

A MEAL FOR EISAV... A FORK FOR YA'AKOV

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Just like the lead-up to the Akeida represented a proverbial fork in the road between the Jewish people and the nations of the world (when Avraham and Yitzchak left Eliezer and Yishmael behind on the way to Har HaMoriah; see Chapter 22), so too does the purchase of the birthright in this week's parsha represent another fork in the road, this time within Avraham's family, between his grandsons, Ya'akov and Eisav.

First some background. It was the day that Avraham had died, and Yitzchak began to sit shiva. As is the custom, Ya'akov prepared the mourner's meal, which included eggs and lentils, which, being round, represent the "wheel" of life. Eisav, on the other hand, found little reason to curtail his regular activities because his grandfather died. On the contrary! It was an exhausted Eisav that came in search of food-exhausted from murdering, raping, and pillaging, according to the midrash!

As Divine Providence would have it, Eisav made his way right for Ya'akov's tent. Seeing the food, he commanded Ya'akov to literally just pour it into his mouth. Ya'akov, realizing the propitious moment, made Eisav sell the birthright for the food, and swear that he'd never go back on the sale. Eisav, feeling close to death, saw little meaning in being the firstborn, and agreed only too readily to give it up for some food. The deal was made, Eisav got his food, and left, despising his birthright, says the Torah.

Some questions arise. First of all, how could Ya'akov be so manipulative? His brother was on the verge of death, and he was able to bargain for the birthright? Doesn't that sound somewhat crass? Second of all, even if Eisav did agree to surrender his birthright for the lifesaving lentils of his brother, shouldn't the sale have been null and void? After all, wasn't Eisav under duress at the time he met Ya'akov's demand to sell and swear about it?

Some more background. The rabbis teach that Avraham didn't give birth to twelve tribes because he still contained some negative elements within him that had to be purged. Some of that happened through the births of sons from Hagar, first Yishmael, and then the other five children he fathered through Hagar (Ketura) after Sarah's death. However, even that didn't cleanse Avraham's line of all these elements, as was evident from the fact that Yitzchak could father a son like Eisav.

It was only Ya'akov who was able to father the Twelve Tribes, because he was "cleansed" enough of

these elements to do so. However, even his children still exhibited some questionable behavior, which means that as great as Ya'akov was, and as spiritually refined as he was, still, his children still bore some of those negative elements which we have been purging through history since then.

Not only was Ya'akov aware of this historical process, he also understood its importance to the purpose of creation, and was therefore devoted to help it along. Avraham's death was precisely the time to begin thinking about the future of his descendants. The only question was, on which side of the line did Eisav fall; was he to be accepted and brought into the fold, or rejection and filtered out of the future Jewish people. Ya'akov needed a test to know Eisav's status, and it seemed that G-d agreed as well.

What Ya'akov wanted to know was Eisav's philosophy on life—was his mind's eye on the ultimate purpose of creation, or was he stuck in the here-and-now. If Eisav was prepared to "die" in the World-to-Come for life in This World (represented by selling the birthright for the food), then he had clearly veered off the straight-and-narrow for good. If he objected to Ya'akov's conditions for the purchase of the lentils, then, that proved that Eisav still related to the ways of his father and grandfather. Making him swear was just the way to prove to everyone just how deeply Eisav despised the birthright, and faith in a world he could not see.

Therefore, the birthright was the litmus test of Eisav's commitment to Avraham's world. It acted as a filter to "sift" Eisav out of the Jewish people, just as the miracle over Har HaMoriah had "sifted" out Eliezer and Yishmael at the time of the Akeida. In the end, the birthright could only belong to Ya'akov, for only he proved to be the one to continue on the attitude and way of his fathers.

Shabbos Day:

A classic of all classic questions on Chumash is, how could Yitzchak be fooled by the clearly evil Eisav, and favor him over the righteous Ya'akov? There are many explanations for this. However, one explanation in particular answers a lot of questions, especially the one about what Yitzchak saw in Eisav in the first place.

First of all, it is important to point out that Eisav, no matter what anyone thought of him, was the bechor (firstborn son). As such, he was entitled to all the benefits of the bechor, and Yitzchak, as his father, was obligated to provide them. According to the strict din (law), which is what Yitzchak best related to (as opposed to chesed, which was the trait of his father, Avraham), Eisav was the bechor, and to ignore that physical reality would have been a denial of the Divine Providence that arranged it that way.

No, as Yitzchak saw it, G-d had known what He was doing when He made Eisav the bechor; who was

he to interfere with that process? True belief in the providence of G-d would dictate that Yitzchak act responsibly and bless Eisav, in spite of what his inner feelings were screaming out. If halacha (Jewish law) mandates an "unpleasant" course of action, it must be carried out, with the belief that G-d will work out the details on His own.

Not so for Rivka. As the mother of the bechor, she had no halachic obligation to make sure that Eisav received the blessings. As a matriarch, it was her job to assure the spiritual purity of the future Jewish people. That's why for her, it was not a violation of trust in Divine Providence to scheme and send Ya'akov in for the blessings in place of Eisav. On the contrary! In concert with Yitzchak's obedience, Divine Providence worked through her to arrange that Ya'akov usurp the right of the firstborn son, without Yitzchak having to deviate from the halacha one bit!

It is a wonderful lesson to integrate, and it teaches us how to use faith and trust in G-d's master plan to work with Divine Providence, as opposed to against it. Many people read the occurrences of history with a jaundiced eye, mistrusting G-d's judgment in what happens in their personal life, and the life of the nation. They feel the need to "override" G-d's authority, and tinker with Jewish law to make it more "compatible" with current circumstances.

However, halacha is halacha, meaning, that situations come and go, but Torah law is eternal. As the Talmud points out (Kesuvos 3a), even rabbinical laws take precedence over life-threatening edicts of oppressing nations, for, the latter are temporal, but the former express eternal truths.

In the end, both Yitzchak and Rivka had been right. Yitzchak had worked with the Divine Providence, and carried out his responsibility of blessing the firstborn with deviation. Rivka had arranged that Ya'akov receive the brocha in place of Eisav. In the end, G-d worked it that Rivka was successful, and Yitzchak blessed the truth firstborn (whom, the midrash says, had been conceived first). Yitzchak could take pleasure in the fact that he had trusted G-d to the end. Rivka could take pleasure from the fact that Ya'akov received the brocha due to him. And the two of them could take pleasure in knowing they had done G-d's will, and that Jewish history was well on its way, along its long journey to national fulfillment.

Seudos Shlishi:

The midrash asks the obvious question: Why does the Torah start off discussing the descendants of Yitzchak, and then mention that Avraham was Yitzchak's father? (Rashi also deals with the question in a simpler manner.) The midrash answers: to indicate that it was Yitzchak's descendant, Ya'akov, who was responsible for saving Avraham's life in Ur Kasdim, after Nimrod had forced him into the fiery furnace to change his belief in G-d (see Parashas Lech-Lecha for more details), as the following midrash indicates:

Rav Shmuel, the son of Rav Yitzchak said, "Avraham would not have been saved from the furnace of fire had it not been for the merit of his future grandson, Ya'akov." A parable explains this: once a man was brought before the Sultan to be judged, who subsequently ruled that the man should be burned to death. However, by way of astrology, it was revealed to the Sultan that in the future, the man, should he not be killed, would father a daughter who would one day marry the king. The Sultan said, "It is worth saving this man's life for the daughter that will one day marry the king!" Thus Avraham was judged to be burned in Ur Kasdim, and when it was revealed before God that in the future, Avraham would have a descendant Ya'akov, G-d said, "It is worth saving Avraham in the merit of Ya'akov!" (Bereishis Rabbah 63:2)

For most of us this is strange. We thought that it was a given that Avraham was supposed to have been saved from the fire of Kasdim, in his own merit! Didn't his willingness to die for his belief warrant a miracle on its own?!

No, says the midrash. Avraham should have and would have died that day had it not been for Ya'akov. This does not mean, however, that had Avraham died that he would not have received ample reward for all of his self-sacrifice, even for the years of life he would have denied. Indeed, in the end, Avraham's death would have been the world's loss, not his own, for eternal reward in the World-to-Come would have more than compensated him for what he had suffered in this world.

From this we can learn that, though G-d disdains open miracles (for they lessen the free-will choice of disbelievers), He will break with tradition, so-to-speak, and perform them for a person who is indispensable to creation because of what he or she will eventually produce if he or she survives. In such a situation, G-d may interfere on his or her behalf to save them in either a small or major way. Many times the positive mazel we experience is not because of what we do or don't deserve, but because of what may eventually come from us. It is a point to ponder from time-to-time, especially when things go our way and we wonder why!

Melave Malkah:

It is pointed out that the brocha Eisav received makes no mention of G-d, whereas, the brocha of Ya'akov not only mentions G-d in it, but even uses the name of G-d that alludes to Him as a Judge. But isn't rain and sustenance a function of G-d's mercy? And why should Eisav's blessing be any different?

The answer given is basic but central to Jewish belief. As the Talmud points out (with regard to Rivka and Yitzchak's inability to have children at first; Yevamos 64a), righteous people suffer often to make them pray to G-d, for G-d desires their prayers. This is not just because G-d wants them to pray, but also because G-d desires a close relationship with them, and all of us for that matter. This is why,

says the Talmud, the manna fell once a day in the desert during the 40 years, and not once a year, which is the way we'd have preferred it to be, as the midrash indicates:

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him: Why did the manna not fall once a year [as opposed to once a day]? He replied, I shall give you a parable: It can be compared to a mortal king who had a son for whom he provided food once a year; [as a result] he saw his son once a year. Thereupon he provided for his maintenance daily, so that he called on him every day. The same [is the case] with Israel. One who had four or five children would worry and say, "Perhaps no manna will come down tomorrow, and all will die of hunger." Thus they turned their faces to heaven [in prayer]. (Yoma 76a)

By making the blessing dependent on Ya'akov's, and later his descendants' closeness to G-d, G-d assured that we'd always have to turn to Him in times of trouble, in order to maintain our relationship with Him. Our prosperity and security became, through the blessing in this week's parsha, the spiritual thermometer to indicate where we are holding in our relationship with Him.

By not entering G-d into Eisav's blessing, it was like telling Eisav "Good-bye. See you in a couple of thousand years ... But by then it will be too late to make amends." However, by mentioning G-d, especially G-d as Judge in our blessing, it was a way of indicating that, not only does G-d want an ongoing relationship with us, but that He will do whatever necessary to maintain that relationship throughout the ages, like any loving and concerned parent would do.

Have a great Shabbos.

Pinchas Winston

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