**PARASHAT TOLDOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Toldot tells the famous story of the blessings which Yitzchak wished to confer upon his older son, Eisav, but were in the end given to Yaakov, who, at his mother’s behest, came before Yitzchak disguised as Eisav. This famous blessing begins with the words, “*Ve-yitein lekha ha-Elokim mi-tal ha-shamayim u-mi-shmanei ha-aretz*’ – “God shall grant you from the dew of the heavens and from the fat of the earth” (27:28).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 66), noting that this blessing begins with the conjunction “*ve-*” (“and”), explains that Yitzchak refers here to more than just a single blessing. Among the interpretations offered by the Midrash is “*yitein lekha berakhot ve-yitein lekha kivsheihem*” – God should grant blessings, as well as “*kivsheihem*.” The precise meaning of this term is unclear. Rav Menachem Kasher, in *Torah Sheleima* (note 116), cites those who explain that “*kivsheihem*” means “conquest,” thus referring to taking possession of the Land of Israel. According to this understanding of the Midrash, Yitzchak wished his son not only that he would be blessed with prosperity, but that he would enjoy prosperity specifically in the land promised to his descendants. Others, as Rav Kasher notes, explain this word to mean storage houses. The great blessing of a food surplus is beneficial only if it can be properly stored, and so Yitzchak mentioned in his blessing not only an abundance of produce, but also the ability to contain it so it is protected and available for long-term use. This interpretation of the Midrash’s comment brings to mind the first verse of *birkat kohanim* (the priestly blessing) – “The Lord shall bless you and protect you” (Bamidbar 6:24), which the *Midrash Tanchuma* (cited by Rashi) explains as a blessing of wealth that would be protected and not lost.

Rav Menachem Bentzion Saks, in his *Menachem Tziyon*, offers a different explanation, suggesting that “*kivsheihem*” refers to control over one’s possessions, as opposed to being controlled by one’s possessions. Material prosperity runs the risk of consuming a person, causing far more anxiety and grief than one would experience if he had fewer possessions. As the Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (2:7) famously warns, “*Marbeh nekhasim marbeh de’aga*” – “One who has many possessions has many worries.” Similarly, King Shlomo, in Sefer Kohelet (6:1-2), laments the phenomenon whereby a person acquires vast amounts of wealth “*ve-lo yashlitenu ha-Elokim le’ekhol mimenu*” – “but God does not grant him control over it to partake of it.” Rashi explains this as referring to those who accumulate wealth but cannot enjoy it due to their constant anxiety and incessant pursuit of more. They have wealth, but have no control over their wealth, as they are instead under the control of their possessions, which demand their constant attention and hard work. The Midrash thus understood Yitzchak’s blessing to his son to mean that he would be blessed not only with material prosperity, but also with “control” over his wealth, that the wealth would be a source of joy and contentment, and not of endless stress and angst.

Sunday

Many people observe the custom at the conclusion of Shabbat to recite “*Ve-yitein lekha*,”the verses containing the blessings that Yitzchak conferred upon Yaakov, as we read in Parashat Toldot (27:28-29). This custom is mentioned already by the *Kolbo* and Avudarham, as cited by the Rama (O.C. 295:1). These *Rishonim* explain that “*Ve-yitein lekha*” is recited as we usher in the new week to express our hopes for a week filled with God’s blessings of success and prosperity.

A much different explanation of this practice is suggested by Rav Yisrael Chaim Friedman of Rachov, in his *Likutei Maharich*, based on the famous tradition that two angels accompany a person home from the synagogue on Shabbat eve – a “good” angel and a “bad” angel. If one’s home is properly prepared for Shabbat, the Gemara teaches, then the “good” angel grants the individual a blessing, and the “bad” angel is forced to reply “*amen*.” If not, then the “bad” angel wishes evil upon the individual, and the “good” angel is forced to reply “*amen*.” The *Magen Avraham* (262) writes (citing the Mahari Weil) that these two angels remain with a person throughout the entirety of Shabbat, and leave only when Shabbat ends (which is one reason why some have the custom to omit the “*Tzeitkhem le-shalom*” passage from the end of the *Shalom Aleikhem* hymn on Friday night, as the angels do not leave at that point). The *Likutei Maharich* further notes sources identifying this “bad” angel as “*saro shel Eisav*” – the angel representing Eisav, which, as Rashi (Bereishit 32:25) cites from the Midrash, wrestled with Yaakov as he made his way back to *Eretz Yisrael* and prepared for his confrontation with Eisav. On this basis, the *Likutei Maharich* suggests a novel explanation for the custom to recite “*Ve-yitein lekha*” at the conclusion of Shabbat. After Yaakov’s triumph over the angel, he refused to free the angel before receiving a blessing (32:27), and Rashi comments that Yaakov demanded that the angel affirm Yaakov’s right to Yitzchak’s blessing, which had been intended for Eisav. Similarly, the *Likutei Maharich* writes, each week, as Shabbat ends and the angels depart, we turn to “*saro shel Eisav*” and demand before he leaves that he affirm our right to the beautiful blessings of “*Ve-yitein lekha*.” For this reason, we recite the verses of “*Ve-yitein lekha*” at the conclusion of Shabbat.

How might we explain this weekly reaffirmation of our right, as Yaakov’s descendants, to these blessings?

Shabbat observance expresses our belief in God’s authority over the world, that it is only with His permission that we work to develop the earth and harness the forces of nature for our benefit during the workweek. By refraining from productive activity on Shabbat, we proclaim that the work we perform is done solely under God’s authority, and that anything we acquire through our work during the week is granted to us through His compassion and grace. This weekly pronouncement is necessary for us to earn the material blessings that God promised to bestow upon His beloved nation. We are worthy of His blessings only if we recognize them as His blessings, and do not mistakenly see ourselves as the true masters over the world. And so each week, “*saro shel Eisav*” returns in an attempt to deny our rights to God’s blessings, to show that we are undeserving of success and prosperity. But when we properly observe Shabbat, expressing our belief in, and awareness of, God’s unlimited control and dominion over the world, then even “*saro shel Eisav*” has no choice but to affirm our right to the blessings of “*Ve-yitein lekha*.”

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells the story of Eisav’s “sale” of the birthright to his younger twin, Yaakov. Eisav had arrived home weary from hunting, and asked Yaakov to serve him a portion of the stew he was preparing. Yaakov requested the birthright in exchange, and Eisav consented. The Torah concludes this story by stating, “*Va-yivez Eisav et ha-bekhora*” – “Eisav scorned the birthright” (28:34). Rashi explains that the Torah here “testifies to his wickedness, that he scorned the service of the Almighty.” The privileges of the birthright came with special religious responsibilities, which Eisav regarded with contempt. Seforno adds that the Torah mentions Eisav’s disdain for the birthright to emphasize that he was not unfairly forced to sell something precious in exchange for food, as he did not desire the birthright at all.

Rav Yisrael of Modhitz, in *Divrei Yisrael*, suggests that Eisav’s contempt for the birthright might also have additional symbolic significance. The term “*bekhora*,” referring to the birthright, is derived from the root *b.k.r.*, which denotes the “first.” Symbolically, then, Eisav’s disdain for the “*bekhora*” could be understood to mean that he despised the first stages, the difficulties and challenges that are confronted whenever one begins a new endeavor or undertaking. Rashi (25:32) cites the Midrash’s comment that Eisav had no interest in the birthright because violations of the strict code of law that applies to the required rituals carry strict punishments. Eisav preferred to avoid the challenges and responsibilities of the birthright, because he did not have the patience to diligently study and accustom himself to the relevant strict guidelines and procedures. And thus, the Rebbe of Modhitz explains, Eisav had contempt for the “*bekhora*” in the broader sense of the term – for the challenging process of patient study of, and acclimation to, something new.

Earlier (25:25), we read that Eisav was so named because he was born with hair on his body, like an adult male. Rashi explains that he looked “readymade” (“*na’asa*”), like an adult, and so he was called “Eisav.” Many remarked that this quality characterized Eisav throughout his life – he wanted to live as a “finished product,” without having to go through the process of growth, development and change. He had no patience for the “*bekhora*,” for undertaking something new, for learning, for training, for gradually becoming better and more accomplished. Similarly, many have noted the significance of the Torah’s description of Eisav returning from the field “*ayeif*” – “fatigued” (25:29). This might indicate not only physical fatigue after a day of hunting, but also a condition of lethargy and apathy. Eisav lacked drive and ambition to grow and improve himself, preferring instead to lazily and complacently remain the same throughout his life. We, the descendants and spiritual heirs of Yaakov Avinu, are to embrace the “*bekhora*,” the challenges of learning and growth, restlessly seeking to positively change and always striving to become better.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells the story of the blessing which Yitzchak wished to confer upon his older son, Eisav, but which he ended granting to the younger son, Yaakov, after Rivka had Yaakov come before Yitzchak – who was blind – disguised as Eisav. Yaakov came before Yitzchak wearing Eisav’s garments, which, apparently, emitted a distinct aroma, for when Yitzchak embraced Yaakov, he smelled the garments and exclaimed, “Behold, my son’s fragrance is like the fragrance of a field blessed by the Lord” (27:27).

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (37a) suggests reading the word “*begadav*” (“garments”) in this verse as “*bogdav*” – “his rebellious ones,” such that the Torah alludes here to the sinners among Yaakov’s descendants. Yitzchak foresaw that the nation which would descend from his son would produce not a small number of “*bogdim*” – those who fail to uphold the values and traditions of *Am Yisrael*. And yet, Yitzchak proclaimed that even these members of *Am Yisrael* emit a “fragrance,” because, as the Gemara comments, “even the empty ones” among the Jewish people are “filled with *mitzvot*.”

Rav Leibele Eiger, in *Torat Emet*, explains the Gemara’s comments as focusing on Yaakov himself. At those moments, when Yaakov – albeit against his will – came before his father in disguise, with the aim of deceiving him, he felt like a “*bogeid*’ – that he betrayed Yitzchak. He felt broken and distressed, wishing he would not be going through this charade. And these feelings of angst, Rav Leibele suggests, emitted a beautiful fragrance. Rav Leibele writes: “When he came to his father with this broken heart, the scent of his broken heart arose… Just like fragrant trees – when the wood is broken the scent wafts more strongly, similarly, through the breaking of Yaakov’s heart…Yitzchak ‘smelled’ the essence of Yaakov’s sanctity.” The “scent” which Yitzchak smelled was the “scent” of Yaakov’s broken heart, his anguish over the act of deception that he was perpetrating.

This chassidic insight teaches that genuine humility has a certain “fragrant” effect that people find appealing. We are naturally repulsed by arrogance and overconfidence, and we tend to feel more comfortable and at ease around those who are humbly aware of their faults and shortcomings, which they do not attempt to hide through a façade of self-assurance. And so while we might think we can impress others and earn their respect by appearing confident, proud and self-assured, in truth, we are far more “fragrant” when we conduct ourselves with honest self-awareness, with a clear recognition of our strengths and weaknesses, and of our successes and failures. It is precisely when we do not try to broadcast ourselves in an effort to impress that we emit a pleasing “scent” through which we are more likely to earn other people’s admiration and favor.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Toldot of how Yaakov, at his mother’s behest, disguised as his brother, Eisav, in order to receive the blessing which his visually impaired father, Yitzchak, intended to confer upon Eisav. Rivka placed goatskins on Yaakov’s arms so he would feel hairy like his brother, and indeed, when Yaakov approached his father, Yitzchak recognized the voice as Yaakov’s, and asked to feel his son’s arms to ascertain that it was Eisav who had come before him. Yitzchak then made what has become a famous proclamation: “*Ha-kol kol Yaakov ve-ha-yadayim yedei Eisav*” – “The hands are the hands of Eisav, but the voice is the voice of Yaakov” (27:22).

The Midrash found deeper, prophetic significance to Yitzchak’s proclamation, understanding that Yitzchak here foresaw the special power of the “voice” of *Benei Yisrael*. In one passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:21), the Midrash comments, “‘The voice is the voice of Yaakov’ – his voice silences the upper and lower worlds.” The Midrash explains by stating, “At the time when Israel say, ‘*Shema Yisrael*,’ the angels are silent.” According to this passage, the Midrash points to the power of our simple recitation of “*Shema Yisrael*” each morning and evening, which has a profound impact even on the upper worlds.

Rav Pinchas Menachem Yustman of Piltz, in his *Siftei Tzadik*, explains that the Midrash’s intent is to offer encouragement for those times when we feel inadequate, when we feel beset by spiritual challenges and begin to question the value of our religious efforts. The Midrash assures us that even the simple *mitzvot* we perform, including the daily proclamation of “*Shema Yisrael*,” have immense value. It might not seem to us all that significant when a small group assembles in a synagogue to recite a brief prayer, but the Midrash guarantees us that even our routine, daily prayers, and all our simple, everyday *mitzvot*, are precious and meaningful.

The *Siftei Tzadik* proceeds to suggest that this theme underlies the entire story of Yaakov’s disguise as Eisav. There will be occasions when our true essence, our deep-seated devotion to the Almighty, will be covered and concealed. Just as Yaakov donned the garments of his wicked brother, Eisav, we, too, will sometimes find ourselves wearing the “garments of Eisav,” acting in an “Eisav-like” manner, rather than faithfully upholding the legacy of Yaakov. There will be times when it could be said about us, “the hands are the hands of Eisav.” And the Midrash teaches us that when this happens, when we struggle to divest ourselves of these “garments,” we must not underestimate the value and significance of “the voice of Yaakov,” the *mitzvot* that we continue to perform. Even if our hands are “the hands of our Eisav,” our “voice of Yaakov” has the capacity to “silence the upper and lower worlds.” We must never make the mistake of thinking that once we slip into a pattern of failure, there is no longer any value to our efforts. To the contrary, specifically in periods of spiritual struggle, we must persist in sounding the “voice of Yaakov” within us, and recognize and appreciate the precious value of each and every *mitzva* that we perform.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells the famous story of Rivka’s scheme to have Yaakov receive the blessing which Yitzchak wished to confer upon their older son, Eisav. Rivka instructed Yaakov to come before Yitzchak pretending to be Eisav, so that he would receive the blessing. Yaakov initially refused, worrying that if Yitzchak realized that he was Yaakov, and was trying to deceive him, “I will be like a fraudster in his eyes,” in which case he would receive a curse, instead of a blessing (27:12). Rivka insisted, however, and Yaakov had no choice but to comply.

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (92a) connects Yaakov’s concern of being exposed as a “*metatei’a*” (“fraudster”) with a verse in Sefer Yirmiyahu (10:15) in which the prophet describes idols as “*ma’aseh ta’atuim*” (“the work of mockery”). Based on this association between Yaakov’s charade and idol-worship, the Gemara comments that “*ha-machalif be-diburo*” – one who speaks deceptively – is considered as though he has worshipped idols. The fact the same unusual root is used in reference to both Yaakov’s deception of his father (“*metatei’a*”) and idol-worship (“*ta’atuim*”) demonstrates that deception is as severe as idolatry.

On one level, of course, the Gemara here seeks to emphasize the severity of dishonesty, and to dispel the all-too-common misconception that the Torah treats the betrayal of God more severely than the betrayal of one’s fellowman. The Gemara establishes clearly and unequivocally that lying and deceiving is no less grievous a breach of the Torah’s values than worshipping a foreign deity.

Additionally, the Gemara perhaps teaches that at least in many instances, deception and dishonesty reflect a lack of faith. If a person feels he must deceive others to obtain what he wants, then he does not sufficiently believe in God’s unlimited ability to provide for and assist all people, such that he finds it necessary to resort to unethical means to fulfill his wishes. And thus this individual resembles an idolater, who denies the existence of a single, omnipotent God.

There might also be another explanation of the Gemara’s comparison between Yaakov’s deception and idolatry. Yaakov’s charade represents not only dishonesty, but also the feeling we sometimes we have that we need to “disguise” as somebody else in order to succeed and achieve. Just as Yaakov, sadly, needed to pretend to be Eisav in order to receive Yitzchak’s blessing, we, too, sometimes feel the need to imitate others in our pursuit of success and happiness. Rav Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin famously taught, “Just as a person must believe in God, may He be blessed, so must he then believe in himself…” We must believe in our own unique potential, that we are each, individually, precious and capable of greatness. If we think we need to copy others, to be somebody else, to “disguise” our true essence, then we express a lack of faith in ourselves, in our uniqueness, in our singular capabilities and talents. Our belief in God must include a belief in the special divine spark within us, and so denying the existence of that unique spark, and believing we need to be somebody else, is akin to idol-worship – denying the existence of a singular God, and worshipping a fake image. The Gemara here perhaps teaches us that just as we must firmly believe in the Almighty, we must firmly acknowledge His belief in each and every one of us, and trust in our ability to serve Him as we are, without having to try to become somebody else.

Friday

The [*Midrash Zuta* (Shir Hashirim)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20893&st=&pgnum=33&hilite=) observes that all three patriarchs are described with the term “*gadol*” (“great”). Avraham’s servant says about his master’s wealth, “*va-yigdal*” (“he became great” – Bereishit 24:34), and the Torah says about Yitzchak’s success as a farmer while living in Gerar, “*va-yigdal ha-ish…ad ki gadal me’od*” (“The man became great…until he was exceedingly great” – 26:13). Finally, the Torah says about Yaakov and Eisav, “*Va-yigdelu ha-ne’arim*” (“The youths grew up” – 25:27).

As this final verse speaks of both Yaakov and Eisav, the *Midrash Zuta* establishes that both brothers were meant to be “*gedolim*,” equal founders of *Am Yisrael*. In the Midrash’s words,“Just as the Name [of God] was bestowed upon Yaakov, so was it supposed to be bestowed upon Eisav.” The Midrash proceeds to explain that Yaakov and Eisav were expected to jointly build God’s special nation. Yaakov was to be the founder of the priestly tribe, and Eisav was to be the founder of the monarchy. However, the Midrash comments, once Eisav sold the birthright to Yaakov, it was said about him, “*Bazui ata me’od*” – “You are very despised,” referring to the second verse of Ovadya’s prophecy condemning the wicked kingdom of Edom, which descended from Eisav. After selling the birthright, Eisav forfeited his status as a partner in the building of *Am Yisrael*.

It seems that the Midrash here draws a connection between Ovadya’s condemning Edom as “*bazui*” (“despised,” or “loathsome”) and the Torah’s conclusion to the story of Eisav’s sale of the birthright: “***va-yivez*** *Eisav et ha-bekhora*” – “Eisav scorned the birthright” (25:34). As a number of commentators explain, the Torah here clarifies that Eisav did not sell his privileges as the firstborn out of desperation, or because he was taken advantage of by his brother. He sold the birthright because he “mocked” it, he dismissed these privileges as worthless and unimportant. The Midrash appears to teach that because “*va-yivez Eisav et ha-bekhora*” – Eisav cynically mocked and ridiculed something valuable and precious, he became “*bazui…me’od*” – a target of scorn and ridicule. Eisav had the potential to be an equal partner with Yaakov in the formation of *Am Yisrael*, but he forfeited this privilege because of his quality of “*va-yivez*,” his cynicism, his denying the value of something precious like the birthright.

If so, then the Midrash here teaches that if we live with an attitude of “*va-yivez*,” looking upon people and things with ridicule and scorn, then we ourselves become “*bazui*,” lowly and contemptible. If we deny the value and significance of things, then we will end up denying our own value and significance; if we don’t take things seriously, we will not take our own life seriously. If we routinely mock and poke fun, we are not likely to have much respect for ourselves, and so we are not likely to invest time and effort to achieve greatness, to become “*gedolim*.” The Midrash here teaches us to take the world around us seriously so we will take ourselves seriously, to show respect for people and for things of value, so we will live with self-respect and work to make the most of our opportunities during our brief sojourn in this world.

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