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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Hanging on to the Heel of History

“After that, his brother emerged with his hand grasping onto the heel of Eisav...” (25:26)

The struggle between Yaakov and Eisav in Parshas Toldos is not merely a tale of two brothers. Chazal teach that it is the spiritual architecture of history itself. Already in the womb, “*va’yisrotzetzu habanim b’kirbah — the children contended within her.*” This is the primordial clash between two irreconcilable orientations toward existence:

A world governed by purpose, destiny, and the primacy of the spiritual — that is Yaakov; a world governed by immediacy, force, and the primacy of the physical — that is Eisav. Their struggle is not an episode; it is a template, resurfacing in every generation, in every political shift, in every confrontation between those who seek meaning and those who seek mastery.

Yaakov emerges holding the *akeiv*, the heel of Eisav. This is not a gesture of rivalry but a revelation of mission. The heel is the lowest, most concealed part of the human frame; it represents what is called *sof ma’aseh*, the end-point of history. Yaakov’s task is to hold on, to remain faithful even when the Divine light appears remote, even when the world seems governed by brute power and confusion. The heel may grind in the dust, but it carries the entire person toward his goal. So too the nation of Yaakov carries the world toward its purpose.

Eisav, by contrast, is described as an *ish yode’a tzayid, ish sadeh* — a hunter, a man of the field. He lives in the open arena where success is measured by speed, strength, and strategy. His worldview sees blessing as a prize to be seized, time as prey to be consumed, and the present moment as the only currency of significance. Yaakov “dwells in tents” — not out of retreat, but out of commitment to the inner dimension of reality, the place where truth is determined - not by headlines or force - but by the Word of Hashem.

When the blessings shift from Eisav to Yaakov, the Torah exposes the deeper structure of reality: the voice of blessing belongs to the one who embodies responsibility, not the one who embodies impulse. And yet the aftermath — Eisav’s fury, his vow to kill Yaakov, and Yaakov’s exile — teaches us that spiritual truth does not guarantee immediate peace. Often the opposite. When the world stands at a crossroads between the values of Yaakov and the values of Eisav, the friction intensifies.

In our days the tremors of that ancient struggle echo powerfully. A world pulled between chaos and order, between force and meaning, between those who see history as random and those who recognize a Divine hand guiding it. The intensity of conflict is not a sign of abandonment but of proximity — *sof ma'aseh*, the footsteps of the final unfolding.

Yaakov triumphs not through domination; he triumphs through perseverance, through unwavering connection to the blessing that defines him. The destiny of Yaakov is not to overpower Eisav but to outlast him, to embody a clarity that survives every concealment.

Parshas Toldot reminds us that the struggle is ancient, but so is the promise. The voice of Yaakov — rooted in truth, restraint, and fidelity to Hashem — endures beyond every storm. And as history nears its heel, that voice becomes the guide through the turbulence toward the fulfillment that Hashem has woven into creation from the very beginning.

PARSHA OVERVIEW

After 20 years of marriage, Yitzchak's prayers are answered and Rivka conceives...twins. The pregnancy is extremely painful. Hashem reveals to Rivka that the suffering is a microcosmic prelude to the worldwide conflict that will rage between the two great nations descended from these twins, Rome and Israel. Esav is born, followed by Yaakov, holding on to Esav's heel. They grow, and Esav becomes a hunter, a man of the physical world, while Yaakov sits in the tents of Torah, developing his soul.

On the day of their grandfather Avraham's funeral, Yaakov is cooking lentils, the traditional mourner's meal. Esav rushes in, ravenous from a hard day's hunting, and sells his birthright (and its concomitant spiritual responsibilities) for a bowl of lentils, demonstrating his unworthiness for the position of firstborn.

A famine strikes Canaan and Yitzchak thinks of escaping to Egypt; Hashem tells him that because he was bound as a sacrifice, he has become holy and must remain in the Holy Land. Yitzchak relocates to Gerar in the land of the Philistines; there, to protect Rivka, he says she is his sister. The Philistines grow jealous of Yitzchak when he becomes immensely wealthy, and Avimelech the king asks him to leave. Yitzchak re-digs three wells that were dug by his father, prophetically alluding to the three future Temples. Avimelech, seeing that Yitzchak is blessed by Hashem, makes a treaty with him.

When Yitzchak senses his end approaching, he summons Esav to give Esav his blessings. Rivka, acting on a prophetic command, arranges for Yaakov to impersonate Esav and receive the blessings. When Esav in frustration reveals to his father that Yaakov bought the birthright, Yitzchak realizes that the birthright has been bestowed correctly on Yaakov and he confirms the blessings that he gave Yaakov. Esav vows to kill Yaakov, and so Rivka sends Yaakov to her brother Lavan where he could find a suitable wife.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Mevarchim HaChodesh
Blessing the New Month (Part 3)

*“The greatest darkness comes just before dawn –
but most people give up one minute before the light.”*
Ba'al Shem Tov

The opening *Tefillah* for *Mevarchim HaChodesh* continues: ...**A life of goodness, a life of blessing, a life of sustenance, a life of physical health, a life in which there is *fear of Heaven* and fear of sin, a life in which there is no shame or humiliation, a life of wealth and honor, a life in which we will have love of Torah and *fear of Heaven*...**

Strangely, in our beautiful *Tefillah*, the request for *Yirat Shamayim* – *fear of Heaven* – is repeated. True, the *Siddur Otzar HaTefillot* – one of the definitive sources for the accuracy of variant texts within *Tefillah* – cites an opinion that earlier versions did not include the first request for *Yirat Shamayim*; the accepted text, however, reads “...*A life in which there is **fear of Heaven** and fear of sin, a life in which there is no shame or humiliation, a life of wealth and honor, a life in which we will have love of Torah and **fear of Heaven**...*”

Many commentaries point out that after asking for *Yirat Shamayim*, we then ask for “a life of wealth and honor.” They explain that very often, wealth and honor blind people to the true source of their blessings; that the more successful they become, the more they believe in their own business acumen. And sadly, even though one would expect the opposite, they lose sight of the “Senior Partner” in all of their business ventures. Too often, paradoxically, the more successful a person gets the less they think they need Hashem. They sometimes stop thinking about Hashem altogether.

And that, say the commentaries, is why we ask Hashem a second time - after asking for wealth and honor - for an *additional* portion of *Yirat Shamayim* to help us counterbalance our wealth and success; to remind us that without Hashem there is no possible way that we can succeed at anything.

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman (1874-1941), one of the closest disciples of the saintly Chofetz Chaim, was one of the most prominent leaders of the Ashkenazic Torah world before and during the Holocaust. A childhood friend once came to visit him. Over the years, this friend had become a very successful lawyer and a very wealthy man. When he saw the poverty that Rabbi Wasserman lived in, he was appalled.

“Elchonon!” he said. “You are far brighter than I am. If you would have gone into law like me, you would have been tremendously wealthy today!”

Rabbi Wasserman didn’t respond and they spent a pleasant few hours together. When it was time to leave, Rabbi Wasserman escorted his guest to the railway station. When they arrived, there were two trains waiting to leave, one in one direction and the other in the other direction. One of them

was a sleek modern locomotive with luxurious first-class carriages and the other was old and dilapidated. The guest made his way to the platform where the shabby, rundown train was standing.

Rabbi Wasserman told his guest that he was a little surprised. “After all,” he said, “Someone as successful as you should really be travelling in the lap of luxury. Shouldn’t you get on the other train?”

His guest was taken aback. “Elchonon!” he exclaimed. “Of what possible use is a luxurious train if it is going in the wrong direction?!”

“Listen to yourself!” said Rabbi Wasserman with a smile. “You are quite right! When you need to arrive at a particular destination, it doesn’t make much difference how you get there; the important thing is that you arrived! Why didn’t I become a lawyer? Because it would have taken me, *in the lap of luxury*, in the totally wrong direction!”

Our Tefillah is teaching us one of the most basic tenets in Judaism. That, like with almost everything here in this physical world that we inhabit, the pursuit of material success is neither good nor bad. Material wealth is simply a vehicle that can be used for spiritual growth. There is nothing wrong whatsoever with material success so long as we never lose sight of Who gives it to us...and how we are supposed to use it.

Rabbi Avigdor Miller (1908-2001) was one of the most multifaceted American-born spiritual leaders in his generation. He was a prolific author, the communal Rabbi of Congregation Beis Yisrael of Rugby in Brooklyn, the Mashgiach of Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, and later served as the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Beis Yisrael; his legendary speeches and classes until today are eagerly awaited by a loyal readership. According to the official website - TorasAvigdor.org - 80,000(!) booklets are printed *each week* with his lessons and thoughts on the Torah. When he was asked why the request for *Yirat Shamayim* is repeated, Rabbi Miller gave an answer that he heard from a very good friend of his, Aharon Birzem - later murdered by the Nazis - when they were students in the legendary “Knesset Yisrael” Yeshivah in Slabodka.

Aharon Birzem pointed out to Rabbi Miller that there is a slight difference in the phrasing used each time we ask for *Yirat Shamayim*: The first time, we ask for “A life in which **there is** fear of Heaven...”. The second time we ask for “A life in which **we will have**...fear of Heaven.”

The difference is this: we first request a life where “*there is*” *fear of Heaven*, that we may live in an environment of *Yirat Shamayim*, where we can gain an awareness of Hashem and feel the *Yirat Shamayim* around us. In effect, we are asking Hashem: “Give us a religious environment.” The second time is a personal request for ourselves, that “*we will have*” *fear of Heaven*, that we should merit to absorb *Yirat Shamayim* so that it becomes a part of our very being.

Living in a community established on *Yirat Shamayim*, Rabbi Miller writes, is a tremendous thing; many of us are able to live fully committed religious lives because of our environment. Better still is when, in addition to our surroundings, we work to reach a level of inner *Yirat Shamayim*. Thus we ask twice for *Yirat Shamayim*: First, that our month should be spent among Jews who live lives of *Yirat Shamayim*; second, that it be a month where we achieve *Yirat Shamayim* ourselves.

To be continued...

Q & A

Questions

1. Why was it important that Yitzchak look like Avraham?
2. Why does the Torah stress that Rivka was Betuel's daughter and Lavan's sister?
3. What are the two differences between Tamar's pregnancy and Rivka's pregnancy?
4. Why was Esav named Esav?
5. Who gave Yaakov his name?
6. How old was Esav when he started worshipping idols?
7. Why was Esav faint when he returned from the field?
8. Why are lentils a food for mourners?
9. What was the birthright that Yaakov bought from Esav?
10. Why was Yitzchak not permitted to go to Egypt?
11. What reason did the Philistines give for plugging up the wells?
12. Why did Yitzchak lose his sight? (three reasons)
13. At what age should one anticipate his own death?
14. Why did Rivka ask Yaakov to bring two kid goats?
15. Why did Esav leave his special garments with Rivka?
16. What fragrance did Yitzchak detect on Yaakov's garments?
17. What was the "fat of the land" promised to Esav?
18. When will Esav be freed from subjugation to Yaakov?
19. According to Rashi, why does the Torah repeat the obvious fact that Rivka was “mother of Yaakov and Esav”?
20. Knowing that Machalat was Yishmael's daughter, it's self-evident that she was the sister of Nevayot. Why, then, does the Torah state that Esav married "Yishmael's daughter, the sister of Nevayot”?

Answers

1. 25:19 - So everyone would agree that Avraham was indeed his father.
2. 25:20 - To praise her, that even though her family was evil she was righteous.
3. 25:24 - Rivka gave birth at full term to two children, one righteous and one wicked. Tamar gave birth after seven months to two righteous children.
4. 25:25 - He was born fully developed. The name Esav is based on the Hebrew word for "made" (עָשָׂה).
5. 25:26 - Hashem.
6. 25:27 - 13 years old.
7. 25:29 - From having murdered.
8. 25:30 - They are round like a wheel, and mourning is like a revolving wheel that eventually touches everyone.
9. 25:31 - The right to bring sacrifices.
10. 26:2 - Through the *akeida*, Yitzchak attained the status of a *korban* and was forbidden to leave *Eretz Canaan*.
11. 26:15 - They claimed that the wells encouraged attacks by marauding troops (who would attack to capture the wells, or, if attacking for other reasons, would use the wells as a water supply.)
12. 27:1 - a) From the smoke of the incense offered by Esav's wives to their idols; b) From the angel's tears which fell into Yitzchak's eyes at the time of the *akeida*; c) In order for Yaakov to receive the blessings.
13. 27:2 - When he reaches five years from the age his parents were when they passed away, until five years after.
14. 27:9 - One for Yitzchak and the other to offer as a *korban Pesach*.
15. 27:15 - He suspected that his wives might steal them.
16. 27:27 - The scent of Gan Eden.
17. 27:36 - Italy.
18. 27:40 - When the Jewish People transgress the Torah.
19. 28:5 - Rashi doesn't know.
20. 28:9 - To indicate that Yishmael died between her betrothal and her wedding, and that it was Nevayot who gave his sister in marriage to Esav. Knowing the date of Yishmael's death, we can determine the date of Esav's marriage and thus Yaakov's age, 63, at the time of his flight from Esav.

TAAMEI HAMITZVOS – Reasons behind the Mitzvos

by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

THE FOUR BLESSINGS OF BIRKAS HAMAZON

Mitzvah #431

In last week's article we discussed why the Torah attaches so much importance to reciting Birkas HaMazon after eating. We will now focus on the structure of its four blessings.

The first and most basic blessing expresses thanks for the food itself. We do not content ourselves to give thanks for the meal just eaten, but rather take the opportunity to thank Hashem for *all* the sustenance He provides to the entire world with unconditional and unceasing kindness.

To give an inkling of the magnitude of this feat, Hashem creates four million krill a day to feed a single blue whale, and each of those krill needs nourishment as well. We thank Hashem for having always provided for us in the past and request that He continue to do so, for the sake of His glorious Name.

The second blessing focuses on thanking Hashem for *Eretz Yisrael*, the inseverable heritage of the Jewish People that produces their sustenance. We are required to speak the praises of the Land, saying *eretz chemdah tova u'rechavah* (a desirable, good, and spacious land) so that people will long to live there (*Abudraham*).

This blessing also includes thanks for the Torah and the covenant of circumcision because the land, the Torah, and the covenant are interconnected, as we were granted the land only on condition that we fulfill the Torah and uphold the covenant (*ibid.*). We also thank Hashem for redeeming us from Egypt because that is what made it possible for us to inherit *Eretz Yisrael* (*HaMaspik L'Ovdei Hashem*, cited *ibid.*, *Re'em* ed.). *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Masei* §23) considers this blessing the most cherished of all blessings because it thanks Hashem for His most cherished land as well as other important gifts.

The third blessing focuses on *Eretz Yisrael's* centerpiece, the holy city of Yerushalayim. Only when Yerushalayim is rebuilt, with the Beis HaMikdash at its top, can *Eretz Yisrael* fulfill its purpose: to serve Hashem. Thus, when the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, we were exiled, and as long as it is not rebuilt, *Eretz Yisrael* remains lacking and we find it difficult to return.

We also pray in the third blessing for the reestablishment of the Davidic dynasty, which can only take root in Yerushalayim, and which is essential to maintaining Torah law throughout the land (based on *HaMaspik L'Ovdei Hashem*).

In the absence of all this, the rebuilding of the Mikdash in Yerushalayim and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty, we are less worthy of Hashem's blessing (*Beis Elokim, Yesodos*, ch. 1). We therefore ask Hashem to nevertheless have mercy upon us and sustain us with dignity until the time when Yerushalayim will be rebuilt.

The fourth blessing expands the scope of *Birkas HaMazon* to include thanks for absolutely everything, past, present, and future. Unlike the first three blessings of *Birkas HaMazon*, this fourth

blessing is a Rabbinical enactment. In a sense, therefore, this blessing is dearer to Hashem than the others, because “the enactments of the Sages are dearer than the Biblical Mitzvos” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, ch. 1).

The background behind this enactment is that when Hadrian Caesar destroyed the Jewish metropolis Beitar and killed its inhabitants, he used the corpses to make a fence for his vineyard. Miraculously, the corpses did not rot, and seven years later, permission was granted for them to be buried respectfully. Upon seeing this, Rabban Gamliel enacted this blessing which praises Hashem using a double term of benevolence: “*HaTov v’Hameitiv - Who is good and Who does good,*” corresponding to the double kindness of allowing the bodies to be buried and keeping them from rotting (*Berachos* 48b).

As explained in the previous article, one of the main purposes of Birkas HaMazon is to prevent us from becoming haughty after eating our fill. By remembering the massacre of Beitar, we recall that every living being is destined to die one day, and this thought helps us humble ourselves before Hashem (*Rokeach*). This blessing is appended to the blessing about Yerushalayim because the kingdom of the Jewish people that dissolves completely with the fall of Beitar will only return with the rebuilding of Yerushalayim (*Rabbeinu Yerucham* 16:7, based on *Yerushalmi, Succah* 5:1).

We may suggest another reason for the fourth blessing. As explained, the second blessing indicates that our sustenance is dependent on our possession of *Eretz Yisrael* — which in turn is dependent on our upholding of the Torah and the covenant — and the third blessing indicates that our sustenance is primarily linked to Yerushalayim, the seat of our Divine service. All the above conditions for our sustenance faltered and fell with the destruction of Beitar, and thus one may have thought that Hashem would withhold His kindness until the time of the redemption. The double miracle that occurred specifically at that time, when we hit rock bottom, was an expression of Hashem’s innermost attribute of benevolence, which is absolute, all-encompassing, everlasting, and unconditional. We express this by proclaiming that “He is good and does good to all.”

The commentaries give various explanations for the many terms of praise in this blessing; see, for example, the commentary of R’ Nosson Shapira of Horodna. To mention one of his insights, the fifteen expressions, *l’chen, l’chesed...v’chol tuv* (favorably, kindly...and all goodness) correspond to the fifteen meals Hashem provides us weekly, counting three meals on Shabbos. On the basic level, though, we may suggest that this blessing is so wordy because it is an expression of overwhelming gratitude and praise. It ends with an acknowledgment that we remain dependent on Hashem for our needs, and a plea that He see fit to continue providing for us.

Some of the sources cited here were drawn from an extensive article on the topic by R’ Shmuel Zlotnik in Alibah D’Hilchasa #33, pg. 42-45.

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