

Maximizing our Unique Blessings

Category: Bereishis, Vayishlach

Rivkah convinced Yaakov to take Eisav's blessings, and her plan seems to have been successful. But did everything work out as planned?

Money, But No Blessing

Back in the 1970s, a Chasidic rabbi from Israel arrived in the United States to raise funds for his organizations. Among other things, he decided to organize a dinner. He succeeded in inviting important people and getting a lot of rich people interested. Ultimately, the dinner was very successful—a large and respectable crowd attended and donated very large sums of money.

However, the entertainment portion of the dinner was not exactly in accordance with halachah (Jewish law) and certainly not appropriate for a Chasidic organization.

Well, a short time after the dinner, the rabbi had a private audience with the Rebbe. After telling the Rebbe how successful the dinner was, etc., the Rebbe told him that he had heard about the kind of entertainment that was had at the dinner. The Rebbe asked the rabbi how he could have done something that was against halachah. The Rebbe said to him, “Do you think that you will succeed with such behavior?” The Rebbe sharply rebuked him and told him that he would not see any blessing from the money.

As it turned out, this rabbi would normally collect his pledges immediately and leave the United States. This time, however, there were huge sums involved, and donors wanted assurances that their donations would be tax-free. For that reason, he had to open an officially registered and legal non-profit, a process that took a lot of time. As a result, the donations raised by that dinner got stuck in the United States for several years. And even after that, the organization did not get all the money. It caused him endless aggravation, and in short, the rabbi did not see blessing in that money.

Grabbing the Dog's Ear

That brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In the beginning of Parshas Vayishlach, we read that Yaakov sent a message about his arrival to his brother Eisav on Mount Seir.

The Midrash asks: Why did Yaakov find it necessary to let him know? Seir was on the other side of the Jordan, in modern-day Petra, while Yaakov was coming from Charan, modern-day Turkey. The Midrash quotes a verse from Mishlei (Ecclesiastes) which basically says that someone who grabs a stray dog by the ear should not complain if the dog bites him. Who asked him to mess around with the dog? Similarly, why was Yaakov getting involved with Eisav?

The Zohar on our Parshah asks the same question: "Rabbi Abba said, 'Why was Yaakov motivated regarding Eisav? It would have been better if he had been quiet about him.'"

To find the answer to this question, we need to go back to the root of the feud between Yaakov and Eisav.

Which Blessing?

The saga began with the blessings from Yitzchak to his sons. Rivkah overheard that Yitzchak wanted to bless Eisav, and she immediately orchestrated an entire scheme to ensure that Yaakov received the blessings instead. When Yaakov expressed his hesitation, she promised to shoulder any blame or repercussions that might come as a result.

What was going on? Why was she so concerned about Yitzchak's blessing?

The answer is that Rivkah worried about the proper transmission of G-d's original blessing to Avraham. In Lech Lecha, G-d promised to make Avraham into a great nation and to give him the land of Israel. These blessings were passed on by Avraham to Yitzchak, and Yishmael was left out. Rivkah assumed that Yitzchak planned to give those blessings to Eisav, and - not thinking highly of Eisav - Rivkah was determined to foil his plan.

So Rivkah convinced Yaakov to disguise himself as Eisav and enter his father's

chamber so as to 'rescue' the blessings—to rescue the future of the Jewish Nation.

A Blessed Mix-Up

But when Yitzchak blessed Yaakov - believing he was Eisav - he gave him a different blessing entirely. He made no mention of the Land of Israel or of the Nation of Israel. Instead, Yitzchak gave him a material blessing: "May G-d give you of the dews of heaven and the fats of the earth... Nations shall serve you and nations shall bow to you... you will be superior to your brother." These blessings meant that their recipient will be rich and will dominate other nations as well as his brother—a very different blessing than the blessing from G-d to Avraham that Yitzchak had inherited!

Clearly, Yitzchak never intended to give Eisav the blessings of Avraham in the first place. Instead, he gave Eisav a blessing that would suit him—a material blessing. (And now Yaakov got it!)

Afterwards, when Yaakov was forced to leave Beersheva for Charan, Yitzchak called him in again and charged him to not marry a Canaanite woman. And then he gave him another blessing. "May G-d Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your number... and give to you the blessing of Avraham, to you and to your seed with you, to inherit the land of your sojourn which G-d gave to Avraham." This time, when Yitzchak intended to bless Yaakov, he gave him the blessings of Avraham.

So again, it becomes clear in hindsight that Yitzchak never intended to give Avraham's blessing to Eisav. Yitzchak knew both his sons, Yaakov and Eisav, good and well, and he knew exactly which blessing was best suited to Eisav and which to Yaakov. And yet, Yaakov still got the blessings that weren't coming to him and which he didn't even want!

Returning the Blessing

And so now, in this week's Torah portion, when Yaakov comes back to the Holy Land after an absence of 22 years, he seeks out Eisav. He approaches him in Seir so as to return the blessings to him.

That is why Yaakov tells Eisav about all the material wealth and abundance that

he had: “And I have oxen and donkeys, sheep and servants and maids.” Moreover, he decides to give all of his wealth to Eisav as a present. As Rashi says in Vayigash (46:6), Yaakov kept the wealth that he had amassed in Canaan, but he gave all of his foreign wealth to Eisav.

For the same reason, Yaakov called Eisav ‘my master’ and himself ‘your servant.’ That choice of words hearkens to the blessing he received instead of Eisav - “be superior to your brother” - and he therefore acted as if Eisav was his master and that he was the one supposed to bow to him.

And so at the end of their encounter, after they hugged and kissed and Eisav refused the gift, Yaakov insisted and said, “Please take my blessing.” Literally, he meant, ‘my gift,’ but the Midrash (Pesikta Rabasi Chap. 13) says that it referred to Yitzchak’s blessing. In other words, Yaakov Avinu said to him, “Take the blessing that Father gave me. I want to return it to you!”

Yaakov not only returned to Eisav the spiritual blessing, but returned to him the material blessing, and quite literally— Yaakov returned to Eisav everything. Why? Because he did not want to benefit from something that he didn’t deserve—as the Midrash says, “Yaakov said that foreign holdings have no blessing, and so he frittered them away.”

Don’t Jump Someone’s Blessings

The lesson from this story is clear, my friends: Every single individual has a unique physical identity and appearance, even identical twins, and every single individual has a blessing that is entirely his or hers—a blessing that no one else can take and which will be unsuitable for anyone else.

So, don’t worry about any competition out there.

Instead, remember that the blessing that G-d has given us is exclusively for us—and that it is incumbent upon us to use it and maximize the powers that we were given so as to complete our mission in this world.

Good Shabbos!