

לע"נ

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The Tragedy of Good Intentions

TO-L'DOT

It is the deep, reverberating question at the heart of Toldot. Why did Rivka tell Yaakov to deceive Yitzchak and take Eisav's blessing? Her instruction is brisk and peremptory:

"Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies" (B'reishit 27:8-10).

Rivka's swift action is extraordinary. The situation had only just arisen - she could not have known in advance that Yitzchak was about to bless Eisav, or that he would request some venison first - yet her plan was immediate, detailed and complete. She had no doubts or hesitations. She was determined to seize the moment. When Yaakov raised concerns (What if Yitzchak is not deceived? What if he touches my skin and knows immediately that I am not Eisav?) her reply is brief and blunt.

"My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me" (27:13).

Our question tends to be, how could Yaakov deceive his father? Yet the real question is about Rivka. It was her plan, not his. How did she consider it permissible

[1] to deceive her husband,

[2] to deprive Eisav of his father's blessing,

and [3] to order Yaakov to commit an act of dishonesty?

Yaakov on his own would not have conceived such a plan. He was an ISH TAM, meaning "a simple, straightforward, plain, quiet, innocent man, a man of integrity" (25:27)? How then did Rivka come to do what she did?

There are three possible answers. The first: she loved Yaakov (25:28). She preferred him to Eisav, but she knew Yitzchak felt otherwise. So she was driven by maternal instinct. She wanted her beloved son to be blessed.

This is an unlikely answer. The patriarchs and matriarchs are role-models. They were not driven by mere instinct or vicarious ambition. Rivka was not Lady Macbeth. Nor was she Batsheva, engaging in court politics to ensure that her son, Shlomo, would inherit David's throne

(see Melachim Alef 1). It would be a serious misreading to interpret the narrative this way.

The second possibility is that she believed strongly that Eisav was the wrong person to inherit the blessing. She had already seen how readily he had sold his birthright and "despised" it (25:31-34). She did not believe a "hunter" and "a man of the field" fitted the template of the Abrahamic covenant. She knew that this was one of the reasons why God chose Yitzchak not Yishmael, because Yishmael was destined to be "a wild ass of a man" (16:12). She knew that Yitzchak loved Eisav but - for various reasons, depending on which commentary one follows - he was blind to his son's faults. It was vital to the future of the covenant that it be entrusted to the child who had the right qualities to live by its high demands.

The third possibility is simply that she was guided by the oracle she had received prior to the twins' birth:

"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (25:23).

Yaakov was the younger. Therefore, Rivka must have assumed, he was destined to receive the blessing.

Possibilities two and three make

sense, but only at the cost of raising a more fundamental question. Did Rivka share her thoughts with Yitzchak? If she did, then why did Yitzchak persist in seeking to bless Eisav? If she did not, then why not?

It is here that we must turn to a fundamental insight of the Netziv (R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816-1893). What is fascinating is that Netziv makes his comment, not on this week's parsha, but on last week's - the first time Rivka set eyes on her husband-to-be. Recall that Yitzchak did not choose his wife. Avraham entrusted that task to his servant. Servant and bride-to-be are travelling back by camel, and as they approach Avraham's tents, Rivka sees a figure in the distance -

Now Yitzchak had come from Be'er Lachai Ro'i, for he was living in the Negev. He went out to the field one evening to meditate, and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. Rivka also looked up and saw Yitzchak. She got down from her camel and asked the servant, "Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?" "He is my master", the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself (24:62-65).

On this, Netziv comments,

"She covered herself out of awe and a sense of inadequacy as if she felt she was unworthy to be his wife, and

from then on this trepidation was fixed in her mind. Her relationship with Yitzchak was not the same as that between Sara and Avraham or Rachel and Yaakov. When they had a problem they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rivka." (commentary to B'reishit 24:65)

The Netziv understood that in this description of the first encounter between Rivka and Yitzchak, nothing is incidental. The text emphasises distance in every sense. Yitzchak is physically far away when Rivka spots him. He is also mentally far away: meditating, deep in thought and prayer. Rivka imposes her own distance by covering herself with a veil.

The distance goes deeper still. Yitzchak is the most withdrawn of the patriarchs. Rarely do we see him as the initiator of a course of action. The events of his life seem to mirror those of his father. The Torah associates him with PACHAD, "fear" (31:42). Jewish mysticism connected him with GEVURAH, best understood as "self-restraint". This is the man who had been bound as a sacrifice on an altar, whose life had been reprieved only at the last moment. Yitzchak, whether because of the trauma of that moment or because of the inhibiting effect of having a strong father, is a man whose emotions often lie too deep for words.

No wonder, then, that he loves Rivka

on the one hand, Eisav on the other. What these two very different people have in common is that they are so unlike him. They are both brisk and action-oriented. Their "native hue of resolution" is not "sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought". No wonder, too, that Rivka hesitates before speaking to him.

Just before the episode of the blessing, another scene takes place, apparently unrelated to what follows. There is a famine in the land. Yitzchak and Rivka are forced into temporary exile, as Avraham and Sara had been twice before. On God's instructions, they go to Gerar. There, just as Avraham had done, Yitzchak passes off his wife as his sister, afraid that he might be killed so that his wife could be taken into the royal harem. Something happens, however, to disclose the truth:

"When Yitzchak had been there a long time, Avimelech king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Yitzchak caressing [M'TZACHEK] his wife Rivka (26:8).

We tend to miss the significance of this scene. It is the only one in which Yitzchak is the subject of the verb TZADI-CHET-KUF. Yet this is the root of Yitzchak's name - meaning "he will laugh". It is the one scene of intimacy between Yitzchak and Rivka. It is the only episode in which Yitzchak, as it were, is true to his name. Yet it nearly

brings disaster. Avimelech is furious that Yitzchak has been economical with the truth. It is the first of a series of disputes with the Philistines.

Did this reinforce Yitzchak's belief that he could never relax? Did it confirm Rivka's belief that she could never be unequivocally intimate with her husband? Perhaps so, perhaps not. But the Netziv's point remains. Rivka felt unable to share with Yitzchak the oracle she had received before the twins' birth and the doubts she had about Eisav's suitability for the blessing. Her inability to communicate led to the deception, which brought a whole series of tragedies in its wake, among them the fact that Yaakov was forced to flee for his life, as well as the counter-deception perpetrated against him by his father-in-law Lavan.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Torah is telling us that communication is vital, however hard it is. Rivka acts at all times out of the highest of motives. She holds back from troubling Yitzchak out of respect for his inwardness and privacy. She does not want to disillusion him about Eisav, the son he loves. She does not want to trouble him with her oracle, suggesting as it did that the two boys would be locked into a lifelong struggle. Yet the alternative - deception - is worse.

We have here a story of the tragedy

of good intentions. Honesty and openness are at the heart of strong relationships. Whatever our fears and trepidations, it is better to speak the truth than practice even the most noble deception.

Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) **Do you believe there are times when lying is acceptable?**
- (2) **Where else in the Tanach has someone lied - or deceived - for the sake of good?**
- (3) **If you were Rivka, what might you have done differently in this situation?**

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH