

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT TOLDOT

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**Birthrights and Blessings**  
**By Rav Yair Kahn**

**1. Fooling a Blind Father**

Upon reaching old age, Yitzchak decides to bless his first born and favorite son – Esav. Rivka overhears the plan and concocts a plot to “steal” the *berakhot* for Yaakov, her favorite. The plot succeeds and Yaakov is blessed. This story raises many serious exegetical and ethical issues. How could Yitzchak be fooled by Esav? Why was it necessary to trick Yitzchak? Why couldn't Rivka simply have spoken to her husband? But the problem that bothers me most is - how can fooling one's elderly blind father be considered ethically acceptable behavior? On the other hand, if it's not ethical, do ends justify the means?

Our Sages were aware of how potentially dangerous this section was. Consider a *gemara* in *Avoda Zara*, which relates a Roman perspective of this episode in which the Jew is presented as an imposter and Esav as the *bona fide* chosen one:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: They [the Romans] have yet another festival in Rome [which occurs] once every seventy years. Then a healthy man [representing Esav] is brought and made to ride on a lame man [representing Yaakov, who began to limp after his encounter with the heavenly minister of Esav]. He is dressed in the attire of Adam, on his head is placed the scalp of R. Ishmael [one of the ten martyrs killed by the Romans], and on his neck are hung pieces of fine gold to the weight of four *zuzim*. The marketplaces [through which these pass] are paved with onyx stones, and the proclamation is made before him: “The reckoning of the ruler is wrong. The brother of our lord, the impostor! Let him who will see it see it; he who will not see it now will never see it. Of what avail is the treason to the traitor or deceit to the deceiver!” (*Avoda Zara* 11b).

Moreover, the story of Yaakov and Yitzchak has been misused to support anti-Semitic propaganda. For instance, David Duke, a famous American white nationalist and former Grand Wizard of the knights of the Ku Klux Klan posted an article entitled “The Culture of Deceit,” by Edmund Connelly, who writes:

What is the archetype of the Jew in the Jews' own founding myth? It is that of the liar or trickster. Recall what happened in Genesis 27:5-45. Nearing death, the elderly Isaac sent Esau out to trap game in order to

prepare a meal appropriate to the blessing Isaac was to bestow upon his first son. With Rebecca's participation, Jacob deceived his father into believing that he was in fact Esau. Numerous times, Isaac suspected a ruse, finally asking, “Are you really my son Esau?” “I am,” Jacob lied. Jacob was ultimately successful in deceiving his father and received his blessing. This passage is a stark instance in which we see one origin for the still-common Jewish belief that others (*goyim*) are to serve them. “Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers.”

The above only underscores the importance of studying this story honestly and seriously. In trying to meet that challenge, we will present two approaches, which deal with the difficulties in very different ways.

**2. The Classic Approach**

According to the commonly accepted version, Yitzchak was in fact fooled by Esav. Had Esav received the *berakhot*, it would have brought an end to the covenantal community. Rivka and Yaakov act selflessly and heroically to continue the tradition of Avraham. They jeopardize their personal relationship with Yitzchak in order to save the future of *Klal Yisrael*.

While still confused about Esav's true identity, Yitzchak apparently believed that both Esav and Yaakov would continue the tradition of Avraham. The blessing to Esav was meant to give him and his descendants political authority over Yaakov. It seems that Yitzchak was unaware of the prophesy known to Rivka, that two independent nations were being carried in her womb and that the elder would serve the younger.

Yitzchak, clouded by Esav's lies, needs the lie of Yaakov in order to achieve clarity and see the truth. When Yitzchak realizes he was fooled and Yaakov, not Esav, received the *berakhot*, when he is informed by Esav that long ago he had sold his birthright to Yaakov, he finally understands that Yaakov alone will continue the tradition passed down to him by Avraham.

He now realizes that his twins are destined to form independent national units. Yaakov alone will continue Avraham's legacy. Yaakov alone is sent to Padan Aram in search of a bride and he alone receives from Yitzchak the *berakha* of Avraham.

This is one variation of the classic approach. It is an approach that is and should be taught in grade schools. It is a simple approach, insofar as the lines are clearly drawn. The heroes of the story are good, while the villains are bad. In the end, the good guys win and live happily ever after.

**3. The Complex Approach**

On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are those who claim that Yaakov acted improperly. Accordingly, he was

actually punished for stealing the *berakhot*. The Torah does not mention punishment explicitly, but there are a number of linguistic and thematic indications which support this approach.

For example, when Rivka tells Yaakov that he has to run away, she uses the exact phrase she used when she told him to steal the *berakhot*: "Now therefore, my son, hearken to my voice." This seems to suggest that the idea to fool Yitzchak caused the necessity to run away. Moreover, when Yaakov arrives in the house of Lavan, he is fooled at night, when his vision is impaired, and the elder daughter switches the younger. After having fooled his blind elderly father, his protest, "Why did you fool me" (29:25), rings hollow. Lavan's response, "We do not act that way **here**, to give the younger before the older" (verse 26), hints to the way Yaakov had acted **there**. He remains in Haran, subject to Lavan's deceptiveness, for the next twenty years. Yaakov tricked his father by wearing the skin of a goat on his arms. Similarly, when Yosef is sold by his brothers, his children trick Yaakov into thinking that Yosef was killed with the blood of a goat. Yaakov spends the next twenty-two years mourning the supposed "death" of Yosef.

There is a *midrash* which supports this approach.

"When Esav heard the words of his father, he cried with an exceeding great and bitter cry." R. Chanina said: Whoever says God is yielding, may his intestines yield. Instead, He takes a long breath and eventually collects that which is owed him. Yaakov caused Esav to cry out one cry - when was he forced to pay? In the capital city of Shushan, as it says, "And he [Mordechai] cried with an exceeding great and bitter cry" (*Bereishit Rabba*).

The alternate approach is more complex, insofar as the line between good and bad is blurred. However, even though Yaakov may have been out of line in the method that he used, he, not Esav, deserves to receive the *berakhot*. Yaakov may have been punished for his tactics, but he is nevertheless chosen to continue the legacy of Avraham.

#### 4. The Limits of Human Involvement

The primary advantage of the complex approach is that it contains implicit censure of Yaakov's ethical insensitivity. Even if Yaakov was justified regarding the ends, according to this interpretation, he was wanting as to the means. His unethical behavior comes back to haunt him when is tricked by his father-in-law.

One might suggest that there is a religious problem with Yaakov's behavior as well. The problem is one of playing God. In general, we believe that Hashem rules the world, but has given Man a mandate to be actively involved. Man was given free choice and it is up to him to perfect the world religiously and morally. Of course, that same freedom can also be used destructively. Nevertheless, the freedom to act and the ability to make a difference is converted into a call to action. Our Sages stated, "*Ein somchin al ha-nes*" – we should not rely on miraculous divine intervention. Man is summoned to partner with Hashem in the creative process, as it were. Passively waiting for Hashem to redeem us is not an act of faith, but rather one of negligence.

This is certainly the case regarding the world of man. Man must be pro-active in improving the world, both religiously

as well as ethically. Is the same true in the realm of God? Are there some areas in which man's involvement might be inappropriate? For instance, when Bila'am is asked to curse Yisrael, Hashem responds, "Do not curse the nation, for they are blessed." If the nation is blessed by God, does the action of man make any difference? Was Bila'am correct in assuming that if he would somehow succeed in slipping a curse by Hashem, the curse would take effect? Or perhaps Hashem was telling him that since the people were divinely blessed, human action was irrelevant. When Bila'am blesses Israel instead of cursing them, he says, "How can I curse that which the Lord has not cursed" (*Bamidbar* 23:8). Isn't this a statement of the limits of human involvement?

This point is emphasized in a Gemara (*Berakhot* 10a) that describes a tense encounter that took place between King Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu, the prophet. The king was very sick and Yeshayahu went to visit him. Yeshayahu told Chizkiyahu that he would die. When Chizkiyahu, who was one of the most righteous kings, questioned the decree, Yeshayahu responded: "you neglected the command to be fruitful and multiply". Chizkiyahu countered: "For I have been shown via *ruach hakodesh* (holy spirit) that the my offspring will not be virtuous". Yeshayahu then said to him: "What have you to do with the secrets of the All-Merciful? You must do that which you are commanded, and let the Holy One, blessed be He, do that which pleases Him."

The question of who will continue the tradition of Avraham is a critical one. Certainly Yaakov should do all in his power to ensure that he is chosen. He should improve his ethical sensitivity. He should raise the level of his religious commitment and devotion. But should he steal *berakhot*? Shouldn't that be left to the Almighty? Do we really think that had Rivka not intervened, Esav, not Yaakov, would be blessed? Didn't the prophet Malachi attribute the choice of Yaakov to Hashem? "Was not Esav Yaakov's brother? said the Lord, yet I loved Yaakov but Esav I hated" (*Malakhi* 1:2-3). Had Yaakov not intervened, would Hashem have loved Esav and hated Yaakov? Should we march under the banner of "*ein somchin al ha-nes*" and call for human involvement in these areas as well?

Yaakov is exiled for twenty years as punishment for tricking his father. During those years, he is cheated, tricked, and fooled by his father-in-law. He undergoes two more years of hardship before returning to his father. *Chazal* call this "*midda kineged midda*" – a measure for a measure. Eventually, the years of exile are over, but Yaakov's suffering has not yet ended. His beloved son Yosef is sold into slavery. Just as he tricked his father using a goat, so too he is tricked by a goat into thinking that Yosef is dead. Yaakov spends the next twenty-two years of his life mourning the "death" of Yosef. The continued suffering of Yaakov seems quite harsh. Wasn't Yaakov already punished? Why was it necessary to begin all over again?

Why did the brothers sell Yosef into slavery? Weren't they trying to play God? Yosef had a dream. They tried to prevent the realization of the dream through human action. "Come now and let us slay him and cast him into one of the pits and we will say, 'An evil beast hath devoured him' and we shall see what will become of his dreams" (37:20).

Yosef was sold to Egypt at age seventeen. He was framed for a crime he didn't commit and thrown into prison. Eventually, he was freed from prison and made viceroy of Egypt

when he was thirty years old. During the first seven years of his reign, the seven years of plenty, Yaakov continued to mourn Yosef. Yosef could easily have contacted Yaakov and informed him that he was well, healthy, and safe. Instead, Yaakov was not informed until nine more long years of bereavement and sorrow had passed, when Yosef finally revealed himself to his brothers. The Ramban is troubled by Yosef's behavior and suggests that Yosef wanted to engineer a plan to make his dreams come true. He had to make sure his brothers came to bow before him. To achieve that end, he had to keep his identity a secret. Wasn't Yosef playing God as well? Yosef's brothers tried to prevent the realization of the dreams. Yosef tried to engineer their realization. Is this a legitimate human endeavor? Shouldn't both be left to Hashem? (Rav Yitzchak Arama, in his commentary *Akeidat Yitzchak*, forwarded this argument in his rejection of the Ramban's suggestion.)

Perhaps the first twenty-two years, during which Yaakov was exposed to the deceit of Lavan, were punishment and penitence for the ethical insensitivity Yaakov showed towards his father. The twenty-two years of mourning Yosef, on the other hand, were *midda kineged midda* for the religious failing of trying to ensure Hashem's blessing through stealing *berakhot*.

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