important dimension – that of the judging and evaluation of the characters and actions in this story.

In my previous shiur on parashat Toldot (VBM 5761), I tried to assess the Torah's moral opinion regarding Ya'akov's acquisition of the blessing, by examining the information provided in the story of the blessings itself. However, I noted then that the context should also be taken into consideration: what are we told prior to the story that may serve as a yardstick for our evaluation, and what events took place as a consequence of the story? I would like to now take up this question, pertaining to what preceded the blessings.

In studying the stories of the forefathers, we cannot properly understand the people and actions described unless we pay attention to the fact that the forefathers acted out of a consciousness that they were chosen by God, the founders of His nation and the heirs of His inheritance. Consciousness of this destiny gives many of their actions the significance of acts aimed at creating a certain future and bringing about a certain historical destiny. The story of the blessings is likewise impossible to understand without recognition of the consciousness of destiny that motivated both Rivka and Yaakov with relation to the future: both are aware that it is Yaakov who is meant to be the father of the nation that is destined to enter into a covenant with God and to carry the blessing given to Avraham. They are therefore clearly aware that giving the blessing to Esav, as Yitzchak means to do, would be a grave error, contradicting the Divine plan, and that they must do everything in order to correct it – even if the correction will involve difficult consequences for their lives in the present. This consciousness of destiny on the part of both of them has its source in our story, as will become clear below.

Rivka felt a particular difficulty in her pregnancy. The text defines this difficulty with the words, "The children strove within her," thereby revealing to us that which Rivka does not yet know: she is carrying twins. Rivka goes to inquire of God as to the meaning of her difficulty, and the answer she receives includes a prophetic vision concerning the distant future. This prophecy is conveyed in poetic form, composed of two parallels:

(23) "Two nations are in your womb

and two peoples will separate from your insides.

One people will strive against the other

And the elder will serve the younger."

Rivka is not asking a medical question about a painful pregnancy. She goes to INQUIRE OF GOD – an expression which, in similar contexts, refers to an appeal to a prophet to explain the FUTURE. Indeed, God's answer reveals to Rivka the distant future, where the explanation for her difficulties is to be found. The Radak comments:

"The prophet told her, in God's name, that the change that she discovered within herself through her fetuses was a sign for the future. For there would be TWO nations – they would not be a single nation... and the sign: that even in the womb they were striving against one another, and this was a sign that they would behave in the same way after they were born and when they would become older...

'...Will separate from your insides' – when they come out of your insides they will noticeably part ways with one another... for this one would be a man with 'the hunt in his mouth,' while the other would be a 'quiet man,' and likewise they would be different in their hearts..."

The two stanzas of the prophecy are not similar to one another from the point of view of either content or form. The subject of the first stanza is "two nations," and it is structured as a simple and progressive parallel:

"Two nations are in your womb

and two peoples will separate from your insides."

The second stanza, in contrast, is chiasmic, and the subject changes in the middle:

"One nation will prevail against the other

and the elder will serve the younger."

The subject of the first half here is the nation that will prevail against the other. The second half exchanges both the order and the subject: the elder will serve the younger. This represents a rather surprising conclusion to the prophecy, and therefore the chiasmic structure is particularly fitting, for it inverts the expected order. It does not say, "One nation will prevail against the other / and one nation will serve his brother," but

rather identifies the one who will prevail – the younger, and the one who will serve him – the elder. The crux of the surprise lies in the fact that this situation is not the natural order; in general the "greatest" or "eldest" among brothers is the firstborn, who has control over the family and who inherits the material wealth. The chiasmic structure of the second stanza and the sudden break in the straightforward style is a stylistic device aimed at highlighting the surprising news that these words contain: "the elder shall serve the younger."

This departure from the natural order of the world will force the younger to exert considerable "effort" (ma'amatz) in order to prevail (ye'ematz) over his elder brother, and this effort itself will arouse his brother's forces of opposition: HENCE THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE BROTHERS IN RIVKA'S WOMB.

The answer to Rivka's question is therefore to be found in the final portion of the prophecy. The fact that she carries the progenitors of TWO nations is not enough to explain the struggle. The explanation lies in the tension and competition between them, and specifically in the fact that it is the younger who will prevail. (The essence of this interpretation is to be found in Derashot ha-Ran, Discourse #2, p. 25.)

The answer is not meant to relive Rivka and convince her that her pregnancy is "normal," considering that she is carrying twins, but rather the opposite: it is truly an abnormal pregnancy, because of the future potential contained in those twins. It is this foreknowledge that relieves Rivka – there is an explanation for the suffering of her pregnancy, and the suffering is worthwhile in light of this unique historical destiny in which the younger of her sons – and apparently the more worthy – will prevail over his elder brother.

This dramatic prophecy, conveyed to Rivka while the twins are still inside her, is an important key in our understanding of her relationship with Yaakov, her younger son, and of her actions in the story of the blessings. Rashbam notes this in his explanation of the words, "the elder shall serve the younger": "Therefore she loved Yaakov, for he was loved by the Holy One." When Yitzchak was ready to bless one of his sons with the blessings of rulership and power, Rivka knows with prophetic certainty who the blessings belong to, and thus the wording of Yitzchak's blessing parallels the prophecy told to Rivka:

"One nation shall prevail over the OTHER NATION (mi-le'om), and the elder SHALL SERVE (ya'avod) the younger." (25:23)

"Nations WILL SERVE YOU (ya'avdukha) and NATIONS (le'umim) will bow down to you;

you shall be a master to your brothers, and your mother's children will bow down to you." (27:29)

Yitzchak, too, knows that one of his sons will serve the other, but his formulation leaves the question of who will serve whom without a clear answer. This will depend, obviously, on the question of who actually receives that blessing. If Esav were to

receive it, it would completely contradict the prophecy that Rivkah received.

D. "BREAKING OF THE SYMMETRY" IN THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF ESAV AND YAAKOV

As our story continues, the brothers are counterposed on three occasions (prior to the great encounter in the story of the selling of the birthright): a. in the description of their birth; b. in the description of their professions, and c. in the description of Yitzchak's love for Esav and Rivka's love for Yaakov. These three brief occasions continue the earlier struggle between them, and represent the beginning of the realization of the prophecy.

In analyzing these three occasions, I shall follow the study of Yosef Tzamudi ("Parallels and Contrasts: On Characterizations in Biblical Narratives," in his book, *Iyun Sheni ba-Mikra*, Jerusalem, 5749). He introduces his article as follows:

"It is well known that the Torah generally refrains from a direct characterization of the characters by the narrator, but rather adopts INDIRECT MEANS... One of the common methods of characterization in the Torah is THE JUXTAPOSITION OF A PAIR OF DIFFERENT – EVEN CONTRASTING – CHARACTERS IN A PARALLEL SITUATION, WITH INVERSE SYMMETRY, such that each character sheds light on the other and is illuminated by the other."

He illustrates this by means of the first biblical story in which this phenomenon is to be found – the story of Kayin and Hevel. The verses (4:3-4), "And Kayin brought of the fruits of the ground as an offering to God; and Hevel, too, brought from the choicest of his flock and of their fats," contain a phenomenon that he calls "THE BREAKING OF THE SYMMETRY IN BOTH HALVES OF THE VERSE:"

"'And Kayin brought' as opposed to 'And Hevel... brought' (in Hebrew, the order of the words is reversed), is a chiasmic parallel that arouses our expectation of a complete symmetrical correspondence; the addition '(Hevel) too' increases it; but the continuation, 'from the choicest of his flock and of their fats' breaks the expected symmetry and highlights the lack of correspondence with the first half. This breaking of the symmetry confuses the reader and forces him to reevaluate the actions of the brothers, and to sense the great difference between them. The same sort of technique, BUILDING UP EXPECTATIONS AND SUDDENLY BREAKING THEM, is to be found in no small number of other ironic or rhetoric expressions, and is not at all unusual in the Torah."

As the broadest illustration of this type of characterization, Tzamudi brings the three descriptions in our parasha:

i. (25) "And the first one emerged

all reddish, like a cloak of hair

and they called his name Esav.

(26) And afterwards his brother emerged,

his hand grasping the ankle of Esav,

and they called his name Yaakov."

"From the very moment of their birth, there is a recognizable difference in the characters of the two brothers. The lack of symmetry stands out from the start, specifically because they are born as twins. The first characterization describes Esav's UNUSUAL EXTERNAL APPEARANCE, while Yaakov is characterized by means of an UNUSUAL ACT – an act that points to his motivation and drive. This may be a first hint at the difference in character between them... Esav is revealed as what he is, while Yaakov is revealed in terms of what he desires."

We may add to the above that, aside from the value of this characterization itself, the description of the birth contains a first confirmation for Rivka concerning the prophecy she heard while pregnant. With condensed symbolism the situation expresses the dissatisfaction of the second (younger) twin with his status: his seizing of Esav's ankle is a halting of the stride of the elder brother. This act therefore expresses the willingness of the younger brother to exert himself – from within the womb and from the moment of birth – in order to acquire the birthright for himself. For Rivka – and for us, the readers – the events hint that what began within the womb is now continuing with the birth of the twins, and will continue to develop in the future.

b. (27) "And the boys grew up

and Esav became a man who knew the hunt;

a man of the field,

while Yaakov was a simple man,

Dwelling in tents."

"In terms of rhythm and form, the above verse (especially in the Hebrew original) appears altogether symmetrical, but the content breaks it apart. Each brother chooses a profession that suits his personality and tendencies. Esav, the stormy and adventurous one, chooses the life of the hunt, while Yaakov, with his profound inner life,

chooses the tranquil life of the shepherd. But the title 'a simple man' (ish tam) for Yaakov represents a departure from the symmetry. Firstly, there is no qualitative connection between the expressions 'a simple man' and 'dwelling in tents' such as we find in the case of 'a man who knew the hunt – a man of the field.' And secondly, being a 'simple man' is a moral characterization – it has no parallel in the description of Esav. If we accept the assumption that a breaking of symmetry in the text is neither coincidental nor arbitrary, but rather a hint at some hidden significance, then we must ask ourselves what this phenomenon indicates in our situation. It is specifically that rarity of a direct moral characterization in the Torah that bestows on this description a unique weight."

We may add that it is not only Yaakov's moral characterization as a "simple man" that awards his character preferential status (via the break in symmetry), but also the very description of his profession. The expression "sitting in tents," which means "a shepherd," is a double contrast – both to Esav's being a "man who knew the hunt" and to his being "a man of the field," i.e., a farmer. The contrast between a farmer and a shepherd brings us back to the contrast between Kayin and Hevel, and the preference for the latter. Esav's hunting of wild animals and Yaakov's shepherding are the opposite of one another in an even stronger sense: although both professions concern animals, the relationship of the hunter towards them is the opposite to that of the shepherd. Furthermore, hunting represents a pre-cultural stage in the development of the human race, while agriculture and shepherding are both branches of human culture.

c. (28) "And Yitzchak loved Esav

For the hunt was in his mouth.

And Rivka loved Yaakov."

"Once again, close to the verse describing the professions of the brothers, we find a verse that is asymmetrical. The reason for Yitzchak's love is stated explicitly, while the reason for Rivka's is not. But what is the meaning of this reason, 'for the hunt was in his mouth'?... His weakness for 'tasty foods'... through which his affections could be bought, and his eyes that had become blinded with age... (teach) that Yitzchak does not see things objectively! ... His view is external, and his judgment mistaken... In contrast to Yitzchak, Rivka is depicted as completely aware and of sharp vision. The lack of explanation for her love for Yaakov tells us, as it were, that her love is obvious, that it is not dependent on anything, and that Yaakov's advantages are clear..."

We may add to this that it is possible that Rivka's love for Yaakov requires no explaining, for in fact we have already been told the reason – both in his moral characterization as a "simple man" and in God's promise, "the elder shall serve the younger."

We may summarize by saying that these three dual characterizations of the two brothers come to highlight the advantage of Yaakov's personality over that of Esav, and this justifies Rivka's love for Yaakov over Yitzchak's love for Esav. All of this comes as a preliminary justification for the very serious act that Rivka and Yaakov will undertake in the story of the blessings – the steering of Yitzchak's blessing in the direction of the son worthy of it.

E. SALE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT

Thus far we have explained the scene of the sale of the birthright in relation to the scene of the birth, as a first stage in the realization of the symbolic hint in the birth, and as a second reason for Yaakov's name. But the scene of the sale is also of great importance as preparation for the story of the blessings, and specifically in the dimension that we have just discussed: the moral evaluation the personalities and actions in that story.

Firstly, we must address the formal, legal ramifications of the sale when it comes to the story of the blessings. If the sale is indeed legally valid, then how does it influence the right to receive the blessing from Yitzchak?

It would seem that Yitzchak intended to bless Esav because he was the firstborn; as the Ramban comments (27:4):

"He intended to bless him that he would merit the blessing given to Avraham, to inherit the land, and to be the covenantal partner of God, FOR HE WAS THE ELDER."

This becomes apparent both from Yaakov's words, when he pretends to be Esav (27:19), "I am Esav YOUR FIRSTBORN," and from the words of Esav himself (verse 32), "I am your FIRSTBORN son, Esav." But in the same story, the text consistently refers to Esav as "the elder son" (see verses 1, 15 and 42); it never refers to him as the "firstborn." It therefore hints that Esav is no longer considered the firstborn, since he has sold this right to Yaakov.

Esav himself hints at the connection between the sale of the birthright and the taking of the blessing:

(27:36) "... He TOOK MY BIRTHRIGHT, and behold, now he has TAKEN MY BLESSING."

While he is clearly protesting having been "supplanted" twice, his actual words hint at the connection between the first "taking" and the second "taking," and this connection is further strengthened by the play on words ("my birthright" – bekhorati – and "my blessing" – birkhati – differ only in the order of the letters).

It is clear that neither Esav nor Yaakov told anyone the story of the sale of the birthright, and each of them obviously had his own reasons for this. But when Yaakov comes to take the blessing that is meant for the firstborn, he does so with the knowledge that he acquired the birthright from Esav, who had relinquished it and sold it to him.

But even without the legal significance of the sale, the act still has a different influence on the story of the blessings: in this act Esav is revealed as someone who is worthy of neither the birthright nor the blessing.

What were Yaakov's motives in requesting the birthright from Esav? He certainly could not have meant thereby to attain an immediate economic advantage over him (by means of a double portion of his father's inheritance): Yaakov did not publicize the sale, so how could any advantage that he claimed be realized only on the basis of a promise given to him by Esav without any witnesses or any written document? Clearly, then, Yaakov's motives arose out of a consciousness of the distant future – the consciousness of his destiny.

Why does Esav agree to sell his birthright for some bread and a pot of lentils? For the opposite reason:

([Yishayahu 22:14](#)) "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die."

([Bereishit 25:32](#)) "Behold, I am going to die; what is my birthright worth to me?"

Esav is depicted here as a person who lives for the moment. This fact becomes even more apparent in the description that concludes the incident of the sale:

(25:34) ... "And he ate and drank, and he got up and went, and Esav despised the birthright."

Through this shameful behavior Esav disqualifies himself for either the birthright or the blessing.

Hence we find that as we approach the story of the blessings, Rivka and Yaakov are equipped with the knowledge that Yitzchak lacks. We cannot be certain whether this double knowledge – of God's promise, "the elder shall serve the younger," and of the sale of the birthright – flowed in both directions between mother and younger son. But we, as readers, in any event receive all this information as preparation for the story of the blessings. The conclusion we may draw from our story is that both Rivka and Yaakov had a firm foundation for the act that they conspired together to commit: to correct Yitzchak's fateful mistake, and to return the blessing to the son worthy of it.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)