



Ashreinu | אשרינו

ENHANCING YOUR STUDY OF THE WEEKLY TORAH PORTION

YITZCHAK AVINU'S LOGIC

RABBI BENJY HOROWITZ

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YITZY LANNER ('19)

NETANYA MEYEROWITZ ('17)

JEREMY GRIFF ('19)

ETAN WINOGRAD ('18)

TOLDOT QUIZ

One of the most difficult portions of the Torah to understand is the story of Yaakov stealing the brachot from Esav and from his father. The questions abound, but I want to focus on just two. First, how could Yitzchak have thought that Esav

should get the brachot? Was he not aware of the actions of his own children? Did he think that Esav was a righteous person and a Torah scholar? Second, how could Yaakov think that a blessing given under false pretenses would not be automatically invalidated?

To begin to answer these questions, a closer examination of the text is in order. There were in fact three brachot given by Yitzchak. The first one was given to who he thought was Esav but was actually Yaakov, the second

one was given to Esav, and there was a third blessing that Yitzchak gives to Yaakov when he knows it is Yaakov.

The first blessing, the one he thought he was giving to Esav, was about a blessing for physical and material success. People and nations would serve him including his brother. When Esav enters the room and it becomes clear to Yitzchak that he was tricked, Esav asks for another blessing, even saying “have you but one blessing father?” (27:38) The blessing that Yitzchak does give to Esav is that while he will serve his brother, “yet it shall be that when you are aggrieved, you may cast off his yoke from your neck”. (27:40)

When Yaakov came to his father before he was forced to run away to avoid Esav's wrath, Yitzchak gives him his last blessing. He says “May He grant you the blessing of Avraham to you and to your offspring that you may possess the land of your sojourns which God gave to Avraham”. (28:4) This blessing could have been given the first time when Yitzchak thought he was speaking to Esav. It could certainly have been given when Esav pleaded with Yitzchak “have you but one blessing father?” It is clear that this blessing, the one about the continuation of the ideals

of Avraham, and the mantle of spiritual leadership was always intended for Yaakov. Yitzchak was well aware of who his kids were and always knew that this blessing of spirituality could only have been given to Yaakov.

On the other hand, Yitzchak had felt that his son Esav, the hunter and warrior, would inherit the physical blessings of this world and that Yaakov the “wholesome man, abiding in tents” could never be so involved in the physical. Yaakov would instead inherit only the spiritual world. Yitzchak goes through a major transformation when he realizes that Yaakov tricked him. In fact the pasuk says “and Yitzchak trembled greatly”. (27:33) In that moment Yitzchak realized his mistake. While his plan to give Yaakov the spiritual blessing was still correct, the physical blessing which he thought was only for a person like Esav, he now realized was to be given to Yaakov as well. In fact right after he told Esav that Yaakov had taken the blessing, he said “he shall also be blessed”, meaning that the blessing that Yitzchak gave to Yaakov when he thought he was Esav, and therefore were invalid, Yitzchak now gave to Yaakov knowingly. Only now does Yitzchak understand that Yaakov is supposed to represent the blessings of spirituality AND physicality in the world.

GRATITUDE TO GOD'S GIFTS

YITZY LANNER ('19)

IN THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, PARSHAT TOLDOT, YITZCHAK gives Yaakov the bracha that is meant for Esav, the bechor. Yaakov tricks Yitzchak into giving him the bracha instead. After Yaakov receives “Esav's” bracha, Esav asks his father Yitzchak for the bracha that he was supposed to receive. Yitzchak responds by telling Esav that he already gave the bracha away to Yaakov and doesn't have anything else to bless Esav with.

After Esav pleads with his father, Yitzchak finally gives in and figures out what bracha to give him. The odd thing about the bracha that Yitzchak gives to Esav is that it appears to be almost identical to the bracha that was given to Yaakov!

There is, however, one difference between the two brachot. When Yitzchak gives the bracha to Yaa-

kov, he blesses Yaakov that Hashem should give him land and whatever he wants, while the blessing given to Esav just blesses him with having whatever he wants; it doesn't seem to matter where or by whom those wishes get fulfilled. Why would Yitzchak make this change in the bracha that he gave to Esav?

Perhaps the difference between Yaakov and Esav is the way in which they appreciate the things they have. On the one hand, there is Esav, who just wants stuff, but doesn't care how he gets it, nor does he appreciate who provides him with it. On the other hand there is Yaakov, who does care how he gets what he has and appreciates those who provide him with everything he receives in life.

For this reason, when blessing Esav, Yitzchak leaves out the part about Hashem giving everything to Esav, because his bracha to Esav was just the hope that he will be successful in life and have what he needs. When Yitzchak gives Yaakov the bracha, he made sure to mention that Hashem is the one who will give him everything and help him in life.

This is a major difference between Yaakov and Esav. Esav only cares about the physical things in life, while Yaakov cares about the physical, but also cares about the spiritual things as well.

LOOKING BEYOND THE PRESENT

NETANYA MEYEROWITZ ('17)

IN PARSHAT TOLDOT, ESAV COMES BACK FROM hunting and asks Yaakov for some of the soup he is cooking. Yaakov responds by trading his soup for Esav's birthright. Esav agrees to give up his birthright for soup and says, “I am going to die, so of what use to me is a birthright?” (Bereishit 25:30). As Jewish people who value the idea and system of birthrights, this seems like a wasteful trade for Esav and an amazing trade for Yaakov.

However, what is more striking is the reason for which Esav gives away his birthright. Esav's reason for not caring about the birthright is that he is going to die, meaning that because it is a spiritual blessing for further generations and will not affect him immediately,

he does not find meaning in it. He is therefore willing to give it up for something that will affect him immediately, such as a bowl of soup.

Esav's decision to only care about his immediate physical desires rather than think about what will affect him in the long run suggests that rash, in-the-moment decisions are ineffective and often harmful. Rather, a person should make an effort to understand the consequences that will become of his actions if he does not look out for his future.

Often we become consumed by current events, and we sometimes act in ways we know we should not. Instead of acting out as a response to wanting something immediately, it is best to think of the future and understand the ramifications of our actions. Perhaps if Esav would have recognized this, he would not have given up his birthright for something that would only satisfy him in the present.

YITZCHAK, THE PARADIGM OF GEVURAH

JEREMY GRIFF ('19)

IT IS QUITE STRANGE THAT YITZCHAK IS IDENTIFIED with the trait of gevurah or strength. It would make more sense to identify Yitzchak with the trait of purity, being that he did not leave the land of Israel, saw no evil in other people, and willingly offered himself as a sacrifice to God. The trait of strength and Yitzchak don't seem to fit well together because Yitzchak is one of the most passive characters in the Torah. Yitzchak rarely takes initiative. He doesn't choose his own wife, never fights in wars, and even continues digging the same wells his father digs. He doesn't question and leave his family like Avraham. A person identified with strength would seemingly be a strong leader who takes initiative and doesn't merely stand in the shadows of others.

However, gevurah does not really refer to physical strength; the word for that is koach. Instead, gevurah is understood to mean spiritual strength. Yitzchak had the spiritual power, gevurah, to keep the Jewish faith alive and pass it down many generations.

There is something even more remarkable about Yitzchak. No one wants to live in other people's

shadows, especially their parents'. There are so many stories of people who want to make a name for themselves and therefore reject the opportunity to join the family business. The world is filled with people who are unsuccessful because they can't escape their parents' shadows and don't want to be a mere extension of their parents.

This helps us understand the true strength of Yitzchak. Yitzchak's father Avraham was a revolutionizer of the world; he was a philosopher, preacher, teacher, and traveler, among other things. It would have been normal for Yitzchak to want to be his own person, escape his father's shadow, and strike out by himself. Yet Yitzchak knew that in order for the revolution of Avraham to flourish and continue, it was necessary to allow some time to pass to internalize and propagate his parents' success, vision, and wisdom. If Yitzchak would have struck out on his own, the revolution may have died down and even sunk. Yitzchak was happy to emulate his father and be a shadow of him.

It takes tremendous inner strength to continue to sacrifice your own goals to further enhance your parents' vision. Yitzchak was passive in a good way, a passivity that required strength and courage. He was able to ignore his own wants and wishes for the greater good of Bnei Yisrael. Like Yitzchak, we should all try to be a link in the chain of the Jewish people and try to stop focusing solely on our own needs and consider what is best for the good of all of Klal Yisrael.

EMBRACING THE BIRTHRIGHT

ETAN WINOGRAD ('18)

IN THIS WEEK'S PARSHA, ESAV COMES HOME FROM hunting and gives Yaakov his birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew. This exchange seems ridiculous and thoughtless. How could Esav belittle the value of the birthright for something as insignificant and temporary as a bowl of stew?

One way to interpret Esav's actions is to suggest that after a hard day's work, he was tired and hungry and solely focused on his physical needs. Esav did not care about or consider anything but satisfying his hunger, leading him to sacrifice his birthright for the delicious-smelling stew.

Rashi suggests, however, that Esav's decision to give up his birthright was not just a matter of which Esav desired more at that moment, the birthright or the stew. The pasuk states:

“וַיִּבֶז עֵשָׂו אֶת-הַבְּכֹרָה”

(Bereishit 25:34)

According to Rashi, this means that Esav intrinsically despised the birthright because it entailed great responsibilities, such as performing the avodah in the Beit Hamikdash. Esav was aware that the birthright came with spiritual burdens and restrictions, which he did not want. Therefore, it was an obvious choice to relinquish the birthright, bowl of stew notwithstanding. The chance to trade his birthright for a satisfying bowl of stew merely provided Esav with the right opportunity to give up the “burden” of being the firstborn; the tasty meal was simply a bonus.

Esav's costly decision to sell his birthright reminds us that we should never belittle the religious and spiritual responsibilities that we carry, even in those times that they feel like a burden. Shrugging off that “burden” and taking the easy way out can cost us, like Esav, the opportunity for a more meaningful life. Instead, we should emulate Yaakov, who embraced the responsibilities of being the bechor so that he could serve Hashem to the best of his ability.



KRIAH CONUNDRUMS

- 1. Which pasuk in this parsha has five verbs in a row?*
- 2. In this parsha we are informed of the birth of the twins Yaakov and Esav. Which other set of twins appears in the Torah?*
- 3. Besides Esav, who else in Tanach is called an “admoni” - a person with reddish complexion?*
- 4. In what two contexts does the number 40 appear in this parsha?*



Answers: (1) When Esav takes the lentil soup from Yaakov, the Torah states: “And he ate and he drank and he got up and he degraded the birthright” (Genesis 25:34). (2) Twin sons, Zerah and Perez, were born to Yehudah and Tamar (Genesis 38:27). (3) When matries Rivka at the age of 40 (Genesis 26:34). Esav also matries at age 40 (Genesis 25:20). (4) Yitzchak the future king, David, first meets the prophet Shmuel, David is described as having “reddish complexion” (1-Shmuel 16:12). (4) Yitzchak

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