

Parashat Toledot

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BIRTHRIGHT, BLESSING AND CHOICE

- Why is Jacob interested in the birthright?
- Why does Esau agree to sell it to him?
- Does Jacob take advantage of Esau's moment of weakness?
- How is it possible to buy or sell a birthright?
- Where else does a birthright pass from one brother to another?

(29) And Jacob was preparing a stew, and Esau came in from the field, and he was tired. (30) And Esau said the Jacob, "Feed me from this red, red [stew], for I am exhausted," and for this reason he was called Edom [lit. "red"]. (31) And Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright at this moment." (32) And Esau said, "I am about to die, what use is the birthright to me?" (33) And Jacob said, "Swear to me at this moment," and he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. (34) And Jacob had given Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and got up and left, and Esau spurned the birthright. (Gen. 25:29-34)

(כט) וַיַּזֵּד יַעֲקֹב (כט) וַיָּבֵא עֵשָׂו מִן הַשָּׂדֶה וְהוּא עֵיִף: (ל) וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל יַעֲקֹב הֲלֵעִיטֵנִי נָא מִן הָאֵדָם הָאֵדָם הַזֶּה כִּי עֵיִף אָנֹכִי עַל פֶּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ אֲדָוִם: (לא) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב מַכְרֵה כִּיִּים אֵת בְּכֻרְתְּךָ לִי: (לב) וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו הֲיֵהָ אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לְמוֹת וְלִמָּוֶה זֶה לִּי בְכֻרָה: (לג) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב הֲשִׁבְעָה לִּי כִּיִּים וַיִּשְׁבַּע לוֹ וַיִּמְכֹּר אֵת בְּכֻרְתוֹ לְיַעֲקֹב: (לד) וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו לֶחֶם וַיִּזְוֵד עֲדָשִׁים וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׂתֶּה וַיִּקֵּם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֹּעַ עֵשָׂו אֵת הַבְּכֻרָה

A. Questions on the Narrative

The story of Esau's sale of the birthright is one of the strangest narratives in the Torah: why is Jacob interested in buying the birthright? Can one even buy or sell such a thing? Does Jacob take advantage of Esau's momentary weakness and force him to sell the birthright? We shall discuss these and many other questions below.

Let us begin with the first question: why is Jacob interested in the birthright? What special status is given to the firstborn which motivates Jacob to buy the birthright from Esau?

The Firstborn's Rights - Double Inheritance

The birthright clearly grants additional rights to the firstborn. This is evident in the legal systems of other nations in the same region during this time period.¹ Even the Torah recognizes the special status of the firstborn by commanding fathers to give their firstborn sons a double inheritance portion:

(טו) When a man has two wives, one beloved and one despised, and both the beloved and despised wives bear him children, and the eldest is born

כי תהיין לאיש שתי נשים האחת אהובה והאחת שנואה וילדו לו בנים האהובה והשנואה

1 Gershon Brin, "The Firstborn in Israel in the Biblical Period" (Ph.D. Diss.) See also Gershon Brin, "Darkhei Ma'avar HaHegemonia HaMishpachit VeHaKeshet LeSidrei HaBekhora," in *Tzvi Yisrael - Asufat Mechkarim BaMikra*, Tel Aviv University School for Jewish Studies, 5736, pp. 47-55.

to the despised wife, (16) on the day when he divides his estate among his sons, he may not favor the son of the beloved wife over his firstborn from the despised wife. (17) For he must acknowledge the firstborn of the despised wife and give him double of everything in his possession, for he is the first of his father's strength, and the right of the firstborn is his. (Deut. 21:15-17)

והיה הבכור לשנואה: (טו) והיה ביום הנחילו את בְּנוֹ אֶת אֲשֶׁר יְהִי לוֹ לֹא יוּכַל לְבַכֵּר אֶת בֶּן הָאֹהֲבָה עַל פְּנֵי בֶן הַשְּׁנוּאָה הַבְּכוֹר: (יז) כִּי אֶת הַבְּכוֹר בֶּן הַשְּׁנוּאָה יִבִּיר לְתֵת לוֹ פִּי שְׁנַיִם כָּכֹל אֲשֶׁר יִמְצָא לוֹ כִּי הוּא רֵאשִׁית אָנוּ לוֹ מִשְׁפֵּט הַבְּכוֹרָה.

These verses discuss the rights of the firstborn who is born to a less favored wife. There is also mention of "the right of the firstborn," who is given additional rights with regards to inheritance. These rights are well-known and recognized by all nations; there is no need to even issue a command about it. Therefore the Torah only emphasizes that even the eldest son from a despised wife is accorded the same rights – meaning that he is "given double,"² which Ibn Ezra

2 Similarly, when Reuben (Jacob's biological firstborn) was denied the birthright (see I Chr. 5:1), Jacob grants Joseph the status of firstborn and gives him a double portion of inheritance:

ואני נתתי לך שכר אחד על אחיך אשר לקחתי מיד האמורי בקרבי ובקשתני. And I shall give you one portion of land more than your brothers, that which I took from the hands of the Amorites with my sword and bow. (Gen. 48:22)

Ramban explains:

והוא חלק הבכורה, להיותך בו יתר על אחיך מיום שלקחתי אותו מיד האמורי

explains as follows:

“Given double” – he shall take two portions. If there are three [sons], he should calculate as though there were four, and [the firstborn] shall take two portions. And if there are two [sons], he should calculate as though there were three, and so on. (Ibn Ezra on Deut. 21:17)

“לתת לו פי שנים” – שיקח שני חלקים. אם היו שלשה, שיחשבו שהם ארבעה, ויקח שני חלקים. ואם שני בנים יחשבו שלשה וכן הבל.

The rights of the firstborn, which grant the eldest son a double portion of inheritance, were not unique to the Jewish people. They were widespread throughout the ancient world:

When brothers divide their father’s inheritance... the firstborn son shall choose and take two portions for his own, and afterwards his brothers shall, in their turn, choose and take their portion... (Middle Assyrian Law, tablet B1)³

אחים כי יחלקו את אחות אביהם... הבן הבכור יבחר ויקח שני חלקים בחלקו, ואחרי כן אחיו, אחד אחר השני, יבחרו ואת שלהם יקחו...

בחרבי ובקשתי.
And this is the portion of the firstborn, for you to be greater than your brothers, from the day that I took it from the hands of the Amorites with my sword and bow. (Ramban ad loc.)

3 This quote appears in **Law and Society in the Bible** by Ziva Maximov, ORT Israel (publisher), ch. 2.2.

Thus it is possible that Jacob is interested in the extra rights afforded by the birthright, as suggested by Ibn Ezra:

“And the birthright” – that he should [have the right to] take twice [the amount] of his father’s money. And some say that the elder is forever superior to the younger, who must rise before him and serve him as a son would his father. (Ibn Ezra on Gen. 25:31)

והבכורה – שיקח פי שניים בממון אביו. ויש אומרים שיש לבכור לעולם מעלה על הצעיר, לקום מפניו ולשרתו כבן לאב.

Sold for Money?

Despite the simplicity of this answer – and perhaps even because of it – there remains a number of questions: if it is a matter of money or honor, why does Esau spurn the birthright and sell it so easily?⁴ Why, as we see later on, is Jacob not accorded any additional honor or property? And most importantly, is this even what Jacob was truly interested in? Is this Jacob’s true character – chasing material possessions and exploiting his brother’s weakness to attain higher status and more property? After all, the previous verse describes Jacob as a “simple man who stayed in the tents.”

The Firstborn’s Responsibilities

The firstborn’s rights mentioned above prompt another basic question: why does the eldest merit

4 Ibn Ezra answers this question by stating that at the time Isaac did not have much property; Esau was therefore willing to part with the birthright. See Ibn Ezra on Gen. 25:34, as well as Ramban ad loc., who disagrees.

a larger inheritance and greater status than the rest of the family? Is this arbitrary or is there a reason behind it? A possible answer suggested in ancient texts is that the firstborn was given a larger portion of inheritance because he had more responsibilities.⁵

5 Nevertheless, some biblical and non-biblical sources suggest that the additional rights granted to the firstborn also developed from the belief that he possessed an inherent holiness:

וַיֵּרָא מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב כִּי חֹזֵק מִמֶּנּוּ הַמִּלְחָמָה וַיִּקַּח אוֹתוֹ שֶׁבַע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ שְׁלֹף הַחֶרֶב לְהִבְקִיעַ אֶל מֶלֶךְ אֲדוֹם וְלֹא יָכֹל: וַיִּקַּח אֶת בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר יִמְלֹךְ תַּחֲתָיו וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ עֲלֵהָ עַל הַחֹמָה וַיְהִי קֶצֶף גָּדוֹל עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ מֵעֲלָיו וַיָּשֻׁבוּ לְאָרְצָם.

And the king of Moab saw that the war was beyond his strength, and he took seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom, but they could not. And he took his eldest son, heir to his throne, and he brought him as a sacrifice on the wall. And a great fury came upon Israel, and they left him and returned to their land. (II Kings 3:26-27)

A similar concept is depicted in an Ugaritic poem discovered in the excavations at Ras Shamra. The poet addresses his god, Ba'al, and promises him everything he deserves: sacrifices, oaths, libations and his firstborn.

The notion of God as the true owner of firstborns does not apply only to humans – it pertains to animals and even produce (hence the *Bikkurim* – First Fruits), as mentioned in the book of Micah:

הֲיִרְצָה ה' בְּאַלְפֵי אֵילִים בְּרִבְבוֹת נַחְלֵי שֶׁמֶן הָאֶתָּן בְּכוֹרֵי פִשְׁעֵי פְרִי בִטְנֵי חַטָּאת נַפְשִׁי.

Will God accept thousands of rams, myriad rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression; the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:7)

Rashi explains:

הָאֶתָּן בְּכוֹרֵי – קָרְבָן לַפִּשְׁעֵי.

“Shall I offer my firstborn” – as a sacrifice for my sin. (Rashi on Mic. 6:7)

The firstborn received divine respect. For example, the Egyptians would bow to the eldest and serve him. This is the *Mekhilta's* interpretation of the Plague of the Firstborn: “God

Along with his parents, the eldest was responsible for overseeing the household. In the event of the parents' death he would take over managing and providing for the family.⁶ The firstborn was given additional rights because of his extra obligations.⁷ Therefore, when purchasing the birthright, Jacob was not only acquiring rights, but also mainly responsibilities. Jacob's motivations for buying the birthright were far deeper than the prospect of extra property or honor.

does not exact payment from a nation until He first [takes payment] from its gods” (*Mekhilta Beshalach* 15:1).

The Torah also grants the firstborn inherent holiness:

קִדַּשׁ לִי כָל בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר כָּל רֶחֶם בְּבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה לִי הוּא.

Consecrate for Me each firstborn, the first of each womb from the nation of Israel and from animals, for he is Mine. (Ex. 13:2; see also Ex. 22:28, 34:20; Num. 3:13, 8:17 and others.)

6 In biblical sources the firstborn seems to take his father's place:

וְלֹא אֶחָיו בְּנֵי יְהוֹשָׁפָט עֲזַרְיָה וַיְחִיאל וַיְזַכְרְיָהוּ וַיְעֹרְיָהוּ וּמִיכָאֵל וַשְׁפָטְיָהוּ כָּל אֶלֶף בְּנֵי יְהוֹשָׁפָט מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם אֲבִיהֶם מִתְּנוּת רַבּוֹת לְכֶסֶף וּלְזָהָב וּלְמַגְדָּנוֹת עִם עֲרֵי מִצְרוֹת בֵּיהוּדָה וְאֶת הַמַּמְלָכָה נָתַן לַיהוֹרָם כִּי הוּא הַבְּכוֹר.

And he had brothers, sons of Yehoshaphat: Azaria, Yehiel, Zechariah, Azariah, Michael and Shephatiah – all of these were the sons of Yehoshaphat, king of Israel. And their father gave them many gifts of gold, silver and valuables, and fortified cities in Judah, and the kingdom he had given to Yehoram, for he was the eldest. (II Chr. 21:2-3)

7 Gershon Brin, “The Firstborn in Israel in the Biblical Period.” However, other commentators interpret the firstborn's double portion differently (see Hizkuni on Num. 3:12).

B. Analysis of the Birthright Narrative

ESAU'S IMPROPER BEHAVIOR

Jacob and Esau – Fathers of Two Nations

Let us start from the beginning of the story of Jacob and Esau. While pregnant with twins, Rebecca receives a prophecy:

And God said to her, “Two peoples are in your womb, and two nations shall separate from within you, and one nation shall be more powerful than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger.” (Gen. 25:23)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבֶטֶןךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֹאִם מִלְּאִם יֵאָמֵן וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צְעִיר.

This prophecy reveals that, from the beginning of their lives, Jacob and Esau are not ordinary children. They are not individuals, but two nations⁸ destined to clash with one another, and this reality gives their behavior particular significance. The Torah continues to describe these two nations:

And the youths grew, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, and Jacob was a simple man, who stayed in the tents. (Gen. 25:27)

וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי יַעֲשֹׂו אִישׁ יָדָע צֹדֵד אִישׁ שָׂדֵה וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יוֹשֵׁב אוֹהֲלִים.

These are not descriptions of each of their personal

⁸ See Rav Mordechai Breuer, *Pirkei Bereshit* vol. 2, ch. 24 – *Ya'akov Ve'Esav*.

traits. Rather, these are qualities that inherently define them as well as the nations that will descend from them.

Man of the Field; Man of the Earth

Esau is “a skillful hunter, a man of the field.”

A “skillful hunter” is a predator – one who shoots arrows, kills and inspires fear among people and animals alike.

“A man of the field” describes one involved in farming and agriculture. However, this occupation has a different name in the Bible: one who “works the land.” Cain is described in this manner: “And Cain worked the land,” as well as Noah: “And Noah, a man of the earth [land], proceeded to plant a vineyard.”

Esau, however, is described specifically as a “man of the field” and not a “man of the land.” What is the difference between these two and what does this teach us about Esau?

It seems that “field” is a general term for all non-residential land that is not area-specific.⁹ This

⁹ For example:

וַיָּשׁוּבוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל עֵין מִשְׁפָּט הוּא קִדְשׁ וַיַּכּוּ אֶת כָּל שְׂדֵה הָעַמְלִיקִי וְגַם אֶת הָאֹמֶרִית הַיֵּשֶׁב בְּחַצְצוֹן תְּמָר.

And they returned and came to Ein Mishpat, which is Kadesh, and they struck all of the fields of the Amalekites, as well as the Amorites dwelling in Chatzotzan Tamar. (Gen. 14:7)

And in Joshua:

וְאֵת שְׂדֵה הָעִיר וְאֵת חֲצֵרֶיהָ נָתַנוּ לְכָלֵב בֶּן יִפְנֵה בְּאֶחָיו. וְאֵת שְׂדֵה הָעִיר וְאֵת חֲצֵרֶיהָ נָתַנוּ לְכָלֵב בֶּן יִפְנֵה בְּאֶחָיו. וְאֵת שְׂדֵה הָעִיר וְאֵת חֲצֵרֶיהָ נָתַנוּ לְכָלֵב בֶּן יִפְנֵה בְּאֶחָיו. (Jos. 21:12)

property is considered unclaimed or no-man's land, a fact which is reflected in the sentence of a betrothed woman who is raped in the field,¹⁰ as well as in the story of Cain and Abel – when Cain kills Abel, he does so in the field: “And it was as they were in the field, and Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him” (Gen. 4).

The field is home to Esau: a man of the field unrestrained and unrestricted by laws.

Man of the Field - Wild Man

This description of Esau as unrestrained and unrestricted is also applicable to Ishmael, his relative and fellow hunter:¹¹

10 See Deuteronomy chapter 22:

כי יהיה נער בתולה מארשה לאיש ומצאה איש בעיר ושכב עמה: והוצאתם את שניהם אל שער העיר והוא וסקלתם אתם באבנים ומתו את הנער על דבר אשר לא צעקה בעיר ואת האיש על דבר אשר ענה את אשת רעהו ובערתה הרע מקרבך: ואם בשדה ומצא האיש את הנער המארשה והחזיק בה האיש ושכב עמה ומת האיש אשר שכב עמה לבדו.

If a virgin is betrothed, and a man finds her in the city and has intercourse with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that city and stone them with rocks until they die; the girl for the fact that she did not cry out in the city, and the man for the fact that he tortured the wife of his friend, and you shall destroy the evil among you. And if a man finds a betrothed woman in the field, and he holds her and has intercourse with her, that man alone shall die. (Deut. 22:23-25)

11 Ishmael was well acquainted with the art of hunting:

ויהי אילקים את הנער ויגדל וישב במדבר ויהי רבה קשת.

And God was with the youth, and he grew and settled in the wilderness, and he became a Bowman. (Gen. 21:20)

Rashi explains:

רובה קשת – יורה חצים בקשת.

קשת – על שם האומנות כמו חמר גמל ציד לפיכך השייך מודגשת היה יושב במדבר ומלסטם את העוברים הוא שנאמר ידו בכל וגו'.

And he shall be a wild man, his hand upon everyone and everyone's hand upon him, and he will live in opposition to all of his brothers. (Gen. 16:12)

והוא יהיה פרא אדם, ידו בכל ויד כל בו, ועל פני כל אחיו ישכן.

This tendency for uninhibited rowdiness is characteristic of both Ishmael and Esau.

Jacob - Staying in the Tents

Jacob, by contrast, is a “simple man, who stays in the tents.” Our Sages (and later Rashi) explain that Jacob sat **and learned Torah** from his ancestors, Shem and Eber. Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, however, interpret “staying in the tents” as a **shepherd**, similar to the description of Yuval, the son of Adah: “He was the father of those who stay in the tents and raise livestock” (Gen. 4:20).

Jacob is portrayed as **calm, simple, honest and fair** – the opposite of Esau.

The Birthright Narrative - Additional Characterization

The story of Esau's sale of the birthright is written in the Torah immediately after the description of Jacob and Esau's respective characters. This suggests that this narrative provides an additional example of the inherent differences in their characters.

“Bowman” – one who shoots arrows from a bow. [The term] “Bowman” – after the art [of the bow], similar in form to [the Hebrew word for] “donkey driver,” “camel driver” and “trapper.” He would sit in the wilderness and rob passersby, about which it was written: “His hand upon everyone, etc.” (Rashi ad loc.)

**The Skillful
Hunter vs.
One who
Stayed in the
Tents**

The verses depict a clear picture of the scene: Esau comes in from the field – his large burly body dirty and tired after a day of hunting. He finds Jacob in the house cooking a stew. This setting highlights the differences between the two brothers. We now understand the full implications of the occupation “skillful hunter” – how such a man appears and acts at the end of the day. In contrast, we see Jacob sitting in the tent, preparing dinner for the family. Esau, hungry and exhausted from a day of hunting, asks Jacob for food. His request oozes with vulgarity: “הלעיטני נא” [lit. “give me”] is a term used to describe feeding animals, and reflects Esau’s haste and excessive appetite;¹² “... From this red, red” – he cannot even pronounce the name of the stew in his haste. The doubling of the

12 Rashi comments:

הלעיטני נא – אפתח פי ושפוך הרבה לתוכה, כמו ששנינו אין אובסין את הגמל אבל מלעיטין אותו.

“Pour me” – ‘I shall open my mouth, and you spill a large portion into it,’ as we have learned [in the Mishna], ‘One does not stuff a camel [on the Sabbath], but one may pour [food into its mouth].’

Rabbenu Bahya adds:

הלעיטני נא – דבר בכסילות בלשון הזה והוא מלשון מלעיטין את הגמל, ועל זה דרשו רז”ל (משלי) צדיק אוכל לשובע נפשו ובטן רשעים תחסר, אליעזר עבד אברהם אמר הגמיאיני נא מעט מים, ועשו אמר הלעיטני נא, צדיק אוכל לשובע נפשו זה אליעזר, ובטן רשעים תחסר זה עשו.

“Pour me” – he spoke in a vulgar fashion; this word is used to describe the feeding of camels. It was about this that our Sages said, “The righteous man eats to satisfy his soul, and the belly of the wicked is empty” (Prov. 13): Eliezer, servant of Abraham, said, “Allow me to sip some water,” and Esau said, “Pour me.” The “righteous man eating to satisfy his soul” – this is Eliezer; “And the belly of the wicked is empty” – this is Esau.

word “red” is also a sign of impatience, as Rashbam explains:

A person who is asking impatiently for something from his friend repeats his words. Here, [Esau] is tired and hungry; it is as though he is saying, “Give me food, quickly.”

דרך אדם הממהר לשאול דבר מחבירו כופל את דבריו. וזה שהוא עייף ורעב הרי הוא כאומר תן לי מהרה לאכול.

**Significance
of the Red
Stew**

Esau calls the stew “red” due to its striking color, and he repeats this twice. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch comments:

The color arouses him no less than the stew itself, as it reminds him of the blood of a dying animal – a sight he lusted after and pursued in the field.¹³

מגרה אותו הצבע לא פחות מעצם התבשיל, הגה הוא מזכיר לו את דם הבהמה הגוססת, תאוות העיניים שהוא רודף אחריה בשדה.

13 R. Hirsch’s comments highlight the effects of Esau’s occupation on his personality. Esau, a hunter of animals, absorbs their animalistic traits. In contrast, Jacob – who also came into contact with animals in the field – was not a hunter, but a shepherd. Esau’s power over animals might seem to be greater than Jacob’s – Esau hunts them while Jacob merely looks after them. However, Esau’s behavior demonstrates that his passion for hunting is actually a weakness, almost a compulsion – his life completely depends on it. Jacob, on the other hand, shepherds the animals, and is able to have control over them without becoming dependent on them.

Esau is Edom At this point the Torah suspends the narrative and adds a brief comment:

For this reason he was called **על בן קרא שמו** Edom [lit. “red”]. (Gen: 25:30) **אָדוֹם.**

Esau is called “Edom” following this incident. His hunger for the red stew gave the nation descended from him the name Edom. In the Bible, the act of naming is of particular importance, as it reflects the inner essence of the person or object being named. The essence of Esau’s nation is “Edom” – **the redness of killing and excessive desire** manifest in Esau’s appetite for the lentil stew. The color red is commonly a symbol of desire, making Edom an appropriate name for Esau and the nation that is to descend from him.¹⁴

National and Eternal Significance

The Torah interrupts the narrative to mention the origin of the name “Edom” to indicate that this is not a minor side story, significant only to the individuals who appear in it. These events have national significance – they characterize Esau and his descendants.¹⁵

14 The color red is also a biblical symbol for sins:

לְכוּ נָא וְנִזְכְּרָה יֹאמֵר ה' אִם יְהִי חַטָּאתְכֶם בְּשָׁנִים בְּשָׁלֵג יִלְבִּינוּ אִם יֵאָדִימוּ בְּתוֹלַע בְּצִמְרֵי יְהוּי.

“Let us settle the matter,” says God, “If your sins are like scarlet, they shall become white as snow; if they are red as crimson, they will become like wool.” (Is. 1:18)

15 This story also influences other biblical narratives that draw from it. One example is the birth of Perez and Zerah (Gen. 38). There are a number of similarities between the two stories: in both narratives, conception is difficult – Rebecca was barren,

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Following this seemingly peripheral comment identifying Esau as Edom, the Torah returns to the narrative of the birthright:

And Jacob said, “Sell me your **וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב מְכַרְהָ** birthright at this moment.” (Gen. **כִּי־אֵת בְּכֹרְתֶךָ** 25:31) **לִי.**

Esau’s Behavior – Unbecoming of Isaac’s firstborn

Now, Jacob truly sees Esau’s behavior. He has seen it before, but as Esau comes in from the field demanding food, Jacob comes to the realization that Esau’s

Tamar was a widow; both describe a dramatic birth, with each of the twin sons struggling to be born first; there is even a similarity in the names: Zerah is named after the scarlet string that the midwife tied around his wrist, reminding us of the Torah’s description of Esau’s birth: “And the first came out red-colored.” The name Zerah may also refer to the color red, as when the sun rises [zore’ah] over the water, the water reflects a red color (see Rashbam ad loc.) Esau’s grandson is also named Zerah (Gen. 36:17), as is the father of one of the kings of Edom (Gen. 36:33).

Similarly, Perez alludes to Jacob. The blessing given to Jacob is: “And you shall burst forth [U-Paratz’ta] westward and eastward” (Gen. 28:14), and it is later said of Jacob: “And the man became exceedingly prosperous [VaYifrotz, from the Hebrew root p.r.tz.]” (Gen. 30:43).

The color red, therefore, is dominant not only in Esau but in other biblical narratives, which the Torah chose to link specifically through the theme of color. In the book of Joshua the color red is used again to symbolize sin:

וַיִּקַּח עֶבֶד בֶּן פְּרָמִי בֶן יִבְדִי בֶן זֶרַח לְמִשְׁהַ יְהוּדָה מִן הַחַרְסִים וַיְחַר אֹפֶרֶת בְּבִגְדֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. And Akhan, son of Karmi, son of Zavdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took from the spoils, and God’s wrath was upon the nation of Israel. (Jos. 7:1)

behavior is crude and unbecoming of the firstborn of Isaac's house.¹⁶ As we mentioned above, in the event of his father's death, the firstborn is expected to head the family and keep to his father's path. It is now clear to Jacob that the leadership of the family cannot be entrusted to Esau, who does not keep to the traditions of Abraham and Isaac. Therefore, Jacob approaches Esau with a request to purchase the birthright.

"I am about to Die"

How does Esau react?

And Esau said, "I am about to die, what use is the birthright to me?" (Gen. 25:32)

וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו הֲנֵה אֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לְמוֹת וְלָמָּה זֶה לִּי בְכֹרָה.

Esau mocks the birthright and seems to consider it

¹⁶ Here, the similarities and differences between Isaac and Esau are obvious. Both father and son spend time in the field, as we read about Isaac:

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׂוּחַ בְּשָׂדֵה לְפָנֹת עָרֵב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה גַמְלִים בָּאִים. And Isaac went out to converse in the field near evening, and he lifted his eyes and saw, behold, there were camels approaching. (Gen. 24:63)

Several commentators (Rashbam, Hizkuni) explain:

לְטַעַת אֵילָנוֹת וּלְרִאוֹת עֵינָיו פּוֹעֵלִיו.

[He went] to plant trees and survey his workers.

While Isaac plants and improves the field, Esau is only interested in destroying the living things there. Isaac (according to another interpretation) goes out to the field "to converse" – this is referring to prayer" (Rashi ad loc.), finding in the field the spiritual exultation of proximity to God; Esau, however, goes out to the field and adopts the bestial ways of the animals inhabiting it, sinking to the lowest possible levels. Esau's occupation is similar to that of his father, but the nature of his deeds is fundamentally different.

worthless. Why?

Esau's Life was in Constant Danger

Some commentators explain that Esau was constantly in danger of death due to his occupation and believed that his chances to inherit the birthright were slim.¹⁷

"Eat and Drink, for Tomorrow We Die"

However this behavior might stem from a deeper issue: Esau's preference for instant gratification was not only because he feared he would not live to inherit the birthright. This inclination is based on an attitude that "I am about to die," a philosophy similar to the one expressed in the book of Isaiah:

Kill cattle and slaughter sheep, eat meat and drink wine – eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. (Isaiah 22:13)

הָרַג בְּקָר וְשַׁחַט צֹאן אֲכַל בְּיֶשֶׁר וְשָׁתוּת יַיִן אֲכֹל וְשָׁתוּ כִּי מָחָר נָמוֹת

Esau's fervent pursuit of hunting and eating is an expression of his spiritual emptiness. There is no spiritual meaning or value to this world – everyone dies eventually anyway; the only sensible course of action is to eat and enjoy oneself as much as possible. Jacob understands that someone with this attitude is unworthy of continuing the line of Abraham and Isaac, whose entire essence consisted of **bringing spiritual meaning and value into this world** through their connection to God.

Esau Spurned the Birthright

Not only does Jacob consider Esau unfit for the birthright – Esau himself thinks so too. He does

¹⁷ Ibn Ezra on Gen. 25:32; Rashbam ad loc.

not understand what the value of the birthright is, asking derisively, “What use is the birthright to me?” This is the reason that he is willing to sell Jacob the birthright, and why he does so without hesitation. The price he agrees to – a bowl of lentil stew – shows the complete worthlessness of the birthright in Esau’s eyes. Moreover, Esau accepts a physical fleeting pleasure in place of the birthright, a fundamentally spiritual possession. This too reflects Esau’s philosophy of “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

The Exchange was Acceptable to Both Brothers Jacob, therefore, did not take advantage of Esau or cheat him. He made an offer that was acceptable to both of them: Jacob wanted the birthright and Esau had no interest in it. The sale of the birthright reflected the worldviews of both Jacob and Esau.

A Deliberate Decision The end of the story also emphasizes this point:

And Jacob had given Esau bread וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו לֶחֶם וְגִייד עֲדָשִׁים. and lentil stew. (Gen. 25:34)

When describing events in chronological order, the Torah uses a specific sentence structure. It begins with the verb in the future form with an additional *vav* (which converts the verb to past tense), followed by the subject. There are a number of examples even within our short narrative:

- וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק And Isaac loved (Gen. 25:28)
- וַיִּזַּד יַעֲקֹב And Jacob was preparing (v. 29);
- וַיָּבֹא עֵשָׂו And Esau came (ibid.)
- וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו And Esau said (v. 32), etc.

Here, the Torah breaks from this pattern and puts the subject before the verb: וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן, “And Jacob had given.” This structure indicates that the action had in fact taken place beforehand,¹⁸ even though it is only mentioned at a later point. This leads us to conclude that Jacob had fed Esau before he asked him to sell the birthright and that **Esau sold the birthright not in a moment of weakness and hunger; he was fully aware of what he was doing.**¹⁹

**“And he ate...
And Esau
spurned the
birthright”**

The latter half of the verse emphasizes this point:

וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׂתֶּה וַיִּקָּם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֹּז עֵשָׂו אֶת הַבְּכֹרָה. ...And he ate and drank and got up and left, and Esau spurned the birthright. (Gen. 25:34)

Esau has already eaten and drank and is no longer hungry or tired; he is in full control of his actions – and only at that point does he get up and leave, unconcerned about the birthright. He does not regret selling it; in fact, he seems satisfied – what use is the birthright to him? Esau’s deeds confirm that his decision was not made in a moment of weakness, but

¹⁸ A similar example is Rashi’s interpretation of the verse, “And Adam had known [וידע] his wife, Eve” (Gen. 4:1):

והאדם ידע – כבר קודם הענין שלמעלה, קודם שחטא ונטרד מגן עדן, וכן ההריון והלידה, שאם כתב וידע אדם נשמע שלאחר שנטרד היו לו בנים.
“And Adam had known” – even before the events described above, before he sinned and was driven out of the Garden of Eden, and so too were the pregnancy and birth, for if it had been written, “And Adam knew [וידע אדם],” it would sound as though he had had children after he was driven out. (Rashi on Gen. 4:1)

¹⁹ See the commentary of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch.

rather because the birthright was worthless to him.

While Jacob recognizes the importance of the birthright and seeks to acquire it, Esau does not appreciate it at all and acts to rid himself of it.

THE BIRTHRIGHT - FAMILIAL RESPONSIBILITY

What exactly is the birthright that is so worthless to Esau and desirable to Jacob? Had the birthright afforded wealth and honor, Esau would never have parted with it so easily; it must have some other significance. The birthright, as we noted previously, was not only a gift of additional rights to the firstborn. It was also - and mainly - a set of responsibilities which demanded complete commitment of the firstborn to his family, as described by Abarbanel:

...that Jacob said to Esau, "The firstborn must stand in place of his father, and he is given the responsibility of managing the home in his father's stead, when his father is old and weak...and you, Esau, are not doing so, for you are always in the field and do not concern yourself with any matters of the home; I am a small and wounded youth, and I must serve my father in his illness, and make stew for him to eat - is this not enough for me?"

...שיעקב אמר לעשיו: הנה הבן הבכור הוא עומד במקום אביו, ועליו מוטלת הנהגת הבית במקום אביו בהיות האב חלוש וזקן... ואתה, עשיו, אינך עושה כן, שאתה הולך תמיד בשדה ואינך חושש בדבר מהבית, ואני נער קטן וכואב, ואצטרך לעבוד את אבי בחוליו, ולעשות נזיד שיאכל, ולא די לי כל הצער הזה אלא שגם אתה

Do I need you to come in from the field like a wounded bear, demanding like a glutton to 'pour me' - as though I were called upon to cook for you!... So, choose: if you desire to remain the firstborn, take the management of the house upon yourself in our father's place, and all of the responsibilities will be upon you. And if you do not desire it - leave me the birthright and I will do everything, and I shall give you to eat as the elder gives the younger..." And Esau looked into his heart and said, "Indeed, I have not chosen to follow the path of my forefathers, whose glory was in their remaining inside the home..." And Jacob had taken upon himself all of the responsibilities and needs of the home, and therefore he had immediately given Esau bread and lentil stew, as the

תבוא מן השדה כדב שכול וכדרך הזוללים תבקש ממני "הלעיטני נא", כאילו מוטל עלי להכין לפניך!... לכן בחר לך, אם תרצה, להיות בכור, עשה הנהגת הבית וצרכיך במקום אבינו ויהיה כל העול מוטל עליך. ואם לא תרצה לקחתו - הנח לי את הבכורה, ואני אעשה את הכל, ואתן לך לאכול כמו שיתן הבכור לצעיר... והנה עשיו התבונן בלבו ואמר: גם אני לא בחרתי ללכת בדרכי אבותי שתפארתם לשבת בית... וקבל יעקב על עצמו הנהגת הבית כולה ובקשת צרכיו והכנתם, ולכן היה שמיד נתן לעשיו לחם ונזיד עדשים, כאשר יתן הבכור לצעיר לאכול...

THE BIRTHRIGHT – DIVINE MISSION

The National Significance of the Birthright

Still, this interpretation is lacking. We are not discussing two ordinary individual brothers; these are Jacob and Esau – “two nations.” There must be some deeper significance behind this birthright. Indeed, Abarbanel is not satisfied with this explanation, and considers another possibility:²⁰

Inheriting Abraham's Blessing

But this effort was in order to inherit the blessing given to Abraham by God, which was His unique providence over [Abraham] and his descendants in inheriting the land... This was the great wealth of Isaac that he had inherited from Abraham, and this was the great wealth and treasure that [Isaac] was to bequeath to his children, not the rest of his possessions... And Jacob thought to himself that this divine inheritance could not be given to both him and Esau – for they were of different natures, and their qualities were the polar opposites of one another...

...אבל היה ההשתדלות בזה כדי לירש את ברכת אברהם אשר ברכו ה' שהיא בהתייחדו ההשגחה בו ובורעו בירושת הארץ שנמשך ממנה... וזה היה ממונו ועשירו של יצחק שירש מאברהם אביו, וזה יהיה הממון העושר והסגולה שיורש לבניו, לא שאר הנכסים... והנה יעקב חשב בלבו שהירושה האלוקית הזאת לא היה אפשר שיזכו בה הוא ועשיו אחיו שניהם יחד, יען לא היו מטבע אחד, וטבעיהם ומדותיהם היו בתכלית החילוף וההרחקה זה מזה,

²⁰ Although Abarbanel suggests this explanation first.

Jacob – Worthy of the Divine Mission

...And Jacob was a God-fearing man and desired His commandments, and was therefore worthy to inherit the divine mission, but Esau was a wicked person, with no fear of God within him. [Esau] would not accept His providence nor seek to become close to Him; how could he receive this divine inheritance?... And Jacob thought that this would not be an affront to Esau, for [Esau] did not believe in these goals and did not desire this inheritance, as he said: “What use is this to me?”... And Esau looked into his heart and said “...And if I have left my forefathers' path, for what purpose should I be called their firstborn, for this birthright is not an inheritance of possessions... and even if it is for spiritual betterment – **I do not believe in this, nor in Abraham's goals; therefore, what use is this to me?**” ...It is clear from this that Jacob sought the birthright only for the sake of the divine mission, since he saw that Esau did not believe in it...

ויעקב היה איש ירא את ה' במצוותיו חפץ מאד ולכן ראוי לירש את היעודים האלוקיים, אבל עשיו היה איש רע מעללים אין פחד אלוקים לנגד עיניו. ולא היה מאמין בהשגחתו ולא חפץ בדבקותו ואיך יהיה אם כן יורש הירושה האלוקית?... והיה בלבו של יעקב שלא היה בזה עלבון לעשיו כי הוא לא היה מאמין באותן היעודים ולא חפץ באותה הירושה, וכמו שאמר: "ולמה זה לי בכורה?... והנה עשיו התבונן בליבו ואמר: ...ואם הנחתי מעשה אבותי מה בצע כי אקרא בכור להם, כי הבכורה הזאת לא תהייה לירושת הנכסים... וגם אם היא לעניין הטובות הנפשיות – **איני מאמין בהם ולא ביעודי אברהם, אם כן, למה זה לי בכורה?** ...הנה התבאר מזה שלא ביקש יעקב את הבכורה כי אם לעניין היעודים האלוקיים, לפי שראה שעשיו אינו מאמין בהם...

**The Birthright –
Purchased
through Deeds**

Jacob seeks the inheritance of Abraham's blessing in the birthright, which is spiritual rather than material: a unique closeness with God and inheritance of His chosen land. Jacob was aware of the spiritual significance of the blessing. Esau, on the other hand, was not worthy of the blessing nor was he even interested in it, since he had chosen not to follow the path of his father and grandfather. The transfer of the birthright from Esau to Jacob was a result of their actions. Jacob bought the birthright not with lentil stew, but rather with his deeds – his choice to be a “simple man, who stayed in the tents,” following in the footsteps of Abraham and Isaac. Esau sold the birthright through his choice to be a hunter, a man of the field, unworthy of inheriting Abraham's blessing.

**The Transaction
was
Unnecessary**

We now understand that the transfer of the birthright described in our narrative does not occur by chance – it is a deliberate act reflective of the course of both brothers' lives until now. Jacob's actions might not have even been necessary for him to acquire the birthright; it would have passed to him naturally in light of his credible deeds and Esau's unworthiness. Despite the fact that Jacob was not the biological firstborn, both brothers' actions resulted in Jacob becoming the appropriate candidate to inherit Abraham's blessing.²¹

21 Similarly, the Mishna states:

כהן קודם ללווי, לוי לישראל, ישראל לממזר, וממזר לתתין, ותתין לגר, וגר לעבד משחרר. אימתו, בזמן שכלן שוין. אבל אם היה ממזר תלמיד חכם וכהן גדול עם הארץ, ממזר תלמיד חכם קודם לכהן גדול עם הארץ.

A Cohen precedes a Levite, a Levite [precedes] an Israelite,

C. Rejection of Firstborns in the Book of Genesis

Our narrative of the sale of the birthright is part of a larger theme present in all the firstborn narratives in the book of Genesis:

**Cain and
Abel**

A. The first firstborn narrative is that of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1-8). Even though Cain is elder, only Abel's sacrifice is accepted by God. God considers the acceptance of this sacrifice significant, and therefore Cain and Abel consider it significant as well – “And God looked with favor **on Abel** and his offering, **and on Cain** and his offering He did not look with favor” (Gen. 4:4-5). The Torah hints that the rejection of Cain's sacrifice and the approval of Abel's reflects a deeper issue – whose deeds are acceptable to God? This is why Cain is so angered by God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice. Cain is convinced that he, the firstborn, is more worthy but apparently, God chooses to accept Abel instead. Even after Abel's death humanity does

an Israelite [precedes] a *mamzer*, and a *mamzer* [precedes] a *netin*, and a *netin* [precedes] a convert, and a convert [precedes] a freed slave. When? When all are equal. But if there is a *mamzer* who is a learned man and a high priest who is ignorant – the learned *mamzer* precedes the ignorant high priest. (Mishna tractate *Horayot* 3:8)

The guiding principle of the Mishna is obvious. While hierarchy is first determined by lineage, ultimately greater emphasis is placed on personal merit.

On this topic, and as an introduction to next week's lesson, see: (Avraham Kariv) “*Bekhora UBechira*,” in **The Seven Pillars of the Bible – Essays of Biblical People and Biblical Ideas** (Hebrew), Tel Aviv: Am Oved.

not descend from Cain, but from a third son, Seth; the only survivors of the Flood are Noah and his family, Seth's descendants (see Gen. 5:1-32).

**Shem, Ham
and Japheth**

B. Noah has three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Shem is the chosen son – he receives from Noah a blessing for special closeness to God,²² and is the progenitor of Abraham. But is Shem actually the eldest? While he is listed first in every genealogical account, Genesis 10:21 states: “And Shem was also born... brother of Japheth, the eldest.” Rashi (ad loc.) interprets this to mean that Japheth was the firstborn. Ramban, too, in his commentary on Gen. 10:1, explains that the list of Noah's descendants begins with Japheth because he was the eldest. Therefore, this is another example of the eldest son being passed over for the birthright.

**Abraham,
Nahor and
Haran**

C. Abraham, too, is not the eldest son even though he is listed before Terah's other sons (“These are the descendants of Terah, Terah fathered Abraham and Nahor and Haran...” [Gen. 11:26]). The Talmud states that Abraham was in fact the youngest of Terah's sons, and he is mentioned first due only to his importance (*Sanhedrin* 69b). How does the Talmud reach this conclusion? Through the narrative of Noah's sons – since Shem is mentioned first because of his special status, even though he is not the firstborn, the Talmud infers that children are listed in the Torah not in order of age but in order of importance.


²² See Gen. 9:18-29.

**Ishmael
and Isaac**

D. The story of Abraham's selection by God is not the last such narrative in the Torah. The entire book of Genesis continues to examine the issue of “chosenness” much more openly. Abraham's eldest son is Ishmael; although not Sarah's son, he is still Abraham's firstborn. Ishmael is exiled from his father's house (Gen. 21:9-14) on Sarah's request. Sarah perceives the struggle over the inheritance, not as a financial but as a spiritual matter. Sarah, witnessing Ishmael “mocking,” demands that “this son of the maidservant” not be among Abraham's heirs. He is a “wild man, his hand upon everyone and everyone's hand upon him,” and is not worthy of Abraham's inheritance. God agrees with Sarah's judgment, telling Abraham: “Through Isaac you shall have descendants.”

**Jacob and
Esau**

E. The next choice is between Jacob and Esau. Although they are twins and both sons of Isaac, even from the womb there is already a sharp distinction between them. Clearly, only one of them can be chosen and we find out that this will ultimately be the younger brother, as God told Rebecca: “And the elder shall serve the younger”;²³ indeed, Jacob later acquires the birthright through his deeds and receives Isaac's blessing.


²³ Gen. 25:23. Despite the fact that the Hebrew language of the verse is ambiguous (it can also be understood as “the elder, the younger shall serve,” meaning that the younger brother will serve the elder), the simple understanding of the verse is that the elder brother will serve the younger brother. See Radak ad loc.

Reuben,
Judah and
Joseph

F. Jacob's family continues this trend as Reuben, the eldest, is not selected for the birthright. The divine blessing and leadership are given to Judah and Joseph instead:

And the sons of Reuben, firstborn of Israel – for he is the firstborn, and since he defiled his father's sheets his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, son of Israel, and he could not be associated with the birthright; since Judah was the strongest of his brothers, the ruler came from him, and the birthright was given to Joseph. (I Chr. 5:1-2)

וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן בְּכוֹר
יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי הוּא
הַבְּכוֹר וּבְחַלְלוֹ
יִצְוְעֵי אָבִיו נִתְּנָה
בְּכֻרְתּוֹ לְבְנֵי יוֹסֵף
בֶּן יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא
לְהַתְיַחֵשׁ לְבְכֻרָה:
כִּי יְהוּדָה גָּבֵר
בְּאֶחָיו וּלְנֶגֶד
מִמֶּנּוּ וְהַבְּכֻרָה
לְיוֹסֵף:

Hints of this selection appear throughout the book of Genesis: the brothers listen to Judah and sell Joseph at his suggestion (Gen. 37:26-27); Jacob places Benjamin in Judah's care as opposed to Reuben's (Gen. 42:37, 43:8-14); Jacob's blessings to his sons make it clear that Judah, not Reuben, receives the crucial blessing of leadership (Gen. 49:1-4, 8-12) while Joseph receives a double portion of land (Gen. 48:5-22).

Ephraim
and
Menashe

G. In Joseph's family, too, the younger son takes precedence over the elder: Jacob crosses his hands when blessing Joseph's sons, conveying the fact that the more significant blessing was not given to the elder brother, Menashe, but specifically to Ephraim (Gen. 48:13-20).

WHY WERE THE FIRSTBORNS REJECTED?

Blessing
the
Chosen,
Not the
Eldest

Divine selection is one of the central themes of Genesis. Throughout Genesis, the Torah grapples with the question of who was chosen by God to represent his path in the world and repeatedly the firstborn is not chosen. Genesis teaches us that being born first does not automatically grant the right to a blessing; **God's blessing is given according to merit, not biological age.** While the Torah does recognize the special status of the firstborn, as stated in Deuteronomy 21, this is only in a narrow, personal sense. When dealing with the question of fundamental "chosenness," of being selected to represent God's path in this world, the firstborn has no particular advantage. God chooses whoever is worthy and it is this choice that confers the blessing of closeness to God and inheritance of the land.

Why
isn't the
Firstborn
Chosen?

In theory, God could have arranged for the worthy son to be born first and avoided this issue entirely. The reality is the opposite – the firstborn *never* receives the blessing, which is given each time to a younger son. This is no coincidence; the Torah is trying to express an important message: God's selection is not guaranteed to any **specific** person, even the firstborn. It is **dependent on one's worthiness to be chosen** and receive God's blessing. Therefore, God arranged for the worthy sons *not* to be born first, to highlight the importance of choice in this matter.

D. The Significance of the “Purchase” of the Birthright

Returning to the story of Jacob and Esau, if the birthright has no significance with regard to being chosen and receiving God’s blessing, why is this chain of events even necessary? Why does Jacob bother to buy the birthright if it does not afford him any advantage in being chosen by God?

Jacob’s acquisition of the birthright seems to reflect a different view: in order for Jacob to receive the blessing, he must possess the birthright. He must become the firstborn.

The Biological Birthright Cannot be Bought

In fact, a closer look at the narrative reveals the opposite: this story is the greatest testament to the fact that one’s status as biological firstborn does not affect his odds of being chosen. Jacob’s deeds cannot make him older; no matter what price he paid or what Esau agreed to, Jacob cannot become the biological firstborn. Jacob is aware of this, and this is not the birthright he has in mind.

The Spiritual Birthright – Acquired through Deeds

Jacob seeks to acquire the true birthright – the leadership of the family and the blessing to continue the path of Abraham and Isaac, the path of God, in doing charity and justice.²⁴ This birthright is not automatically given to the eldest; it is acquired through one’s deeds. Jacob bought this birthright not with lentil stew, but with his actions and his

²⁴ See Gen. 18:19.

being spiritually suited to the task. This is why Jacob is ultimately given the birthright: the “legal” transaction is not the reason Jacob is chosen to continue the house of Isaac; it is merely symbolic of Jacob’s attitude towards the birthright and its included responsibilities to his family – an attitude infinitely greater than the derision with which Esau treated the birthright.

The Sale Symbolizes the Transfer of the Birthright

The story of the transaction between Jacob and Esau portrays Esau as unworthy of (and uninterested in) the birthright. In contrast, Jacob seeks the true birthright, the divine blessing, and makes an effort to “purchase” it. **This story symbolizes the transfer of the birthright from Esau to Jacob resulting from their respective natures.**

Good Character and Effort Bring God’s Blessing

The fact that the birthright can be bought demonstrates that the circumstances of a person’s birth do not automatically ensure his being worthy of blessing. Meriting God’s blessing requires spiritual readiness and significant personal effort in pursuit of the true birthright.