

The Path To Follow

Toldot

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The Tzaddik Perishes, But No Man Takes it to Heart

It is written, "Jacob cooked a stew, and Esau came in from the field and was exhausted. Esau said to Jacob, 'Please pour some of that very red stuff into me, for I am exhausted.' ... Jacob said, 'Sell me, as of this day, your birthright.' Esau said, 'Look, I am going to die, so why do I need this birthright?' ... He swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. ... [Esau] ate and drank, and arose and left. Thus Esau despised the birthright" (Bereshith 25:29-34).

Let us consider a few things that require further explanation in the story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob: Esau returns from the field exhausted and starving, and he asks Jacob to give him something to eat. Why does he ask in such an odd way, requesting that Jacob feed him as one feeds an animal? As Rashi explains on verse 30, Esau said: "I will open my mouth, and you will pour a lot into it." Why did he not just eat it by himself?

We also need to understand why our father Jacob, the chosen one among the Patriarchs, decided to act with such indifference towards his twin brother, his closest relative, when he was starving. Instead of demonstrating kindness to Esau, he took advantage of his weakened state to take his birthright by means of a coerced sale. Furthermore, Jacob should have been afraid that Esau would die of hunger while they were still agreeing on the details of the sale, as we read in the story of Nachum Ish Gamzu: As he was traveling on the road with three donkeys loaded with food, a poor man stopped him and asked for something to eat. While still unloading food from his donkey, the poor man died of hunger (Taanith 21a). That said, why was Jacob not afraid that the same thing would happen to Esau?

Furthermore, why was Jacob so attached to Esau's birthright and tried to buy it from him? Commenting on verse 31, Rashi states that Jacob thought: "Since the sacrificial service is performed by the firstborn, this evildoer is not fit to perform the sacrificial service for G-d." It still remains difficult to understand Jacob's reasoning, for it is clear that Esau was wicked, meaning that he would never have brought offerings to G-d. Furthermore, Esau committed five sins on that day, including the sin of denying G-d (Bava Batra 16b)! Since it is clear that he even denied G-d, he would never have brought Him offerings. Therefore what did it matter if Esau was designated as the firstborn, since it meant nothing to him? In the end, Jacob and his descendants would be the ones standing before G-d to serve Him and bring Him sacrifices and offerings.

We can understand all this by the words of our Sages, which Rashi cites here: "Avraham died on that day in order to prevent him from seeing Esau, his grandson, taking to an evil path, for that would not be 'the good old age' which G-d had promised him. It is for this reason that G-d shortened his lifespan by five years.... Jacob cooked lentils as a first-meal for mourners." Now five years of a tzaddik's life represent an entire world, and we have no idea of the eternal benefit that Creation draws from each instant in which a tzaddik lives on earth. This applies even more to the life of Abraham our father, for each day and at every moment he radiated and spread faith in G-d within the world, laying the foundations of faith in the existence of G-d and in His guiding hand. It is certain that with five more years, he would have done incredible things to further increase faith in the world. The tzaddik also draws an immense benefit from each moment in which he lives and serves G-d here in the world of action. As G-d answered King David when he asked Him to take him out of the world on the eve of Shabbat, not during Shabbat itself (which was His

intention): "Better to Me is one day in which you sit and engage in [Torah] learning than the thousand offerings which your son Solomon is destined to offer before Me on the altar" (Shabbat 30a). Despite all this, G-d wanted to keep His promise to Abraham and allow him to live out his final days in joy. He therefore shortened his lifespan by five years in order to prevent him from seeing his grandson Esau taking to the wrong path.

We need to understand just how wicked Esau was: He became such a sinner that it was preferable for Abraham to forgo five years of his life rather than to be disturbed by the sight of his grandson distancing himself from G-d's ways, denying his faith, the resurrection of the dead, and so on. As we read in the Gemara, "Bad upbringing in a man's house is worse than the war of Gog and Magog" (Berachot 7b). Furthermore, Esau's deeds and wickedness led to Abraham's death five years too early, and all the detrimental effects which this had on the world and his personal development must be imputed to him.

Abraham died and everyone was in mourning, grieving over his death. It was now time for people to do some soul-searching, to examine their deeds. At that point everyone related to the deceased had sudden bursts of repentance, especially since Abraham was a great man. The greater the loss, the greater the interest in knowing who can replace him. Yet the wicked Esau, who was the cause of all this, went out into the field to quench his desires on that very same day. At that point he fulfilled the verse, "The tzaddik perishes, but no man takes it to heart" (Isaiah 57:1). Not only that, but when he returned and saw Jacob preparing lentils for the meal of mourners – whose objective is to awaken in the mourner's heart the realization that the wheel turns – Esau's soul was unmoved. On the contrary, he rejected from his mind any thought of mourning and had no desire to think about his mission or the day of his death. All that mattered to him was how to quench his desires and eat. In fact he asked Jacob, "Please pour some of that very red stuff into me." He did not even want to make visual contact with the lentils, nor did he mention them by name, since to him it was just red food. Esau also did not want to let himself be reminded or think about what the lentils alluded to, which is why he asked someone else to cram the food into him, a very unusual way of eating! Let the lentils reach his stomach alone, not his mind or thoughts.

When Jacob saw Esau's indifference to the mourning of their family, not sharing in their pain, but rather disdain for his grandfather and father, he responded in kind by showing indifference to his hunger, refusing to feed him "for free." Jacob thought, "This evildoer, who ridicules everything that's holy, isn't worthy of being called the firstborn, whose holiness is tied to being the 'first born.'" Even if it was clear that this rebel, this heretic, would not stand before G-d to bring Him offerings, the fact that he was designated as the firstborn – which in principle implied the offering of sacrifices – was a great sacrilege. Stripping him of the birthright would therefore be a good thing. Hence Jacob attempted to take it from him in exchange for a meal of lentils. It was also for this reason that Jacob was not afraid that Esau would die of hunger, for if Esau really felt that he would faint, he would have eaten anything to regain his strength. However he stubbornly insisted on gulping down his food, like an animal, for he sought to ridicule the mourning of the tzaddik. Jacob therefore concluded that Esau was not in danger, and as mentioned earlier he demonstrated his indifference towards Esau by stripping him of his birthright, since he was not worthy of being shown kindness or benefiting from being the firstborn.

Renouncing the Birthright

It is written, “Jacob said, ‘Sell me, as of this day, your birthright’ ” (Bereshith 25:31).

The Rivash expresses his surprise here: “We cannot acquire something which does not yet exist, so how could Esau have sold him his birthright?” (Responsa Rivash 221).

Rabbi Aryeh Leib Heller (Ketot HaChoshen 278) answers this question according to a statement in the Gemara: “A man is free to renounce beforehand an inheritance that is likely to accrue to him from another source. This agrees with a dictum of Rabba: If anyone says, ‘I do not want a decree of this kind from the Sages,’ his desire is granted” (Ketubot 83a).

According to this explanation, when Esau told Jacob, “I am going to die, so why do I need this birthright,” it was considered as a renunciation before the fact. Esau renounced the birthright, not wanting a decree of this kind from the Sages. Hence the birthright went to Jacob in all fairness.

The Offering of Sacrifices Only

It is written, “Jacob said, ‘Sell me, as of this day, your birthright’ ” (Bereshith 25:31).

What does “as of this day” mean?

Rabbi Chaim Tzvi of Kalish Zatzal answers this question in the following way:

There are two advantages to possessing the birthright: The first is that the firstborn assumes responsibility for offering sacrifices in the Temple, and the second is that the firstborn has a double portion of the inheritance.

Therefore when Jacob acquired the birthright, his only intention was to assume responsibility for offering sacrifices, not to have a double portion of the inheritance. This is the simple meaning of the expression, “Sell me, as of this day, your birthright” – regarding the birthright, the only thing I ask for is what applies today: The offering of sacrifices. All that the birthright deals with in the future, the inheritance, I leave to you.

Step by Step

It is written, “The man became great, and kept becoming greater until he was very great” (Bereshith 26:13).

The gaon Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer, author of Kaf HaChaim, comments on this repetitive expression regarding Isaac’s wealth. He writes the following:

We have learned that the greatness which comes to a man will only endure if it comes to him progressively, one step after another, little by little. When it comes to him all at once, and in one fell swoop he finds himself above others – be it in regards to money, honor, or power – such greatness will not endure, be it because of jealousy or for other reasons.

This is what the verse is referring to when it says, “The man became great, and kept becoming greater until he was very great.” It means that our father Isaac became great and his greatness endured because it did not come to him all at once, but rather progressively, one step after another. Hence Isaac merited for his greatness to be permanent, “until he was very great.”

We Harm Everyone

It is written, “If you harm us...! Just as we have not touched you, and just as we have done only good with you, and sent you away in peace” (Bereshith 26:29).

The Midrash recounts the following parable: “A wild lion killed [an animal], and a bone became stuck in its throat. It then proclaimed, ‘I will reward anyone who removes it.’ An Egyptian heron, which has a long beak, came and pulled it out and demanded a reward. ‘Go,’ [the lion] replied, ‘you will be able to boast that you entered the lion’s mouth in peace and emerged in peace’ ” (Bereshith Rabba 64:10).

Thus Avimelech said to Isaac, “We have been very kind to you by sending you away in peace, for we normally harm everyone who comes before us.”

Chava

It is written, “Isaac prayed l’Hashem lenochach ishto [to Hashem for his wife], for she was barren” (Bereshith 25:21).

The last letters of each word in the expression l’Hashem lenochach ishto form the name Chava (Eve). This alludes to the fact that Rebecca rectified the sin of Eve, for she was her reincarnation. This hints to us that just as Eve carried this name because she was the mother of all the living, likewise Rebecca merited this name because she was the mother of Jacob, whose descendants received the Torah, and thanks to whom the world endures.

– Yismach Israel

In the Light of the Parsha

The Voice of Torah Study and the Shira of the Angels

It is written, “The voice is the voice of Jacob” (Bereshith 27:22).

By way of allusion, we may explain the double expression (“the voice is the voice of Jacob”) according to what the book Mishpat Tzedek states on the remark: “If Israel only knew why G-d visits their sins upon them more than those of the other nations, they would realize that He does not collect even a hundredth of His due” (Zohar III:66a).

Mishpat Tzedek states that from our holy books (see Be’er Mayim Chaim, Bereshith 1:1, Note 6), we know that all the upper and lower worlds are in the hands of man. If a Jew studies Torah and serves Hashem, He will shower him with abundance that he can transfer to the worlds that depend on him, giving angels the strength to recite their shira. Yet when Jews neglect Torah study and the service of Hashem, the angels cannot recite the shira and the worlds do not receive the outpouring of abundance which they need. If the Jewish people sin, this damages all the worlds, which is why it is such a serious thing.

Consequently, from here we learn that when “the voice of Jacob” is heard in this world, it also awakens the voice of the angels, who can then recite the shira. This allows us to understand the double expression, “The voice is the voice of Jacob,” a reference to “the voice of Jacob” in the Torah which Jews study in this world, and “the voice of Jacob” on high, for the voice of Jacob gives angels the strength to recite the shira before Hashem.

One Bed for Another

A thousand students were sitting and learning Torah in the great hall of the Ponevezh yeshiva in Bnei Brak, under the direction of the gaon Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman Zatzal, the Rosh Yeshiva. A young man arrived from Switzerland and asked to be accepted as a student, but the directors of the yeshiva could not accept him because there was absolutely no extra space.

The young man was fully aware that Eretz Israel was the place where he could grow in the study of Torah, and his desire was to be admitted into this giant fortress of Torah. The refusal by the directors did not discourage him, and he asked to speak with the Rebbetzin of the Rosh Yeshiva.

The request was laughable, for everyone knew that the Rebbetzin had absolutely no influence on the enrollment of new students into the yeshiva. Yet because they felt sorry for him, he was allowed to meet with her.

When he entered the Rebbetzin's home, the young man took a letter out of his pocket and handed it to her. She read it, then told the directors and the young man to follow her to see "the Rav" – the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponevezh.

As he usually did, the Rav welcomed them warmly. Then, immediately after reading the letter, he approached the young man and embraced him. He kissed him on the forehead and then proclaimed for all to hear: "You are accepted as a student in the Ponevezh yeshiva."

The directors could see that there was a connection between the letter and the young man's acceptance into the yeshiva, but nobody knew what the letter contained.

Later on, the Rav explained everything.

A Far-Sighted View

When the young man was much younger, his parents traveled each year to a holiday resort in Switzerland. In the winter of 5715, the Rav fell ill and had to undergo a serious and complex operation. His doctors and relatives advised him to take a break from the yoke of the yeshiva, his exhaustive workload, and the multitude of visitors that he received, saying that it was better for him to travel to Switzerland and rest.

The Rav and his wife traveled to the holiday resort in question, but upon arriving they learned that their hotel was almost completely booked, the only available room being on the third floor. Because of the Rav's health, however, they could not use that room. The hotel owner, who was honored by the presence of the Rav in his establishment, made great efforts to switch the Rav's room with someone staying on the first floor.

That year, the young man had traveled to the hotel with only his mother, and they booked, as they did every year, a room on the first floor. The hotel owner tried his luck: Perhaps this woman would agree to switch rooms with the Rav? He started discussing things with her, mentioning the greatness of the Ponevezh Rav in Torah. The woman agreed to the switch, but asked the hotel owner to also obtain the permission of her young son. Was he also prepared to forgo the comfort of the first floor and walk up two extra flights of stairs?

The conversation between the boy and the hotel owner went as follows:

"Would it be alright with you to switch rooms with the Rav of Ponevezh, who has trouble walking because he just had a serious operation?"

"Absolutely, I agree," said the boy.

Half an hour later, the Rebbetzin stood at the door of their third-floor room, profusely thanking the woman for having given up her room. The Rebbetzin added that when she would be on the first floor, the Rav would like to personally thank her for the great favor which she was doing for him.

The woman said to the Rebbetzin, "Actually, my young son deserves credit as well, for he also agreed to switch rooms with the Rosh Yeshiva."

The Rebbetzin then spoke to the boy and covered him with thanks for having given up the comfort of a room on the first floor. She offered to buy him a chocolate bar to thank him for agreeing to walk up the two extra flights of stairs.

"Thank you very much Rebbetzin, but I don't need it!"

"Perhaps you would like a new toy that I can buy you in town, where I will be spending the day?"

"Thank you very much Rebbetzin, but I don't need that either."

"All the same," insisted the Rebbetzin, "let me get you something as a token of appreciation!"

The boy thought for a moment, and then said: "Just as I gave my bed to the Rav, I hope that when the time comes and I want to study at the Ponevezh yeshiva, the Rav will also give me a bed!"

The Rebbetzin marvelled at the boy! What a far-sighted view he had!

On the spot, the Rebbetzin took out a sheet of paper and wrote the following words on it:

When the young [boy's name] arrives at the Ponevezh yeshiva, he will immediately be given a bed.

She signed her name in the margin and then proceeded downstairs to the Rav's room, at which point he also signed it to express his complete agreement.

The boy's mother safeguarded this letter for years, and when the time came for her son to leave for Eretz Israel, she gave it to him. She confidently told him to hand it to the directors as soon as he arrived at the Ponevezh yeshiva, and he would be accepted without delay.

That was the secret of the letter!

Guard Your Tongue!

Rechilut Behind the Subject's Back

It is forbidden to engage in Rechilut [talebearing], even if the information is completely true. It is also Rechilut if the information is said in the presence of the subject or not, and even if the speaker feels comfortable relating the information in front of the subject. How much more forbidden is it to be brazen enough to speak Rechilut in front of the subject ("you said this about him," "you did this against him"), which is a much graver transgression.

It is written, “Vayikra [And he called] his name Jacob” (Bereshith 25:26).

Who called his name Jacob?

According to the Ohr HaChaim, the term vayikra refers to the Holy One, blessed be He, Who personally named the newborn child. Other commentators believe that Jacob’s name was given to him by his grandfather Abraham. For Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, the identity of the name-giver has no particular importance.

The situation is entirely different for Esau, whose name was given to him by the people, as clearly evidenced by the expression: “They called his name Esau” (Bereshith 25:25). In other words, everyone recognized his character and specific traits, and thus his name was in accordance with his deeds and characteristics.

The name given to a child at the time of his circumcision constitutes somewhat of a spark of Ruach HaKodesh, a spark that manifests itself for a few moments in the hearts of the parents when they decide upon the name that will accompany their child for his entire life.

(It is said that the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael Alter, was once asked by one of his chassidim to choose a name for his newborn son. With surprise accompanied by a smile, the Rebbe replied: “The little Ruach HaKodesh that you have, you want to give it to me?”)

Influencing a Person’s Life

In ancient texts we find, “Tell me your name, and I will tell you who you are.” A person’s name encapsulates his personality, virtues, and potential, as well as the role assigned to him in this world.

After 120 years on earth, when a man arrives before the Celestial Court, he will be asked to present himself by name. Hence the famous custom, at the end of Shimoni Esrei (before saying Yiheyu le’ratzon imrei phi [“May the words of my mouth”]), of reciting a verse whose first and last letter are the same as the first and last letter of the person’s name. This is a segula for not forgetting one’s name before the Celestial Court.

At a somewhat deeper spiritual level, we find that a person’s life unfolds according to the letters that form his name, especially in light of the possible combinations of these letters. A person’s name can influence his destiny and future for good or bad, as emerges from the Zohar: “[T]he name is of great significance and potency, and the combination of letters with one another works either for good or bad. Connected with this mystery is the combination of the letters of the holy Names, and even the letters in themselves can be made to reveal supreme mysteries” (Zohar II:179b).

The Midrash also warns us in this regard by stating: “We should always be extremely careful about the names we give to our children, for sometimes a name can have a good or bad influence, as we see with the spies” (Tanchuma, Ha’azinu 7).

This warning and advice are quite useful for someone who is well-versed in the deep mysteries of the holy letters, someone who knows how to combine the letters of a name in a positive way. Yet what can be said for us, we who have no knowledge of the secrets of the letters? How should we choose names for our children?

The holy Tanna Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel already looked into this question and said, “The Ancients, because they could avail themselves of Ruach HaKodesh, named themselves in reference to [forthcoming] events. Yet we, who cannot avail ourselves of Ruach HaKodesh, are named after our fathers” (Bereshith Rabba 37:7).

This means that we name our children after our holy ancestors, having faith that just as the names of the Ancients helped them to succeed, these holy names will also help our children to succeed in life.

A Segula for Longevity

As we have said, a person’s name testifies to his character and inner nature. In the Gemara we find that Rabbi Meir would commonly examine each person according to his name. After a certain incident, Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yossi were also careful to evaluate each person according to his name, just like Rabbi Meir. From this comes the custom of naming a child after one of his holy ancestors, people who were righteous, pious, and holy.

In halachic literature, we find several customs in regards to this issue. For example, in Chochmat HaNefesh the Rokeach cites his teacher, Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid, who in his testament warns against naming one’s son Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, or even Moshe, for otherwise he may die, fall ill, lose his mind, or other things of this nature. However the book Brit Avoth believes that what he meant is that one must not give his three sons the names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, although he does not know if it means that these names must not be given in succession, meaning one after the other. Whatever the case, in Responsa Minchat Yitzchak we find that if a person does not heed this warning, then of him it is said: “Hashem protects the simple” (Tehillim 116:6).

The book Brit Olam discusses the custom of not naming one’s son after oneself. It also mentions a custom practiced by the Sephardim of Jerusalem, who regard it as a segula for longevity for a father to name his son after himself. This custom is also cited in the book Even Sapir, which states that in Yemen, when a man has had sons who died in their youth, it is considered a segula to name his next son after himself.

An extraordinary story is told about Rabbi Yaakov of Lissa, the author of Netivot HaMishpat, who carried the name of his father while his father was still alive. After Rabbi Yaakov was born and it came time for his circumcision, his father, who was known for his great diligence in Torah learning, was completely immersed in a difficult sugia. When the mohel reached the words, “His name in Israel shall be,” his father believed that he was being asked for his own name, and so he said “Yaakov.”

Each time that the author of Netivot HaMishpat was called up to the Torah, and the shamash summoned “Rabbi Yaakov ben Yaakov,” the congregants tried hard to understand how this had happened. They were then told this unusual story regarding the great diligence of Rabbi Yaakov’s father.