**The Voice is the Voice of Yaakov
and the Hands are the Hands of Esav**

**Dr. David Neustadter**

The story of the *berakha* that Yaakov “steals” from Esav is difficult to understand and leaves us with many questions. Primary among them are the following:

1. Why is it that Yitzchak wants to give the *berakha* to Esav and Rivka wants it to go to Yaakov?
2. What is Rivka’s intention in instructing Yaakov to trick his father? Does she believe that it is possible to steal a *berakha*? Isn’t it obvious that Yitzchak will realize what happened when Esav eventually returns?
3. What is the “*charada gedola*” that Yitzchak experiences upon Esav’s return, and what causes him to reconfirm his *berakha* to Yaakov by declaring, “*gam barukh yihyeh*,” “He shall remain blessed” (*Bereishit* 27:33)?
4. When Yitzchak senses that “the voice is the voice of Yaakov and the hands are the hands of Esav” (27:22), why does he not continue to investigate who is really standing before him? Before this, he is clearly unsure who it is, and he makes efforts to clarify the issue. Why does he bless Yaakov at this point if he is still unsure?

Many classical and modern commentaries have dealt with some or all of these questions, but none of them provide a coherent explanation of the entire story basing it on a fundamental disagreement between Yitzchak and Rivka about which of their sons is more fit to be the father of the Jewish nation. Some of the commentaries suggest that the *berakha* being given here is only the material *berakha* and that Yitzchak always intended to give the *birkat Avraham* to Yaakov, but even if that is the case, I would still expect the story to contain a philosophical message about leadership of the Jewish people. If the story does not contain such a fundamental message, it is difficult to understand why it is told to us in such detail.

In this article, I attempt to present an explanation of the entire story according to which its basis is a fundamental disagreement between Yitzchak and Rivka.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch is troubled by the idea that a *berakha* can be “stolen.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He therefore suggests that the *berakha* that Yitzchak gave to Yaakov, thinking that he was Esav, was ineffective; the *berakha* to Yaakov took effect only later, when Yitzchak, knowing about whom he was speaking, said, “*gam barukh yihyeh*.” For this reason, R. Hirsch claims that Rivka could not possibly have meant to deceive Yitzchak, because this would not have resulted in Yaakov getting a *berakha*. Rather, the “deception” must have been meant to convey a message to Yitzchak, which was in turn intended to convince him to give the *berakha* to Yaakov instead of Esav.

R. Hirsch suggests that the message that Rivka intended to convey to Yitzchak through this deception was how easily he could be fooled. Once Yitzchak realized how easily Yaakov tricked him, he would also realize that Esav had been tricking him all along and that Yaakov was the one who should be receiving the *berakha*.

I suggest that Rivka was indeed attempting to send a message to Yitzchak through the deception, as described by R. Hirsch, but that the message that she was hoping to convey, which ultimately led Yitzchak to give the *berakha* to Yaakov instead of Esav, was a message of more fundamental significance.

I suggest that Yitzchak and Rivka agreed that a strong spiritual foundation is the most important attribute for the leader of the future Jewish nation. However, due to their different backgrounds, they disagreed about which of their sons showed the greater potential to achieve the necessary spiritual greatness.

Each of the *Avot* related to God in a different way. This is described by a *midrash* that notes the different ways in which the *Avot* referred to the place where they found God:

Avraham called it a mountain, Yitzchak called it a field, and Yaakov called it a house. (*Midrash Tehillim* 81; *Pesachim* 88a)

Avraham related to God as found off in the distance, on the mountaintops. It is notable that Avraham never initiates a conversation with God. Yitzchak related to God as a bit closer to home, but still outside in the field. He did not have to go up to the mountains to reach God, but he still had to go out into nature; he “went out to talk [to God] in the field” (*Bereishit* 24:63).[[2]](#footnote-2) Yaakov brought God into his home. He related to God as being there with him in his daily life; he did not need mountains or fields to help him achieve closeness to God.

The fact that Yitzchak related to God through nature is what led him to prefer Esav over Yaakov. He was well aware that Esav was not a spiritual person, but he saw within him a connection with nature that provided the foundation and potential for spiritual growth. Esav was “a man of the field” (25:27), and Yitzchak was sure that Esav, through his closeness to nature, would eventually achieve spirituality. Yaakov, in contrast, was a spiritual person, but he was an “*ish tam yoshev ohalim*” (ibid.). His spirituality was based on philosophy and thought, not on a relationship to God through the natural world. Yitzchak viewed this type of spirituality as weak and fragile. He felt that Esav had a better chance of being able to pass on a strong spiritual foundation to his children than did Yaakov.

The connection between Yitzchak’s belief that God is to be found through nature and his decision to bless Esav is highlighted by Yitzchak’s proclamation upon smelling Esav’s clothes upon Yaakov – “Behold the scent of my son is like the scent of the field that God has blessed!” (27:27) – which is immediately followed by Yitzchak giving the *berakha* to Yaakov.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Rivka, on the other hand, having grown up in Betuel’s house, viewed Esav as following in the ways of her family. She knew all too well that a strong connection with nature does not necessarily lead to spirituality. She may have agreed that a connection with nature is one way to achieve spirituality, but she knew that it is not sufficient and believed that it is not necessary. She therefore believed that Yaakov, who had achieved spirituality, was much more likely to pass on a strong spiritual foundation to his children than Esav.

I believe that this was a fundamental disagreement between Yitzchak and Rivka about the nature of human spirituality and the nature of their children, and as spiritual people and good parents, they probably discussed it often. For this reason, when the moment of truth arrived and Yitzchak was about to give the *berakha* to Esav, Rivka knew that nothing she could say would change his mind. Her only chance was to try to demonstrate to Yitzchak in a convincing manner that she was right. By showing Yitzchak how easily Yaakov could “dress up” as Esav, she intended to convince him that the features that he admired in Esav were externalities and not the important fundamental qualities that he thought they were.

According to this explanation, the story of the blessings unfolds as follows. When Yaakov approaches Yitzchak, both his speed and his voice (or language) make Yitzchak uncertain of who is really standing before him. Yaakov’s response, “*Ki hikra Hashem Elokekha lefanai*,” “Because Hashem your God arranged it for me” (27:20), solves the problem of the speed, but makes the suspicion of the language more severe. Yitzchak, unsure but hopeful that his beloved Esav has finally begun to speak of God like his brother, asks to feel him in order to be sure that it is really Esav. Upon feeling him, Yitzchak exclaims, “The voice is the voice of Yaakov and the hands are the hands of Esav” (27:22) and blesses him. This exclamation is not one of uncertainty, but rather one of confidence and satisfaction. He is now convinced that it is Esav who stands before him and that Esav has finally achieved the “voice of Yaakov,” the spirituality that Yitzchak has been waiting all these years for him to achieve. In Yitzchak’s eyes, the combination of the voice of Yaakov and the hands of Esav is the ideal combination for a Jewish leader, and he has long been confident that Esav would eventually attain it.

When Esav returns and Yitzchak realizes that it was actually Yaakov who had been standing before him, he is suddenly struck by the reality that Rivka has been telling him all along. The “hands of Esav” and the scent of the field are external features that Yaakov can easily achieve, whereas the “voice of Yaakov” is a fundamental quality that Esav is unlikely to ever attain. This realization is the “*charada gedola ad meod*” (27:33) that Yitzchak experiences and that results in his decision to give the *berakha* to Yaakov by declaring, “*gam barukh yihyeh*” (ibid.).

1. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah*, *Bereishit* 27:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi quotes the *Midrash Rabba*, which explains that “*lasuach*” means “to pray.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interestingly, the verse cited in support for the statement that “Yitzchak called it a field” is different in the *midrash* and in the Gemara. Whereas the Gemara quotes the verse “Yitzchak went out to talk in the field,” the *midrash* quotes the verse “Behold, the scent of my son is like the scent of the field that God has blessed!” The fact that the *midrash* quotes this verse implies that the author of this *midrash* maintained that the word “field” in this verse is a reference to the place where God is found. This implies that Yitzchak felt that Esav “smelled like” God; Yitzchak associated Esav’s smell with his own relationship to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)