

SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

by Rabbi Dovid Green

"You appropriately called his name Yaakov, and he tricked me ("Yaakov"ed) me twice!"

This week's parsha is probably a major contributor to the centuries-old distrust of Jews. The story of Yaakov tricking his father Yitzchok into thinking that he was his brother Eisov, and receiving Eisov's blessings is a puzzling story to understand. It has led many people to as many conclusions, with the common denominator being that the Jew is intrinsically dishonest, and worthy of scrutiny and suspicion. A careful study of the verses sheds a different light on this topic, and reveals the level of superficiality and anti-Jewish bias which went into arriving at that ridiculous conclusion.

Yitzchok beckons from his older son Eisov that he go out to the wild and hunt for tasty game to serve him before he bestows his sacred blessing. Rivka overhears the conversation and begs Yaakov, Eisov's younger twin brother to go as an imposter and receive the blessings first. Yaakov reluctantly agrees, and allows his mother to prepare foods and dress him up to go into his father posing as Eisov. After verifying that this person bringing his food is indeed "Eisov," Yitzchok bestows the sacred blessing on Yaakov only moments before the real Eisov enters.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th cent. Frankfurt) begins his explanation saying that as always, we accept the words of our Talmudic sages in understanding this topic. We neither need nor want to be apologetic about the events recorded here. We use the explanations in order to understand the background of this event, and attitudes and lessons we can glean from it. We are talking among ourselves about our Torah, and those who wish to listen in and learn are welcome to do so. No apologies are being offered.

Rabbi Hirsch examines what Rivka thought she would gain by sending Yaakov in as an imposter. It was clear from the outset that Yaakov would not be able to hide what he did for long. Eisov was scheduled to return and there was no way to keep Yaakov's actions a secret. If this was a blessing that G-d was to bestow by Yitzchok's wish, how could Rivka expect G-d to agree to bless someone receiving the blessing in this fashion? A blessing is not unconditional. How could the blessing of Avraham, which was passed through Yitzchok, fall on the head of a dishonest imposter? Alternatively, if this blessing bestows some kind of legal preference to its recipient, then how could Rivka expect the legal status to be binding under these circumstances? The blessing will have been given under false pretences, and as such, can be rescinded.

Rabbi Hirsch explains, based on the words of the sages, that Rivka had very different intentions. In

short she wanted to prove to Yitzchok once and for all that he was very mistaken about who should be receiving this blessing. In this she succeeded. If Yaakov, a person unlearned in the ways of the world, could so easily trick Yitzchok into thinking that he is Eisov, than how easily could Eisov, a cunning hunter, trick him into thinking that he is a Yaakov - honest, straight, and sincere? This explanation is proven by the words Yitzchok himself says in his conversation with Eisov, after the revelation that he had been tricked. "...he shall even be blessed!" Yitzchok does not rescind Yaakov's blessing; on the contrary, he even validates it!

What was the dispute between Yitzchok and Rivka? Rabbi Hirsch explains that two elements were represented by Yaakov and Eisov. In Eisov - material power. In Yaakov - spiritual power. Both factors are necessary for the prosperity of the nation-to-be. Yitzchok could have believed that the Abrahamitic calling was to be carried on by both Eisov and Yaakov in brotherly unison, each one complementing the other. Consequently, he intended to give Eisov a blessing of material content, and a spiritual one for Yaakov.

Rivka, on the other hand, knew from Lavan, her brother, and her own upbringing, the failure of such a division. The material can blossom to blessing and true happiness only in a home guided by the spirit. She recognized the curse that arises out of materialism devoid of spirit. Rivka envisioned Yaakov at the helm with both of these forces in his hands, and the dictates of the spirit as the guide.

When Yitzchok was forced to come to terms with how short Eisov had fallen in terms of living up to his aspirations for his progeny, and according to the Midrash, when he found out that Eisov had rejected and forfeited his lofty destiny by selling his birthright to Yaakov, he was more than convinced that Rivka was right. Then and there he validated Yaakov's blessings, and recognized Yaakov as the sole spiritual inheritor of the blessings and the calling of Avraham.

It is true that it is forbidden to compromise the laws of the Torah even at the behest of a parent whom the Torah dictates that we must honor, but Yaakov saw in his mother's demand for complete obeisance prophetic wisdom which transcends even that rule. There are times when prophetically stated, the rules can be set aside for a greater purpose - albeit only temporarily. Yaakov's actions in this case were in direct conflict with his true essence - a complete abhorrence for falsehood, cheating, and dishonesty. This is why the same scriptures which relate this story to us call Yaakov by the name Yeshurun which means "straight" and completely honest.

As Jews, we need to be closely in touch with this spiritual heritage of honesty. We need to be its emissaries. We need to constantly be aware that we are the ones who make or break our forefather Yaakov's image in the world. Our actions directly effect peoples acceptance or rejection of the lies which have been perpetuated about Yaakov and his progeny. We must take this responsibility seriously, and we should be proud and overjoyed that we are fortunate to be the ones to do so.

Good Shabbos!

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