

Three Different Blessings

By Rav Tamir Granot

At the center of *Parashat Toldot* we find, of course, Yitzchak's blessing of Yaakov. This is a well-known story, and the problems that it poses are equally familiar. As both early and later commentators have pointed out, the most difficult problem is the absence of any explicit judgment on the part of the Torah concerning Yaakov's act of deception, carried out at Rivka's instruction. The stealing of the blessing is undoubtedly a most important episode, and we want to learn the appropriate lessons from it – but the Torah provides no moral commentary; it simply recounts the events as they happened, with no evaluation.

We shall not address here the question of evaluating Yaakov's act. Readers interested in an overview of contrasting approaches are advised to consult Nechama Leibowitz's *Studies on the Parasha*, as well as Rabbi Elchanan Samet's *shiur* on this *parasha* in his book, *Iyunim be-Parashat ha-Shavu'a*.

What we shall focus on here is not the theft, but rather the blessings themselves. The question serving as our point of departure is a simple one. Yaakov received, within a very short period of time (both chronologically and textually), three blessings, on three different occasions:

1. Yitzchak blesses him, believing him to be Eisav (27:27-29)
2. Yitzchak blesses him as he sends him off to Charan to find a wife (28:1-4)
3. God blesses him in Beit-El, in the dream of the ladder (28:12-15)

Our question is: why does Yaakov need three blessings; why will one not suffice? Obviously, from Yaakov's perspective there is no problem. One blessing – the one that was meant to be given to Eisav – he wanted, and indeed received, while the other two were bestowed upon him without any initiative on his part. But why does Yitzchak need to give him an additional blessing, over and above the one he has already received, and why does God add yet another blessing, in addition to Yitzchak's two?

One may offer an apparently simple solution. At the time of the first blessing, Yitzchak actually meant to bless Eisav; hence, he apparently gave Yaakov the blessing that he had prepared for Eisav, rather than a blessing tailored to his own personality and destiny. When he sent Yaakov off to Charan, he blessed him as Yaakov. And God had not blessed him up until this time, therefore He too added a blessing so as to confer a Divine "confirmation," as it were, on that which a righteous man (Yitzchak) had decreed in the mortal realm.

This answer may go some of the way to clarifying the matter, but it certainly falls short of resolving it.

The principal point is that the blessings are fundamentally different from one another. Although this makes sense in light of the above explanation – we expect Eisav's blessing to be different from one meant for Yaakov – it fails to explain the difference between Yitzchak's blessing and that of God. Furthermore, if the first blessing that Yaakov received had indeed been appropriate for Eisav, why did he and his mother go to such efforts? Was it all just to receive a blessing that would nevertheless remain, essentially, geared to Eisav? Even if we want to posit that perhaps Rivka and Yaakov did not realize this in advance – why did Yitzchak agree to the blessing, and not give Eisav the blessing meant for him? Lastly, in what sense is the blessing that Yitzchak gives appropriate to Yitzchak, according to its content, and in what sense is God's blessing appropriate to God, according to its content?

In this *shiur* we shall try to clarify the above questions. In order to do this, we shall first compare the blessings with each other in order to demonstrate the essence of the differences between them. Thereafter we shall try to answer the rest of our questions. The discussion may also shed some light on the course of the story as a whole.

Let us then examine the three blessings:

Yitzchak's blessing to Yaakov disguised as Eisav **(Bereishit 27:27-29)**

(27) "He approached and kissed him, and he smelled the scent of his garments, and he blessed him and said: "Behold, my son's scent is like the scent of a field that God has blessed.

(28) May God (Elokim) give you of the dew of the heavens and the fatness of the earth, and much corn and wine.

(29) May the nations serve you, and may peoples bow down to you; may you be a lord over your brethren, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed, and may those who bless you be blessed."

Yitzchak's blessing to Yaakov as he sends him off to Charan **(28:1-4)**

(1) Yitzchak called Yaakov and blessed him and instructed him, and said to him: "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.

(2) Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the home of Betuel, your mother's father, and take yourself a wife from there, from the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother.

(3) May the Almighty God (Kel Shakai) bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may be a multitude of peoples.

(4) May He give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and to your descendants with you – that you may possess the land of your sojourning, which God gave to Avraham."

God's blessing to Yaakov in the dream of the ladder (28:12-15)

(12) He dreamed, and behold – there was a ladder standing on the ground, with its head reaching the heaven, and behold – angels of God were ascending and descending it.

(13) And behold – God (YKVK, the "Tetragrammaton") was standing over him, and He said: "I am the Lord God of Avraham your father, and the God of Yitzchak; the land upon which you lie – to you I shall give it, and to your descendants.

(14) Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread westward and eastward, northward and southward; through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed, and through your descendants.

(15) And behold – I am with you and shall watch over you wherever you go, and I shall return you to this land, for I shall not leave you until I have fulfilled that concerning which I have spoken to you."

Let us now focus on the differences between these blessings:

1. Preparation to and context of the blessing: Yitzchak utters the first blessing in the midst of eating his meal and drinking wine; this implies a mortal blessing. The second blessing relates to the purpose of sending Yaakov away: marriage. The third blessing is unexpected; it offers Yaakov support and encouragement.

2. God's Name in the blessing: The first blessing includes the words, "May God (ELOKIM) give you..."; in the second Yitzchak says, "May the Almighty God (KEL SHAKAI) bless you..."; in the third, we read "Behold, God (YKVK) stood over him...."

3. Content of the blessing: Yitzchak's first blessing to Yaakov invokes material abundance of the land, dominion over nations, dominion over brethren, a curse to those who curse him, and a blessing to those who bless him. His second blessing to him speak of being fruitful and multiplying, the blessing of Avraham, and the inheritance of the land of his sojourning – Canaan. God's blessing starts off with an identification: "I am the Lord God of your fathers...," there is the promise of the land – "to you I shall give it," there are descendants like the dust of the earth, expansion beyond the geographical limitations, and a blessing to all the families of the earth through him.

An examination of the three blessings and the differences between them lead us to the following conclusions:

1. The second and third blessings are relatively similar to one another; at the center of both lies the same promise of a multiplicity of descendants and of the land. The first blessing is an exception in terms of both style and content: it contains no promise as to dominion in the land or its inheritance; it speaks only of general abundance, and there is no mention of the classic element of descendants.

2. There are considerable differences in style between the second and third blessings, with additions and elaborations of one as opposed to the other and vice versa.

3. The first blessing is preceded by a process apparently aimed not only at arousing Yitzchak's affection for his son, but also at arousing a serene and joyful atmosphere conducive to Divine inspiration. The meat and wine give Yitzchak vitality and cause him to want to convey his blessing. The character of the blessing is entirely mortal and

worldly. While it does contain a prominently religious element, testifying to the profundity and spirituality of Yitzchak, ultimately it arises from his inspiration and the awakening of his spirit; it lacks any transcendental foundation.

4. Formulations of blessings are usually based on the pattern of previous blessings. The first blessing fits the general mold of a father's blessing to his son, and scholars have noted parallels between this formulation and similar examples in the Ancient Near East. In the second blessing, Yitzchak wants the blessing of Avraham to pass on to Yaakov. The question is, to which one of Avraham's blessings is he referring? In the third blessing it is easy to identify the elements of the various blessings to Avraham. Below we shall trace the exact sources.

5. The blessings invoke different names of God. In this context a general principle should be pointed out: in the Torah we find frequent interchanges of God's Names. The three most dominant Names are the ones mentioned here: "Elokim," the Tetragrammaton, and "Kel Shakai" (less common than the other two). The commentators who focus on the literal level of the text do not always accord importance to this phenomenon; they tend to treat the interchange of Names as any ordinary use of synonyms. However, even the use of ordinary synonyms – if it is deliberate and systematic – should be addressed seriously; how much more so where the text in question is the Torah and the words in question – Names of God. The kabbalists and commentaries who address the level of "yesod" (including Rabbeinu Bechaye, and sometimes Ramban), regard the use of a certain Name of God as an element of central importance in understanding a text. Among later commentators, too, more significant attention is paid to the interchange of Divine Names. Let us understand this phenomenon in a simple way: God's different Names represent different aspects of His appearance and involvement in reality. A name reflects a relationship. It indicates the particular manner or functioning by means of which we perceive the person we refer to by that name. The same person may be called "Dad," "Shlome'leh," "Professor Ben-Ami," or "the Honorable Foreign Minister" – each name reflecting a certain aspect of his personality and role as manifest at any given moment. Obviously, this person would not introduce himself at a government meeting as "Shlome'leh," nor demand that his wife call him "the Honorable Foreign Minister." The same principle may be applied to the interchanging of God's Names.

Chazal set forth the following distinction: the name "Elokim" reflects Divine justice, while the Tetragrammaton represents the trait of Divine mercy. Since the etymology of both of these names is unclear, and since both cases represent unique grammatical forms, we have no way of understanding the Names on their own; we can only arrive at their significance based on their respective contexts. In this regard, the first appearance of each, in the two chapters of Creation, is of particular importance. The name "Elokim" is used in the first chapter, which recounts the story of the creation of nature in general, in a process of orderly development and fixed laws. The Name is connected to the fact that God is the Source of nature, the Source of natural law and regularity in the world, and this is also a context for what *Chazal* refer to as the "trait of strict justice" or the "trait of law."

The second section of the Creation story (Chapters 2-3) is recounted using the name YKVK. The greater part of this section describes the creation of man and woman. It contains much of what is absent from the first section – particularly concerning the personal connection between God and man, and the closeness between them, as manifest in God's

concern for him, His placement of him in the Garden of Eden, the commandment He gives him, etc. Hence, we deduce that the use of the name YKVK should be regarded as a private, personal name – or, as arises from God's words to Moshe at the burning bush, where Moshe asks: "They shall say to me, What is His Name?" and God's answer is EH-YEH and YKVK (we shall not elaborate here on the difference between these two Names). Thus it appears that the Name "Elokim" expresses God's relationship with the world in terms of function and rule, while YKVK is His "private" Name. (In human terms, "David Ben-Gurion" is a private name, whereas "the Prime Minister" is a name relating to role and rule.)

This idea is expressed in a straightforward way by R. Yehuda ha-Levi in his book, *The Kuzari*:

The Rabbi said: Elokim is a term signifying a ruler or governor...

...For He is called "Hashem (YKVK)" after His uniqueness. This is as if one asked, "Which 'Elokim' is to be worshipped: the sun, the moon, the heaven, the zodiac, any star, fire, wind, angels, spirits, or any other – each of these has its own activity and domain, and each of them is a factor responsible for existence or annihilation? The answer to this question is, "Hashem (YKVK)!" As if you said, "So-and-so!" and called him by his proper name, "Reuven" or "Shimon" for instance, supposing that the names "Reuven" and "Shimon" convey their true personalities. (Part IV, I)

In light of the above analysis, we can better understand the different blessings:

In the first blessing, the Divine Name that is used is "Elokim" – a general name, referring to the Creator of nature; this Name relates to all humans on the same level (it is God's universal Name). It is therefore natural that Yitzchak uses it in a blessing whose source is human and whose character and content are universal.

In his second blessing, Yitzchak uses the Name "Kel Shakai." The source of this Name is to be found in the story of Avraham's circumcision, where God identifies Himself to Avraham using this Name. Hence, we must seek the reason for this Name in that context – as we shall do below.

In the third blessing, God appears with the text referring to Him as "YKVK." From the context of this blessing and its purpose, the reason is clear: this is a private revelation, a substantial part of which reflects the Divine will to encourage Yaakov and promise him support. God reveals Himself to Yaakov for the first time and, understandably, presents Himself using the Name by which He was known to the forefathers: "I am YKVK, the God of your father Avraham..." But as we noted concerning the second blessing, here too it should be noted that the use of this Name takes us back to a previous blessing – one or more of the blessings to Avraham. Let us examine the relationship between (some of) Avraham's blessings and Yaakov's blessing, which share the characteristic of being given in the Name YKVK:

Dream of the ladder:

And behold, YKVK stood over him and said, "I am YKVK, the God of your father Avraham, and the God of Yitzchak. THE LAND UPON WHICH YOU LIE – TO

YOU I SHALL GIVE IT, AND TO YOUR DESCENDANTS.

YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE LIKE THE DUST OF THE EARTH, and you shall spread WESTWARD AND EASTWARD, NORTHWARD AND SOUTHWARD, and THROUGH YOU SHALL ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH BE BLESSED." (*Bereishit* 28:13-14)

The blessing of "lekh-lekha" (*Bereishit* 12)

YKVK said to Avram, "Go forth... and I shall make of you a great nation, and I shall bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.

I shall bless those who bless you, and those who curse you – I will curse; AND THROUGH YOU SHALL ALL THE FAMILIES OF THE EARTH BE BLESSED." (12:1-3)

The blessing following the separation from Lot, to the east side of Beit-El

YKVK said to Avram, after Lot had separated from him. "Lift up your eyes and see, from the place where you are – NORTHWARD AND SOUTHWARD AND EASTWARD AND WESTWARD.

FOR ALL THE LAND WHICH YOU SEE – TO YOU I SHALL GIVE IT, AND TO YOUR DESCENDANTS, FOREVER.

And I SHALL MAKE YOUR DESCENDANTS LIKE THE DUST OF THE EARTH, that if a person may count the dust of the earth – so shall he count your descendants. ARISE AND WALK ABOUT IN THE LAND, THROUGHOUT ITS LENGTH AND BREADTH, FOR TO YOU I SHALL GIVE IT."

So Avraham packed his tent and moved and settled in Elonei Mamrei which is in Chevron, and he built an altar there to God. (13:14-18)

It is easy to see that all of the elements of God's blessing here to Yaakov are taken from the first two blessings that were given to Avraham – which in fact may be viewed as a single blessing in two parts, since it was only after Lot separated from him that Avraham merited the blessing in its entirety. In other words, God's blessing to Yaakov is in fact a conferral of His first blessings to Avraham. In fact, the only element that is missing is the expression, "I am God" – which Rashi explains, in several places, as simply representing a form of pledge! This expression is taken from the "*Berit Bein Ha-Betarim*" (the Covenant Between the Parts): "I am YKVK, Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land for a possession." Therefore, the introduction to God's blessing to Yaakov likewise reflects the dimension of God's commitment to him – a commitment rooted in covenant, the Covenant Between the Parts.

Let us now summarize what arises from this equation. The blessing that Yaakov receives in the dream, when God is revealed to him, is the continuation of God's blessings to Avraham – the two that are given to him at the outset of his move to Canaan, and the third at the Covenant Between the Parts. As we might have predicted, God's appearance to Avraham at the Covenant Between the Parts is with the Name "YKVK" – and only this.

Attention should also be paid to the fact that what immediately follows God's two revelations to Avraham, as well as His revelation to Yaakov, is the establishment of an altar (Avraham) or monument which Yaakov swears is destined to

be the "house of God." Using the Name YKVK – and only this Name - God appears to Adam personally and shows concern for him, accompanies him and commands him. And it is only to God – by His "private" Name – that one may offer sacrifices or build altars. Thus Noach, who builds an altar, does so to "YKVK," Who is revealed to him: "YKVK smelled the sweet savor..." It is impossible to offer sacrifices to the First Cause, to the Infinite, to the Source of Laws, etc. Sacrifices are always brought to YKVK, Who is revealed through private revelation.

Let us now compare the second set of blessings:
Yitzchak's blessing as he sends Yaakov off:

Yitzchak called to Yaakov and blessed him and commanded him, and he said to him, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.
Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the home of Betuel, your mother's father, and take yourself a wife from there, from the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother.
May KEL SHAKAI bless you AND MULTIPLY YOU AND MAKE YOU NUMEROUS, THAT YOU MAY BE A MULTITUDE OF PEOPLES.
AND MAY HE GIVE YOU the blessing of Avraham – to you and to your descendants with you, to possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Avraham."
(28:1-4)

At Avraham's circumcision:

Avram was ninety-nine years old, and YKVK appeared to Avram and said to him, "I am KEL SHAKAI; walk before Me and be wholehearted.
I shall give My covenant between Me and you, AND I SHALL MULTIPLY YOU EXCEEDINGLY MUCH."
And Avram fell upon his face, and God spoke to him, saying:
"Behold, this is My covenant with you: YOU SHALL BE THE FATHER OF MANY NATIONS.
And your name shall no longer be called 'Avram'; your name shall be 'Avraham,' for I have made you the father of many nations.
And I SHALL MAKE YOU MOST EXCEEDINGLY FRUITFUL, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall emerge from you.
And I shall establish My covenant between Me and you, and your descendants after you, in their generations, as an eternal covenant, to be God for you, and for your descendants after you.
AND I SHALL GIVE YOU – and your descendants after you – the LAND OF YOUR SOJOURNINGS; all of the land of Canaan, as an eternal inheritance, and I shall be their God." (17:1-8)

The similarity between the blessings is clear, as is a further point: the spirit of Chapter 1 of *Bereishit* hovers over the blessing to Yaakov, since the source of the promise to make him fruitful and numerous lies in the command to Adam, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the land and conquer it..."

The Name "Kel Shakai" has its source in the story of Avraham's circumcision. The message of the circumcision is clear. It promises continuity of descendants – and hence also the birth of Yitzchak. In fact, the promise of the land is secondary, for only if Yitzchak is born will it be possible for the promise to be fulfilled in its original sense that the child born to Avraham and Sara will inherit the land. Circumcision, as an act

of covenant, performed upon the organ of procreation, connects the act of circumcision itself to the promise of progeny. We may view the act of removing the foreskin as symbolically representing the elimination of the barrier that has prevented the realization of the blessing thus far, and the clearing of the path to fertility and birth. (It should be emphasized here that the significance is only symbolic: Hagar, after all, had already borne a son to Avraham; it was Sara who was barren.) The Name Kel Shakai, which appears specifically here, at the circumcision, is therefore related to this concept of Divine abundance and fertility. Rashi explains the name as follows: "I am the One Whose deity (*elohut*) is sufficient (*dai*) for every creation." Obviously, this Name is therefore a sort of abbreviation – "*she-dai*" – "Who is (or contains) sufficient," but it also expresses the idea of unlimited abundance that emanates from God. (Concerning the etymology of the Name, see Ibn Ezra and Ramban *ad loc.*)

Yitzchak's use of this name is therefore understandable. His main objective is to pass on to Yaakov the blessing of fertility that was given to Avraham. It is precisely for this purpose that he is sending Yaakov away – to find a wife! The invocation of the Name "Kel Shakai" is meant to refer to the promise that Avraham received at the time of his circumcision, and particularly to the connection between these two blessings. Yitzchak is telling Yaakov, "I am blessing you with the blessing of progeny and hope, even though you now are being forced to leave the land, that you will merit to receive Avraham's blessing – to inherit the land of your sojourning."

All of the above leads us to the conclusion that the three blessings to Yaakov are completely different in their essence and in their purpose:

The first blessing is a worldly one - the blessing bestowed by a mortal spirit. It has only generalized significance. Yitzchak makes no mention, in this blessing, of Avraham's successor, the inheritor of the land – i.e., it contains no historical or religious perspective. It concerns only property and material abundance. It seems that this is where Rivka's mistake lies: she believes that Yitzchak is going to make a decision as to passing on the blessing of Avraham, with all that it entails. Believing that Eisav is unworthy of being chosen, she initiates the act of deception. Yitzchak, it appears, did not believe that it was his job to appoint the successor to Avraham. It is possible that he did not believe that either of his sons would necessarily be chosen. There are no grounds to be certain that what we know after the fact was also clear to Yitzchak at the time. The historical fact that one of his sons was rejected and the other chosen to continue is not a necessity. Hence, Yitzchak simply wanted to bless his elder son, who would take over and assume responsibility for his property after his death. Indeed, in terms of character, Eisav was certainly suited for this role. Thus, as we have seen, what Yitzchak bestowed upon Yaakov-disguised-as-Eisav was no more than a general, universal blessing.

The other two blessings have a dual nature, like the blessing to Avraham. God forged two covenants with Avraham: the circumcision, and the Covenant Between the Parts. Each of these creates a different mode of commitment and relationship. As we have noted, the first blessings to Avraham are essentially bound up with the Covenant Between the Parts. We shall not elaborate here on the fundamental difference between the two covenants; for our purposes suffice

it to note that one covenant was not enough, and that each covenant required its own blessing and its own covenantal act.

When Yitzchak sends Yaakov to Charan, he bestows upon Yaakov the blessing that continues the Covenant of Circumcision – for two reasons:

1. The purpose – to marry and establish a family. The circumcision likewise concerns fertility.
2. Yitzchak cannot bless in place of God. The Name YKVK can only come from revelation, and from it God's blessing emanates. Yitzchak can pray for Yaakov concerning the continuity of the Covenant of Circumcision – the crux of which, in contrast to the Covenant Between the Parts, is not Divine revelation or a Divine act, but rather a human act. Therefore he prays: "May Kel Shakai bless you and make you fruitful and numerous... and grant you the blessing of Avraham...." The use of this Name indicates a prayer focusing specifically on the continuity of the fulfillment of the Covenant of Circumcision and its promises – for which Yitzchak is able to pray.

Finally – God's blessing in the dream of the ladder is the continuation of the first blessings to Avraham and of the Covenant Between the Parts, with which they conclude. Like the episode of the Covenant Between the Parts, the blessing here is accompanied by a Divine commitment. From this perspective, God's revelation in the dream of the ladder is the continuation of His revelation to Avraham in the vision, in the Covenant Between the Parts, and the events themselves are indeed quite similar. It is worth re-emphasizing the opening words: "I am YKVK," uttered in both instances. God reveals Himself using His Name and promises, like a person committing himself to his word.

In summary: at the beginning of the *shiur* we questioned the need for three separate blessings to Yaakov, and the differences between them. We arrived at the conclusion that there is a distinction between the first blessing, representing a private initiative on Yitzchak's part, with no parallel (except for Yaakov's blessings to his sons, which are of similar character), and the two latter blessings, which are a sort of complementary pair that continue the blessings to Avraham, and particularly the two covenants: the Covenant Between the Parts, and the Covenant of Circumcision. The general significance of this analysis is that the blessing and selection of Avraham are passed on in their entirety, with all their components, to Yaakov. And each blessing relates to a different one of God's Names, since each Divine Name reflects a different aspect of Divine manifestation in the world.

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