

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Sforno, a 16th-century Italian commentator, notes that Yaakov feels justified in receiving the birthright from Esav because of this very lack of close 'seeing'. Sforno writes: *"(Yaakov) saw that Esav was so totally absorbed in his futile occupation, an occupation which does not represent the task of man on earth, that he could not even identify the lentils by their name but referred to them only by their color..."* Yaakov decides that a person who does not even see the world closely enough to identify a particular pot of food does not have the skills to carry on the family line. The exchange of the birthright becomes a test that will determine if Esav has the ability to see the world complexly. He fails that test and loses the birthright.

Yaakov does not only understand the high risk of not seeing, but also the revelatory power of truly witnessing the other. As his mother tries to encourage him to dress up as his brother Esav to steal, or perhaps rightfully receive the birthright that is now his, Yaakov is concerned that through his father's close intimacy he will perceive the truth. Yaakov worries: "If my father touches me, I shall appear to him (lit: in his eyes) as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing." (Genesis 27:12).

Ramban, a 13th-century commentator from Spain, explains that Yaakov could not have been literally worried about his father seeing him. After all, Yitzhak is blind! Instead, he teaches: *"(What Yaakov really meant was) Maybe my father will touch me: [He wasn't worried that] the reason he would touch him would be to recognize him, but he said, "Maybe he will draw me close to him to kiss me or to put his hand on my face in the way that a father expresses love for his son, and he will find by touching that I am smooth."* According to Ramban, Yaakov is concerned that his father's love for his sons will cause him to quickly discover the ruse and perhaps even curse him in place of a blessing.

In the end, Yitzhak will also not fully see. The birthright will go to Yaakov, and a perceived disunity between the two brothers will cause Yaakov to flee. Yitzhak will not live to see his sons reconcile.

The more we lose this ability to see, the more chaos we will encounter. May our Jewish response to the tragedy in Pittsburgh include a recommitment to a deep seeing of others. May our pain slowly transform into a deep love of humanity, for this is the force that will repair the world.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center for Conservative Judaism

Agron Street 8 • P. O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265
Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Toledot

November 10, 2018 | 2 Kislev 5779

Annual | Genesis 25:19-28:9 (Etz Hayim p. 146-161; Hertz p. 93-101)
Triennial Genesis 27:28-28:9 (Etz Hayim p. 157-161; Hertz p. 99-101)
Haftarah | Malachi 1:1-2:7 (Etz Hayim p. 162-165; Hertz p. 102-105)

D'var Torah: To Lift One's Eyes

Tyler Dratch, Conservative Yeshiva & Hebrew College Rabbinical Student

"I lift my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come from? My help will come from God, creator of the heavens and the earth. (Psalms 121:1-2)

What does it mean to "lift one's eyes?" A number of medical studies now tell us about the damage we are collectively doing to our backs and necks by spending so much time looking down at iPhones and tablets. But there is so much more we are missing when we do not look up.

When the psalmist looks up, they are looking, deeply and carefully, for God. This kind of looking enables one to see the divinity present in other people and the world in general. It brings with it the potential for redemption. This is not how the Pittsburgh shooter saw. By the time he entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, he was blinded by propaganda and rage, and blind to the humanity of people engaged in worship. When we fail to see the humanity of others, we power a destructive force that distances us from God, and disorders the world. As Jews, it is thus our obligation to look for God and to see others and the world, in their full complexity.

In our parashah, the ability and inability to see creates the central family crisis between Yitzhak, Rivka and their children Esav and Yaakov. Esav is famished after a long day of hunting in the field. When he asks Yaakov to share some of his food with him, he can only identify it as 'red stuff', not exactly sure what he is actually asking for. Yaakov decides that he will give Esav some of his lentil stew in exchange for the family birthright blessing.

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

D'var Haftarah: A New Paradigm

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The meaning of the identifications found at the beginning of prophetic messages is often unclear to us. Was “Malachi” the name of the prophet or was he simply as the word “*malachi*” implies - a “divine messenger”? And when it says that God’s message was delivered “*b’yad Malachi*”, which literally means “in the hands of Malachi”, does it mean that the prophecy is God’s words or those of Malachi inspired by God? In rabbinic times, this curious phrase, “*b’yad Malachi*”, prompted an even deeper and more extensive debate over the nature of prophecy itself - whether its divine source makes it timeless, or whether its human speaker makes it a product of its historical milieu. The following Midrash takes up this question:

Said Rabbi Yitzhak: ‘Even that which the prophets in the future will prophesy, all of them were received from Mount Sinai, as was written: ‘Those who are standing here with us this day’ (Deut. 29:14) – this refers to those who were already created, those who are [already] in the world; ‘and those who are not with us here this day’ (Ibid.) – this refers to those who will be created in the future and do not as yet exist (einenu)... And so it says: ‘A pronouncement: The word of the Lord to Israel through the hands of Malachi’ (1:1) – It does not say ‘by Malachi’ but rather ‘through the hands of Malachi’, to teach you, that the prophecy was already given to the prophet at Sinai.’ (adapted Tanhuma Yitro 11)

For Rabbi Yitzhak, all prophetic messages derive from the “original” and “ultimate” prophetic event - Mount Sinai - and thus predate the later prophets. But Rabbi Yitzhak says something even more radical. Unlike the Torah given at Sinai, these “later” prophecies were not passed, as per Pirkei Avot, from Moshe to Yehoshua to the Elders, etc. No, each prophet’s message was given to that prophet at Sinai.

What could this mean? Maybe Rabbi Yithak’s view reflects the famous midrash that all Jewish souls that would ever enter the world were present at Sinai. If so, then each prophet’s soul could have received it’s particular prophecy. But Rabbi Yithak’s might have meant something else entirely, namely that Sinai embedded prophecy into the fabric of the universe, secret messages waiting to be revealed by particular people in the future. This conception of prophecy more closely parallels how we think about knowledge and wisdom. The genius does not bring some new truth into the world. Rather, the genius causes a paradigm shift by revealing something that was always there, but in a way others can understand.

No matter how one reads Rabbi Yitzhak, the implications are staggering. Pirkei Avot sees God’s message as legitimate only if it has been passed down through legitimate hands. But for Rabbi Yitzhak, a prophet’s message, or a sage’s wisdom, can come seemingly out of nowhere. (See Avraham Yehoshua Heschel’s Torah Min Hashamayim vol. 2 pp. 259-61)

The chain of transmission approach produces stability, but the second approach makes it possible for the kinds of deeper changes needed when circumstances change radically or particular lines of thinking have run their course. The late First Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Avraham Kook is a prime example of the Rabbi Yitzhak’s approach. The challenge, and often the tragedy, is that we may only know after the fact whether a radical new ideal is correct.

Parashat Toledot Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this parashah we get a glimpse of the life of Yitzhak, our least storied patriarch, and his wife Rivka. Here is also where the foundation of the relationship between their sons, the twin brothers Esav and Yaakov, is laid - a relationship that is viewed as a foreshadowing of some of Jewish history.

1) The opening of our parashah follows the closing paragraph of the previous one. There we are told that “these are the begettings of Yishmael son of Avraham, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s maid, bore to Avraham” (25:12). Ours opens with “these are the begettings of Yitzhak, son of Avraham. Avraham begot Yitzhak” (25:19). What are the differences between the descriptions? Who is missing from Yitzhak’s description? Do you have any explanation for the omission?

2) The similarities between Yitzhak and Avraham highlight the differences between them. Both had wives that did not conceive, Avraham says to God ‘what will you give me...you did not give me a seed...’ (15:2-3) and Yitzhak entreats God on behalf of his wife (25:21). What is the difference in approach? Who is at the center in each case? What do the differences teach you about each person?

3) Rivka gives birth to twins. Esav, the first born, is hairy and grows up to be a hunter and a man of the field. Yaakov is smooth and a tent dweller. Returning from the field one day, Esau asks Yaakov for the soup he has prepared. Yaakov asks him to sell the firstborn right and gives him soup. Esau agrees and does not seem to change his mind even after he eats (25:29-34). What do you think was included in that right that did not interest Esav?

4) Yitzhak settles in Grar, on the coastal plain. Apparently, he had presented Rivka as his sister, but the king realizes the lie and confronts him. Yitzhak explains he feared being killed because of her (26:7-11). The king responds by decreeing that no one is allowed to touch them. However, as Yitzhak becomes economically successful, they ask him to leave (26:16). What picture emerges of Yitzhak’s life, and of the people of Grar (and, perhaps, what people can tolerate)?

5) Yitzhak loses his eyesight as he grows old. He decides to bless Esav ‘before I die’ (27:4). Why do you think that Yitzhak had a sense of impending death (he will

live for many more years)? If you read 27:1-40 (the story of the stolen blessing) try to notice where Yitzhak's blindness makes the story possible, and whether the blindness affected more than just his ability to see physically.