

Dividing the Berakhot

By Rav Ezra Bick

The question of why Yitzchak wanted to give Esav the berakhot (blessings) is one of the most widely discussed by commentators on Bereishit. Several commentators have suggested that Yitzchak never intended to deny Yaakov the spiritual legacy of Avraham, including the promise of the Land. The berakha intended for Esav, ultimately usurped by Yaakov, was a different and parallel one to that given to Yaakov at the end of the parasha. Yitzchak was fully aware that the spiritual stature of Esav disqualified him from being the bearer of the mantle of Avraham.

There are several versions of this double-berakha theory. R. Menachem Leibtag has suggested that Yitzchak thought that both children would together share in "Jewish" identity. Both would receive personal blessings, just as all of Yaakov's twelve children were blessed, each according to his nature. There is no reason not to bless both, though the "bechira," the "birkat Avraham" of "zera" (offspring) and "aretz" (homeland), was reserved for Yaakov alone. Rivka, on the other hand, knew that the two sons were destined to be two nations, not one - God had told her before they were born that "Two PEOPLES are in your womb and two NATIONS shall separate out of your bowels, and one nation shall be stronger than the other and the older shall serve the younger." Knowing that Yitzchak's plan cannot be fulfilled, she acts to divert the berakha from Esav. The main support for this contention lies in the comparison between the berakha intended for Esav, and the one Yitzchak gives Yaakov at the end of the parasha, right before Yaakov departs for Charan. The first refers only to prosperity and power. There is no mention of the Land of Israel (birkat ha-aretz) and none of the promise of children, or the future people of Israel, the two elements of the repeated blessing given by God to Avraham. The second, on the other hand, is explicitly called "birkat Avraham" - And Kel Shakkai shall bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you should be a MULTITUDE OF PEOPLE; and give you the BLESSING OF AVRAHAM, to you and your seed with you, that you should INHERIT THE LAND in which you dwell, which God gave to Avraham."

What is still left unexplained in this scheme? One perplexing point is the apparent belief of Yitzchak that the berakha given to Yaakov (Esav) cannot be shared - there is nothing left to give Esav after this has been given to Yaakov. Why not? Why cannot both have a blessing of prosperity and riches? In fact, Yitzchak soon recovers and does bless Esav. The difference between the berakha given to Yaakov and that given to Esav seems to lie in the element in the first berakha of "You shall be the superior of your brother and the sons of your mother shall bow before you." This can be given only once. But that itself is puzzling. Why did Yitzchak see fit to subjugate one brother to the other? Yaakov, in giving

blessings to all his children, did not divide the physical benefits in such an exclusive manner. If the disagreement of Yitzchak and Rivka was whether to follow the example of Avraham-Yitzchak, or to anticipate the path of Yaakov-twelve tribes, Yitzchak's choice and the attendant tension does not correspond the subsequent form taken by Yaakov.

A second point relates to the prophecy received by Rivka before the birth of the children. It must be argued that Rivka had not shared this prophecy with Yitzchak. Two weeks ago, in the shiur on Vayeira, a similar question arose whether Avraham had told Sara about the impending birth of Yitzchak before the arrival of the angels. I argued then (against the Ramban) that it is inconceivable that Avraham would not have told Sara. In the case of Rivka, silence has admittedly a greater probability. Unlike the earlier case, this prophecy does not directly concern Yitzchak. Specifically, the element of Sara's name change, which I believe could not possibly have not been retold to Sara, is absent here. Nonetheless, the necessity of concealing a prophecy given to one of the foreparents from the other is troubling. Why should Rivka have never told Yitzchak?

Finally, I have a methodological problem. The basis of the story is a simple mistake, out of ignorance of God's plan? What is the significance of this story then? The passing on of the blessing is the central story of the parasha, in fact, the central story of Yitzchak's life (after the akeida, which is schematically part of Avraham's life). Yitzchak's mistake is a logical one, and in fact is only wrong by a few years, by one generation. I believe it is not enough to interpret Bereishit as a logical personal narrative; it must be a story of the Avot, of the creation of the Jewish people, of the spiritual community. What was the important ISSUE that divided Yitzchak and Rivka?

In an article printed in Megadim, Naava Guttman ("Hakol Kol Yaakov," Megadim 21, pp. 17-22) offers an interesting twist on the double-berakha theory. Yitzchak believed that it is necessary to separate the two aspects of a "holy people," the spiritual and the political. The Jewish nation would be a political entity with a spiritual destiny, a nation living on the earth with a *raison d'être* centered in heaven. Yitzchak thought it not only possible to divide the berakhot between Yaakov and Esav, he thought it necessary. One son would devote himself to the life of the spirit, to being an "ish tam" who dwells in the tent, the other would be the political leader, molding the nations fortune in the world, IN ORDER TO ADVANCE THE CAUSE OF THE FORMER. In other words, "ha-kol kol Yaakov ve-hayadayim yedei Esav," there is a man of hands and a man of words. The two cannot exist in the same individual. The two tasks are mutually exclusive. This is the distinction between king and priest, between court and temple. The need to be concerned with the problems of the world will ruin and contaminate the man of spirit and kedusha. Yitzchak recognized the personality of Esav and planned to utilize the strengths of that personality in order to further the future of Am Yisrael. Yitzchak loved Esav because "tzayid be-fiv" - he was practical, a provider, a hunter. Giving him a blessing of property and power is not merely a father caring for his son, it is part and parcel of the future of "and I shall make you a great nation." Hence, he

grants him not merely wealth, but dominion as well, for Yitzchak believes that one aspect of Jewish life must be in control of the other. The practical side, the side that must exercise power, shall rule, and "your mother's sons shall bow down before you." This does not mean that Esav will subjugate Yaakov, merely that he will be the ruler, much as Yosef dreamed that his brothers would bow down to him. Once this berakha is given to Yaakov instead of Esav, however, Yitzchak has nothing left to give to Esav, for he is surely not worthy of receiving the blessing of Avraham, the spiritual leadership of sanctity.

According to this theory, Rivka did not merely oppose Yitzchak's choice, she disagreed with the theory behind it. It is possible that she is influenced by the message of God she had received before the birth of the children, knowing not only that they would be "two peoples," which could be understood as two tribes, two parts of a greater unit, but also that "one nation shall be stronger than the other," which she understood as "one nation shall struggle against the other" (ye'ematz). It is also possible that, as Guttman claims, Rivka misunderstood, thinking that Yitzchak planned to give Esav the spiritual berakha. Guttman's proof for this is that whereas Yitzchak tells Esav that he wishes to "bless you before I die," Rivka tells Yaakov that Yitzchak said he wishes to "bless you before God before I die." The blessing "before God" is reminiscent of the status of a kohen, who "stands before God." But I think that even if Rivka had understood Yitzchak's intentions perfectly, she would have opposed them. The disagreement between Rivka and Yitzchak was one of principle. Rivka opposed separating the two aspects of Jewish existence so totally. Knowing Esav's character, knowing how totally dominated he was by the practical mundane side of life, she did not believe that separation of realms was the way to achieve a more perfect union of Jewish destiny.

Rivka aspires to unity, to completeness, in one individual. In this she is the complete opposite of Yitzchak. Why did Yitzchak believe that Yaakov should be left without any practical control over his life, dependant on his brother for food, sustenance and political leadership? The answer, I think, lies in Yitzchak's own personality. Last year, in a shiur I sent to this list, I described Yitzchak as being purely spiritual, inward, contemplative, withdrawn from the world, and detached. In other words, in his own life, Yitzchak's immense spiritual stature had been achieved by withdrawing from the sphere of the practical. He was a dreamer, a contemplative. We find no incidents in Yitzchak's life comparable to the drama of Avraham's or Yaakov's - in fact, we find nearly no incidents in Yitzchak's life at all, as retold by the Torah. Yitzchak was an "ola temima" (a flawless, "pure" sacrifice - the term used by Chazal to describe his special status, which, among other things, prevented him from leaving the sacred grounds of Eretz Yisrael), sanctified, hallowed, separated. It is only natural, then, for Yitzchak to believe that Yaakov's spiritual destiny as a "yoshev ohalim" must be protected by finding someone else to carry out those functions that require contact with the hurly-burly of everyday life. Esav is the perfect candidate. Yitzchak imagines that Yaakov will be able to carry on and perfect his own life work, while Esav will lay the practical foundations to transform solitary Jewish existence into nationhood. What's more, Yitzchak believes that power and sovereignty should be granted to Esav, since his role requires it, and Yaakov has no need for it. This is one of the great spiritual positions in history - an absolute divorce between power in the world and personal spiritual development, echoing

the plaint of Wordsworth, "the world is too much with us." Yitzchak knows from self-inspection that practical concerns, conflicts, and struggles would have destroyed him. In fact, God has shielded him from them all his life, leaving us with a rather eventless biography to read, encapsuled all in one parasha.

Rivka, on the other hand, is practical, with a bit of those qualities, such as deviousness and stealth, that are completely foreign to the "pure" nature of Yitzchak. She understands that Yaakov will complete the development of the avot, not by being more like Yitzchak, but by combining the "ohel" (tent) of Yitzchak with practical skills to change the world. (Getting a bit ahead of ourselves, Yaakov is the first to build a house, "bayit," and not live in a tent. He builds!). She knows that dividing the aspects of Jewish national life will not lead to a greater whole, but to conflict. The relationship she had with Yitzchak cannot exist between Esav and Yaakov, and Yitzchak's plan will lead to conflict and struggle, not harmony. Even if she had told Yitzchak what God had told her earlier, he would have understood it differently, given his character. She had not only heard the message of God, she had felt the boys' struggle in her womb, in her body, and could harbor no illusions about the outcome of giving Esav dominion over Yaakov. Hence, demonstrating her own practical side, and involving Yaakov in her scheme as well, she acted to correct the situation, to insure that Yaakov would bear within himself, and pass on to his many children, the unified dream of "tal ha-shamayim u-mishmanei ha-aretz" - the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth - together with "birkat Avraham." the inheritance of Eretz Yisrael.

That her plan will be accomplished with trickery, with all the attendant moral ambiguity, is itself indicative of the nature of what is happening here. Yitzchak shuns any involvement with what could be possibly morally ambiguous, with anything that could affect his status as "ola temima." He is not permitted to have contact with the mundane, to go to chutz la-aretz, lest it detract from the purity of his heaven-bound vision. The "trick" of getting the berakha is itself the contradiction to Yitzchak's plan, irrespective of the result in changing the intended recipient of the berakha. Hence, the response of Yitzchak:

"Isaac trembled very excessively and said, 'Who, then, was it who hunted the provision, and brought it to me that I should eat from all before you came, and I have blessed him? Yea, and he shall be blessed.'"

The trembling, the anxiety of Yitzchak, has troubled commentators since Chazal. The midrash, feeling the dread implied in the words "charada gedola," says this refers to a feeling of gehinom; he felt the opening of hell, of death, before him. Yaakov had brought the world, its deceit, its ambiguity and lack of clarity (see Rashi on "ani Esav bekhorekha") into Yitzchak's life; indeed, he had fed it to him, and Yitzchak had eaten it "from all." This was a contradiction, a desecration, of the foundation of Yitzchak's whole existence, a corruption of his special purity. "Charada gedola" (a **great** trembling), asks the midrash, is **greater** than what? - "greater than the trembling he experienced on the altar at the akeida." The akeida defined Yitzchak as ola temima; deceit rocks, as an underlying anxiety and dread, that foundation.

Yitzchak, however, recovers. "Gam barukh yihyeh" - yea, and he shall be blessed. In one second, Yitzchak sees that the next stage is not as he thought, a further deepening of spiritual

detachment, but rather a widening of spiritual dimension to encompass and sanctify the practical side of life. The berakha he gave Yaakov CAN coexist with Yaakov's spiritual blessing. He shall be blessed, it is not impossible, it is not a contradiction. Yaakov shall leave the house of Yitzchak to wander, to struggle, with Esav, with Lavan, with the problems of his children, with galut and tum'a, and by doing so he will complete the building of "beit Yisrael." As the angel who blesses him and names him Yisrael says, "For you have struggled with God and men and you have prevailed."

Further questions:

1. Is the deception of Rivka and Yaakov morally justified, even granted the theory presented in the shiur? Is there a parallel here to the tragic events which take place between Yaakov and his children?
2. What is the significance of the "bekhora," the status of first-born, which Yaakov bought from Esav? What is the relationship of "bekhora" to "berakha?" Remember that Esav, at least, seems to think they are two different things - "Va-ya'akveini zeh PA'AMAYIM."
3. How does Rivka's separation of the two realms of Jewish life compare with Torah's separation of the Leviim from the rest of the people, especially in light of the Ramban's contention ([Bereishit 49,10](#)) that there is a specific prohibition for a kohen to take part in government?