

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Toldot)

At the end of every command-course in the Israeli army, a questionnaire known as a Socio-Metric test, is given to each cadet which has to be filled out.

*It's a pretty simple form: each soldier is asked to list five fellow cadets, in order of priority, whom they would choose to lead their unit, and five fellow cadets, also in order of preference, whom they would **not** want leading their unit. No-one is permitted to leave the form blank; it's a pre-requisite for graduating the course (not to mention getting out of the army that Shabbat ☺)*

I recall finding this difficult; especially at the end of Officers' course, literally the day before we were all meant to get our bars. There was actually a cadet who had been with me in Commanders' (Sergeant's) course who was not accepted to officer's course, even though he had one of the highest scores in our course, was extremely intelligent, and was clearly cool under pressure, simply because his name came up negatively (so the rumor went) on this Sociometrist questionnaire.

*But we were not given the choice; we were obligated to think of five names under whom we would serve without question, and five whom we would not want to follow anywhere. Most challenging for me was the fact that we had to name the **number one choice** for leading us (we were not allowed to enter our own names...).*

I often wondered why we couldn't just pick the top five; why was it necessary for one cadet to be our top choice....

This week's portion of **Toldot** relates one of the most challenging parenting moments in Jewish history: Yitzchak's decision to bless his first-born son Esau.

We have spoken in the past about why Yitzchak chose Esau, perhaps seeing in his proficiency for the hunt and comfort in the world of nature, some of the necessary qualities for leading the Jewish people.

But why does Yitzchak have to choose one son? Why would he prefer Esau over Yaakov? Why can't both of his sons, Yaakov as well as Esau be blessed? In fact, we already know this can happen, as Noach blesses all three of his sons (see Bereishit (Genesis) 9:24-27), and Yaakov himself gives a *bracha* to each of his twelve sons on his death bed (see Bereishit (in Parshat **Va'yechi**) chap. 49). So why does Yitzchak wish to bless Esau and why does this necessitate Rivka's subterfuge in ensuring the blessing is in fact conferred upon Yaakov?

It certainly seems as though Yitzchak's blessing to Esau (and Yaakov) contradicts the way in which Yaakov blesses his own sons! Did Yaakov see something flawed in this process which he later corrected? That would be a difficult presumption, considering the fact that Yaakov himself ultimately benefits from the story of Yitzchak's blessings.

Contradictions usually mean we need to re-define our terms. In truth, there are two types of blessings. But in order to understand this, we first need to define blessings (*brachot*): what is a *bracha*?

At the end of his life, the Torah tells us:

*"And Avraham was old, well on in years, and Hashem blessed (**beirach**) Avraham with everything."*
(Bereishit (Genesis) 24:1)

Most people think that when I make a blessing, I am thanking G-d, but that is not actually correct. “Bracha’ (the Hebrew word for blessing) does not mean thank you. We have a word for thank you: ‘*Todah*’; and we use it often both when we pray as well as after we eat (“*Nodeh lecha*’ we *thank* you....”). So obviously ‘bracha’ (blessing) has to mean something different.

In fact, **Rav Soleveitchick** suggests, the word *bracha* means to increase; hence we are told that Hashem (G-d) has blessed Avraham which means Hashem has increased Avraham’s wealth or progeny (At the end of his life Avraham remarries *Ketura* and has many more children).

And this makes a lot of sense. After all, what is it I am trying to do when I say a blessing? I am trying to increase Hashem’s presence in my life. I can choose just to eat a piece of bread, or I can choose to use that bread as a vehicle for deepening my relationship with G-d.

Most people don’t think twice when they bite into a soft piece of fresh bread, other than to relish its taste. But it takes a lot of work to make bread: You have to plough and then sow a field, then reap the crops, and thresh and winnow and sift the grains and eventually crush the wheat into kernels and produce and then knead the dough until finally baking it into bread. And all this is completely dependent on rain and sunshine....

And by seeing myself as a partner with G-d in producing this bread I increase Hashem’s presence in my life and thus in the world.

As such, our verse which describes Hashem’s blessing of Avraham with everything, is as much about how Avraham chooses to see the world Hashem gives us, as it is about what Hashem actually bestows upon Avraham.

Indeed, at the end of his life, Yaakov wants each of his twelve sons to know that they are all blessed, and that they have the ability, each through their own special gifts and talents, to see Hashem’s presence in everything they do, and everything they experience. In this instance (as in Noach’s blessings of his three sons) the process of blessing is **inclusive**; **everyone** is blessed, because we are all special and created by Hashem to be vehicles for a better world.

Sometimes though, despite all our children being special, we need to choose one, to the exclusion of all others. Some things cannot be run by committee; a ship needs one captain and an army unit needs one commander. And in that instance the blessings are **exclusive**; someone needs to **lead**.

Hashem tells Avraham only one of his sons will carry on the Jewish message, and thru him the world will all be blessed; because every human being is special and blessed, but for any particular mission, sometimes one has to be chosen to (in this case) lead the world to a better place.

Of course, this leaves us with the question of why Yitzchak chooses Esau despite the fact that Rivka already knows that Yaakov will lead. (See *Bereishit* 25:22-23; Rivka receives a prophecy to that effect)

Perhaps this entire story unfolds in this manner so that Yaakov learns to fight for what is his?

There is a very strange ruling in the Talmud (Tractate *Bava Metzia* 2a) regarding a case brought before a court by two litigants, each claiming ownership of a boat at sea. Neither has evidence to support their case; they have no witnesses, no contract and no presumption of ownership (*chazaka*), so the court, with no basis upon which to rule, pronounces: *Kol de'alim gevar*: whoever is strongest, let him win! In other words, go outside and fight it out and last man standing gets the boat!

What sort of a ruling is that?! How can a court make such a statement? There are many different opinions amongst the commentaries (some say it is actually a reflection of the act that the court cannot issue a ruling in such a case...) but one that speaks to me is the **Rosh** (*Rabbeinu Asher*, brought in the *Shitah mekubetzet*) who suggests that we learn from this case: if something is really yours, you have to be willing to fight for it.

Perhaps Yaakov, as a harbinger of millennium of Jewish history to come, is meant to learn that sometimes one cannot stay in the tent of study; sometimes achievement must come with struggle.

Indeed, this idea is exactly what the Jewish people finally understood, after the horrors of the Holocaust, in 1948, and now more than ever. If we wanted to call Israel our Home, we would have to be willing to fight for it.

In life, every human being deserves to find something so meaningful and so beautiful, that they are willing to struggle, and perhaps even give up life itself, for its achievement precisely because it is so much bigger than any one person.

The message of the Jewish people and the gift it is meant to share with the world, is one such ideal as Yitzchak and Rivka and later Yaakov understood, four thousand years ago...

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman