



The very texts that introduce perplexing questions, are also the very clues to the answers. This design also offers us an excitement, for we learn to anticipate new insights with every hour of continued study. True Torah "codes" must always increase our wisdom of God.

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Weekly Parsha

What is essential about Jacob clutching Esav's heel at birth, that God included it in the Torah?



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Weekly Parsha

Toldot

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Blessing of the Firstborn
And Esav said to Yaakov, "Let me swallow some of this red food for I am tired." Therefore, his name is Edom. (Beresheit 25:30)

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THE TRUE CODES OF THE TORAH

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Weekly Parsha

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Esav returns from the field exhausted. Yaakov is preparing lentil porridge. Esav asks Yaakov to give him the porridge. Yaakov offers to exchange the porridge for Esav's rights as firstborn. Esav agrees and the birthright is transferred to Yaakov.

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra discusses the reason Yaakov was preparing a porridge of lentils. He draws an important conclusion from this aspect of the incident. He argues that Yitzchak was not wealthy. His household was forced to sustain itself with humble foods.[1]

Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam disagrees with Ibn Ezra. He argues that Yaakov's preparation of this porridge does not indicate poverty. Yaakov was a tzadik – a righteous person. He had little interest in delicacies. He was content with simple foods and avoided foods which might awaken greater appetite.[2]

It is difficult to understand this dispute. What compelled each authority to assume his respective position? This dispute appears to be the result of a more basic argument. Yaakov purchased Esav's birthright. What special claim or privilege was secured through this birthright? Ibn Ezra maintains that the first born traditionally inherited a larger portion of the estate of the father. This explains Ibn Ezra's assertion that Yaakov was impoverished. This poverty played an essential role in Esav's decision to sell his birthright. Esav observed that his father was not wealthy. He calculated that even a double portion of a poor man's estate was of little worth. Therefore, he was willing to abandon his rights as first born.[3] From Ibn Ezra's perspective Yitzchak's poverty was fortuitous. It is an essential element of the incident. It encouraged Esav to sell the birthright to Yaakov. The poverty might even have been providential.

Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam understood the birthright differently. He explains that traditionally the first born assumed the role of kohen, or priest. Esav had no interest in devoting himself to the service of Hashem. This birthright had no value to Esav.[4] Therefore, he sold it to Yaakov. This interpretation underlies Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam's position regarding Yitzchak's wealth. From this perspective, poverty or wealth did not play a role in Esav's decision. There is little reason to assume that Yitzchak was impoverished.

This dispute is expressed in one additional area.

The last pasuk states that Esav "sold the birthright".[5] The term used for "sold" is va'yevaz. This is an unusual and ambiguous term. It is interpreted by many authorities to mean "and he sold". However, Rashi offers another interpretation. He posits that the term means "and he rejected".[6] Why does Rashi adopt this interpretation?

Ibn Ezra understands the birthright as the privilege to inherit a larger portion of the father's property. If this is the nature of this right, its sale cannot be viewed as immoral. It is a straightforward business calculation. Accordingly, Ibn Ezra seems to interpret va'yevaz to mean "and he sold". This translation does not involve any moral judgment of Esav's decision.

However, Rashi agrees with Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam. He explains that the firstborn was destined to be a kohen.[7] The abandonment of this right is a moral decision. It is a rejection, or belittlement, of a spiritual opportunity. Therefore, Rashi interprets va'yevaz to mean "rejection". This implies Esav's action was a moral judgment.

Yitzchak's Blindness

And it was when Yitzchak became old that his vision faded. And he called to Esav his older son. And he called to him, "My son." And he responded to him, "I am here". (Bereshit 26:1)

Yitzchak approaches death. He decides that the time has come to bless his oldest son. He summons Esav and directs him to prepare for the blessing. Yaakov disguises himself as Esav and receives the blessing destined for Esav. How did Yaakov deceive his father into bestowing the blessing upon him? Our pasuk explains that Yitzchak had very poor vision. This handicap enabled Yaakov to trick his father. Yitzchak could not recognize that Yaakov had replaced Esav.

Rashi quotes an interesting comment from our Sages regarding the cause of Yitzchak's blindness. Our Sages explain that Yitzchak's blindness was a consequence of the Akeydah – Yitzchak's placement by his father upon the altar. The Sages explain that the angels observed Avraham bind Yitzchak and place him upon the altar. Like Avraham, the angels assumed that Yitzchak would be slaughtered and offered as a sacrifice. The angels began to cry. Their tears descended from the heavens and fell into Yitzchak's eyes. These tears caused Yitzchak's blindness.[8] It is difficult to

(continued on next page)

understand these comments in their literal sense. Assuming that an allegory is intended, what is its interpretation?

In order to unravel the mystery of our Sages' comments, we must return to Yaakov's deception of his father. Why was this subterfuge necessary? Rashi explains that it was actually Esav who intentionally mislead Yitzchak. Esav succeeded in tricking his father into believing that he was a moral, earnest individual.[9] Based on this assessment of his son, Yitzchak decided to bestow the blessing associated with the birthright upon Esav. This would have been disastrous. Yaakov intervened. Taking advantage of his father's blindness, he disguised himself as Esav and secured the blessing. It is notable that two types of "blindness" are at play in this incident. Yitzchak is "blind" to the true moral character of Esav. This blindness leads to a potential crisis in which Yitzchak was prepared to bestow a crucial blessing upon Esav. Yaakov forestalls this disaster through taking advantage of his father's physical blindness and disguising himself as Esav. In short, Yitzchak's figurative blindness precipitated the crisis and his literal blindness was crucial to its solution.

But how could Yitzchak have been so taken in by Esav's ruse? Yitzchak was certainly a wise individual. He was a prophet. He had a profound understanding of the world and Hashem. How did he not see through Esav's deception?

Gershonides responds to this issue. He explains that Yitzchak's wisdom was not necessarily a useful resource in penetrating Esav's deception. He argues that Yitzchak's very perfection interfered with his ability to identify Esav's corruption. Yitzchak was completely devoted to the study and the pursuit of truth. This total devotion deprived him of the ability to sense and to recognize Esav's true character. He could not discern Esav's evil and deceptive character. His spiritual perfection left him ill-prepared to deal with Esav.[10]

Perhaps we can now understand the message of our Sages. Our Sages are telling us that Yitzchak's blindness was a consequence of the experience of the Akeydah. Yitzchak underwent a unique experience. He was almost sacrificed on the altar to Hashem. This experience permanently affected Yitzchak's values. This close encounter with death, under these unusual circumstances, reoriented Yitzchak's relationship with the material world. He became removed and distant from this world. Instead, he devoted himself to the world of wisdom and truth. This intense devotion

to wisdom and truth left him ill-prepared to recognize Esav's deviousness. He failed to recognize Esav's true nature.

Yitzchak's inability to see through Esav made it necessary for Yaakov to deceive his father. This was the only way he could secure the blessings. A necessary requisite for Yaakov to succeed was Yitzchak's physical blindness. This blindness made Yaakov's impersonation of Esav possible. In short, Yitzchak's physical handicap was necessary because of his inability to see Esav's true character. This "blindness" to Esav was a consequence of the Akeydah. The Sages communicate this lesson by relating Yitzchak's blindness to the incident of his offering upon the altar.

The Impact of Approaching Death on Yitzchak

And he said, "I have become old and I do not know the day of my death." (Beresheit 26:2)

Yitzchak explains that he wishes to bestow the blessing now because he is old. He does not know when his life will end. Rabbaynu Shemuel ben Meir – Rashbam – explains that Yitzchak wanted to transmit this blessing personally. He must act while alive. At his advanced age, he felt compelled to act. If he did not now bestow the blessing, he might lose the opportunity.[11]

Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno offers a very different explanation for Yitzchak's decision to act at this time. He observes that Yaakov also blessed his children when he was close to his death. Moshe, too, blessed Bnai Yisrael at the end of his life. Apparently, these tzadikim felt that giving their blessings at this specific time was appropriate. Why is this time special?

Sforno explains as a person ages, the individual has the opportunity to advance spiritually. The allure of the material world fades. The physical desires, which may have influenced the person in youth, are now viewed as passing fancy. Faced with approaching death, the importance of the brief period spent in the material world decreases. One can use this opportunity to examine values. This examination should lead to a reemphasis of the spiritual. In a tzadik, this is a natural transition. Attachment to the material world fades with age and the spiritual element of the personality becomes more pronounced.

The bestowal of a blessing is a spiritual endeavor. The blessing requires that the benefactor enter into a very close spiritual relationship with Hashem. In order to achieve this relationship the individual must be able to forsake the attraction of the material world. This becomes

easier to achieve in old age and with the approach of death. This is the reason these tzadikim waited for this point in their lives to bestow their blessings.[12]

Yitzchak's Assessment of His Sons

And Yitzchak answered and he said to Esav, "I have made him a lord over you. I have given to him all his brothers as servants. And grain and wine I have associated with him. What can I do for you, my son?" (Beresheit 27:37)

"Nations will serve you, and governments will bow to you. You will be a master over your brother, and the brothers of your mother will bow to you. Those that curse you will be cursed, and those that bless you will be blessed." (Beresheit 27:29)

Esav discovers that Yaakov received the blessing that was destined for the firstborn. He asks his father, Yitzchak, for some other blessing. Yitzchak replies that he has blessed Yaakov and that the blessing will be effective. He has awarded Yaakov dominion over his brother Esav. There is no appropriate blessing remaining for Esav.

There is a basic difficulty with Yitzchak's response because there was an additional blessing. Later in the parasha, Yitzchak bestows upon Yaakov the "blessing of Avraham." This blessing designated Yaakov as Avraham's spiritual heir. He would receive the Land of Israel and serve as the standard bearer of the ideas developed by Avraham.

Sforno explains that Yitzchak always realized that Yaakov was the more righteous of his sons. There was no question that the blessing of Avraham was only appropriate for Yaakov. He never considered transmitting this legacy to Esav. However, Yitzchak felt that the blessing of material prosperity and political power was most fit for Esav. Yaakov had no interest in these mundane matters.

Sforno explains that Yitzchak believed that Esav's domination would be a blessing for both children and their descendants. Yitzchak perceived Esav as materialistic, but good-hearted. His benevolent governance over Yaakov would free his younger brother, and his descendants, from toil in the mundane. Thus unencumbered by the burden of material want, Yaakov could freely pursue wisdom and truth.[13]

Yitzchak's error was his belief that the "benevolent" Esav would use his wealth to care for his brother, Yaakov. Rivkah recognized that Yitzchak had misread Esav's nature and she diverted the material blessing to Yaakov.[14]

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(Toldot cont. from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

Prayer and the Natural Order

And Yitzchak prayed for his wife because she was barren and Hashem answered him and Rivka, his wife, conceived. (Bereshit 25:21)

This passage is the first instance in which the Torah explicitly makes reference to prayer. Rivkah was childless and Yitzchak prayed to Hashem and asked that they be given children. This incident clearly illustrates the efficacy of prayer. However, in everyday life the effectiveness of prayer is far less evident. So many prayers seem to go unanswered! Must one be a tzadik like Yitzchak in order to merit Hashem's attention? Can common people realistically hope that their prayers will be heard?

In order to respond to this difficult issue, we must begin by analyzing and correcting two fundamental misunderstandings regarding prayer.

Many people wonder why Hashem does not answer all of our prayers. After all, Hashem is merciful and omnipotent. He has the power to grant all of our requests. Since this is the case, why does He not simply grant any petition that is sincerely expressed? Remember Tevyah – the poor dairyman in *The Fiddler on the Roof*? Tevyah struggles in his poverty and asks this simple question: Would it interfere with some grand scheme of the Almighty if he were a wealthy man? Tevyah wonders what difference it would make to Hashem if he were relieved from the burden of his poverty. Certainly, there could be no reason of cosmic importance that should dictate that he must suffer! Why does Hashem not just grant him wealth? Let us consider whether Tevyah is asking a valid question.

How does Tevyah see the world? He sees the events of this world as an infinite collection of unrelated choices made by the Almighty. The Almighty made him poor and the Almighty can make him wealthy. Certainly, to the Almighty it makes little difference whether Tevyah is rich or poor. So, Tevyah asks, "Why does Hashem not make me wealthy?" But is this world view correct?

Nachmanides explains that one of the foundations of the Torah is that Hashem performs subtle, invisible miracles. When we think of miracles, we often recall the wonders described in the Torah – the splitting of the Red Sea and the manna in the desert. However, Nachmanides explains that these overt wonders represent only a portion of the miracles Hashem executes. Far more common are the less visible, subtle miracles He performs. In fact, these subtle miracles are fundamental to the Torah. The Torah tells us that we will be blessed for righteousness and punished for evil. This assurance is predicated on the assumption that

Hashem performs these subtle miracles.

What is a blessing? A blessing is some material benefit that is accrued as a reward for acting righteously. Inherent in this concept is that this material benefit was not destined to occur. A blessing is a benefit that is not destined to occur, but results from acting righteously. Nachmanides applies the same reasoning to punishments. The Torah describes material punishments that we will experience if we violate Hashem's will. These punishments are not destined to occur. Instead, Hashem interferes with destiny in order to punish evil.

Now, let us analyze Nachmanides' comments a little more carefully. Nachmanides asserts that there is a natural order that guides events in this world. Hashem sometimes interferes with this natural order in order to bless or punish us. Nachmanides maintains that the material world is guided by physical laws and that these laws determine events in this world. When Hashem blesses or punishes us, He interferes with these laws. Nachmanides' contention is that a miracle is a breach in the natural order. If this is so, then every time Hashem bestows a blessing or punishes us, He is performing a miracle. We may not be able to see this subtle miracle, but, nonetheless, it is there.

It is notable that Nachmanides maintains that the very concept of a miracle implies that there is a

normal, natural order; the concept of a miracle could not exist without the complementary concept of natural law. If there is no natural law, then what is a miracle? The very definition of a miracle is a breach in the natural order.

For when I contemplate Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon, and the stars that You set in place – then what is a human being that You should have him in mind or mortal man that You should take note of him. (Tehilim 8:4-5)

When Hashem formed the universe, He created a system of natural laws to guide its activities and processes. It is His will that these laws determine events in this world. He interferes with these laws when He bestows a blessing or carries out a punishment. This means that Tevyah is quite wrong! Hashem created the physical laws that have conspired to condemn Tevyah to poverty. In his petition, Tevyah assumes that the only issue at stake is whether he should be rich or poor. This, however, is not the issue at stake – something much more profound is at work here. Should the laws Hashem created to guide events in this world be abrogated? Should Hashem "compromise" His will on behalf of Tevyah? When the question is phrased this way, Tevyah's wish that Hashem make him wealthy is not as benign and inconse-

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quential to the cosmic order as Tevyah believes.

Let us now relate this to prayer. When we pray to Hashem, we are asking Him to perform one of His subtle miracles. For instance, someone is sick. We pray for the person's recovery. We assume that without Hashem's help this recovery may not occur. We are asking that Hashem interfere with the laws He created to remedy the problem. Like Tevyah, we are asking for Hashem to "compromise" His will!

This raises a question. If every prayer is a request for a miracle and every miracle represents some "compromise" of Hashem's will, then how can we expect any prayer to be answered? In truth, this is the real wonder of prayer! Many disappointed people often ask why their prayers go unanswered; a more reasonable question would be to ask what induces Hashem to respond to our petitions. Why should He "compromise" His will for us?

This idea in the passage above is expressed by King David. David saw that Hashem was the creator and master of the entire universe. Yet, King David also knew that Hashem cared for and provided for humanity and would even suspend the natural order He created in order to benefit humanity. How different David's attitude is from ours! We ask why Hashem does not answer all of our prayers. David asks why Hashem should have any concern with our needs!

This brings us to the second popular misunderstanding regarding prayer. What is a prayer? It is generally assumed that a prayer is a heartfelt petition and that the more sincere the supplication, the more likely Hashem will respond. Based on this understanding of prayer, it follows that everyone can pray effectively. Anyone can sincerely appeal to Hashem to satisfy one's needs. However, let us seek a definition of prayer from the Torah.

A study of the Torah's treatment of Avraham provides no instances in which Avraham overtly prayed to Hashem. However, the Sages maintain that Avraham did pray and that at least two of his prayers are explicitly recorded in the Torah. In the first instance, Hashem promises Avraham that He will reward him for his righteousness. Avraham protests. What is the value of the reward Hashem will bestow upon him if he does not have offspring? In response, Hashem promises Avraham that he will have children and his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens.[15] Our Sages describe this conversation between Avraham and Hashem as an instance of Avraham praying.[16] But this conversation does not seem to be a prayer. Instead, it seems that

Avraham is debating with Hashem. Rather than presenting himself as a supplicant, Avraham seems to challenge Hashem.

There is another conversation between Hashem and Avraham that our Sages identify as prayer.[17] Hashem tells Avraham that He will destroy Sedom. Avraham protests. He argues that there may be innocents among the people of Sedom. How can Hashem destroy the innocent with the wicked? Surely, this is not justice![18] Again, this does not seem to be a prayer. Instead, Avraham seems to be engaged in a debate. He argues with Hashem and urges Him to do justice. Why did our Sages regard these two instances as examples of prayer?

Clearly, the Sages did not define prayer as the act of a supplicant petitioning Hashem. Apparently, prayer need not even involve supplication. A different definition of prayer emerges from these examples. In each, Avraham is stating a request accompanied by an argument for granting the request. This indicates that prayer need not involve supplication, but it must include an argument favoring the granting of the request. Also, in both instances, Avraham offers similar arguments. He contends that Hashem's will shall be fulfilled on a higher level if Hashem fulfills his request. If Hashem grants him children, then His promises of reward will far more meaningful. If, in destroying Sedom, Hashem spares the innocent, humanity will recognize Hashem's justice. In other words, we do not emphasize our needs as much as we express the desire to see Hashem's will fulfilled in the most complete manner. We petition Hashem by demonstrating an understanding of Hashem's grand design for a just and righteous world and expressing our desire for the fulfillment of this design.

Let us consider another example of prayer in the Torah. Bnai Yisrael created and worshiped the Egel – the Golden Calf. Moshe prayed to Hashem to spare Bnai Yisrael. What was Moshe's prayer? Again, we find that it included an argument. Moshe argued that the destruction of Bnai Yisrael would lead the Egyptians to believe that Hashem took Bnai Yisrael out of Egypt just to destroy them in the wilderness. Moshe argues that the will of Hashem will be fulfilled more completely through sparing Bnai Yisrael.

Our own prayers follow this same pattern. Let us consider the Amidah – the central prayer of the service. We ask Hashem for health, redemption, forgiveness and so many other blessings. But, in each instance we make an argument: Forgive us because it is Your nature to forgive and forbear; Redeem us because You are a mighty redeemer; Heal us because You are a trustworthy healer and merciful. In each case, we appeal to Hashem to reveal Himself. We do not emphasize ourselves,

we emphasize Hashem. In asking Hashem for His help, we are expressing our understanding of His will and our desire for His will to be fulfilled. This does not seem to be similar to Avraham and Moshe's petitions.

If we accept our Sages understanding of prayer, it emerges that it is not as easy as is imagined to offer sincere prayer. Yes, it is easy to be sincere in asking for one's personal needs to be fulfilled, but it is not as easy to frame one's request as an act of devotion to Hashem.

Through this understanding of prayer we can begin to answer David's question. We cannot completely understand Hashem's concern with humanity. However, a partial explanation emerges. We do not ask Hashem to compromise His will in our behalf. How can we expect Hashem to alter His universe for us? Instead, we ask Hashem to act in fulfilling a higher objective. We ask Him to interfere with the natural order in order to reveal Himself. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 25:32.

[2] Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 25:29.

[3] Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 25:32.

[4] Rabbaynu Avraham ben HaRambam, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 25:31.

[5] Sefer Beresheit 25:34.

[6] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 25:34.

[7] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 25:32.

[8] Sefer Beresheit 27:1

[9] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 25:28.

[10] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 176.

[11] Rabbaynu Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam) Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 26:2.

[12] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 26:2.

[13] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 27:29.

[14] Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, Commentary on Sefer Beresheit, 27:29.

[15] Sefer Beresheit 9:1-6.

[16] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 16:5.

[17] Mesechet Berachot 26b.

[18] Sefer Beresheit 18:20-33.

Letters



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Gay Marriage

Rabbi: You support gay marriage?

Friend: Of course. This is a civil rights issue. To deny someone the right to marry is to deny them the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness... I have yet to have anyone articulate an intelligent position in the other side. All I have ever heard on response is "it's a religious issue". If that is the case then 1. Who's religion decides this? or 2. Why then do significant financial rights go with the right to marry?

Rabbi: I never understood how the US can be built on "One nation, under God,...etc" and simultaneously separate church and state. It's a contradiction. Regardless, morality can only be decided by the One who created life. No one else is an authority on this. Marriage is like murder and theft: both are moral questions as to if and when they are permitted. If God is omitted from this question, then there is no final say.

Friend: Which god? I think the Spanish thought they knew the one true god and tortured people through the inquisition under the name of that one true god. The system you are suggesting gives those with the most power the right to establish the one true god. It won't work... Which is why there has to be a separation of church and state. You will have to keep your one true god in your pocket or die by the sword of someone else's...

Rabbi: Precisely. That's why incontrovertible evidence that God gave a religion to man is essential to determine any moral issue. No religion other than Judaism offers proof; all others require faith. Once a religion is proven as the only God-given religion, then its moral codes convey God's acceptable values. Otherwise, it's a free for all, as you stated.

Friend: With all due respect, how's that worked for us over the last 2000+ years?

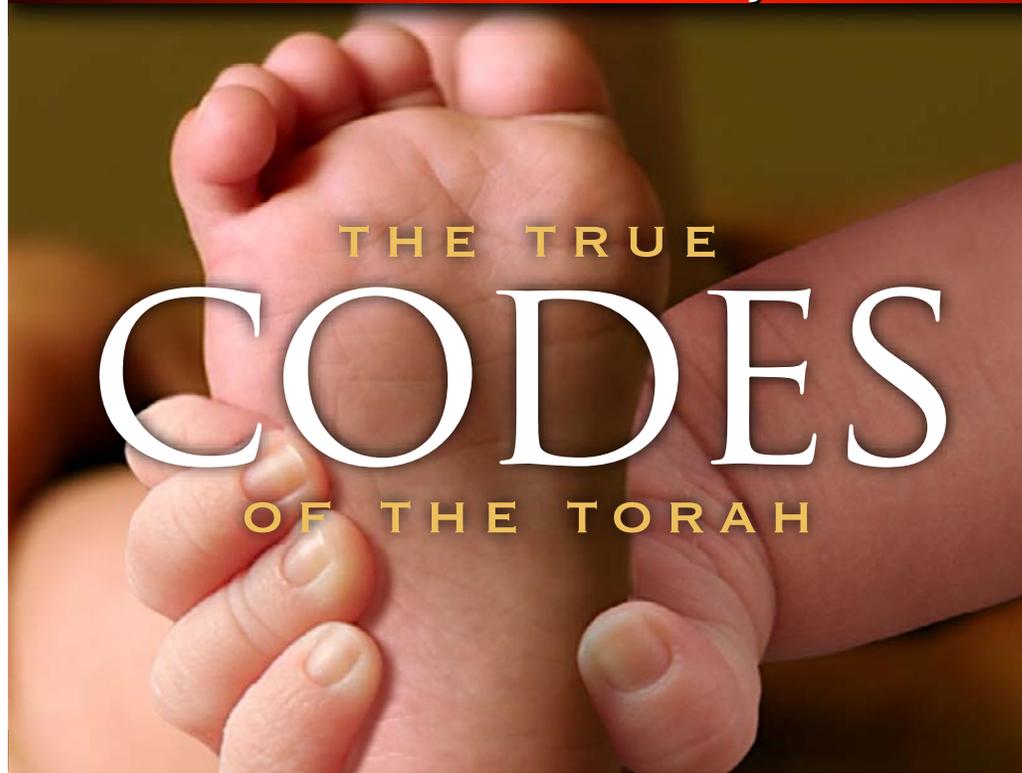
Rabbi: It's worked perfectly for those who follow a life of intelligence. If others wish to live by blind faith, that's their right. God wants us all to use our free will...that's why we each have it. But free will should be guided by reason and proof...not religious fervor or simple faith.

We don't assess the value of anything, simply by viewing what the masses do. If all mankind would say $2+2=5$, that would have no affect on the reality that it's 4. If a person wants to follow reality and not fool himself, he must use reason in all areas...including religion and morality. Einstein, Columbus, Newton and others demonstrated that the masses can be wrong. They determined scientific fact based on reason and proofs. And no matter how many others ignored their evidence, it did not change the realities that these scientists proved true.

So how do we determine morality? The same way as science, regardless if masses disagree, we must follow the facts. And the fact is that no other religion ever received a law from God. Revelation at Sinai was witnessed by 2.5 million people. They verbally transmitted the Torah that states their claim "our eyes saw it". Had they never witnessed it, they would not tell their children that their history was other than what truly transpired. But as they did in fact transmit Revelation at Sinai for 3000 years, and there is no "alternative" Jewish history, we know it occurred in front of 2.5 million people. No other religion makes this claim. But they are too steeped in their dogma and blind faith to emancipate themselves from their unproved religions.

This same method is how we prove any history. Where masses attended an event, we remove the possibility that a story we possess today was fabricated, since it is impossible to get masses to share a common motive to lie. And since the phenomena they witnesses was easily comprehended - mountain, fire, voice - we don't suggest the subject was unintelligible. Thus, both ways we reject history - fabrication and ignorance - can not be imputed of Revelation at Sinai, Caesar, Alexander the Great, and all other true, historical events. Therefore, we accept Caesar, as he was witnessed by masses, and it is impossible to confuse him with anyone else, as he alone was in the palace and was easily identified. If a person accepts Caesar, he must also accept Revelation at Sinai.

But all other religions have no claims that masses witnessed any law given by God. Therefore, they demand blind faith, or the sword. ■



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Reading the Parsha each week, we sometimes gloss over various verses that seem quite simple, as we assume nothing more is intended below the surface. But this cannot be the case. Maimonides teaches, “there is a good reason for every passage; the object of which we cannot see. We must always apply the words of our Sages: “It is not a vain thing for you” (Deut. xxxii. 47), and if it seems vain, it seems your fault.” (The Guide, book III, chap. L) With this in mind, let’s ask a few questions on this week’s Parshas Toldot.

What was God’s intent in Rivkah experiencing an unnatural, tormenting pregnancy?

Why was Rivkah’s response to inquire about God’s providence from a prophet?

And why did she inquire of the prophets Abraham or Shem, but not of her own husband?!

Why was Jacob’s hand clutching Esav’s heel at birth?

Of what significance is it that “Rivkah loved Jacob, while Isaac loved Esav”?

Why was Jacob “instantly” prepared to purchase the birthright from Esav when he asked for the lentils?

Why did Rivkah and Jacob agree they must deceive Isaac to obtain the blessings: why not ask Isaac openly?

Why was Isaac shocked when the blessings

were successfully uttered to Jacob?

Ibn Ezra says that Rivkah first asked other women if her pregnancy was the norm. When the women told her that her pregnancy was abnormal, she sought out counsel from God via a prophet (either Abraham or Shem, Noah’s son) for she was aware of God’s providence initiated with Abraham, and passed to Isaac and herself. The nation of the Jews was to be established through her.

Rivkah then learned from the prophet that she will give birth to two nations, and that the “greater son will be subservient to the younger”. This was the primary message. This was also substantiated through Jacob’s clutching of Esav’s heel. Perhaps this also taught Rivkah that Jacob’s nature – right out of the womb – was one that could confront his twin. Perhaps Rivkah relied on this knowledge later in her plan to deceive Isaac.

We learn that when Rivkah gave birth, Esav exited first, but Jacob was clutching Esav’s heel as he exited second. The Torah then says how Isaac loved Esav, for he captured food for Isaac, while Rivkah loves Jacob. The Torah hints at an imbalance.

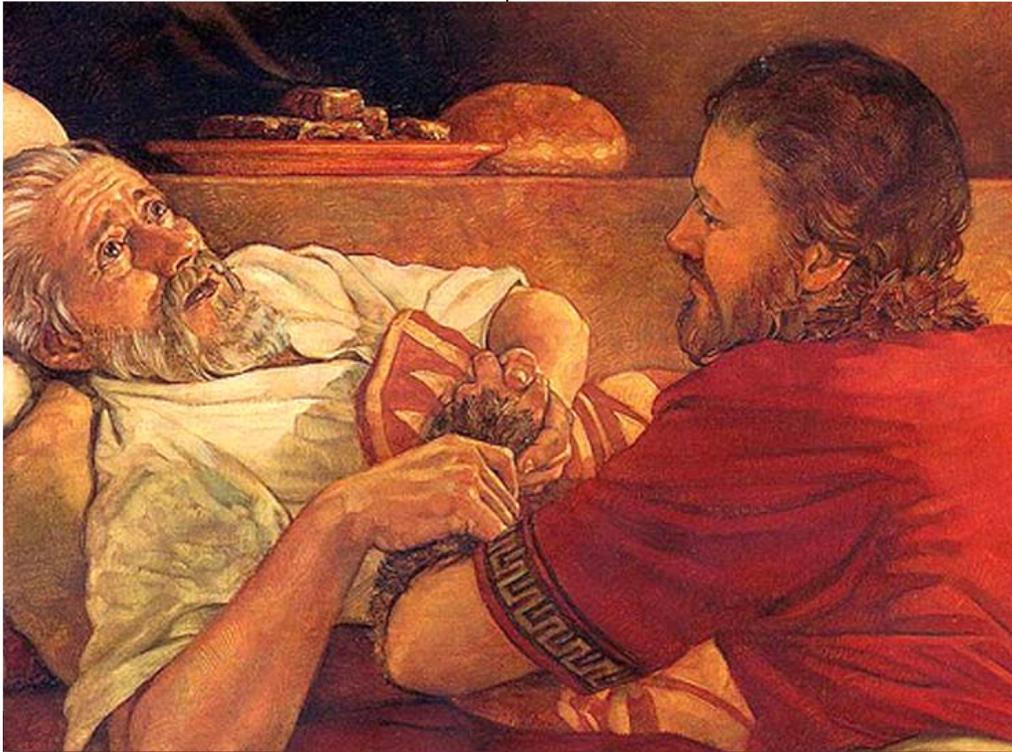
It is clear that God intended Rivkah to obtain information vital to the establishment of the Jewish people. Her difficult pregnancy was intended to lead her to those who could inform her of God’s intentions. With that new information obtained via the prophet, that the older

would serve the younger, Rivkah now cherished Jacob over Esav, as she learned through that prophecy that a matter of “nations” depends on the younger Jacob. (She was told that two nations would issue from her.) The prophecy taught her that she was to be instrumental in securing the younger son’s success, as a means of establishing the nation of Israel.

The patriarchs and matriarchs did not function in accord with simplistic favoritism as we do today. We must not err and project our interpretations onto them. Thus, when the Torah teaches that “Isaac loved Esav while Rivkah loved Jacob”, it must teach an important lesson. It appears this lesson is that Isaac was not as well informed as was Rivkah about the natures of their two sons. Thus, the Torah saw fit to teach us the imbalance of their divergent loves, so we might appreciate how God orchestrated His providence. As Isaac was misled by Esav’s “capturing his father with his mouth” (Gen. 25:28), Isaac loved him more. Isaac was deluded by Esav’s ostensible good nature, as Esav disguised himself as upright with inquiries of proper conduct from Isaac (capturing him) only to earn Isaac’s favor. In truth, Esav was evil. In contrast, the Torah teaches that Jacob was a “dweller of tents” (ibid 25:27): he was modest and delved into the study of God. Jacob’s proper, modest lifestyle did not present the charade offered by Esav’s veneer. Therefore, Isaac didn’t perceive what was not presented to him by the more solitary Jacob. But Isaac did encounter an Esav who continuously presented himself in the manner he knew his father would cherish. He “captured his father with his mouth”. Thus, the Torah thereby informs us of the need for God’s providence to work through the more aware Rivkah. From the very outset of the lives of Esav and Jacob, Rivkah was taught that the younger Jacob was to rule his older brother. Jacob was to receive the blessings of Abraham. This also explains another phenomenon...the account that immediately follows this one...

Esav arrives at home exhausted. The Rabbis teach he had murdered, committed adultery and idolatry. He did so, for on that day, Abraham had died. Esav – a man seeking an Earthly, hedonistic existence alone – was frustrated that his grandfather Abraham would actually perish from this Earth. Esav’s immortality fantasy was abruptly shattered. He no longer clung to any role model displayed by Abraham: “for what is life, if it ends?” Esav

(continued on next page)



felt. He therefore went astray from Abraham's values and committed these grave acts. Esav, exhausted, requested the lentils Jacob had cooked. Jacob "instantly" countered with his offer to purchase the birthright from Esav, in exchange for the lentils. Thus, Jacob's purchase was premeditated. He had already planned to obtain the birthright prior to this event!

We might explain Jacob's readiness to obtain the birthright as directly due to Rivkah's informing him of her knowledge obtained via that earlier prophecy. Rivkah most probably explained to Jacob what she learned, that the younger – Jacob – was to rule over the older. This is supported by a later event...

When Rivkah overhears that Isaac was about to give the birthright blessings to Esav, she urges Jacob to deceive his father and to disguise himself as Esav in front of his now blind father. The point here is that Rivkah is not first informing Jacob "that" he must obtain the birthright, but rather, "how" he can accomplish this. Thus, we find proof that Jacob already knew he was to obtain the birthright blessings. This is why he purchased them from Esav at the outset, for Rivkah must have instructed him to do so. Otherwise, without a proper purchase, what right would he have to take them later? And without Rivkah informing Jacob that he should have the blessings, why would Jacob even think to purchase them with the lentils? It must be as we

suggest, that Rivkah learned through prophecy that Jacob – although the younger – must obtain the blessings. Therefore, Jacob was prepared at all times for the right moment to purchase them. Then, he must act to obtain them even through deceit. For a lie is not absolutely prohibited by God. As we see God told Samuel (Sam. I; 16:2) to make believe he was offering a sacrifice, although he was truly en route to anoint David in Saul's place. Samuel feared that Saul would learn of this and would kill Samuel for attempting to replace him with a new king. Thus, God instructed Samuel in a deception. Jacob too did not argue with Rivkah about the deceit here. He was only concerned that his father would not curse him, but he had no concern about the deceit itself as a sin to God. Jacob knew a lie is necessary at times. And Rivkah as well as many others lied for just reasons. Ibn Ezra teaches here that there is no harm in lying if it is for a proper motive. (Gen. 27:13)

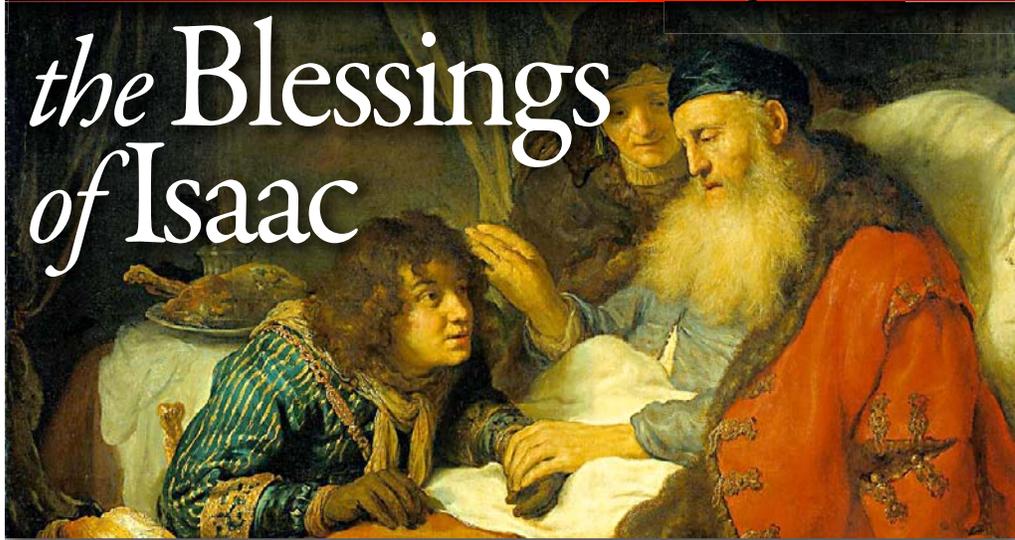
In summary, Rivkah required divine instruction due to the imbalance between Esav and Jacob, and between her and her husband. She would have to act to bring about the nation of Israel. God orchestrated an abnormal pregnancy precisely to educate Rivkah on matters of this pregnancy: the issuing nations of Jacob and Esav and how they must be guided through her. Forced to inquire from a prophet, Rivkah was

now equipped with the divine knowledge vital to insure the blessings transfer to the proper recipient. Rivkah teaches Jacob this prophecy when he is young, and Jacob is thereby ever prepared from that point forward to purchase the birthright. And at the right moment, Rivkah and Jacob strategize a plan that succeeds, but again, only through God's providence. For we see that "no sooner that Jacob left, did Esav return." This is to teach that God controlled the timing to the second, insuring Rivkah and Jacob's success. (Gen. 27:30) And finally, Isaac too attests to Jacob's rightful receipt of the blessings, as he tells Esav, "and he is surely blessed". (ibid 27:33) For Isaac realized that since he was able to utter the blessings, then it must have been God's will that Jacob had received them. Isaac's sudden shock (ibid 27:33) also explains why Rivkah did not inquire from her husband about her abnormal pregnancy, but only from Abraham or Shem. For she understood that Isaac would reject the idea of Esav's unfit character. That is why Jacob too could not openly ask for the blessings, even though he rightfully purchased them. Until Isaac successfully uttered the blessings, he would not accept Esav as unfit. Rivkah therefore avoided approaching Isaac with her concerns regarding her pregnancy, and also when securing the blessings for Jacob. And Isaac again confirms to Esav that Jacob was correct in taking the blessings, as Isaac says to Esav, "your brother came with wisdom and took your blessings." Why does Isaac say this? Perhaps to teach Esav that Jacob was correct.

The obvious questions and the clues to their answers are the true "codes of the Torah". This is God's Torah method of directing us to unlock the Torah's mysteries, imbuing us with an ever-growing appreciation for His wisdom, the development of our minds and souls, and understanding the perfection of our matriarchs and patriarchs.

As a final thought, could it be that God prepared Rivkah to be Lavan's sister, so she might learn of his cunning, as a preparation of this necessary deceit of Isaac? And could it be that Rivkah's training of Jacob to use deceit helped to prepare Jacob to deal with Lavan for those 20 years when Lavan tried again and again to deceive Jacob? If so: it ends up that Lavan's cunning came back to haunt him. For he displayed to Rivkah in their childhood home a deceitful nature. Thereby, Rivkah learned to be cunning herself and achieved a good outcome of the blessings. Through Rivkah's deceit, Jacob learned how to deal with Lavan. Lavan's cunning came full circle and ended up ruining him. ■

the Blessings of Isaac



Rabbi Israel Chait *Transcribed by students*

Upon analyzing the events surrounding the blessings of Isaac to his children it seems that certain inferences can be made. When Isaac discovered that Jacob fooled him, his response is recorded at Genesis Chapter 27 verse 33 “And Isaac trembled very exceedingly...” It would appear that Isaac was truly amazed upon discovering Esau’s true personality. However this reaction raises a very poignant question. When Jacob brought Isaac the venison he requested of Esau, Isaac remarked that his quest for the venison was successful rather quickly. Jacob answered that God facilitated the promptness of the mission. Rashi on this verse 21 states, “Isaac thought in his heart, it is not the custom of Esau that the name of God should be fluent in his mouth...” It would thus seem that Isaac was aware of Esau’s true nature.

We must also understand the significance of the blessings. Chazal, the Rabbis, teach us that the blessings although couched in physical terms are blessings of the spiritual. In this regard, Maimonides in the ninth chapter of the Laws of Repentance states that the reason for blessings and curses is merely to reflect God’s providence in this world. Therefore, they are written in terms of worldly good and evil, although the true benefit is the world to come.

Why was Esau so interested in spiritual blessings? Furthermore, after Isaac discovered he blessed Jacob, Esau pleads with his father three times, “don’t you have a blessing for me?” At first Isaac responded that the blessings were already given to Jacob, but finally he seems to relent and blesses Esau as well. What was this blessing if in fact Jacob had usurped the blessings beforehand? Furthermore, an analysis of the blessing of Jacob and Esau seems strikingly similar. Both seem to contain the blessing that each shall be fortunate to attain the

dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth.

Isaac essentially had two blessings. One blessing was for the physical goodness of this world. This was a blessing for the material benefits of this world, which is not the ultimate good. However, Isaac also bestowed the essential blessing of the truly spiritual, which he obtained from his father Abraham. This was the blessing, which he gave Jacob and is recited at the commencement of Chapter 28. Chapter 28 verses 3 and 4 state, “And God almighty shall bless thee and make thee fruitful and multiply thee, and thou may become a congregation of people. And I give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee and to thy seed with you, so thou may inherit the land of thou sojournings which God gave unto Abraham.”

These blessings were inherently spiritual. This was the blessing of Abraham that the nation of Israel, a nation based upon the laws of the Torah, will come forth from Jacob.

Isaac was not fully ignorant of Esau’s character. He was aware of Esau’s instinctual needs and desires. In the same fashion, he appreciated that Jacob was a simple man, whose nature was more in line with perfection derived from the learning of Torah. Accordingly, the blessings in Chapter 28, which were inherently spiritual, Isaac had always intended to bestow upon Jacob. As the man of Torah, he had to be recognized as the one who would bring forth the will of God. However, because of Esau’s nature, Isaac felt that Esau needed the blessing of the physical as a means for Esau to reach his perfection. He didn’t perceive Esau as a wicked person but rather as an instinctual being who required the physical in order to assist him to elevate himself to a higher level of perfection. He felt that Esau would utilize the blessing of the physical to help Jacob perpetuate the teachings

of the Torah. Isaac’s miscalculation of Esau’s true character resulted because of Isaac’s nature. Isaac was the consummate tzaddik. He was unable to leave Israel because of said status. Abraham was compelled to send Eliezer to choose Isaac a wife because Isaac was incapable of judging an individual’s true character. As the purely righteous individual, Isaac was naive and incapable of perceiving evil. He was unable to appreciate the nuances of the average man’s actions. Thus he wrongly perceived Esau’s character. However, it wasn’t a total misconception. He intended to bless Esau with the blessings of the physical as a means for his perfection. He was oblivious to the fact that Esau sought the physical as an end, in and of itself. Thereafter, upon realizing that Jacob had received the blessings of the physical, which he intended to bestow upon Esau, a fear gripped him. He suddenly became aware that God’s providence had determined that Jacob receive these blessings. He thus realized that he misjudged Esau and that Esau was truly an instinctual being whose only value was the life of the physical. He thus realized and feared that he had raised a wicked person in his house. Rebecca was aware of her son Esau’s true personality and realized that if Esau obtained the blessing of the physical he would utilize it to destroy Jacob. Rebecca was raised in the house of wicked people and was a capable judge of human character.

Thereafter, Isaac informed Esau, that he had no remaining blessings for him. The blessing of the physical, which were originally intended for him, were already bestowed upon Jacob. The truly spiritual blessings, Isaac had always intended to give Jacob, and would still do so. However, Esau persisted and Isaac relented and blessed Esau. The blessing of Esau was not a true blessing. It was a conditional blessing. In verse 40 Isaac states, “And it shall come to pass, when you (Esau) shall break loose and you shall shake his (Jacob) yoke from off thy neck.” Rashi comments that when Israel will violate the precepts of the Torah then Esau will achieve the blessings of the physical. Thus Isaac did not bestow upon Esau any new blessings but rather he limited the blessing of the physical, which he had previously given to Jacob. If Jacob uses the physical as a means to achieve intellectual perfection then he will truly merit the blessings of the physical. However, if he violates the Torah and seeks the physical as an end, in and of itself, then Esau will have the upper hand and merit the blessings of the physical.

Upon reflection of the history of our people we can appreciate the authenticity and veracity of the blessings of Isaac as their ramifications have been manifested throughout the experiences of our nation. ■



Isaac's Wells

the Emergence of the Second Patriarch

Rabbi Reuven Mann

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In Gen. 26:1-33, the Torah recounts the story of Isaac, and the famine as the reason why he journeyed to Avimelech in Garar. God then commanded Isaac not to descend to Egypt, for despite the famine, He assured Isaac that he would provide. The Torah notes that this famine was not the same as the one in Abraham's days. Rashi states, the first famine of Abraham was a test for him. Abraham did not base his service of God on whether he enjoyed the fortunes of life. Ramban says Abraham was wrong, and should have had faith that God would provide, despite the famine. But Ramban is silent on Isaac's very same decision. Therefore, leaving a land when it suffers a drought is not inherently wrong. Had God not revealed Himself to Isaac, it would appear correct for Isaac to travel towards Egypt, away from the stricken lands.

We see that God's continued providence for Isaac was dependent on Abraham's guard of God's word. Regardless, each patriarch was worthy to have God's name connected with him. Isaac was not simply perpetuating his studies received from his father Abraham: he added a new dimension, and derived his convictions from his own thinking. God promises His oath to Isaac, as Isaac deserved this providence due to his own merit.

When Isaac entered Garar, he did as Abraham his father, and claimed his wife Rebecca was his sister, to protect his own life. After time had passed, we read that the king, Avimelech, had looked from his window, witnessing Isaac engaged in some activity with Rebecca which clearly conveyed that their relationship was in fact not siblings, but husband and wife. Avimelech rebuked Isaac for endangering his people, one of whom might have taken Rebecca, bringing sin to them. Avimelech then commanded his people that no one should harm Isaac and Rebecca.

We then read that Isaac reaped a hundredfold, and grew very successful. His successes did not cease. The Philistines envied Isaac for this. There is an interesting Rashi on this section. He writes, "Better the dung of the mules of Isaac, than the silver and gold of Avimelech." This is a strange idea: why would people prefer the former? The Torah goes on, "All the wells that his (Isaac's) father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had and stopped up and filled with dirt." For what reason does the Torah inform us of this obscure fact?

Ramban states there is no honor to Isaac in this whole story. So why was it recorded? He answers that the point of this section is to allude to

(continued on next page)

(Wells cont. from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

something hidden: these three wells allude to the three Temples. The first well was named Esek, meaning contention. The first Temple was amidst much contention. The second well Isaac dug was named Sitna, for the hatred displayed by the Philistines towards Isaac. Similarly, during the second Temple, there was much hatred. Rechovos was the name of the third well, over which the philistines did not quarrel. Rechovos means breadth, as in the breadth of mind now afforded to Isaac. And in the third Temple, there will be peace. Rabbi Israel Chait commented that although there may be some future correlations, there must also be something in each Torah account, to which we may relate to in the here and now.

Emergence of the Second Patriarch

In what sense were Abraham and his son Isaac patriarchs? Isaac differed from Abraham. Abraham made his mark through his ability to interact with the world. He debated with many, and although eventually exiled, he resumed his teachings. However, there is another element responsible for their success at spreading knowledge of God: Divine providence. God miraculously saved Abraham on many occasions, paving the way for his continued teachings, while also creating his unparalleled reputation. Isaac was different. He was an "Oleh Temima", a "wholly burnt offering" of sorts. His energies were not directed to the world of the social, but exclusively towards knowledge. Coming so close to death when he was bound to the altar had a profound effect on the personality of Isaac. Thus, God told Isaac not to descend to Egypt; he was a different personality. So how did Isaac play a role as a patriarch?

Both famines were a result of providence. But in Isaac's case, it did not have the purpose as a test, as was the case with regards to Abraham. During the famine in Isaac's era, God instructed him to remain in the land. Why was this necessary?

The Wells

The wells were essential for Isaac's emergence in his role as an independent patriarch. We are told that Isaac became very wealthy. But he does not cease in his monetary growth, as was the case with Avimelech. Avimelech was stagnant in his wealth. Therefore, the Philistines said they preferred Isaac's mule dung to Avimelech's riches. This means they respected Isaac who could take dung (famine) and make successes from it. This wealth created a great respect for Isaac. Avimelech then asked Isaac to leave Garar, as his continued dwelling in Garar made Avimelech, the king, look bad by comparison.

But the Philistines became envious. We learn that they filled up Abraham's well. This demonstrated their denouncing of Abraham's philosophy. Why didn't the Philistines fill Abraham's wells earlier? It is because when they saw the greatness of Isaac, they now learned that Abraham's ideology was not a "flash in the pan", a one-time movement. Isaac's continuation of Abraham's philosophy now created friction in Garar, as they could no longer view Abraham's era as eclipsed by time. His philosophy was sustained through Isaac; there is a dynasty. The Philistines' realization that Abraham's philosophy was continuing was intolerable to their corrupt lifestyle. Had Abraham passed, along with his monotheistic views, they could let matters go. But this was not the case any longer. Thus, they desired to rebel against Abraham's sustained philosophy. But the Philistines could not harm Isaac. They respected his wealth. So they attacked Abraham through stopping up his wells.

Isaac left, but then returned. Why? He did so for the express purpose of reopening Abraham's wells. He made a separate journey back after having left, precisely to demonstrate why he came back: to resuscitate Abraham's fame and teachings. What was the response of the Philistines? They strove with Isaac over his new wells. The Philistines attempted to negate the greatness of Isaac. The Philistines did not say, "ours is the water" as in the first well, demonstrating that the water was not the issue. Rather, Isaac's fame was what they deplored. After a certain amount of time, they saw they could

not bring down Isaac. The Philistines eventually succumbed to another emotion: their underlying respect for Isaac's success. The adage, "If you can't beat them, join them" enunciates this very change in the Philistines. Thus, the final well, which Isaac's servants dug, was named "breadth." Isaac was no longer attacked, as the emotion of adulation replaced the Philistines' prior repulsion. This point is when Avimelech desired to secure a truce. Wealth draws people. This was the method through which Isaac became renown.

God orchestrated a famine, as the prefect backdrop to emphasize Isaac's wealth. No one else prospered during this famine. Ultimately, Isaac returns to Abraham's teaching ground, Beer Sheva. Isaac arrived physically at this location, and philosophically at his goal to be engaged in study. Thus we read, "He called out in God's name", meaning, he resumed teaching about God, his primary goal. We also learn that God's plan was successful, as we read that Avimelech traveled to Isaac, recognizing his greatness. Isaac's fame was now positive. Avimelech did not desire any truce with Isaac while he dwelled in Garar. It was only after his successes. Subsequent to his exile, Isaac became very wealthy, and this wealth was the groundwork necessary for others to recognize Isaac's philosophy.

The Philistines realized that by applying Isaac's philosophy, one could achieve success. This was exceptionally profound, while they endured a famine. ■

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WorldNEWS

November 27th, 2008

From combined news sources



Mumbai: Hostages freed as PM blames 'outsiders'

MUMBAI, India (CNN) -- Fresh gunfire and explosions were heard late Thursday in Mumbai as police and soldiers battled terrorists at three sites about 24 hours after the first wave of violence hit the city.

Security forces trying to flush out militants at two hotels used in-house telephones to ask guests holed up in their rooms to switch on lights and open curtains, so that they could provide cover, CNN correspondent Andrew Stevens reported.

Regular gun fire and blasts could be heard at the Oberoi and Taj Mahal hotels and a Jewish center in the city.

Police had some success with 10 hostages reportedly freed from the Oberoi despite a major fire.

Up to 20 more people were believed trapped or held hostage at the hotel, said Stevens citing an official.

Shortly after authorities said the siege had ended at the Taj Mahal hotel, two explosions were heard, similar to the six blasts heard earlier.

It was not immediately clear what caused any of the explosions. Witnesses said continuous gunfire could be heard at the hotel.

CNN-IBN, CNN's sister network in India, reported commando forces "encountered stiff resistance from the terrorists who were heavily armed and well entrenched inside."

A few blocks away, at the Hotel Oberoi, a major fire raged Thursday night through one floor there. Later, an explosion was heard from the hotel's rear side.

At least three or four terrorists were still holding hostages in both the Taj Mahal and Oberoi hotels, British officials told CNN on Thursday.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh suggested the group behind the terrorist attacks, which killed 125 people, was based outside the country. ■

Israeli Hostages Still Held Incommunicado

by Tzvi Ben Gedalyahu and Hana Levi Julian

(A7) -- (IsraelNN.com) Some 15 to 25 Israeli hostages were still being held incommunicado as the siege by Al Qaeda-linked Islamist terrorists entered its twenty-first hour.

A 45-minute exchange of intense gunfire between India government forces and terrorists at the Oberoi Trident Hotel located near Mumbai's Chabad House has led to the rescue of at least a dozen tourists who were trapped in the upper floors of the luxury hotel Thursday evening. There were no Israelis among the rescued. Five terrorists holed up in Mumbai's Nariman House building housing the city's Chabad House offered to negotiate with India's government for the lives of the Jewish hostages they are holding. Approximately eight Israelis are being held captive in the Chabad House, and Israel's Foreign Ministry estimated that another 10 to 15 Israelis are being held hostage in other locations around the city as well, including an undetermined number at the Oberoi Trident Hotel.

A spokesman for the terrorists who identified himself to a local television station as "Imran" complained about government treatment of Muslims in Kashmir.

"Ask the government to talk to us and we will release the hostages," he said, speaking in Urdu with what was described as a Kashmiri accent. "Are you aware how many people have been killed in Kashmir? Are you aware how your army has killed Muslims? Are you aware how many of them have been killed in Kashmir this week?"

Meanwhile, government commandos in black caps moved into position for a final assault on the building where the Israelis are being held hostage, including a Chabad rabbi and his wife. They have flooded the entire area with light, hoping to be able to see what is going on the building. "They have a lot of ammunition on them and that is why they are considered so very, very dangerous and the commandos are proceeding with such caution," said one journalist. ■

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