

KEEN SENSE OF SMELL

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Toldos centers around the relationship of Yaakov and Eisav, the twin sons of Yitzchak and Rivkah. The Torah notes that while, "Rivkah loved Yaakov," Yitzchak was taken in by the verbal ploys of Eisav, "And Yitzchak loved Eisav, because he ensnared [Yitzchak] with his mouth. [25:28 and Rashil]"

Even the most cursory reading of the parsha makes it undeniable that the differences between Eisav - who was a "man of the field," and Yaakov, who was "a wholesome man, dwelling in tents [of study]" - were not lost on Yitzchak. Yitzchak knew that "the name of G-d was not usually on Eisav's lips" as it was on Yaakov's [Rashi 27:21]. He knew that while "Yaakov spoke gently and with respect," Eisav "spoke harshly and directly. [Rashi 27:22]" He was wary enough to warn Eisav that when he goes to hunt game for Yitzchak, he should be careful to take only from wild animals, and not to steal from others [Rashi 27:4]; and to sharpen his knife, in order to be sure that his shechitah (ritual slaughter) not render his catch unkosher.

Aware as Yitzchak may have been of the differences between Yaakov and Eisav, he still had great love and respect for Eisav. So much so in fact, that when the time came to give over the blessings that would ultimately determine who of them would be the one to carry on the lineage of the Jewish nation, his choice lay with Eisav. Although Eisav was not the scholar, nor the superficially devout man that Yaakov was, Yitzchak saw Eisav as being sincere and frank - he made no airs, was honest and straightforward, and, in his eyes, beneath Eisav's uncultured surface lay an unpolished gem, a character of great integrity and piety, worthy of being the successor of himself and his father Avraham. Eisav, for his part, realized that his father was taken in by his apparent sincerity, and would reinforce this impression by asking his father questions that seemingly revealed his "true character" - "Father," he would ask, "how does one tithe salt, and straw?" which, of course, require no tithing [Rashi 25:27].

This is the backdrop within which Yitzchak consciously decides to give his paternal blessings to Eisav, and asks him to "go out to the field and hunt game for me, so that my soul may bless you before I die [27:3-4]." We all know that Rivkah, who was not taken in by Eisav's facade of sincerity, and sees grave danger in giving the blessings to Eisav, pulls the old "switcheroo," disguises Yaakov as Eisav, and has him bring a meal that she has prepared to Yitzchak.

Although Rivkah was able to disguise Yaakov superficially, by dressing him in Eisav's clothing, and placing goat's hair on Yaakov's smooth skin, she was not able to disguise Yaakov's true nature. Yitzchak is confused and distressed by the contrast of a man who physically seems to be Eisav, yet

has the personality of Yaakov. His confusion culminates in his troubled declaration, "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, yet the hands are the hands of Eisav! [27:22]"

It is at this point in the drama that an amazing thing happens. Yitzchak beckons Yaakov/Eisav to draw near, kisses him, remarks on his sweet fragrance ("See, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field that Hashem has blessed!" [27:27]), and then bestows upon him the coveted paternal blessings, thus conferring the lineage of the Jewish nation to Yaakov. The rest, as they say is history.

The reader, however, is left dumbfounded. What ultimately gave Yitzchak the resolve to continue with his blessings, despite his distress and confusion as to who it was that stood before him?

A conservative Rabbi who's been leading a congregation for many years is upset by the fact that he's never been able to eat pork. So he devises a plan. He flies to a remote tropical island and checks into a hotel. He immediately gets himself a table at the finest restaurant and orders the most expensive pork dish on the menu.

As he's eagerly waiting for it to be served, he hears his name called from across the room. He looks up to see ten of his loyal congregants approaching. His luck, they'd chosen the same time to visit the same remote location! Just at that moment, the waiter comes out with a huge silver platter carrying a whole roasted pig with an apple in its mouth. The Rabbi looks up sheepishly at his congregants and exclaims, "Wow, you order an apple in this place - and look how it's served!"

Rashi (26:34), quoting Chazal, compares Eisav to the pig. Animals require two signs in order to be classified as kosher: split hooves and chewing their cud. The pig has the former, not the latter (see Vayikra 11:3,7). However, unlike other hooved animals, that fold their legs beneath them when they lie down, the pig stretches forth its hooves, as if to say, "See how kosher I am!" So too Eisav went to great trouble to give his father the impression of sincerity and righteousness, all the while committing grave and unforgivable sins. He duped Yitzchak, as it were, by making him "miss the pig for the apple."

Smell is referred to by Chazal, our Sages, as "something from which the soul takes pleasure." "From where do we derive," our Sages ask, "that one must pronounce a blessing over good fragrances? For it is written (Tehillim/Psalms 150:6), 'Let every soul praise G-d!' What [thing] gives pleasure to the soul? This refers to smell." [Talmud, Berachos 43b]

When Yaakov drew near, Yitzchak became aware of his beautiful fragrance. Our Sages say he smelled "like a field of apples," which is a reference to the Garden of Eden [see Rashi 27:27]. The holy Zohar comments, "The Garden of Eden came in with Yaakov, for it is a field of holy apples." It was this - the scent of Yaakov - that finally made Yitzchak realize he had been had. Scent is connected to the soul - so if Eisav was indeed a "gem in the rough," where was the scent? Why was it only now - when this perplexing Yaakov/Eisav character stood before him - that Yitzchak's spiritually-sensitive sense of smell picked up the fragrance of Gan Eden?

"And he smelled the fragrance... and he said, 'See, the fragrance of my son - Yaakov, is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed! And may G-d give you from the dew of the heavens, and the fatness of the earth...' All along there had been something missing - the "smell of the sincere" - yet it was only now that Yitzchak realized it.

Have a good Shabbos.

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