

Why Bless Esav?

Introduction

THIS TOPIC IS CURRENTLY IN PROGRESS

Parental Favoritism

From the very opening of the Yaakov and Esav narratives, the brothers are pitted one against each other, not least by their parents themselves. Shortly after recording their births, the text points out:

וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת עֵשָׂו כִּי צִיד בָּפִיו וְרִבְקָה אֲהָבָת אֶת יַעֲקֹב. (כה:כח)

And Yitzchak loved Esav, because he ate of his hunting, and Rivka loved Yaakov.
(25:28)

This parental disagreement comes to the fore in Chapter 27, the story of the blessings. While Yitzchak hoped to bless Esav, Rivka used her wiles to ensure that the blessing went instead to Yaakov. What, though, led to each parent's decision? Was each motivated only by personal preference? Were not other factors, such as personal character, worthiness, or birth order taken into account?

What Did Hashem Say?

Two incidents in Chapter 25 raise further issues regarding the choice of the blessings' recipient. After Rivka questions the cause of her abnormal fetal movement, she receives a prophecy about her future children:

(כג) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ שְׁנֵי גֵ[ו]י(י)ם בְּבֶטֶןךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאָמִים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדּוּ וְלֵאמֹם מְלֹאָם יֵאָמֵץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר.

25:28

Rivka is apparently told, even before the birth of her twins, that the elder would serve the younger. If so, should it not have been evident that Hashem's choice was Yaakov? How could Yitzchak act against a prophecy? Did Rivka never share it with her husband? If not, why did she keep such information to herself? Or, is it possible that bestowing the blessing on Esav was actually not contradicting the prophecy?

Buying the Birthright, Buying the Blessings?

Later in Chapter 25, the text relays how Esav sells his birthright to Yaakov:

(ל) וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו אֶל יַעֲקֹב הֲלֹעִיטָנִי נָא מִן הָאֲדָמָה הַזֶּה כִּי עָיִף אָנֹכִי עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ אֲדָמָה. (לא)
וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב מִכֶּרֶה כִּיֹּם אֶת בְּכֻרְתְּךָ לִי. (לב) וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לָמוֹת וְלָמָּה זֶה לִי בְכֻרָה. (לג)
וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב הִשָּׁבְעָה לִּי כִּיֹּם וַיִּשָּׁבַע לוֹ וַיִּמָּכֶר אֶת בְּכֻרְתּוֹ לְיַעֲקֹב.

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Regardless of how one evaluates the actions of either brother during this sale, it would seem that, in the end, Yaakov could claim the birthright as his own. Did this earn him rights to the blessings as well? Was the sale known to either parent, and, if so, did it have any effect on their actions?

Why Bless Esav?

Exegetical Approaches

THIS TOPIC IS STILL BEING DEVELOPED AND UPDATED

Yitzchak Favored Esav

Love

Yitzchak simply loved Esav more, and therefore wanted to give him as much as possible.

SOURCES: Rashbam, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor

What did the blessing constitute? According to R"Y Bekhor Shor, the blessing was, in essence, the birthright itself. It included Yitzchak's material inheritance and supremacy over all members of Yitzchak's household, and it virtually assured its recipient of also receiving the Abrahamic blessing ("בְּרַכַּת אַבְרָהָם"). In contrast, Rashbam views the blessing and birthright as separate, but he also agrees that Yitzchak wanted to bestow upon Esav the blessings of Abraham.

Was Yitzchak aware of the prophecy to Rivka? Rashbam emphasizes that Rivka's actions were informed by her knowledge of the prophecy, implying that Yitzchak did not know of it. R"Y Bekhor Shor does not explicitly relate to the issue, but he might agree that Yitzchak was either unaware of the prophecy or thought that it was ambiguous.¹

Was Yitzchak aware of the sale of the birthright? R"Y Bekhor Shor claims that Yitzchak knew of the sale, and that the blessing was, in fact, designed to circumvent it. By blessing Esav before he died, Yitzchak was able to ensure that Esav did not lose out on the inheritance that he had sold to his brother. This was in effect a "living will". For Rashbam, though, the blessings were completely independent of the birthright, and the sale had no impact on them.

Why ask Esav to prepare food? According to R"Y Bekhor Shor, Yitzchak told Esav that he had lost his inheritance for a meal; now he was to retrieve it in return for a different meal. Moreover, it is the way of officers to partake in a meal when they gain a position of authority.

What was Rivka thinking? Rashbam explains that Rivka was motivated by the Divine prophecy. R"Y Bekhor Shor, though, simply suggests that just as Yitzchak was attempting to ensure that his beloved son prevailed, Rivka was acting on behalf of her preferred son, Yaakov.

Evaluation of Esav – Rashbam and R"Y Bekhor Shor both view Esav as a neutral character; thus Yitzchak's preference is understandable. For elaboration, see A Portrait of Esav.

"גַּם בְּרוּךְ יְהִי" – Rashbam posits that Yitzchak recognized that Rivka was behind the events which had transpired and that he deferred to her wisdom. According to R"Y Bekhor Shor, though, Yitzchak simply was acknowledging that once the blessing had been given, it could not be retracted.



Firstborn Status

Esav's status as firstborn was enough to merit him the blessing.

SOURCES: Ramban, Abarbanel #1²

Character versus age order

- According to Ramban, Esav was not a particularly wicked character, and thus his status as firstborn sufficed to make Yitzchak want to give him the blessing.
- According to Abarbanel, in contrast, Yitzchak assumed that unless Hashem told him otherwise, the blessing was the right of the firstborn. As Hashem had given Esav that position at birth, Hashem would have told Yitzchak if he should remove such status.³

What did the blessing constitute? Both Ramban and Abarbanel maintain that Yitzchak was planning to give Esav the blessing of Avraham.

Was Yitzchak aware of the prophecy to Rivka? Both these commentators assert that Rivka had never shared the prophecy with her husband; otherwise Yitzchak would never have acted against it.

Was Yitzchak aware of the sale of the birthright? According to Ramban, Yaakov had bought either a double portion of the inheritance or honored status, but not the legacy of Avraham. As such, the sale should not have affected Yitzchak's choice in blessing regardless. Abarbanel would likely suggest that Yitzchak was unaware of the sale.⁴

What was Rivka thinking? Rivka, aware both of the prophecy and Yaakov's superior nature, wanted to ensure that the correct child be blessed. According to Ramban, she feared that if Yitzchak knew, he would simply not give any blessing and leave it all in the hands of Hashem. Thus, she took efforts that Yitzchak bless Yaakov with a willing heart.⁵

Evaluation of Esav – Ramban paints a negative but not overly wicked portrait of Esav. Yitzchak was thus swayed both by the delicacies he served and his firstborn status to prefer him. Abarbanel, in contrast, views him as wicked, but assumes that Yitzchak was unaware of this. For more, see A Portrait of Esav.

"גם בְּרוּךְ יִהְיֶה" – Ramban suggests that Yitzchak realized that the blessing was effective and that, against his will, it would take hold.



Unaware of True Nature

Yitzchak was blind to Esav's faults and did not realize that he was unworthy of the blessing.

SOURCES: Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Bereshit Rabbah, Tanchuma, Rashi, Ralbag, Abarbanel #2,⁶ Sforno,⁷ R. S"R Hirsch⁸

Why was Yitzchak oblivious? According to most of these commentators, Esav actively misled his father into thinking that he was a righteous person. Abarbanel adds that Yitzchak's natural love for his eldest son blinded him, while Ralbag asserts that his constant communion with Hashem made Yitzchak less aware of the doings of his children.⁹

"וַתִּכְהַן עֵינָיו מֵרָאֵת" – Tanchuma and Abarbanel suggest that the dimming of Yitzchak's eyes refers to his blindness to Esav's character.¹⁰

What did the blessing constitute? Abarbanel asserts that Yitzchak was planning on blessing Esav with the legacy of Avraham, while Ralbag, Sforno, and R. Hirsch assert that this was just a blessing for material good.¹¹

Did Yitzchak know of the prophecy to Rivka? Abarbanel claims that Yitzchak must not have been aware of the prophecy, for if were, he would never have attempted to circumvent it.¹²

Was Yitzchak aware of the sale of the birthright?

- Rashi presents Yitzchak as unaware of the sale; when Esav reveals it to him,¹³ he is relieved that even according to strict justice, the blessing went to the proper son.
- The other commentators do not address the question, but both Ralbag and Abarbanel suggest that the blessing Yitzchak was bestowing was in essence what Yaakov had bought.¹⁴ As such, it is likely that they would suggest that Yitzchak was either unaware of the sale or thought it was invalid. Sforno, on the other hand, asserts that the birthright was related to religious status, and thus was unconnected to the blessings.

What was Rivka thinking?

- **Aware of children's ways** – Unlike Yitzchak, Rivka recognized the true nature of each of her sons and tried to ensure that the blessing did not go to the undeserving child.¹⁵ Ralbag points out that she thought that the blessings of a prophet automatically come to fruition, and so she feared that Yaakov would lose out.
- **Acting on prophecy** – Abarbanel adds that Rivka knew that Yaakov was Hashem's choice due to the prophecy of "the elder shall serve the younger".
- **Show Yitzchak his error** – R. Hirsch posits that Rivka's real motivation in her ruse was not to obtain the blessing for Yaakov,¹⁶ but to prove to Yitzchak how easily fooled he was. She could, thus, convince him that he had been similarly deceived by Esav throughout.

Why ask Esav to prepare food? Both Abarbanel and Sforno suggest that Yitzchak wanted Esav to do a good deed so as to make him more worthy.¹⁷ Alternatively the meal was needed to put Yitzchak in the proper frame of mind to receive Divine inspiration.

Evaluation of Esav – According to this position, Esav was undeserving of the blessing. Most of these sources claim that he was outright wicked, but deceived his father into believing otherwise. For elaboration, see A Portrait of Esav.

"גַּם בְּרוּךְ יִהְיֶה" – R. Hirsch asserts that Rivka's plan worked, and Yitzchak finally recognized the true nature of Esav, leading him to wholeheartedly bless Yaakov. Ralbag and Abarbanel similarly conclude that, after the fact, Yitzchak realized that this must be Hashem's desire, leading him to affirm the blessing. Sforno more simply suggests that Yitzchak recognized that the blessing had already taken hold.



Both Brothers Were to be Blessed

Yitzchak had planned that each brother would receive a blessing. While Esav was to be given the material blessing, the legacy of Avraham was meant to be inherited either by Yaakov alone or by both brothers together.

SOURCES: Radak, Shadal,¹⁸ R. S"R Hirsch, R. D"Z Hoffmann, Malbim

What did the blessing constitute? Radak, R. Hirsch, and Malbim all maintain that the blessing was a material one. According to Shadal, it was mainly one of dominion, while according to R. Hoffmann it was the blessing of Avraham.

Who was to get what?

- **Split leadership** – According to R. Hirsch and Malbim, Yitzchak had assumed that his two sons would share in the leadership of the nation, with Yaakov taking on the spiritual role (and receiving the blessing of Avraham) and Esav caring for the physical needs (thus meriting the material blessing).¹⁹
- **Share Avraham's blessing** – Shadal and R. Hoffmann, on the other hand, assert that Yitzchak thought that both brothers would be chosen to share Avraham's blessing and live together in the land of Israel. Nonetheless, Yitzchak had hoped to give Esav an advantage over Yaakov, and thus blessed him that he would be the dominant of the two.²⁰

Evaluation of Esav's nature – R. Hirsch and R. Hoffmann assume that Yitzchak was somewhat deceived by Esav and thought him more righteous than he was. Malbim, on the other hand, asserts that he recognized Esav's wickedness,²¹ but also saw how his physical traits and might could be used for good.

Was Yitzchak aware of the prophecy to Rivka?

- **No** – Malbim claims that he was unaware of the prophecy, which was part of the reason for his preference for Esav. Malbim could have suggested, though, that even had he been aware, he might have interpreted it to mean that the elder shall serve the younger in the sense of providing for his material needs.²²
- **Yes** – R. Hirsch, on the other hand, claims that it was likely that he knew of the prophecy and recognized that the son who gained the material blessing would ultimately serve the other son. The partnership, thus, would not be totally equal, but a partnership nonetheless. If this is true, though, it is not clear why he intends to bless Esav: "הוה גביר לאַסְיָר".

Was Yitzchak aware of the sale of the birthright?

- **Yes** – Malbim asserts that he was, and this was one of the reasons that he knew that Yaakov, rather than Esav, was to inherit the blessing of Avraham.
- **No** – Shadal asserts that the brothers never told Yitzchak of the sale, as evidenced by the fact that each still referred to Esav as the first-born when speaking to their father. Shadal claims that this proves that Yaakov had never thought that he had rights to the blessing after the sale, for the birthright and blessings were two distinct things.²³
- **No legal standing** – Though R. D"Z Hoffmann assumes that Yaakov bought rights to inherit Avraham's legacy, which could have impacted the blessing, he maintains that the sale was like child's play and had no legal validity.

What was Rivka thinking?

- **Unaware of Yitzchak's plans** – Radak suggests that Rivka thought that Yitzchak was giving the only blessing to Esav. She did not realize that Yitzchak meant for Yaakov to inherit the blessing of Avraham separately.
- **Splitting the blessing would be catastrophic** – R. Hirsch and Malbim assert that Rivka believed that Yitzchak was mistaken to think that the brothers could share in the leadership of the nation.²⁴ She insisted that the blessing could not be split, for if the physical is not combined with the spiritual in one person, it would only be detrimental.²⁵
- **Esav unworthy** – According to R. Hoffmann, Yitzchak was not as aware of Esav's true nature as she was,²⁶ so only she could see that giving him an extra blessing of dominion was problematic.

"גַּם בְּרוּךְ יִהְיֶה" – Malbim asserts that Yitzchak realized that what transpired must have been Hashem's will and, thus, he agreed. R. Hoffmann, instead, claims that this is a statement confirming that because the blessing had already been given, it had indeed taken hold.



Esav Needed the Blessing More

Yitzchak recognized that Esav was not as righteous as his brother, and he hoped that the blessing would help improve his character.

SOURCES: Philo, Radak,²⁷ R. Maimon, cited by his grandson R. Avraham b. HaRambam

What did the blessing constitute? According to Radak, Yitzchak reserved the blessing of Avraham for Yaakov and only meant to give Esav a material blessing.

Why ask Esav to prepare food? According to Radak, Yitzchak desired that Esav treat him to delicacies so that he would be inclined to bless him. As he was undeserving on his own, Yitzchak realized he needed to be proactive to bestow one upon him.

Was Yitzchak aware of the prophecy to Rivka? According to Radak the prophecy was ambiguous. Due to the fact that the clause had no defining article ("את"), it could read either as "the elder shall serve the younger" or "the elder shall the younger serve". As such, even if Yitzchak knew of it, he could interpret it as he pleased.

Was Yitzchak aware of the sale of the birthright? According to Radak the birthright referred to honored status. This was distinct from the blessing and, as such, the sale was irrelevant to Yitzchak's decisions.

What was Rivka thinking? This position might suggest that Rivka might have questioned the efficacy of giving a blessing to an undeserving son so as to improve his ways. Moreover, she might have found it unfair to Yaakov.²⁸

Evaluation of Esav – All of these sources suggest that Esav was a negative character and Yitzchak was aware of this fact. For more, see A Portrait of Esav.

"גַּם בְּרוּךְ יִהְיֶה" – When Yitzchak recognized that the blessing had gone to his son, albeit not Esav, he upheld it.

¹ See Radak below, that due to the absence of the defining participle "את", the prophecy could be read as either "the elder shall serve the younger", or "the elder, shall the younger serve."

² Abarbanel combines this approach with the above, that Yitzchak did not recognize Esav's wickedness.

³ Abarbanel points out that had Yitzchak not been blind to Esav's true character (see approach above), he should have realized that there was a problem in giving Esav the blessing and asked Hashem what to do.

⁴ See discussion above.

⁵ It is not clear why Rivka felt that Yaakov needed to be blessed explicitly by his father, especially considering that Yitzchak himself had not received the same from Avraham. Moreover, how would it help for Yitzchak to wholeheartedly bless Yaakov, if he only did so thinking he was talking to a different son?

⁶ Abarbanel combines this position, with the approach below that posits that Esav was chosen due to firstborn status.

⁷ Sforno maintains that Yitzchak was not totally oblivious to Esav's nature, but that he simply did not appreciate the magnitude of his wickedness. He asserts that Yitzchak knew his sons well enough to prefer Yaakov, whom he had always planned to inherit the blessing of Avraham. Nonetheless he was deceived into thinking that Esav, too, deserved a blessing.

⁸ He combines this approach with the position below which suggests that Yaakov and Esav were supposed to share the blessings.

⁹ See Moshe for how Ralbag similarly explains various aspects of Moshe's character.

¹⁰ Tanchuma understands that "bribery" blinds a person; thus Yitzchak was blinded by Esav's hunting and talk. Both Tanchuma and R. Elazar b. Azarya in Bereshit Rabbah also raise the idea that Hashem intentionally blinded Yitzchak so that he would not be distressed by the evil-doings of his son.

Sforno, who claims that Yitzchak was aware of some of his son's faults, instead asserts that the bad eyesight was a punishment for not chastising Esav enough. As support, he points to the similar blindness of the high priest Eli who was faulted for not rebuking his sons.

¹¹ See below that R. Hirsch maintains that Yitzchak had wanted his sons to share in the leadership of the nation and that the spiritual blessing was always to be given to Yaakov. Ralbag and Sforno agree that Yaakov was to receive the blessing of Avraham but do not speak of any plans for shared leadership.

¹² In this he follows Ramban below.

¹³ According to Rashi, when Esav said that Yaakov had tricked him twice, his father questioned what he was referring to and Esav responded by telling of the sale.

¹⁴ Abarbanel asserts that Yaakov bought the right to fulfill the legacy of Avraham, while Ralbag asserts that he bought rights to extra material blessings, but according to each, this is exactly what Yitzchak was bestowing.

¹⁵ Abarbanel asserts that Esav's marriage convinced Rivka that his progeny would never be able to inherit the level of closeness to Hashem and the Land of Israel necessary to properly lead the nation.

¹⁶ He points out that such an endeavor would have been useless. If the blessing was one that comes straight from the Divine, how could she think that she could deceive Hashem? Moreover, how could she dream that the blessing of Avraham, which is contingent on "צדקה ומשפט" could be attained through trickery? If, on the other hand, the blessing was simply a father's promise regarding his property or the like, once Yaakov was found out, it would be considered a mistake and thus an invalid gift (מקח טעות).

¹⁷ This is based on the assumption that Yitzchak realized that Esav was not as deserving as he would have liked.

¹⁸ See also Shadal's earlier lengthier discussion in Bikkurei Halitim 9-10.

¹⁹ See N. Guttman, "הקל קול יעקב והידים ידי עשו", Megadim 21 (5754): 17-22 who develops this approach.

²⁰ R. D"Z Hoffmann compares it to the role Yehuda was given amongst the twelve tribes. Though all twelve sons were chosen, Yehuda was given dominion over them and told that others would bow down before him.

²¹ Radak agrees but suggests that it was this very wickedness which led Yitzchak to the realization that he needed the blessing. See approach above.

²² Though Shadal and R. D"Z Hoffmann do not address the question, they would probably also suggest that Rivka never shared the prophecy. If she had, it would be strange that Yitzchak would suggest that the brothers share the blessing but specifically give Esav dominion. Moreover, the fact that the prophecy stated that the babies were to become two separate nations should have made him realize that both could not have inherited the legacy of Avraham.

²³ In selling the birthright, Esav had simply agreed to allow Yaakov to be guardian of the house and live in Israel after their father's death. Yitzchak did not need to know of this, and, in fact, Esav, on his own, kept his side of the bargain when he moved to Seir.

²⁴ See above that R. Hirsch also suggests that Rivka might have simply been attempting to get Yaakov to realize how gullible he was, so that he could be convinced that he had been deceived by Esav into thinking that he was righteous.

²⁵ R. Hirsch asserts that only Rivka, who grew up in a house of trickery and materialism, realized this. The more sheltered and innocent Yitzchak did not see the dangers of a purely physical component to the leadership.

²⁶ He claims that having grown up in Lavan's house made it easier for Rivka to see through Esav's deceptions. Cf. R. Hirsch in above note.

²⁷ Radak combines this approach with the one below which suggests that Yaakov was planning on giving Esav only the material blessing while Yaakov was to inherit the spiritual one.

²⁸ Radak suggests that she was upset since she thought that only Esav was to be blessed. Had she realized, though, that Yaakov was to inherit the blessing of Avraham, she might not have acted.

