

לע"נ
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Between Prophecy and Oracle

TO-L'DOT

Rivka, hitherto infertile, became pregnant. Suffering acute pain, "she went to inquire of the Lord" [VATEILECH LIDROSH ET HASHEM] (B'reishit 25:22). The explanation she received was that she was carrying twins who were contending in her womb. They were destined to do so long into the future:

Two nations are inside your womb;

Two peoples are to part from you.

One people will be stronger than the other,

And the older will serve the younger [V'RAV YA'AVOD TSA'IR]. (25:23)

Eventually the twins are born - first Eisav, then (his hand grasping his brother's heel) Yaakov. Mindful of the prophecy she has received, Rivka favours the younger son, Yaakov. Years later, she persuades him to cover himself in Eisav's clothes and take the blessing Yitzchak intended to give his elder son. One verse of that blessing was "May nations serve you; may nations bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you" (27:29). The prophecy has been fulfilled. Yitzchak's blessing can surely mean nothing less than what was disclosed to Rivka before either child was born, namely that "the older will serve the younger". The story has apparently reached closure, or so, at this stage, it seems.

But biblical narrative is not what it seems. Two events follow which subvert all that we had been led to expect. The first happens when Eisav arrives and discovers that Yaakov has cheated him out of his blessing. Moved by his anguish, Yitzchak gives him a benediction, one of whose clauses is:

By your sword you will live,

And your brother you will serve;

But when you break loose,

You will throw off his yoke from your neck. (27:40)

This is not what we had anticipated. The older will not serve the younger in perpetuity.

The second scene, many years later, occurs when the brothers meet after a long estrangement. Yaakov is terrified of the encounter. He had fled from home years earlier because Eisav had vowed to kill him. Only after a long series of preparations and a lonely wrestling match at night is he

able to face Eisav with some composure. He bows down to him seven times. Seven times he calls him "my lord". Five times he refers to himself as "your servant". The roles have been reversed. Eisav does not become the servant of Yaakov. Instead, Yaakov speaks of himself as the servant of Eisav. But this cannot be. The words heard by Rivka when "she went to inquire of the Lord" suggested precisely the opposite, that "the older will serve the younger". We are faced with cognitive dissonance.

More precisely, we have here an example of one of the most remarkable of all the Torah's narrative devices - the power of the future to transform our understanding of the past. This is the essence of Midrash. New situations retrospectively disclose new meanings in the text. The present is never fully determined by the present. Sometimes it is only later that we understand now.

This is the significance of the great revelation of God to Moshe in Sh'mot 33:33, where God says that only His back may be seen - meaning that His Presence can be seen only when we look back at the past; it can never be known or predicted in advance. The indeterminacy of meaning at any given moment is what gives the biblical text its openness to ongoing interpretation.

We now see that this was not an idea invented by the Sages. It already exists in the Torah itself. The words Rivka heard - as will now become clear - seemed to mean one thing at the time. It later transpires that they meant something else.

The words V'RAV YA'AVOD TSA'IR seem simple: "the older will serve the younger." Returning to them in the light of subsequent events, though, we discover that they are anything but clear. They contain multiple ambiguities.

The first (noted by Radak and R. Yosef ibn Kaspi) is that the word ET, signalling the object of the verb, is missing. Normally in biblical Hebrew the subject precedes, and the object follows, the verb, but not always. In Iyov 14:19 for example, the words AVANIM SHACHAKU MAYIM mean "water wears away stones", not "stones wear away water." Thus the phrase might mean "the older shall serve the younger" but it might also mean "the younger shall serve the older". To be sure, the latter would be poetic Hebrew rather than conventional prose style, but that is what this utterance is - a poem.

The second is that RAV and TSA'IR are not opposites, a fact disguised by the English translation of RAV as "older". The opposite of TSA'IR ("younger") is BACHIR ("older" or "firstborn"). RAV does not mean

"older". It means "great" or possibly "chief". This linking together of two terms as if they were polar opposites, which they are not - the opposites would have been BACHIR/TSA'IR or RAV/M'AT - further destabilises the meaning. Who was the RAV? The elder? The leader? The chief? The more numerous? The word might mean any of these things.

The third - not part of the text but of later tradition - is the musical notation. The normal way of notating these three words would be MERCHA-TIPCHA-SOF PASUK. This would support the reading, "the older shall serve the younger." In fact, however, they are notated TIPCHA-MERCHA-SOF PASUK - suggesting, "the older, shall the younger serve"; in other words, "the younger shall serve the older."

A later episode adds yet another retrospective element of doubt. There is a second instance in B'reishit of the birth of twins, to Tamar. The passage is clearly reminiscent of the story of Eisav and Yaakov:

When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb. As she was in labour one child put out a hand, so the midwife took a crimson thread and tied it to his wrist, saying, "This one came out first." But he pulled his hand back and then his brother came out. She said, "How you have burst through!" So he was

named Peretz. Then his brother came out with the crimson thread on his wrist. He was named Zerach (B'reishit 38:27-30).

Who then was the elder? And what does this imply in the case of Eisav and Yaakov? These multiple ambiguities are not accidental but integral to the text. The subtlety is such, that we do not notice them at first. Only later, when the narrative does not turn out as expected, are we forced to go back and notice what at first we missed: that the words Rivka heard may mean "the older will serve the younger" or "the younger will serve the older."

A number of things now become clear. The first is that this is a rare example in the Torah of an oracle as opposed to a prophecy (this is the probable meaning of the word CHIDOT in Bamidbar 12:8, speaking about Moshe: "With him I speak mouth to mouth, openly and not in CHIDOT" - usually translated as "dark speeches" or "riddles"). Oracles - a familiar form of supernatural communication in the ancient world - were normally obscure and cryptic, unlike the normal form of Israelite prophecy. This may well be the technical meaning of the phrase "she went to inquire of the Lord" which puzzled the medieval commentators.

The second - and this is fundamental to an understanding of B'reishit - is that the future is never as straight-

forward as we are led to believe. Avraham is promised many children but is 100 years old before Yitzchak is born. The patriarchs are promised a land but do not acquire it in their lifetimes. The Jewish journey - though it has a destination - is long and has many digressions and setbacks. Will Yaakov serve or be served? We do not know. Only after a long, enigmatic struggle, alone at night, does Yaakov receive the name Yisrael meaning, "he who struggles with God and with men and prevails."

The most important message of this text is both literary and theological. The future affects our understanding of the past. We are part of a story whose last chapter has not yet been written. That rests with us, as it rested with Yaakov.

Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) How does Yaakov and Eisav's changing relationship challenge the idea of clear "winners" and "losers"?
- (2) Yaakov and Eisav both received blessings. What does that tell us about how God's plan can include more than one "truth" at once?
- (3) Rivka acted on what she believed God wanted, but did she do the right thing? How do we balance faith, trust, and taking action?

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH