The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

TO-L'DOT 5786

In our Parsha, Yitzchak's preference for his son Eisav, has always been quite intriguing and even mystifying (28:28). Why choose the violent Eisav over the tranquil Yaakov; and further, why confer upon him blessings? Moreover, how are we to explain Rivka's attempt to thwart her husband's intention and derail his objective? And finally, what happens to convince Yitzchak that Yaakov, masquerading as Eisav, still deserves his blessing - V'GAM BARUCH YIHYEH (27:33).

As one would imagine, there have been a number of different explanations to answer the above questions. Perhaps the most familiar is based, in part, upon the insight of the Netziv (B'reishit 24:65 and 27:46) and supported by Rashi (25:27), based upon the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 63:10). In this account, Yitzchak is portrayed as a luftmensch. After the intense Akeida experience, Yitzchak lived in a spiritual otherworldliness where his ability to see through Eisav's hypocrisy was impeded. Because he was clueless about Eisav's true criminal behavior, he felt his red-blooded son was deserving of his blessing. Rivka, born into a family of scheming manipulators, was not so easily fooled. She cleverly intervenes to ensure that Yaakov would receive the blessing intended for Eisav. And once Yitzchak suddenly becomes aware of the ruse, he recognizes the wisdom of his wife and finally accepts the tragic reality of Eisav's delinquency.

There is, however, another approach which takes an entirely different tact. Yitzchak was very much aware of Eisav's uncouth and offensive nature, but strangely, he felt a certain affinity with his son. The Torah characterizes Eisav as ISH SADEH, a man of the field. When Rivka first meets her future husband, she sees him... in the field. VAYEITZEI YITZCHAK LASU-ACH BASADEH (B'reishit 24:63). Indeed, Yitzchak, in our tradition, is associated with the field. Now, for Yitzchak, the field was where he communed with Gd. In the field, he was able to detect "signals of transcendence" (in Peter Berger's felicitous phrase). Our second Patriarch revealed and experienced Gd's Presence in the material. We asked why did Yitzchak love Eisav? Could it be because he was convinced that he could influence his son, prevail upon his son, to become not just a hunter in the field, but - like him - a Gd-seeker in the field.

When Yitzchak decides to give Eisav his blessing, it is with the clear intention that with "the dew of the Heaven" first and "the fatness of the land" second (27:28), Eisav would aspire to not just honor his father, but to emulate him as well. This expectation on the part of Yitzchak was not some wishful thinking. As a prophet, there is every reason to believe that he was aware of the prophecy told to Rivka during her pregnancy that both of her sons would be great nations, not that one would be evil and the other righteous. Rather, as Rashi relates, the ideal relationship between Yaakov and Eisav would be realized, millennia later, in the friendship between R' Yehuda HaNasi (Rebbi) and the Roman emperor, Antoninus. Additionally, in that prophecy, V'RAV YAAVOD TZA-IR, and the elder will serve the younger" (25:23), we see an echo of the blessing No'ach gave to his son, Yefet, the putative ancestor of Eisav, that his ultimate fulfillment can only be achieved by dwelling in the tents of his brother Sheim, the ancestor of Yaakov (B'reishit 10:27). In other words, it is only when Eisav is prepared to subject himself to the moral and spiritual ethos of Yaakov that he fulfills his true destiny. Indeed, the respective roles of Yaakov and Eisav and their unique partnership will finally come to fruition in the messianic era. Yitzchak had therefore every reason to believe that he could bring about this redemptive future much sooner.

But quite suddenly, Yitzchak is shocked to discover something he was not aware of until that instant when Eisav enters only to discover that his blessing had been coopted by his brother Yaakov. Rashi (27:36), quoting the Midrash (Tanchuma Yashan 23), recounts the conversation that took place at that moment. "Why did Yitzchak tremble? He said: 'Perhaps I sinned because I blessed the younger son before the elder.' Eisav began to cry out: ' He outwitted me these two times!' His father said to him: 'What other thing did he do to you?' Eisav said: 'He took my birthright as firstborn.' Yitzchak said: 'Over this I was distressed and trembling, lest I acted unjustly. Now I see that I indeed blessed the firstborn. [And] He shall be blessed - GAM BARUCH YIHYEH."

In this unexpected revelation, Yitzchak became aware of something much more upsetting about his son. Eisav not only sold the birthright, but as the Torah testifies (25:34), VAYIVEZ EISAV ET HAB'CHORA, and Eisav spurned the position of firstborn. What was it about the B'CHORA that Eisav so despised? As Rashi states (ad loc): "Eisav belittled the service to the Omnipresent." When Eisav inquired of Yaakov what obligations the firstborn entailed, and Yaakov told him that it would require sacrifice accompanied by prohibitions and punishments for non-com-

pliance, Eisav would have none of it. In effect, by rejecting the birthright, Eisav was choosing to be an absolute "man of the field", completely discarding - forsaking - the heaven for the earth, with no desire whatsoever to address himself - to submit himself - to a Higher Authority. Yitzchak's hope and dream about his son's reformation was shattered.

Yitzchak now understood the not-so-subtle message his wife attempted to convey when she had Yaakov dress up as Eisav. The impersonation was not only to obtain the blessing, but something far more consequential was afoot. Until that great eschatological era when V'ALU MOSHI'IM B'HAR TZIYON... And the saviors will ascend Mount Zion to judge Eisav's mount" (Ovadiya 1:21) and Eisav will repent, Yaakov will have to assume and take-up V'HAYADAYIM Y'DEI EISAV, "the hands of Eisav" in addition to his HAKOL KOL YAAKOV. Until that future moment, Yaakov will have to bear and shoulder a dual role. In addition to being the moral and religious lodestar to the world where his voice and deed would teach the wisdom of Gd, he would also have to be the builder and technocrat - Eisav's mission, and at times to even pick up the sword of Eisav and fight HaShem's battles against the "Amalek-evil" of Eisav.

Yitzchak then, with this newfound understanding of the upsetting reality of his elder son's unredeemable persona, now turns and wholeheartedly blesses his younger son and sends him forth to marry and carry on the great and sacred tradition of Avraham (28:1-4).

What important lessons may we derive from this approach to the Yitzchak/Eisav encounter? The first is to sadly see Eisav as a tragic figure: one who, for whatever reason, failed to overcome his "field" animality and rise to his ideal self as a true son of Yitzchak. Except for some periodic moments in our history when the courageous good Eisav emerged, Yaakov's elder brother remains a flawed and dangerous personality, one who must always be regarded with suspicion and watched with vigilance. And the 'Eisavs' of today are surely no different.

The second lesson we are obliged to learn from this episode is that often Plan A, that design which would ensure the realization of an immediate utopian future would have to be sidelined and postponed, and another far less ideal Plan B would have to take its place and be executed. The promise of Yaakov and Eisav living together in a joint cooperative enterprise for mankind would have to wait, perhaps centuries or millennia, but wait we will because a divine promise made will be a promise kept!