**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT TOLDOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Toldot tells the famous story of the blessing which Yitzchak intended to bestow upon the older of his two twins, Esav, but was deceived into granting to the younger twin, Yaakov. Rivka, after hearing Yitzchak’s plan to bless Esav, instructed Yaakov to come before Yitzchak, who was visually impaired, and pretend to be his brother in order to receive the blessing. To ensure this ruse would work, Rivka placed goatskins on Yaakov’s arms so he would feel hairy like his brother, and she also had him wear Esav’s clothing. Specifically, the Torah tells that Rivka had Yaakov wear Esav’s “precious” garments (“*chamudot*”) which she happened to have with her in the house (27:15).

We find several different approaches in the commentaries to explain the term “*chamudot*” in this verse and the special quality of these garments to which the Torah here refers. Onkelos translates this word as “*dakhyata*,” which Rashi explains to mean “clean.” According to this explanation, it seems, Rivka made a point of having Yaakov wear Esav’s fine garments. In a similar vein, the Rashbam and Chizkuni explain that these were Esav’s special garments which he used when tending to his father as a sign of respect. Chizkuni adds that Esav also wore these garments when he was in the presence of other distinguished people, and not only when tending to Yitzchak. As part of Yaakov’s disguise, he wore the clothing that Esav would normally wear when serving Yitzchak, since Yaakov was bringing Yitzchak food before receiving the blessing, as Yitzchak had requested of Esav.

The difficulty with this explanation is that it is unclear why Rivka felt she needed to have Yaakov wear this clothing. After all, Esav was blind, which is precisely what enabled Rivka to devise this plan, so there seemed to be no need to have Yaakov disguise himself. Rivka needed to wrap Yaakov’s arms in goatskins in case Esav felt Yaakov’s arms, which, unlike Esav’s, were smooth, but there does not seem to be any reason for why Yaakov would have to wear Esav’s clothing.

To answer this question, the Radak writes that since Esav would wear these special garments when in the company of distinguished people, he would place fragrant flowers on them so they would have a pleasant scent. This is why, as we read later (27:27), Yitzchak compared Yaakov’s scent to the fragrance of a lush garden – because these garments were scented. Rivka had Yaakov wear this set of clothing so that he would not only feel like Esav, but also smell like Esav.

Chizkuni suggests a different approach, explaining that these were the garments Esav normally wore while hunting. They were called “*chamudot*” because they were set aside for use when Esav engaged in his favorite activity – hunting animals. (It seems difficult to explain, however, why, if these were Esav’s hunting clothes, they were in the home at the time, given that Esav was out hunting game to prepare food for Yitzchak.)

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that the Torah here gives an incidental glimpse into Esav’s married life, informing us that he kept his most precious possessions with his parents, since he did not trust his wives. According to Rav Hirsch, Rivka dressed Yaakov in these garments because they were the only garments that Esav kept in Yitzchak and Rivka’s home – and he kept them there because he did not trust his wives enough to keep his expensive clothing in their home. The advantage of this interpretation is that it accounts for the otherwise superfluous phrase “*asher itah ba-bayit*” (“that were with her in the home”). The Torah found it necessary to emphasize that these garments were with Rivka at home – a point which would seem plainly obvious. According to Rav Hirsch, the Torah is telling us that Rivka took these clothes specifically because they were the only garments that Esav chose to leave at home when he got married and moved out of the house.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the unusual term “*chamudot*” with which the Torah refers to Esav’s garments which Rivka had Yaakov wear when he came before Yitzchak disguised as Esav in order to receive the blessing intended for Esav (27:15). The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65), cited by Rashi, explains this term to mean that these were garments which Esav had “coveted” (“*chamad*”). They had originally belonged to Nimrod, the powerful emperor briefly mentioned earlier in Sefer Bereishit (10:8-10). Esav desired these special garments, and so he killed Nimrod and seized the clothing.

A more elaborate version of this Midrashic account appears in *Da’at Zekeinim Mi-ba’alei Ha-Tosafot*, and specifies the unique quality of these garments. These garments had on them pictures of every type of beast and bird, and could thus be used by a hunter to attract the animal or bird he sought the capture. The beast or bird he wanted would naturally come to him, seeing the image on the hunter’s shirt, and could thus be hunted without any effort. Esav very much desired these garments, and so he killed Nimrod. (See *Torah Sheleima* to this verse, note 66, and to 25:27, note 157, for other versions of this Midrash.)

How might we explain this “magical” quality of these garments described by the Midrash, and why might it be significant that Esav strongly desired to obtain them?

We might suggest an allegorical approach to this Midrashic passage, and explain that it speaks of Esav’s penchant for deceit. Esav is described earlier in Parashat Toldot (25:27) as a “*yodei’a tzayid*” – an expert hunter – and the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 63) explains this to mean that Esav knew how to ensnare people with his mouth, through duplicity. The depiction of Esav’s magical garment could perhaps be understood as a metaphoric description of his mastering the art of deception, how he was able to attract people through his charm and charisma, thereby ensnaring them, earning their trust which he then used to rob them.

If so, then Yaakov’s donning these garments when approaching his father disguised as Esav becomes especially significant. Yaakov here needed to “wear” Esav’s dishonesty and manipulation. These characteristics, which, ordinarily, must be utterly rejected and abhorred, were deemed necessary on this particular occasion, when, at least in Rivka’s mind, Yitzchak’s blessing needed to be diverted from Esav to Yaakov. On this one occasion, Yaakov “wore” the “garments” of Esav, he adopted Esav’s deceptive techniques, taking advantage of his father’s impaired vision and pretending to be his brother.

However, Yaakov’s attitude towards these “garments” was very different than Esav’s. For Esav, deception and trickery were “*chamudot*” – something he relished and loved. Yaakov, however, as the Midrash elsewhere (*Bereishit Rabba* 65) describes, went along with his mother’s scheme “*annus ve-kafuf u-vokheh*” – “coerced, in submission, and weeping.” He consented reluctantly, and loathed every moment spent pretending to be somebody he wasn’t. Nothing made him more uncomfortable than having to deceive and manipulate his father. Although he was forced to “wear” Esav’s “garments,” and adopt his cruel techniques, he did so with disgust. This is in direct contrast to Esav, who “coveted” these “garments,” who savored every opportunity to ensnare people and trap them with his duplicity.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells the famous story of the blessing which Yitzchak wanted to grant to his older son, Esav, but ended up being conferred upon the younger twin, Yaakov. Esav instructed Esav to hunt game and prepare food for him, promising to then grant him his blessing when the food was served. Rivka heard Yitzchak’s plans, and immediately sprang into action to ensure that the blessing would be granted to Yaakov instead of Esav. She prepared meat from goats in the family’s herd, and had Yaakov bring it to Yitzchak, who was blind, claiming to be Esav. Yitzchak, though initially suspicious upon hearing Yaakov’s voice, indeed granted the blessing to Yaakov, thinking he was Esav.

When Yaakov first came before his father with the food Rivka had prepared, Yitzchak asked him how he managed to complete his mission so quickly. After all, Yitzchak had asked Esav to go out and hunt and then prepare food – a process which he naturally expected would take far longer than it took Rivka to prepare meat from a goat in the family’s stable. Yaakov answered, “*Ki hikra Hashem Elokekha lefanai*” – “Because the Lord your God made it available before me” (27:20). In other words, Yaakov – pretending to be Esav – explained that whereas normally hunting an animal would take a good deal of time, God helped him and made an animal easily accessible, such that he completed his mission with unusual speed.

A meaningful insight into this verse is presented by Rav Shimshon Chaim Nachmani, in his *Zera Shimshon*, where he suggests that Yaakov here was not speaking untruthfully. He indeed firmly believed that “*hikra Hashem Elokekha lefanai*,” that God made accessible to him the animal from which Rivka prepared the meat he now brought to his father. Yaakov recognized God’s hand in providing the goats in the family herd no less than he would have recognized God’s hand in making an animal instantly and easily trappable in the jungle. There was no difference, in Yaakov’s mind, between the animals in the pen outside his home and an animal that would miraculously fall into a trap without any effort on the hunter’s part. Both were manifestations of “*hikra Hashem Elokekha*,” of divine providence.

The *Zera Shimshon* here draws our attention to the tendency we have to take for granted that to which we are accustomed to having, and to feel grateful only for the unusual, unexpected blessings that come our way. We don’t think twice about the “goats” in the “family herd,” the beautiful blessings that have long been part of our lives and about which we haven’t had to think twice, such as health, family, and our basic necessities. It is only when we receive some exceptional, unforeseen good fortune that we feel a deep sense of gratitude. The *Zera Shimshon* here challenges us to feel appreciative and enthusiastic about even the “ordinary” blessings in our lives, about the “goats” which are part of everyday existence, recognizing them as precious gifts lovingly granted to us by the Almighty.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Toldot the difficult and disquieting story of Yaakov coming before his father, at his mother’s behest, to receive the blessing which his father had sought to grant to his older twin, Esav. As Yitzchak had lost his vision, Yaakov was able to come before him and pretend to be his brother, and thereby receive the blessing which Yitzchak thought he was conferring upon Esav.

Rav Aryeh Tzvi Frommer of Kozhiglov *Hy”d*, in his *Eretz Tzvi*, draws our attention to one of the more overlooked aspects of this story, namely, Yaakov’s humiliation at those moments when he came before his father. The Rav of Kozhiglov imagines Yaakov’s feelings of shame and degradation as he found himself forced to pretend to be his brother in order to receive Yitzchak’s blessing. Rav Frommer writes:

There was no time better suited for a blessing than that moment, when our patriarch Yaakov saw that Yitzchak loved Esav more than him, and wanted to bless Esav and not him, and also that Yitzchak was not prevented by Above from doing so – as a result of this Yaakov’s heart was incomparably broken and despondent, as he thought of himself worse than Esav. And therefore, he was then especially suited to receive the light of sanctity of these blessings.

Rav Frommer explains that we become especially deserving of blessing through humility. It is specifically when a person feels unworthy, when he does not feel naturally entitled, that he earns special blessing. Rav Frommer boldly suggests that this is precisely the reason why Yaakov needed to receive the blessings in such an unusual manner – because the humbling, humiliating experience of having to disguise as his brother is what rendered him worthy of this blessing.

Yaakov obeyed his mother’s command to seize the blessing intended for his brother, but he did so reluctantly, without any sense of pride or entitlement. He felt unworthy of this blessing – and this, according to the Rav of Kozhiglov, is precisely what made him worthy of it. This episode, then, teaches us that we help ourselves best through humility, by limiting our demands and expectations, and not by arrogantly assuming that we deserve all that we desire.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot describes Esav as an “*ish yodei’a tzayid ish sadeh*” – “a man who knew how to hunt, a man of the field” (25:27). Rashi, commenting on the expression “*ish sadeh*” (“a man of the field”), explains that Esav was an “*adam bateil*” – somebody who wasted his time hunting animals in the fields. Rather than engage in meaningful and productive activities, he instead wasted his time in the jungle.

In a similar vein, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 63:10) cites a view explaining this term to mean “*hifkir atzmo ke-sadeh*” – that Esav made himself “ownerless” like a jungle. As Rav Yechezkel Levenstein explains (*Or Yechezkel* – *Middot*), this means that Esav harbored no long-term ambitions, and did not want to assume any sort of responsibility. Like an ownerless piece of land that is neglected and abandoned, Esav essentially abandoned himself, allowing himself to waste his time without trying to guide and direct his life in any sort of meaningful way. He treated his life as though it was “*hefker*” (“ownerless”), without meaning or value, as something that was not worth his time to care for and use properly.

Rav Levenstein adds that this might mark the point of connection between the Torah’s two descriptions of Esav. As we saw, the Torah says that Esav was a “man of the field” but also “a man who knew how to hunt.” The Midrash, cited in part by Rashi, explains this phrase as a reference to Esav’s penchant for deceit, his “hunting” people through deception. Esav misled people by pretending to be an upstanding, conscientious person, concealing his true character. Rav Levenstein notes that a person who is in the habit of deceiving other people is likely to begin deceiving himself, as well. In Esav’s case, he deluded himself into thinking that he could waste his time, that he did not need to work hard and be productive. Laziness, Rav Levenstein explains, is so often a product of delusion, of self-deception, of the tragically mistaken notion that life is not important and significant enough to demand our hard work and effort to use it properly and meaningfully. People delude themselves into viewing their lives as “*hefker*” in order to absolve themselves of the need to live disciplined lives of hard work and productivity. And thus Esav’s habitual dishonesty led to “*hifkir atzmo ke-sadeh*,” to disregarding himself, to his wasting his time on vanity, as he deluded himself into thinking that there was no need to lead a life of meaning and direction.

Yaakov, meanwhile, is described as an “*ish tam*” (literally, “simple person,” or “innocent person”), which Rashi explains as a reference to scrupulous honesty, the precise opposite of his brother’s penchant for deception. As opposed to Esav, Yaakov did not try to deceive other people into thinking he was anything other than what he really was. And thus he was also a “*yosheiv ohalim*” (“dweller of tents”), which Rashi explains to mean that he was a diligent, disciplined student, who devoted himself tirelessly to the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. When we live with honesty, then we are true not only to others, but also to ourselves, and we then recognize the need to exert effort and hard work to maximize our potential and make the very most of all the time we are given during our brief sojourn in this world.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Toldot of the blessing with which Yitzchak blessed Yaakov (thinking he was Esav), which begins with the words, “*Ve-yitein lekha ha-Elokim mi-tal ha-shamayim u-mi’shemanei ha-aretz*” – “God shall grant you from the dew of the heavens and from the fat of the earth” (27:28). Rashi, citing the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 66:3), explains the term “*ve-yitein lekha*” (“shall grant you”) to mean “*yitein ve-yachazor ve-yitein*” – “he shall give and then give again.” Numerous different approaches have been taken to explain the precise intent of this blessing, that God should “give and then give again.”

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro of Piasetzna *Hy”d*, in *Eish Kodesh*, suggests a creative reading of Rashi’s comment based on an expression used by the Gemara in the beginning of Masekhet Kiddushin (2b), “*ba’al aveida mechazeir al aviedato*.” This expression refers to somebody who lost a precious object – a “*ba’al aveida*” – who persistently searches – “*mechazeir*” – for the object. Although the object is currently nowhere to be found, if the owner truly cares about it, he will spare no efforts in his quest to retrieve it. The Gemara uses this expression as a metaphoric description of a man’s search for a wife; a man seeks a wife like somebody who has lost something immensely valuable and determinedly searches for it.

Accordingly, the Rebbe of Piasetzna suggests that the phrase “***yachazor*** *ve-yitein*” used by Rashi in the context of Yitzchak’s blessing to his son be understood as a reference to the search for a lost item – “*mechazeir*.” Yitzchak first blessed his offspring that “*yitein*” – God should grant them joy and prosperity, but then added “*yachazor ve-yitein*” – that God should “search” for them when they are lost in order to grant them joy and prosperity. There are times, the Rebbe explained, when a Jew is spiritually “lost,” having drifted far from religious observance and the service of God. Yitzchak prophetically foresaw that his descendants would not always be worthy of God’s blessing, that they would at times drift far from their spiritual roots such that they are not immediately identifiable as his offspring who are included in the blessing he now granted to his son. He thus began by praying, “*yachazor ve-yitein*” – that God should go out and search, as it were, for the “lost” members of His nation, without ever despairing. His blessing was that just as somebody who lost a precious possession makes every effort to search for the object, leaving no stone unturned in this quest, similarly, God should never despair from a “lost” member of His beloved nation. Yitzchak beseeched God to continue blessing his descendants even when they lose their direction, when they are led astray and find themselves distant from the service of God. Even under such circumstances, Yitzchak begged, his offspring should continue to benefit from God’s special protection and care, and always enjoy His blessings.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells of Yitzchak’s experiences while living among and then near the *Pelishtim* during a period of drought in Canaan. Yitzchak enjoyed exceptional success farming despite the harsh conditions, arousing the jealousy of the local Philistine population, as a result of which he was driven from the region of Gerar where he had taken residence. Settling nearby, the Torah writes, Yitzchak dug anew precious wells of water which his father, Avraham, had dug years earlier but were subsequently filled with earth by the *Pelishtim*: “Yitzchak dug anew the wells of water which were dug in the times of his father, Avraham, and which the *Pelishtim* stuffed after Avraham’s death, filling them with earth, and he gave them names like the names which his father called them” (26:18).

Numerous writers over the centuries have suggested that this account alludes to something deeper than Yitzchak’s struggles to find water in an arid region during a period of drought. Various different approaches have been taken in an attempt to identify the possible symbolic meaning of these wells, and of the fact that Yitzchak dug the same wells which his father had dug.

One such theory is advanced by Rav Yechezkel of Shinova, in *Divrei Yechezkel*, where he explains that Yitzchak’s style and approach in serving God differed from Avraham’s. The *Divrei Yechezkel* suggests that the *Pelishtim*’s rejection of Yitzchak, driving him from their region, alludes to the scorn and contempt with which people regarded Yitzchak for deviating from his father’s style. They accused Yitzchak of violating and betraying Avraham’s legacy by not being precisely like Avraham. The *Divrei Yechezkel* further proposes that the stuffing of Avraham’s wells by the *Pelishtim* alludes to the accusation leveled against Yitzchak that he was reversing the progress made his father. But Yitzchak insisted on giving his “wells” the same names which Avraham gave his wells – meaning, he insisted that his unique style and approach also bore the “name” of authentic and genuine service of God, even though it differed drastically from Avraham’s. The significance of Yitzchak’s wells having the same names as Avraham’s wells, the *Divrei Yechezkel* explains, is that there are different paths to greatness and different styles of greatness, and they are all legitimate. Yitzchak’s approach was no less valid or authentic than Avraham’s, and thus his wells were given the same names as Avraham’s.

Of course, not everything people do in the name of religion is necessarily valid; there are, undoubtedly, boundaries of legitimate religious expression that must not be crossed. However, the *Divrei Yechezkel* here teaches us that there is more than one valid approach, that greatness comes in different styles, and that one person’s path in his service of God does not necessarily have to precisely resemble everybody else’s. Just as Yitzchak was able to give his “wells” the same names as his father’s, affirming that his approach to *avodat Hashem* was no less valid than Avraham’s, we are all encouraged to find our individual paths, maximizing our personal talents and unique potential, working together under the joint “name” of serving our Creator.

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