

BS"D



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From: TorahWeb.org [torahweb@torahweb.org]  
Sent: November 11, 2004 Subject: Two Tents of Education: The Yeshiva and the Home - Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger  
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RABBI YAAKOV NEUBURGER  
TWO TENTS OF EDUCATION: THE YESHIVA

AND THE HOME

"...and Yaakov was a simpler person, sitting in tents" (Braishis 25:27)

"Sitting in tents" certainly does not conjure up in our minds a rigorous and ennobling course of training that would mold the third of our Avos. Yet, that is precisely how the Torah describes the events of Yaakov's life that did indeed give him the wherewithal to successfully navigate through the unfriendly waters of his "Diaspora", and take his place amongst angels as well. Accordingly, Rashi, quoting chazal, interprets that "sitting in tents" refers to the total immersion in the study of Hashem's will, perhaps contributing to the development of the modern phrase, "sitting and learning". With that kind of commitment, Yaakov would develop all the principles and insights of what would be our Torah, all of which would deliver his children safely from the trauma of Mitzrayim to the sacred slopes of Sinai.

Apparently, one tent would not assure the nascent patriarch of the necessary learning and instruction, and therefore Yaakov studied, as Rashi explains, in both the yeshiva of Shem and the yeshiva of Eiver. We must assume that these two yehsivos had distinct teachings to impart and Yaakov wished to absorb both. Where has Rashi already given us some insight into the teachings of Shem and Eiver? Shem, according to Rashi, was King Malki Tzedek, (14:18) who greeted Avraham after his miraculous victory over Kedorlaomer and his imperial army. It is on that occasion that Shem recognizes the handiwork of Hashem and introduces the concept of tithing and berachos into the world, coining phrases that later became part of our daily davening. In our terms these concepts grow out of the study and observance of mitzvos and parshiyos such as Shabbos, yomim tovim, teffilin, hilchos avodah zara, tzedaka, korbanos shelamim and ahavas Hashem. The weltanschauung that is associated with Shem would clearly guide Yaakov as he sets out from his parents' home and dreams of travels that are governed by angels sent from Above. Eiver is introduced by Rashi as a prophet who named his son Peleg (10:25) to forewarn of the impending events surrounding the Tower of Bavel. From Eiver, Yaakov would come to understand how to foresee upcoming events and try to make the necessary preparations. This beis hamedrash would focus on maaseh avos siman lebanim with all its attendant demands and teachings, on preparing his integrity at the house of Lavan, on preparing his children to maintain their uniqueness throughout the Mitzrayim years and ready themselves for the building of the mishkan.

Is it not strange that Yaakov sought his instruction far from home? Why did the multiple tents of training not include the beis hamedrash of Yitzchak? Is there anything he could not learn from his saintly father and the mesorah that he bore? The Ksav Sofer suggests that even though the teacher (Yitzchak) and the Torah would be unsurpassed, still the environs of Eisav had to be avoided at all costs. Yaakov was simply afraid that he would be influenced by the character of his older brother, and that concern came above all else.

The Ksav Sofer notwithstanding, is it not possible to suggest that the multiple tents in which Yaakov studied did indeed include both father and school? That is, the tents of Yitzchak, Shem and Eiver? Thus the training of Yaakov may have required the partnership of home and the yeshiva, a model with which we have become so familiar.

If so, then we must assume that just as the yeshivos of Shem and Eiver had different contributions to make, so to the tents of home and yeshiva have significantly different contributions to make to the growth of our children, an idea which should give us all much pause. Indeed, does not every child require two tents - one that measures according to one's achievements, and demands responsibility and productivity; and another that clearly and continuously communicates absolute, unconditional and unwavering nurturing and acceptance. Together the home and the yeshiva, each one emphasizing its role almost exclusively, can, with warmth and love, raise another generation that will bring so much pleasure to the partnership with whom they are entrusted.

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A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON YAAKOV'S PURCHASE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT  
BY RABBI CHAIM JACHTER

Introduction

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (Orot HaKodesh 3:11) writes that it is forbidden for one to develop his Yirat Shamayim (fear of Heaven) at the expense one's natural sense of morality. Rav Kook insists that one must strive to integrate Yirat Shamayim and his natural sense of morality. One may extrapolate from Rav Kook that the Torah fundamentally never conflicts with natural morality, an idea that Rav Walter Wurzbarger develops at length in his work Ethics of Responsibility. Indeed, Rav Wurzbarger develops the idea that one's natural morality should serve as a hermeneutical tool to interpret the Torah. For instance, Halachic decisors strive to resolve problems of Mamzeirut and Igun in light of this principle. For example, Rav Avraham Shapira writes, "It is the accepted practice amongst our rabbinical sages to expend extraordinary effort to find a Halachic solution to relieve someone from the status of Mamzer" (Techumin 9:27).

Commentaries to the Chumash vigorously apply this principle to the narrative sections of the Torah. They will often interpret texts in a manner that satisfies our natural sense of morality. An example is the manner in which commentaries of all generations seek to harmonize the story of Yaakov's purchase of the birthright from Esav with our sense of natural morality (for a summary of many of these approaches see Rav Yehuda Nachshoni's Hegut BiParshiot HaShavua 1:96-100). The reader of the story recoils from what appears at first glance to be Yaakov's exploiting Esav's hunger and impulsivity in order to secure the birthright. Yet none if any of the classical commentaries assert that

Yaakov sinned by engaging in this activity. Let us examine two major and representative approaches to this issue and subsequently suggest a somewhat novel approach to resolve this problem.

#### Rashi's Approach

Rashi (Bereshit 25:31, based on Bereshit Rabbah 63:13) interprets that Yaakov was seeking the Bechorah to attain the privilege of serving G-d (presumably in the Tabernacle and Temple service), as the service of G-d is performed by the first-born. According to Rashi, Esav did not deserve the privilege of this honor, as Esav was wicked. Indeed, Rashi seizes every opportunity to highlight the wicked character of Esav. It appears that Rashi concedes that Yaakov's actions were immoral per se. The actions are justified, though, because the Torah sanctions acting immorally with immoral individuals (see Samuel II 22:26-27, Psalms 18:26-27, Daat Mikra commentary to Bereshit 2:297, and Rav Elchanan Samet, *Iyunim Biparshat Hashavua* pp.178-191).

A potential weakness, though, in Rashi's approach lies in its seeming anachronistic approach to this story. A Pshat (straightforward reading of the Biblical text) approach might have difficulty with Rashi's assertion that Yaakov was seeking to secure the right to serve G-d in the Tabernacle or Temple. A Pshat approach would have difficulty sustaining Rashi's introduction of a concept from the books of Exodus and Numbers to the book of Bereshit. In fact, in the book of Bereshit we find that Hevel as well as Kayin offered sacrifices even though Hevel was not a first-born (although Kayin offered first presumably because of his first-born status, see Rav Elchanan Samet, *Iyunim Biparshat Hashavua* 1:11). Perhaps it is for this reason that the Rashbam and Ibn Ezra do not interpret the right of the first-born in this context as the right to serve in the offering of sacrifices.

#### Rashbam's Approach

The Rashbam presents a more Pshat oriented approach to this problem. He asserts (as does Ibn Ezra) that Yaakov merely sought to purchase from Esav the first-born's customary double share in Yitzchak's future estate. Daat Mikra, Bereshit 2:231 notes that it was customary in the Near East during the time of book of Bereshit for the first-born to receive a double share in the father's estate. Rashbam asserts that Yaakov paid full value for this purchase of the right of primogeniture. The Rashbam insists (as does the Seforno) that the soup was merely a technical means to seal the deal similar to the *Kinyan Suddar* (formal act of transaction) that is described in the book of Ruth (4:7). According to this approach, Yaakov did not exploit Esav's hunger to attain the right of the first-born for a mere bowl of soup. Rather, he paid full price for this monetary purchase. Rashbam thus resolves moral conflict surrounding this story by diminishing the significance of Yaakov's purchase and "increasing" the amount Yaakov paid.

One might, however, raise two problems with this approach. First, Esav certainly perceives in hindsight that he was manipulated into selling the right of the first-born, as Esav later expresses to Yitzchak (Bereshit 27:36). Second, is that if Yaakov merely purchased the right to the double share of the first born it is difficult to understand why the Torah presents this story. Why must the Torah inform us of details surrounding the division of Yitzchak's estate?

#### A New Approach

Both Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (commentary to Bereshit 25:34) and Daat Mikra Bereshit 2:235) assert that Yaakov's purchase of the birthright from Esav was an invalid sale. Rav Hirsch notes that Bereshit Rabbah (63:14) records Bar Kappara referring to this transaction as "Mischakim," games. Daat Mikra notes that in the ancient Near East such a sale would not be valid unless the father consented. Accordingly, why did Yaakov engage in this false and seemingly meaningless sale and why does the Torah dignify this story by recording it for posterity?

One might answer that Yaakov was engaging in a character test to objectively determine whether Esav was worthy of his first-born rights

and obligations (Rav Mordechai Breuer, *Pirkei Bereshit* pp.494-496, presents a similar idea but takes it in a different direction than we do).

Someone who would relinquish his birthright in exchange for soup, even if he were ravenously hungry, is not a worthy successor to the legacy of Avraham. Indeed, the Jewish People have survived through the millennia only because of the willingness and readiness of Jews to preserve the Torah even in the most severe circumstances. Moreover, Esav's impulsivity and lack of emotional self-control also constitute sufficient reason for him to lose the birthright. Indeed, it is for this reason that Reuven is later to lose his rights as the first-born (see Bereshit 49:4 and Divrei Hayamim 1:5:1). Indeed, Yehuda demonstrates that his leadership skills are superior to Reuven by their respective responses to a crisis artificially created by Yosef. Reuven seeks to convince his father to immediately permit Binyamin to travel to Egypt by offering to kill two of his children if he does not return with Binyamin to Canaan. Yehuda, on the other hand, does not immediately seek to convince Yaakov to permit Binyamin to travel to Egypt. Rather, he patiently waits until the food supply has run out and Yaakov is left with no other viable choice other than to permit Binyamin to travel. Reuven's impulsive and irrational solution to the problem as opposed to Yehuda's patient and effective resolution of the problem, prove Yehuda to be the true leader and Reuven lacking the temperament to lead. In the case of the "sale" of the birthright Esav exhibits impulsivity and lack of emotional self-control, as he expresses, "I am about to die, why do I need the birthright?" (Bereshit 25:32), thereby demonstrating his inadequacy as a leader (the Seforno 25:31 articulates a similar approach). The right of the first-born that Esav is ready to relinquish in exchange for a bowl of soup seems to refer to the privilege to serve as the leader of a family that will preserve and cultivate the legacy of Avraham and Sarah (as indicated by the Ramban and Chizkuni). We recall that character tests to determine if one is worthy of membership in good standing of Avraham's immediate family abound in the book of Bereshit. Avraham servant's character test of Rebecca (as explained by commentaries collected and expanded upon by Nechama Leibowitz, *Iyunim Bisefer Bereshit* 157-161) and Yosef's testing his brothers (as explained by Avraham Avraham to Bereshit 42) to see if they would acquiesce to Binyamin's enslavement are two examples of such character tests. The three angels' visit to the tent of Avraham and Sarah disguised as travelers may be construed as a test to determine the worthiness of Avraham and Sarah to merit having a child at a very advanced age (see Yonatan Grossman, *Megadim* 29:24). Rashi (Bereshit 22:1) in one explanation suggests that the episode of the binding of Yitzchak was designed to test and demonstrate Yitzchak's worthiness to serve as the successor to Avraham (as opposed to Yishmael).

The reason why Yaakov felt a need to engage in such a character test was the imbalance in Yitzchak's family. The Torah (Bereshit 25:28) notes, in what might constitute an introduction to our story, that Yitzchak loves Esav because of the meat from the hunt that the latter serves the former. Yaakov may have wished for Yitzchak to be told of this incident and subsequently realize that Esav is unworthy the right of the first-born. Indeed, Esav reveals this incident to Yitzchak in the immediate aftermath of Yaakov's dressing as Esav to receive the blessing from his father. A major question posed by the commentaries such as Ibn Ezra (Bereshit 27:40) is why Yitzchak did not revoke the blessing he mistakenly conferred upon Yaakov based on deception. An answer might be that when Yitzchak discovered that Esav sold the right of the first-born under pressure, Yitzchak realized that Esav was unworthy to continue the legacy of Avraham and Sarah and thereupon suggested to Esav that he abandon the land of Israel in favor of life in Seir east of the Jordan River (see Daat Mikra commentary to Bereshit 27:40).

Another reason for Yaakov to subject Esav to this character test is to determine the propriety of engaging in extraordinary means to secure the right of the first-born. Rav Elchanan Samet (*Iyunim Biparshat Hashavua*

1:71) wonders what constituted the moral license for Yaakov to engage in deception to secure the right of the first-born. According to our interpretation, Yaakov engaged in this character test in order to verify his assumption that Esav was unworthy of the right of the first-born. The result of Yaakov's experiment was that Yitzchak was blinded to Esav's spiritual inadequacies to be the leader of or even a member of the future house of Avraham. Thus drastic action was justified in order to correct Yitzchak's misperception that threatened the future of the legacy of Avraham and Sarah.

Moreover, Rav Samet (Iyunim B'Parshot HaShavua p. 63 notes Yaakov's determination and steadfastness when he presents himself to Yitzchak as Esav. Yaakov does not break under the pressure of Yitzchak's repeated questioning and investigating his identity. This reflects Yaakov's full confidence that he acting entirely appropriately. What gave Yaakov such confidence? One might answer that since Yaakov had empirical evidence that Esav was unworthy of the birthright, he had no doubt that he was correct to take the birthright from Esav.

Finally, the last words of this incident "and Esav denigrated the birthright" (Bereshit 25:34) may support our interpretation. Unlike Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni who interpret that after he ate the soup Esav denigrated the worth of the birthright, Rashi interprets that this is the voice of the Torah noting that Esav has denigrated the birthright. This might be interpreted as the Torah's summary of this incident, that Esav thereby denigrated the birthright. Note that the text does not summarize the incident by stating that Esav has sold the birthright, for indeed, he has not! Rather, in this character test, Esav has denigrated the birthright and has proven himself unworthy of its privileges and obligations. We should note that our novel approach to this issue might be implied by Rashi's comments to this story, if we understand Rashi in a non-literal manner.

Although Yaakov's actions were both correct and necessary, he had to pay a price for engaging in such drastic activities (as Rav Elchanan Samet develops at length in Iyunim BiParshat HaShavua pp.68-71 in the context of Yaakov posing as Esav). Just as he subjected Esav to a character test, so too Yaakov suffered from the character test that was necessary for Yosef to impose upon his brothers. In certain circumstances it is necessary to choose between the lesser evil of two bad choices. The choice to subject Esav to a character test was a less offensive choice than to permit Yitzchak to elevate Esav to a position of leadership or even membership in the house of Avraham. Nevertheless, a price had to be paid for engaging in an activity that per se is offensive, but necessary due to the circumstances involved, as demonstrated at length by Rav Samet in the context of Yaakov dressing as Esav.

#### Conclusion

Accordingly, Yaakov did not exploit Esav in this incident. Rather, he laid the groundwork to preserve the future of the legacy of Avraham and facilitated the creation of the Jewish People. Extraordinary circumstances demand extraordinary actions.

Dedicated by Joy and Malcolm Lyons in loving memory of Cecil Jacobs z"l on his fourth Yahrzeit

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#### JEWISH VALUES

by CHIEF RABBI DR JONATHAN SACKS

#### GIVING THANKS

It is one of the paradoxes of our age. Ours is the most affluent generation in history. The average supermarket sets before its customers a range of goods that, a century ago, would have been beyond the reach of kings. We are able to travel further, see more of the world, have more education and a longer life expectancy than our ancestors would have thought possible. Yet we are not measurably happier.

Throughout the West, by every index, children are more anxious than their parents and grandparents. Rates of distress-related syndromes, from eating disorders to drug and alcohol abuse, psychiatric illness and suicide attempts, have rocketed between 300 and 1,000 per cent in the course of two generations. One psychiatrist has called ours a low-serotonin society - serotonin being the hormone in the brain associated with the feeling of well being. Why has it happened?

The causes are many, but there is one in particular. Our consumer culture relentlessly emphasises the things we don't yet have, but are encouraged to buy ("because you're worth it") - the new flatscreen television, the mobile phone that doubles as a camera, next year's car, suit or holiday venue. Shopping has become a combination of duty ("if you don't buy, how is the economy going to grow?") and psychic salvation ("retail therapy"). It is as seductive a myth as has ever bewitched the intelligence of a society that ought to know better. Wordsworth put it well: "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

Many centuries ago, in Pirkei Avot, Ben Zoma cut through the fallacy at the heart of consumerism. "Who is wealthy?" he asked. Not one who has what he wants but "One who rejoices in what he has." Instead of being obsessed with what you lack, he implied, give thanks for what you enjoy. Simple things: family, friends, work, rest, the whiteness of snow on a winter's morning, the first sight of a flower in spring.

Give thanks for merely being alive. That is what we do in our prayers each morning. It is why we make a blessing over a piece of bread or a glass of water. It is why, when we buy something new, we don't make a blessing over the thing we have purchased, but instead we say Shehecheyanu, thanking G-d for "keeping us alive and sustaining us and bringing us to this time." It is a blessing not over possessions but over life itself. We are here; we might not have been. Judaism is a sustained meditation on existence as a gift of G-d.

Consciousness of what we lack makes us restless, depressed. Giving thanks for what we have can make us (another Wordsworth phrase) "surprised by joy." Ben Zoma was right. Wealth is not a possession but a state of mind.

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From: Rafael Salasnik [rafi@brijnet.org] Sent: November 10, 2004 To: daf-hashavua@shamash.org Subject: daf-hashavua Toldot 5765/2004 Toldot-5765 @ U N I T E D S Y N A G O G U E - L O N D O N (O) Toldot



MACCHAR CHODESH Shabbat Mevarchim Shabbat ends in London at 5.04pm

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RABBI DAVID SILVERBERG

<http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/salt-bereishit/06-3toldot.htm>

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PARASHAT TOLDOT Towards the beginning of Parashat Toldot, we learn of Esav's surrendering of the birthright to his younger brother, Yaakov. Rashi (25:32) explains that Esav relinquished the birthright out of genuine fear of the immense responsibility involved. Upon hearing of the many strictures, rigorous guidelines and prohibitions applicable to the service in the Bet Hamikdash (which was to be the exclusive right of

the first-born), and the death penalty issued against violators, Esav declined the privilege of the birthright. If this fear indeed formed the basis of Esav's decision to forego this privilege, then we have trouble understanding the Torah's apparent criticism of Esav in this affair: "and Esav scorned the birthright" (25:34). How did Esav's sale of his birthright reflect any sense of contempt for the service in the Mikdash? To the contrary, he was motivated by a genuine, self-effacing realization of his inadequacy and the potentially disastrous consequences of his shortcomings. Rav Moshe Feinstein answers that Esav's intimidation did, in fact, indicate an inappropriate attitude towards the privilege of the Temple service. There are reasons for one to decline a position of leadership, authority, or honor. Unwillingness to accept the responsibility - no matter how great it may be - is not a valid reason. When presented with an opportunity, one must respond with enthusiastic preparedness to take on challenges and do what it takes to get the job done. Esav's "scorn" of the birthright involved his lackadaisical attitude in this regard. True, he was afraid; but if the birthright meant anything to him, he would have undertaken the challenge, no questions asked. Opportunities of all kinds present themselves before us regularly. One must always weigh the difficulty involved against the potential benefit to others. Rav Moshe applied this principle to the specific instance of potential rabbis and religious teachers who shy away, inhibited by the immense responsibility that leadership positions entail. Rav Moshe urges them to reconsider and accept the challenge rather than escape it. But this lesson may be applied to each individual, regardless of professional aspirations or inclinations. One can achieve greatness only by accepting upon himself difficult challenges and setting for himself high goals. Anything less amounts to a "scornful" attitude towards the many responsibilities we have the privilege to undertake.

Parashat Toladot opens as follows: "These are the 'toladot' of Yitzchak: Avraham begot Yitzchak." Although the term "toladot" generally refers to offspring, many translators and commentators prefer to translate this phrase as "This is the story of Yitzchak..." The reason is clear: if the verse opens, "These are the offspring of Yitzchak," then we expect the verse to continue with Yitzchak's children, not the already-known fact that Avraham was Yitzchak's father! One may, however, retain the straightforward meaning of the word "toladot." On a simple, "peshat" level, the opening verse may serve to introduce the entire parasha, not necessarily the continuation of the verse. Indeed, the rest of the parasha does in fact tell of Yitzchak's progeny. "Avraham begot Yitzchak" may be seen as a parenthetical comment, inserted before the discussion regarding the offspring of Yitzchak. Although this may be the simplest explanation, the peculiar structure of this opening verse calls for additional levels of interpretation, along the lines of "derash." Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l suggests that the verse here tells us that the primary "offspring," or legacy, of Yitzchak involved his being Avraham's son. His most significant contribution to the world in general and the development of G-d's nation in particular was his emulation of his father. "This is the legacy of Yitzchak - Avraham begot Yitzchak," Yitzchak was truly Avraham's son, the ultimate inheritor of his teachings. It should be added that, as has been pointed out by many, Yitzchak innovates very little throughout his lifetime, at least as appears from the Chumash itself. As opposed to Avraham, who developed a revolutionary theological system and emerged as an internationally renowned religious figure, Yitzchak seems to introduce very little. Yet, his contribution may be the most significant of all. It was he who stabilized the new beliefs of Avraham, who ensured that the name and legacy of Avraham would survive the centuries and millennia and not be left as a curious historical anecdote. Yitzchak's dedication to that for which his father stood guaranteed its safe passage through the ocean of time, to this very day. Rav Moshe applied this idea to what he perceived as an exaggerated tendency to innovate, to introduce new ideas and fresh concepts. He felt

that too many organizations, many of which were motivated by sincere aspirations for the sake of Torah and Am Yisrael, emerged claiming some new idea to sell. What had been lost, felt Rav Moshe, was a commitment to perpetuity, to simply transmitting the Jewish heritage to the next generation. This constituted Yitzchak's primary contribution, and this constitutes the primary responsibility of every generation.

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From: Shlomo Katz [skatz@torah.org] Sent: November 08, 2004 To: hamaayan@torah.org Subject: HaMaayan / The Torah Spring - Parashat Toldot Hamaayan / The Torah Spring Edited by Shlomo Katz Toldot: His Father's Son Volume 19, No. 6 Sponsored by the Marwick family in memory of Samuel Sklaroff a"h and by the Benn family on the yahrzeit of David Benn (Dovid ben R' Mordechai a"h) Today's Learning: Peah 3:4-5 O.C. 302:7-9 Daf Yomi (Bavli): Kreitot 28

"Esav became one who knows hunting, a man of the field; but Yaakov was a wholesome man, dwelling in tents." (25:27)

Rashi explains: "Knows hunting"--"literally understanding hunting; 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 the commandments."

R' ELAZAR MEIR PREIL z"l (1881-1933; rabbi of Elizabeth, N.J.) writes: Esav was the type of person who acts like a Roman when among Romans and a Yerushalmi when in Jerusalem, like an Orthodox Jew when among the Orthodox and a non-religious Jew when among the nonobservant. Can such a lifestyle bring a person happiness? Esav's own words demonstrate that it cannot, for he complained to Yaakov (25:32), "Look, I am going to die, so of what use to me is a birthright?"

In contrast, Yaakov lived a life of consistency. In his youth, he was a wholesome man, dwelling in the tents of Torah study. When he grew up and left home, where did he go? Chazal tell us that on his way to his uncle Lavan's home he detoured to the yeshiva of Shem and Ever for 14 years of Torah study. Where did all of this lead Yaakov? We read (33:18): "Yaakov arrived whole at the city of Shechem." In contrast to the chameleon-like Esav, Yaakov was the same wholesome person he had been as a youth. (Ha'maor)

Why doesn't the Torah say, "Yaakov was a wholesome man who knows Torah," just as it says that Esav "knows hunting"? R' Shmuel Halevi Wosner shlita (one of the elder rabbis of Bnei Brak) explains: A Torah student's future success is determined not by what he knows, but by his diligence. Yaakov was not content to know the Torah. Rather, he sat in his tent and toiled to reach greater and greater heights.

(Quoted in Oztrotaihem Shel Tzaddikim)

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives are available starting with Rosh HaShanah 5758 (1997) at [www.torah.org/learning/hamaayan/](http://www.torah.org/learning/hamaayan/) . Text archives from 1990 through the present are available at [www.acoast.com/~seh/hamaayan/](http://www.acoast.com/~seh/hamaayan/) . Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible. Torah.org: The Judaism Site <http://www.torah.org/> Project Genesis, Inc. 122 Slade Avenue, Suite 250 Baltimore, MD 21208

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From: Yeshivat Har Etzion Office [office@etzion.org.il] Sent: November 10, 2004 To: yhe-parsha@etzion.org.il Subject: PARSHA65 - 06: Parashat Toldot YESHIVAT HAR ETZION ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM) PARASHAT HASHAVUA

This parasha series is dedicated in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha65/06-65toldot.htm>

In memory of Chana Friedman z"l (Chana bat Yaakov u- Devorah) on her ninth yearzeit.

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## ESAV'S MERIT

BY RAV YAAKOV MEDAN

**WAS YITZCHAK WRONG?** A straightforward reading of the Biblical text indicates that Yitzchak was mistaken in his identification of the chosen son. However, there is a problem with this reading. The blessing that Yitzchak sought to give his chosen son does not include the essentials of chosenness that were later bestowed explicitly upon Yaakov – and not as a result of any deception: "May the Almighty G-d bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be a multitude of nations. And may He give you the blessing of Avraham – to you and your descendants with you, to possess the land of your sojournings, which G-d gave to Avraham." (28:3-4) Only this blessing makes mention of the desirable land that G-d will give as a possession, while the blessing that Yitzchak meant to give Esav mentions only a good land and kingship. We cannot maintain that Yitzchak saw Esav as the chosen son in every sense, for Yitzchak certainly must have known that Esav violated the holy covenant – the covenant of circumcision. By marrying Canaanite wives, daughters of the foreign peoples living in the land, Esav violated the oath that Avraham's servant swore by Avraham's own circumcision: "I make you swear by the Lord G-d of the heavens and G-d of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell." (24:3) We are told explicitly that Esav violated this covenant: "Esav was forty years old when he took in marriage Yehudit the daughter of Be'er the Hittite, and Basmat the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they were a source of grief to Yitzchak and to Rivka." (26:24-25) Hence we deduce that it was a conscious decision on Yitzchak's part to withhold from Esav the Avrahamic blessing mentioned above (28:3-4). This blessing, making mention of the name Almighty G-d (E-l Sha-dai), the blessing of being fruitful and multiplying, and Eretz Yisrael, is the continuation of the covenant of circumcision, which was based on consecrated offspring and a distinction from the Canaanites: "Avram was ninety-nine years old when G-d appeared to Avram and said to him: 'I AM E-L SHA-DAI; walk before Me and be wholehearted. I shall place My covenant between Myself and you AND I SHALL MULTIPLY YOU GREATLY... AND MAKE YOU EXCEEDINGLY FRUITFUL... And I shall give you and your descendants after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession...' (17:1-8). This blessing was given knowingly and consciously to Yaakov, who was commanded by his father not to marry a Canaanite wife, but rather a woman from his family in Charan. It is Yaakov who received the land of Canaan – the holy land, G-d's inheritance. What Yitzchak wanted to give Esav was the reign over the great land – between the Nile and the Euphrates, the land in which all the descendants of Avraham lived, the land of Yishmael and Yitzchak, of Yaakov and Esav, of the children of Ketura and the children of Lot, the land of Midian, Moav, Ammon, Edom, and the Land of Canaan also [1]: "May the Lord give you of the dew of the heavens and the fatness of the earth, and much corn and wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you; may you be a lord to your brethren and may your mother's children bow down to you; may those who curse you be cursed, and those who

bless you be blessed." (27:27- 29) The division of blessings between Yaakov and Esav was supposed to resemble the division of destiny between the tribe of Levi and the tribes of Yehuda and Yosef. The tribe of Levi received the "inheritance of G-d;" G-d [Divine service in the Sanctuary] was their inheritance. The tribes of Yosef received the blessings of the land and its fatness, while the tribe of Yehuda received the kingship and the subjugation of the other tribes. Yitzchak did not know that which Rivka knew: the prophecy that "two peoples will separate from your bowels." He wanted to distinguish between his children like two tribes of the same nation. Rivka overturned this plan – and she did it by mistake! She adopted the path of deception because she believed – to her great surprise – that Yitzchak was about to turn Esav into the tribe favored before G-d. A closer look at the verses reveals her mistake: "It happened, when Yitzchak was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called Esav, his elder son, and said to him: 'My son,' and he said to him, 'Here I am.' He [Yitzchak] said: 'Behold, now, I have become old; I do not know the day of my death. And now, take up your weapons – your quiver and your bow – and go out to the field to hunt me some venison. And prepare me tasty food such as I like, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die.'" (27:1-4) From Rivka's words a different picture emerges: "Rivka told her son Yaakov, saying: Behold, I heard your father speaking to Esav, your brother, saying: 'Bring me venison and prepare me tasty food and I will eat, and I will bless you BEFORE GOD before I die.'" (27:6-7) Rivka believed that Yitzchak was referring to the blessing of chosenness, the blessing of being "before G-d." She had no idea that Yitzchak meant to give Esav only his own, personal blessing. Why did Rivka make this mistake? Apparently, the situation was brought about by G-d. In fact, both parents had made a mistake. What transpired was not what either of them had intended, and ultimately what prevailed was the Divine plan. \*\*\* WAS ESAV AN UNMITIGATED VILLAIN? [2]

**Part I**  
A. Our parasha is somewhat opaque, offering no acceptable explanation for why G-d chose Yaakov while rejecting Esav. Is it possible that Esav lost a glorious destiny just because of his gluttony when it came to the meal of pottage and his momentary scorn for the birthright? To some extent, it appears from the sources that the rejection of Esav was a Divine decree, unrelated to his behavior. In our haftara, the prophet Malakhi teaches: "You say, 'In what [way] have You loved us?' 'Was not Esav a brother to Yaakov?' says G-d. 'Yet I loved Yaakov....'" (1:2) G-d promises Rivka that, from the very womb, Yaakov has been chosen and Esav rejected: "The one nation will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger." (25:23)

B. Though the Biblical text does not clearly indicate the reason for the rejection of Esav, all the midrashim insist that Esav was rejected because of his evil actions. On the same day that he scorned the birthright, he also murdered, had relations with a girl who was betrothed, and served idols (according to Bereishit Rabba). Yet, one could question the midrash, the destinies of both were settled before their birth! This is solved by Chazal through a midrash teaching that even while still in the womb, Yaakov would become agitated and seek to emerge whenever his mother walked by a beit midrash, while Esav wanted to visit a temple of idolatry – and this was the reason for their unceasing agitation within the womb. But despite their "hostility" towards Esav, Chazal zealously protect Esav's merit in connection with two mitzvot: settling Eretz Yisrael (while Yaakov lived in Padan-Aram) and honoring his father. I shall focus here on the second issue.

C. Chazal mention Esav's merit in this regard in many midrashim, and teach that the prohibitions against hating the Edomites and against conquering the land of Edom arise from this merit in Esav's favor [3]. One such midrash teaches: "R. Nechunia taught in the name of R. Tanchum bar Yudan: Who caused Yaakov's honor to be withheld in this world? The great honor that Esav showed for his father... Esav said: 'My father is worthy of using royal garments.'" (Pesikta Rabati 23) For what reason did Chazal, who were so insistent as to

Esav's many sins, elaborate in this way on his merit in honoring his father? Was the fact that he brought his father venison and prepared tasty food for him so great in their eyes? It may be so, but in light of current events we may suggest a different understanding.

D. Our parasha reveals two outstanding characteristics of Esav: 1. Esav is determined to receive his father's blessing and the desirable land promised to Avraham and to Yitzchak. He is prepared to do anything to earn this, and weeps bitterly when he loses it. 2. Owing to his occupation and his personality ("admoni" – fiery, hot tempered), killing comes easily to Esav. The Torah calls him a "valiant hunter" (like Nimrod, who was certainly a man of war, hunting people and murdering them); he went about with a band of four hundred fighters who occupied themselves and made their living in this way. His father's blessing – "by your sword shall you live" – likewise reflects this trait. We may add that Esav appears to have been unaware of the prophecy told to his mother concerning himself and his brother Yaakov, nor is there any sign that he ever found out that it was Rivka who had coaxed Yaakov into tricking Yitzchak. He believed that his brother had come deceitfully on his own initiative. If we add to this his two major character traits, his plan to kill Yaakov is quite natural and, in fact, almost obvious.

E. Despite the obvious reasons for wanting to kill Yaakov, Esav conquers his murderous urges for one single reason: he does not want to cause anguish to his father. "The days of mourning for my father will approach, and [afterwards] I will kill my brother Yaakov." (27:41) He will do this only after his father's death, despite the spirit of vengeance that burns inside him.

F. In order to understand Esav's greatness in this regard, and the strength that it took to suppress his vengeful, hateful and murderous inclination, let us compare his behavior with that of Yaakov's sons, several decades later. The brothers hate Yosef and are jealous of him; to a large extent, their feelings are understandable and perhaps even excusable. After all, Yosef speaks badly of them to their father, causing Yaakov – in their (mistaken!) understanding – to love them less than he does Yosef. The hatred of some of the brothers for Yosef is so great that they even find justifications for killing him – or at least for selling him. The commentaries of the Rishonim (especially the Ba'alei ha-Tosafot) are filled with the legal arguments that they used: Yosef was, to their view, a "pursuer" [i.e., he was a real threat to their lives]; he was trying to make himself into a god ("Behold – the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me"). Their conniving against and abuse of their brother was a most severe transgression, and it is interesting, therefore, that the textual criticism of them (excluding the specific criticism of Reuven) focuses largely on one single element:

"How shall I go up to my father, while the boy is not with me – lest I see the anguish that will befall my father." (33:31) This anguished cry appears at the climax of the process of repentance undergone by Yehuda and his brothers. It concerns not the injustice caused to Yosef, or the injustice that was seemingly about to happen with the handing over of Binyamin. The anguish deals with a different injustice – that caused to their elderly father. The crux of the brothers' regret, and Yehuda's separation from the rest of the brothers, arises from the mourning of the elderly father who refuses to be consoled over the disappearance of his beloved son. Esav succeeded in conquering his hatred in order not to break his father's heart, while Yaakov's sons were not successful in this test. Esav's merit in this regard exceeds that of Bnei Yisrael.

G. When Yaakov returns to Canaan from Padan-Aram, he is afraid of Esav and prays broken-heartedly to G-d. He sends Esav an offering and bows seven times before him – for which he is criticized by Chazal (e.g., Bereishit Rabba 75:3). Chazal are certain that Esav did not intend to kill Yaakov. How do they know this? When Yaakov returned, Yitzchak was still alive. Yaakov underestimated the power of Esav's honor for his father. Even Rivka underestimated it, sending Yaakov off – WRONGFULLY – to twenty years of hard exile with Lavan. They were not aware that ESAV WOULD NOT BREAK HIS FATHER'S HEART. Yitzchak dies close to the time when Yosef ascends to greatness in Egypt, and a few years later Yaakov goes down to Egypt – under the patronage of the Egyptian viceroy. It is perhaps for this reason that Esav does not manage to fulfill his plan.

Part II

A. Many people have questioned my above conclusion: Is it indeed praiseworthy that someone refrains from killing his brother – no matter how profound the animosity between them? Can a civilized and G-d-fearing person admire someone who, after losing his birthright, refrains (temporarily!) from such a barbaric act as murder in general – and of his brother, in particular? How can we justify a person who takes up a sword, whatever his reasons? I maintain that the midrashim that discuss Esav's merit and his reward, weigh up his merit for honoring his father against his great liability for his acts of murder, demonstrating to us how the mitzva of honoring his father can prevent the transgression of "You shall not murder." For it is a

fact: it was out of his respect and consideration for Yitzchak that Esav refrained from killing Yaakov – and this represents a situation of "one mitzva drawing another mitzva after it." This does not mean to turn Esav into a tzaddik, a righteous man. Esav remains a wicked person because of his evil acts, which included much bloodshed, but it does award this evil person an important point in his merit, bringing about (according to the midrash) the burial of Esav's head in Me'arat ha-Makhpela. If his entire merit was based on serving food to his father, I do not believe that it would be awarded such weight in Chazal's teachings. Let me emphasize once again: there was not a moment in Esav's life when his honor for his father was more likely to reach its lowest point than the moment when it became clear to him that he had lost the blessing – the reward for honoring his father, which he had so keenly awaited. On the other hand, in my view there was no moment when his lack of restraint and his inclination to murder were as powerful as they were when he sought revenge on Yaakov for stealing his blessing. This was a MOMENT OF GENUINE TEST, when our natural expectation from someone like Esav would be that he would follow the path of bloodshed, to which he was so accustomed, and trample the mitzva of honoring his father – to which he was likewise accustomed. Despite this, at the crucial moment, the mitzva prevailed over the sin, drawing in its wake the fulfillment of the mitzvah, "You shall not murder." Esav's honoring of his father led him to refrain from bloodshed. This was not a "mitzva that comes about by means of a transgression," but rather a mitzva that prevented a transgression. His reward for this is even greater!

B. In order to clarify my position, I shall take an example from a less sensitive sphere. Let us attribute to Esav's honor for his father not only the mitzva of "You shall not murder," but also the mitzva "You shall not commit adultery." In the midrash quoted previously, concerning Esav's five major transgressions committed on the day he sold the birthright, we are told that Esav not only spilled blood but also had relations with a girl who was betrothed to another man. Indeed, taking this idea further, the midrash teaches: "Throughout these forty years, Esav used to kidnap women from their husbands and rape them" (Bereishit Rabba 85, 1). However, upon reaching the age of forty, he marries wives – just as Yitzchak was married at the age of forty. We may scorn Esav for cheap imitation of his father, and interpret his actions as hypocrisy. Indeed, this is the line adopted by the midrash, which compares Esav to a pig that stretches forth its hooves as if to say, "See – I am kosher!" The midrash perceives an absolute contradiction between Esav's licentiousness in his sexual relations and his imitation of his father, and Chazal condemn him for it. But I believe that, at least in spirit, this particular midrash contradicts those midrashim that praise Esav for the honor he shows his father. If the midrash praises Esav for honoring his father, then it would not mock an external show of this behavior – such as marrying his wives at the age of forty. Let us attempt, therefore, to analyze the facts of this midrash in a different way. Esav is a lawless kidnapper of women so long as he is a bachelor, free of any family responsibilities. But at the age of forty, he assumes family responsibilities, and from that time onwards his wives rein him in – at least partially – since it is the nature of married life to temper unrestrained licentiousness. And he assumes this yoke out of identification with his father. At the end of the section, Esav sees that the Canaanite women are evil in Yitzchak's eyes, and he goes and takes a wife from among the Yishmaelite women. Again, Rashi and the midrash treat him with contempt: "Because of his wives' – he added another evil deed onto his former evildoing," but Seforno praises him, because according to the text, here again Esav sought to honor his father. Any evil inherent in this deed certainly cannot be greater than his merit. The women that he married in the beginning were Canaanite idolaters. They did not honor his mother. There is certainly room for doubt as to whether the Yishmaelite woman was a great saint. And Esav did not divorce his first wives. It would certainly be difficult to compare Esav to the great penitent Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya – but can we not detect some aspect of repair, some "tikkun," in the fact that he marries at the age of forty, and that he marries a Yishmaelite woman after Yaakov flees? Once again – if this represents any kind of merit, then we cannot ignore yet another aspect of Esav's "kibbud av" (honor for his father).

D. Esav is definitely more evil than righteous, but he is not altogether devoid of merit and we cannot ignore the weight of his merits. Still, we are troubled by the question: how could the household of Avraham, the personification of kindness, give rise to a murderer? The acuteness of this question arises, to my mind, from the exegetical approach prevalent in the Torah world, which perceives Avraham's tent as a beit midrash, where Eliezer sits as the Rosh Yeshiva and passes on his master's teachings to the disciples. The tent is open on all four sides, and all wayfarers are invited to enter, to eat and drink, and to bless G-d's Name. At the same time, Avraham is calling G-d's name, praying for the rehabilitation of the evil Sedom: in his abundant

love and kindness, he is unable to sit by and watch the destruction of even the most wicked people. How can a grandson like Esav, who has grown up in a home of Torah and prayer, kindness and boundless love, come to hate people and to spill their blood? In other words, Yitzchak's home – which must clearly have been a beit midrash, like his father's home – a home that was filled with the holy fire of self-sacrifice and fear of heaven, a fire with its source in the flames upon the altar on Mount Moria, a home where the blind Yitzchak, cut off from reality, would sit and commune with His Creator and with His ministering angels – how could this background give rise to a murderer such as Esav?

E. The above assumptions concerning the respective homes of Avraham and Yitzchak, and the concepts which, to my mind, form the basis of the biblical approach familiar to all of us, are certainly true. They represent a great and illuminating truth – but, to my mind, not the whole truth. The image of Avraham as welcoming guests and praying on behalf of the wicked men of Sedom is taken from a single day in his life. Although we may assume that this day is meant to teach us about his conduct in general, there is still room to examine other aspects of Avraham's life. In fact, we may question whether Avraham himself did not spill much blood. In his daring raid, at the head of his three hundred and eighteen men, on the camp of Kedarla'omer, Avraham slew all at once the armies of four great kings. We have previously discussed the obvious parallel between Avraham in this battle and Gidon: the elements that are similar include the size of the army (Gidon's force numbered three hundred), the strategy (splitting up into several parties at night and then launching a sudden attack on an enemy camp that is fast asleep), and the goals (one of Gidon's goals, as borne out at the end of the battle, was to save his brethren who had been captured by the Midianites, while Avraham intended to save his "brother" Lot). Gidon killed one hundred and twenty thousand men on the same night, and this number may give us some idea of how much blood was spilled by Esav's grandfather – none other than Avraham. What was Avraham fighting for? For what purpose did he multiply the widows in Shinar and the orphans in Alsar? The answer provided by the text is extremely concise: he intended only to save Lot from captivity.

F. Let us return to Esav. We could make our task easier and absolve ourselves of the need for profound thought and precise distinctions by casting Esav as a mobster – a person who kills for pleasure, or for the purposes of his personal business. The differences between himself and Avraham, his grandfather, will be great, and we will be faced not with the difficult question of what differentiates them from one another, but rather with the (psychologically) easier question of how an Esav could arise from the home of an Avraham. But if Esav was a rotten murderer from the start, how are we to explain Yitzchak's love for him? Was Yitzchak so completely cut off from his surroundings? Was he blind from the day that Esav was born? Can we imagine a blind father who is so acutely out of touch with his son? Why did Rivka not report Yitzchak's son's doings?

G. To my mind, the red-haired Esav did not grow up as a MURDERER. He grew up as a WARRIOR. He took with him into battle the brave spirit and military heritage of his grandfather Avraham, and the band of fighters that he commanded was only slightly greater than that headed by Avraham: he had 400 men as opposed to Avraham's 318. Chazal connect Esav's bravery in hunting to that of Nimrod, the valiant hunter. The literal text regarding Nimrod would seem to refer to bravery in battle and hunting of men, and therefore Nimrod – the valiant hunter – became the king of Bavel. After all, a hunter of animals does not become king. It is precisely for this reason that Yitzchak loves Esav. The blind Yitzchak, sitting in his tent and communing with the Shekhina, is not the only Yitzchak that we know. Yitzchak was a "man of the field," who held onto his land tenaciously, sowed it and reaped a hundred-fold. He achieved this in the Negev region during a drought (Rashi on 26:12)! Yitzchak owned much property and vast flocks – to the extent that the king of Gerar told him, "Go away from us, for you have become far greater than us." Owing to his extensive property and his stubborn attachment to the land [4], Yitzchak earned himself many enemies. In contrast to Avraham, Yitzchak's solitary nature did not allow him to lead an army of soldiers. It is for this reason that Yitzchak pursued relentlessly on account of his first wells, and he is forced to withdraw and to move from place to place. Yitzchak withdrew from Gerar, from Esek and from Sitna. When he came to R he no longer suffered any harassment. We may attribute this to the distance between Rechovot and the inhabited center of the land of the Philistines, or to some other explanation. Yet it is possible that between the time of his banishment from the original wells and Yitzchak's resettlement in Rechovot, Esav grew up and became a valiant warrior, who gathered a band of fighters around him, such that the Philistines no longer dared to torment him. It is reasonable to assume that even after Yitzchak settled in Rechovot, in the Negev, he was open to raids by lawless desert bandits. It seems that here, too, Esav was required to rely on his

sword and bow, and not just to hunt for food. A covenant of blood was forged between Yitzchak – a man of the field, the land and hard labor – and his son Esav, who maintained his legion on Yitzchak's land, with its wells and the flocks grazing in the wilderness. It was a covenant between the scythe and the sword, between the farmer and the guard. Because of these qualities in Esav, Yitzchak wanted to eventually bestow the kingship upon him, since "a king is appointed in order to effect justice and to wage war." When the plan was thwarted, his blessing to Esav was, "You shall live by the sword, and you shall serve your brother." Yaakov was to be the lord of the land, while Esav and his army would be the mercenaries who would protect it [5].

H. It is the Esav who plots to kill Yaakov, who gives rise to the midrashic image of Esav the murderer, the spiller of blood – an image that, to my mind, is as far removed from the literal text as a soldier from a murderer. And since we can neither abandon the literal text nor ignore the image depicted by the midrash, we seem to have no choice but to describe a character comprised of both sides of the sword: defensive war on the one hand, and murder on the other. In practice, it is not at all difficult to describe such a character. A man who raises his sword in war will soon become accustomed to the smell of blood. He is likely even to become used to the terrible sight of a living person turning into a lifeless corpse as a result of his own blow; he may well habituate his ears to the weeping of widows and the cry of orphans – at that moment losing the distinction between good and evil; between cruel necessity and killing that is only ALMOST a necessity: KILLING THAT AMOUNTS TO MURDER. After all, so great a soldier as Yoav, who devoted his entire life to saving Israel and killing their enemies, ultimately stumbled and committed several acts of murder (Avner, Amassa, and perhaps Avshalom and Uria), for which he was held accountable.

I. Esav was nothing like Yoav. The murders committed by Yoav were failures that resulted from his habituation to the sword, the battlefield, and the delicate line dividing life and death. He felt his acts of murder had viable legal justification. He paid their price in being put to death at Shelomo's command, but he died in G-d's house. In the Gemara in Sanhedrin and in all the midrashim, Chazal regard him as destined for life in the World to Come. Nowhere is he called "the wicked Yoav." Esav, in contrast, is "the wicked Esav." Chazal do not regard him as a person who stumbles in isolated acts of killing based on halakhic justifications, but rather consider him a person who started out as a defending warrior and then deteriorated from killing desert bandits to killing personal adversaries and the husbands of women that he desired for himself, etc. Perhaps this moral decline took place only after Yitzchak lost his sight. This, then, was the dividing line between what Yitzchak knew – that Esav was a fighter who had inherited his traits from Avraham, and what Yitzchak did not know – that Esav had crossed the boundary between the permissible and the prohibited. Esav probably asked Yitzchak questions concerning the laws of warfare – whom he was permitted to kill and whom he must refrain from killing – and it is perhaps to this that Chazal refer when they describe Esav asking about tithing straw and salt. But he eventually followed the path of other fighting bands, who deteriorated because of their might and their success in performing whatever deeds they chose, while their natural, moral sensitivity to blood gradually disappeared. Still, we must ask: can we really judge a warrior, whose sensitivity to blood is dulled as a result of his occupation, by the same standards that we apply to a person who sits engaged in study in the beit midrash?

J. The key to answering to our last question lies with Esav's biblical "double" – none other than King David. Like Esav, he too was a red-haired hunter, who killed a lion and a bear with his bare hands. Like Esav, he gathered a band of four hundred embittered fighters under his leadership, and went off with them to the northern Negev in order to engage the desert bandits in battle. Like Esav, who managed to paint a deceptive picture of himself in the eyes of his father, David deceived Akhish, king of Gat, not telling him of the massacre that he had wrought among the Gizrites and Geshurites, inhabitants of the land. Like Esav, the man of the sword who protected his father, a man of the land – David, too, forged a covenant with the people of Yehuda who dwelled in the Kenite and Yerachmielite Negev, to protect their fields and their flocks. He lived by the sword, and that was how he made his living. Like Esav, picked out by his father for kingship ("You shall be a lord to your brethren..."), David was anointed for kingship by Shemuel. Like Esav, who lost his right to rule when he exchanged the sword of defensive battle for the sword of the murderer, David ALMOST lost his right to rule – but only "almost." Here we come to that most common mistake in the beit midrash: judging biblical characters as though they were students in a beit midrash all their lives. David was engaged in warfare his whole life. On two occasions, he nearly crossed the line to murder, but turned back at the last moment. David fully intended to murder Shaul in the cave at Ein Gedi; he crawled over to Shaul in the dark and lifted his

sword against him. Only after he lifted the sword, did he decide to lower it and to limit himself to cutting off a corner of his cloak (and even for this he suffered remorse). He did not reproach his men initially for their advice that he kill Shaul; he rebuked them only after listening to their advice and then reconsidering. He decisively rejected murder, but only after coming perilously close to committing it. Likewise, in a later incident, David set off in great anger intending to slaying every male in the house of Naval the Carmelite – all because of food that he had been refused. Because of a broth of pottage, David was prepared to kill. But while his sword was still raised in the air, Avigayil succeeded in rebuking him over needless bloodshed – and David returned his sword to its sheath. My heart tells me that it is precisely David's standing up to these difficult tests that gave him the merit to prevent a future slaughter. During the terrible plague when David saw the angel of G-d at the threshing floor of Ornan the Yevusite, standing between earth and the heavens, his sword in his hand outstretched towards Jerusalem, G-d heard David's prayer. There we are told, "G-d commanded the angel – and he returned his sword to its sheath" (Divrei ha-Yamim I 21:27).

K. Let us return to our question: are we to judge the killing perpetrated by a warrior by the same moral standards that we apply to a civilian? The answer is dual: certainly we do not, and certainly we do. There is no doubt that the fighter's habituation to the sword and his lack of sensitivity to bloodshed may bring him very quickly to lift up his sword. In modern terms, he may place his opponent in his sights, insert a magazine, ready his weapon – and even open the safety catch. But it is specifically the awareness and responsibility that he is supposed to have, because he bears arms, that should serve as the brakes, telling him at the last moment – "Do not put forth your hand towards the boy and do not do anything to him." Or in our terms – although you have opened the safety catch, don't pull the trigger. A peaceful civilian, a person engaged in Torah study, will loathe, from the very outset, the idea of inserting a magazine into the weapon. Not so David and Esav. Both are red-headed. Both are hardened, embittered fighters. Both command bands of fighters who live by their swords, who require a cruel and decisive leader. Both lift their sword against people who are borderline candidates for halakhic justification to be put to death. David returns his sword to its sheath and is rewarded with kingship. Esav uses his sword to kill his opponents. From here he descends to killings that are not borderline cases for a justified death sentence, and instead of kingship he is told, "You will live by your sword – and you will serve your brother." It is a very fine line that separates the sword of a mitzva from the sword of a murderer. But woe to the person who crosses this line.

L. On one occasion, Esav the red-head did have the merit of resembling King David. The valiant fighter indeed became, for just one moment, a true hero, who conquered his evil inclination. The "conqueror of the city" became the master of his own spirit. The man whose hand never let go of his sword discovered the secret of its boundaries. FOR ONE MOMENT, the murderer once again – RIGHTFULLY – assumed the features of a fighter in defense. This was when Esav lifted his sword against his competitor, the one who stole his blessing, his birthright and his future – Yaakov – but returned it to its sheath out of honor for his father. No moral consideration, in my eyes, can take this merit away from Esav. This merit was greater than that of the brothers, the tribes of G-d, in their conflict with Yosef. It was a moment in which Esav was truly worthy of the kingship that his father had wanted to bestow upon him. Esav was indeed awarded this kingship when the king of Yehuda, Yehoram ben Yehoshafat, the eldest son, killed all his brothers in order to become king (Divrei ha-Yamim II 21). Then Edom revolted, and appointed themselves a king. He was awarded kingship again when the two sons of Shlomo – Hyrkanus and Aristobulus – fought over the kingdom and were ready to kill one another. At that time, the merit of Esav – who had refrained from killing his brother, in similar circumstances – stood firm for his descendants. And it was then that Antipater and Herod inherited the royal throne of Israel – may it be rebuilt and restored speedily in our days, Amen. NOTES:

This shiur is abridged from the Hebrew original. The full shiur can be accessed in the original at: <http://www.etzion.org.il/vbm/parsha.php>. [1] See last week's shiur on the children of Ketura. [2] What appears here is my part in a written debate that took place several years ago. To read the entire debate, see "Daf Keshet," vols. 522, 525, 526 and 528, archived online at <http://www.etzion.org.il/dk/1to899/522daf.htm> (follow the links at the end of the article). [3] See, for example, Bereishit Rabba 76, Devarim Rabba 1, Tanchuma Kedoshim 15, and many other sources. In short – search the Bar-Ilan Responsa project CD. [4] Avraham, in contrast, was a wandering shepherd who did not hold any land. Yaakov was similar to Avraham in this respect. [5] I first heard the idea of a covenant between Yitzchak and Esav on this basis from Rav Yoel bin-Nun. In the years following his original article, Rav bin-Nun wrote

about it at greater length in his book, "Pirkei ha- Avot." Translated by Kaeren Fish

Comments regarding this shiur may be sent to [Parsha@etzion.org.il](mailto:Parsha@etzion.org.il).  
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Covenant & Conversation

Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from

RABBI DR. JONATHAN SACKS

Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth

[from 2 years ago]

Toldot Between Prophecy and Oracle

Rachel, hitherto infertile, became pregnant. Suffering acute pain, "she went to inquire of the Lord" [vatelekh lidrosh et Hashem] (Bereishith 25:22). The explanation she received was that she was carrying twins who were contending in her womb. They were destined to do so long into the future:

Two nations are in your womb, And two peoples from within you will be separated; One people will be stronger than the other, And the older will serve the younger [ve-rav ya'avod tsa'ir]. (Bereishith 25: 23)

Eventually the twins are born - first Esau, then (his hand grasping his brother's heel) Jacob. Mindful of the prophecy she has received, Rebekah favours the younger son, Jacob. Years later, she persuades him to dress in Esau's clothes and take the blessing Isaac intended to give his elder son. One verse of that blessing was "May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you." (Bereishith 26:29) The prediction has been fulfilled. Isaac's blessing can surely mean nothing less than what was disclosed to Rebekah before either child was born, namely that "the older will serve the younger." The story has apparently reached closure, or so, at this stage, it seems.

But biblical narrative is not what it seems. Two events follow which subvert all that we had been led to expect. The first happens when Esau arrives and discovers that Jacob has cheated him out of his blessing. Moved by his anguish, Isaac gives him a benediction, one of whose clauses is:

You will live by your sword And you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, You will throw his yoke from off your neck. (Bereishith 27: 40)

This is not what we had anticipated. The older will not serve the younger in perpetuity.

The second scene, many years later, occurs when the brothers meet after a long estrangement. Jacob is terrified of the encounter. He had fled from home years earlier because Esau had vowed to kill him. Only after a long series of preparations and a lonely wrestling match at night is he able to face Esau with some composure. He bows down to him seven times.

Seven times he calls him "my lord." Five times he refers to himself as "your servant." The roles have been reversed. Esau does not become the servant of Jacob. Instead, Jacob speaks of himself as the servant of Esau. But this cannot be. The words heard by Rebekah when "she went to inquire of the Lord" suggested precisely the opposite, that "the older will serve the younger." We are faced with cognitive dissonance.

More precisely, we have here an example of one of the most remarkable of all the Torah's narrative devices - the power of the future to transform our understanding of the past. This is the essence of midrash. New situations retrospectively disclose new meanings in the text (see the essay 'The Midrashic Imagination'). The present is never fully determined by the present. Sometimes it is only later that we understand now.

This is the significance of the great revelation of G-d to Moses in Shemot 33:33, where G-d says that only His back may be seen - meaning, His presence can be seen only when we look back at the past; it can never be known or predicted in advance. The indeterminacy of meaning at any given moment is what gives the biblical text its openness to ongoing interpretation.

We now see that this was not an idea invented by the sages. It already exists in the Torah itself. The words Rebekah heard - as will now become clear - seemed to mean one thing at the time. It later transpires that they meant something else.

The words ve-rav yaavod tsair seem simple: "the older will serve the younger." Returning to them in the light of subsequent events, though, we discover that they are anything but clear. They contain multiple ambiguities.

The first (noted by Radak and R. Yosef ibn Kaspi) is that the word et, signalling the object of the verb, is missing. Normally in biblical Hebrew the subject precedes, and the object follows, the verb, but not always. In Job 14:19 for example, the words avanim shachaku mayim mean "water wears away stones," not "stones wear away water." Thus the phrase might mean "the older shall serve the younger" but it might also mean "the younger shall serve the older". To be sure, the latter would be poetic Hebrew rather than conventional prose style, but that is what this utterance is: a poem.

The second is that rav and tsa'ir are not opposites, a fact disguised by the English translation of rav as "older." The opposite of tsa'ir ("younger") is bechir ("older" or "firstborn"). Rav does not mean "older." It means "great" or possibly "chief." This linking together of two terms as if they were polar opposites, which they are not - the opposites would have been bechir/tsa'ir or rav/me'at - further destabilises the meaning. Who was the rav? The elder? The leader? The chief? The more numerous? The word might mean any of these things.

The third - not part of the text but of later tradition - is the musical notation. The normal way of notating these three words would be mercha-tipcha-sof pasuk. This would support the reading, "the older shall serve the younger." In fact, however, they are notated tipcha-mercha-sof pasuk - suggesting, "the older, shall the younger serve"; in other words, "the younger shall serve the older."

A later episode adds a yet another retrospective element of doubt. There is a second instance in Bereishith of the birth of twins, to Tamar (Bereishith 38:27-30). The passage is clearly reminiscent of the story of Esau and Jacob:

When her time was come, there were twins in her womb, and while she was in labour one of them put out a hand. The midwife took a scarlet thread and fastened it round the wrist, saying, "This one appeared first." No sooner had he drawn back his hand, than his brother came out, and the midwife said, "What! You have broken out first!" So he was named Perez. Soon afterwards his brother was born with the scarlet thread on his wrist, and he was named Zerah.

Who then was the elder? And what does this imply in the case of Esau and Jacob? (See Rashi to 25: 26 who suggests that Jacob was in fact the elder.) These multiple ambiguities are not accidental but integral to the text. The subtlety is such, that we do not notice them at first. Only later, when the narrative does not turn out as expected, are we forced to go back and notice what at first we missed: that the words Rebekah heard may mean "the older will serve the younger" or "the younger will serve the older."

A number of things now become clear. The first is that this is a rare example in the Torah of an oracle as opposed to a prophecy (this is the probable meaning of the word chidot in Bamidbar 12: 8, speaking about Moses: "With him I speak mouth to mouth, openly and not in chidot" -- usually translated as "dark speeches" or "riddles"). Oracles - a familiar form of supernatural communication in the ancient world - were normally obscure and cryptic, unlike the normal form of Israelite

prophecy. This may well be the technical meaning of the phrase "she went to inquire of the Lord" which puzzled the medieval commentators. The second - and this is fundamental to an understanding of Bereishith - is that the future is never as straightforward as we are led to believe. Abraham is promised many children but has to wait years before Isaac is born. The patriarchs are promised a land but do not acquire it in their lifetimes. The Jewish journey, though it has a destination, is long and has many digressions and setbacks. Will Jacob serve or be served? We do not know. Only after a long, enigmatic struggle alone at night does Jacob receive the name Israel meaning, "he who struggles with G-d and with men and prevails."

The most important message of this text is both literary and theological. The future affects our understanding of the past. We are part of a story whose last chapter has not yet been written. That rests with us, as it rested with Jacob.