YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**Praying for the**

**complete and speedy recovery of**

**Noam Avraham ben Atara Shlomit**

**seriously injured in Lebanon**

**among cholei Yisrael**

**PARASHAT TOLDOT**

**The Blessings to the Forefathers, and the Course of History**

**Divine Providence and Free Choice**

One of the core principles of Tanakh is a profound faith in Divine Providence – i.e., the belief that God intervenes in the course of history in order to lead the world in a certain direction, to reward the righteous, and to punish the wicked.

We see in many places that human actions can change the course of history – sometimes even against the will of God. For example, Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden in the wake of their sin, even though this was not God’s “original plan.” In other instances, God presents man with different possibilities, and leaves it to him to choose between them. Here, too, human decisions can change the course of history. We discussed one example in the shiur on *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, where God presented Avraham with the choice of whether to save Lot or to inherit the land in his lifetime. As discussed there, this was not a choice between a “good” option and a “bad” one; rather, Avraham had to choose between two possibilities, each with its advantages and disadvantages.

In some narratives in Tanakh, we see a different kind of choice: a person thinks he knows God’s will and tries to align the course of history with that vision. The choice in these instances is very risky, since no one can be sure he really understands God’s will. One example is the story of Yosef: according to some commentators, Yosef deliberately refrained from letting his father know that he was in Egypt in order to arrange things in such a way that the dreams of his youth would be realized. Some opinions are critical of Yosef’s decision, since it is not man’s job to organize history to match God’s will; people are supposed to act to the best of their understanding, and God will guide history as per His will. An episode in this week’s *parasha* brings this idea into sharp focus.

**Yitzchak’s blessing**

Why did Yitzchak love Esav and not Yaakov? Based on Rashi’s description, Esav’s behavior was so savage that it is difficult to understand how Yitzchak could have overlooked it. Esav could not have deceived Yitzchak, in whose house he lived, all the time; it is almost certain that he did not spend all his time questioning Yitzchak (as the *midrash* describes it) about tithing salt. Moreover, the Torah notes that Esav’s wives were a source of heartache to Yitzchak (*Bereishit* 26:35); presumably, he could have drawn more general conclusions about his son from that.

The commentators suggest various solutions to this problem. Most suggest that Yitzchak knew Esav was not as righteous as he pretended to be, and the blessing he intended for him was in fact not the “valuable” blessing. Yitzchak reserved the main blessings for Yaakov, with the intention of bestowing a lesser blessing on Esav.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rivka’s behavior on behalf of Yaakov seems no less strange than Yitzchak’s in favoring Esav. She betrays the trust of Esav, who had left his garments in her care; she exploits her husband's blindness; and she is willing to work against one of her sons for the benefit of the other. In fact, Rivka is punished for this: after the story of the blessings and Yaakov's flight to escape from Esav, Rivka "disappears": no further mention is made of her, and the Torah tells us nothing of her death and burial.

Yaakov is also punished, "measure for measure," for pretending to be Esav, the firstborn: the woman he is supposed to marry is exchanged on their wedding night for her firstborn sister; and as a result of this, many hundreds of years later, the kingdom of Yehuda is split. The prophet Yirmiyahu expresses veiled criticism of Yaakov when he says:

Take heed each one of his neighbor, and do not trust in any brother, for every brother acts with cunning (*kol ach akov ya'kov*) and every neighbor goes about slandering. (*Yirmiyahu* 9:3)

In order to understand Yitzchak's thinking, let us take a closer look at the blessings that he bestows on his sons.

Reviewing *Sefer Bereishit*, we find eight main elements in the blessings God gives to the forefathers: 1) to become a great nation; 2) blessing; 3) "I shall bless those who bless you"; 4) "All the families of the earth will be blessed through you"; 5) inheritance of the land; 6) multiplying their descendants; 7) to be their God; and 8) dominion over others.

The following table shows where each of the forefathers is blessed with these elements:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Avraham** | **Yishmael** | **Yitzchak** | **Yitzchak to sons** | **Yaakov** | **Yaakov to sons** |
| 1. **Great nation[[2]](#footnote-2)** | Beginning of *Lekh Lekha* |  |  |  | Descent to Egypt |  |
| 1. **Blessing** | Beginning of *Lekh Lekha* |  | Descent to Gerar | to Yaakov |  | Yosef’s sons |
| 1. **Blessing those who bless you** | Beginning of *Lekh Lekha* |  |  | To Yaakov disguised as Esav |  |  |
| 1. **Others will be blessed through you** | Beginning of *Lekh Lekha* |  | Descent to Gerar |  | Ladder dream | Yosef’s sons (“Israel shall bless through you”) |
| 1. **Blessing of land** | After separating from Lot |  | Descent to Gerar | to Yaakov | Ladder dream | Yosef’s sons |
| 1. **Blessing of progeny** | After separating from Lot | At circumcision[[3]](#footnote-3) | Descent to Gerar | To Yaakov | Ladder dream | Yosef’s sons |
| 1. **Being your God** | *Brit ben ha-betarim* (*Bereishit* 15) |  | Descent to Gerar | To Yaakov disguised as Esav | Ladder dream[[4]](#footnote-4) | Yosef’s sons |
| 1. **Dominion** | When he was named “Avraham” (father of a multitude of nations) | Angel’s blessing to Hagar |  | To Yaakov disguised as Esav |  |  |

Without delving into the particular meaning of each of these elements, it is clear that there is a difference between the blessings bestowed on the two sons who were ultimately not part of *Am Yisrael*. Some of the blessings originally bestowed on Avraham were inherited by Yishmael, by virtue of his being Avraham’s child. In the next generation, however, Yitzchak blesses “Esav” (i.e., Yaakov disguised as Esav) with more significant blessings than those given to Yishmael: for instance, “Esav” receives a stronger blessing of dominion than did Yishmael; he is also given the blessing that those who bless him will be blessed, which does not appear at all with regard to Yishmael. Note also that God’s name is invoked in the blessing to “Esav.” All this indicates that Yitzchak believed, at that moment, that Esav was to be part of *Am Yisrael*.While Yishmael was banished so as to distance him from *Am Yisrael*, Yitzchak wants to give Esav the same blessings that could have been passed on to Yaakov. How can we understand this?

**"There are two nations in your womb"**

During her pregnancy, when the two fetuses struggle inside her, Rivka goes to inquire of God:

And the Lord said to her: Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will be separated from inside you; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people, and the elder shall serve the younger. (*Bereishit* 25:23)

This prophecy has two parts to it. We tend to give more attention and emphasis to the second part, which describes the younger son as overcoming or overpowering the elder one. But there is also the first part – the very knowledge that there are going to be two nations. This is not a simple matter. Were it not for the prophecy, we could have assumed that Rivka’s two sons would belong to the same nation, just as in the next generation, a nation emerges that comprises twelve sons. Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of the *midrash* that describes a rumor circulating in Lavan’s region:

Rivka has two sons; Lavan has two daughters. The elder [daughter will be] for the elder [son], and the younger, for the younger [son]. (*Bava Batra* 123a)

If we assume that Leah is destined to build the house of Israel – then perhaps the house of Israel will be built from Esav and Yaakov together.

At this point, we can explain the different preferences of Yitzchak and Rivka as a disagreement over the question of who will continue to build the house of Israel in the next generation. It seems reasonable to assume that Rivka told Yitzchak of the prophecy she received during pregnancy – but they understand it differently. Rivka understands the prophecy to mean that *Am Yisrael* will emerge from only one of the sons, following the pattern so far, in which one son is chosen over the other. The question is whether it is Esav or Yaakov who should be chosen, and Rivka’s unequivocal answer is that Yaakov should be shown preference over Esav.

It is possible that if this question were to be posed to Yitzchak, he would agree with Rivka. But Yitzchak, at first, understands the situation differently. In his view, *Am Yisrael* starts with himself, and both of his sons make up part of the nation. He hears the prophecy, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will be separated from inside you,” and interprets it in a manner similar to God’s later blessing to Yaakov – “A nation and a company of nations shall be from you” (35:11) – as well as Yaakov’s blessing to Efraim and Menashe:

And his father refused, and said: I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great, but his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations. (*Bereishit* 48:19).

Seen in this light, the fact that two nations will emerge from Rivka’s womb does not necessarily mean that one of them will need to be removed from the framework of *Am Yisrael*. Perhaps, when Yitzchak said to Esav, “he, too, shall be blessed,” in reference to Yaakov, he was expressing his more general approach:[[5]](#footnote-5) Why did your brother have to steal the blessings? He, too, is part of *Am Yisrael*; he, too, will be blessed!

Yitzchak’s plan was to divide the blessings of the forefathers, awarding part of them to Esav and the other part to Yaakov. The significance of such a division would be that both sons were chosen, and that *Am Yisrael* would be built out of both of them.

If forced to choose just one of the two sons who would be a forefather of *Am Yisrael*, Yitzchak would have agreed that Yaakov was more worthy than Esav. We see this when Esav begs, “Bless me, me too, my father” (27:34), and Yitzchak does not exchange the blessings as per his original plan – bestowing the blessing that he had meant for Yaakov – but instead tells him he has no blessings left: “Your brother came with guile and took your blessing” (v. 35). Yitzchak understands that Yaakov is more worthy of the blessing than Esav, and therefore he is unwilling to give Yaakov’s blessing to Esav. Note, also, that while God name appeared in the blessing to “Esav,” it is not invoked when Yitzchak finally gives the real Esav a different blessing (vv. 39-40).

Years later, when Yaakov faces a similar situation, seeking to bless Yosef’s two sons who are in front of him, he crosses his hands and places them on both of their heads. He could bless one first and then the other, but he fears the ramifications of such an act. By crossing his hands, he ensures that both Efraim and Menashe understand that each of them is chosen and blessed, as one, even though one brother may have an advantage over the other. They both receive the same blessing, though within that blessing is a more prestigious status for one than the other.

In contrast to God’s response to Sara’s demand that Yitzchak be banished, our *parasha* makes no mention of God’s agreement that Esav be distanced from the development of *Am Yisrael*. After Yitzchak makes his choice, God continues to guide the world in consideration of that choice. After all, He gave man the power to determine the course of history; this is the essence and meaning of free choice.

It is not my intention, nor within my power, to determine whether Yitzchak or Rivka was correct, but it is interesting to consider what *Am Yisrael* might have gained or lost if Esav had been included. *Chazal* offer an approach that attributes at least some of the suffering experienced by Yaakov’s descendants to the “bitter cry” that Esav let out on account of his brother’s actions:

R. Chanina said: Anyone who says that the Holy One blessed be He is lax [i.e., waves off wrongdoing], may his intestines become lax. Rather, He shows patience and collects His due. Yaakov caused Esav to emit one cry, as it is written: “When Esav heard his father’s words, he cried out…”. And where was [Yaakov] punished? In Shushan, the capital, as it is written, “And [Mordechai] emitted an exceedingly great and bitter cry….” (*Bereishit Rabba* 67:4)

Since God punished Yaakov for that cry of Esav, we may imagine a different reality in which Esav was not made to cry out. But God’s ways are hidden: the Torah does not tell us how the history of *Am Yisrael* could have been different had Yitzchak’s approach overcome that of Rivka.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. This also explains Yitzchak’s response when he understands that Yaakov has stolen the blessing from Esav. After Esav brings Yitzchak the meat that he asked for, Yitzchak exclaims, “Who then is it who hunted venison, and brought it to me, and I ate of it all before you came, and blessed him? **Indeed, he shall be blessed**” (*Bereishit* 27:33). If Yitzchak had meant to bestow on Esav the greater and more prestigious blessing, why does he reaffirm it for Yaakov? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is not clear whether the words “a great nation” (*goy gadol*) means a populous nation or something closer to “I shall make your name great.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Bereishit* 17:20: “And regarding Yishmael, I have heard you; behold, I bless him, and I will make him fruitful and extremely numerous. He will father twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is possible that the clause, “And the Lord shall be my God,” in Yaakov’s words following his dream, are part of his request to God rather than part of the vow. This may also be the meaning of God’s words, “And I shall be with you.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is difficult to understand the words “he, too, shall be blessed” as a retroactive reconcilement to the theft of the blessings, since that same verse starts with the words, “And Yitzchak trembled exceedingly greatly….” It seems unlikely that within the space of the same verse, he could shift to a completely different view and bless Yaakov. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)