

27 ¹ When Yitzchak was old and his eyes were too dim for seeing, he called Esav, his elder son, and said to him, My son! and he answered him, Here I am.

כֹּז א וַיְהִי כִּי־יָקַן יִצְחָק וַתִּכְהֶינּוּ עֵינָיו
מִרְאֵת וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־עֵשָׂו | בְּנֵו
הַגָּדֹל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו בְּנֵי וַיֹּאמֶר
אֵלָיו הִנְנִי:

These two verses are a highly significant introduction to the narrative that now follows.

CHAPTER 27

1 We follow the example of our Sages, as we have mentioned (above, 12:10), and do not consider it our duty to be apologists for our great ancestors, just as God's Word itself never refrains from revealing their errors and shortcomings. When Rivkah directs Ya'akov to deceive his father, Scripture states candidly: בא אחיך במרמה (below, v. 35).

R. Chanina (*Bereshis Rabbah* 67:4) comments on the events of this chapter as follows: כל מי שהוא אומר שהקב"ה וותרן הוא יתוותרון בני מעוהי, אלא מאריך רוחיה וגבי דיליה, זעקה אחת הזעיק יעקב לעשו והיכן נפרע לו בשושן הבירה שנא' ויזעק זעקה גדולה ומרה. Whoever maintains that the Holy One, blessed be He, is lax with his pious ones, that pious people are entitled to take liberties from time to time, deserves to have his innards torn out. God is long-suffering, but ultimately collects His due. Ya'akov caused Esav to break into a cry but once (*Bereshis* 27:34), and where was he punished for it? In Shushan the capital, as it says: "And he cried with a loud and bitter cry" (*Esther* 4:1).

The *Tanchuma* (ed. Buber, *Toldos* 24) states: ג' דמעות הוריד עשו אחת מימינו ואחת משמאלו ואחת נסתלקה בתוך עינו והיא האכילתם לחם דמעה ותשקמו בדמעות שלישי. "Esav shed three tears: one from his right eye, one from his left eye, and one he held back. The last one, the bitterest of them all, has salted the bread of our exile with tears and has made us taste the tears in threefold measure."

Nevertheless, if a calm, dispassionate study leads us to a conclusion that dispels much of the distress that this event engenders, we will not suppress that conclusion just so as not to appear as apologists. There still will remain much that cannot be justified, especially when measured

by the standards of a nation whose name of honor is ישורון, a nation commanded to achieve all its aims only by “straightforward” (ישר) means and to avoid all crookedness, no matter what the objective.

When we attempt to *understand* the actions of the three main actors in this event, we find *Ya'akov's* behavior to be clear and transparent. From the very outset his mother appeals to him to obey her unquestioningly (v. 8). She does not expect him to act for the sake of his own personal interest. She knows that as an איש תם he will revolt against doing such a thing. She therefore silences all objection by exercising her maternal authority and appealing to his duty to obey her. She assumes full responsibility for any injustice or negative consequences. All he needs to do is obey her. Whatever *Ya'akov* did, he did only out of obedience to his mother, and the only blame that can be assigned to him is that he should have known that the moral law sets limits even to filial obedience: one must not practice deceit, even if it is one's own mother who commands him to do so.

What, however, was Rivkah's intention? Even the worst anti-Semite and defamer of the Bible will look for reason or, if you will, shrewdness, in her actions. Indeed, the shrewder he would like to make Rivkah appear, the less will he attribute to her imbecility or childish foolishness. And yet — if all she intended to do was to direct, by guile, the father's blessing onto the head of her beloved son *Ya'akov*, what success could she possibly have expected from this stratagem? Regardless of the benefit she might have ascribed to the father's blessing, the result would inevitably have been the very opposite of what she expected.

If the father's blessing calls down God's blessing upon the head of the one who is being blessed, how could Rivkah have believed — even if she could deceive the blind and aged father — that she could deceive God with this masquerade? How could she have believed that the blessing of Avraham, which God had made conditional on the practice of צדקה ומשפט, could be obtained from God by way of trickery and deception?

Or if she had in mind some concrete advantage resulting from the paternal blessing, e.g., priority in inheritance, would not such a grant, won by deception, be a מקח טעות, null and void? After all, the deceit would inevitably be discovered. Rivkah must have known full well that, even if she succeeded in carrying out the masquerade, upon Esav's return everything would be exposed.

Moreover, how clumsy was this whole masquerade! Who but the most naive person could have been taken in by goatskins wrapped around the neck and hands?

What could she possibly have hoped to achieve with this masquerade? The answer is: *the masquerade itself! Her objective was precisely to put on an act! Only if the inevitable discovery of the truth had been part of Rivkah's calculations* does everything become clear and make sense. Only thus can we *understand* Rivkah's point of view. Although her actions cannot be completely justified, they can, under the circumstances, be excused.

We have read, as an introduction to these events, how Esav struck a double blow at his great Abrahamite mission by marrying two Hittite women. This should have opened Yitzchak's eyes to his eldest son's utter unworthiness for the task. Yet we see Yitzchak calling his eldest son, in order to bless him; that is, to appoint him as the future leader and guide of the House of Avraham. What a "hunter with his mouth" Esav must have been, and how adept at disguising himself, if — despite his way of life, which was so antithetical to the way of Avraham — he succeeded in deceiving his father and stealing his heart!

The word "נא" — הנה נא זקנתי (v. 2) — implies that Yitzchak had long ago intended to bestow the blessing on Esav, but had been dissuaded from doing so. Rivkah, apparently, had been stalling for time, telling her husband: "Wait a while; there's still plenty of time; you are not old yet" and so forth, hoping that, in the meantime, she would manage to bring about his disillusionment. But she had not succeeded.

What, then, was she to do now? *What could have been her intention? Only this: to demonstrate to Yitzchak how easily he could be deceived!* If even Ya'akov, an איש תם, could pose before him as a גיבור ציד, how much easier could Esav pose before him as an איש תם! Rivkah sought to disillusion Yitzchak through an act of deception, and in this she succeeded. As soon as he realized that he had been tricked, he was seized with terror. As the Sages put it, "he saw Gehenna open up before him" (*Tanchuma, Toldos* 11). He saw how all his life he had been deceived. Immediately, his eyes were opened; he quickly recovered and, deliberately, of his own volition, added: גם ברוך יהיה (v. 33).

ר', יהושע בן לוי, too, seems to have understood this episode in this way, as he says: לא ממה שהיתה רבקה אוהבת את יעקב יתיר מעשו עשתה את הדבר; הזה אלא אמרה לא ייעול ויטעי לה הוא סבא; *Rivkah did not do this because she*

2 He said, Lo! now, I am, after all, **ב וַיֹּאמֶר הַנְּהִינָא זְקַנְתִּי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי**
 old; I do not know the day of my **יּוֹם מוֹתִי:**
 death.

loved Ya'akov more than she loved Esav. She did it so that Esav should no longer be able to deceive his aged father" (*Bereshis Rabbah* 65:3).

The actions of Yitzchak, too, become clearer, when we examine the nature of the blessing he wished to confer upon Esav. Esav himself had never expected that Yitzchak would confer upon him the *whole* blessing. He immediately asks his father: הלא אצלה לי ברכה, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" (v. 36). That is to say, had you given me the blessing, you surely would have reserved a blessing for Ya'akov; that blessing — give to me! Yitzchak readily admits this, but in revealing to him the content of the blessing given to Ya'akov, he shows Esav that this was the only blessing appropriate for Esav. The blessing that was reserved for Ya'akov was totally inappropriate for Esav.

Yitzchak's two sons represented two different elements in his home. Esav represented material power; Ya'akov represented spiritual power. Yitzchak knew very well that both of these tendencies would be needed, if his future nation was to grow and prosper. He, too, apparently knew of the prophecy that the materially stronger one would ultimately serve the materially weaker one: ורב יעבד צעיר (above, 25:23). But Yitzchak thought that Esav and Ya'akov would fulfill the mission of Avraham in partnership and brotherly harmony, with the one complementing the other. He therefore intended to give Esav a blessing of material content, and reserved a spiritual blessing for Ya'akov. This blessing that was reserved for Ya'akov was meaningless to Esav, who by nature had no understanding of the spiritual aspect of the House of Avraham.

Rivkah, however, remembered from the home of Lavan the misfortune entailed by such a division. She knew from personal experience that only in a home pervaded by the spirit of Avraham, and only in the hands of one guided by this spirit, would material things bring blessing and true happiness. She was right. She realized that materialism devoid of spirit is actually a curse, and that Yitzchak's blessing could not be divided; it could be placed only upon the head of one of the sons.