

TIMELESS TORAH

TOLEDOT: The Quest for Truth

Truth to Yaakov

This complex parshah about the struggle between Yaakov and Eisav for the blessings from their father, Yitzchak, can be set in perspective with a verse in the Book of Michah (7:2): '*Titein emet l'Yaakov chessed l'Avraham* – You will give truth to Yaakov; kindness to Avraham'. The commentators (see Rashi and Radak) explain that the two subjects of this sentence – truth and kindness – are actually one. The 'kindness to Avraham' is a reference to the gift of Eretz Yisrael which was promised to Avraham, and 'truth to Yaakov' means that this promise was fulfilled, or at least in some way solidified, through Yaakov. Thus, the blessings of this week's parshah – which essentially established Yaakov as the inheritor of the legacy of Avraham and the *Avot* – were significant as a critical stage in the fulfilment of Hashem's promise to Avraham.

Viewed through this lens, the intrigue and seeming deception played by Yaakov and Rivkah in order to gain the blessings becomes all the more fascinating because it is this very deception that Michah calls '*truth to Yaakov*'. An enigmatic Midrash describes the debate in the Heavenly spheres when Hashem was about to create Man. While some of the angels approved of Man's creation, the angels of truth and peace opposed the notion of a being that could bring about dishonesty and strife. In response, Hashem threw truth to the ground and created Man anyway, proclaiming, 'The truth will sprout from the ground' (Tehillim 85:12).

Among the lessons of this perplexing Midrash is the notion that truth is not always easy to discover; absolute truth is Divine, but it must be discovered from a human perspective – coming from 'the ground'.

Today's Soup, Tomorrow's Inheritance

The dialogue between Yaakov and Eisav about the selling of the birthright, the *bechorah*, provides a critical perspective on all that follows in the parshah. The Torah describes how Eisav came home, famished and tired, and found Yaakov cooking a lentil stew. Too exhausted even to notice what was in the pot, Eisav asks Yaakov to give him some of 'that red stuff', to which Yaakov agrees - on condition that Eisav sells his birthright to Yaakov.

The Seforno (d.1549) picks up on a nuance in Yaakov's speech. Twice, Yaakov mentions the word 'today': He requests from Eisav, 'Sell to me today your birthright', and later, he asks Eisav to 'swear to him today' that he will uphold the sale. The hidden insinuation here, explains the Seforno, is that Yaakov was demonstrating how his brother could not see past the here and now of 'today'. That being the case, Yaakov argued, you have no need for the birthright, which will only be realised in several hundred years' time, following the Exodus from Egypt. According to the Chizkuni (13th century), Eisav replied that indeed, 'I am going to die', and the birthright is irrelevant to me.

With this understanding of the brothers' dialogue, it would seem that both parties should have left the negotiating table happy;



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Eisav, with his impetuous focus on immediate benefit, came away with a free meal, while Yaakov's long-term vision gained him a legacy for his descendants. Nevertheless, as the Steipler Gaon (d.1985) discusses, we find through the ensuing passages that Eisav harboured deep resentment against Yaakov for this. As soon as he had eaten and the lentil stew had become no more than a memory, Eisav regretted his sale.

Future Focus

Perhaps the most difficult topic in this parshah is understanding how Yaakov responded to Yitzchak's direct demand to identify himself. Yaakov answered with what seems to be an outright lie: 'I am Eisav, your firstborn'. Rashi offers the classic interpretation that Yaakov meant, 'It is I – and Eisav is your firstborn', in other words, two separate and true statements. Of course, there was still a level of deception in this response, but Rashi has at least explained how the words that Yaakov uttered were not untrue. Ibn Ezra (d.1164) goes even further than this, writing that Yaakov's statement should not cause undue surprise. According to the Ibn Ezra, although prophetic statements informing the will of Hashem must be entirely accurate, a prophet can, in general, utter an ambiguous or even misleading statement that will lead to a spiritually desired outcome. Citing several examples, he shows how the term 'truth' can be defined more broadly than we normally understand it.

Rabbeinu Bechaye (d.1340), however, disagrees; in his view, it is impossible that Yaakov said anything less than the truth.

When Yaakov said, 'I am Eisav, your firstborn', Rabbeinu Bechaye explains, he was saying that he is in the place of Eisav because he bought the rights to the bechorah. Having fairly purchased the birthright from his brother, Yaakov was entitled to make the claim to the blessings that otherwise would have gone to Eisav.

Following this approach, the Kli Yakar (d.1619) explains Eisav's cry of anguish when he realised that Yaakov had taken the blessings before him. At this point, Eisav linked the taking of the blessings to the sale of the bechorah: 'he has tricked me twice – he took my birthright and now he has taken my blessings (27:36)'. Although the sale of the bechorah was not done deceptively, Eisav now understood that the two episodes must have been linked, and that Yaakov could only have passed himself off as Eisav because he had bought the right to do so years earlier.

Too late, Eisav realised the effect of his shortsightedness. His fleeting desire for a bowl of soup reflected his lack of appreciation for the true value of his rights, and it was indeed those character flaws that rendered him an unsuitable heir for the promise of Eretz Yisrael. Yaakov, on the other hand, had the ability to remain focused on the future, taking his eyes off immediate gratification to realise the spiritual potential of Eretz Yisrael and the other blessings that he eventually received.

Next Week - VAYEITZEI: The Journey of Exile & Return