**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT TOLDOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells the famous story of the blessing which Yitzchak intended to give to his older son, Esav, but which was taken by Yaakov after Yitzchak’s wife, Rivka, had Yaakov disguise as Esav and deceive his father. This section begins by informing us that Yitzchak lost his eyesight in his later years (27:1), thus setting the stage for the deception.

Rashi cites a number of reasons why Yitzchak was struck with blindness, one of which, cited from the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:6) relates to his experience at the *akeida*, when his father placed him upon an altar and nearly slaughtered him as a sacrifice: “When he was bound upon the altar and his father sought to slaughter him, at that moment, the heavens opened and the ministering angels saw and cried. Their tears descended onto his eyes, and so his eyesight dimmed.”

[Rav Shmuel Berenbaum](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=49014&st=&pgnum=43&hilite=) found it significant that the Midrash describes the heavens “opening” at the time of the *akeida*. Did God really need to open the heavens to show the angels what was happening? Are they incapable of seeing the events here on earth without God opening the heavens?

Rav Berenbaum explained that God wanted the angels to empathize with the pain endured by Avraham and Yitzchak at that moment, and this necessitated His “opening” the heavens. From the perspective of the heavens, all events in our world are good and just. As God is good, everything He does is, by definition, good. Evil and misfortune are experienced as such only from our human, earthly perspective. We are required to pray that tragedies not occur, and to mourn when they do occur, because we are expected to view life from our human frame of reference, from which tragedies are indeed tragic. But the angels view our world’s events from the heavens, where everything is, by definition, the ultimate good, the manifestation of the impeccably just divine will. At the time of *akeidat Yitzchak*, however, God “opened the heavens” and brought the angels to look upon the scene from the human vantage point. From the perspective of our world, the sight of a father prepared to kill his son is excruciatingly painful and tragic. And so the angels wept, as they were shown the scene of the *akeida* from the human perspective, rather than from a heavenly perspective.

On this basis, we might suggest an explanation for why the Midrash associates Yitzchak’s blindness with this incident. Many writers have noted that the description of Yitzchak visual impairment as the introduction to the story of the blessings is likely intended both literally and figuratively. Yitzchak was not only “blind” in the sense that his eyes stopped functioning, but also “blind” in the sense that he was unable to properly assess Esav. The story of the blessings began with Yitzchak’s figurative “blindness,” in his failure to accurately see who Esav was, and recognize that he did not deserve his blessing. The Midrash perhaps associates this “blindness” with the angels’ tears at the time of the *akeida* because it was this model of empathy, of stepping into somebody else’s frame of reference, that resulted in Yitzchak’s “blindness.” Yitzchak followed this example in his own life, descending from the “heavens,” from his lofty stature of piety, to empathize with the struggles of others. He refused to judge Esav critically because he insisted on seeing things from Esav’s viewpoint, rather than impose his own standards and frame of reference onto his son – precisely as the angels had done for him when they viewed his condition from his vantage point, and not from the vantage point of the heavens.

If so, then the Midrash here alludes to the delicate balance that must be maintained with regard to empathy. On the one hand, we must follow the angels’ example and try as much as possible to assess others from their vantage point, from the perspective of their experiences and background, and take into account their unique challenges before rendering judgment. At the same time, however, especially when dealing with students and children, we cannot allow empathy to “blind” us to problems that need to be addressed. Yitzchak was correct in “opening the heavens” and empathizing with Esav, but he erred in overlooking Esav’s sinfulness and deeming him worthier of his blessing than Yaakov. While we must try as much as possible to judge people favorably by stepping into their shoes and assessing them on their level, we cannot allow ourselves to be “blinded” to faults that require attention and must be addressed.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells of the stark difference between Esav and Yaakov, describing Esav as “a man who knew hunting, a man of the field,” and Yaakov as “a simple man, a dweller of tents” (25:27). While the simple meaning of the verse is that Yaakov was a shepherd who resided in tents as he tended to his flocks, *Chazal* famously understood the term “*yoshev ohalim*” as a reference to Torah study. Interestingly, the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Vayishlach, 9) explained on this basis the plural term “*ohalim*” (“tents”) used in this verse: “There was nobody who toiled in Torah like our patriarch Yaakov… It does not say here, ‘dweller of a tent,’ but rather ‘a dweller of tents’ – he would go from the study hall of Shem to the study hall of Eiver, and from the study hall of Eiver to the study hall of Avraham.” Yaakov was a “dweller of tents” in the sense that he studied diligently in several different “tents” of Torah learning.

Why might it be significant that Yaakov studied in a number of different “tents,” rather than remaining in just a single house of learning?

The image depicted by the Midrash is one of rigorous, proactive learning. Yaakov did not sit comfortably in one place, but rather traveled about intensively from one place to another in the pursuit of wisdom. And thus the Midrash informs us that “there was nobody who toiled in Torah like our patriarch Yaakov.” The Midrash seeks to teach us about “toiling” in Torah, that Torah learning should not be easy, comfortable, relaxing or effortless. Yaakov did not sit comfortably in a tent, but rather invested a great deal of hard work in his studies.

This point assumes particular importance in the context of the difference noted by the verse between Yaakov and Esav. The Torah describes Esav as “a man of the field,” which we naturally associate with laudable qualities such as courage, daring and physical exertion. With these words still echoing in our ears as we read the next words – the description of Yaakov as “a dweller of tents,” we might naturally think of Yaakov as a lazy, easygoing, passive man who chose the “easy life” as opposed to the challenging, exciting, ambitious lifestyle embraced by his brother. The Midrash therefore emphasizes that Yaakov did not enjoy an easy, relaxed life in a comfortable “tent.” He, too, exerted a great deal of effort and worked very hard, intensively and tirelessly pursuing knowledge and wisdom.

The message, then, is that Torah study should never be the “easy” option, and success in learning should never be expected to come without exertion and effort. While the phrase “*yoshev ohalim*” might conjure an association with comfort and ease, the truth is that the “tents” of Torah study must be places of hard work, discipline and intensive effort, the indispensable prerequisites to the acquisition of knowledge and scholarship.

Monday

We read in Parashat Toldot that when Yaakov disguised as Esav and brought meat to his father in order to receive his blessing, Yitzchak “smelled the smell of his garments,” and exclaimed that these garments smelled like “the field which the Lord has blessed” (27:27). Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that as Yaakov entered the room, he was accompanied by “the scent of *Gan Eden*,” and this is what evoked Yitzchak’s enthusiastic response, noting that he smelled the scent of “the field which the Lord has blessed” – namely, the Garden of Eden.

The Gemara, however, in Masekhet Sanhedrin (37a), presents a much different explanation of this verse, explaining that the word “*begadav*” (“his garments”) can also be read as “*bogdav*” – “his rebellious ones.” Yitzchak here foresaw that even the sinners among Yaakov’s descendants would have good deeds to their credit, and even they would emit a fragrant scent, so-to-speak, through their virtuous actions.

Seeking to explain the connection between these two readings of the verse, Rav Yosef Salant, in [*Be’er Yosef*,](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=47091&st=&pgnum=105&hilite=) cites a fascinating Midrashic passage in *Shemot Rabba* (chapter 19) describing the paschal sacrifice offered by *Benei Yisrael* on the night of the Exodus. The Midrash relates that many among *Benei Yisrael* refused to perform *berit mila* before the Exodus as God had commanded. But when Moshe offered his *korban pesach*, the Almighty had special winds blow from *Gan Eden* to Moshe’s sacrifice, and the fragrant scent of *Gan Eden* wafted through air. All *Benei Yisrael* followed the intoxicating scent to Moshe’s sacrifice, and asked for a share of the meat. Moshe informed them that they were not permitted to partake of the sacrifice until they underwent circumcision, and they promptly performed *berit mila*.

The “scent of *Gan Eden*,” then, refers to the inspiration that God sends to draw people to *mitzva* observance. It is the beauty and special appeal that *mitzvot* often have, and which motivates people to make considerable sacrifices which they had previously refused to make, for the sake of serving God.

Not coincidentally, Rav Salant notes, *Chazal* elsewhere (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, 32) comment that the meat which Yitzchak requested at the time he gave the blessing to his son was prepared as the *korban pesach*. The “scent of *Gan Eden*” accompanied Yaakov as he brought the *korban pesach* to Yitzchak just as this scent was produced by Moshe Rabbenu’s paschal offering in Egypt. *Chazal* associate this scent with the scent of “*bogdav*,” of the sinners of Israel, because this is the scent of inspiration, the draw and appeal of *mitzvot* that has the ability to arouse the hearts of even evildoers and motivate them to change.

The message of this insight, perhaps, is that we must do all we can to ensure that the *mitzvot* we perform indeed emit the “scent of *Gan Eden*,” a pleasing and attractive fragrance. We must perform *mitzvot* with sincerity, joy, humility and a genuine desire to serve the Almighty so He will send the special “scent” from *Gan Eden*, which will inspire and stir the hearts of people far and wide, engendering within them a deep-seated love for *mitzvot* and an appreciation for living life devoted to the service of God.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted Yitzchak’s proclamation upon smelling the scent of Yaakov’s garments when he brought him the meat Rivka had prepared for him: “Behold, my son’s smell is like the field which the Lord has blessed” (27:27). Rashi, citing the Midrash, raises the question of why Yitzchak was so enthusiastic about the smell emanating from Yaakov. As we read earlier (27:16), Yaakov had on his arms the skins of the goats which Rivka had used to prepare the meat for Yitzchak. Goatskins, the Midrash observes, are foul-smelling. Why, then, did Yitzchak compare this stench with the scent of “the field which the Lord has blessed?” The Midrash, as Rashi cites, answers that the scent of *Gan Eden* entered the room along with Yaakov as he appeared before Yitzchak.

How might we understand the Midrash’s reference to the “scent of *Gan Eden*” in this context? And how was this scent able to offset the stench of the goatskins covering Yaakov’s arms?

One answer, perhaps, is that the Midrash here seeks to convey the message expressed by the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Pesachim (65b), “It is an honor for the children of Aharon to walk about [in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*] up to their knees in blood.” Some might have presumed that it was unbecoming for the *kohanim*, the nation’s representatives serving before the Almighty in the Temple, to have to walk about the Temple courtyard when it was filled with the blood of the paschal sacrifices on Erev Pesach. The Gemara therefore teaches that to the contrary, the *kohanim* saw this as a mark of pride and distinction. Activities which might strike us as unseemly and repulsive become beautiful and glorious when they are done in the context of a *mitzva*, as part of one’s service of God. Even a scene as inherently unattractive as a courtyard filled with the blood of animals is considered magnificent and exquisite when it is the courtyard of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* filled with the blood of sacrifices.

We might explain the Midrash’s remark concerning Yaakov’s scent in a similar vein. Yaakov, in truth, brought to the room the displeasing stench of goatskins. However, Yitzchak considered this smell the “scent of *Gan Eden*” because it was associated with a *mitzva*. He had asked his son to hunt an animal and prepare him meat, and his son complied out of respect and love for his father. From Yitzchak’s perspective, then, the stench of the goatskins was the “scent of *Gan Eden*,” a magnificent and attractive smell. The Midrash’s intent is not that Yaakov actually had a pleasant, fragrant scent, but rather that even the offensive stench of goatskins was pleasing since it was associated with his respecting his father. We are to regard *mitzvot* and anything associated with them as “fragrant” like “the scent of *Gan Eden*,” even if they entail things which would otherwise strike us as unseemly. If we truly appreciate the centrality of *avodat Hashem* in our lives and the privilege we are given to serve the Almighty, then even smelly “goatskins” are beautiful when they are used in the performance of a *mitzva*.

Wednesday

We read towards the end of Parashat Toldot of Esav’s decision to kill Yaakov in revenge for his having stolen the blessing which Yitzchak had intended to give to Esav: “Esav said to himself: The days of mourning for my father will soon arrive, and I will then kill my brother Yaakov” (27:41). The Torah then tells that Rivka learned of Esav’s murderous plans, whereupon she instructed Yaakov to flee to Charan and reside with her brother, Lavan.

Rashi, citing the Midrash, comments that Rivka heard about Esav’s intention to kill Yaakov through *ru’ach ha-kodesh* (prophetic powers). Presumably, Rashi made this comment in order to answer the question of how Rivka would know of plans which, as the Torah explicitly states, were not verbally expressed, and were made only in Esav’s mind. The Torah tells not that Rivka feared or intuited that Esav would seek revenge, but rather that “Rivka was told the words of Esav, her older son,” indicating that Esav’s precise plan was somehow relayed to Rivka. Rashi therefore explained that she learned this information through her prophetic powers.

We might wonder why Rivka waited for this prophetic revelation before urging Yaakov to flee. According to Midrashic tradition, Esav was a violent murderer (see, for example, Rashi’s comment to 25:29, citing the Midrash), and Esav was clearly enraged by Yaakov’s ruse, crying loudly and condemning Yaakov’s treachery (27:34,36). Was there not reason to fear Esav’s vengeance even without *ru’ach ha-kodesh*? Shouldn’t Yaakov have fled immediately? Why did Rivka decide to have Yaakov escape from home only after learning of Esav’s plans through prophecy?

Possibly, the Midrash’s comment is meant to impress upon us not to rashly reach drastic conclusions about other people’s evil characters. We may presume that Rivka and Yaakov felt concerned immediately upon seeing Esav’s furious reaction to losing the blessing. Nevertheless, Rivka decided to carefully but patiently monitor the situation before taking the drastic action of sending Yaakov away. It was only once it became clear that Esav planned to take Yaakov’s life that she urged Yaakov to flee. *Chazal* here teach us not to rush to think the worst of others. Even Esav was not presumed to be planning a murder until this was determined through *ru’ach ha-kodesh*. Not every “Esav” necessarily poses a direct threat that requires drastic action. Rather than rushing to shun people for every negative quality, remark or action, we should instead try to judge people favorably and patiently allow them an opportunity to prove themselves worthy of respect.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells of how Yaakov disguised as his brother, Esav, in order to receive the blessing that Yitzchak sought to confer upon the older twin. Yitzchak had instructed Esav to hunt game and prepare meat which he would then bring to Yitzchak so he could receive his blessings. As Esav was out hunting, Rivka had Yaakov bring her goats from the family’s herd, and she prepared meat for Yaakov to bring to Yitzchak, disguised as Esav. When Yaakov arrived, Yitzchak – who assumed the person standing before him was Esav – naturally wondered how he managed to hunt and prepare meat so rapidly. Yaakov replied, “*Ki hikra Hashem Elokekha lefanai*” – “Because the Lord your God brought it before me” (27:20). In other words, he attributed his speed to God, who enabled him to catch game without much time or effort.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:19) comments that Yaakov also noted a precedent for such divine intervention. According to one view cited by the Midrash, Yaakov said to his father, “If for your sacrifice the Almighty made it available to you…then for your food, all the more so!” The Midrash refers here to the story of *akeidat Yitzchak*, when, after God instructed Avraham not to sacrifice his son, Avraham immediately saw a ram that was trapped by its horns in the thicket of trees. Avraham easily captured the ram and offered it as a sacrifice. Yaakov thus told Yitzchak that if God made his sacrifice available without requiring much effort, then certainly he would provide him with the meal he wanted without requiring much effort.

Intuitively, we might have assumed just the opposite – that God is more likely to make it easy for us to obtain our “sacrifice,” the materials we need to serve Him, than to make it easy for us to obtain our physical sustenance. After all, since our religious obligations are to be the central component and ultimate goal of life, it would seem that He should provide us with more help for our religious duties than for our mundane needs. The Midrash, however, teaches us that to the contrary, we are more likely to receive God’s assistance when it comes to our material needs than with regard to our spiritual endeavors. And thus Yaakov noted that if God made an animal readily available for a sacrifice, He would certainly make an animal readily available for the meal that Yitzchak desired. The reason is because God specifically wants us to exert work and effort in fulfilling our religious duties. Fulfilling His will is meant to be difficult and to require a great deal of challenges and hard work. And thus while we can and should ask for His assistance, we also should never expect spiritual achievement to come easily. *Chazal* here teach that we are more likely to receive special divine assistance in the pursuit of a livelihood than we are in the pursuit of excellence in *avodat Hashem*, as the latter is meant to be obtained through lifelong struggle and efforts, and by constantly working to overcome difficult obstacles.

Friday

Earlier this week, we noted the comment of the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Vayishlach, 9) explaining the Torah’s description of Yaakov as a “*yosheiv ohalim*” – “dweller of tents” (25:27). *Chazal* understood this term as a reference to Yaakov’s diligent study, and the *Midrash Tanchuma* elaborates, “There was nobody who toiled in Torah like our patriarch Yaakov… It does not say here, ‘dweller of a tent,’ but rather ‘a dweller of tents’ – he would go from the study hall of Shem to the study hall of Eiver, and from the study hall of Eiver to the study hall of Avraham.” Drawing upon the plural form “*ohalim*,” the Midrash tells that Yaakov did not study in a single “tent,” but rather availed himself of the variety of different learning opportunities that existed at that time.

The Tolna Rebbe explained that the Midrash seeks to convey to us the importance of learning from multiple teachers and utilizing a variety of different learning styles and methodologies. Torah exists in “*ohalim*,” in many different schools, offering a wide range of approaches. We are encouraged not to remain confined to a single “tent,” to one specific approach, but rather to follow Yaakov’s example of going from one study hall to another, exploring different methodologies and benefitting all we can from each in our pursuit of excellence.

The Tolna Rebbe further noted the significance of the fact that the Torah presents this description of Yaakov as a point of contrast with his brother: “Esav was a man who knew hunting, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a simple man, a dweller of tents.” Symbolically, Esav is associated with negative spiritual forces and tendencies. Yaakov’s description as a “*yosheiv ohalim*” thus alludes to us that we can resist and overcome “Esav,” our negative tendencies and external spiritual threats, by following his example of learning in many different “tents.” No single “tent” can be assumed to have the solutions for all the different manifestations of “Esav.” In order to overcome the wide range of spiritual challenges that we face over the course of our lives, we need to access the wide range of spiritual resources that are found in the various different “tents” of study. We are encouraged and urged to “go from the study hall of Shem to the study hall of Eiver, and from the study hall of Eiver to the study hall of Avraham” – to avail ourselves of different styles of learning and different approaches to Torah life, so we can build for ourselves a complete, integrated Torah persona that can overcome the different religious challenges that we confront.

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