YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

PARASHAT TOLDOT

Sicha of Harav Aharon Lichtenstein *shlit”a*

Yaakov’s Two Blessings

Translated by Kaeren Fish

In our *parasha*, Yitzchak bestows two blessings on Yaakov. The first blessing is given while Yitzchak believes that he is blessing Esav:

“May God give you of the dew of the heaven and the fatness of the earth, and much corn and wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be a lord to your brothers, and let your mother’s sons bow down to you; those who curse you are cursed, and those who bless you are blessed.” (*Bereishit* 27:28-29)

The second blessing is given after Yitzchak discovers the deception, just before Yaakov leaves for Padan Aram:

“May the Almighty God bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a multitude of people. And may He give you the blessing of Avraham – to you and to your descendants with you – causing you to inherit the land of your sojourning, which God gave to Avraham.” (28:3-4)

The Midrash addresses this dual blessing, and explains that Yitzchak blessed Yaakov a second time in order to validate the first blessing:

“‘Yitzchak called to Yaakov and he blessed him…’ – Rabbi Abahu said: Because [the first blessings] were held in some doubt… [therefore he blessed him a second time,] so that no one could say, ‘Were it not for Yaakov’s deception of his father, he would not have received the blessings.’” (*Bereishit Rabba* 67)

What the Midrash implies is that there is no difference between the two blessings in terms of content; the second one simply reinforces and gives validity to the first. I shall propose a different understanding.

Yitzchak – as depicted in our *parasha* – seems to be an elderly, helpless victim who not only fails to discern Esav’s evil character but also falls into the trap of Yaakov’s disguise. Thus, the Torah’s description of his blindness appears to be an expression of his general state of weakness. Indeed, this is manifest in Yitzchak’s request of Esav to bring him food:

“He said: Behold now, I am old, [and] I do not know when I will die. Now, I pray you, take up your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt me some venison, and prepare me savory food such as I like, and bring it to me and I shall eat it, that my soul may bless you before I die.” (27:2-4)

Clearly, the family roles have been exchanged: the father, who is meant to be the authority figure and the pedagogue, has become dependent and weak, and is now at the mercy of his son: “I do not know when I shall die… Now, I pray you….”

In light of this depiction, we see a marked change come over Yitzchak when he bestows the second blessing. The same Yitzchak who, only a few verses earlier, was seemingly weak and dependent, has resumed his role as a father who commands and educates his son in unequivocal language:

“Yitzchak called to Yaakov and he blessed him, and he commanded him and said to him: You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan; arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Betuel, your mother’s father, and take for yourself from there a wife from the daughters of Lavan, your mother’s brother.” (28:1-2)

Two missions

Perhaps the explanation for this change lies in the reason Yitzchak sent Yaakov away, which in turn is related to the dual nature of Yaakov’s departure from his home.

The Torah tells us that “Yaakov obeyed his father and his mother, and he went to Padan Aram” (28:7). The reason for the seemingly belabored emphasis – the fact that he obeyed “his father and his mother” – is unclear. Our puzzlement is intensified by the two different ways in which the departure itself is presented. In our *parasha*, we read, “… and he went (*va-yelekh*) to Padan Aram," while in *Hoshea* (12:13) the language is very different: “Yaakov fled (*va-yivrach*) to the field of Aram.”

All of this duality arises from the fact that Yaakov did, in fact, have two different motivations for leaving.

Rivka sent Yaakov away from Charan because she saw that, “Behold, Esav your brother comforts himself [by planning] to kill you” (27:42) – i.e., there was a fear of Esav’s response to Yaakov’s act of deception. Yitzchak, on the other hand, sends Yaakov away for a completely different reason: “Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Betuel, your mother’s father, and take yourself a wife from there, from the daughters of Lavan, your mother’s brother… and may He give you the blessing of Avraham – to you and to your descendants, causing you to inherit the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Avraham.” In other words, Yaakov is instructed to go to Padan Aram in order to marry one of Lavan’s daughters, and to continue the family legacy that began with Avraham. From Rivka’s point of view, it makes no difference where Yaakov goes; the important point is that he should get away from Esav. Yitzchak sends him specifically to Padan Aram, which is in the northern reaches of Eretz Yisrael, and his journey is defined as a mission, not as flight.

In view of this duality, we may now understand the difference between the two blessings. The first time, Yitzchak bestows on the disguised Yaakov material blessings that are not connected to any particular land: “May God give you of the dew of the heaven and the fatness of the earth, and much corn and wine.” The second time, Yaakov receives the blessing of the forefathers, passing the scepter of the Abrahamic dynasty into his hands.

Now we can also understand the change that comes over Yitzchak himself in between the two blessings. When he gives the material blessings, he is a feeble old man. However, when he gives Yaakov the blessing of the forefathers, he is imbued with new strength and energy, since at that moment he is choosing the person who will be the progenitor of Am Yisrael. It is no wonder, then, that as Yitzchak gives the blessing to Yaakov, he commands him unequivocally to go to Eretz Yisrael, for it is only there that the Israelite nation can come into existence.

In our time, too, it is important to recall the duality inherent in Yaakov’s blessings. We must not suffice with material blessings – which might be obtained, by the same token, in Uganda or in America. We must also aspire to the realization of the blessing of the forefathers, which can come to fruition only in Eretz Yisrael. That is our heritage, that is our mission, and that is our destiny.

(This sicha was delivered on Shabbat parashat Toldot 5763 [2003].)