

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

WHAT DID YITZCHAK KNOW AND WHEN DID HE KNOW THAT HE KNEW IT?

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Did Yitzchak know that Esav had sold his birthright to Yaakov, let alone that he had sold it for a mess of lentils?

Opposites attract, and yet birds of a feather flock together. Haste makes waste, but a stitch in time saves nine. In the proverbial economy, paradox does not diminish truth-value. We respond to contradictory proverbs by making space for both rather than by choosing among them.

The Talmudic rabbis treat legal traditions in much the same way. They find space for apparently contradictory halakhic statements by making *okimtas*. An *okimta* is the unspoken context of a text, the implicit case a legal statement addresses. Apparently contradicting texts may turn out to have completely disjointed spheres of influence, or one may relate to a narrow subscope of the other's scope.

Something along the same lines may be suggested for interpretations of Torah narratives. Different readings of the stories exist in parallel, and the intent of the text is to generate multiple versions, and let us figure out which teaches us most when. Meir Sternberg's amazing and vital *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* advocates powerfully for this position, and it is possible that *midrash* makes the same point when it strings together chains of divergent interpretations.

Now halakhic *okimtas* may be descriptively accurate, in other words they may correctly convey what the authors of those statements actually intended. With regard to proverbs—since there is rarely an author whose intent might be fathomed—the question is rather whether the statements as popularly used are intended as absolutes, and I think the answer is clearly no. Everyone understands that sometimes

haste is an efficient strategy, and that not all friendships or romances are rooted in similarity, nor do all opposites attract.

But with regard to Torah narratives, if one presumes the historicity of the Biblical accounts, it can only have happened one way. To take Sternberg's parade example—either Uriah the Hittite knew that King David had slept with Batsheva, or he did not.

Similarly here—either Yitzchak knew that Esav had sold the birthright, or he did not.

The medieval parshan Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor offers a powerful reading of Genesis 27:1-4 that assumes he did.

בראשית פרק כז:א-ד

ויהי כי זקן יצחק ותכהין עיניו מראת

ויקרא את עשו בנו הגדל

ויאמר אליו: בני

ויאמר אליו: הנני

ויאמר: הנה נא זקנתי - לא ידעתי יום מותי. ועתה - שא נא

כליך, תליך, וקשתך, וצא השדה וצודה לי ציד(ה), ועשה לי מטעמים כאשר אהבתי, והביאה לי, ואכלה, בעבור תברכך נפשי בטרם אמות

It happened when Yitzchak was old, and his eyes had dimmed beyond seeing,

that he called Esav, his older son,

and said to him: "My son!

He said to him: "Here I am."

He said: "Indeed I have aged - I do not know the day of my death. So now - please lift up your equipment, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt me a hunt, and make me delicacies such as I have loved, and bring them to me, and I will eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die."

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בכור שור

לא ידעתי יום מותי – ואם אמות הרי הפסדת הכל, כי יעקב אחיך
קנה ממך הבכורה, ויטול השררה כולה ועיקר הנכסים

I do not know the day of my death – and if I die you will have lost everything, as Yaakov your brother has acquired the birthright from you, and he will take all the authority and the key properties.

בעבור תברכך נפשי בטרם אמות – כי במתנה שאתן לך אינו יכול
לערער כלום, דדין בכורה לא שייך גבי מתנה, ואתן לך כל
השררה . . . דדין בכורה לא שייך אלא בירושה . . . ולפיכך אמר לו
עשה לי סעודה, שהרי נתת בכורתך בשביל אכילה אחת, ואני
אשיבנה לך בשביל סעודה ושם אמשיך, ועוד כי דרך השרים לעשות
סעודה כשמקבלים שררה

so that my soul may bless you before I die – because he can make no objection to the gift I will give you, as the law of the birthright does not apply to gifts, and I will give you all the authority . . . as the law of the birthright only applies to inheritance . . . and therefore he said ‘Make me a feast’, as you have given your birthright for the sake of one eating, and I will return it to you for the sake of a feast and there I will give you dominion . . .

In Bekhor Shor’s universe, Yitzchak is an active conspirator who fully understands what he is doing and who he is doing it for. He knows that Esav has sold the birthright for a bowl of soup, considers the sale valid, and nonetheless seeks to evade the implications of that sale.

Ramban finds this both so literarily plausible and so theologically concerning that he feels compelled to reassure us that Yitzchak is not defying Hashem, because he has received no explicit Divine instruction that Yaakov should come out on top.

רמב"ן בראשית פרק כ"ו

ונראה שלא הגידה לו רבקה מעולם הנבואה אשר אמר ה' לה רב
יעבוד צעיר, כי איך היה יצחק עובר את פי ה' והיא לא תצלח
והנה מתחלה לא הגידה לו דרך מוסר וצניעות
כי ותלך לדרוש את ה', שהלכה בלא רשות יצחק
או שאמרה אין אנכי צריכה להגיד נבואה לנביא כי הוא גדול מן
המגיד לי

ועתה לא רצתה לאמר לו "כך הוגד לי מאת ה' טרם לדתי" כי
אמרה באהבתו אותו לא יברך יעקב ויניח הכל בידי שמים
והיא ידעה כי בסבת זה יתברך יעקב מפיו בלב שלם ונפש חפצה.
או הם סבות מאת ה' כדי שיתברך יעקב, וגם עשו בברכת החרב, ולו
לבדו נתכנו עלילות

It appears that Rivkah never told Yitzchak ever of the prophecy which Hashem had said to her that “the elder shall serve the younger”, as how would

Yitzchak transgress the utterance of Hashem (by seeking to make Esav master) (which would never succeed)?!

Now initially she didn’t tell him out of propriety and modesty, because “she went to seek insight from Hashem” indicates that she went without Yitzchak’s authorization, or because she said ‘I don’t need to tell a prophecy to a prophet, since he is greater than the one who told (this prophecy to) me’, and now she did not wish to say to him ‘Thus was told to me from Hashem before I gave birth’ because she said ‘In his love for Esav he will not bless Yaakov and leave everything in the hands of Heaven’, and she knew that as a result of all this Yaakov would be blessed from his mouth wholeheartedly and with a willing soul, and that these are causes from Hashem so that Yaakov would be blessed, and Esav too with the blessing of the sword (and He Alone has the capacity to plan effectively).

Here, though, Ramban unintentionally provides us with an opening. **יעבוד צעיר** may mean “The elder shall serve the younger,” but it may also grammatically mean “The elder will be served by the younger.” So even if Rivkah had told Yitzchak of the prophecy, he might have heard only what he wished to hear, and perhaps that is why the prophecy was given with classical oracular ambiguity—so that Yitzchak could hear only what he wished to hear.

Many years ago, I was informed of serious allegations against a rabbi who had been kind to me. Some years later, I was informed of the same allegations, and I realized with deep disquiet that I had completely forgotten about the first time. I suspect that I am quite typically human in my capacity to forget facts that disturb me; i.e. to remember only what I wish to remember, and soldier on in blissful ignorance.

Perhaps that is the best reading of Yitzchak’s behavior here. He was told—by Esav himself, perhaps also by others—that Esav had treated the birthright with shocking disrespect. He then promptly forgot this, as often as he was told.

But willful ignorance is not the same as genuine innocence, and the repressed knowledge often leaks through into behavior. I find it hard to accept Bekhor Shor’s understanding that Yitzchak tried to give Esav the birthright in full awareness of his character. But asking Esav to bring food in exchange for the blessing may well have been an unconscious “tell” that Yitzchak’s ignorance was willful, and perhaps that underlying uneasiness is why Yitzchak is so easily manipulated into giving Yaakov the *berakhot* in the end. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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