

## And Now My Son Listen to My Voice

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

We tend to think of Rivka as the hero of Parashat Toldot. She saves not just the day, but the future as well. In the core action of the parasha, Yitzchak decides to pass on the precious family heritage, the blessings, to Eisav. He loves Eisav, the respect Eisav gives him and the food Eisav brings him (25:28). He is the first born, a perfectly good son and a worthy heir. But Rivka knows better. She recognizes Eisav for who he truly is. She loves Ya'akov and remembers the revelation received during her pregnancy (Rashbam 25:23, 27:13, Ramban 27:4,15). She takes action. Without hesitation, she orders Ya'akov to help her prepare an imitation "product of the hunt," to pose as Eisav and to take the blessings (27:5-10). Overriding all opposition from Ya'akov, she dresses Ya'akov in Eisav's clothing, gives Ya'akov the food and sends him to Yitzchak (27:11-17). Despite Yitzchak's suspicion, the plan succeeds (27:18-29) and with a little bit of trickery, Ya'akov receives the blessings. Tragedy is avoided and the covenant is saved. The nationhood, land and blessing promised to Avraham's descendants goes to a nation known as the Children of Israel and not the Children of Eisav.

Reading Rivka as the heroine of the parasha places her at a pivotal point in the development of a crucial theme in Sefer Bereishit. Brotherhood, competition and preference constitute one of the key motifs of the book. Throughout Bereishit, we are presented with a succession of pairs of brothers, an older and a younger. In each case, despite the normal rule of primogeniture, (the primacy of the first born), the younger, the not-first born is preferred. The pattern begins with Kayin and Hevel (4:1-4) and continues on in Yishma'el vs. Yitzchak (17:19-21), Eisav vs. Ya'akov (28:1-4,13), Re'uven vs. Yosef-Yehuda (37:1-3, 48:22, 49:4,8-10) and Menashe vs. Ephraim (48:13-20). This pattern of switching, of going against the grain, connects with one of the key themes of the Sefer. It is a sign of God's providence. Not just the standard social pattern of preferring the first matters. God's will and the persona of the people involved matter even more.

As such, Rivka stands at a crucial juncture. Until this point, the choice of the younger, the "switching," has been done solely by God. It is God and God alone who accepts the offering of Hevel as opposed to that of Kayin (4:4-5). It is God alone who decides to establish his covenant with Yitzchak rather than with Yishma'el (17:19-21). But from this point on, in the latter part of the book, the switch involves human initiative. It is Rivka who replaces Eisav with Ya'akov, Ya'akov who prefers Yosef and Yehuda over Re'uven and of course Ya'akov who crosses his

hands over the heads of Menashe and Ephraim. All of this begins with Rivka. It is she who teaches her son and the reader that sometimes divine providence requires a certain amount of human action in order to be realized. It needs to be worked for, steered, directed and dragged into the world. Rivka is not just the heroine of the story of Chapter Twenty-seven, the theft of the blessings. She is also the teacher of a crucial lesson, the need for human vision, activism and initiation as a necessary condition for proper realization of the divine plan.

## II

The marriage of Ya'akov and the marriage of Yitzchak have much in common. Near the end of Parashat Toldot, Yitzchak summons Ya'akov and forbids him to take a bride from among the local inhabitants, "the daughters of Canaan" (28:1). Rather he is to travel to (Padan) Aram to "take a wife" from the house of Betu'el and Lavan (28:2). Yitzchak's command clearly echoes the command given by Avraham to his servant and the servant's accomplishment of the command in Chapter Twenty-four. Avraham forbade the "daughters of Canaan" (24:3) and commanded his servant to "take a wife" (24:4) for Yitzchak from his land and birthplace. This turned out to be the house of Betu'el and Lavan in Aram (Naharaim) (24:10,23,24,50).

Moreover, in both stories the future bride is found at a source of water. In what might be thought of as a groom, bride and well scene, Ya'akov meets Rachel at a well (29:2,10). This of course echoes the finding of Rivka at the well (24:11-15). Serving as a kind of stand in for Yitzchak, the servant meets the bride at the water.

In addition, the ends of the stories, the parting and return sections, are eerily similar. In both cases, the "groom" asks to be "freed" to return home (24:54, 30:25). In each case, despite wanting to prevent the trip, Lavan and his family are forced to accede to God's wish and are consequently unable to comment whether the matter is good or bad (24:50-51,55, 31:23,29). Finally, each story ends with a blessing delivered by Lavan to his departing relatives (24:55,60, 32:1).

The parallels between the bride search trip of the servant and the bride search trip of Ya'akov should focus our attention on a crucial aspect of Ya'akov's time in the house of Lavan, - its duration. While the servant succeeded and parted from the relatives in the course of a single day, Yaakov's trip took him over twenty years. Not the brief trip of the servant, not the brief trip probably expected by Yitzchak, nor the "few days" necessary

for the passing of Eisav's anger (27:44-45) predicted by Rivka. Nor were these easy years. The very verse that gives us the number twenty also describes the quality of those years.

For twenty years I have been in your house,  
fourteen years I served you for your two  
daughters and six years for your cattle, and  
you have switched my wages ten times.  
(31:41)

Years of hard work, treachery, trickery and switches.

### III

Let us turn our attention to another blatant difference between the marriage of Yitzchak and the marriage of Ya'akov. Yitzchak succeeded in marrying Rivka almost immediately. For Ya'akov, marrying the girl from the well was not so easy. He first had to contend with the wiles of Lavan.

The story is familiar. Rather than have Ya'akov work for him for free, Lavan generously offers his own "flesh and bone" a salary (29:14-15). Ya'akov and Lavan agree that Ya'akov will work for seven years. As compensation he will receive the hand of his beloved Rachel, Lavan's younger daughter in marriage (29:18-19). But all does not go as planned. On the night of the wedding, Lavan switches Leah for Rachel, replacing his younger daughter with his older daughter.

The story contains numerous echoes of the events of Parashat Toldot and constitutes a reversal of many of its key themes. Before even getting to the switch, let us consider the original deal. Lavan describes himself as Ya'akov's brother and immediately puts him to work, described by the word for service, or slavery, the stem ayin, bet, dalet (29:15). In place of the prediction of the prophecy, "ve-rav ya'avod tzair", (and the older brother shall serve the younger brother) (25:23), Rivka's motivation for arranging the theft of the blessings, Ya'akov finds himself in the reverse situation. He, the younger clansman - "brother" - now serves his older clansman - "brother" - Lavan.

Ironically, this situation has been arranged by Rivka herself. In an attempt to save Ya'akov from the wrath of Eisav, his biological brother, Rivka suggests that Ya'akov seek refuge in the house of Lavan, her brother and Ya'akov's clan-brother, for a "few days" (27:43-45). These "few days" turn out to be a lot longer than a few days. In another example of irony, the Torah uses this exact phrase, "yamim achadim," in describing Ya'akov's perception of the seven years of servitude that Ya'akov endured in exchange for the hand of Rachel (29:20). They passed quickly for him as he labored for a desired end. But did they pass quickly for Rivka? In fact, the Torah never depicts Rivka as reuniting with her beloved son Ya'akov. In sum, not her expectation for the future of her son, nor her expectation for his refuge in the house of her brother, nor her expectation for a quick reunion with her son work out as planned. They are all contradicted, ironically reversed.

This brings us to Ya'akov, Lavan and Leah. In Parashat Toldot, in thieving the blessings, Ya'akov takes advantage of Yitzchak's

weak eyes, his darkness and eternal night, to replace the older child, Eisav, with the younger child, Ya'akov. Here, in the marriage, Lavan utilizes the darkness of night to pull a parallel, yet reverse switch on Ya'akov. He replaces the younger child, Rachel, with the older child, Leah. Not just the switch is reversed but also Ya'akov's role. While before, Ya'akov had been the beneficiary of the younger-older switch, here he is the victim.

A quick look at the ensuing dialogue between Ya'akov and Lavan the next morning should further strengthen this line of thinking. Needless to say, Ya'akov was upset.

And it was the morning, and behold, it was Leah: and he said to Lavan, What have you done to me? Didn't I serve you for Rachel? Why have you tricked me ("rimitani")? And Lavan said to him, it can not be done so in OUR place, to put the younger ahead of the older. (29:25-26)

Ya'akov describes Lavan's actions as "trickery," utilizing a word based on the stem "reish," "mem," "aleph." This is the exact verb stem and meaning used by Yitzchak in explaining the situation and Ya'akov's action to a disappointed Eisav. "Your brother has come with trickery ("b'mirma") and taken your blessings" (27:35). What Ya'akov did onto others has now been done onto him. In a certain sense, Ya'akov's naive outrage serves as judge and jury on his own previous actions.

Lavan's response takes all of this one step further. A careful reading of Lavan's words reveals something like the following. Perhaps in your place you switch around the younger and the older, placing the youth before the first born. But such is not the way in OUR place, a place of civilized norms. To put the younger ahead of the older? Perish the thought!

Does Lavan know what happened back in Canaan? Did Ya'akov tell him when explaining his presence in Padan Aram (29:13)? Has he heard it through the grapevine? Or is it just God arranging Lavan's words for Ya'akov ears? Either way Ya'akov is subject not only to the reversal of his very own switch and a taste of his own trickery but also to the additional humiliation of rebuke from his tormentor, the moral paragon known as Lavan.

This entire complex of themes: ironic reversal, measure for measure punishment and rebuke is captured perfectly by Midrash Tanchuma Yashan. Reading against the grain of the text, the midrash interprets Ya'akov's accusation of trickery as directed not against Lavan, but as against Leah. To fill in the resulting gap, the lack of response by Leah, it provides us with the conversation on the morning after.

All night she conducted herself as Rachel. When they stood up in the morning and behold she was Leah he said to her: "Daughter of a trickster, why did you trick me?" She replied: "And you, why did you trick your father when he said to you "Are you my son Eisav?" and you said to him "I am Eisav your

first born" (27:19-21). And now you ask "Why did you trick me?" And didn't your father say "your brother has come with trickery and taken your blessings" (27:35). (Tanchuma Yashan Vayeitzei 11)

The pot cannot call the kettle black.

#### IV

The matrix of disappointed expectations, ironic reversals, suffering, switches, measure for measure occurrences and rebuke outlined above should force us to reconsider the classical interpretation of the theft of the blessings outlined earlier. If in fact, Rivka and Ya'akov reap a bitter harvest, if in fact Ya'akov receives for twenty years what he did onto Eisav, can we really maintain the traditional interpretation? Can Rivka still be viewed as the heroine of the story? Can Ya'akov be viewed as the simple and deserving man doing just as he must?

It would seem that rather than linking to the theme of older-younger switches and divine providence in Sefer Bereishit, the theft of the blessings connects to an altogether different pattern in Sefer Bereishit.

In commenting on the inclusion of the first eleven chapters of Bereishit in the Torah, Ramban (1:1) maintains that much of the material serves the purpose of establishing a crucial pattern, the model of sin and exile. After sinning, Adam is banished from the Garden of Eden. Similarly, after killing his brother, Kayin is condemned to a life of wandering, referred to by Kayin as banishment from upon the face of the earth (4:14). Ramban argues that even the destruction of the generation of the flood can be viewed as part of this pattern. They are banished not just from the Garden of Eden, not just from grounded existence, but from the world itself. Although, Ramban does not make explicit reference to the covenant of the pieces, one can easily add the exile in Egypt to the list of sin-exile occurrences in the book of Bereishit. Ramban himself (12:10) claims that the exile constitutes retribution for Avraham's abandonment of the land and sojourn in Egypt during a time of famine.

For Ramban, this pattern serves as justification for the future banishment of the Canaanites from the Land of Israel and as warning to the children of Israel as to the conditions for remaining in the land. Sin can always lead to banishment, exile and suffering.

If so, it would seem that the stories of Parashat Toldot and Vayeitze, the theft of the blessings and the banishment and exile of Ya'akov to Padan Aram, where he suffers at the hands of Lavan, dovetail nicely with this theme. The story of the blessings is not so much part of an older-younger switching and providence theme but rather part and parcel of a sin and exile theme. The story should not be read as teaching the necessity of human initiative and the requirement of guiding divine providence but rather as a story of inappropriate activity, of error and sin.

#### V

Before considering committing to this new interpretation, we must deal with an apparent logical flaw in the error and sin approach. As pointed out earlier, we tend to think of Rivka as the heroine of the story. She prevents Yitzchak from committing an irreversible and tragic error - from giving the blessings to the undeserving Eisav, whom the Torah has already informed us cares little for the family heritage. He is a man who transgressed the family tradition by marrying a Canaanite woman, thereby creating a source of bitterness and aggravation to his parents (26:34-35), a man who "scorned" the rights of the first born and the family heritage, who sold it for a bowl of soup (25:34). But if Rivka saves Yitzchak from a tragic error, how can we view the story as one of mistake and sin? She did the right thing.

In response, let us examine the assumption underlying the question. Did Yitzchak in fact intend to pass the family heritage to Eisav? Let us take a look at the Torah's description of Yitzchak's parting words to Ya'akov. Yitzchak "blesses" Ya'akov (28:1):

And Yitzchak called Ya'akov, and blessed him...and said to him... And God Almighty should bless you and make you fruitful, and multiply you, and you should become a multitude of peoples. And he should give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and your seed with you; to inherit the land in which you dwell, which God gave to Avraham. (28:1-4)

Yitzchak explicitly blesses Ya'akov with God's granting to Ya'akov the "blessing of Avraham." The language of this blessing closely parallels the language of the blessing given to Avraham in the covenant of circumcision. There too, the name of God is "God Almighty" (Kel Shakai) (17:1). There too the blessing consists of being the father of a "multitude of nations" (17:4-5), of being "fruitful" (17:6), and of those children receiving "the land in which you dwell" (17:8). But if Ya'akov has already stolen the family jewels, has already irreversibly thieved the blessings, why does Yitzchak now wish that God give the blessings of Avraham, in both name and content, to Ya'akov?

The content of the blessings stolen by Ya'akov should help complete the picture.

See the smell of my s, it is like the smell of a field which God has blessed: therefore God should give you of the dew of the heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you: be lord over your brethren and let your mother's sons bow down to you: cursed be those that curse you and blessed be those that bless you (27:27-29)

As Sfomo points out (27:29), here there is no mention of a multitude of descendants nor of possessing the Land of Canaan. While the last line, the reference to the power of blessing and cursing does echo God's first words to Avraham (12:3), every other standard marker of the covenant between God and Abraham is absent (see 12:7, 13:15-16, 15:18-21,

17:1-8, 18:18-19, 22:17-18, 26:3-4). The contrast with the "blessings of Avraham" given to Ya'akov upon his departure and their reference to the standard content of descendants and Canaan highlights this point. The stolen blessings, the "blessings of Eisav," seem to be about economic and political success, the fat of the land, not necessarily Canaan, and political power. These are blessings appropriate for a warrior-hunter destined for future nationhood. They are in no way the blessings of Avraham nor necessarily connected to the blessings of Avraham. They are no more than Yitzchak's personal wishes for his hunter-warrior son whom he loves. The parting blessing of Yitzchak, the man of the field, the land and the hunt (24:63, 25:28, 26:12) for his son, the man of the field, the land and the hunt (25:27, 25:29, 27:3-4,27); not the blessings of Avraham.

In addition to the considerations above, the bestowing of the blessings of Avraham upon Ya'akov at the end of the parasha and the non-covenantal content of the blessings of Eisav, I have always thought it highly unlikely that Yitzchak ever imagined giving the blessings of descendants and land to Eisav. Not so much due to his certain knowledge of Eisav's true character, but more so due to his own psychological connection to the heritage of Avraham. It is no accident, that in parting from Ya'akov, Yitzchak refers to "the blessings of Avraham" and wishes that God should give them to Ya'akov. This is after all how they were given to Yitzchak, by God (17:15-19, 26:2-5). Moreover, each time God appeared to him to converse and remind him of the covenant, God specifically mentions that Yitzchak's status is due to the action of his father Avraham (26:5,24). Yitzchak knows his possession of the blessings to be a consequence of God's decision and knows his blessedness to result from his father's relation with God. Can such a man suddenly view himself as the owner of the blessings, to be passed on to whichever son he so decides? This seems near impossible.

If so, the final piece of interpreting the theft of the blessings as part of a sin and exile pattern clicks into place. Yitzchak never imagined nor intended to pass on the blessings of Avraham to Eisav. He intends a personal blessing, a father-son act. Rivka's plan saves nothing, not the day nor the covenant. Rather it constitutes an error, a tragic mistake, rebounding through the events and years of her and her beloved son's lives. The story of the theft of the blessings is not the story of right initiative, but exactly the opposite. It is the story of wrong initiative. Not the story of the necessity of human action for the realization of divine providence, but the story of the necessity of human withdrawal and passivity for the realization of divine providence, the story of trespassing on the divine role and usurping the prerogative of God.

## VI

Before closing I would like to try to connect our two readings of the theft of the blessings with the characters of Rivka and Yitzchak. I have argued for the existence of two distinct interpretations of the story. On the one hand, we have the traditional interpretation, which views Rivka as the hero, as someone who rightly understands the need for human initiative and active participation in the realization of divine providence in our world. Alternatively, we may interpret the story as a story of

sin and error, a story in which Rivka plays the role of anti-hero. It is a story of the tragedy of human initiative, of the tragedy of interference in the workings out of God's plan and of consequent punishment. It is a story that points to the wisdom of restraint rather than the wisdom of action.

On some level these two readings and the values highlighted by each match up with the characters of Rivka and Yitzchak. Last week I claimed that God commands Avraham in three distinct journeys, the journey in search of nationhood, the journey of religious and ethical activism and the Akeida, the journey of negation. Throughout, I argued for identifying Rivka as the possessor of the character necessary for the first two journeys. She is the successor of Avraham in her vision, orientation to the future, conviction, activism and willingness to go beyond the conventional. But it is Yitzchak who is the successor of Avraham in his third journey. He possesses the character of negation, of withdrawal and self-nullification. What happens when these journeys are not lived in chronological order but in parallel, in real time? This is the story of Parashat Toldot. Who is the hero? Is it Rivka and her activism, initiative, breaking of the norms and steering of divine providence? Or is it Yitzchak and his negation, withdrawal and acceptance of the divine will be what it may? This is, of course, the choice between the two readings outlined above.

Which reading is correct? I would like to leave the issue open. After all, the text is amenable to both interpretations. Perhaps more importantly, taken together the two readings reflect the problem of being granted free will on the one hand but yet living in the shadow of a divine plan on the other. When taken together the two interpretations represent the problem of the balance between initiative and withdrawal, between activism and negation, a tension not amenable to simple resolution - not by Rivka and Yitzchak, nor by ourselves.

## Further Study

1. See 25:23. How is Rivka's prophetic knowledge of the older serving the younger problematic for both of the interpretations outlined in the shiur above? See Ramban 27:4.
2. See Rashi 27:19 and Ibn Ezra 27:13. How do these approaches to the problem of lying differ from the approach advocated in the shiur above? Might it be possible to reconcile the traditional reading of Rivka as the heroine with the evidence indicating the punishment of Rivka and Ya'akov outlined in the first part of the shiur? Should we distinguish between means and ends? Does Rashi indicate such a distinction?
3. Read Abarbanel on why Yitzchak decides to establish his successor when Avraham had not. How convincing is his approach?
4. See 27:4-7 and 27:25. Contrast 27:4 and 27:25 with 25:7. What evidence exists that Yitzchak and Rivka look upon the blessing of Eisav from different perspectives? Does Rivka think that Yitzchak is dying? Compare this with Ya'akov's attitude to the dying Eisav in 25:32-34.