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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT TOLDOT

This week's *shiurim* are dedicated in memory of Rhona Albert z"l
by Jose and Fay Poliak

The Taking of the Blessings – Means vs. Ends

By Dr. Brachi Elitzur

At the center of our *parasha* is the story of how Yaakov obtains the blessings meant for Esav, his brother. In the *midrashim* that serve as background to Rashi's well-known explanations, *Chazal* take a positive view of Yaakov's actions, justifying and legitimizing his taking of the blessings. The expression "*Esav ha-Rasha*" (the evil Esav) which we are so accustomed to using is likewise the product of negative propaganda created by *Chazal* in the midrashic and aggadic literature. There, Esav stands accused of the most demonic sins in the history of man, sins whose connection with the plain text seems far-fetched. For example, we find R. Yochanan accusing Esav of five major sins:

R. Yochanan said: That wicked one [Esav] committed five sins on that day: He had relations with a girl who was betrothed to another, and murdered someone, and denied God's existence, and denied the resurrection of the dead, and spurned the birthright. [We know that] he lay with a betrothed maiden, because it is written here, "And Esav came in from the field," and it is written elsewhere [*Devarim* 22, in connection with a betrothed girl], "He found her in the field." [We know that] he committed murder, because it is written here [that he was] "faint," and it is written elsewhere (*Yirmiyahu* 4), "Woe is me now, for my soul is faint before the murderers." [We know that] he denied God, because it is written here, "What benefit is this to me" (*lama zeh li*), and it is written elsewhere (*Shemot* 15), "This is my God (*zeh eli*) and I will praise Him." And [we know that] he denied the resurrection of the dead because he said, "Behold, I am about to die..." and also that he spurned the birthright because it is written, "So Esau despised his birthright." (*Bava Batra* 16b)

Other Sages identify Esav with the "scoundrel who says in his heart, There is no God," mentioned in *Tehillim* 14:

"A scoundrel (*naval*) says in his heart..." – This refers to the wicked Esav, who said one thing with his mouth but something else in his heart. In his heart, he said, "The days of mourning for my father draw near..." while with his mouth he said, "Here I am"... And why is he called "*naval*" ["scoundrel"]? R. Yehuda said in the name of R. Shmuel: Because he filled the entire world with disgusting things (*neveilot*). He established, *batei kiklin*, *batei kotzim*, theaters, circuses, and temples of idolatry. R. Huna said: Because he filled the land with Jewish carcasses (*mei-nivlatam shel Yisrael*). R. Abba said: Because he was despicable (*menuval*). He set up statues of himself at the entrance to the prostitute and at the entrance to toilets and bathhouses. This is as it is written, "Your contemptibleness has deceived you, the pride of your heart" (*Yirmiyahu* 49:16). (*Midrash Shochar Tov* 14:4)

The Midrash Tanchuma sums up the picture with the words:

We find that all the transgressions that God hates were all to be found in Esav. (*Tanchuma* [6], *Toldot* 8).

The designation "*rasha*" (wicked one) is reserved in rabbinic literature for historical figures who threatened the physical or spiritual existence of the Jewish People or its Sanctuaries.¹ Exceptions to this rule are two biblical figures whose intentions to annihilate the nation or destroy its holy places are not stated explicitly in the text, but are nevertheless awarded this title by *Chazal*: Nimrod and Esav. While neither of these two characters was particularly righteous, it would seem that *Chazal* overstate their evil nature.

Esav is referred to as a "*rasha*" far more often than are the other figures. The bewildering gap separating the description of his actions in the Torah and the hostile attitude towards him amongst *Chazal* testifies to his allegorical role. *Chazal* cast this character as a symbol of the internal and external enemies of the Jews during their period, and especially Rome and Christianity. The descriptions of the wickedness of Nimrod and Esav and the elaboration and exaggeration of their evil intentions and contemptible actions camouflaged the attitude of the Sages and of the Jewish People towards their enemies in later periods and allowed them to channel expressions of hatred towards them in a covert way.² Indeed, the above quote from *Midrash Shochar Tov* offers a most

¹ Examples include Bil'am, Pharaoh, Balak, Doeg, Sancheriv, Nevukhadnetzar, Haman, Titus, Turnus Rufus, and Hadrian.

² G.D. Cohen, "Esau as a Symbol in Early Medieval Thought," *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures*, NY (1991), pp. 243-269. See also Yisrael Yaakov Yovel, *Shenei Goyim Be-Vitnekh* (Tel Aviv, 5763).

telling sketch of Roman culture with all its perversions.

But is it all merely propaganda? Is the biblical Esav an innocent victim who falls into the trap set by his mother and brother? Are his only faults his weakness for food and his marriages to foreign women? How does the text itself evaluate him? Is the theft of the blessings, with its consequences, presented as ultimately right and proper? Modern Hebrew poetry, waging a war of justice for and defense of the oppressed characters of the *Tanakh*, protests the wrong suffered by Esav and criticizes Yaakov.³ Does this message emerge from the verses themselves?

In this *shiur*, we will explore the difficulty of discovering the textual evaluation of Yaakov's act. Close examination of the literary devices employed by the text will reveal an ambivalent and undecided stance in relation to the act of deception, and we will try to understand what message this equivocation means to convey.⁴

A. Descriptions supporting a positive view of the act:

1. Molding of time

The story of the blessings begins by noting Esav's marriage to two Hittite women and Yitzchak's physical condition. Neither of these matters is related, in terms of proximity in time, to the moment when Yitzchak calls upon Esav in order to bless him. Esav marries the Hittite women when he is 40 years old, while at the time of the blessings he is 63, according to the calculation of the *Seder Olam*.⁵ Similarly, the words, "And it was, when Yitzchak was old and his eyes were dim..." indicate not a new development, but rather the past progressive tense, an ongoing state. Why, then, does the text not note this fact at the time of its occurrence? Alternatively, the text could have introduced this point when it becomes relevant for an understanding of the situation, in our case, as an introduction to Yaakov's words, "Behold, Esav my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man; Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to him a deceiver, and I shall bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing" (27:11-12). The noting of Yitzchak's blindness at this point would explain Yaakov's fear of being discovered through touch rather than sight, as well as Rivka's idea of disguising him. The fact that the text notes Yitzchak's blindness immediately after the description of Esav's marriage to the Hittite women and prior to his request for meat as a condition for blessing Esav hints to the influence of his blindness

³ See, for example, the poem "Esav" by Yehudit Kafri.

⁴ R. Elchanan Samet analyzes the story of the deception and discusses the contribution of the broad boundaries of this textual unit to a positive evaluation of Yaakov's actions (*Iyunim Be-Parashot Ha-Shavu'a*, second series, pp. 102-113). Samet focuses mainly on the descriptions of the brothers prior to the theft. Our emphasis will rest more heavily on the artistic devices within the story itself and their ramifications for our moral judgment. Many of these artistic devices and their significance are also addressed by M. Garsiel, "Ha-Mivneh Ha-Sifuti Ve-Ha-Meser Be-Sippurei Yaakov Ve-Esav," *Hagut Ba-Mikra* 4 (5744), pp. 63-81.

⁵ *Seder Olam Rabba*, chapter 2

on the misjudged choice of Esav to receive the blessing.⁶

2. The motif of old age and blindness

There are three other narratives in *Tanakh* whose exposition includes a description of a father's old age, and in one instance there is also mention of blindness:

And Eli was very old, and he heard all that his sons did to all of Israel. (*Shmuel I* 2:22); And it was at that time, when Eli was lying in his place and **his eyes had begun to grow dim**, so he could not see. (*Shmuel I* 3:2)

And it was, **when Shmuel was old**, that he made his sons judges over Israel. (*Shmuel I* 8:1)

And **King David was old**, advanced in years, and they covered him with clothes, but he was not warmed. (*Melakhim I* 1:1)

All three narratives go on to document the failings of their respective sons, and it seems that the description of the father's situation is meant to explain the sons' impropriety as well as the fathers' misjudgment of their sons' behavior.⁷ The fact that in our *parasha* the text follows the same pattern by starting off describing Yitzchak's state indicates that the four stories share a common element. It is Yitzchak's advanced age and his blindness that lead to his mistaken decision to award the blessing to Esav.

3. The wording of Yitzchak's request to Esav and the allusion to the agreement between the brothers

As noted, Yaakov and Esav are 63 years old at the time of the giving of the blessings. We have no way of knowing how old they were when Esav sold his birthright to Yaakov, but it would seem that many years had passed since then, given that at the time of Esav's marriage to the Hittite women, which is mentioned after the selling of the birthright, he was 40. One might argue, in Esav's defense, that the taste of the pottage and the exorbitant price that he paid for it had by now been forgotten, and this explains why he does not reveal the agreement to his father, who seeks to bless him as his "elder son." The text jogs his memory by means of parallels that connect the agreement made in the past to the request in the present:

⁶ It seems that the *midrash* accusing Esav of "trapping his father" with his smooth words (*Tanchuma, Toldot* 8) is based on this juxtaposition. It suggests that Esav's smooth talk was accepted by Yitzchak because he was unable to observe the evil actions that went on at the same time.

⁷ All three stories emphasize that the father ignores his sons' behavior or fails to rebuke them: "And he made his sons judges" (*Shmuel I* 8:1); "and he did not restrain them" (*Shmuel I* 3:13); "and his father had never grieved [reproached] him" (*Melakhim I* 1:6).

Esav's request (25:29-34)	Yitzchak's request (27:2-4)
And Yaakov cooked pottage; and Esav came from the field, and he was faint. And Esav said to Yaakov, "I pray you, let me taste some of that red pottage, for I am faint." Therefore he was called Edom. And Yaakov said, "Sell me this day your birthright." And Esav said, "Behold, I am about to die ; of what profit is this birthright to me?"	And he said, "Behold now, I am old; I know not the day of my death. And now, I pray you, take up your weapons – your quiver and your bow – and go out to the field, and catch me some 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. "

The allusions create a sense of proximity between the events and the expectation that Esav will carry out his part of the agreement and reveal his altered family status to his father. Esav's silence places him in disfavor, and later he ignores completely his part in the agreement by presenting himself with the words, "I am your firstborn son, Esav" (32).

4. Yitzchak's request – The original command, the report to Yaakov, and the recommendation

Yitzchak's request of Esav is overheard by Rivka, and she repeats it to Yaakov. A comparison of the wording reveals that Rivka makes some deliberate changes:

Yitzchak's original command	Rivka's report	Rivka's new command
And now, I pray you, take up your weapons – your quiver and your bow – and go out to the field, and catch me some venison;	<u>Bring me venison</u>	Go, I pray you, to the flock and fetch me from there two good kid goats
and make me savory food, <u>such as I love,</u>	And make me savory food	And I will make them into a savory food for your father, <u>as he loves.</u>
<u>and bring it to me that I may eat,</u>	That I may eat	And you shall <u>bring it to your father,</u> that he may eat
<u>In order that</u> my soul may bless you before I die.	And bless you <u>before God</u> before my death.	<u>In order that</u> he bless you before his death.

Rivka omits Yitzchak's desire for fresh venison, which entails the act of hunting. Rivka knows that Yaakov will not be able to go out and hunt and return in time before Esav, and she therefore simplifies the request. She also omits the

description "such as I love" from Yitzchak's words to Esav; this seems to be a sort of secret code between them, implying that only Esav knows how to prepare the food the way he likes it. Rivka also omits the words "and bring it to me," thereby blunting the transaction implicit in his words. She makes the request for meat sound as though it expresses Yitzchak's need to derive strength and inspiration from eating, rather than a condition for the blessing. She adds, on her own initiative, the words "before God," conveying to Yaakov that what Yitzchak will be passing on is the blessing of Avraham, and thus spurring him on to action.

In her own command, Rivka echoes Yitzchak's original request, leaving out only the act of hunting. In this manner she presents the additional details as her own advice, rather than as Yitzchak's specifications.

The changes that Rivka introduces into Yitzchak's request cast Yaakov's act of deception in a somewhat mitigating light, since the identity of Esav as the recipient of the blessing is not explicit and the struggle is over the spiritual blessing of God rather than over a material inheritance.

5. Words, verbs and rhythm in the description of Yaakov's actions

Yaakov's reservations about carrying out his mother's recommendation is documented explicitly in the text, but the text goes further and describes the process of preparing the disguise down to the tiniest details:

"Perhaps my father will feel me and I shall seem to him a deceiver, and I shall bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing." (12)

The words "I shall seem to him a deceiver" seem redundant. Yaakov's statement expresses his fear of consequences that will bring about the opposite of the desired effect. Thus, it would suffice for him to mention the possibility of Yitzchak feeling him and then cursing him upon discovering the ruse. The addition testifies that Yaakov does not view the act as one of fraud or deceit; his only concern is not to offend his father.

Yaakov's action is described through a series of verbs that evoke a slow and cumbersome manner:

And he went, and fetched, and brought them to his mother, and his mother made savory food, such that his father loved. (14)

The climax of all this preparation is, of course, what this mother does for her 63-year-old son:

And Rivka took the best clothes of her eldest son, Esav, which were with her in the house, and **she dressed** Yaakov, her younger son, [with them]. And **she dressed** his hands and the smoothness of his neck with the

skins of the goat kids. And **she placed** the savory food and the bread which she had made, **in the hand of Yaakov**, her son. (15-17)

It is not difficult to conjure a mental image of the energetic mother urging her recalcitrant son and doing what needs to be done in order to complete the mission.

6. Molding of the tension and the reader's position

The climax of the story lasts from the moment that Yaakov enters his father's room until Esav appears. The "happy ending" with which we are all familiar tends to overshadow the nerve-wracking drama leading up to it. Let us examine the verses (18-30), noting the mounting tension:

And he came to his father and he said, "My father," and he said, "Here I am – who are you, my son?"

Here, already, is the first hitch. Yitzchak suspects something...

And Yaakov said to his father, "I am Esav, your firstborn; I have done as you spoke to me. Arise, I pray you; sit and eat of my venison, in order that your soul may bless me." And Yitzchak said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?"

A second hitch. Rivka had changed the wording of Yitzchak's request, but had not thought about the ramifications in terms of the time needed to prepare the meat. Yaakov has no idea that Esav was supposed to go out and hunt, and Yitzchak's words take him by surprise.

And he said, "Because the Lord your God gave me good speed."

Yaakov improvises an answer.

And Yitzchak said to Yaakov, "Come near, I pray you, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esav or not."

This is not really a problem; Yaakov had planned for this in good time. However, the lengthy process is delaying the blessing, and Esav may arrive at any moment.

And Yaakov drew near to Yitzchak, his father, and he felt him and he said, "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esav."

Another hitch, this time relating to the sense of hearing, which had not been taken into consideration.

And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy, like the hands of Esav, his brother; so he blessed him.

A sigh of relief.

And he said, "Are you really my son Esav?"

The tension reaches fever pitch. What is going on? Why does Yitzchak not give the blessing?

And he said, "It is I."

And he said, "Bring it near me that I may eat of my son's venison, that my soul may bless you." And he brought it near to him, and he ate, and he brought him wine, and he drank.

This is a serious delay. All seems lost; the ruse is doomed to be exposed at any moment – but Yitzchak proceeds at his elderly pace, stopping at intervals to drink.

And Yitzchak his father said to him: "Come near, I pray you, and kiss me, my son."

It seems that the father is suspicious; why else would he want to smell him?

And he drew near and he kissed him, and he smelled the smell of his clothes, and he blessed him and said, "Behold, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that God has blessed. May God give you of the dew of the heavens, and of the fat places of the earth, and much corn and wine. May people serve you, and nations bow down to you; be a lord over your brethren, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you."

The tension is unbearable.

And it was, as soon as Yitzchak had finished blessing Yaakov, that it came to pass that Yaakov had scarcely emerged from the presence of his father, when Esav, his brother, came in from his hunt.

A sigh of relief. The trick worked.

Who could possibly not be cheering at this point? The text adopts Yaakov's point of view completely, thereby influencing the reader to take a positive stance – even though the act of deceiving one's father is usually viewed as a terrible sin and an act of ingratitude.

The preparatory stage and the stage of execution are described from the point of view of Rivka and Yaakov, and through various ploys the text succeeds in conveying the details of the story in such a way that not only is the reader not roused to criticize Yaakov, but he hopes, with baited breath, to see him succeed.

What happens when the perspective changes and the text moves over to Esav's side of the story?

B. Covert criticism of the act of deception

1. Allusion to Avraham and the *akeda*

Chazal note one single positive character trait that Esav possesses – he honors his father:

“A son honors his father” (*Malakhi* 1:6) – This is Esav, who honored his father greatly. He would go out to the field and hunt venison, and bring it, and cook it, and bring it in to his father, and feed him every day. (*Shemot Rabba* 46)

The text seems to hint to this quality in its formulation of Esav's answer to his father's question, echoing Avraham's response to God's command concerning the *akeda* and his response to his son's questioning during the journey to Mount Moriah:

Avraham at the <i>akeda</i>	Esav
And He said to him, “ Avraham. ” And he said, “ Here I am. ” (22:1) And Yitzchak said to Avraham, his father, and he said, “ My father. ” And he said, “ Here I am, my son. ” (22:7)	And he said to him, “ My son. ” And he said to him, “ Here I am. ” (27:1)

In contrast to Yaakov, who deceives his father, we find Esav ready to fulfill his father's request, even before he hears what is required of him.

2. The appellations for the brothers

Esav and Yaakov are well known to the reader, who is already familiar with the story of their birth, their respective occupations, and the story of the pottage. Nevertheless, in our chapter, the text adds appellations indicating their family status:

And it was, when Yitzchak was old and his eyes had ceased to see, that he called Esav, **his elder son**. (1)

And Rivka took the best clothes of her **elder son**, Esav, which were with her in the house, and she dressed Yaakov, her **younger son** [with them].

(15)

And these words of Esav, **her elder son**, were told to Rivka, and she sent and called Yaakov, **her younger son**, and she said to him, "Behold, Esav, your brother, comforts himself, planning to kill you." (42)

The repeated mention of the brothers' respective positions casts some doubt on the validity of the sale of the birthright and suggests that Esav should receive a blessing because he is the eldest, despite his relinquishing of the birthright.

3. Pathos

The description of Esav's entrance, the fright that seizes Yitzchak upon hearing of the ruse, and Esav's devastated reaction are all accompanied by pathos that arouses tremendous sympathy for the characters who have been tricked:

And Yitzchak was seized by **a very great trembling**. (33)

When Esav heard his father's words, he **cried with a great and exceedingly bitter cry**, and he said to his father, "Bless me, me too, my father." (34)

And Esav said to his father, "Have you only one blessing, my father? Bless me, me too, my father." **And Esav raised his voice and he wept**. (38)

Pathos is a rhetoric device aimed at arousing emotion on the part of the reader. It is difficult to remain unmoved at the thought of the blind, helpless, elderly father seized by trembling, and at the sound of the cry and the weeping of Esav, the great hunter, who had previously seemed so untroubled by thoughts of the future.

4. Leading word

A leading word or expression appears in just a few places. The identical word or expression in both, or all, places indicates a connection between the narratives. *Chazal* note the link between Esav's cry and that of Mordekhai upon hearing of Haman's decree:

Yaakov caused Esav to emit one cry, and where was this repaid to him? In Shushan, the capital [of Achashverosh's kingdom], as it is written, "And he cried a great and bitter cry..." (*Esther* 4:1). (*Bereishit Rabba* 67)

5. Judgmental terminology

The title of a story can testify to a judgment of it. The title, "The story of the

theft of the blessings" expresses a view of the act as immoral, while the title "The story of the taking of the blessings" is non-judgmental. Yitzchak does not grapple with his evaluation of what has happened. When he explains the situation to Esav, in an attempt to protect Yaakov from his brother's fury, he expresses his position in the most direct way possible:

And he said, "Your brother came **with cunning** and has taken your blessing." (35)

In the future, Yaakov will be the victim of similar cunning in his own life.

6. **Motifs from the story of the taking of the blessings in Yaakov's life story**

From the moment he flees from his home, Yaakov's life is a restless one. He contends with family problems that become increasingly severe up until his old age, as we learn from his own testimony: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life" (47:9). Between the lines, the text hints to the reason for his troubles by employing motifs that we recognize from the story of the blessings:

- Corresponding to Rivka's conspiring with Yaakov prior to his taking of the blessings, "**And now, my son, obey my voice**" (verse 8), we find her advice for him to flee: "**And now, my son, obey my voice**, and arise, flee to Lavan, my brother, in Charan" (verse 43).
- Corresponding to Yaakov's deceit using **food** and fine **clothing**, he is forced to ask: "If God will be with me and watch over me on this road that I take, and give me bread **to eat and clothing** to wear..." (28:20).
- Lavan's words, "**This is not done in our place, to give the younger before the elder**" (29:26), and his trickery in exchanging the sisters hint to Yaakov's having placed himself before his elder brother.
- Corresponding to Yitzchak's plea, "Come near that I may **feel you** (*va-amushekha*), my son, whether you are my son Esav or not" (21), Yaakov suffers from Lavan's suspicions: "And Yaakov answered and said to Lavan, 'What is my crime, what is my sin, that you rush after me? For you have **felt** (*mishashta*) [i.e., searched] all my belongings..." (31:36-37)
- The deception of Yaakov using the coat of his beloved son, Yosef, recalls the deception of Yitzchak using his son's finest clothes.
- The skins of the **goat kids** (*gedayei izzim*) that served as Yaakov's

disguise are echoed in the blood of the **kid goat** (*se'ir izzim*) in which Yosef's coat is dipped.

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Yaakov's righteousness and Esav's wickedness are diminished somewhat by means of descriptive devices used in the story of the blessings. Yitzchak's unintended rebuke, "Your brother came with cunning..." makes it impossible to exempt Yaakov completely from responsibility for what he has done and for the atmosphere of trickery in which he is now forced to spend many years.

The complexity of the story's message teaches us of the need to draw a distinction between the end and the means for achieving it. The positive evaluation of the act comes through on the level of the purpose and aim of the blessing, while a negative evaluation surrounds the way in which it is achieved. The text uses different ways of showing that Yitzchak's choice of Esav for the blessing is mistaken and as arising from his old age and blindness. Rivka tries to demonstrate and reflect this mistaken judgment to him by misleading him with his son's clothing. Once she succeeds in this, the aim has been attained, and at this point she should persuade him to change his decision.

The text seems to point to the optimal moment for Yaakov to reveal his identity:

He did not recognize him, for his hands were hairy, like those of Esav his brother, and he blessed him. (23)

Yitzchak means to utter the blessing with the belief that it is Esav who stands before him. Yitzchak has been misled, but he recognizes the possibility of being mistaken, and suddenly he asks again: "Are you really my son Esav?" (24).

It is at this point that the deception should end. Rivka and Yaakov could use the mistaken identity, which has just been exposed, to persuade Yitzchak that he has been similarly mistaken for some time in his judgment of Esav. In answering his father, "It is I," Yaakov takes the matter one step too far, thereby tarnishing the purity of the lofty aim. He does receive the blessings, but the price of the deception and the blow to his father's honor is one that he continues to pay for most of the rest of his life.

Translated by Kaeren Fish