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To: parsha@groups.io
From: Chaim Shulman <cshulman@gmail.com>

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Adapted from
Chiddushei HaGri"z al HaTorah by Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rav (1886-1959)

ביצחק ולא כל יצחק- When Was Yaakov Chosen?

Before Yaakov leaves for Lavan's house, Yitzchak calls him in one more time: ויקרא יצחק אל יעקב ויברך אתו ויצוהו ויאמר לו לא תקח אשה מבנות כנען - *Yitzchak called Yaakov and blessed him and commanded him, and said to him, do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan* (Toldos 28:1). Then he blesses him: והיית לקהל עמים ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם לך ולזרעך אתך - *may you become a congregation of nations, and may He give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and to your children with you* (Toldos 28:3-4).

What is difficult to understand is how these two things fit together. Yitzchak tells Yaakov not to marry a girl from Canaan, and at the same time he gives him the blessing of Avraham. What does one have to do with the other? What is also difficult is why Yaakov needs a new beracha at all. He already received Yitzchak's berachos earlier in the parsha. And a few pesukim later the Torah connects the two again, when it tells us that Esav saw that when Yitzchak blessed Yaakov, he commanded him not to take a wife from Canaan. The Torah treats the beracha and the command as one thing. Why?

The Rambam and the Gemara

To understand this we first need to look at a question Rav Chaim Brisker zt"l asked on the Rambam. The Rambam (Hilchos Melachim 10:7) discusses who is obligated in bris milah. The mitzvah was given to Avraham and his children, and the Rambam says that the children of Yishmael are not included, because the pasuk says כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע - *through Yitzchak will your children be called* (Vayeira 21:12). The children of Esav are also not included, because Yitzchak told Yaakov ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם לך ולזרעך, which shows that only Yaakov is *zera Avraham*, Avraham's child.

What is difficult to understand is that the Gemara (Nedarim 31a, Sanhedrin 59b) learns that Esav is excluded from a different pasuk. The Gemara reads כי ביצחק very carefully: ביצחק ולא כל יצחק - *through Yitzchak, but not all of Yitzchak*. The pasuk does not say that Yitzchak and all his children will be called Avraham's children. It says *through* Yitzchak, which means only some of Yitzchak's children. So the Gemara already has a pasuk that excludes Esav. Why does the Rambam need a different one?

Rav Chaim answered that the Rambam needs both pesukim. The pasuk of ביצחק ולא כל יצחק tells us that not all of Yitzchak's children count as Avraham's children. Without it we would have said that all of them count. But it does not tell us which one counts. Yitzchak had two sons, Yaakov and Esav, and from this pasuk alone we cannot know which one is *zera Avraham*. That is why the Rambam brings the second pasuk, ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם. This pasuk tells us that Yaakov is the one who received the blessing of Avraham, and not Esav. One pasuk tells us that only one of Yitzchak's sons counts, and the other tells us which one.

The Choice Was Made at That Moment

If this is correct, then it comes out that until Yitzchak blessed Yaakov here, it was not yet decided who would be *zera Avraham*. It was still open, תלוי ועומד. Only now, with this beracha, was it decided that כי יעקב בחר לו ה' - *Hashem chose Yaakov for Himself* (Tehillim 135:4), and only now did it become clear that Yaakov is the one about whom it says כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע.

This fits in nicely with the Rambam's own words. The Rambam says that the pasuk shows מכלל שהוא לבדו זרעו של אברהם המחזיק בדתו ובדרכו הישרה - *that only he is the child of Avraham who holds on to his faith and his straight path*. The Rambam does not say that Yaakov is Avraham's child just because he was born to Yitzchak. He says that Avraham's child is the one who keeps Avraham's faith and follows Avraham's way. That was not decided when they were born. It depended on which son would follow in Avraham's path.

Malachi and Sefer Yehoshua

This explains the pesukim at the beginning of Malachi: אהבתי אתכם אמר ה' ואמרתם במה אהבתנו הלוא אח עשו ליעקב נאם ה' ואהב את יעקב ואת עשו

שנאתי - *I have loved you, says Hashem, and you say, how have You loved us? Is Esav not Yaakov's brother, says Hashem, and I loved Yaakov and Esav I hated* (Malachi 1:2-3). The navi is saying that Yaakov and Esav really were brothers. Both were sons of Yitzchak, and both could have received the blessing of Avraham. They were not like the children of Yishmael and Ketura, who were never part of the bris at all, since Hashem told Avraham ואת בריתי אקים את יצחק - *My covenant I will keep with Yitzchak* (Lech Lecha 17:21). Esav was pushed out only later, when Hashem chose Yaakov over him. That is what the navi means when he says ואהב את יעקב ואת עשו שנאתי.

The same idea is found in Sefer Yehoshua. When the navi speaks about Avraham, he says וארבה את זרעו ואתן לו את יצחק - *I made his children many, and I gave him Yitzchak* (Yehoshua 24:3). Yishmael is not even mentioned, because once Yitzchak was born, Yishmael was out. But when the navi speaks about Yitzchak, he says ואתן ליצחק את יעקב ואת עשו - *I gave Yitzchak Yaakov and Esav* (Yehoshua 24:4). Here Esav is mentioned together with Yaakov, because at first the two of them were equal. Only afterward does the pasuk say ואתן לעשו את הר שעיר לרשת אותו ויעקב ובניו ירדו מצרים - *I gave Esav Mount Seir to inherit, and Yaakov and his sons went down to Egypt*. Esav got his own land and never had to be a stranger anywhere. Yaakov and his sons went down to Mitzrayim, because only they were chosen to carry on the bris, and the promise to Avraham כי גר יהיה זרעך - *your children will be strangers* (Lech Lecha 15:13) came true only through them.

Back to Our Parsha

So now we can understand our parsha. When Yitzchak called Yaakov and sent him to Paddan Aram, that was the moment Yaakov was chosen to be *zera Avraham*. This explains why Yitzchak told him now, and not before, לא תקח אשה מבנות כנען. Yaakov was going to carry on Avraham's bris and Avraham's way, and he needed a wife who could help him do that. Such a wife could not come from the daughters of Canaan.

This also explains why Yitzchak goes on to say והיית לקהל עמים, which Onkelos translates ותהא לכנשת שבטין - *you will be a gathering of tribes*, because the shevatim would come from Yaakov. And it explains why Yitzchak continues ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם, because Yaakov is now the one about whom it says כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע, in every way. The command not to marry a girl from Canaan and the blessing of Avraham are not two separate things. They both come from the same fact, that this is the moment Yaakov became Avraham's heir.

One Last Thought

This also explains the pasuk a little later: וירא עשו כי ברך יצחק את יעקב ושלח אתו פדנה ארם לקחת לו משם אשה בברכו אתו ויצו עליו לאמר לא תקח אשה מבנות כנען - *Esav saw that Yitzchak blessed Yaakov and sent him to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there, that when he blessed him he commanded him, do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan* (Toldos 28:6). The Torah ties the beracha and the command together, בברכו אתו ויצו עליו - *when he blessed him he commanded him*. This is exactly what we said. The beracha and the command go together, because both come from the fact that Yaakov was now chosen to be *zera Avraham*.

Hagut BeParashiyot HaTorah by **Rav Yehuda Nachshoni**

Rivkah's Fear for Her Children

The Torah describes the extraordinary struggle taking place within Rivkah: ויתרוצצו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר אם כן למה זה אנכי ותלך לדרוש את ה׳ - The children struggled within her, and she said, If so, why am I? And she went to seek Hashem (Bereishis 25:22). Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that whenever Rivkah passed a beis midrash, Yaakov struggled to emerge, while whenever she passed a place of avodah zarah, Esav struggled to emerge. But what was Rivkah so troubled about? After waiting twenty years for a child, why would she now question the very pregnancy for which she and Yitzchak had prayed?

Rashi explains that Rivkah was overwhelmed by the suffering of her pregnancy. But there is another way to understand her anguish. Perhaps Rivkah sensed that she was carrying a child with an inclination toward evil. Her question was not simply why she had to endure such physical suffering, but why she should bring a child into the world who might become a rasha. If motherhood meant giving life to someone who would ultimately rebel against Hashem, was that a blessing or a tragedy?

A remarkable parallel appears in the Gemara (Berachos 10a). When Yeshayahu HaNavi informed King Chizkiyahu that he was about to die, he explained that the punishment was because Chizkiyahu had failed to fulfill the mitzvah of having children. Chizkiyahu answered, משום דחזאי לי ברוח הקדש דנפקי מינאי בנין דלא מעלו - Because I saw through ruach hakodesh that unworthy children would descend from me. He had deliberately avoided having children because he knew that his descendants would include reshaim. But Yeshayahu responded, בהדי כבשי דרחמנא למה לך מאי דמפקדת איבעי לך למעבד - Why concern yourself with Hashem's hidden plans? You must do what you have been commanded. The eventual outcome belongs to Hashem.

Chizkiyahu accepted the rebuke, but his response is especially significant. He asked Yeshayahu for his daughter in marriage, explaining, אפשר דגרמא זכותא דידי ודידך ונפקי מינאי בנין דמעלו - Perhaps through my merit and yours, worthy children will descend from me. Even though he had seen the future through ruach hakodesh, Chizkiyahu still hoped that the combined zechus of himself and Yeshayahu might produce a different outcome. His responsibility was not to avoid bringing children into the world because of what they might become, but to fulfill Hashem's command and seek His help.

This sheds new light on Rivkah's next action, ותלך לדרוש את ה׳ - She went to seek Hashem. Rashi explains that she went to the beis midrash of Shem to discover what would ultimately happen. But the expression לדרוש את ה׳ can also refer to tefillah, as David HaMelech declares, דרשתי את ה׳ וענני - I sought Hashem, and He answered me (Tehillim 34:5). Rivkah was not necessarily seeking only an explanation of her suffering. She may also have been seeking Divine help in confronting the possibility of having a child whose spiritual future was so troubling.

Hashem answered her, שני גוים בבטנך ושני לאמים ממעיך יפרדו - Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will separate from within you (Bereishis 25:23). The conflicting tendencies did not belong to one child torn between good and evil, but to two distinct children, each possessing a different nature and destined to follow a different path.

Yet this raises another question. If Esav already displayed such troubling tendencies before birth, was his eventual wickedness inevitable? Does a child's natural disposition determine what he will

ultimately become?

The Torah later tells us, ויגדלו הנערים ויהי עשו איש ידע ציד איש שדה ויעקב איש תם ישב אהלים - The boys grew up, and Esav became a skilled hunter, a man of the field, while Yaakov was a wholesome man, dwelling in tents (Bereishis 25:27). The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 63:10) relates that for their first thirteen years, both boys attended school. Only afterward did their radically different paths become apparent, with Yaakov going to the beis midrash and Esav turning toward avodah zarah.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch draws attention to the very different personalities of the two brothers and invokes the principle of חנוך לנער על פי דרכו - Educate a child according to his own way (Mishlei 22:6). Yaakov was naturally drawn to the quiet life of the beis midrash, while Esav possessed physical strength, courage, and an adventurous spirit. These qualities were not inherently evil. Strength and determination, no less than intellectual ability, can be directed toward avodas Hashem. Without attempting to judge the chinuch of Yitzchak and Rivkah, we can appreciate the broader lesson that different children possess different talents and temperaments, each of which can find its proper expression in the service of Hashem.

This brings us back to Rivkah's original anguish. She feared that a child born with troubling inclinations might eventually turn away from Hashem. But the Gemara's account of Chizkiyahu teaches that even knowledge of a potentially tragic future does not release a person from his responsibilities. Nor should it extinguish the hope that tefillah, zechus, and human effort can make a difference. And the contrasting personalities of Yaakov and Esav remind us that a child's natural temperament is not itself a measure of his spiritual worth.

Rivkah's question, אם כן למה זה אנכי - If so, why am I? thus touches upon one of the deepest concerns of parenthood. No parent can know with certainty what his children will become. Every child arrives with a unique combination of strengths, weaknesses, and inclinations, and ultimately possesses his own bechirah. The parent's task is to recognize those qualities, provide guidance suited to the child, and turn to Hashem in tefillah, while understanding that the final outcome remains in His hands.

Adapted by *Chaim Shulman* from

The Netziv vs. Rav Hirsch

Why Didn't Rivkah Speak to Yitzchak?

One of the most perplexing episodes in Sefer Bereishis is the story of Yitzchak's berachos. Yitzchak intends to bless Esav, while Rivkah is determined that the berachos should go to Yaakov. Yet instead of discussing the matter with her husband, she devises an elaborate plan in which Yaakov disguises himself as Esav and receives the berachos through deception. Why did Rivkah not simply speak to Yitzchak? She knew Esav's true character, and she had received the prophecy ורב יעבד צעיר - *the older would serve the younger* (Toldos, Bereishis 25:23). Why not explain why Yaakov should receive the berachos? The Netziv, in his Haamek Davar, finds the answer in Rivkah's first encounter with Yitzchak many years earlier. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch offers an almost opposite explanation.

The Netziv: A Fear That Never Disappeared

The Torah describes Rivkah's first glimpse of Yitzchak: ותשא רבקה את עיניה ותרא את יצחק ותפל מעל הגמל - *Rivkah raised her eyes, saw Yitzchak, and lowered herself from the camel* (Chayei Sarah, Bereishis 24:64).

The Netziv explains that Rivkah saw Yitzchak standing in prayer, utterly absorbed in his avodah, appearing כמלאך אלקים נורא מאד - *like an extraordinarily awe-inspiring angel of Hashem*. The sight overwhelmed her with fear. She did not yet know that this was Yitzchak, and asked the servant, מי האיש הלזה ההלך בשדה לקראתנו - *Who is this man walking through the field toward us?* When the servant answered, הוא אדני - *He is my master*, Rivkah realized that the extraordinary figure before her was the man she was about to marry. Overwhelmed by his spiritual greatness, she covered herself with her veil.

Here the Netziv makes a remarkable observation:

ומאז והלאה נקבע בלבה פחד ולא היתה עם יצחק כמו שרה עם אברהם ורחל עם יעקב - *From that moment onward, fear became firmly established in her heart, and her relationship with Yitzchak was not like Sarah's with Avraham or Rachel's with Yaakov.*

Sarah did not hesitate to challenge Avraham, nor Rachel to confront Yaakov. Rivkah, however, was so overwhelmed by Yitzchak's spiritual stature that she could not bring herself to challenge him, even when she believed he was mistaken. The Netziv explicitly connects this to the berachos:

ולא מצאה רבקה לב להעמיד את יצחק על דעתה בדברים נכוחים - *Rivkah could not bring herself to correct Yitzchak's understanding through direct and forthright discussion.*

Rivkah recognized Esav's true character, but her extraordinary reverence for Yitzchak prevented her from confronting him. She therefore resorted to deception rather than openly challenging his judgment. The Netziv concludes that this was all part of hashgachah pratis. Hashem arranged that Rivkah's first encounter with Yitzchak would occur while he was immersed in tefillah, establishing the awe that would ultimately affect how Yaakov received the berachos decades later.

It is a remarkable explanation. Yet Rivkah was an exceptionally independent and determined woman, as demonstrated by her conduct at the well and her immediate willingness to leave Charan. Could this same woman really have been unable to discuss something so important with her husband?

Rav Hirsch: Rivkah Had Already Tried to Convince Him

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a strikingly different explanation. According to Rav Hirsch, Rivkah had apparently spoken to Yitzchak repeatedly about Esav, but had been unable to change his mind. Rav Hirsch finds an indication in Yitzchak's words to Esav, הנה נא זקנתי לא ידעתי יום מותי - *Behold, I have now grown old, and I do not know the day of my death* (Toldos, Bereishis 27:2). The expression הנה נא זקנתי suggests that Yitzchak had been considering giving the berachos for some time. Rav Hirsch proposes that Rivkah had persuaded him to postpone them, hoping that he would eventually recognize Esav's true character. But Yitzchak remained unconvinced. What, then, did Rivkah hope to accomplish by disguising Yaakov as Esav?

Rav Hirsch offers an ingenious explanation. Rivkah was not simply trying to obtain the berachos for Yaakov. She wanted to demonstrate to Yitzchak how easily he could be deceived. Yaakov was an איש תם - *a straightforward man*, yet dressed in Esav's clothing, with goatskins covering his hands, he successfully impersonated his brother. Even when Yitzchak recognized that הקל קול יעקב והידים ידי עשו - *the voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of*

Esav (27:22), he accepted the disguise.
Rivkah knew that Esav would soon return and the deception would be exposed. But that was precisely her intention. If Yaakov, whose entire nature was straightforward and innocent, could successfully impersonate Esav, how much easier would it be for Esav, an experienced deceiver, to impersonate a righteous man? Rivkah used a temporary deception to expose the far greater deception that had misled Yitzchak for years.
When Esav returned, ויחרד יצחק חרדה גדלה עד מאד - *Yitzchak trembled with exceedingly great fear* (27:33). According to Rav Hirsch, Yitzchak suddenly understood what Rivkah had been trying to tell him. His confidence in Esav had been misplaced. He therefore declared, גם ברוך יהיה - *Indeed, he shall remain blessed*, recognizing that Yaakov was the appropriate recipient of the berachos.

Two Opposite Understandings

The disagreement between the Netziv and Rav Hirsch is striking. According to the Netziv, Rivkah could not bring herself to challenge Yitzchak. According to Rav Hirsch, she had already tried to persuade him and, when words failed, devised a way for Yitzchak to discover the truth for himself.
Neither explanation is explicit in the Torah. The Netziv reconstructs Rivkah's feelings from her first encounter with Yitzchak, while Rav Hirsch infers earlier conversations and a deliberate strategy from the events surrounding the berachos. Both are seeking to explain what the Torah leaves unsaid.
Rav Hirsch's explanation is particularly attractive because it is consistent with Rivkah's independence and determination throughout her life. The Netziv must explain why such a forceful woman was nevertheless unable to challenge her husband. On the other hand, Rav Hirsch assumes earlier conversations that the Torah never records. His interpretation, too, depends upon reconstructing events hidden from us.
Perhaps the most remarkable distinction is that the Netziv finds the key to the story in Rivkah's first encounter with Yitzchak, when she was overwhelmed by his spiritual greatness. Rav Hirsch finds it in Yitzchak's final realization, when he discovered how easily he could be deceived.
For the Netziv, Rivkah's silence led to the deception. For Rav Hirsch, the failure of her words made the deception necessary. One sees a woman whose reverence prevented her from speaking openly. The other sees a woman whose words had failed, and who therefore found another way to make herself understood.

Adapted from **Iyunei Parsha** by **Rav Avraham Rivlin**

How Can One Sell a Bechorah?

וימכר את בכרתו ליעקב - *And he sold his bechorah to Yaakov* (Toldos 25:33).

Can a Bechorah Be Bought?

The Gemara (Shabbos 30b) says that before Rava began his shiur, אמר מילתא דבדיחותא ובדחי רבנן - *he would say something humorous, and the Rabbanan would laugh*. Rashi explains, נפתח לבם מחמת השמחה - *their hearts opened through the joy*. So here, too, a humorous story may help us understand a difficult point in the parsha.
A Jew comes to his rav and demands to be made a kohen. He is one of the wealthiest and most important members of the kehilla, its principal supporter, and it is difficult to refuse him. The rav explains that he cannot make anyone a kohen. He offers him other positions: gabbai, chazzan, teacher, even rav. But a Jew cannot be turned into a kohen. The gvir refuses to give up, and after considerable pressure, the rav finally gives in. Following an elaborate ceremony in which the gvir is declared a kohen, the rav asks him: You are already so wealthy and respected. Why was it so important to become a kohen as well? The man answers: Because I hold so many positions of honor, there was one thing I simply could not tolerate. My grandfather was a kohen, my father was a kohen, and I am not? That was too much for me!
This joke brings us directly to Esav's sale of his bechorah to Yaakov. The question here is not the familiar halachic difficulties. One is how a person can sell a *davar shelo ba l'olam*, something that does not yet exist, since the benefits of the bechorah would come only upon the father's death (see Ohr HaChaim, Abarbanel, Ramban, and Malbim). Another is whether a sale made under pressure is valid, *talyuhu v'zavin* (Bava Basra 48b). Our question is more fundamental: How can someone sell something that, by its very nature, cannot be bought or sold?
Of course, a person can buy more than physical objects. He can purchase the enjoyment of a play, a concert, or a lecture. He can even acquire things that cannot be touched at all. Friendship: קנה לך חבר - *acquire for yourself a friend* (Avos 1:6). Torah: התורה נקנית בארבעים ושמונה דברים - *the Torah is acquired through forty-eight qualities* (Avos 6:5). The same is true of wisdom.
But some things simply cannot be bought. Kehunah cannot be purchased. One who is born a kohen does not need to buy it, and one who is not born a kohen cannot acquire that status. The exceptional case is Pinchas, who was not originally included in the kehunah and became a kohen after killing Zimri, as Chazal say, לא נתכהן פנחס עד שהרגו לזמרי - *Pinchas did not become a kohen until he killed Zimri* (Zevachim 101b).
The same should be true of the bechorah. The child born first is the bechor, and that fact cannot be changed. If you are the bechor, you are the bechor; if you are not, you cannot change the circumstances of your birth. So how could Esav sell his bechorah to Yaakov? One might answer that Esav sold only the rights associated with the bechorah, rather than the status itself. But the pesukim repeatedly speak of the bechorah itself: מכרה כיום את בכרתך - *sell me your bechorah today* (Toldos 25:31), and וימכר את בכרתו ליעקב - *he sold his bechorah to Yaakov*.

Choice Over Birth

It is worth noting that Yaakov's not being the firstborn may itself carry a message. Sefer Bereishis repeatedly presents situations in which the younger child is chosen over the older: Hevel and Kayin, Yitzchak and Yishmael, Yaakov and Esav, Yosef and his older brothers, Peretz and Zerach, and Ephraim and Menashe. These cases are not identical, nor is the younger sibling invariably more righteous. Nevertheless, they repeatedly challenge the assumption that spiritual leadership necessarily follows the order of birth.
We usually say Shem, Cham, and Yefes, but the pasuk describes Shem as אחי יפת הגדול - *the brother of Yefes the elder* (Noach 10:21), according to the interpretation that Yefes was older. Here, too, the relationship between birth order and spiritual distinction is not straightforward.
One might say that Sefer Bereishis is, in part, the story of the struggle between *bechirah*, personal choice, and *bechorah*, birthright. The Torah places great value on what a person achieves through his

own decisions rather than merely on the advantages he receives at birth. What matters is not only how or where a person was born, but what he does with the gifts he has received. As Chazal say, הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים - *everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven* (Berachos 33b).

Perhaps this also helps explain the Mishnah's statement, ממזר תלמיד חכם קודם לכהן גדול עם הארץ - *a mamzer who is a talmid chacham takes precedence over a kohen gadol who is an am ha'aretz* (Horiyos 3:8). Whether a person is born a mamzer or the son of a kohen gadol is not within his control. But whether he becomes an am ha'aretz or a talmid chacham depends upon his own efforts. That is where his spiritual achievement is measured. Of course, this does not change anyone's halachic status. A mamzer remains a mamzer even if he becomes a talmid chacham, and a kohen gadol retains his kehunah even if he is an am ha'aretz.

The Beloved Wife and the Hated Wife

How, then, could Yaakov acquire the bechorah? A remarkable approach emerges from an explanation attributed to the Vilna Gaon concerning the beloved wife and the hated wife (Ki Seitzei 21:15–17).

The Torah describes a man with two wives, האחת אהובה והאחת שנואה - *one loved and one hated*. Both bear sons, and והיה הבן הבכר לשניאה - *the firstborn son belongs to the hated wife*. When the father divides his estate, לא יוכל לבכר את בן האהובה על פני בן השנואה הבכר - *he may not give the son of the beloved wife the status of firstborn ahead of the son of the hated wife*. Rather, he must give the latter a double portion, כי הוא ראשית אנו לו משפט הבכרה - *because he is the first of his strength, the right of the bechorah belongs to him*.

The Gra raises several questions. First, how can the Torah describe a man hating his wife when it commands לא תשנא - *do not hate* (Kedoshim 19:17)? Second, the pasuk says וילדו לו בנים האהובה והשנואה - *the beloved and the hated wife bore him sons*. Since the beloved wife is mentioned first, it sounds as though she gave birth first. Why, then, is the son of the hated wife called the bechor? Third, why must the Torah expressly prohibit the father from treating the beloved wife's son as the bechor? And fourth, why does it emphasize כי הוא ראשית אנו?

The explanation attributed to the Gra is that the Torah describes an unusual situation. A man marries a woman, comes to hate her, and divorces her shortly after the wedding. He immediately marries another woman. Less than seven months later, the second wife gives birth to a son. A few days afterward, his first wife, who had already been pregnant when divorced, also gives birth.

The second wife's child was born first, but the first wife's child was conceived first. Naturally, the father prefers to recognize the child of his beloved second wife as his bechor. The Torah therefore tells him that he may not do so. He must recognize the son of the first wife as the bechor because כי הוא ראשית אנו - *he is the first of his strength*. According to this interpretation, the determining factor is conception rather than birth (Kol Eliyahu, Ki Seitzei 191).

This answers the questions. The hatred refers to a wife whom the husband has divorced, as in ושנאה האיש האחרון וכתב לה ספר כריתת - *the latter husband hated her and wrote her a bill of divorce* (Ki Seitzei 24:3). The beloved wife really did give birth first, yet the hated wife's son is considered the bechor because he was conceived first. That is why the Torah must prohibit the father from giving the bechorah to the beloved wife's son, and why it emphasizes כי הוא ראשית אנו.

Yaakov Was Conceived First

This brings us to Rashi's remarkable explanation of Yaakov's birth. On the words וידו אחזת בעקב עשו - *his hand was holding Esav's heel* (Toldos 25:26), Rashi writes, יעקב נוצר מטפה ראשונה ועשו מן השניה - *Yaakov was formed from the first drop and Esav from the second*. Rashi compares this to placing two stones into a narrow tube. The stone inserted first emerges last, while the one inserted last emerges first. Thus, Esav, who was formed second, emerged first, while Yaakov, who was formed first, emerged second. Yaakov therefore tried to hold Esav back so that he would be born first as well, ויפטור את רחמה ויטול את הבכורה מן הדין - *so that he would open the womb and take the bechorah by right*.

This is a Midrashic illustration, not a medical description of how twins develop. Its point is that the order of birth need not reflect the order of formation. According to this approach, Yaakov was formed first and therefore had a prior claim to the bechorah.

But if Yaakov was already the rightful bechor, why did he need to buy the bechorah from Esav?

The answer is that the sale was intended to silence Esav's objections. Yaakov could say: Even according to your understanding that the firstborn is the bechor, you have sold me whatever claim you possessed. And you valued that claim so little that a bowl of lentil stew was enough to make you surrender it.

This also explains why Yaakov tried to prevent Esav from emerging first. Esav would naturally regard birth order as decisive. Yaakov therefore wanted to be first in birth as well as in formation, leaving Esav with no grounds for disputing his claim.

Conception or Birth?

There is, however, a serious difficulty. The explanation attributed to the Gra is not the accepted halachah. The halachic bechor is determined by birth, not conception.

Indeed, the Netziv strongly rejects the attribution of this interpretation to the Gra. In Haamek Davar (Ki Seitzei 21:15), he writes, ולא אאמין לקול השמועה - *I do not believe this report*, and ושקר העידו בשמו - *they falsely attributed it to him*. According to the Netziv, the Torah's point is precisely that the order of birth determines the bechorah, even if another child was conceived earlier.

After such a forceful objection, הדרא קושיא לדוכתא - *the original question returns*. How could Yaakov acquire Esav's bechorah?

One explanation is that halachah generally determines the bechorah by birth for two reasons. First, there is ordinarily no reliable way to establish which child was conceived first. Halachah requires practical and ascertainable standards. Rather than leaving every case to uncertain judgments, it frequently establishes clear measurements, such as fifty amos (see Moshe Silberg, *Kach Darko Shel Talmud*, p. 50).

Second, birth marks a decisive stage in the child's emergence into the world. Although a fetus has significant halachic status, birth ordinarily determines the status of a bechor. Chazal ask מאימתי יצר הרע שולט באדם - *from when does the yetzer hara exercise influence over a person?* The Gemara answers that this begins upon birth, citing לפתח חטאת רבץ - *sin crouches at the entrance* (Sanhedrin 91b; Bereishis 4:7).

Yaakov and Esav, however, were exceptional. Their distinctive spiritual inclinations were already evident before birth. On ויתרצצו הבנים בקרבה - *the children struggled within her* (Toldos 25:22), Rashi explains that when Rivkah passed the places of Torah study of Shem

and Ever, Yaakov struggled to emerge, while Esav struggled when she passed places of avodah zarah.
According to the Ostrovtzer Rebbe, Rav Meir Yechiel, this exceptional circumstance provides a basis for understanding Yaakov's claim to the bechorah through his earlier formation. The explanation, cited in Iturei Torah (Bereishis, p. 213), is a Midrashic interpretation of the unique circumstances of Yaakov and Esav, rather than a general halachic rule replacing birth with conception.

A Gift From Above and Work From Below

We can now appreciate the double message of the bechorah. On one hand, Yaakov had a claim to it from the beginning. On the other, the bechorah appeared to belong to Esav. Yaakov therefore purchased it, demonstrating that his entitlement came in two ways: as a gift from Above and as something he actively sought and acquired.
This duality appears throughout Jewish life. Torah is a gift from Hashem, yet a person must labor to acquire it. Eretz Yisrael was promised to the Avos, yet their descendants had to take possession of it. A shidduch, too, combines Divine providence with human initiative. On one hand, בת קול יוצאת ואומרת - *a heavenly voice announces the match*. On the other, אדם מחזר אחר אבידתו - *a man searches for what he has lost*. Similarly, Hashem sanctified Shabbos, yet we are commanded to sanctify it through Kiddush.
Why must both elements be present? If everything depended solely upon human effort, our connection to Hashem's gifts would be weakened. They therefore begin as gifts from Above. But if everything came without effort, we would lack the satisfaction of having earned what we possess, the idea sometimes described as *nahama d'kisufa*, the bread of shame.
The Mishnah teaches, איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו - *who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion* (Avos 4:1). There is a special satisfaction in the portion a person has earned through his own efforts, as the pasuk says, יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך - *when you eat from the labor of your hands, you are fortunate, and it is good for you* (Tehillim 128:2).
Thus, even though Yaakov had a claim to the bechorah from the beginning, he nevertheless worked to acquire it. What was given to him from Above also became something he had personally pursued.

The Message to Esav

There is another important message in this episode, directed toward Esav himself.
By birth, Esav was the bechor. No one disputed that he emerged first. Yet he willingly surrendered his birthright, ויבז עשו את הבכרה - *and Esav despised the bechorah* (Toldos 25:34).
His eating and drinking, ויאכל וישת, might be understandable. He was exhausted and hungry. But the Torah continues, ויקם וילך - *he arose and went away*, and concludes, ויבז עשו את הבכרה. His casual departure revealed his contempt for what he had surrendered.
Esav had already declared, הנה אנכי הולך למות ולמה זה לי בכרה - *I am going to die, so what use is the bechorah to me?* (25:32). Rashi explains that Esav asked what obligations the avodah of the bechor imposed. When Yaakov described the many warnings and severe consequences associated with it, Esav responded, אני הולך למות על ידה אם כן מה חפץ לי בה - *I will die because of it, so what use do I have for it?*
Even without Yaakov's purchase, the Torah's account of Esav's contempt would remain decisive in evaluating his attitude toward the bechorah. Chazal describe the nations as eventually claiming אף אנו ישראל - *we too are Yisrael* (Tanchuma, Vayera 5; see also Pachad Yitzchak, Purim, sections 6 and 35). Against such a claim stands the Torah's testimony: ויבז עשו את הבכרה.
The contrast is striking. Esav possessed the bechorah by birth but despised it. Yaakov, who did not possess the ordinary birthright, valued it so deeply that he actively sought to acquire it.
That is the larger lesson of the parsha. What a person receives from Heaven is precious, but receiving it is not enough. He must recognize its value, work to become worthy of it, and make it his own. Yaakov understood that a gift from Above does not diminish the need for effort below. On the contrary, the greater the gift, the greater the responsibility to earn it.

Adapted from
Rav Tamir Granot, הבן הנבחר

Three Berachos, One Heir

Why Three Berachos?

Yaakov receives three berachos in rapid succession. First, disguised as Esav, he receives the berachah Yitzchak intended for his older son (Toldos 27:27–29). Then Yitzchak knowingly blesses Yaakov before sending him to Padan Aram (Toldos 28:1–4). Finally, Hashem blesses him at Beis El in the dream of the ladder (Vayeitzei 28:12–15). Why does Yaakov need three berachos, and why does each come under such different circumstances?
The three berachos are not repetitions. Each adds something the others do not: material prosperity, the covenant of Bris Milah, and Hashem's personal confirmation of His covenant with Avraham, together with His promise to accompany and protect Yaakov. The differences emerge from the very words of the pesukim.

The First Berachah: Wealth and Leadership

Yitzchak's first berachah begins ויתן לך האלקים מטל השמים ומשמני הארץ ורב דגן ותירש - *May Elokim give you the dew of heaven, the richness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and wine* (Toldos 27:28). He continues יעבדוך עמים וישתחוו לך לאמים הוה גביר לאחיך - *May peoples serve you, nations bow to you, and may you rule over your brothers* (27:29). The berachah promises agricultural abundance, power, and leadership.
But what is missing is more significant than what is present. There is no mention of inheriting Eretz Yisrael, becoming the father of a great nation, or continuing Hashem's covenant with Avraham. The berachah that Rivkah and Yaakov struggled so hard to secure does not explicitly confer ברכת אברהם at all.
The setting is equally revealing. Yitzchak asks for a meal, enjoys the food and wine, and blesses his son out of a father's love. His berachah is holy, but it concerns the material blessings that a father might wish for his bechor, the one expected to lead and manage the family estate. Material leadership, however, is not necessarily the same as inheriting Avraham's spiritual mission. The divine name אלקים, associated with Hashem as Creator and ruler of the natural world, suits a berachah of this kind.

The Second Berachah: ברכת אברהם

When Yaakov prepares to leave home, everything changes. Yitzchak knows whom he is blessing, and he begins by instructing him לא תקח אשה מבנות כנען - *Do not marry a woman from the daughters of Canaan* (Toldos 28:1). He then declares ואל שדי יברך אתך ויפרך וירבך והיית לקהל עמים - *May Kel Shakkai bless you, make you fruitful and multiply you, so that you become a community of peoples* (28:3).

Most importantly, he adds ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם לך ולזרעך אתך - *May He give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and to your descendants,* לרשתך את ארץ מגריך - *so that you may inherit the land in which you have sojourned* (28:4).

Here, for the first time, Yitzchak expressly gives Yaakov ברכת אברהם, the promise of descendants and Eretz Yisrael. And he invokes Hashem as אל שדי. That is precisely the name with which Hashem appeared to Avraham when commanding Bris Milah: אני אל שדי התהלך לפני והיה תמים - *I am Kel Shakkai; walk before Me and be wholehearted* (Lech Lecha 17:1). Hashem then promised והפרתי אתך במאד מאד - *I will make you exceedingly fruitful* (17:6), and ונתתי לך ולזרעך אחריך את ארץ מגריך - *I will give you and your descendants the land in which you have sojourned* (17:8).

The parallel is unmistakable. Yitzchak's second berachah invokes the covenant of Bris Milah, with its promise that Avraham's family will multiply and inherit the Land. Bris Milah itself gives physical expression to the continuity of that family from generation to generation. It is therefore especially fitting that Yitzchak bestows this berachah as Yaakov leaves to find a wife and establish the home from which the next generation will emerge.

There is also a deeper point. Bris Milah calls for human participation: ואתה את בריתי תשמר - *You shall keep My covenant* (Lech Lecha 17:9). Yitzchak can charge Yaakov with the responsibility of continuing that covenant and bless him with its promises, including the inheritance of Eretz Yisrael. But a father's berachah, however holy, is not the same as Hashem Himself reaffirming His covenant. Only Hashem can personally confirm that promise and assure Yaakov that He will accompany and protect him. That requires a third berachah, from Hashem Himself.

The Third Berachah: Hashem's Own Promise

Alone on the road to Charan, Yaakov dreams of a ladder reaching heaven. Hashem appears and declares אני ה' אלקי אברהם אביך ואלקי יצחק - *I am Hashem, the G-d of Avraham your father and the G-d of Yitzchak* (Vayeitzei 28:13). He promises הארץ אשר אתה שכב עליה לך אתננה ולזרעך - *The land upon which you lie I will give to you and your descendants* (28:13), and והיה זרעך כעפר הארץ - *Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth* (28:14). Then comes a promise neither of Yitzchak's berachos could give: והנה אנכי עמך ושמרתיך בכל אשר תלך והשבתיך אל האדמה הזאת - *I am with you, I will protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land* (28:15).

Hashem is not introducing the promise of Eretz Yisrael for the first time. Yitzchak has already included it in ברכת אברהם. What is new is that Hashem Himself now confirms the inheritance of the Land and pledges His personal presence and protection, even as Yaakov leaves Eretz Yisrael for an uncertain future in Charan.

These words recall Hashem's promises to Avraham, especially at the Bris Bein HaBesarim, where Hashem declared אני ה' אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים לתת לך את הארץ הזאת לרשתה - *I am Hashem, Who brought you out of Ur Kasdim to give you this land to inherit* (Lech Lecha 15:7). The opening אני ה' is echoed at Beis El. Hashem Himself now renews His covenantal commitment, identifying Yaakov as the one through whom the promises to Avraham will be fulfilled.

The divine names help explain the progression. In the first berachah, אלקים accompanies the blessings of the natural world. In the second, אל שדי recalls the covenant of Bris Milah and the growth of Avraham's family. In the third, Hashem reveals Himself as ה', the name associated here with His personal relationship and covenantal promise. Yaakov receives not merely prosperity or descendants, but the assurance that Hashem will remain with him, even in exile.

When Was Yaakov Actually Chosen?

This distinction offers a surprising understanding of the dispute over Yitzchak's first berachah. We usually assume that the blessing intended for Esav would determine who inherited Avraham's spiritual mission. But perhaps Yitzchak intended only to give Esav the material blessings and authority of the bechor. He had not necessarily decided that Esav alone would inherit the covenant. Indeed, Yitzchak may not have assumed that only one of his sons could continue Avraham's legacy.

Rivkah, however, feared that Esav's ascendancy would make him Avraham's successor. She may have understood the first berachah as carrying more than Yitzchak intended. Her intervention would then reflect a misunderstanding of the purpose of that berachah, even if her assessment of Esav's character was correct.

The decisive selection occurs later. The Torah states ויקרא יצחק אל יעקב ויברך אתו - *Yitzchak called Yaakov and blessed him* (Toldos 28:1). There is no disguise and no misunderstanding. Yitzchak instructs Yaakov not to marry among the daughters of Canaan and expressly gives him ברכת אברהם. The two matters are connected. Just as Avraham insisted that Yitzchak marry outside Canaan, Yitzchak recognizes that the continuation of Avraham's covenant depends on the home Yaakov will establish. Esav's Canaanite marriages had caused his parents distress; Yaakov is now entrusted with building the next generation of Avraham's family.

Yet even Yitzchak's deliberate selection is not enough. A father can choose the son who will carry the family mission and bless him with the covenantal promises, but only Hashem can personally reaffirm those promises and pledge His continuing presence. That is what happens at Beis El.

Conclusion

The three berachos therefore mark three stages in Yaakov's destiny. The first concerns what he will possess: prosperity and authority. The second concerns what he will build: a family that continues ברכת אברהם and inherits Eretz Yisrael. The third concerns Hashem's own confirmation of that covenant and what only He can promise: והנה אנכי עמך - *I am with you*. Yaakov first receives the blessing intended for Esav, then is knowingly chosen by Yitzchak to continue Avraham's covenant, and finally hears Hashem Himself confirm that choice. He becomes Avraham's heir not merely by receiving a berachah, but by accepting a mission and receiving Hashem's promise to sustain it.

[In Parshas Toldos, the Torah tells us כי עקרה הוא **ויעתר יצחק לה' לנכח אשתו** (Toldos 25:21). Rashi explains: **זה עומד בזוית זו ומתפלל וזו עומדת בזוית זו ומתפללת**. After twenty years of marriage, Yitzchak and Rivka were davening for the very same thing, a child. Yet they did not stand together. This **may** relate to the rules of mechitza in shuls.]

Separation During Prayer: Mechitza

Rav David Brofsky

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One of the defining characteristics of halakhic communal prayer is the separation between men and women known as the "mechitza." This week, I would like to explore and develop different understandings of this separation, and address the halakhic issues that arise.

Source

The earliest source for separation between men and women during a ritual appears in massekhet Sukka. The mishna (51a) records: "One who has not seen the happiness of the water drawing has not (seen) happiness in his days… they went down to the ezrat nashim (women's courtyard) and would make a great arrangement…"
The gemara (51b) continues: "What was this great arrangement?… Originally, the women were inside and the men were outside, and they would come to frivolity… They (then) established that women should sit above and men (should sit) below…"
The Yerushalmi (Sukka 5:2) provides a source for this arrangement: "…That they would set up the men by themselves and the women by themselves… From whom did they learn? From the verse (Zekharya 12:12), 'And the earth mourned, each family alone (… and their wives alone).'… if at a time when they are mourning you say that the men should be by themselves and the women should be by themselves, then when they are happy, all the more so!…"
The Acharonim discuss the relationship between the separation instituted in the Beit Ha-mikdash and the mechitza of the synagogue. What is the reason for this separation? What type of separation suffices? We will focus on three approaches to mechitza in the contemporary synagogue.

Three Approaches to Mechitza

Rav Moshe Feinstein (1895–1986) offers a unique approach. Regarding the level of obligation, he writes (Iggerot Moshe OC 1:39): "The rule that even if the men are on one side and the women on the other it is forbidden without a **mechitza is… a biblical rule**. And the proof is from Sukka… questioned… (how they built a balcony in the ezrat nashim given) that it is forbidden to add anything to the Temple and the courtyard, and Rav answered that they found a verse that it is necessary to separate men from women…"
Rav Moshe Feinstein argues that the requirement of a mechitza is biblical, mi-de'oraita; if it were not, it would have been prohibited to alter the Beit Ha-mikdash. Rav Feinstein goes on to explain: "…The prohibition is only **because of frivolity**… it is somewhat necessary to say that this law is biblical in any place of gathering… and without a need for a gathering, even in the Temple it is permissible, because Chana prayed next to Eli the priest…"
Rav Feinstein here defines the purpose of the mechitza as prevention of frivolity… In any place of "gathering," it is necessary to separate the men and women; when there is no gathering, separation is unnecessary even in the Beit Ha-mikdash… this theory may have far-reaching ramifications regarding weddings, shiurim, and social gatherings. (See Iggerot Moshe OC 1:41.)
Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook, on the other hand, offers a different theory. He explains that the requirement for a mechitza is based on another gemara (Megilla 29a), which teaches: "'Yet have I been to them as a little sanctuary…' (Yechezkel 11:16) - these are the synagogues and study (houses) in Bavel…" Rav Kook (Ma'amarei Ha-Ra'aya, "Le-Mikdash Me'at") argues that "**We are** certainly **obligated to come as close as possible… to** the holy qualities of the **great and holy sanctuary**…"
In other words, the obligation to build a mechitza is rooted in the synagogue's similarity to the Beit Ha-mikdash… Seemingly, this explanation would not apply to other social gatherings, as Rav Moshe Feinstein suggested.
Rabbi Norman Lamm, [former] chancellor of Yeshiva University, wrote a … defense of the mechitza in 1959… (Tradition 1:2, 1959, 141-164)… he argues that the need for a mechitza is firmly … rooted in an understanding of the Jewish concept of prayer… Mixed pews, Rabbi Lamm argues, lead to distraction and frivolity, which undermine one's kavana. … He quotes his teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who attacked the notion of family pews: "…The approach of the Jew to G-d must be out of a sense of isolation… There must be a recognition that without G-d none of us has any security at all, that my husband's life is dependent on G-d's will…"
The sense of security one feels when sitting with one's spouse, Rabbi Soloveitchik argued, is antithetical to the Jewish concept of prayer.

Height and Material of the Mechitza

How high must the mechitza be? From which materials may it be fashioned? Seemingly, this should depend upon the reason, or purpose, of the mechitza.
The Acharonim debate the reason, or function, of the mechitza. On the one hand, some cite the Rambam (Hilkhot Shofar Lulav ve-Sukka 8:12): "…they would make in the Temple a place for the women above and the men below **in order that they should not mix with each other**…" Others, however, point to another citation of the Rambam… (Peirush al Ha-Mishna, Sukka (5:2)): "…**the place for the women was higher than the place for the men in order that the men should not look at the women**…"
Rav Moshe Feinstein authored a number of teshuvot on this question. In Iggerot Moshe (OC 1:39), he writes: "…Also in synagogues, where men and women gather to pray**, it is preferable to make a balcony in which the women are above. If for whatever reason it is difficult to make a balcony**, **it is necessary to make a real separation**, which will prevent them from frivolity… Therefore, …a mechitza of ten tefachim is **not** sufficient… **rather it seems that a mechitza which reaches shoulder [height] would be sufficient,** as we see that the need for a mechitza is not related to gazing… **A mechitza of less than 18 tefachim (five feet) is prohibited**…"
In other words, **Rav Moshe Feinstein views the mechitza's function as preventing the possibility of frivolity**… However, **he is not concerned with men and women seeing each other**, per se, as long as standards of modesty are preserved.[1]
Others, such as the **Satmar Rav** [Rav Yoel Teitelbaum], Rav Shmuel Wosner (Shevet Ha-Levi 1:29) and representatives of the Hungarian and Chassidic communities, disagree. They claim that the **primary purpose of a mechitza is to prevent visual contact** between men and women…
Rav Soloveitchik reportedly ruled that a mechitza need only be **ten tefachim** tall… See ...Rabbi Michael J. Broyde's article ["The

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1 [Ed. See **Unpacking the Iggerot: Mehitza *By Rabbi Moshe Kurtz***, Tradition Online September 18, 2025, which states: While **R. Feinstein** contended that the purpose of a **mehitza was about preventing interaction rather than blocking line of sight**, he had to reckon with **what should be done in the event that the women were not dressed [properly]. Regarding hair covering**, he **adopts a similar approach to the Arukh ha-Shulhan**, that while women are obligated to cover their hair, the **exposure of hair does not constitute erva** ...preventing the recitation of certain prayer when such is visible. On the other hand**, if they are attending shul with sleeveless dresses, it would be necessary for there to be some way to block the line of sight from the men's section, even if the women are situated on the balcony** (see Iggerot Moshe O.C., vol. 1, #42-43).]

Parameters of the Mechitza ..."] ... [Ed. Rav Soloveitchik's shiur for mechitza of **ten tefachim is** roughly 31.5 to 40 inches depending on the various opinions how large a tefach is; **Rav Soloveitchik** would tell Rabbanim that a **mechitza in shul must be at least "three feet"** (36 inches) - assuming a tefach to be ~3.6 inches]

Rav Moshe Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe OC (1:39)) **rejects this position**, as seen above.

Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg (1885–1966), in his Seridei Eish, supports Rav Moshe Feinstein's position. In addition, he argues that while the Hungarian position "may be guided by pure motives… nowadays the situation has changed; if women stay home and do not go to shul, they will completely forget their Judaism…" …

May part, or all, of the **mechitza be constructed of glass?** Rav Moshe Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe OC 1:43) discusses a mechitza in which **the top third is made of glass**. He argues that **the mechitza poses no problem halakhically, but he raises a concern regarding modesty**… He also notes that "I have heard that there is glass that can be seen through from only one direction, and it would be good to use this glass…"

… in one teshuva (OC 4:29) he addresses a mechitza in which 50 inches are made from a solid material, and the top 13 inches consist of lattice work ("open windows"). He strongly discourages praying in such a synagogue… In another teshuva (Iggerot Moshe OC 4:32), however, he **permits a lattice mechitza with small holes, as long as the mechitza is 60 inches** high and is able to prevent frivolity ("kalut rosh").

Rav Feinstein (Iggerot Moshe OC 4:31) addresses another issue common in American synagogues. He was asked about a women's section that was raised 40 inches; from the men's side, the mechitza was at least 70 inches high, but from the women's side, (it) was only thirty… (He) insists that the **mechitza should be at least 60 inches high on the women's side as well**…

[Abridged for space as indicated; full text at https://www.etzion.org.il/en/halakha/orach-chaim/prayer-and-blessings/separation-during-prayer-mechitza]

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from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>
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Rabbi Mordechai Willig

Tents and Blessings

I

"Yaakov was a wholesome ("Tam") man, dwelling in tents" (Breishis 25:27). Ibn Ezra renders "tents" as in, "dwells in a tent with livestock" (4:20), a shepherd (Rashbam). Rashi, citing Breishis Rabbah (63:10), states that this refers to the tent of Shem and the tent of Ever, to learn Torah, as Onkelos translates, "a house of study". This accounts for the plural form, "ohalim", i.e. one of Shem and one of Ever.

Seforno explains the plural differently, to refer to two types of tents. One, a shepherd's tent, (Yeshaya 38:12), which is not permanent and is moved from place to place when the pasture is exhausted (Rashi, see Rashi 4:20). The second, a tent that will not be displaced (Yeshaya 33:20), a permanent tent. There, Yaakov learned to recognize his Creator, to be sanctified by His glory (Shemos 29:43). As opposed to Rashi and Onkelos, who refer only to tents of learning Torah, and Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, who refer only to shepherd's tents, Seforno includes both types of tents. The Torah tent is permanent, while the shepherd's tent is not, as it moves from place to place. This parallels the respective position of Torah and worldly pursuits in one's life. The Gemara (Berachos 35b) relates that those for whom Torah is fixed (keva) and work (melacha) is temporary (ara'i) succeeded in both. Those with the opposite orientation succeeded in neither.

Primacy is not measured quantitatively. Rather, the relative value ascribed to Torah and melacha determines one's priority. The Gemara (Shabbos 10a, 33b) calls Torah study eternal life (chayei olam), and worldly pursuits temporal life (chayei sha'a). This axiological prioritization is the key to success in both Torah and worldly affairs.

II

Yitzchak Avinu's decision to give the blessings to Esav (27:1-4) is difficult to comprehend. Did he not see that Yakov was a tzaddik and Eisav was a rasha? The Medrash (65:7) understands, "His eye dimmed from seeing (27:1) as "a bribe will blind those who see" (Shemos 23:8). Yitzchok loved Esav, because he would eat of his trapping (Onkelos 25:28). This affected his judgement. But how could he ignore the righteous and wholesome Yakov, Rivka's favorite?

The answer is that just as there were two tents, there were two blessings. Yitzchak blessed Esav (27:39), and Yakov when he thought that he was Esav (27:28), with physical success – "the dew of the heavens and the fatness of the earth, and abundant grain and wine". The spiritual blessing of Avraham, the one that would endure for generations (28:4), was always intended to be given to Yakov (Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch 27:1, end). In other words, Yitzchak wished that Yakov remain in the tent of Torah, and Esav would occupy the physical tent. Yitzchak did not want Yakov to be involved in rulership and the futility of the ephemeral (serara vehavlei hanifsadim), so he could devote himself exclusively to Torah study (Seforno 27:29). Perhaps he hoped that Esav would support Yakov, as, a generation later, Zevulun, who went out and prospered, supported Yissachar, who remained in the tents of Torah (Rashi, Devarim 33:18).

Rivka disagreed. She understood that Yaakov's role in this world was to succeed in both tents, as the Seforno explained. Yakov was to sublimate the physical aspects of life. This could only be achieved by having both blessings, corresponding to both tents.

Rivka told Yakov to fetch two goats (27:9). Rashi explains: one for the Pesach offering, and one to make delicacies for Yitzchok. Pesach is the one offering in which eating plays the central role (Pesachim 76b). The very idea of eating before Hashem (see Devarim 14:23) is the unique ability and responsibility of Yakov's descendants. Gentiles can only bring burnt offerings (Menachos 73b). The juxtaposition of the two goats represented the very essence of Rivka's insistence that Yaakov receive both blessings (Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht).

III

The aforementioned Gemara (Berachos 35b) records a dispute which echoes the disagreement between Yitzchak and Rivka. Rav Shimon bar Yochai aspires to a world in which Torah is our only occupation. Work (melacha) is done for us by others. If one is busy plowing, planting, reaping, threshing, and winnowing, what will become of Torah study? This is precisely what concerned Yitzchak Avinu (Malbim 27:1). R' Yishmael disagrees. One must adjoin Torah study

with gathering grain, wine and oil (Devarim 11:14). The Gemara concludes that, “many followed R’ Yishmael and succeeded; many followed R’ Shimon bar Yochai did not succeed”. Just as those whose melacha was their primary preoccupation did not succeed, so, too, those who did no melacha did not succeed.

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 156:1) codifies this idea as follows: All Torah without melacha will cease in the end (Avos 2:2). One must make Torah primary (keva) and melacha temporary (ara’i), so that he will succeed in both. The Be’ur Halacha adds: while the many must follow R’ Yishmael, in every generation some individuals can follow R’ Shimon bar Yochai. The paradigm is Shevet Levi, which the Rambam (Shemita V’yovel 13:12-13) extends to others who subsist on a minimum and avoid the worldly efforts of nearly all people.

Yitzchak Avinu wanted all of Yakov’s progeny to be like Shevet Levi, supported by Esav (Malbim). Rivka knew that this arrangement was impossible and would fail. Moreover, the material could only blossom into blessing through the blessing of Avraham, intended for Yakov (Rav Hirsch).

In the felicitous phrase of Rav Soloveitchik zt”l, the Hashgacha (Divine Providence) paskened (ruled) like Rivka. Similarly, the Shulchan Aruch ruled like R’ Yishmael. With few exceptions, Am Yisrael must engage in melacha, while acknowledging the primacy of Torah. By inhabiting both tents, we receive both blessings.

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Rabbi Yehuda Brandes, Torat Imecha,
quoting **Rav Menachem Ziemba Hy"d**

Esav Hates Yaakov

In Parshas Toldos, the conflict between Esav and Yaakov comes into the open. Yaakov receives the berachos that Esav expected to receive and is forced to flee to Charan to escape his brother's anger. The Torah tells us וישטם עשו את יעקב על הברכה אשר ברכו אביו - *Esav hated Yaakov because of the blessing his father had given him* (Toldos 27:41). Chazal understood this hatred as something that would extend far beyond the relationship between the two brothers. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai declares הלכה היא בידוע שעשו שונא ליעקב - *It is an established principle that Esav hates Yaakov* (Sifrei, Bamidbar 69; Rashi, Vayishlach 33:4).

Rav Menachem Ziemba, Hy"d, one of the great Torah scholars of prewar Poland, who was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto, offered a remarkable explanation of Chazal's use of the word הלכה - *halachah*. As recorded in *Chiddushei HaGRaMZ*, there have always been people who attempt to identify the reasons for antisemitism: ישנם אנשים החושבים ומנסים למצוא את הנימוקים והסיבות לשנאתם של הגוים כלפי היהודים - *There are people who try to discover the reasons and explanations for the nations' hatred of the Jews*. Yet these explanations repeatedly collapse under the weight of their own contradictions. Rav Ziemba explains that שנאה זו היא חסרת כל סיבה וכל נימוק, אלא רק הפך לבם לשנוא עמו - *This hatred has no genuine reason or justification, but reflects the words of the pasuk, He turned their hearts to hate His people* (Tehillim 105:25).

Rav Ziemba illustrates this with examples from Jewish history. כאן שונאים את היהודים על שום שהם קפיטליסטים ושם על שום שהם סוציאליסטים - *In one place, Jews are hated because they are capitalists, while elsewhere they are hated because they are socialists*. כאן על שום שהם זריזים ופקחים יתר על המידה ושם על שום שהם מהווים מעמסה מבלי להביא כל תועלת - *Here they are condemned for being excessively industrious and clever, while elsewhere they are accused of being a burden on society who contribute nothing*. כאן על שום שהם חרדים וקנאים יתר על המידה ושם על שהם מתקדמים ומפיצים דעות חילוניות - *In one society, Jews are hated for being excessively religious and zealous, while in another they are condemned for being too progressive and spreading secular ideas*.

The accusations contradict one another, often completely. As Rav Ziemba observes, כך תמיד סותרים הנימוקים זה את זה ללא קורטוב של הגיון ושיקול דעת - *Thus, the explanations invariably contradict one another, without the slightest trace of logic or reason*. The hatred does not arise from the accusations. Rather, the accusations are fashioned to justify a hatred that already exists.

This explains Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's unusual terminology. The Gemara teaches that רבי שמעון דריש טעמא דקרא - *Rabbi Shimon seeks the underlying reason for the Torah's commandments* (Bava Metzia 115a). Nevertheless, when discussing Esav's hatred of Yaakov, Rabbi Shimon offers no explanation. Instead, he declares הלכה היא בידוע שעשו שונא ליעקב - *It is an established principle that Esav hates Yaakov*. Rav Ziemba explains that שנאתו של עשו ליעקב היא בבחינת הלכה פסוקה, ללא כל טעם ונימוק - *Esav's hatred of Yaakov is like an established halachic ruling, without any discernible reason or explanation*. The hatred is a recurring reality that cannot be explained by the constantly changing arguments advanced to justify it. The comparison to a halachic ruling emphasizes the certainty of the observation, not a binding legal determination that every non-Jew necessarily hates Jews. (Chiddushei HaGRaMZ, siman 48.)

Yet the recognition that עשו שונא ליעקב - *Esav hates Yaakov* did not prevent Yaakov from attempting to appease his brother. Even after obtaining the bechorah and the berachos, Yaakov sought reconciliation. When he returned to Eretz Canaan after twenty years, he knew that Esav might still intend to kill him. Nevertheless, he sent gifts and spoke respectfully to his brother, hoping to restore their relationship. At the same time, he prepared to defend himself and his family. As Rashi explains, Yaakov prepared לדורון ולתפילה ולמלחמה - *With gifts, with prayer, and for war* (Vayishlach 32:9).

Yaakov's willingness to seek reconciliation did not arise merely from fear. He did not seek to harm Esav unnecessarily even when he had the upper hand. Nor did he assume that because Esav hated him, he was required to respond with an equal hatred. His objective was not to mirror Esav's conduct, but to remain faithful to his own mission. That mission was to bring the knowledge of Hashem into the world, ultimately leading all mankind to recognize His sovereignty. In our tefillos on Rosh Hashanah, we express this hope: וידע כל פעול כי אתה פעלתו ויבין כל יצור כי אתה יצרתו - *Every being will know that You created it, and every creature will understand that You fashioned it*. Similarly, in Aleinu we pray וכל בני בשר יקראו בשמך להפנות אליך כל רשעי ארץ - *All mankind will call upon Your name, turning all the wicked of the earth toward You*. The ultimate aspiration is not simply that our enemies be defeated, but that they abandon their hatred and recognize Hashem.

This principle is reflected in the Gemara's account of Rabbi Meir and Bruriah. Rabbi Meir was troubled by wicked individuals who caused him considerable suffering, and he prayed that they should die. His wife Bruriah pointed to the pasuk יתמו חטאים מן הארץ - *Let sins cease from the earth* (Tehillim 104:35). She explained חטאים ולא חוטאים -

Sins, not sinners. Rather than praying for their destruction, Rabbi Meir should pray that they abandon their wickedness. He accepted her argument and prayed for them, and they repented (Berachos 10a). The objective is to eliminate evil, not to make hatred of evildoers an end in itself.

This distinction is no less important in the relationship between Yaakov and Esav. Recognizing the reality of Esav's hatred does not require Yaakov to respond with hatred of his own. He must remain vigilant and be prepared to protect himself. When necessary, he must confront Esav and resist his aggression. But even while doing so, he can continue to hope that Esav will ultimately change.

The knowledge that עשו שונא ליעקב - *Esav hates Yaakov* therefore has two very different implications. It teaches Yaakov that he cannot afford to be naive about the danger he faces. But it does not relieve him of his responsibility to seek peace when peace is possible, or to hope for a world in which hatred will finally disappear.

Yaakov's own conduct provides the example. Knowing that Esav hated him, and knowing that his brother was approaching with four hundred men, he nevertheless sought to appease him. He prepared for war without abandoning the possibility of reconciliation. Even the knowledge that Esav's hatred might never disappear did not cause Yaakov to surrender his own values or his hope that his brother might ultimately change.

Adapted and excerpted from
Torat Har Etzion

Esav's Kibbud Av and Yitzchak's Love
by Rav Yaakov Medan

After Yaakov receives the berachos, Esav declares, יקרבו ימי אבל אבי ואהרגה את יעקב אחי - *Let the days of mourning for my father come, and then I will kill Yaakov my brother* (Toldos 27:41). Esav makes no secret of his murderous intentions. Yet he postpones his revenge because he does not want to cause his father pain.

Chazal speak harshly of Esav. They tell us that on the day he despised the bechorah, he committed murder, violated a betrothed woman, and worshipped avodah zarah (Bava Basra 16b). Yet they also attribute extraordinary merit to his kibbud av. The Pesikta declares, מי איחר כבודו של יעקב בעולם הזה כבוד גדול שכיבד עשו את אביו - *What delayed Yaakov's glory in this world? The great honor Esav showed his father* (Pesikta Rabbasi 23).

Why did Chazal attach such importance to Esav's kibbud av? Was bringing his father game and preparing his meals really such an extraordinary achievement? And if his merit was that he refrained from killing Yaakov while Yitzchak was alive, is that praiseworthy? Surely a man cannot claim credit merely because he postpones murdering his brother.

There is also the question of Yitzchak himself. If Esav was such a rasha, how could Yitzchak love him and intend to bless him? Did Yitzchak not recognize his son's character? And what exactly did he intend to give Esav?

Two Brothers, Two Shares

A careful reading of the berachos reveals an important distinction. The berachah Yitzchak originally intended for Esav promises מטל השמים ומשמני הארץ - *the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth*, together with political leadership: הוה גביר לאחיך - *Be master over your brothers* (Toldos 27:28–29). There is no mention of inheriting Eretz Yisrael or continuing Avraham's covenant.

Only later, when Yitzchak knowingly blesses Yaakov, does he declare ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם לך ולזרעך אתך לרשתך את ארץ מגריך - *May He give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and your descendants, so that you may inherit the land in which you have sojourned* (28:4). Rav Medan suggests that Yitzchak may never have intended to give Esav Avraham's spiritual inheritance. Instead, he envisioned a division of responsibilities between his sons, somewhat like the later division among the shevatim. Yaakov would inherit Avraham's covenant and spiritual mission, while Esav would receive material prosperity and worldly leadership. Together, the two brothers would form one nation, each contributing his distinctive strengths.

Yitzchak did not know what Rivkah had been told: ושני לאמים ממעיך יפרדו - *Two nations will separate from your womb* (Toldos 25:23). He hoped that his sons would remain united. Rivkah, however, feared that Yitzchak intended to give Esav the covenantal berachah itself. According to this interpretation, the parents understood the purpose of the berachah differently, and neither fully anticipated how Hashem's plan would unfold.

But why would Yitzchak want Esav to exercise worldly leadership?

The Sickle and the Sword

Perhaps the difficulty arises because we imagine the homes of Avraham and Yitzchak exclusively as places of Torah and tefillah. Certainly they were centers of avodas Hashem, but the Avos also confronted the dangers of the world around them. Avraham went to war with three hundred and eighteen men to rescue Lot, defeating the armies of four kings.

Yitzchak, too, was not merely a man sitting in his tent. He cultivated the land and achieved extraordinary agricultural success: וימצא בשנה ההוא מאה שערים - *He found in that year a hundredfold* (Toldos 26:12). His prosperity provoked jealousy and hostility. Avimelech told him לך מעמנו - *Leave us* (26:16), and the Pelishtim repeatedly disputed the wells that Yitzchak's servants dug. At Esek and Sitnah, he withdrew rather than fight, until finally, at Rechovos, the disputes ceased.

Rav Medan suggests that Esav may have played a role in defending Yitzchak's household and property. Although the Torah does not explicitly describe such a role, it would help explain why Yitzchak valued a son described as איש ידע ציד איש שדה - *a skilled hunter, a man of the field* (Toldos 25:27).

Perhaps Yitzchak saw in Esav qualities necessary for leadership in a dangerous world. A nation requires not only Torah and spiritual guidance but also people capable of defending its land and protecting its inhabitants. Between Yitzchak the farmer and Esav the hunter, Rav Medan envisions a partnership between the sickle and the sword, an idea also developed by Rav Yoel Bin-Nun in *Pirkei HaAvot*. This may explain why Yitzchak intended to give Esav worldly leadership. As the Rambam explains, one of a king's responsibilities is to establish justice and defend his people in war (Hilchos Melachim 4:10). Yitzchak may have recognized in Esav the strength and courage needed for that role.

But strength alone does not make a worthy leader.

A Mitzvah That Prevents a Sin

Two seemingly contradictory traits stand out in Esav's character. He desperately wants his father's berachah and weeps bitterly when he loses it. Yet bloodshed appears to come easily to him. He is described as אדמוני - *ruddy*, a description associated by Chazal with bloodshed, and Yitzchak tells him ועל חרבך תחיה - *By your sword you shall live* (Toldos 27:40).

From Esav's perspective, his brother had taken both his bechorah and his father's berachah. He knew nothing of the prophecy Rivkah had received or her instructions to Yaakov. His response was murderous anger. Yet at the moment when his desire for revenge was strongest, his concern for his father restrained him.

This is the remarkable point. Esav's kibbud av did not merely lead him to bring Yitzchak food or fulfill his wishes. It prevented him from carrying out a terrible sin. כבד את אביך - *Honor your father* restrained him from violating לא תרצח - *Do not murder*, the very next commandment in the Aseres HaDibros (Yisro 20:12–13).

This was not a מצוה הבאה בעבירה - *a mitzvah accomplished through a sin*, but a מצוה המונעת עבירה - *a mitzvah that prevents a sin*.

That does not make Esav a tzaddik. His murderous intentions were themselves wicked, and his restraint did not erase his other sins. Nevertheless, Chazal recognized that even within such a deeply flawed person, one mitzvah retained enough strength to restrain him from acting on his worst impulses. This was a genuine merit, even if it fell far short of complete righteousness.

The Two Edges of the Sword

A sword has שני צדדים - *two edges*. The same courage and capacity for violence that enable a person to defend the innocent can also become instruments of cruelty and murder. A warrior who repeatedly confronts danger may gradually lose the distinction between force that is necessary and force that merely appears convenient. The boundary between defending one's people and destroying one's personal enemies can become dangerously blurred.

Rav Medan suggests that something similar may have happened to Esav. Perhaps he initially used his strength to protect Yitzchak's household but eventually crossed the boundary between legitimate force and murder. This reconstruction is not stated in the pesukim, but it offers a possible way to reconcile Yitzchak's appreciation of Esav with Chazal's descriptions of his wickedness.

Yitzchak may have recognized Esav's courage and capacity for leadership without fully appreciating how those qualities had been corrupted. The very strength that could have made Esav a defender became a danger when he failed to restrain it.

David, Esav's Double

One of Rav Medan's most striking comparisons is between Esav and David HaMelech.

David, too, is described as אדמוני - *ruddy* (Shmuel I 16:12). He, too, gathered four hundred men around him, protected people and property, and possessed extraordinary military courage. Yet David also encountered situations in which anger or the opportunity for revenge might have led him to shed innocent blood.

When Shaul entered the cave at Ein Gedi, David's men urged him to kill his pursuer. David approached Shaul but cut only the corner of his garment, and afterward felt remorse even for that act. He refused to strike Hashem's anointed king (Shmuel I 24).

Later, when Naval insulted David and refused to provide food for his men, David set out intending to kill the males of Naval's household. Only Avigail's intervention prevented the bloodshed. David recognized the wisdom of her words and thanked Hashem for sending her to restrain him (Shmuel I 25).

David possessed the courage of a warrior, but he also knew when to hold back his sword. Esav possessed similar strength, yet repeatedly allowed his violent impulses to overcome him.

חוט השערה - *a hair's breadth* can separate the sword used in the service of a mitzvah from the sword used for murder. The distinction lies not in the warrior's physical strength but in his willingness to submit that strength to the will of Hashem.

And here we return to Esav's kibbud av. At the very moment when he wanted to kill Yaakov, the mitzvah of honoring his father imposed a limit upon his conduct. For that moment, Esav displayed the restraint that a warrior must possess if his strength is to serve a righteous purpose.

One Last Thought

We can now understand both Yitzchak's love for Esav and the extraordinary importance Chazal attached to his kibbud av. Yitzchak may have seen in Esav a son capable of protecting the family and exercising worldly leadership. Those abilities were real, even if Esav ultimately failed to direct them properly.

Esav's tragedy was not that he lacked strength, courage, or even the capacity for genuine mitzvos. It was that he failed to bring those qualities together under the discipline of Torah. His kibbud av revealed that he possessed the capacity for restraint, but he did not make that restraint the governing principle of his life.

Yaakov's way was different. He possessed extraordinary physical strength, as Chazal emphasize when describing his removal of the stone covering the well: להודיעך שכחו גדול - *to teach us how great his strength was* (Rashi, Vayeitzei 29:10). Yet when confronted by Esav, he fled rather than fight. When he later returned to Eretz Yisrael, he prepared for the possibility of war but first sought reconciliation.

The Torah does not teach that force is always wrong. Avraham went to war to rescue Lot, and David HaMelech fought to defend Yisrael. There are times when a sword is necessary. But the ability to use force does not determine whether its use is justified.

The true test of strength is not merely whether a person can draw his sword, but whether he knows when to return it to its sheath.