

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Reimagining a Fixed Image

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When I read Toledot, I can't help but have in mind a painting called "Jacob and Esau" by Jose de Ribera. I studied this painting while taking an art history class at the Prado Museum in Madrid many years ago. It is so vivid in my imagination that not only can I recall most of the details, I also can remember the exact location of the painting in the museum. The painting is known for its lifelike depiction of fabrics and the sheep skin on Jacob's arm used to trick his father. Having this vibrant, detailed portrayal enriches my reading of the text.

Yet having an image so fixed in mind also limits my imagination. This reflects a tension in human interaction and in the text itself. Esau and Jacob are described in sharp contrast to one another. Although having such clear differences between the brothers may have made things simple in some ways, this lack of imagination created opposition and contributed to pain and tension within the family.

Sometimes having a fixed image can limit the potential we expect from ourselves and those around us. Perhaps this is why rereading the text, if only once every year, is such an important practice. The text and the painting do not change, but the circumstances of our lives do, opening the possibilities of interpretation and imagination.

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Parashat Toledot 5776

פרשת תולדות תשע"ו



Giving Blessings on a Full Stomach

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Some stories are rich with visual imagery, while others resound with song. But it is fragrance, specifically the smell of savory food, which infuses Parashat Toledot. Food plays an essential role in several pivotal scenes. It is with a pot of lentil stew that Jacob purchases Esau's birthright, and it is with a steak dinner that he secures the senior blessing from his father. The first story is simple—Esau is famished and ready to trade away anything for a bowl of soup. But the second story is enormously complex.

Isaac's announcement that he requires Esau to hunt an animal and feed his father from the kill before blessing him is baffling. As a literary device, this delay in the action creates narrative space for the collusion between Rebecca and Jacob to transpire. While Esau is out hunting they will quickly kill two goats from the herd and feed Isaac. Rebecca and Jacob take advantage of Isaac's blindness in order to trick him into making a false blessing. True, Rebecca had received a divine oracle saying that Jacob was destined for primacy, and Jacob had after all purchased the birthright. However, it seems that old Isaac had not been filled in on these details, so he is literally and figuratively in the dark. And he is hungry, waiting for his boy to bring him dinner.

But why does Isaac need to eat meat before blessing Esau? Why can't he simply call his son in for his blessing, just as other biblical characters do? Indeed, we bless our children on Friday night before dinner, not after enjoying our meal. What is different about Isaac?

In fact, a great deal is different about Isaac. When you think of Isaac, can you imagine him smiling? Although he was named for laughter (Yitzhak="he will laugh"), few biblical characters lead a sadder life. Rivalled by his brother, nearly killed by his father, and left bereft at the death of his mother, Isaac never has it

easy. He loves Rebecca, but her initial barrenness causes them sorrow, and starting with her pregnancy there is constant strife in their home. Isaac ends up alone, betrayed by his wife, despised by his elder son (“may the days of mourning my father come soon”), and abandoned by Jacob, who takes his blessings and flees for his life. Even before the dreadful deception plays out, Isaac is not in a good state to give out blessings, and so he needs some assistance. Isaac requires a luxurious dinner of meat and wine before he can act the patriarch and transmit the blessings of Abraham.

Rabbinic literature discusses the importance of feeling sated and happy before summoning the spiritual energies needed to bless another person. A person who is hungry may not have the ability to focus intention upon the recipient and to phrase the blessing appropriately. In the Talmud (BT Bava Batra 12b) Rav Avdimi from Haifa plays on a verse from Job (11:12), which discusses the “heart” (or perhaps “hearts”) of a “hollow man.” Rav Avdimi explains that before a person eats and drinks, his or her heart is divided, but once they have eaten, they become able to focus.

While we recite blessings before eating, this is considered to be a form of permission-taking before enjoying God’s bounty. The greater obligation is to bless God *after* we have eaten in fulfillment of the verse, “you shall eat, be satisfied, and then bless the Lord. . .” (Deut. 8:10). The experience of satiety is essential to the activity of offering blessing.

The great halakhist Rabbi Yosef Karo says, “It is appropriate for one who offers blessing to be in a state of joy, as we find with Isaac.” (Beit Yosef to Orah Hayim 128). After recalling our story, Rabbi Karo gives a second biblical example from 1 Kings chapter 8. There King Solomon feeds the people, who “returned to their tents, happy and in good spirits, and they blessed the king.” There is nothing like a feast to put people in a good mood, and there is nothing like a good mood to elicit a beautiful blessing.

Looking ahead, when Joseph presents his father Jacob to Pharaoh, the king asks the patriarch for his age. Jacob gives a bitter answer: “Few and hard have been the years of my life,” and it is in this sad state that he blesses Pharaoh. (Gen 47:7-10) Remember that it was only a severe famine that brought Jacob’s sons and then the aged patriarch himself down to Egypt. I sense that even a sumptuous Egyptian feast would not have inspired him to give Pharaoh an enthusiastic blessing.

I was asked recently whether a person who has suffered the loss of a parent may offer a Shabbat blessing to his own child before the funeral. Jewish law considers a person in this painful moment to be an *onen*—exempt from all positive commandments. But may an *onen* offer such a blessing nonetheless? I did not find a prohibition, but based on the texts above I concluded that he should not do so. A blessing should come from a place of abundance and joy, not from sorrow.

Why then do parents bless their children before eating on Friday night? Shouldn’t we wait until the meal is over, or at least underway? I can answer only from personal experience. The moment when family and friends are gathered around a table to sing and feast together is a moment of exceptional joy. At the Shabbat table it feels like the divine presence is shining, causing us to well up with a spiritual satisfaction that far exceeds the pleasure of a full stomach. And so we offer blessings from the heart, right at the start of the meal.

Reading the story of Isaac and Rebecca with their divided home and hearts, it is hard not to sense the anxiety and sorrow that hang over these blessings. Indeed, the blessings are not received in a spirit of gratitude and tranquility, but of anxiety and fear. A full stomach is necessary to elicit Isaac’s blessings, but it is not adequate to ensure a blessed outcome.

When we have the privilege of offering a blessing to another person, it is our obligation to prepare ourselves to be in a state of joy at that sacred moment. Recognizing the great blessings that have nestled in our own lives, we reach out our hands and open our hearts, allowing the flow of well-being to spill out and connect us to the recipient. May all of our blessings come from a place of joy and be received with love.

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