

I spoke briefly last week about Isaac, and how he recovered from trauma by being in loving relationship; seeking out his banished brother and connecting with his wife, Rivka.

In this week's parasha, Toldot, Yitzhak and Rivka become parents to twins, Yaakov and Esav. For those who need a refresher on the narrative, Esav is born first, Yaakov's hand clasped around his ankle. They grow up displaying two different temperaments – Esav the hunter, Yaakov staying close to home. Yitzhak appears to favor Esav, Rivka to favor Yaakov.

Near the end of Chapter 25 of Genesis, Esav comes in after a failed hunting expedition to find Yaakov making a lentil stew. He demands some of the stew. Yaakov demands Esav's birthright in return.

Now the *bechora*, the right of the first born, means not only the double portion of the family's estate, but as many commentators point out, the responsibilities of carrying on the family name, and making sacrifices on behalf of the family. So Yaakov's demand can be read plainly as opportunistic, taking advantage of Esav's desperate hunger for material advancement, or as our sages have preferred to read it, as a gambit for greater responsibility. Likely both. In any case, Esav acquiesces.

Later in the parashah, in Chapter 27, as Yitzhak has aged, he calls Esav to him, telling him to go hunt him some meet and come back to receive his deathbed blessing. Rivka hears of this plan and intervenes, killing and preparing a lamb to feed Yitzhak and disguising Yaakov as Esau, so that Yaakov will receive the blessing designated for the firstborn.

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So Yaakov stands before his father as his father intones a blessing that he intends for his firstborn, Esav. “May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, Abundance of new grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow to you; Be master over your brothers, And let your mother’s sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you, blessed they who bless you.”

As soon as Yaakov receives the blessing and leaves, Esav arrives with the game he had hunted, expecting his blessing. His father, Yitzhak, in verse 33, is “seized with a violent trembling,” as he realizes that he has been deceived, and as he put it, “I blessed him, he must remain blessed!”

Esav bursts into tears, and must implore his father multiple times, “bless me, too! Father!” before Yitzhak is able to find words of blessing to offer him.

This moment just slays me: the father helpless to the entreaties of favored son, sobbing before him – baffled about how to bless him when he has already given away his blessing.

In Torah study yesterday, we noted the many questions this episode raises about the nature of blessing: How can a blessing be stolen? Why is it that a blessing would not automatically go to its intended recipient?

And yet it is clear that everyone in the story – Yitzhak, Rivka, Yaakov and Esav – all believe that Yaakov has in fact gotten the blessing.

But further, and more troubling – why would blessings be so zero-sum? Why would a father assume that he has only one blessing to give, and why would the blessing involve one son subjugating another? Why can Isaac only think of blessings that pit his sons against each other?

To answer this question, we may have to go back two weeks of Parashiyot, to *Vayera*, when Avraham first banished Yishmael, and then bound Yitzhak on the altar as an intended sacrifice, the *akeidah*.

Traditional commentaries suggest that this experience influenced Yitzhak for the rest of his life, and in fact led him to favor Esav and be unwilling to perceive his flaws. They point to the first verse of Chapter 27, when Yitzhak calls Esav to him to tell him to go out and hunt. It opens, “When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, he called his older son Esau and said to him, “My son.” He answered, “Here I am.””

Midrash Rabbah comments that Yitzhak’s eyes were dim – for when Avraham sacrificed his son on the altar the ministering angels wept and tears dropped from their eyes into his eyes and were impressed into his eyes. . .

Another explanation – When Abraham sacrificed his son Yitzhak on the altar he sent his glance on high and beheld the divine presence.” As Nechama Liebowitz writes, the midrash suggests “...that one who came so close to the divine presence in his aspiration for purity, one who offered himself up as a sacrifice to [the One] whose seal is Truth, is no longer capable of understanding the world of falsehood.” And so he could not acknowledge Esav’s flaws.

But Avital Hochstein of Mechon Hadar offers more psychological, less mystical consequence of the *akeidah*. She writes:

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“Maybe what we have in front of us is a variation on the original Akeidah story: Esav has a father who has two children, and who has, according to Yitzhak’s understanding of the divine will, just one blessing. One son will be left behind, sacrificed. Yitzhak is a father who believes that he has to choose between his oldest and youngest sons, and maybe even between his God and his children, a father who is afraid when he is called to respond and protect by means of the saying, “My father.” He is startled at the exact moment when, as a father, he is expected to supply a solution or response, a father who can’t hear his son’s cry for order, for an arrangement that is both complex and connected. Esav cries “My father!” four times and in the end he realizes, just as his father did, that there is no answer beyond silence. He gives up and he cries.”

Perhaps Yitzhak was just doing the best he could with the trauma he had witnessed and the trauma he had experienced. Perhaps he could not imagine blessing both his sons, could not imagine blessing them equally, because it was literally beyond his capacity to imagine that possibility.

And yet, there is hope. As Arthur Waskow wrote earlier this week:

“Here for the third time we see God favoring the younger son: Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau. It happens again: Joseph and Benjamin over their elder half-brothers, Ephraim over Manasseh. They are all reversals of the official legal framework in which the older brother is supposed to inherit more property, more blessing. . . To me this seems an early set of mythic pointers toward a rough sort of social justice.

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Yaakov's supplanting of Esav's blessing hearkens all the way back to the archetypal sibling rivalry and trauma of Cain's and Abel. The legacy plays out, passed down the generations.

But there is learning, and there is healing. Cain murders his brother, and future generations manage to refrain from killing each other. Avraham banishes his firstborn son, and almost sacrifices Yitzhak. Yitzhak can barely imagine blessing both sons, and yet he gets there, pierced by Esav's cry. Yaakov, the thief of the blessing, is the one who exiles himself away at the end of the parasha, but he returns. Yaakov's son's, too, experience a sibling rivalry that sends Joseph all the way to Egypt as a slave, but when they finally reunite at the end of Genesis, they all receive blessings from their father, and the Jewish people descend from all of them, with no child kicked out of the lineage. Slowly, slowly each generation attempt to learn from the mistakes of the past, and improve on them.

Perhaps Rabbi Waskow is right, and this all militates towards a time when no child will be preferred over the other, when a time when we need not think of any kind of blessing as zero-sum. In the meantime, the spiritual work continues, of taking the blessings of our ancestors – all of the strength and all of the trauma contained therein, and trying, in each generation, to offer better blessings to our children.

May you be blessed to imagine expansive blessings.