

## "Give Truth to Yaakov"

By Rav Zeev Weitman

And Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivka, daughter of Betuel the Aramean from Padan Aram, sister of Lavan, as his wife.

The elaborate and detailed description of Rivka's lineage here leads Rashi to ask:

Has it not already been written that she is the daughter of Betuel, and the sister of Lavan, and from Padan Aram?

He then goes on to answer:

It comes to speak her praise: for she was the daughter of a wicked man, and the sister of a wicked man, and came from a place inhabited by wicked people – but she did not learn from their actions.

This is perhaps the opposite of the conclusion that we might have arrived at on our own. The narrative presented in the *parasha* appears to show that Rivka is well versed in the art of her native society - as we see from her deliberate deception of Yitzchak through her close guidance of Yaakov so that he will receive the blessings that his father had meant to convey to Esav, his brother.

Another comment by Rashi is similarly puzzling. Concerning the verse,

And Esav was skilled in hunting (or "trapping"), a man of the field, while Yaakov was a plain man (*ish tam*), dwelling in tents.

Rashi explains:

"Skilled in hunting" – In trapping and deceiving his father through his words, asking him, "Father, how does one tithe salt and straw?," such that his father was convinced that he was careful in his observance of the commandments. "While Yaakov was a plain man" – inexperienced in all of this. Rather, he said what was in his heart. One who is not sharp in deceiving [others] is called "plain" (*tam*).

Is this indeed what the *parasha* reveals – that Esav deceives his father, "trapping him with his words," while Yaakov is "inexpert in all of this"? An objective reading of *Parashat Toldot* would seem to invite some very difficult questions concerning Yaakov's behavior – and no less so the behavior of Rivka, his mother – specifically and especially in the sphere of honesty and integrity.

Our problem surfaces with the very first interaction that the text records between Yaakov and Esav. Esav returns from the field. He is very hungry (the word "ayeef," used today to mean "tired," is used in the Torah to indicate hunger and thirst; see Ibn Ezra) and he asks Yaakov, his brother, for some of the stew that he has prepared while at home. Yaakov exploits his brother's hunger, allowing him to eat of the stew only in return for Esav's sale of his birthright. Abravanel formulates the question that immediately arises:

If Yaakov was plain [guileless] and upright, how could it occur to him to ask his older brother to sell him his birthright for a lentil stew? Furthermore, it is not proper for a God-fearing person who keeps far from evil to covet that which is not his own; certainly, he should not cause him anguish through his words in order to purchase his birthright for the laughable price of a lentil stew. And if Esav was dim-witted, Yaakov should have conducted himself as someone who loves justice and not caused him distress... And even if we say that the price was not lentil stew, but rather silver and gold – it remains troubling that the order and development of events is such that when Esav returns from the field, hungry and asking to eat, and that Yaakov, upon seeing that he is weary with hunger and thirst, asks, "Will you sell me your birthright today?"

Just as this first narrative concerning the brothers depicts Yaakov exploiting the weakened state of Esav who has just returned from the field, the second story shows him exploiting his father's blindness in order to present himself as Esav and to receive the blessings that were meant for him.

In fact, Yaakov deceives his father no less than five times:

- a. "I am Esav, your firstborn."
- b. "I have done as you spoke to me."
- c. "Eat of my venison."
- d. "For the Lord your God sent me good speed."
- e. In response to the question, "Are you really my son Esav?" Yaakov answers, "[It is] I."

In light of all of this, it seems very strange that it is Esav who is accused of deceiving his father and entrapping him with words – an accusation with no apparent support in the text.

It is true that Yaakov acts as he does at his mother's command, but it is doubtful whether a command by his mother to deceive his father and act contrary to his father's wishes can be regarded as justification for Yaakov's behavior. Seemingly, he should have told Rivka that he was unwilling and unable to deceive his father, and if she was certain that the blessings should be given to Yaakov and not to Esav, then she should have gone to Yitzchak and convince him of this, rather than attempting to achieve this through deception, forcing Yaakov to exploit his father's blindness. Indeed, this is the course that she takes when seeking to send Yaakov to Padan Aram.

**Is the blessing dependent on the presence of the recipient?**

Another question is why and how the blessing can be realized for an impostor, rather than for the person for whom it was originally intended. In other words, if Yitzchak's intention is to bless Esav and he is certain that it is Esav who stands before him, then how exactly does the blessing come to be fulfilled for Yaakov, simply because he is physically standing in front of Yitzchak at the time? Can the blessing not find its way to Esav if that is Yitzchak's intention, even if he is not physically present? Is a blessing a material, tangible object that is passed from hand to hand, such that it is handed to the person standing before one, regardless of his intentions?

Concerning this last question, we see that the blessing is indeed something beyond a prayer and supplication or request from God; it is something more tangible that is passed over in the face to face encounter between the one who blesses and the one who is blessed. In order for the blessing to be conveyed, there must be physical proximity between them. This is true of all the blessings in the Torah, and is most clearly apparent in the blessings that replace the curses that Bil'am tries to direct towards *Bnei Yisrael*. In order to curse them, he has to locate himself at some vantage point from which he is able to view them; only thus can the curse that he utters (which ultimately becomes a blessing) have any effect on them.

From Bil'am, we also learn that a curse – and likewise, a blessing – is far more than a prayer or request that God send bad (or good) fortune upon the subject. If it were nothing more than a prayer or request, then why is it necessary that God stop Bil'am from uttering the curse, turning his words into a blessing instead? Why could God simply not have acceded to Bil'am's prayer and not caused harm to *Am Yisrael*? We must conclude that had Bil'am succeeded in uttering his curse, it would have had its intended effect. If so, then a curse – like a blessing – is something tangible that has an effect on the person to whom it is addressed, and it requires eye contact with, and physical proximity to, the person who is being cursed or blessed.

Out of all the discussion and debate over this story, to my mind the only defense that can be offered for Yaakov's behavior is that he submits to his mother's command, instructing him – sternly and with complete confidence – to deceive his father. However, it seems that this defense is not enough, since we know that there is no such alibi as being an "agent for a sinful act." A person who does something that is wrong bears full responsibility for his action; he cannot claim that the blame lies with the person who dispatched him or tempted him into his act. Even if we say that our *parasha* does not describe a routine instance of agency for sin, but rather a mother who is commanding her son, we must counter that if a son's respect and obedience towards his mother entails violating his obligation to honor and fear his father, then surely that would not justify following her command.

### **Rivka follows God's word**

Rivka's perspective is different. Had the situation here been a difference of opinion, with Rivka loving Yaakov while Yitzchak loved Esav and Rivka trying to force her opinion on Yitzchak, not through persuasion and face-to-face discussion but rather through deceit, then her conduct, too, would be unjustifiable – even if she was certain of her position. However,

Rivka is operating here at God's command, and it is this fact alone that explains and justifies the path that she chooses.

Many years previously, during her pregnancy, Rivka had gone to "inquire of God":

And the children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it be so, why then I?" And she went to inquire of God. And God said to 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."

God explains the reason for the "struggling" that is going on inside her, and tells her that of these two nations, "the elder shall serve the younger." Over the course of many years, Rivka guards this message in her heart. When the Torah testifies that "Yitzchak loved Esav, but Rivka loved Yaakov," with no explanation, perhaps this is the reason for Rivka's position. Now that Yitzchak intends to bless Esav and to tell him, among other things, "Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow before you," she knows and understands that she must take action. It was not for nothing that God conveyed His message before her sons were born! At this moment, Rivka acts in order to realize God's decision and His stipulation that "the elder shall serve the younger." This alone justifies her actions, her determination, and her confidence in the decision to act without discussing the situation with Yitzchak and trying to convince him of her vision.

It appears that Yaakov hears something in the tone of her voice, in her determination and decisiveness. Knowing her as he does, he sees that there is no alternative but to follow her command, since his mother appears to know, with absolute certainty, that she is doing the right thing. It is even possible that Yaakov understands that Rivka is operating here not from the position of a difference of opinion between herself and Yitzchak concerning the favorite son, but rather that she is being directed from Above to act, and the energy that surrounds her and the answers that she offers to his questions serve as evidence of this.

### **The price of deception**

In any event, even the above perspective cannot exempt Yaakov from facing any consequences for his actions. Nechama Leibowitz, in her *Iyyunim le-Sefer Bereishit*, sets forth the price that he pays:

From the subsequent events of Yaakov's life, we see that he spent the rest of his days in sorrow and suffering. "Measure for measure," he is deceived by his own sons concerning what happened to Yosef; Lavan deceives him time after time; even Leah, his wife, deceives him by disguising herself as Rachel. The *midrash* depicts this conversation between them:

Yaakov: "Daughter of a swindler! Why did you deceive me?" Leah: "What about you? Why did you deceive your father... And now you say, 'Why did you deceive me?' – did your father not say, 'Your brother came treacherously?'"

Nechama Leibowitz also cites the following *midrash*:

Anyone who says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is lenient – he will lose his life; rather, God is patient, but eventually collects His debts. Yaakov caused Esav to emit just one single cry – as it is written, “And he cried a great and bitter cry” – and where was this repaid to him? In Shushan, the capital, as it is written, “And [Mordekhai] cried a great and bitter cry.”

### Was Yitzchak mistaken?

Many commentators have tried to explain Yitzchak's mistake and his blindness with regard to Esav, but it would seem that the Torah notes his love for him in order to convey that God chose Yaakov for His own reasons, and not because there were necessarily any outwardly apparent indications of his superiority. The fact that Yitzchak loves Esav shows that Esav was not a negative character and there is room to love him no less than there is room to love Yaakov, as Rivka does. In the natural course of events, Esav would have been the chosen brother, since he is the elder one, Yitzchak loves him, and he chooses to bless him. It is only through God's intervention - through the prophecy of the future to Rivka and her instructions to Yaakov - that Yaakov is ultimately chosen to receive the blessing. The message seems to be that *Am Yisrael* should not think that it was by our own merit that we were chosen. As the last of the prophets, Malakhi, declares as the introduction to his prophecy:

“I have loved you,” says God. And you say, “In what have You loved us?” “Is Esav not Yaakov's brother, says God, yet I have loved Yaakov. But I hated Esav...”

Malakhi is teaching us the same idea: the choice of Yaakov arises not from his inherent superiority, but rather from God's inscrutable decision. After all, Esav and Yaakov are brothers, and there is no apparent reason for the stark distinction between them – yet God chooses Yaakov and rejects Esav.

The expression, “Yet I have loved Yaakov...” is reminiscent of the testimony in our *parasha*, “but Rivka loved Yaakov” – and this reinforces the idea mentioned above, that the reason for Rivka's love of Yaakov is the Divine choice, of which she was notified even before they were born: “And the elder shall serve the younger.”

The interpretation we propose here is fundamentally different from that adopted by those who accuse Yitzchak of blindness towards his son's behavior – an accusation that is based on and conforms with the *midrashim* describing Esav's deficiencies in contrast with Yaakov's sterling qualities. It is difficult to find any solid basis for these *midrashim* in the text, and they are clearly meant to supply the justification, omitted from the biblical account, for the Divine choice of Yaakov. I also do not believe that Yitzchak acknowledges any wrongdoing when he says to Esav: “Who then is he who hunted venison and brought it to me, and I have eaten of it all before you came, and I blessed him? Moreover, he shall be blessed.”

The meaning of the phrase, “Moreover, he shall be blessed” is as Ramban understood it: that it is unthinkable that a person who feels a great fear over having been tricked, would say, “Moreover, he shall be blessed”:

Instead, he would curse him. And if “Moreover, he shall be blessed” is Yitzchak's acquiescence to and justification of the deception, then we would expect Esav to cry out even more broken-heartedly, “Why did you just bless him now, my father?” For how could Esav believe that the whole episode had been a deception from the outset if he saw that Yitzchak now blessed Yaakov of his own free will?

Therefore, according to Ramban, what Yitzchak means is: “Who is the one who deceived me and stole the blessing from you, and who will now be blessed because of his deed in bringing about a situation whereby he received your blessing?” To Ramban's view, Yitzchak's great fear arises not from his discovery of his mistake, but rather from his knowledge that his beloved son has lost his blessing forever.

### Why does Yitzchak make no mention of Yaakov's deed in their next encounter?

This leaves us with the problem of why Yitzchak makes no mention whatsoever of Yaakov's act of deception when they next meet, nor is there any apology by Yaakov, nor any indication of hesitation on his part in anticipation of appearing before his father:

And Rivka said to Yitzchak, “I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Chet; if Yaakov takes a wife from among the daughters of Chet such as these, natives of the land, then what good is my life?” And Yitzchak called Yaakov and he blessed him and charged him and said to him, “Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Rise and go to Padan Aram, to the home of Betuel, your father's mother, and take a wife for yourself from there, from the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother. And may God Almighty bless you and cause you to be fruitful and multiply, that you may become a multitude of peoples. And may He give you the blessing of Avraham – to you and to your descendants with you, that you may inherit the land of your sojourning, which God gave to Avraham.” And Yitzchak sent Yaakov, and he went to Padan Aram, to Lavan, son of Betuel the Aramean, brother of Rivka, mother of Yaakov and Esav.

It is also difficult to understand why Rivka needs Yitzchak to send Yaakov after she herself has commanded him to flee to her brother. Have we not already seen that Yaakov obeys his mother, even at the heavy cost of having to deceive his father? Surely he would obey her where there is no conflict with his father!

And one more question: Why does Yitzchak give Yaakov the blessing of descendants and of the land, the blessing of Avraham, without any thought of giving this blessing, at least, to Esav, his firstborn?

We might say that there are two completely different blessings: the blessing of Avraham – the blessing of descendants and the blessing of the land – and a blessing for material abundance and political power. Perhaps Yaakov had planned in advance that the blessing of abundant wealth and power would go to Esav, his firstborn, while the blessing of Avraham was meant for Yaakov. Perhaps the blessing of Avraham is meant for Yaakov as a consequence of the sale of

the birthright. Upon discovering Yaakov's act of deception, Esav cries:

"Is it not appropriate that he is called Yaakov? For he has supplanted me already twice: he has taken my birthright, and now he has also taken my blessing."

This suggests that the blessing which Yitzchak had meant to convey to Esav has nothing to do with the birthright which was sold to Yaakov, and by virtue of which Yaakov seems to now be in line for the blessing of Avraham. Now, through his deception, Yaakov has also taken the blessing which Esav was supposed to receive not by virtue of being the firstborn, but rather by virtue of being his father's favorite son.

Whatever the case may be, it is extremely difficult to understand how the encounters between Rivka and Yitzchak, and then between Yitzchak and Yaakov, take place with not a word about the great crisis brought about by the actions taken by Rivka and Yaakov.

### Two reasons for Yaakov's journey

It seems that we have no choice but to suggest that this *parasha* should be read as two separate narratives that are recounted concurrently, presenting us with two different reasons for Yaakov's exodus to Padan Aram. The first reason is that he is fleeing, at his mother's command, from his brother Esav, who seeks to kill him for stealing his blessings. The other reason is that the women of Canaan are deemed altogether inappropriate in the eyes of Yitzchak and Rivka, and they therefore decide to send Yaakov to find a wife among the women of Rivka's family.

If we pay attention to the language of the Torah, we see that Rivka sends Yaakov to Charan out of fear that Esav will kill him:

"And now, my son, obey my voice; arise and **flee** to my brother Lavan, in **Charan**."

When Yitzchak sends Yaakov, it is with a view to finding a wife:

Yitzchak called Yaakov and he blessed him and charged him and said to him, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to **Padan Aram**, to the home of Betuel... and **take a wife for yourself** from there, from the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother."

The Torah then records twice Yaakov's journey: he is first described (at the end of *Parashat Toldot*) as heading for **Padan Aram**. Then, right at the start of *Parashat Vayetzei*, we read, "And Yaakov departed from Beer Sheva and he went to **Charan**."

In both stories, his departure is related to and in close proximity to receiving the blessings from his father. In the first story, the blessing was originally meant for Esav, and Yaakov ends up receiving it because his mother commands him to deceive his father and to extract the blessing against Yitzchak's will. In the second story, the blessing is meant for Yaakov in the first place, and Yitzchak and Rivka are in agreement that Esav is

apparently unworthy of this blessing owing to his marriage to Canaanite women, causing Yitzchak and Rivka great anguish.

The synthesis of these two narratives entails drawing a distinction between the two blessings. There is the blessing of Avraham, which relates to the destiny of descendants and of the land, while the other blessing involves power and material abundance. The synthesis of these two stories also suggests that while on one hand, Yaakov and his descendants are chosen by God because of their special and unique merit, as reflected in the second narrative, at the same time, there is also a Divine decision that has no apparent reason and does not arise from any inherent quality:

"Is Esav not Yaakov's brother, says God, yet I have loved Yaakov. But I hated Esav..."

Translated by Kaeren Fish