YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**PARSHAT TOLDOT**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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In loving memory of my parents
Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger *z"l*
- Benzion Lowinger

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**Yitzchak, Esav, and the Field**

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

At the end of the previous *parasha*, *Parashat* *Chayei Sara*, there is a concise description of Yitzchak establishing his own house after his father’s passing:

And it came to pass after the death of Avraham, that God blessed Yitzchak his son; and Yitzchak dwelt by Be'er-Lachai-Ro'i. (*Bereishit* 25:11)

It is noteworthy that Yitzchak does not continue to live in the areas where Avraham had been active – e.g., Hebron, Be'er-Sheva, and Gerar – but instead moves farther south, deep into the desert, and settles in a place that is identified specifically with Hagar and her escape from the house of Avraham.

What is the meaning of this disconnection from the areas of Avraham's activity, and the move to areas more strongly connected to Yishmael and his way of life? We might relate this to *Chazal*’s statement(*Bava Batra* 16b) that Yishmael repented and the brothers once again cooperated with each other, but there seems to be something even more significant going on here.

**Avraham and Yitzchak: Society Versus Nature**

In contrast to Yitzchak and Yishmael, both of whom establish their lives in the wilderness, Avraham is a man of society all his life: wherever he goes, a group of people gather around him. He preaches and teaches, leads and commands, builds altars and brings people under the wings of the *Shekhina.* Accordingly, he is cut off from nature. His world is the world of humans, and it is among them that he always establishes his residence.

Of course, Avraham does not totally ignore nature, and sometimes he even establishes contact with it, as *Chazal* say (*Midrash Tehillim, Tehillim* 81:2): "Avraham called the Temple ‘mountain.’" However, even when he goes out into nature, he is not interested in nature for itself but only as an instrument, as a means. Avraham climbs the mountain not for the sake of reaching the top, but to look further from there.

In this matter, Yitzchak (and Yishmael too, but we will not discuss his ambivalent character here) is very different from Avraham. First, he differs in a negative way, regarding his attitude to society – he does not involve himself with people; his encounters with the outside world are few and are characterized by seclusion and suspicion; and in general, we never see him spreading Avraham's message to new audiences.

But Yitzchak differs from Avraham in a positive way as well, in his relationship to nature. Yitzchak is very connected to nature, and his encounter with it is the basis of his service of God. We see his connection to nature on many occasions. When Rivka meets him for the first time, there he is:

And Yitzchak came from the way of Be'er-lachai-ro'i; for he dwelt in the land of the south. And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field [*la-su'ach ba-sadeh*]toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, there were camels coming. (*Bereishit* 25:62-63)

What is the meaning of the phrase "*la-su'ach ba-sadeh*"? *Chazal* explain that "*sicha* means only prayer" (*Berakhot* 26b), and they learn from here that "Yitzchak instituted the afternoon prayer" (ibid.). In contrast, the Ibn Ezra relates this term to Yitzchak's connection to nature, writing: "*La-su'ach –* to walk among the bushes" (Ibn Ezra, *Bereishit* 24:63).

There is no contradiction: even according to *Chazal*, Yitzchak does not pray in a building, nor even in a tent, but rather in a field among the bushes.

Another point in this context is Yitzchak's emphatic occupation with wells. Avraham also dug wells in his time, but they are mentioned only in the context of his son, Yitzchak: "Now all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham his father." The well is the symbol of Yitzchak's enterprise: to take wild and free water, and give it clear boundaries so that it can serve man in the best way.

**The Danger Posed by Nature**

In this context, we must remember that the question of how to relate to nature is of great importance. Nature can be a place for powerful, individual service of God. Nobody describes this better than the author of *Tehillim* in his psalms from the Judean desert:

A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Yehuda. O God, You are my God, earnestly will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my flesh longs for You, in a dry and weary land, where no water is. (*Tehillim* 63:1-2)

All this happens when nature overwhelms man with his existential dependence on God: in the face of the splendor and power of creation, man can directly feel his smallness and nothingness, and thus his longing for the Creator of all these wonders grows.

But there is also another side: the person who is alone in front of nature and all its mighty features might instead turn in another direction. He is liable to shake off society's chains and morals, and join a wild world where only the strongest survive and everything is subject to considerations of personal benefit. This is true not only at the behavioral level but also at the conceptual level: in such a reality, a person may think that he is solely in control of the world, which is all material and disconnected from the sublime.

It was Yitzchak's task to turn against this second direction: to harness all the powers of nature and offer them to God. We meet this idea already in Yitzchak's early days, at the *Akeida.* There he was supposed to serve in the role of the lamb, the natural animal, and be offered as a sacrifice, as a whole-burnt offering to God – that is to say, to subordinate the forces inherent in nature to the service of the Creator.

**The Connection – and Distance – Between Yitzchak and Esav**

In light of this, it is clear why Yitzchak loved Esav and hoped to give him the birthright. Esav, like himself, was "a man of the field" (*Bereishit* 25:27), who was active in nature and connected to it. In contrast to Yaakov, who was holed up in his tents, Esav went out to wander about in the world of God. Their connection greatly intensified once Yitzchak grew old and became blind, and was thus cut off from his beloved nature and forced to restrict himself to his immediate surroundings. Esav would bring him game, reminding him in some small way of the field from which he had become so distanced.

Accordingly, when Yitzchak plans to bless his son, he seeks to "return" to nature, to once again remember it, so that the blessing will be given with a whole and happy heart:

And it came to pass, that when Yitzchak was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called Esav his elder son, and said to him: My son; and he said to him: Here am I. And he said: Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death. Now therefore take, I pray you, your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and take me venison; and make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless you before I die. (*Bereishit* 27:1-4)

Again later, when he is preparing to bless his son, it is stated:

And he came near, and kissed him. And he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said: See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed. (*Bereishit* 27:27)

Esav, however, was different from Yitzchak, for the worse. His relationship to nature was not like Yitzchak's experience of surrender. Yitzchak's contemplation of the power of nature would break his spirit and make him thirst for God. Esav's relationship involved the intoxicating feeling of "I and nothing else," the sense that he alone controls his destiny and shapes his path.

Yitzchak did not sense this gap between them, and hoped that Esav would continue in his path, but things did not unfold as he had hoped. Instead, the disconnect between him and Esav grew and became noticeable. The end of the story, which is also the end of Esav's path in the house of Avraham, involves Esav linking up with Yishmael:

So Esav went to Yishmael, and took to the wives that he had Machalat the daughter of Yishmael, Avraham's son, the sister of Nevayot, to be his wife. (*Bereishit* 28:9)

Esav and Yishmael together establish a "coalition of the disadvantaged," who live in nature and are connected to it but are disconnected from God.

In conclusion: it is important to relate to nature, as Yitzchak did, but it is also necessary to remember the risk – and to remember our duty to bring nature into the framework of God's service and the strengthening of our connection to Him.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat *Parashat Toldot* 5781].