S.A.L.T. – Parashat Toledot

By Rav David Silverberg

Motzaei

The *Midrash Ha-gadol*, in a remarkable passage (Bereishit 25:28), addresses the famous question of why Yitzchak loved and showed preference to Esav. Esav was clearly a problematic character, and is portrayed in Midrashic and Talmudic literature as a villain, whereas Yaakov is depicted as pious and studious. The Midrash thus asks, “Did our patriarch Yitzchak not know that Esav’s conduct was unbecoming? Why did he love him?”

The Midrash answers, “He loved him only outwardly, in order to draw him close and bring him near… If his conduct was improper when he loved him, how much more so [would his conduct have been improper] if he had despised him and distanced him!” According to the Midrash, Yitzchak reacted to Esav’s sinful conduct and character by showering him with love and affection, hoping that this would have the effect of inspiring some degree of change. And the Midrash, remarkably, contends that the strategy was effective. Although Esav is known as sinful, ruthless and corrupt, the Midrash claims that he would have been even worse were it not for his father’s unconditional love and affection.

A source for this contention can be found in the Torah, in reference to Esav’s marriage. Before the story of Yaakov’s seizing the blessings intended for Esav, the Torah informs us that Esav married two Chittite women, which caused great distress to Yitzchak and Rivka (26:34-35). Later, towards the end of Parashat Toledot (28:8), we read, “Esav saw that the women of Canaan were evil **in the eyes of his father, Yitzchak**,” and decided to marry Yishmael’s daughter. Significantly, Esav was affected specifically by his father’s displeasure with his wives, but not by Rivka’s objections. Both Yitzchak and Rivka opposed Esav’s marriage to Chittite women, but Esav’s change of heart resulted only from Yitzchak’s distress. It did not bother him that his mother, who had rejected him, was displeased, but he was troubled by his loving father’s displeasure.

The *Midrash Ha-gadol* concludes its comments by noting, “Our Sages said: The right shall always draw close, and the left push away.” *Chazal* viewed Yitzchak’s handling of Esav as a model to be followed in relating to those who deviate from the proper path of conduct. We must express displeasure and opposition, but this should be secondary (“the left”) to the love and affection that we must continue to exhibit (“the right”). The Midrash teaches us that we must work to draw even “Esav” close to us, with love and warmth, because every bit of love and warmth can have an impact – however minor – on the person’s conduct. And, perhaps most importantly, the Midrash teaches us that even a minor impact is significant. We must never despair from trying to inspire and guide a fellow Jew, because every small ounce of growth and improvement is a meaningful achievement. Just as Yitzchak refused to give up on Esav, we must never allow ourselves to give up on anyone, and must instead draw all people close with our “right,” even as we disapprove “with our left” of their chosen path.

(Based on [an article by Rav Amnon Bazak](https://he-il.facebook.com/amnon.d.bazak/posts/532508953552298))

Sunday

Towards the end of Parashat Toledot (28:9), we read of Esav’s marriage to his first cousin, Machalat, the daughter of Yishmael. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Bikkurim 3:3) notes that later in Sefer Bereishit (36:3), the Torah refers to this woman by the name Bosmat, and not Machalat. To reconcile this apparent contradiction, the Yerushalmi suggests that her true name was Bosmat, but she is called Machalat when the Torah speaks of her marrying Esav to allude to the fact that Esav’s sins were forgiven on the day he got married. The name “*Machalat*” relates to the root *m.ch.l* – “forgive” – and thus alludes to the special opportunity for forgiveness granted to Esav at that time.This is the source of the famous tradition that a bride and groom earn atonement for all their sins on their wedding day.

Rav Avraham Danzig (author of *Chayei Adam*), in his work *Tosefot Chayim* (132:58), cites several sources claiming that a bride and groom earn atonement only if they perform *teshuva*. Just as *Halakha* follows the view that Yom Kippur provides atonement for our sins only if we undergo repentance, similarly, a bride and groom must repent in order to take advantage of the unique opportunity for atonement offered by the occasion of their wedding.

Some have argued, however, that atonement is achieved on one’s wedding day irrespective of his or her repentance. They draw proof from the fact that this entire concept is sourced in Esav’s marriage, and it is difficult to imagine that a wicked man like Esav repented. The Tolna Rebbe related that this argument was advanced by the Rav of Tchebin (Rav Dov Berish Weidenfeld, 1881-1965) in the presence of the *Beit Yisrael* (Rav Yisrael Alter, the fifth Gerer Rebbe, 1894-1977), who strongly objected to this theory and refuted the argument. He noted that it is quite possible that Esav repented, and he proceeded to cite several sources suggesting that Esav was a more complex character that we might have thought, and may very well have repented, at least to some degree, at the time of his marriage to Bosmat.

We might add that Esav’s marriage to Bosmat (as we saw yesterday) was indeed the result of some degree of soul-searching on Esav’s part. The Torah writes explicitly that Esav married Bosmat upon reflecting on how his father disapproved of his marriage to two Chittite women. He decided to improve the situation, however slightly, by marrying Yishmael’s daughter, who was from Yitzchak’s family. Although this decision does not necessarily amount to full *teshuva* the way we commonly use the term, and the Torah even says that Esav married Bosmat “in addition to his wives,” indicating that he did not divorce his Chittite wives, nevertheless, Esav’s change of heart is deemed significant. He at least acknowledged that his marriage to Chittite women caused his father distress, and decided to rectify the situation in some small measure.

On this basis, we might suggest a third possibility regarding the question of whether a bride and groom must repent to earn atonement on their wedding day. If, indeed, Esav serves as the model of a newlywed couple’s atonement, then perhaps the Yerushalmi is teaching that even small, seemingly insignificant measures of growth and improvement assume particular importance on the day one marries. The special quality of this day enables the couple to access God’s compassion and forgiveness through small steps, through genuine feelings of remorse and by contemplating change. *Chazal* are thus reminding us of the potential laden within each and every minor step towards self-improvement, how even Esav’s ever so slight change of heart sufficed to earn him atonement when the opportunity presented itself. We should never discount the importance of any small step or small measure we take to improve, because each one holds the potential of growing and developing into the full-fledged transformation that we should be seeking.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted *Chazal*’s famous comment in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Bikkurim 3:3) that one’s sins are forgiven on his or her wedding day. The Yerushalmi derived this concept from the fact that when the Torah tells of Esav’s marriage to Bosmat, it calls her “Machalat,” which alludes to the *mechila* (forgiveness) earned when one marries. As we saw, Rav Avraham Danzig (author of *Chayei Adam*), in his work *Tosefot Chayim* (132:58), insisted that this applies only if one performs *teshuva*. The occasion of one’s wedding day is an auspicious time for forgiveness, but it is achieved only if the bride and groom repent; it cannot provide atonement without *teshuva*.

The Tolna Rebbe cited a clever proof to this contention in the name of the *Beit Yisrael* ((Rav Yisrael Alter, the fifth Gerer Rebbe, 1894-1977). The opening Mishna of Masekhet Yoma brings the view of Rabbi Yehuda that before Yom Kippur, a woman was designated as a wife for the *kohen gadol* in case the *kohen gadol*’s present wife died. Rabbi Yehuda explained that the *kohen gadol* on Yom Kippur offered a sacrifice to atone for himself and his wife (“*ve-khiper ba’ado u-ve’ad beito*” – Vayikra 16:6), and therefore he had to be married on Yom Kippur. Hence, it was necessary to choose a woman before Yom Kippur as the *kohen gadol*’s potential spouse, so the *kohen* would still be married if his wife died. The Yerushalmi, as cited by Tosefot (Yoma 13b), explains this to mean that if the *kohen gadol*’s wife died on Yom Kippur, the *kohen gadol* would right away marry the second woman so that he could continue the Yom Kippur service as a married man. The *Beit Yisrael* noted that even in such a case, when the *kohen gadol* marries on Yom Kippur, he must nevertheless bring a sin-offering to atone for him and his new wife. Although the occasion of a wedding brings atonement, an atonement sacrifice is needed. Evidently, the *Beit Yisrael* observed, the atonement earned on one’s wedding day is not guaranteed, as it is contingent upon proper repentance, and thus a sacrifice was necessary even in such a case.

The Tolna Rebbe concluded by commenting that this claim of the *Chayei Adam* and the *Beit Yisrael* reflects the fact that atonement cannot be achieved “magically,” without a sincere and significant process of introspection and internal change. Spiritual achievement is impossible without investing work and effort. There is no simple, magical cure for spiritual ills. Even though certain occasions are more auspicious for earning forgiveness or other spiritual benefits, these depend on our hard work. There is no substitute for struggle and effort, and putting in the work to grow and improve.

Tuesday

Rashi, commenting on the first verse of Parashat Toledot, cites the Midrash’s comment that after Yitzchak’s birth, the “*leitzanei ha-dor*” – “cynics of the time” – claimed that Yitzchak was the result of Sara’s abduction by Avimelekh, the Philistine leader. Sara conceived shortly after being released by Avimelekh the morning after her abduction, and the “*leitzanei ha-dor*” thus attributed her pregnancy to Avimelekh. After all, they argued, she lived for Avraham for decades without bearing a child, and now, suddenly, after spending a night with Avimelekh, she conceived. To discredit the cynics, God had Yitzhak look remarkably similar to his father, proving beyond a doubt that he was Avraham’s son.

The connection between Sara’s abduction by Avimelekh and her subsequent conception is noted by *Chazal* elsewhere, as well – in a famous Mishna in Masekhet Bava Kama (92a). The Mishna comments, “Whoever prays on behalf of his fellow, and he needs that same thing – he is answered first.” As the Torah (20:18) tells, God punished Avraham for abducting Sara by making his wives and maidservants infertile, but Avraham prayed on Avimelekh’s behalf, whereupon God restored the reproductive capabilities of the women in Avimelekh’s palace. The Misha noted that in reward for praying for Avimelekh to have children, Avraham was shortly thereafter blessed with a child from Sara. By praying for somebody else’s fertility, Avraham was blessed with a child.

The Mishna and the account of the “cynics” present us with two opposite models of responses to Sara’s conception. The “*leitzanei ha-dor*” contended that her pregnancy resulted from a violent and selfish abuse of power against an innocent woman, whereas the Mishna attributes Sara’s conception to the ultimate act of selflessness – Avraham’s prayers that God remove the punishment he brought for Avimelekh’s crimes against Sara. Symbolically, then, the claims of the “*leitzanei ha-dor*” may reflect something deeper than a mere refusal to accept the miracle of Yitzchak’s birth. At stake was the question of what “bears fruit,” which approach is the proper one to follow to produce and succeed – the approach of Avimelekh, or the approach of Avimelekh. The people of Avraham’s time, it seems, followed the view that one is entitled, and expected, to use his power to the greatest extent possible to satisfy his desires and attain everything he wants. The “*leitzanei ha-dor*,” the surrounding culture of that time, believed in the unbridled right of power and force in the pursuit of personal gratification. Avraham, of course, advocated kindness, compassion, self-sacrifice, forgiveness and love of all people. And thus at one extreme, the cynics viewed Sara’s conception as the result of ruthless power, whereas the truth lay at the other extreme, as Sara conceived as a result of Avraham’s extraordinary act of mercy and benevolence, praying for Avimelekh the day after he abducted his wife.

*Chazal* thus remind us that although it may outwardly appear that power and coercion is how we succeed and attain what we want, the truth is just the opposite. We achieve and produce by following the model of Avraham Avinu – the model of humility, benevolence and compassion, and of extending goodwill even to those who have harmed us and now seek forgiveness.

Wednesday

The Torah tells in Parashat Toldot that when Yaakov came before Yitzchak disguised as Esav to receive his blessing, Yitzchak “smelled the scent of his garments and said, ‘Behold, my son’s scent is like the scent of a field blessed by the Lord!’” (27:27).

Malbim offers an insightful symbolic interpretation of this account. Garments represent that which is peripheral and external, as they are placed on the person without becoming a part of his essence. Therefore, Malbim suggests, we may view the image of garments as symbolic of our mundane pursuits, which are to be regarded as secondary to our primary goal in life – the strive for excellence in *avodat Hashem*. These “garments” do not, intrinsically, have any “scent”; they are not, in and of themselves, significant. We can, however, infuse them with “fragrance” – with meaning and purpose – by utilizing our physical strengths and material blessings for worthwhile spiritual objectives.

This might be the intent of the Midrash cited by Rashi in his commentary to this verse. Rashi notes that there does not appear to be any reason for a pleasant fragrance to have been emitted from Yaakov at this time. In order to disguise Yaakov as Esav, Rivka wrapped his arms in goatskins (27:16), which produce a foul odor. Why, then, did Yitzchak marvel at the pleasant fragrance of Yaakov’s garments? The Midrash answers that “the scent of *Gan Eden*” accompanied Yaakov as he approached his father, and this is the scent which Yitzchak smelled and enjoyed. The Midrash’s question and answer may perhaps be understood in light of Malbim’s comments. To a spiritually sensitive person, who has a proper sense of priorities, our “garments” seem to emit a “foul odor.” If we seek to commit our lives to sincere *avodat Hashem*, then the “garments” – our engagement in mundane activities – seems unbecoming, or perhaps even “odorous.” Our physical and material needs often appear to get in the way of our pursuit of what ought to be our true goals, and threaten to distract us and lure us away from intensive spiritual engagement. But *Chazal* here are teaching us that to the contrary, even our mundane affairs can emit the “scent of *Gan Eden*”; even they can be meaningful and significant. As long as we conduct our lives with our priorities in order and with our minds focused on our pursuit of spiritual excellence, then even the “goatskins” assume a “heavenly” scent. If we maintain a clear perspective on what is primary and what secondary, what is essential and what is peripheral, then all aspects of our lives together emit the “scent of *Gan Eden*,” as even our ordinary, mundane undertaking become laden with meaning and importance.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Toldot that when Yitzchak was compelled to move to the Philistine region due to the drought conditions in Canaan, God appeared to him and reaffirmed the promises He had made to Avraham. God concluded the prophecy by saying that these blessings were granted “on account of the fact that Avraham heeded My voice and observed My charge, My commands, My statutes and My laws” (26:5).

The Gemara, in Masekhet Yoma (28b), interprets this verse to mean that Avraham observed all the Torah’s commands. In fact, the Gemara adds, not only did Avraham observe all the commands written in the Torah, he even observed the *mitzva* of “*eiruvei tavshilin*,” which does not actually appear in the Torah.

At first glance, the law of “*eiruv tavshilin*” is mentioned here simply as an example of a halakhic detail which we would not have expected Avraham to observe. Not only is it not written in the Torah, it was introduced by *Chazal*. Seemingly, then, the Gemara is telling us that Avraham intuited and observed the entire corpus of *Halakha*, including those rules established by the Sages millennia later.

On a deeper level, however, many have sought to identify the possible significance of this specific reference to the law of “*eiruv tavshilin*.” This law involves the preparation of food for Shabbat when it is immediately preceded by Yom Tov. The Mishna in Masekhet Beitza (15b) establishes that although one may not cook on Yom Tov in preparation for Shabbat, one may begin cooking for Shabbat before Yom Tov and then continue on Yom Tov. Therefore, when Yom Tov falls on Friday, we prepare two food items for Shabbat before Yom Tov, which then allows us to make preparations over the course of Yom Tov for Shabbat. What might be the particular significance of this law in the context of Avraham’s *mitzva* observance? What reason could there be for *Chazal* to specifically point to “*eiruv tavshilin*”?

One answer, perhaps, emerges from the Gemara’s formulation (there in Masekhet Beitza) in explaining the concept of “*eiruv tavshilin*”: “*Zokhreihu mei’achar she-ba le’hashkicho*” – “Remember it, since one is likely to forget it.” The Sages provided a means of circumventing the prohibition against preparing on Yom Tov for Shabbat because they wanted to ensure that people would not forget about and neglect Shabbat. When Yom Tov falls just before Shabbat, the special excitement and festivity surrounding Yom Tov might overshadow the observance of Shabbos, and lead to its neglect. Each Yom Tov is celebrated just once a year, while Shabbos is observed each and every week, and thus the special occasion of Yom Tov could easily dominate one’s time and thoughts at the expense of Shabbat. *Chazal* wanted to ensure that Shabbat would receive proper attention and consideration even when it is preceded by Yom Tov, and they therefore instituted the “*eiruv tavshilin*” to facilitate Shabbat preparations in such a case.

Symbolically, then, “*eiruv tavshilin*” represents the need to be mindful of our basic, routine obligations even amid the excitement surrounding special and exceptional *mitzvot*. This institution seeks to avoid the danger of neglecting ordinary responsibilities in favor of extraordinary undertakings. It reminds us to pay sufficient attention to “Shabbat” even during “Yom Tov,” to tend to our elementary duties even as we pursue loftier and more ambitious goals.

This message, perhaps, underlies *Chazal*’s reference to “*eiruv tavshilin*” in the context of Avraham’s *mitzva* observance. The Torah and Midrashim tell of Avraham’s extraordinary achievements, such as preaching monotheism, inviting wayfarers as his guests, waging wars against powerful armies, and nearly slaughtering his own son when commanded to by God. *Chazal* perhaps seek to remind us that Avraham also fulfilled the message of “*eiruv tavshilin*,” ensuring not to neglect his basic responsibilities amid his tireless pursuit of very ambitious goals. Although he devoted a great deal of time to “Yom Tov” – to extraordinary achievements – he remained forever mindful of Shabbat – his ordinary, elementary duties and responsibilities as a human being and a servant of God.

(A somewhat similar explanation is given by Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlap, in *Ma’ayanei Ha-yeshu’a*, p. 191.)

Friday

We read in Parashat Toldot that before Yitzchak blessed Yaakov – whom he thought was Esav – he kissed his son and declared, “Behold, my son’s scent is like the scent of a field blessed by the Lord!” (27:27).

Rashi, citing the Midrash, raises the question of how Yitzchak smelled a pleasant fragrance when he smelled Yaakov. After all, as we read earlier, Rivka had taken the skins of the goats she had slaughtered to feed Yitzchak, and wrapped them around Yaakov’s arms so he would be hairy like Esav. Fresh goatskins emit a foul odor, and yet Yitzchak marveled at Yaakov’s pleasing fragrance. The Midrash explained that the “scent of *Gan Eden*” accompanied Yaakov as he came before his father for the blessing, and this is what Yitzchak smelled.

One way of explaining the Midrash’s comments, perhaps, is that it allegorically depicts the tragic absurdity of the situation. Yitzchak mistook the foul “odor” of Esav’s conduct as “the scent of *Gan Eden*.” This entire situation arose because Yitzchak failed to recognize Esav’s true character. Somehow, Yitzchak misperceived Esav as a person accompanied by the aura of *Gan Eden*, overlooking the “odor” of Esav’s sinful conduct.

The question remains, however, as to how Yitzchak could have overlooked this “odor.” How could Esav’s conduct possibly be mistaken for the “scent of *Gan Eden*”?

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (36a) comments that when the Torah describes Yitzchak smelling “*rei’ach begadav*” – the smell of Yaakov’s garments – it means that he smelled “*rei’ach bogdav*” – “the smell of his unfaithful ones.” Meaning, Yitzchak “smelled” the “scent” of the sinners that descended from Yaakov. This interpretation appears also in the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:22), which gives examples of sinners who ultimately repented. These repentant transgressors, the Midrash teaches, emit a “pleasing fragrance” despite their years of sin, because they eventually changed course and underwent *teshuva*. Interestingly, the Midrash associates repentant sinners with the word “*begadav*” – garments. Clothing is external to a person’s being, and can be easily removed. Similarly, sinful conduct and negative qualities are not something permanent; we are capable of ridding ourselves of our vices and faults just as we are capable of removing an article of clothing. Of course, this requires a great deal of work and effort, but it can be done. And thus *Chazal* associate penitent sinners with Esav’s garments worn by Yaakov. Just as Yaakov wore these as a disguise, and they did not reflect who he truly was, likewise, we must always view our negative tendencies as something external to our beings which does not reflect our true essence, and as something which we are capable of removing.

*Chazal* make this comment in reference to Yitzchak’s embrace of Yaakov, whom he mistook as Esav, perhaps to explain how Yitzchak could have made such a mistake. Yitzchak undoubtedly noticed Esav’s “garments,” and smelled the “odor” emitted by his wrongdoing. Nevertheless, he smelled the “scent of *Gan Eden*” because he believed that these “garments” could and would eventually be removed. Yitzhak felt confident in Esav’s ability to overcome his negative tendencies and then harness his God-given talents and energies for the right purposes and goals. He smelled the “scent of *Gan Eden*” because he insisted that beneath the outer layer of putrid goatskins there was a great deal of goodness and purity that would one day be revealed.

Although Yitzchak erred in regard to his assessment of Esav, his assessment nevertheless serves as an important example of attempting to find the “scent of *Gan Eden*” within all people. Of course, there are exceptions, such as Esav, whose “odor” indeed reflects their true essence, and from whom we must distance ourselves. Generally, however, we are capable of finding the “scent” within even those whose “garments” emit a “foul odor,” who outwardly appear flawed. If Yitzhak held out hope for Esav, albeit mistakenly, then we should certainly be looking for the “scent” of goodness within the people around us, searching beneath the veneer of wrongful conduct to find the spark of sanctity and virtuousness waiting to be ignited.