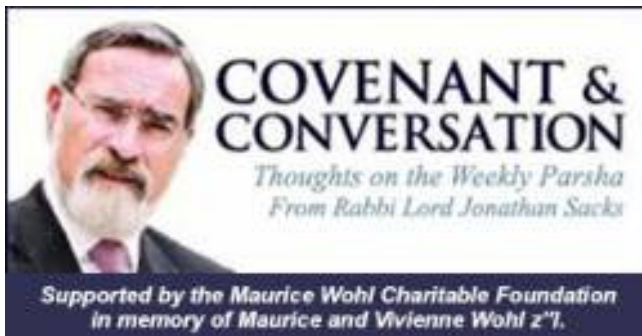


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Isaac and Rebecca: Communication Matters

The Netziv (Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893, dean of the yeshiva in Volozhin) made the astute observation that Isaac and Rebecca seem to suffer from a lack of communication. He noted that Rebecca’s “relationship with Isaac was not the same as that between Sarah and Abraham or Rachel and Jacob. When they had a problem, they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rebecca.” (Ha’amek Davar to Gen. 24:65)

The Netziv senses this distance from the very first moment Rebecca sees Isaac, as he is “meditating

in the field” (Gen. 24:63), at which point she fell off her camel and “covered herself with a veil” (Gen. 24:65). He comments, “She covered herself out of awe and a sense of inadequacy, as if she felt she was unworthy to be his wife, and from then on this trepidation was fixed in her mind.”

Their relationship, suggests the Netziv, was never casual, candid, and communicative. The result was, at a series of critical moments, a failure of communication. For instance, it seems likely that Rebecca never informed Isaac of the oracle she had before the twins, Esau and Jacob, were born, in which God told her “the elder will serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). That, apparently, is one reason she loved Jacob rather than Esau, knowing that he was the one chosen by God. If Isaac had known this foretelling of their sons’ futures, would he still have favoured Esau? He probably did not know, because Rebecca had not told him. That is why, many years later, when she hears that Isaac was about to bless Esau, she is forced into a plan of deception: she tells Jacob to pretend he is Esau. Why does she not simply tell Isaac that it is Jacob who shall be blessed? Because that would force her to admit that she has kept her husband in ignorance about the prophecy all the years the children were growing up.

Had she spoken to Isaac on the day of the blessing, Isaac might have said something that would have changed the entire course of their, and their children’s, lives. I imagine Isaac saying this: “Of course I know that it will be Jacob and not Esau who will continue the covenant. But I have two quite different blessings in mind, one for each of our sons. I will give Esau a blessing of *wealth*

and power: ‘May God give you the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth ... May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you.’ (Gen. 27:28-29) I will give Jacob the blessing God gave Abraham and me, the blessing of *children* and the *promised land*: ‘May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham.’” (Gen. 28:3-4).

Isaac never intended to give the blessing of the covenant to Esau. He intended to give each child the blessing that suited them. The entire deceit planned by Rebecca and carried out by Jacob was never necessary in the first place. Why did Rebecca not understand this? Because she and her husband did not communicate.

Now let us count the consequences. Isaac, old and blind, felt betrayed by Jacob. He “trembled violently” when he realised what had happened, saying to Esau, “Your brother came deceitfully.” Esau likewise felt betrayed and experienced such violent hatred towards Jacob that he vowed to kill him. Rebecca was forced to send Jacob into exile, thus depriving herself of the company of the son she loved for more than two decades. As for Jacob, the consequences of the deceit lasted a lifetime, resulting in strife between his wives and even between his children. “Few and evil have been the days of my life” (Gen. 47:9), he said to Pharaoh as an old man. So many lives scarred by one act which was not even necessary in the first place – Isaac did in fact give Jacob “the blessing

of Abraham” without any deception, knowing him to be Jacob not Esau.

Such is the human price we pay for a failure to communicate. The Torah is exceptionally candid about such matters, which is what makes it so powerful a guide to life: real life, among real people with real problems. Communication matters. In the beginning God created the natural world with words: “And God said: ‘Let there be’”. We create the social world with words. The Targum translated the phrase, “And man became a *living* soul,” (Genesis 2:7) as “And man became a *speaking* soul.” For us, speech is life. Life is relationship. And human relationships are built through communication. We can tell other people our hopes, our fears, our feelings and thoughts.

That is why any leader – from a parent to a CEO – must set as their task good, strong, honest, open communication. That is what makes families, teams and corporate cultures healthy. Everyone must know what their overall aims are as a team, what their specific roles are, what responsibilities they carry, and what values and behaviours they are expected to exemplify. There must be praise for those who do well, as well as constructive criticism when people do badly. Criticism must be of the act, not the person; the person must feel respected whatever their failures. This last feature is one of the fundamental differences between a “guilt morality” of which Judaism is the supreme example, and a “shame morality” like that of ancient Greece (namely, guilt makes a clear distinction between the act and the person, which shame does not).

There are times when much depends on clear communication. It is not too much to say that there are moments when the very fate of the world depends upon this.

One such instance happened during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of nuclear war. At the height of the crisis, as described by Robert McNamara in his film, *The Fog of War*, John F. Kennedy received two messages from the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. One was conciliatory, the other far more hawkish. Most of Kennedy's advisers believed that the second represented Khrushchev's real views and should be taken seriously.

However, one man offered a different perspective. Llewellyn Thompson Jr. had been American ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1962 and had come to know the Russian president well. He had even spent a period of time living with Khrushchev and his wife. He told Kennedy that the conciliatory message sounded like Khrushchev's own personal view while the hawkish letter, which did not sound like him, had probably been written to appease the Russian generals. Kennedy listened to Thompson and gave Khrushchev an opportunity to back down without losing face – and the result being that a potentially devastating war was averted. It is terrifying to imagine what might have happened, had Thompson not been there to establish which was and which was not the real act of communication.

So many aspects of our lives are impacted by misinformation and enhanced by genuine

communication. This is why friends, parents, partners and leaders must establish a culture in which honest, open, respectful communication takes place, and that involves not just speaking but also listening. Without it, tragedy is waiting in the wings.

Shabbat Shalom

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. If God knew that Rebecca and Isaac did not communicate freely, why was the prophecy only given to Rebecca before the twins were born?
2. Can you think of other examples from the Torah when communication issues had consequences?
3. Is it ever better to hold back and communicate less?



A Little Bit of Lavan

With the start of the Parasha we are reintroduced to the second patriarchal couple – Yitzchak and Rivka:

(19) And these are the generations of Yitzchak, Avraham's son. Avraham fathered Yitzchak. (20) Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivka, the daughter of Betuel the Arami of Paddan Aram, the sister of Lavan the Arami, to be his wife. (Bereishit 25:19-20)

The introduction lacks symmetry, in more ways than one. First, in describing Yitzchak, the opening verse is repetitive. Yitzchak is the son of Avraham, and Avraham fathered Yitzchak – are these not two different ways of saying the same thing? Next, Rivka is described – only once – as the daughter of Betuel, but seemingly superfluous information about her brother is added. The emphasis in the verse on Yitzchak's lineage seems to indicate that this is a man who follows in holy father's footsteps; not only is Yitzchak the son of Avraham, Avraham is his father, both literally and figuratively. However, when it comes to Rivka there are apparently two problematic influences. Not only is she the daughter of Betuel – as if that weren't enough of a problem – but she also has a brother named Lavan, who is also “quite a character.” How all of this may impact the story which unfolds remains to be seen.

Yitzchak entreated God on behalf of his wife because she was barren. God answered his entreaties, and Rivka, his wife, conceived. (Bereishit 25:21)

Even though it will soon become clear that this couple had been married for some twenty years before Rivka became pregnant, the description in the verse makes it sound like an immediate

response – Yitzchak prays; Yitzchak's prayers are answered and God responds.

The episode that immediately precedes this chapter gives us the same impression:

(62) Yitzchak came from the way of *Be'er Lahai Roi*, for he lived in the land of the South. (63) Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field at the evening. He lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, there were camels coming. (64) Rivka lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel. (Bereishit 24:62-64)

Yitzchak is returning from a place of spiritual significance; *Be'er Lahai Roi* was a place of revelation, a place of importance for his brother Yishmael, and for Hagar¹. Yitzchak stops in the field to pray, presumably for what was his most acute need at that moment, a wife.² As he stands in prayer, his prayers are answered almost immediately, and Rivka appears.³

He had detoured from his regular path to the field in order to pour out his heart to God in prayer. He did not want to be interrupted in his devotion by passing travelers whom he would have to greet. This was in spite of the fact that he had already prayed in *Be'er Lahai Roi*, and he was answered before he began to pray, as it says (Daniel 10:12) “For from the day you set your mind to prayer and fasting, your prayer was heard.” (Seforno, Bereishit 24:63)

Another crucial element to our understanding of these verses is that Yitzchak's prayer in the field takes place during the day. Rabbinic tradition attributes the afternoon prayer of *mincha*⁴ with this very particular scene: Yitzchak's prayer is unique precisely because of the setting in which it is uttered. Unlike *shacharit*, the morning prayer prior to the start of the workday, and unlike *arvit* with which the workday comes to an end, *mincha* is a prayer for the middle of the day. It is therefore quite appropriate that this prayer is said in the field, the place of labor; the essential essence of this prayer infuses physical existence with spiritual power.

It may be argued that not much is known about the life of Yitzchak; the verses are sparse when compared to the details of the lives of our other patriarchs. On the other hand, this forces us to be hypersensitive to what the text does tell us. The field -*sadeh*- is a theme in the life of Yitzchak. An entire chapter (26) tells of his planting in the field and digging wells. Yitzchak was a man of the field; he knew the value of work in the field. It is certainly not a coincidence that his prayers come from the field as well.

Sensitivity to this very central element in Yitzchak's life sheds light on Yitzchak's relationship with his son Esav, who is described as "a man of the field."⁵ Yitzchak surely understood that the challenge presented in the personality of Esav was the same challenge represented by *mincha*, the afternoon prayer: to infuse the physical with spirituality, to raise up a prayer from the fields.

This brings us to the episode of the blessings. In his later years, Yitzchak summons his son Esav in order to bless him, but the blessing is contingent on Esav bringing the hunt from the field.

When Yitzchak was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esav and said to him, "My son." He answered, "Here I am." And he said, "I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die. Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the field and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that my soul can bless you before I die."

Yitzchak, who has excelled at praying from the field and making the mundane holy, hopes to do the same with his son Esav. By **commanding** him to hunt and prepare food of the field, the hunt itself is transformed into a **mitzvah**. Yitzchak has created the means with which he hopes to elevate Esav, as he had elevated the field itself in his younger days. Yitzchak continues to infuse the mundane with spirituality – including, or perhaps especially, the soul of his son Esav.

But lest we forget, there is another parent, Rivka, and another sibling, Yaakov. She overhears this conversation and derails the plan. There is another narrative, another strand that must be considered and understood, and it is alluded to from the outset.

(19) And these are the generations of Yitzchak, Avraham's son. Avraham fathered Yitzchak. (20) Yitzchak was forty years old when he took Rivka, the daughter of Betuel the Arami of

Paddan Aram, the sister of Lavan the Arami, to be his wife. (Bereishit 25:19-20)

Rivka was not only the daughter of Betuel, she was the sister of Lavan. We previously had a glimpse of Lavan, and we will learn much more about him as the narrative unfolds. When we are first introduced, Lavan seems like an opportunist. When Avraham's emissary appears, we can easily imagine Lavan eyeing the jewels the man bears. He is interested in the money, and quite capable of manipulative behavior in order to get his hands on it: After a marriage agreement is reached and gifts have changed hands, Rivka's brother Lavan (and her mother) suggest a delay of indeterminate duration before the bride-to-be sets out on her journey – if at all:

Her brother and her mother said, "Let the young lady stay with us some days, or ten. After that she will go."
(Bereishit 24:55)

Years later, fearing Esav's wrath, Rivka uses eerily similar language when she instructs Yaakov to run away for "a few days," setting him off on a journey that will take decades to complete.

(43) Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Lavan, my brother, in Haran. (44) Stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury turns away; (Bereishit 27:43-44)

Perhaps this is precisely the sort of delay Lavan had in mind when he made his cryptic suggestion to Avraham's representative.⁶

This is not the only similarity between Rivka and her brother Lavan. After her exchange with Avraham's servant at the well, Rivka runs home and recounts the events and the conversation to her mother. Lavan hears, and leaps into action:

(28) The young lady ran and told her mother's house what had transpired. (29) And Rivka had a brother, and his name was Lavan. Lavan ran out to the man, to the spring. (30) And when he saw the ring, and the bracelets on his sister's hands, and when he heard the words of his sister Rivka, saying, "This is what the man said to me," he approached the man, who was standing by the camels at the spring. (Bereishit 24:28-30)

Like her brother, Rivka also has a highly developed sense of hearing; in fact, hers is even keener than her brother's. Whereas Lavan overhears conversations between others, Rivka hears other people's thoughts. When Esav is enraged that his brother has taken the blessing intended for him, he is so infuriated that he contemplates murdering Yaakov – and Rivka hears Esav's unspoken thoughts:⁷

(41) Esav hated Yaakov because of the blessing with which his father blessed him. Esav said **in his heart**, "The days of mourning for my father are at hand. Then I will kill my brother Yaakov." (42) The words of Esav, her elder son, were told to Rebekah. She sent and called Yaakov, her younger son, and said to him, "Behold, your brother Esav comforts himself about what you have done by

planning to kill you. (Bereishit 27:41-42)

Rivka's "gifted" hearing skill is explained by some commentaries as prophetic ability.⁸

"It was told to Rivka:" Who told her? Rabbi Hagai taught in the name of Rabbi Yitchak, the matriarchs were prophets and Rivka was among the matriarchs. (Bereishit Rabbah 27:42)

This prophetic ability was mentioned previously by Targum Onkolus, when Yaakov hesitated before fulfilling his mother's instructions to impersonate his brother and take Esav's blessing. Yaakov tells Rivka that he is afraid that such action would lead to a curse and not a blessing:

(11) Yaakov said to Rivka his mother, "Behold, Esav my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. (12) What if my father touches me? I will seem to him as a deceiver, and I would bring a curse on myself, and not a blessing." (13) His mother said to him, "Your curse will be on me, my son. Only obey my voice, and go get them for me." (Bereishit 27:11-13)

Rivka's response, according to the Targum, goes beyond a mere dismissal of Yaakov's fears:

And his mother said to him, I have been told in a **prophecy** that there shall be no curses upon you, my son; only obey me, and go, and take for me. (Targum Onkolus 27:13)

Rivka may not have been referring to a recent prophecy, rather to one that she had received

years earlier, when after years of childlessness she experienced a strange and unsettling pregnancy:

(22) The children struggled together within her. She said, "If it be so, why is this happening to me?" She went to inquire of Almighty. (23) God said to her, "Two nations are in your womb. Two peoples will be separated from your body. One will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger." (Bereishit 25:22-23)

Rivka knew. She knew things her husband did not know, and this knowledge influenced her attitudes and actions from the very start. She knew she was carrying twins; she knew they would not live in harmony, that they would not act like brothers. She knew they would sire two separate nations, and she knew that her younger son, Yaakov, would prevail.

Perhaps Yitzchak had imagined his two sons working side by side toward a common goal. Together they would be unstoppable: the studious, spiritual Yaakov protected by the strong and capable Esav. For this vision to become a reality, all Yitzchak needed to do was to instill in Esav an appreciation for spirituality.⁹

Rivka knew this was not the way things would play out, that this unity between the two very different strengths of her sons would not materialize as her husband envisioned it. She knew that she would have to step up, that she – and not Esav – would have to look out for Yaakov. She knew that rather than teaching Esav to be spiritual she would have to teach Yaakov to be more physical, more grounded in this world,

and perhaps even a little more manipulative. She knew she would have to teach her younger son to be more like her own older brother, Lavan.

This explains the strange introductory verses with which we began: Rivka is identified not only as the daughter of Betuel, but as the sister of Lavan, for indeed she was both. Just before her children are born, the text reminds us that Rivka shares traits with Lavan – and those traits will soon become manifest, but not necessarily where we might have expected to see them. We might well wonder how Esav’s personality developed as it did;¹⁰ there are those who try to blame his wild, bloodthirsty nature on the genetic imprint passed down from Rivka’s family. Perhaps this is so; perhaps this is a convenient excuse. Lavan was sly, a slick-tongued trickster – traits never displayed by Esav, but behavior which is manifest in Rivka and her son Yaakov.

Perhaps this is the character trait that Esav points to when he accuses Yaakov of deceiving him not once but twice:

(36) He said, “Is he not rightly named Yaakov? For he has held me back these two times. He took away my birthright, and now he has taken away my blessing.” He said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”
(Bereishit 27:36)

Yaakov took the blessing intended for Esav – not by force, nor as a result of the earlier trade they had made, but by shrewdness. Esav now began to wonder if the earlier “sale” he had made to his brother, which had seemed at the time like the deal of a lifetime, was not also somehow one

more instance of his younger brother hoodwinking him.

Yitzchak, too, has his eyes opened – but in a very different sense – when he realizes what has happened, what Yaakov has done:

(33) Yitzchak trembled violently, and said, “Who, then, is he who has hunted the venison and brought it me, and I have eaten of it all before you came, and I blessed him? Yes, he will indeed be blessed.”... (35) He said, “Your brother came with **deceit**, and has taken your blessing.” (Bereishit 27:33-35)

The normative reading of the text is that Yitzchak trembled, and this would generally be interpreted as a response of fear. Strangely, Yitzchak describes Yaakov’s behavior as deception – but still insists that the blessings will come true, that the perpetrator of the deception will be blessed. Why didn’t Yitzchak withdraw the blessing he had mistakenly bestowed on his “righteous” son who has now proven himself a scoundrel?

The Targum’s translation explains the very specific language of this verse, which reveals Yitzchak’s new understanding of the situation:

And Yitzhak was wonderstruck with great astonishment, and said, ‘Who, then is that person who hunted game, and brought it to me, and I partook of all when you had not yet come in, and I blessed him? Indeed, blessed shall he be. (Targum Onkolus, Bereishit 27:33)

Rashi highlights the subtlety of the Targum's translation:

TREMBLED – As the Targum renders it: *tivah*, which means he was astonished. (Rashi Bereishit 27:33)

Rather than trembling in fear (as the Targum renders this word in other places), Yitzchak was not so much afraid as astonished: Could this really have been his son Yaakov? *This* Yaakov – the Yaakov he had never seen before – will indeed be blessed. One more word in the Targum helps explain the source of Yitzchak's astonishment:

And he said, Your brother came with wisdom, and has received your blessing. (Targum Onkolus Bereishit 27:35)

WITH deceit – with wisdom (Rashi Bereishit 27:35)

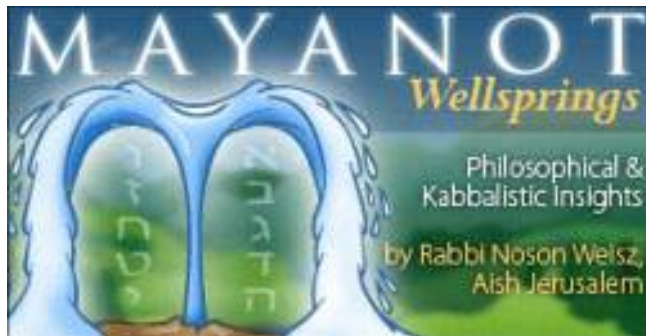
Yitzchak is astonished by Yaakov's display of wisdom and guile. The word he uses, *b'mirma*, is suspiciously similar to a word we heard at the beginning of the parasha – a word used to describe Betuel and Lavan¹¹ – and, we now realize, by extension¹² – a word that also describes Rivka and Yaakov:¹³ Betuel the *Arami* and Lavan the *Arami* – they hail from Aram, and they act, as do Rivka and Yaakov after them, *b'mirma*, with guile.¹⁴

At first, Yitzchak thought that Esav could be “fixed” with a dose of spirituality, but he learns that it is Yaakov who is “improved” with a dose of guile. Yitzchak finally comes to understand what Rivka had known all along:¹⁵ Esav would

not serve as the protector of Yaakov. The partnership imagined by Yitzchak would never come to fruition. Yaakov would have to manage on his own, but Yitzchak saw that Yaakov, who had mastered the necessary tools of a glib tongue and sly bargaining skills, had the guile to survive and even thrive in the real world. Yitzchak understood that Yaakov was ready for the next stage, and he sends him off to face Lavan and find a wife for himself,¹⁶ – for as Lavan will soon learn, Yaakov will not be the perpetual victim. Although Lavan will get the best of him in the first round, Yaakov will emerge victorious, in his battle with Lavan and in life, because Yaakov had a bit of Lavan in his own bag of tricks. After all, he had been trained by his mother Rivka, daughter of Betuel and sister of Lavan the *Arami*.

1. See Bereishit 16:13-14.
Bereishit 16:
(13) She called the name of Hashem who spoke to her, “You are a God who sees,” for she said, “Have I even stayed alive after seeing him?” (14) Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi. Behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered.
2. See Ha'amek Davar Bereishit 24:63.
3. This parallels the prayer of Eliezer, when he prays for a wife for Yitzchak, before he completes his words – Rivka appears.
Bereishit 24:
(15) It happened, before he had finished speaking, that Rivka, who was born to Betuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Avraham's brother, came out with her pitcher on her shoulder.
4. Talmud Bavli, Brachot 26b.
Yitzchak instituted the afternoon prayer, as it is stated: “And Yitzchak went out to converse [*lasuah*] in the field toward evening” (Bereishit 24:63), and conversation means nothing other than prayer, as it is stated: “A prayer of the afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint [*siho*] before the Almighty” (Tehilim 102:1).
5. Bereishit 25:27.
6. Later, when Yaakov runs away and works for Lavan, similar language is used regarding Yaakov's experience; the seven years seem like days.
Bereishit 29
(20) Yaakov served seven years for Rachel. They seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had for her.

7. It is possible that this was not the first instance in which Rivka displays the ability to hear other people's thoughts. When the servant (Eliezer) arrives and prays that God provide a wife, the scene is described twice, with a very subtle difference. In the first telling, the text reads as follows:
It happened, before he had finished speaking, that behold, Rivka came out, who was born to Betuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Avraham's brother, with her pitcher on her shoulder. (Bereishit 24:15)
When the servant repeats the story, he clarifies that his words were not audible, rather they were a silent prayer – yet Rivka somehow heard, and knew the precise words with which to respond:
Before I had finished speaking **in my heart**, behold, Rivka came out with her pitcher on her shoulder. She went down to the spring, and drew water. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' (Bereishit 24:45)
In this earlier episode, we would be tempted to attribute her behavior not to her "hearing" but to her decency. It is only in retrospect, when we see a repetition of this phenomenon and the very same words with which it described, that we may suspect there is more to her hearing than would otherwise have been expected.
8. **Bereishit Rabbah 67:9. Targum** Unkulus hints the interpretation at least in this verse, in other places he seems to reaffirm here prophetic ability – see further on in this essay. Targum Pseudo Yonatan and Rashi says she was told by "Ruach Hakodesh"
And the words of Esav her eldest son were shown to Rivka, and she sent and called Jakob her younger son, and said to him, Behold, Esav your brother plotteth against thee, to kill thee. And the words of Esav her elder son, who thought in his heart to kill Jakob, were shown by the Holy Spirit to Rivekah, and she sent, and called Jakob her younger son, and said to him, Behold, Esav your brother lies in wait for you, and is plotting against you to kill you.
Rashi Bereishit 27:42:42
WERE TOLD TO Rivka – It was told her by the Holy Spirit what Esav was thinking in his heart (Bereishit Rabbah 67:9).
Radak, Bereishit 27:42
how did she come to know about Esav's intentions which he had not articulated? It is possible that she experienced a prophetic revelation, seeing that she was a prophetess (compare Rashi). It is also possible that what Esav had thought about doing, he inadvertently mentioned to someone so that the one who had heard him reported it to Rivka.
9. See my Explorations Expanded 122-143, and especially footnote 12 and citation from the Sfat Emet.
10. See Seforno Bereishit 25:20.
11. See Bchor Sho, Bereishit 25:20.
12. Rashi (25:20) insists that Rivka did not learn anything from her father or brother, a contention not easily supported by the text. THE DAUGHTER OF BETUEL OF PADAN-ARAM, SISTER TO LAVAN – Has it not already been written that she was the daughter of Betuel and sister of Lavan of Padan Aram? But we are told these facts once more to proclaim her praise – she was the daughter of a wicked man, sister of a wicked man, and her native place was one of wicked people, and yet she did not learn from their behavior (Bereishit Rabbah 63:4).
13. At least according to Rashi, guile was something Yaakov lacked when he was first introduced as an *Ish Tam*.
A PLAIN MAN – not expert in all these things: his heart was as his mouth (his thoughts and his words tallied). One who is not ingenious in deceiving people is called plain, simple.
14. See Baal Haturim short commentary, Bereishit 25:20.
15. Part of the prophecy of Rivka as understood by the Talmud is the two brothers/nations would not only be separate they would have an inverse relationship, when one rose the other would fall. See Megila 6a
Yitzchak too understands this point, see the Targum to 27:40. Caesarea, which represents Rome, and Jerusalem are diametric opposites. If, therefore, someone says to you that both cities are destroyed, do not believe him. Similarly, if he says to you that they are both settled in tranquility, do not believe him. If, however, he says to you that Caesarea is destroyed and Jerusalem is settled, or that Jerusalem is destroyed and Caesarea is settled, believe him. As it is stated: "Because Tyre has said against Jerusalem: Aha, the gates of the people have been broken; she is turned to me; I shall be filled with her that is laid waste" (Ezekiel 26:2), and Tyre, like Caesarea, represents Rome. Consequently, the verse indicates that if this city is filled, that one is laid waste, and if that city is filled, this one is laid waste. The two cities cannot coexist.
Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak said: The same idea may be derived from here, a verse dealing with Yaakov and Esav: "And the one people shall be stronger than the other people" (Genesis 25:23), teaching that when one nation rises, the other necessarily falls. By the sword you shall live but your brother shall serve. Yet it shall be when his descendants transgress the words of the Torah you will be able to remove his yoke from upon your neck .
16. Rivka is quite dramatic and manipulative when after telling Yaakov that he will need to run for his life to Lavan's home, under the guise of (only) finding a wife she has Yitzchak command Yaakov to go on the journey she had already planned for Yaakov.



The Red Badge of Cruelty

The major theme of our Torah portion introduces and explains the origin of the historic conflict between Jacob and Esau. The enmity that Esau developed toward Jacob in the context of the events that are described in Toldot has led to consequences that can be traced throughout Jewish history, and has served as the main cause of Jewish suffering through the ages in various forms.

The evil that descended from Esau includes:

1. **Amalek.** The nation of Amalek, which is descended from Esau's marriage to one of Ishmael's daughters, was the first nation to attack Israel following the Exodus. (See Exodus 17:8.) Rashi quotes a Midrash that compares Amalek to a deranged person that jumps into the scalding bath. He gets burnt but in the process cools the water so that it becomes tolerable for others to enter it. (Rashi on Deut. 25:18) It was so important to the nation of Amalek to demonstrate that Israel was not invincible, that its forces came all the way from Mount Seir to the desert to attack Israel without the slightest hope of victory or

shred of any motive for the action. The Haman of the Esther story who was the first one to attempt Hitler's "final solution" a total annihilation of the Jewish people came from Amalek.

2. **Edom.** This kingdom established by Esau became the Roman Empire according to our Sages (Leviticus Raba 13,5). We are presently in our final Diaspora, which is called the "Diaspora of Edom" that began with the destruction of the second Temple at the hands of Rome. Today's Western world has evolved out of the Roman Empire which converted to Christianity in the 4th century CE and established the Christian Church.
3. **Germany.** The Talmud also connects Esau with Germany as follows:

Rabbi Yitzchak said, "We find written, *Grant not God the desires of the wicked one; do not grant his conspiracy fruition, for them to be exalted, Selah.* (Psalms 140:9) This is a reference to a prayer that Jacob addressed to God: 'Master of the Universe, please do not grant Esau his heart's desire and do not grant his conspiracy fruition.' This is a reference to Germany [the name of a kingdom also of Edom, according to Rashi]. If it is ever released, it would destroy the entire world." (Megila 6b)

THE ENMITY OF ESAU

The enmity of Esau towards Jacob is summed up by Shimon Ben Yochai the author of the "Zohar" in the following words:

And he kissed him (Genesis 33:4)
[This passage describes a meeting between Esau and Jacob, when Esau kissed Jacob; the Hebrew word describing the kiss *vayishokehu*, has a dot over each of the letters in the Torah scroll.] The hatred Esau bears to Jacob is as immutable as a law of nature; despite this, at that particular moment Esau was overcome by a genuine pang of love, and he kissed Jacob with all his heart. (Sifri, Numbers 69)

The phenomenon we are looking at is no simple grudge over the loss of a set of blessings. What are the origins of such monumental hatred? To understand Esau and his motivations a little better, we must gain some insight into the second of our patriarchs Isaac, who is, albeit against his will, the source of Esau's immense evil spiritual power.

THE MIGHT OF ISAAC

We begin the *Shmoneh Esreh* by introducing God to ourselves as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and introducing ourselves to God as their grandchildren. We also describe Him as the great, the mighty and the awesome God. Jewish tradition maintains that these descriptions of God are to be correlated with the earlier reference to the Patriarchs. We describe God as being great in terms of the God of Abraham, as greatness stands for benevolence, the chief character trait of Abraham. We describe Him as being mighty in terms of the God of Isaac, as might stands for the power of judgment, the chief character trait of Isaac. Finally, we describe Him as being awesome

in terms of the God of Jacob, as awe stands for the power of truth, the chief character trait of Jacob.

The correlation is based on the following concept. The feeling experienced by the recipient of an act of benevolence is the appreciation of the greatness of the giver. The feeling experienced by one undergoing judgment is a feeling of dread in face of the might of the one wielding the power of the law. The feeling inspired by perceiving the full beauty of enduring reality is awe of the One who could have designed all this. Thus these descriptions of God as great, mighty and awesome are uttered from the point of view of the recipient/observer coming into contact with His attributes.

Until the Patriarchs came along, these attributes of God were only visible in the world in a very general way. God made use of them to design and build the natural world, but no human being specifically interacted with God on a daily basis through these attributes. That is to say, there was nothing personal about the way God ran the world. The Divine-human relationship was totally businesslike and unemotional. It was the Patriarchs who altered this by reaching out to God and taking an interest in developing a personal relationship with Him founded on emotional attachment rather than on considerations of efficiency or mutual benefit.

KINDNESS VS. MIGHT

To make this more concrete, let us describe the traits of *chesed*, "benevolence/kindness," attributed to Abraham and contrast them with

gevura, "might," attributed to Isaac in terms of the following metaphor.

We all know that smoking is a health hazard. There are two potential ways of tackling such a hazard.

- a. We could develop a lot of medicines that would cure lung cancer and emphysema, the chief dangers facing the smoker; we could build hospitals to care for sick smokers till they get better; and we could provide comprehensive social insurance schemes that would allow smokers to pay for all their treatments without becoming bankrupt. This method would be termed handling the problem of smoking through the attribute of benevolence/kindness.
- b. We could make a serious attempt to make smokers give up their habit. We could raise the price of cigarettes to astronomical heights. We could refuse to converse with people who smelled of cigarettes. We could make sure that they received no promotions. In short, we could demonstrate our intolerance and disgust for the addiction to nicotine in such powerful ways, that smokers would be forced to change their inner character, and voluntarily give up the habit. This method would be termed handling the problem through the attribute of might.

When we human beings face problems, we often have no choice between these two methods. For example, in the case of smoking, we have no cure for cancer or emphysema, and we have only limited means at our disposal, so we cannot

financially support smokers who are suffering the downside of their habit. But God has no such limitations. Theoretically, both these methods are available to Him when considering tackling any problem.

Abraham went about the world spreading the name of God under the banner of benevolence. He told people, "Turn to God's benevolence and He will help you to surmount all your problems." In this way he taught people to love God. When someone learns to love God, he will automatically start changing his character as well. Once a person experiences the joy and uplift that comes from being close to the Divine presence, he becomes afraid of risking the loss of God's love by being unworthy of it. Thus He learns the fear of God through his love of God.

Isaac was drawn by his nature to the other method. He went around the world spreading the name of God under the banner of might. He told people, "God is good and He would love to help you more than anything in the world, but He cannot associate with evil. Control yourselves and your evil inclinations and you will observe that God will immediately begin to respond to your prayers and begin to help you as soon as He sees that you are attempting to make a change. All you have to do is open the tiniest crack in your heart and you will begin to experience massive inputs of Divine assistance. *Open your heart to me like the eye of a needle and I will broaden the hole till you can drive a wagon through it.*" (Tanchuma, Toldos, 18)

In Isaac's system, a person first internalizes the fear of God and is led to love of God through fear.

THE DANGERS

Each of these approaches to God has a built in danger. The danger of Abraham's approach is the possibility that people might conclude that the day of reckoning will never come. God will continue to solve all the problems through his great love endlessly and there is no need to work on changing one's character so as not to risk the alienation of God's affection. In the absence of the need for restraint, harmless self-indulgence may develop into dangerous wildness.

This indeed, is what happened to Abraham's son Ishmael, who unlike Isaac, inherited Abraham's character trait of benevolence, but more intensified. Thus the angel informs Hagar about Ishmael:

And he shall be a wild man; his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him; and over all his brothers shall he dwell. (Genesis 16:12)

Ishmael's task in life was to continue the approach of his father Abraham, but he got lost in the love of God and never developed the fear and the consequent self-criticism and restraint that his love of God should have produced. Lacking the restraining power provided by the fear of God, he simply went wild.

PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

The danger in Isaac's approach is even more obvious. The pursuit of perfection can easily lead to arrogance, extreme cruelty and the excessive use of force. It is easy to forget that the purpose of the pursuit of perfection is only to ultimately reach the state where one merits the gentle benevolence of God's love.

The zealous pursuit of perfection through self-discipline requires the suppression of all forms of weakness, including softness and gentility. If these qualities are permanently destroyed instead of merely temporarily suppressed, you destroy the human being in the overzealous attempt of correcting his faults and produce a Nazi.

The children agitated within her, and she said, "If so, why am I thus?" And she went to enquire of God. (Genesis 25:22)

Rashi: Our sages interpreted "agitated" as "running" [the word for agitation employed is *vayitrotzetzu*, from the Hebrew root *ratz*, which means "run"]. When she passed by the doors of the academy of Shem and Ever, Jacob ran to get out of the womb and into the door; when she passed by the doors of the temple of the idol worshippers, Esau ran to leave the womb and go to through the door. (Genesis raba 63,6)

It would appear then, that Jacob was an eager Talmudic student from before his birth, whereas Esau was a full-fledged idol worshipper. But this cannot be so. If God created Esau as evil then he is not to blame for any of the evil acts he

perpetrated, nor is Jacob in any way meritorious despite his good deeds; God created him a holy man. But if this is not the case, how can we explain this running?

Rabbi Dessler explains: We are all created to accomplish different things. Each of us has his own way of serving God. Esau was attracted to the temple of the idol worshippers because that is where his life's work lay, whereas Jacob ran to the study hall because that is where his service of God would take place. Each one was eager to begin; hence the running.

Just as Ishmael inherited a more intense edition of Abraham's character, Esau inherited a more intense form of Isaac's character. Esau's task was to continue his father's work: to attack and subdue the evil in the world; to teach the evildoers the error of their ways; to stamp out the opposition to the dominion of God on earth; and thus to bring humanity to the state where it can bask in the warm rays of God's affection.

The roots of the corruption and evil in the world are implanted in the temples of the idol worshippers and they provide the proper venue for the release of Esau's energies. They were the places to which he was attracted as he was supposed to do his good work there. However, instead, he was corrupted by them.

NATURAL SUCCESSOR

Isaac loved Esau for game was in his mouth. (Genesis 25:28)

It is not that Isaac had a mistaken assessment of his sons' characters and he misjudged Esau. Isaac understood that Esau was his natural successor.

He understood the downside of his approach to Divine service. He tried to shower Esau with warmth and affection and attach him to himself and to God so that he would not fall prey to the lurking pitfalls inherent to his character.

Perhaps we can gain some insight as to where exactly Esau went astray by paraphrasing the conversation described in Genesis 25:29-34 in the light of Rashi's commentary.

On the day that Abraham passed away, Jacob prepared a soup of lentils for Isaac, traditional fare for those in mourning. Lentils are round and smooth, lacking perforations that are reminiscent of the human mouth. They symbolize a double message:

1. They remind us that life is cyclical; mourning is an experience we must all go through as death is an inevitable part of the life cycle.
2. They remind us that our sojourn on earth is temporary as our main purpose is to be elsewhere, and therefore, bearing this in mind, we should keep our mouths closed to expressions of bitterness and complaint.

Esau returns from the field weary of this fatalistic attitude. He sees his purpose as bringing perfection to the world and is confident of his ability to accomplish this. If the world could be made perfect, there would be no need to die. After all, death is a curse that came into the world only in response to the imperfection of Adam's sin. He wants to consume the lentils, those symbols of mourning. He sees no need to resign oneself to death and sees no value in contemplating a different venue for continued existence.

In contrast, Jacob dreams of the service in the Temple. He sees no way to perfect the world as a self-contained entity. He wants to reach out to God, to teach people to connect to the Divine. Only with the inspiration provided by such contact can people be persuaded to strive for a perfection that can no longer be attained on this earth following Adam's fall. You have to give people a glimpse into a more perfect world than this one and instill the desire to reach it.

JACOB'S VIEW VS. ESAU'S VIEW

In Jacob's view, Temple service is the obligation of the first-born. As the establishment of a connection to God is the highest priority among all human needs, the first child born in each generation should naturally dedicate his life to this activity, occupying as it does, the place of primary importance in the pantheon of possible careers.

But Esau has no patience for this. He has the power to bring order to the world without focusing on another existence. He will use his powers of persuasion and if necessary, the power of the sword. After all anything is justified if it can bring the world to a state of perfection and eliminate all the evils that infect it, up to and including death.

He tells Jacob he will gladly trade places. He does not see the Temple service as occupying the place of primary importance. Perfecting the world by teaching people temperance and self-restraint is more important. Jacob's message is the wrong one. The obligation of the first-born is to focus on this world, not to spend life dreaming of the next.

Esau understood Isaac's love for him as an endorsement of his entire approach to interpreting the mission of God's people that Abraham established and Isaac continued. He did not react to the awarding of the blessings to Jacob as merely the loss of a valuable prize. He regarded it as a betrayal of what he had been led to believe was his father's approach. In his heart he felt that Jacob and his mother Rebecca had manipulated his father into adopting the incorrect policy for the global mission of Israel and elevating Jacob as the leader of Israel and the setter of its policies. He rejected the new approach.

Amalek, Esau's grandson, and his nation attacked the Jewish people on the way to Mount Sinai to accept the Torah, the final endorsement of all that he opposed. He was so convinced of the rightness of his course and the justice of his cause that he was prepared for self-sacrifice. If he could not entirely prevail, at least let him turn world enthusiasm for Jacob's approach from scalding hot to merely lukewarm and leave himself some room to maneuver.

When you examine them deeply, [it would take an entire essay on its own to do so] all the acts of genocide referred to in the introduction stem from the same root. Each time such genocide was attempted it was on the grounds that the Jews, and what they stood for, were the true obstacles to perfecting mankind and attaining Utopia in this world.

The Roman Empire and all its successors -- that have included the Spanish, French, British, Prussian, Austro-Hungarian, etc. -- always carried out their imperialistic policies in the name of

world progress and the promotion of the spread of true civilization. We still have not progressed past Esau's vision. We still believe that all our problems have earthly solutions.



Past and Present Love

"And Yitzchak loved Eisav, for the game he put in his mouth, but Rivkah loves Yaakov" (Genesis, 25:28).

Even people not normally attuned to grammar are struck by the Torah's strange use of tenses to describe the relationship of Yitzchak and Rivkah with their children. Yitzchak "loved" Eisav, in the past tense, while Rivkah "loves" Yaakov, in the present tense. What is this meant to teach us?

The Dubno Maggid suggests a solution based on a keen observation of the world. In non-Jewish society, people define themselves and are defined by others according to what they do. In Jewish society, people are defined by what they are.

Eisav represented non-Jewish values. He defined himself and expected other to define him by what he did. He wanted to be seen as the athlete, the warrior, the storied hunter. The basis for the admiration and love of other people was what he

had accomplished in the past. Should he cease to be a hunter, the admiration would cease as well. Therefore, Yitzchak "loved" Eisav, in the past tense, "*for the game he put in his mouth,*" the things he had done in the past. But Yaakov represented Jewish values. He was defined by what he was rather than by what he did. Therefore, Rivkah "loves" Yaakov, in the present tense, a love that continues uninterrupted and is not dependent on his latest feat and achievement.

This is particularly true in our own times. Ask a non-Jewish child what he wants to be when he grows up and he will inevitably tell you he wants to be a doctor or a lawyer or a Silicon Valley entrepreneur or perhaps a rock star. Ask a Jewish child, and hopefully he will tell you he wants to be a *tzaddik* (righteous person), a *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar), a *baal chessed* (kind), and *oveid Hashem* (servant of God). Hopefully.

The Jewish child answers the question directly. He tells you what he wants to "be." The non-Jewish child, however, is not giving a direct answer to the question. He is telling what he will "do" rather than what he will "be." He has been conditioned to believe that a person's entire value is dependent on his profession or vocation. If he is a doctor he is important. If he is a mailman he is not important.

A columnist here in Baltimore recently wrote a piece decrying this tendency in society. Whenever he meets someone new at a function or party, it takes no more than fifteen seconds before he is asked, "So what do you do?" Sometimes, he is so annoyed he identifies himself as an auditor for the Internal Revenue Service, which is a guaranteed

conversation stopper. Obviously, he concludes, in America "you are what you do," and what you really are - your character, your interests, your thoughts, your feelings, your opinions - do not really matter that much.

In America, you are measured by your performance, by what you do. Therefore, you may be idolized and adored one day and despised the next. If the level of your performance falls off, if you go through a stretch when you strike out instead of hitting, your fickle admirers will turn on you. After all, it was not what you are that they never admired but what you do, and when you no longer do it, there is no longer any basis for the admiration.

This is not the perspective of Judaism. In fact, it is the exact opposite. Judaism values all people for what they are, for their *tzelem Elokim*, for their character, their integrity, their goodness, their ethical standards, their *menschlichkeit*, their spiritual accomplishments. What they do for a living or for professional fulfillment is only secondary.

A DOSE OF HOLINESS

And he inhaled the scent of his garments, and he blessed him. (Gen. 27:27)

Yitzchak lost his sight in his old age, but his sense of smell was just fine. Yaakov was counting on that. He put on Eisav's garments, brought Yitzchak delicacies and asked for the blessing. Yitzchak "inhaled the scent of his garments" and gave him the blessing. And the rest is history.

The Midrash offers a completely different homiletic interpretation of these words. The word used here for "his garments" is *begadav*. With alternate vowelization, it can be read as *bogdav*, which means his renegades. In other words, when Yitzchak "inhaled the scent of his renegades," when he sensed prophetically the descendants of Yaakov who would become renegades to the Jewish people, he was inspired to give him the blessings. What exactly does this mean?

Let us consider the renegade the Midrash holds up as an example. His name was Yosef Meshisa, and he was an awful Jew. When the Romans mounted their assault on the *Beis Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple, this Yosef Meshisa served as their native guide. As a reward, the Roman officer gave him permission to take for himself any of the valuables he wanted. He went into the *Heichal* and took the golden *menorah*, but the Roman decided it was too extravagant a treasure for a mere commoner.

"Go back and take something else," the Roman told him.

"I cannot go back in," Yosef Meshisa replied.

"No, you must go back," said the Roman.

"But I simply cannot," said Yosef Meshisa. "Isn't it enough that I defiled the Lord's Temple once? Must I do it again?"

"Aha! What have we here all of a sudden?" said the Roman. "A pious man, no less. Well, I absolutely insist that you go back in."

But Yosef Meshisa would not budge from his resolution. The Roman beat and tortured him

mercilessly, but still he refused to go back into the *Heichal*. In his agony, he cried out, "Woe is me, for I have angered my Creator!" Finally, he died.

What had transformed this renegade Jew into a holy martyr in a matter of minutes? One minute, he was prepared to loot the *Beis Hamikdash* and carry off the golden *menorah*, and the next, he allows himself to be tortured to death rather than violate the sanctity of the *Heichal*. What, asks the Ponovezher Rav, brought about this amazing change?

The answer is simple, says the Ponovezher Rav. Stepping into a holy place transformed him. He may have entered the *Heichal* with the worst of motives. But once there, he was exposed to the aura of holiness, and he emerged a changed man.

This, according to the Midrash, is what Yitzchak saw in Yaakov's future that convinced him to give him the blessings. He saw that even the lowest of the low among Yaakov's descendants, even the most despicable renegades such as Yosef Meshisa, would have such strong spiritual fortitude that they could be turned around by exposure to holiness. As low as they would fall, they would be one mere step from transformation into righteous people willing to die *al kiddush Hashem*. This was the lineage that was truly deserving of the blessings.

History has shown us that these kinds of transformations are not limited to the Inner Sanctum of the *Beis Hamikdash*. In the early 20th century, a Jew named Franz Rosenzweig told his story in a book entitled *The Star of Redemption*.

Franz was a successful author, a respected philosopher and a totally secular Jew. At one point, he was engaged to a gentile woman and was seriously considering baptism. It was during the First World War, and he served as a captain of cavalry in the German army on the Eastern front.

On the night of Yom Kippur, he found himself stationed in a small Polish town. As he made his rounds, he saw the light in the *shul* and heard the voices of the congregants, and out of curiosity, he stopped in to see what was going on. When he walked out a little while later, he writes, he was a religious Jew, a sincere *baal teshuvah*. He broke off his engagement to the gentile woman and led a life of observance from that point on.

In Germany of 1915, the idea of a *baal teshuvah* was virtually unheard of, unlike today when it such a common phenomenon. What brought about his incredible transformation? One thing: exposure to holiness. When he stepped into the *shul* and experienced the aura of Yom Kippur, he became a different person.

Such is the power of holiness, not just the holiness of the *Shechinah* in the *Beis Hamikdash*, but the holiness of just a handful of sincere Jews praying together in a small village *shul*. They too have the power to change a man forever.

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