

What We Hear as Blessing
Rabbi Schatz - Parashat Toldot - 2020

בראשית כ"ז:א'

וַיְהִי כִּי־זָקֵן יַצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶיּוּ עֵינָיו מִרְאֵת וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־עֵשָׂו בְּנֵו הַגָּדֹל לַיְאֹמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנְנִי:

Genesis 27:1

When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." He answered, "Here I am."

בראשית כ"ז:ב'

וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא זָקֵנְתִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי יוֹם מוֹתִי:

Genesis 27:2

And he said, "I am old now, and I do not know how soon I may die."

בראשית כ"ז:ג'

וְעַתָּה שָׂא־נָא כְלִיךָ תַלְיֶיךָ וְקִשְׁתְּךָ וְצֵא הַשָּׂדֶה וְצוּדָה לִי צִידָה [צִיד]:

Genesis 27:3

Take your gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game.

בראשית כ"ז:ד'

וַעֲשֵׂה־לִּי מִטַּעֲמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּתִי וְהִבִּיֵּאָה לִּי וְאֶכְלָה בְּעֵבוּר תְּבָרְכֶנּוּ נַפְשִׁי בְטָרֶם אָמוּת:

Genesis 27:4

Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die."

בראשית כ"ז:ה'

וְרִבְקָה שָׁמְעַת בְּדַבֵּר יַצְחָק אֶל־עֵשָׂו בְּנֵו וַיֵּלֶךְ עֵשָׂו הַשָּׂדֶה לְצוּד צִיד לְהִבִּיֵּא:

Genesis 27:5

Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau had gone out into the open to hunt game to bring home,

בראשית כ"ז:ו'

וְרִבְקָה אָמְרָה אֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּנֵה לֹאמֶר הִנֵּה שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־אָבִיךָ מְדַבֵּר אֶל־עֵשָׂו אַחִיךָ לֹאמֶר:

Genesis 27:6

Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying,

בראשית כ"ז:ז'

הִבִּיֵּאָה לִּי צִיד וְעֲשֵׂה־לִּי מִטַּעֲמִים וְאֶכְלָה וְאַבְרַכְכָּה לְפָנָי יְהוָה לְפָנָי מוֹתִי:

Genesis 27:7

'Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with the LORD's approval, before I die.'

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רש"י על בראשית כ"ז:א'
לפני ה'. בְּרִשׁוֹתוֹ, שִׁסְפִים עַל יָדַי:

Rashi on Genesis 27:7:1

'ה לפני BEFORE THE LORD — By his permission: that He should approve of what I do.

רד"ק על בראשית כ"ז:א'

לפני ה', הוסיפה לו לפני ה' מה שלא אמר הוא, כדי להכניס בלבו של יעקב, דבר גדול הוא ברכת אביו כי לפני ה' תהיה, כלומר בנבואה שתשרה עליו בעת הברכה יברכה:

Radak on Genesis 27:7:1

הביאה, she gratuitously added the words 'לפני ה', as if they had been Yitzchok's words (which they were not). She intended thereby to convince her son Yaakov that the blessing about to be given to Esau was of an unusual, critical importance, one that would reflect a prophetic utterance by Yitzchok.

הטור הארוך, בראשית כ"ז:א'

ואברכה לפני ה'. אע"פ שיצחק לא אמר אלא בעבור תברכך נפשי הזכירה השם לומר אני יודעת שתחול הברכה כי מאת ה' היא:

Tur HaAroch, Genesis 27:7:1

בעבור "I will bless you in the presence of G'd." Although Yitzchok had only said: תברכך נפשי, "in order that my soul will bless you, without adding the name of the Lord, he was certain that G'd would fulfill such a blessing when pronounced by him. After all, all blessings originate with the Lord.

Isaac's Blessing meant for Esau

בראשית כ"ז:כ"ח-כ"ט

(כח) וַיִּתֵּן לְךָ הָאֱלֹהִים מִטַּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וּמִשְׁמַנֵּי הָאָרֶץ וְרֹב דָּגָן וְתִירֹשׁ. (כט) יַעֲבֹדוך עַמִּים וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְךָ לְאֲמִים הִוא גְּבִיר לְאַחֶיךָ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְךָ בְּנֵי אִמְךָ אַרְרֶיךָ אֲרוּר וּמְבֹרָכֶיךָ בְּרוּךְ.

Genesis 27:28-29

(28) So God give you of the dew of heaven, And of the fat places of the earth, And plenty of corn and wine. (29) Let peoples serve you, And nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, And let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone that curses you, And blessed be everyone that blesses you.

Isaac's final blessing to Jacob

בראשית כ"ח:ג-ד'

(ג) וְאֵל שַׁדַּי יְבָרַךְ אֶתְךָ וַיַּפְרֵךְ וַיַּרְבֶּךָ וְהֵייתָ לְקַהֲל עַמִּים. (ד) וַיִּתֵּן לְךָ אֶת בְּרִכְתּוֹ אֲבִרְהֶם לְךָ וּלְזַרְעֶךָ אֶתְךָ לְרִשְׁתָּךְ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם.

Genesis 28:3-4

(3) And God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you, that you may be a congregation of peoples; (4) and give you the blessing of Abraham, to you, and to your seed with you; that you may inherit the land of your sojournings, which God gave unto Abraham.'

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Nechama Leibowits (*Studies in Genesis*), pp. 278-9

We may note the contrast between the two [blessings]. On the one hand Esau was promised abundance, fatness, power and dominion--material blessing. But the Abrahamic mission, the blessing of seed and the promise of the land were not bequeathed to Esau, since such a spiritual blessing cannot be conferred by succession but only granted to the one who is deserving of it.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (Excerpt from *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, January, 1966)

Shakespeare's Hamlet said: "To be or not to be, that is the question." But that is no problem. We all want to be. The real problem, biblically speaking, is how to be and how not to be; that is our challenge, and it is what makes the difference between the human and the animal...The meaning of God is precisely the challenge of "how to be."

Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel ("Can Jews and Christians Pray Together?" in *International Service of Jewish-Christian Documentation*, 1992, Volume XXV, Numero 1, Pages: 2-6)

Prayer serves many aims. It serves to save the inward life from oblivion. It serves to partake of God's mysterious grace and guidance. Yet, ultimately, prayer must not be experienced as an act for the sake of something else. We pray in order to pray. Prayer is a perspective from which to behold, from which to respond to, the challenges we face. Man in prayer does not seek to impose his will upon God; he seeks to impose God's will and mercy upon himself. Prayer is necessary to make us aware of our failures, backsliding, transgressions, sins.

Isaac's two different blessings for Jacob foreshadow Jacob's own evolving attitude towards prayer. In his younger years, prayer is a "shopping list" he sends to God (Gen. 28:20-22). Later, a more mature Jacob sees in prayer the power of personal transformation (Gen. 32: 25-33).

Darashos HaRan 5:26

The answer: Scripture makes it clear that Isaac loved Esau, undoubtedly not knowing of his evil deeds, as our sages have apprised us (Tanchuma, Toldoth 8). And if there had come to him a prophecy that he put aside his eldest son, whom he loved, and bless Jacob instead, there is no doubt that this would have saddened him; and this sadness would have prevented the spirit of the L-rd from coming to rest upon him in perfection. For this reason the Blessed One desired him to think that he was blessing his beloved son, Esau, so that his heart expand in joy and he attain the G-dly spirit to the full extent of his powers. And this is, likewise, the reason for Isaac's saying to Esau (Genesis 27:4): "And make me savory food, as I love, and bring it to me and I will eat it, so that my soul bless you." That is, so that his soul expand and rejoice and the spirit of prophecy come to rest upon it. And it is because of this factor that the Blessed One desired that Jacob think he was blessing Esau when he was, in reality, blessing Jacob.

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Congregation Beth El–Keser Israel

If he did not hear the blessing of fruitfulness and dominion that G-d gives to his father Abraham,

Where did Isaac learn it? It came with Rebecca.

When Rebecca says she will go with Abraham’s servant to marry Isaac, Laban says:

“O sister! may you grow into thousands of myriads; may your offspring seize the gates of their foes.”

More than one commentator has noted the parallel between the blessing that Laban gives Rebecca and the blessing that God gives Abraham after the *Akeidah*:

Again we see the pairing of a blessing of power, of dominion – seize the gates of their foes – with a blessing of fruitfulness, of *p’ru urvu*.

But what’s important here is not just the parallel, but the difference:

A blessing that God gave in the extraordinary moment of the *Akeidah* is now being offered not by G-d but by a person,

and not in the extraordinary moment of the *Akeidah* but in an ordinary moment of leave-taking, of a sister leaving home to get married.

That complex interweaving of multiplication and death is now a blessing uttered by human mouths.

This is the moment when the notion of the human power to offer a blessing of dominion first entered the Jewish people.

We still don’t know what a blessing is, but we know that the idea that a person can give a blessing of dominion, of martial victory, begins with Laban, and enters the Jewish people through Rebecca.

* * *

At some point Isaac must learn of blessings from this woman he loves, must learn of blessings of power and dominion, blessings of fruitfulness.

But for Isaac, the years after Moriah, after his mother’s death, were filled with silence, not blessings. [...]

The Torah tells us that after Abraham died, when Isaac and Ishmael came together to bury their father in the cave where their mother too was buried, God blessed Isaac.

The text offers nothing more – nothing about the content of that blessing, or what it means – and it does not say that God spoke to Isaac.

And we have no record of Isaac himself speaking at all since that climb up Mount Moriah.

We see him speak only after twenty years of marriage, twenty years of Rebecca’s barrenness, when he pleads with God “on behalf of his wife, for she was barren.”

God “grants his plea,” but does not speak, and even with this granted plea, it’s clear that Isaac isn’t getting quite what he wished for:

the children struggle in the womb, and his wife falls into despair:

“Then why me?” [...]

* * *

Lest Isaac think his own worth warrants such attention, God makes clear why he will give this blessing: “because *Abraham* has listened to my voice and has kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my teachings.”

This is the Isaac of the deathbed speech,

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the Isaac blinded by his ordeal on Moriah,
 the Isaac who knows from his beloved Rebecca that people can offer blessings of fruitfulness
 and blessings of dominion.

The Isaac who received neither from his father.

Now he will make up for what his father lacked.

He will reward Esau, whom he loves.

His favorite son. The son who loved him back. Who did for him. The
 meritorious son.

This son will get blessings not only of fruitfulness, the half-blessing Isaac got from God, but of
 dominion too, of power:

This boy, this Bowman, this true son, will be a leader, a conqueror.

Of course it goes awry.

Rebecca, who knows the blessing of dominion better than Isaac, also knows how to trick a man
 blinded by his own trauma:

a man who looks back when he should look forward.

She will switch the boys, maneuvering Jacob into the special spot where Isaac gives him the
 blessing of dominion.

For that is the blessing he gives:

"May God grant you

*from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth,
 and abundance of grain and drink.*

May peoples serve you,

and nations bow before you.

Be overlord to your brothers,

may your mother's sons bow before you.

Those who curse you be cursed,

and those who bless you, blessed."

Now we understand why Isaac thinks he has no blessing to give:

Only one can hold dominion.

In a blessing of power, there is only one winner.

And that winner now is Jacob.

Isaac's desire to give the blessing that his father never gave him, that not even God gave him,
 has led him to create a world that is the opposite of what he wanted.

These are dangerous blessings, these blessings of dominion. [...]

Both blessings, the blessing of Jacob and the blessing of Esau, have the blessing of fruitfulness –
 the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth – but dominion cannot be shared: One
 dominates, one serves. [...]

Isaac ends up getting Abraham's blessing, but not from Abraham; from God.

And so Isaac has no personal experience of human blessing, of a father blessing his son.

When he feels his death day near he wants to do what his father did not:

He will bless his children, with his own hands,

and not a half-blessing, but a full one:

of fruitfulness *and* power.

So he, unlike his father, and unlike that tenant farmer, must choose between merit and
 equality.

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He chooses merit: He will not worry about giving different gifts; he will give what is merited:

The greater blessing to the greater son: Esau.

Unschooling in blessings, untaught by his father, a novice at blessing: He fails miserably, not just because he blesses who he doesn't want to bless, and curses who he meant to bless, but because he sows enmity between his only sons, a deep hatred between his twins.

By the end of the chapter, Rebecca has plotted against her son;

Esau is crying and enraged, planning murder;

Jacob has fled to Laban – of all people – the first man to offer a blessing of power to this family.

A blessing that is tearing this family apart.

Is there no middle ground? [...]

* * *

[...] But for me, there is a deeper explanation.

Isaac has learned that the blessing of fruitfulness is not limited.

It is not like the blessing of dominion, Which requires the dominant and the submissive.

The blessing of fruitfulness can be shared by all, Can be given again and again and again.

And now – after his violent shaking, after learning how he has been deceived – he still has in him the blessing of fruitfulness.

He will bless his sons, no matter what, and he will do it freely, not through deceit.

Isaac now turns away from one tradition of blessings –

the tradition begun by the hung-over Noah who offered a blessing-curse to Canaan,

that half a blessing that the clever-wielding Abraham receives at the *Akeidah*,

the one that Laban says aloud, and sends in Rebecca's ears to the Jewish people.

He turns toward the other tradition:

the blessing of fertility and increase, the *p'ru uvru* blessing offered to the first people,

the other half of the oddly twined *Akeidah* blessing, the tree, perhaps, of vital

potions.

This is Isaac's lineage: v'eyleh toldot yitzchok.

Isaac will still bless – He will not be the father his father was.

But his ordeal has taught him – the anger about to tear his family apart has shown him – what blessings of dominion can do.

They were a beginner's mistake, perhaps, the first Jew's clumsy efforts at blessing his children.

That is Isaac's story: *v'eyleh toldot yitzchok.*

* * *

[...] We've come a long way from Isaac, from his story and his lineage.

These blessings –

Our hands on our children's heads on Friday night –

These are our story, our lineage, our *Toldot*.

Shabbat shalom.