**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT TOLDOT**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Toldot tells the story of the blessings which Yitzchak intended to grant to his son, Esav, but which were given to Yaakov, who came before Yitzchak disguised as Esav. We read that Yitzchak instructed Esav to hunt game and prepare meat for him, whereupon he would grant him his blessings. The Torah writes that Esav left “to hunt game to bring” (27:5).

Noting the seemingly superfluous word “*le-havi*” (“to bring”) in this verse, the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:13), cited by Rashi, comments, “If he didn’t find game, he would bring via theft.” The Torah’s emphasis on Esav’s intent “to bring” game for his father suggests that Esav was unconditionally committed to this goal, even to the point of violating the most elementary ethical norms if this became necessary.

These comments of the Midrash should perhaps lead us to read another, more famous, Midrashic passage in a new light. A bit later in *Bereishit Rabba* (65:16), the Midrash cites Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel as effusively praising the standard at which Esav showed respect to his father. Rabban Shimon remarked that although he himself devotedly tended to his father, he did so in his ordinary clothing, whereas when he left the house, he made a point of wearing clean clothes. Esav, by contrast, tended to his father on a higher standard, as he always ensured to wear dignified clothing when he served his father, feeling that it would be inappropriate to come before his father appearing unkempt. In light of the Midrash’s comment cited above, we might suggest that Rabban Shimon Gamliel’s remark is not entirely complimentary. While on the one hand Esav’s devotion to his father is certainly admirable, it is clear from the Midrash’s depiction of Esav that he lived a morally imbalanced and hypocritical life. His exaggerated emphasis on the ideal of *kibbud av* contrasted sharply with his immoral conduct in every other area of life, and, as such, it is not necessarily something for us to emulate. The fact that Esav was prepared to steal if this was necessary to fulfill his father’s request bespeaks a woefully distorted scale of priorities, and shows that he exaggeratedly pursued excellence with regard to one particular important value while entirely neglecting all others.

*Chazal*’s depiction of Esav’s exaggerated fulfillment of *kibbud av* serves as a warning not to overemphasize one area of religious life, viewing it as the central Torah value around which all other values revolve. Torah life requires carefully balancing a wide array of different obligations, responsibilities and ideals, and when we inordinately focus upon one, we necessarily end up compromising the others. Just as Esav was prepared to steal for the sake of fulfilling his father’s wishes, we, too, are prone to neglect certain religious responsibilities for the sake of excelling in others. *Chazal* here alert us to the vital importance of balance and proportion, and instruct us to ensure that our passionate devotion to one religious ideal does not lead us to neglect the others.

Sunday

Yesterday, we made mention of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s remark cited by the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:16) marveling at the level at which Esav showed respect to his father:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: I served my father my entire life, yet I did not serve him 1/100th of how Esav served his father. When I would serve my father, I would serve him with soiled clothing, and when I would leave to travel, I would go out with clean clothes. But Esav, when he would serve his father, he served him only with royal garments. He said, “It is not respectful to Father to serve him other than in royal garments.”

How might we understand Rabban Shimon’s praise for Esav’s respect for his father? Why was it so admirable that Esav ensured to wear fine clothing when tending to his father, and if this is indeed a virtue, then why did not Rabban Shimon do the same?

Yesterday, we proposed (based on an earlier Midrashic passage) that Rabban Shimon perhaps did not intend to praise Esav, but to the contrary, pointed to Esav’s hypocrisy, as he ensured to maintain the highest possible standards of respect for his father while ignoring other, far more basic, moral obligations. There may, however, be an additional way to explain Rabban Shimon’s remark.

Possibly, Rabban Shimon here observes the common phenomenon of people wearing “clean clothes” outside the home, but wearing “soiled clothing” inside the home. There is a tendency to appear and conduct oneself in a dignified and respectable manner around people outside the family, but to lower standards within the home. Many people, for example, seldom express anger and frustration outside the home, but frequently lose their temper among their family members. They ensure to maintain a refined, disciplined and controlled demeanor in their dealings outside the family, but are rude, discourteous and insensitive to their family members. Understandably, around family members we tend to feel more comfortable and at ease than we do among other people, and thus difficult emotions which we suppress in public are released in the home environment.

Rabban Shimon, however, takes note of the fact that Esav did just the opposite. As *Chazal* describe elsewhere, Yitzchak was misled to believe that Esav was noble and righteous, because in the home he conducted himself with dignity and piety, even as outside the home he acted without any moral constraints. Rabban Shimon points out that whereas he – and most people – save their “clean clothes” for outside the home, Esav did just the opposite, wearing his “finest clothes” specifically at home, in his relationship with his parents, and wore “soiled clothes” outside the home, where he violated even the most basic norms of decency.

If so, then Rabban Shimon here teaches us to learn from Esav’s example in the sense of trying to restore, at least to some extent, the balance between our behavior inside and outside the home. Esav is not to be admired for the sharp contrast between his noble conduct in his father’s presence and his immoral conduct elsewhere, but many of us are guilty of the opposite fault – saving our “finest clothing” for outside the home, and showing our family our “soiled clothing.” If there’s something to learn from Esav’s example, it is that we should always make an effort to wear our “finest clothing” in our dealings with all people, even within the privacy of our homes and in our relationships within our families.

Monday

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 67) draws a curious association between the story of Yaakov seizing the blessing intended for his brother, Esav, and the story of the Purim miracle. The Torah tells that when Esav learned that Yaakov had disguised himself and received Esav’s blessing, Esav cried bitterly (“*va-yitz’ak tze’aka gedola u-mara*” – 27:34). The Midrash notes that very similar terminology is used to describe Mordekhai’s cry upon hearing of Haman’s decree to exterminate the Jews (“*va-yiz’ak ze’aka gedola u-mara*” – Ester 4:1). Based on this parallel, the Midrash comments that Yaakov was punished for the pain he caused Esav, when the Jews were nearly annihilated during the times of Mordekhai.

How might we explain the connection drawn by the Midrash between these two incidents? Clearly, *Chazal*’s intent is to underscore the gravity of causing somebody emotional distress. But what significance might there be to the connection made between Esav’s cries after losing his blessing and Mordekhai’s cries in Shushan?

The answer perhaps lies in the obvious point of distinction between these two episodes. Esav cried over a personal matter, over the loss of something that was important and precious to him, whereas Mordekhai wept upon learning of a looming catastrophe, of his death and that of the entire Jewish Nation. At first glance, the fact that the same terminology is used in both contexts might lead us to look scornfully at Esav’s cries. He cried as bitterly as Mordekhai did, despite the fact that he wept over losing a blessing and Mordekhai wept over the impending extermination of many thousands of innocent men, women and children. Seeing the textual parallel between Esav’s and Mordekhai’s cries, we would, instinctively, read the description of Esav’s cry as almost satirical, depicting his angst in exaggerated terms.

It is perhaps to counter this reading of the verse that the Midrash made its comment linking these two episodes. *Chazal* here teach us that the anguish people feel after being victimized can, indeed, be as painful and intense as Mordekhai’s anguish upon hearing of Haman’s edict. While we ourselves are to strive to overcome the pain over our personal losses and struggles, and forgive those who have wronged us, we cannot necessarily expect this of those whom we have wronged. The Midrash teaches of the need for sensitivity to other people’s personal pain, even when it initially strikes us as exaggerated and unwarranted. Very often, a personal struggle which to others might seem trivial can inflict immense emotional pain to which we must be sympathetic. It is wrong to flippantly dismiss people’s distress as exaggerated. People react very differently to the same experiences. An incident that one person can handle without trouble can cause great pain to somebody else, and one person’s ability to cope in trying circumstances might not be the same as somebody facing those same circumstances. *Chazal* here convey a vitally important message about empathy and sensitivity, calling upon us to acknowledge people’s distress even if it appears to us unwarranted or exaggerated.

Tuesday

The final verses of Parashat Toldot tell of Esav’s plan to kill his brother, Yaakov, in revenge for Yaakov’s having schemed to receive the blessing which Yitzchak had intended to give to Esav. After losing his blessing, Esav said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father will soon arrive, and I will kill my brother Yaakov” (27:41).

The familiar explanation of this verse is that which is offered by Rashi and the Radak, who explain that Esav decided to delay his revenge in order to avoid causing his father distress. In order to spare Yitzchak the anguish of losing his son, Esav decided that he would wait until his elderly father passed on before killing Yaakov.

Chizkuni explains differently, writing that Esav’s intent was that he had no reason to fear killing Yaakov because Yitzchak was already elderly and would not beget any more children who would avenge Yaakov’s death. He was saying that since “the days of mourning for my father will soon arrive,” meaning, Yitzchak is already aged, and thus no longer capable of reproducing, “I will kill my brother Yaakov” without fear of another family member avenging his blood.

A much different interpretation to this verse is given by Malbim and *Akeidat Yitzchak*, one which diametrically opposes the explanation given by Rashi and the Radak. Whereas Rashi and the Radak understood that Esav decided to delay his revenge for the sake of his father, Malbim and *Akeidat Yitzchak* write that to the contrary, Esav was specifically expressing his disregard for his father’s wellbeing. He was saying that he was prepared even to hasten Yitzchak’s death by killing Yaakov, which would likely cause Yitzchak life-threatening anguish. Esav was specifically expressing his willingness to accelerate his father’s physical decline for the sake of taking his revenge without any delay. Malbim goes so far as to say that Esav’s rage was directed not only towards Yaakov, but also towards Yitzchak. He resented the fact that Yitzchak refused to retract his blessing which was mistakenly granted to Yaakov, and that when he finally agreed to bless Esav, he declared that Esav would be subservient to Yaakov (“*ve-et achikha ta’avod*” – 27:40). Esav there had no qualms about hastening his aged father’s physical decline by murdering his son, as he was enraged at them both.

Rav Avraham Korman, in *Ha-avot Ve-ha’shevatim* (pp. 143-144), notes how this perspective – that Esav sought to exact revenge from both Yaakov and his parents – may possibly explain the final verse in this *parasha*, which tells of Esav’s marriage to his cousin, the daughter of Yishmael. The Torah relates that upon seeing how Yitzchak and Rivka sent Yaakov to Charan, to the home of Rivka’s brother, Lavan, where he was to marry Lavan’s daughter, and that Yitzchak and Rivka disapproved of his marriage to local Canaanite women, Esav decided to marry Yishmael’s daughter. This account is difficult to understand for several reasons. Most obviously, the Torah emphasizes that Esav married his cousin “*al nashav*” – in addition to his two current wives, clearly indicating that he did not divorce his first two wives (as Rashi noted). Seemingly, if his motivation for marrying Yishmael’s daughter was to please his parents, who disapproved of his earlier marriages, there was little purpose in marrying a third wife without divorcing the first two. The explanation, Rav Korman suggests, might be that as Esav now threatened Yaakov and Yitzchak, thrusting the family into bitter conflict, alliances began to form. Yitzchak and Rivka sent Yaakov to Lavan and told him to marry one of Lavan’s daughters, essentially trying to draw Rivka’s family’s support in this struggle. Esav realized that he needed to counter the support his parents would be receiving from Lavan by forging an alliance with another part of the family. His Canaanite wives were no help for him in this effort, as his parents felt no connection to them to begin with. Esav therefore turned to Yishmael, Yitzchak’s brother, figuring he could exploit the resentment Yishmael presumably harbored towards Yitzchak, his younger brother who was their father’s inheritor and successor. Esav’s decision to marry Yishmael’s daughter was thus in direct response to his parents’ sending Yaakov to marry Lavan’s daughter, seeking to draw support from Yishmael to counterbalance the support they sought to receive from their family in Charan.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Toldot tells of the agricultural success that Yitzchak enjoyed during the period he lived among the Philistines in Gerar, despite the harsh drought conditions that prevailed in the region at that time. We read that in his first year in Gerar, his fields yielded “*mei’a she’arim*” (26:12), which is commonly translated as, “one-hundredfold.” This translation is based on the familiar usage of the word “*sha’ar*” to mean “measure” or “rate,” such that the expression “*mei’a she’arim*” refers to one-hundred times the anticipated or normal quantity that Yitzchak’s lands should have produced.

However, Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch observes that the word “*sha’ar*” has this meaning only in rabbinic literature, but not in Biblical Hebrew. Throughout the *Tanakh*, Rav Hirsch writes, the word “*sha’ar*” means “gate,” or, as in Sefer Melakhim II (7:1), a marketplace, which was often located near the entrance to the city. Accordingly, Rav Hirsch maintains that in the Torah’s description of Yitzchak’s yield, too, the word “*she’arim*” must be understood to mean “markets.” He explains that Yitzchak’s lands produced one-hundred stocks of merchandise; meaning, his agricultural enterprise yielded one-hundred times the normal amount that he would bring to the market for sale.

Rav Hirsch adds that the conclusion of this verse – “and the Lord blessed him” – should be understood on this basis. Intuitively, we might have assumed that the Torah here simply gives us perspective on Yitzchak’s remarkable success, attributing it to God’s special assistance. Rav Hirsch, however, explains the conclusion of this verse differently. He writes, “Inasmuch as he did not usuriously hoard up the blessing but brought it out generously to the markets, in that year of famine used his blessing to the general good, he becomes recognized as the man blessed by God.” According to Rav Hirsch’s reading, Yitzchak was considered “blessed” not because of his unusually large yield, but because he turned his large yield into one-hundred “*she’arim*,” making the produce available in the marketplace during a period of shortage. Material prosperity alone does not make a person “blessed.” True blessing is when a person becomes a vehicle for other people’s blessings, when one is given wealth which is then shared with others and used for the general welfare.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Toldot of Yaakov’s “purchase” of the birthright from his older twin, Esav. After Esav asked Yaakov to feed him some of the food he was preparing, Yaakov asked for the rights of the firstborn in exchange. Esav happily agreed, dismissing the significance of these privileges: “Here I am going to die; why do I need the birthright?” (25:32). The Torah concludes this narrative by telling, “*Va-yivez Esav et ha-bekhora*” – “Esav scorned the birthright” (25:34).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 63) comments, curiously, that Esav in truth scorned not only the birthright, but also the belief in *techiyat ha-meitim* – the future resurrection of the death. Esav’s rejection of the birthright, the Midrash teaches, included as well the rejection of this tenet of Jewish faith.

What might have prompted *Chazal* to introduce the belief in *techiyat ha-meitim* in this context? Of what relevance is this tenet to the story of Esav’s disregard for the privileges of the firstborn?

An insightful explanation is offered by Rav Shraga Pollack, in his work *Tishbi*. Symbolically, the concept of *techiyat ha-meitim* signifies not merely the future resurrection, but also the ability we all have to “resurrect” ourselves, to recover from grave failures, to rise from even the deepest abyss of sin, and to change even after having reached the point of spiritual “death.” This ability, however, depends upon our belief in ourselves, in our capabilities, in our capacity to grow and achieve, and in our latent potential which has yet to be maximized. Esav’s rejection of the significance of the birthright reflected a deeper form of rejection – a rejection of his God-given capabilities. The birthright, like any privilege a person is granted, is an opportunity to achieve. We are all given skills, talents, knowledge, experience and a myriad of other favorable conditions that we can utilize in order to produce and accomplish during our lives. Esav’s rejecting the birthright meant rejecting the blessings with which he was endowed, essentially denying his potential. Indeed, when Esav looked at his existence, all he saw was “I am going to die.” He did not recognize his ability to make his life meaningful and worthwhile, the blessings he was given that he could use to achieve greatness and to favorably impact upon the world. Esav’s rejection of his birthright was in effect a statement of despair, of meaninglessness, declaring that anything God had given him was useless and pointless.

Such rejection of one’s potential and capabilities is tantamount to a rejection of the belief in “*techiyat ha-meitim*,” the belief in our ability to rise, to change and to grow. We are to embrace our “birthright,” all the talents and privileges that God has granted us, recognizing that they are given to us for the sake of developing ourselves and making a significant impact upon the world.

Friday

Parashat Toldot tells of Yitzchak’s experiences with the Philistines after settling in their region, in the city of Gerar, during a period of drought. Yitzchak prospered after moving to the region, as his fields produced many times more than the usual yield. He became very wealthy, arousing the envy of the Philistines, to the point where the Philistine king, Avimelekh, drove him from the city (26:16). After relocating, Yitzchak found himself victimized by unscrupulous Philistine shepherds who stole his wells. Later, Avimelekh initiates a meeting of reconciliation, traveling to Yitzchak’s home in Be’er Sheva to propose a formal treaty between the two parties. The Torah writes that they made a treaty and feasted together, after which Yitzchak bid the king and his general farewell, “and they left him in peace” (26:31).

The plain meaning of this conclusion, of course, is that the Torah seeks to emphasize that the Yitzchak’s relations with the Philistines finally became peaceful. After having endured their hostility for quite some time, he once and for all enjoyed amicable relations with them.

Rav Simcha Bunim of Pashischa, however, detects an additional dimension of this description of Avimelekh’s “peaceful” departure from Yitzchak’s presence, suggesting an element of criticism. A conscientious person, Rav Simcha Bunim writes, does not leave the presence of an outstanding figure in a completely “peaceful” state of mind. An encounter with a righteous person should leave one feeling somewhat uneasy and uncomfortable with himself. Upon beholding greatness, we ought to feel some degree of lowliness, recognizing how far we are from maximizing our potential. When we take leave of a giant, we are to feel small. Avimelekh was too comfortable with himself, and thus he is derisively described as leaving Yitzchak’s presence “in peace,” without any feelings of unease or smallness.

Rav Simcha Bunim’s remark is consistent with Avimelekh’s arrogant character as it is presented in this story. Avimelekh falsely and self-righteously told Yitzchak that he sought a treaty to ensure that Yitzchak would not cause harm to the Philistines, the way they caused him no harm. He spoke of himself and his people as the righteous victims in this tense relationship, as though they treated Yitzchak fairly and had reason to fear his unprovoked hostility. Rav Simcha Bunim, it seems, observes that this blatant dishonesty is rooted in exaggerated self-assurance and comfort with oneself. If we feel too comfortable with who we are, then we will always see ourselves as innocent victims, and refuse to admit wrongdoing. We need to have the courage to judge ourselves with pure objectivity, to acknowledge our faults and weaknesses just as we pride ourselves over our noble qualities and our strengths. We should feel a degree of uneasiness with ourselves and our accomplishments, a feeling which will, hopefully, spur us to constantly work harder to strive to become better.

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