**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**Parashat Toledot**

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In loving memory of

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**הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ**

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**Yitzchak's Love of Esav**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

**I. Why Did Yitzchak Love Esav?**

And the boys grew; and Esav was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Yaakov was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Now Yitzchak loved Esav, because he did eat of his venison; and Rivka loved Yaakov. (*Bereishit* 25:27-28)

According to the conventional understanding, Rivka loves Yaakov because of his righteousness and innocence. It is possible, however, that her love for him stems from the prophecy that she has received:

And the Lord said unto her: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.” (*Bereishit* 25:23)

This prophecy would certainly not dull the natural love of a mother for each of her sons, but it might move her to work on advancing the destiny of the son whom God chose to continue the path of his forefathers, and this might be the meaning of the verse.

It seems that Yitzchak is unaware of the prophecy received by Rivka, as we find in many places that without God's explicit permission, a prophecy cannot be revealed to another person who has not received it.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yitzchak sees Esav as his legitimate firstborn, and therefore nurtures him toward his destiny. The fact that the Torah, and even more so *Chazal,* present Esav as a sinner, is not known to Yitzchak, and apparently, in light of his behavior, is not self-evident, as we shall see below. Even if Yitzchak knows that Esav is not exactly a righteous man, it is possible that by showing him special love, Yitzchak is trying to keep Esav in his family's framework and to do everything within his power to restore him to the proper path.

It is, however, possible to find a better and more positive reason for Yitzchak's love of Esav. Let us examine the verses:

And Yitzchak sowed in that land, and found in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. And the man waxed great, and grew more and more until he became very great. And he had possessions of flocks, and possessions of herds, and a great household; and the Pelishtim envied him.

Now all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham his father, the Pelishtim had stopped them, and filled them with earth. And Avimelekh said unto Yitzchak: “Go from us; for you are much mightier than we.”

And Yitzchak departed thence, and encamped in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there. And Yitzchak dug again the wells of water, which they had dug in the days of Avraham his father; for the Pelishtim had stopped them after the death of Avraham; and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them. And Yitzchak's servants dug in the valley, and found there a well of living water. And the herdsmen of Gerar strove with Yitzchak's herdsmen, saying: “The water is ours.” And he called the name of the well Esek; because they contended (*hitasseku*) with him.

And they dug another well, and they strove for that also. And he called the name of it Sitna (hatred). 

And he removed from thence, and dug another well; and for that they strove not. And he called the name of it Rechovot; and he said: “For now the Lord has made room for us (*hirchiv lanu*), and we shall be fruitful in the land.” (*Bereishit* 26:12-22)

Yitzchak arrives in the land of the Pelishtim in a period of famine, purchases for himself land and sows it. Despite the years of famine and the difficult terrain, in the western Negev, Yitzchak finds in his fields a hundredfold. Yitzchak is the first and only "settler" in the Torah.[[2]](#footnote-2) Avraham and Yaakov are primarily wandering shepherds, and they do not pose a threat to the landowners. Yitzchak, who is also a diligent and successful farmer, poses a threat to them in his fields and wells, and they harass him and uproot him from place to place.

For lack of any alternative, Yitzchak abandons his fields and wells, and he journeys to more desolate places. He arrives at Rechovot in the Negev (identified today with the Halutza sands), and he will still have to travel further south to Be'er La-chai Ro'i (west of today's Nitzana). Yitzchak is portrayed in our *parasha*, despite his diligence, ability and agricultural successes, as a weak and persecuted Jew who is unable to defend himself, his family and his property.

Suddenly, we are painted the opposite picture:

Then Avimelekh went to him from Gerar, and Achuzat his friend, and Pikhol the captain of his host. And Yitzchak said unto them: “Why have you come unto me, seeing you hate me, and have sent me away from you?”

And they said: “We saw plainly that the Lord was with you; and we said: Let there now be an oath between us, even between us and you, and let us make a covenant with you; that you will do us no hurt, as we have not touched you, and as we have done unto you nothing but good, and have sent you away in peace; you are now the blessed of the Lord.” (*Bereishit* 26:26-29)

Yitzchak is depicted here as a military and political power against the Pelishtim. The king of the Pelishtim comes with his general to Yitzchak's tent, and pleads with him not to harm his people. This is not an alliance of love, as was Avimelekh's pact with Abraham. This is an alliance that broadcasts the Pelishti fear of Yitzchak. What causes such a radical change in the balance of power?

Our answer in one word: Esav!

Esav grows up in the house of a hungry and persecuted man who has been dispossessed of his assets, and it is there that he grows into a young man and an adult. In this house, the idea of revenge against the Pelishtim and the need to teach them a lesson is his daily bread. As a hunter, he develops combat knowledge and ability, gathering around him "vain fellows" (compare to the story of Yiftach; *Shofetim* 11:3), and turning them into a high-quality foreign legion living on their swords. Backed by a battalion of four hundred men (*Bereishit* 32:7), Esav sets out on assault raids in the land of the Pelishtim.

Can four hundred people, with no landed property, support themselves on their swords? It turns out that they can. A very similar episode reported elsewhere in the Bible takes place in the same area in the western Negev:

And David said unto Akhish: “If now I have found favor in your eyes, let them give me a place in one of the cities in the country, that I may dwell there; for why should your servant dwell in the royal city with you?” Then Akhish gave him Tziklag that day…

And David and his men went up, and made a raid upon the Geshurites, and the Gizrites, and the Amalekites; for those were the inhabitants of the land, who were of old, as you go to Shur, even unto the land of Egypt. And David smote the land, and left neither man nor woman alive, and took away the sheep, and the oxen, and the asses, and the camels, and the apparel. And he returned, and came to Akhish. And Akhish said: “Where have you made a raid today?”

And David said: “Against the South of Yehuda, and against the South of the Yerachme’elites, and against the South of the Kenites.” And David left neither man nor woman alive, to bring them to Gat, saying: “Lest they should tell on us, saying: ‘So did David, and so has been his manner all the while he has dwelt in the country of the Pelishtim.’” (I *Shemuel* 27:5-11)

What David and his men do to the desert bandits in the area southwest of the land of the Pelishtim, Esav does to the Pelishtim themselves. Afterwards, when his father Yitzchak moves southwest to Rechovot and Be'er La-chai Ro'i, he does this to the desert bandits that harass him. Esav and his men are good soldiers, and Esav exploits this not only to support himself and his men, but also to take revenge against the Pelishtim, the oppressors of his childhood in the valley of Gerar. Avimelekh the king of Gerar and Pikhol his general are forced to go to Yitzchak in Be'er Sheva and plead before him not to harm them, and to remember their acts of kindness toward him (about which we have never heard before!) when they hosted them in their country.

This is how the covenant of blood is made, the covenant between the sickle and the sword, between Yitzchak, the farmer and the shepherd, and Esav, the head of a fighting battalion.[[3]](#footnote-3) The result of this covenant is: "Now Yitzchak loved Esav, because he did eat of his venison."

### II. The Difference Between Esav and David According to the Midrash

As was already mentioned above, *Chazal* present Esav as a totally wicked man:

And the boys grew; and Esav was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Yaakov was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. (*Bereishit* 25:27)

"A cunning hunter" — understanding how to entrap and deceive his father with his mouth. He would ask him: “Father, how should salt and straw be tithed?” Consequently his father believed him to be very punctilious in observing *mitzvot*. (Rashi, ad loc.)

From a linguistic perspective, this exposition is based on the fact that "cunning hunter" stands in contrasting parallelism to "quiet man," implying that Esav is cunning and deceptive. In another *midrash*, *Chazal* explicitly express their doubts about Yitzchak's love for Esav:

"And it came to pass, that when Yitzchak was old" (*Bereishit* 27:1) – R. Yitzchak opened: "That justify the wicked for a reward" (*Yeshayahu* 5:23) — whoever accepts a reward and justifies the wicked as a result and takes away the righteousness of the righteous from him… This is Yitzchak, whose eyes, because he justified the wicked, grew dim. (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:5)

It is possible that *Chazal* are alluding here in this *midrash* to a comparison between Yitzchak and Eli the Priest. Both of them fail to rebuke their sons for their evil deeds, and thus, as it were, they "justify the wicked." For this they are both punished with the loss of their eyesight.[[4]](#footnote-4)

According to what we said above, Yitzchak's love for Esav stems from the fact that Esav protects his agricultural lands. If so, why do *Chazal* criticize Yitzchak for his alliance with Esav?

Let us examine another *midrash*:

"And Esav came in from the field [and he was faint]" (*Bereishit* 25:29) — said Rabbi Yudan in the name of Rabbi Aivo, Rabbi Pinchas in the name of Rabbi Levi, and the Rabbis in the name of Rabbi Simon… Esav committed two transgressions: He had relations with a betrothed woman, as it is stated: "For he found her in the field" (*Devarim* 22:27). "And he was faint" — for he had killed another person. This is what it says: "For my soul faints before the murderers" (*Yirmeyahu* 4:31). Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-nasi] said: He also stole. This is what it says: "If thieves came to you, if robbers by night" (*Ovadya* 1:5). (*Bereishit Rabba* 63:12)

What brings *Chazal* to attribute such serious offenses to Esav on the basis of verbal analogies that could easily be refuted?

It seems that *Chazal* consider the comparison between Esav's battalion and that of David. At the head of each battalion of four hundred men stands a red-haired general:

And the first came forth ruddy [*admoni*], all over like a hairy mantle; and they called his name Esav. (*Bereishit* 25:25)

And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy (*admoni*), and withal of beautiful eyes, and goodly to look upon… and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David… (I *Shemuel* 16:12-13)

The life of such a battalion, and especially its commander, is not easy. We see above the war of survival waged by David and his men in Tziklag. A cruel life of bloodshed (against cruel desert bandits), a life steeped in lies and the cunning of the wisdom of survival, in a life of danger and struggle. Another example of the life of David's battalion is his struggle against Naval the Carmelite, who holds back the wages of and humiliates his soldiers:

And David said unto his men: “Gird you on every man his sword.” And they girded on every man his sword; and David also girded on his sword; and there went up after David about four hundred men; and two hundred abode by the baggage….

Now David had said: “Surely in vain have I kept all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that pertained unto him; and he has returned me evil for good. God do so unto the enemies of David, and more also, if I leave of all that pertain to him by the morning light so much as one male.” (I *Shemuel* 25:13-22)

David nearly destroys the entire house of Naval the Carmelite, young and old, but Avigayil arrives and appeases him with her wisdom.

Military might, life in the desert without law and order, daily life-or-death battles with enemies from other nations or tribes, a mob of scoundrels and wretched souls[[5]](#footnote-5) forming the core of a band living by its swords — all this is liable to easily turn bloodshed, robbery and even taking women from their husbands into a routine of life. David is tested time after time in these matters, when he is presented with the opportunities to kill Shaul and to eradicate Naval. Esav, living a similar life, is tested once explicitly, when he meets Yaakov on his way back from the house of Lavan. Nevertheless, *Chazal* maintain that countless times he fails the test, and theydescribe him as coming from the field after having shed blood, stolen and taken a betrothed woman. This is the natural fate of desert fighters in no man's land.

Esav succeeds in persuading his father Yitzchak, that he, like King David, is an honest man, not drunk with victory and power. It is possible that Yitzchak believes that Esav leads his battalion as does David, like the mythical Robin Hood, who always protects the weak and fights against their oppressors, and as he does with the Pelishtim who harass Yitzchak. It turns out that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish among bands of swordsmen, between a righteous man like David and one who sheds innocent blood, as *Chazal* tell us about Esav. In fact, Esav is not like David. What Yitzchak does not know is that Esav chooses to be like Nimrod,[[6]](#footnote-6) killing innocents in order to instill fear and impose his rule. About Nimrod it is stated:

He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; wherefore it is said: Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord. And the beginning of his kingdom was Bavel, and Erekh, and Akkad, and Kalneh, in the land of Shinar. (*Bereishit* 10:9-10)

If Nimrod only hunted animals, it is hard to imagine that he would become a king. Nimrod the mighty hunter was also a mighty warrior, and thus he conquered the aforementioned cities, and was for a certain time the king of the world, as it were.

Similarly, Esav appears for his meeting with Yaakov when he returns from Lavan as the leader of a battalion of four hundred fighters, and as one who appoints his sons as commanders in all the districts of the land of Edom.

Nevertheless, the mitzvaof honoring his father Yitzchak stands to his credit, not only when he serves him food in his old age, but also when he stands by him against the desert looters and the Pelishtim in Yitzchak's struggle to gain a hold on the land of God with his nails and teeth.

### III. Rivka

It is not clear whether Rivka, who loves Yaakov, knows more about Esav's hidden deeds than Yitzchak. Nevertheless, it seems that Rivka does not believe in the way of the sword at all. As someone who enters the tent of Sara, over whose entrance the clouds of God's glory rest, presumably continuing along the path of lovingkindness to which she had been accustomed already at the well in Paddan Aram. On the day when she is left with no other choice, on the day when she faces a test of survival and struggle against evil, she prefers the weaponry of cunning over the weaponry of bloody swords. She chooses Yaakov.

It should be remembered that we are not dealing here with little children, whose parents will always love them equally and share everything between them. Rather, we are dealing with mature brothers who must give a reckoning for their actions during the time of their struggle over the inheritance.

Translated by David Strauss

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1. Compare, for example, to the words of Rashi (*Bereishit* 37:35): “‘Thus his father wept for him’ — Yitzchak wept for Yaakov's trouble, but did not mourn, for [Yitzchak] knew that [Yosef] was alive." The Midrash explicitly explains that Yitzchak cold not reveal his prophecy to Yaakov without permission:

   Said Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon: [Yitzchak] would cry alongisde him, but when he departed, he would wash and annoint, eat and drink. Why did he not reveal this to [Yaakov]? He said: The Holy One, Blsessd be He, has not revealed it to him, should I then reveal it? (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:21) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I took this idea from my revered teacher, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, who wrote about this at length in his book, *Pirkei Avot* (Alon Shevut: 2003), pp. 127-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the history of Zionism, we are familiar with such an alliance between the farmers of the First Aliya and the members of the Jewish defense organization, *Ha-shomer*, founded by Israel Shochat, of the Second Aliya. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See I *Shemuel* 1:2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I *Shemuel* 22:1-2; ibid. 30:22. In a certain sense, these actions can be compared to the formation of the French Foreign Legion in the 19th century. Many of its members were criminals and murderers who escaped the hands of the law of the civilized world and became dedicated soldiers, who could be counted upon in the **Battle of Camarón** in Mexico and many other places. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Bereishit Rabba* 37:2; ibid. 65, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)