



ברכת אברהם

The Blessing of Avraham

■ Two Blessings

The struggle between Yaakov and Esav for their father's blessing is the subject of a long chapter in the weekly Torah reading of Toldot. It begins with Yitzchak's invitation to Esav to prepare a meal for him and receive the blessing, continues with their shock at learning that it was Yaakov who had actually acquired it, and ends with Esav threatening to kill his brother after receiving a "reduced" blessing.

Upon realizing that he had lost the blessing to Yaakov, Esav turns to his father with tears and pleads: *"Have you only one blessing, my father? Please bless me as well"* (B'reshit 27,38). In response, Yitzchak grants him some crumbs of the blessing that he had just given to Yaakov. He doesn't reveal to Esav that in truth, another blessing does still remain – one that is even more valuable than all those that Yaakov had already received, and that it, too, was soon to go to Yaakov.

At the end of Parashat Toldot, Yitzchak summons Yaakov, almost secretly, and warns him not to marry a Canaanite woman (28,1). Instead, Yaakov is to go to Padan Aram and make sure to take only a daughter of Rivka's family for a wife. Yitzchak then gives Yaakov yet another blessing – the very one that he had refused to grant Esav: *Birkat Avraham*, the Blessing of Avraham, encompassing the most basic elements of the G-d-Israel relationship. Given first to Avraham, and then to Yitzchak on his way to Gerar, it is now passed on to Yaakov:

וַיִּתֵּן לְהָאֵת בְּרִכַּת אַבְרָהָם, לְהָאֵת וּלְזַרְעָהּ אַתָּה,
לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אֶת אֶרֶץ מְגֻרֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם.

*May G-d grant you the blessing of Avraham, to you and your
descendants with you, to inherit the land
of your dwelling that G-d gave to Avraham. (28,4)*

Yaakov thus receives this crucial double blessing: the inheritance of Eretz Yisrael, and a covenant between G-d and the nation that will receive the Land. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevy writes in his classic 12th-century work *HaKuzari* that this is the most important blessing ever given since the times of Adam. The Land was fought over by Adam's sons Kayin and Hevel, and by Yishmael and Yitzchak, and was also the crux of the conflict between Yosef and his brothers.

One who reads Parashat Toldot might receive the mistaken impression that *Birkat Avraham* is of secondary importance, because of all the attention centered on Yitzchak's first blessing to Yaakov. But in truth, *Birkat Avraham* deals with spiritual matters – our genuine connection with the Creator of the world, as well as Israel's bonds with the Land of Israel – and is therefore on a higher plane than the other, material blessing. Why, then, did Yitzchak present the blessing of wealth as the central focus of attention, while keeping the spiritual blessing concealed?

To answer this, let us study carefully what Yitzchak's first blessing included. Two of its elements are such that whoever merits to receive them, will surely also receive the Blessing of Avraham. The first one is: “*May those who curse you be cursed, and those who bless you will be blessed*” (27,29). This is parallel to the blessing that had been given to Yitzchak on his way to Gerar, when Hashem said: “*And I will give your descendants all of these lands, and all the peoples of the land will be blessed by your descendants.*” (26,4)

This blessing to Yitzchak means that the nations will “take pride” in Israel, as in, “*Nations will be blessed via Him and will take pride in Him*” (Jeremiah 4,2). The blessing thus clearly links between the one who is to merit Eretz Yisrael, and the fact that the entire world will be blessed via his descendants. Therefore, when Yitzchak said in his first blessing, “*May those who bless you be blessed,*” he was telling his beneficiary – whom he did not know was Yaakov – that he would also receive the Avrahamic blessing of the Land of Israel.

The second indication that Yitzchak's material blessing was actually a guarantee to receive the Land of Israel is this:

הוּהוּ גְבִיר לְאַחֵיךָ וְיִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְךָ בְּנֵי אִמְךָ...

You shall be a lord over your brothers, and your mother's sons shall bow down to you... (27,29)

It is inconceivable that one who receives the Land would have to bow down to the one who does not receive it! It is therefore obvious that these words are also a blessing for the Land of Israel.

■ Yitzchak's Plan

Though we now understand that the material blessing also includes the blessing for Eretz Yisrael, it is still not clear why Yitzchak did not reveal the entire story of the spiritual blessing until the end. What was his plan?

Yitzchak hoped that by giving the basic physical blessing to Esav, he would bring about a change in his behavior. He was optimistic that Esav would be brought closer to Hashem, that he would behave more kindly and spiritually, and that he might change sufficiently to become deserving of the spiritual blessing as well.

But the plan did not even begin to materialize, because Yaakov ended up receiving the blessing, and not Esav. When Yitzchak learned this, he realized without a doubt that the more important blessing – *Birkat Avraham* – would also belong to Yaakov, for the reasons stated above.

Yitzchak also learned some new facts that he did not know before. For one thing, he learned that Yaakov was favored with a special, Divine aroma about him. It happened when Yitzchak prepared to greet his son with the first blessing; he immediately smelled his son's clothes, and said: “*See the fragrance of my son as that of a field blessed by G-d*” (27,27). Yitzchak originally thought this special aroma was Esav's – but he now realized that it was Yaakov who was graced with it. Yitzchak also learned, when Esav came to receive the blessing, that Esav had in fact sold his birthright of his own free will (verse 36). Yaakov had all the rights of the first-born! Yitzchak thus realized that his plan to give both blessings to Esav was misguided, and that it was Yaakov who was to receive them.

■ The Send-Off

When Rivka saw how Esav reacted with such passion to losing the blessing, even threatening to kill Yaakov, she advised her beloved son to take shelter from his wrath with her family in Haran. Rivka did not explain to her husband the real reason for this advice; she merely expressed concern that Yaakov might marry one of the local Canaanite girls:

קִצְתִּי בְּחַיֵּי מִפְּנֵי בָנוֹת חֵת, אִם לִקַּח יַעֲקֹב אִשָּׁה
מִבָּנוֹת חֵת כְּאֵלֶּה מִבָּנוֹת הָאָרֶץ, לָמָּה לִּי חַיִּים?

“I am disgusted with my life over the daughters of Chet. If Yaakov takes a wife... like these, from the daughters of the land, of what use is life to me?” (verse 46)

Earlier (26,35), the Torah had told us that Esav's Canaanite wives were a source of bitterness for Yitzchak and Rivka. When Rivka told Yitzchak her fear regarding Yaakov's future wife, Yitzchak agreed; he called in Yaakov for a parting blessing, and sent him off to marry a girl from his mother's family in Haran. Yaakov, acceding to his parents' request, thus leaves with two objectives in mind: To run away from Esav, who has vowed to kill him, and to marry a woman from Lavan's household. This double objective is expressed in the first verse of Vayetze: "*Yaakov left Be'er Sheva, and went toward Haran*" (28,10). He "*left Be'er Sheva*" because he was running away, and "*went toward Haran*" to find an appropriate wife.

Was this a permanent send-off? Let us return a few verses earlier to the end of Parashat Toldot, where the Torah describes Yaakov's departure:

וַיִּשְׁלַח יִצְחָק אֶת יַעֲקֹב וַיֵּלֶךְ פָּדָן אַרָם...

Yitzchak sent Yaakov, and he went towards Padan Aram... (28,5)

The implication is that Yitzchak was sending Yaakov on a mission, namely, to marry a woman from Rivka's family. Yitzchak had no intention of sending him away permanently, but rather expected Yaakov to marry and return to inherit the Land. Esav, however, sees the situation very differently. The Torah states:

וַיֵּרָא עֵשָׂו כִּי בֵרַךְ יִצְחָק אֶת יַעֲקֹב וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתוֹ פָּדָן אַרָם...

*Esav saw that Yitzchak blessed Yaakov,
and sent him off to Padan Aram...* (28,6)

The word *shilach* used here is a stronger form of the verb in verse 5; both of them are based on the same root, but here in verse 6, the implication is to "send away," that is, Yaakov truly wants Yaakov to leave for good. By saying "*Esav saw*," the Torah is telling us that this is how Esav mistakenly perceived it. He did not realize that Yitzchak's send-off of Yaakov was only temporary. Esav thought that Yaakov would build his new family in Aram, and that Eretz Yisrael would remain Esav's inheritance – to make up for the first blessing that he did not receive.

But Esav did see one problem that might impede his inheritance of the Land: "*Esav saw that the daughters of Canaan were bad in the eyes of his father Yitzchak*" (28,8). Yet he himself was married to Canaanite women (26,34)! Esav therefore calculated that if he would take other wives, this would solve the problem and he would receive the Land. And so the Torah tells us (28,9) that he went to his uncle Yishmael to take his daughter as a wife.

Thirty-four years later, when Yaakov returns to the Land of Israel with his family, Esav realizes that his dreams and plans of inheriting the Land are unraveling. He therefore goes to greet Yaakov with 400 men, as we read in the beginning of Vayishlach, with the intent of killing him. This is strange, for we know that Esav honored his father greatly, and had promised even amidst his anger that he would not kill Yaakov until **after** his father died: “*The days of mourning for my father will approach and I will kill my brother Yaakov*” (27,41). Yitzchak was still alive at this point! How, then, could Esav try to kill Yaakov?

Our above explanation provides the answer. Esav was sure that Yaakov had violated his father’s command by returning to the Land of Israel. Esav thought that Yitzchak had told him never to return, and that Yaakov was thus in violation of his command. For Esav, this was a good enough excuse to kill Yaakov even while his father was yet alive (though he later changed his mind, for other reasons).

■ Prophetic Blessings

The Torah is the ultimate Book of Prophecy, expressing the link between Hashem and His human creations. Any period in which prophecy was absent was omitted from the Torah, even if it lasted dozens or hundreds of years. It behooves us to follow the Torah’s prophecies and find the thread that unites them. The Book of B’reshit, of course, supplies us with a series of prophecies delivered to the Patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Let us begin with Avraham, to whom G-d appeared following *Akedat Yitzchak*, the Binding of Isaac. G-d vowed:

...וְהִרְבָּה אֲרָבָה אֶת זְרַעְךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם...

וַיִּרְשׁ זְרַעְךָ אֶת שְׂעַר אֵיבָיו, וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזְרַעְךָ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ...

*I will greatly increase your seed, as the stars of the heavens...
and your descendants will inherit the cities of their enemies, and
all the nations will be blessed via your descendants... (22,17-18)*

The blessing comprises three parts: 1) Descendants, 2) The Land of Israel, 3) Becoming a light unto the nations. All three of these elements appear again in G-d’s revelation to Yitzchak:

וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת הַשְּׁבָעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם אָבִי.

וְהִרְבִּיתִּי אֶת זְרַעְךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם...

*I will fulfill the oath that I made to your father Avraham,
and I will increase your seed as the stars of the heavens...*

וְנָתַתִּי לְזֶרְעֶךָ אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶצֶת הָאֵל וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזֶרְעֶךָ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ.
*And I will give your descendants all of these lands, and all the
 peoples of the land will be blessed by your descendants.* (26,3-4)

Furthermore, G-d precisely preserves this triple-format blessing when He blesses Yaakov as he dreams of angels ascending and descending the ladder:

הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנֶּנָּה וְלִזְרְעֶךָ.
*The land upon which you are lying,
 to you and your descendants I will give it.*

וְהָיָה זֶרְעֶךָ כְּעֶפֶר הָאָרֶץ...
And your seed will be as numerous as the dust of the earth...

וְנִבְרְכוּ בְּךָ כָּל מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה וּבְזֶרְעֶךָ.
*and all the families of the earth will be blessed via you
 and your descendants.* (28,13-14)

The torch passes from Avraham to Yitzchak, and from Yitzchak to Yaakov. What they have been given is not just a blessing, but a sacred mission of three components: 1) Establishing the nation of G-d, 2) Inheriting the Land of Israel, 3) Being a light unto the nations. We will see below how each of the Patriarchs took upon himself a different one of these components.

In light of this, it is not clear why Yitzchak, when he sent Yaakov to Aram Naharayim, blessed him with only two of these elements: “*G-d shall bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers... and He will give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and your seed with you, to inherit the land of your residence*” (28,3-4). Yitzchak blesses Yaakov with abundant descendants and the Land of Israel; why did he leave out the blessing of being a light unto the nations?

As an important side note, it is remarkable that Hashem appeared to Yaakov 34 years later, when he was on his way back home to Eretz Yisrael, using almost exactly the same language that Yitzchak used. This teaches us how G-d’s message was so much a part of the Patriarchs that G-d “affirms” Yitzchak’s earlier blessing nearly word for word. Let us compare the two blessings:

When Yaakov was leaving the Land of Israel, Yitzchak said:

וְאֵל שַׁדַּי יְבָרֶךְ אֶתְךָ וַיַּפְרֶה וַיְרַבֶּה וְהָיִיתָ לְקַהַל עַמִּים.

G-d (E-l Sha-dai) shall bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and you will be a congregation of nations. (28,3)

On Yaakov's way back to the Land 34 years later, G-d said to him:

אֲנִי אֵל שַׁדַּי, פְּרֹה וּרְבֵה, גּוֹי וְקַהֲל גּוֹיִם יִהְיֶה מִמֶּךָ וּמְלָכִים מִחֲלָצֶיךָ יֵצְאוּ.
I am G-d (E-l Sha-dai): Be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a congregation of nations shall come into existence from you, and kings will come from your loins. (35,11)

Furthermore, Yitzchak's blessing stated:

וַיִּתֵּן לָהּ אֶת בְּרַכַּת אַבְרָהָם לָהּ וּלְזַרְעָהּ אֲתָךְ לְרִשְׁתָּךְ אֶת אֶרֶץ מְגֻרֶיךָ
אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱ-לֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם.
and He will give you the blessing of Avraham, to you and your seed with you, to inherit the Land of your residence, which G-d gave to Avraham. (28,4)

G-d's blessing to Yaakov included the same components:

וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ... לָהּ אֶתְנַנֶּה, וּלְזַרְעָהּ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶתֵּן אֶת הָאָרֶץ.
*And the Land... I will give you;
and I will give it to your descendants after you.* (35,12)

Yaakov Avinu, too, carried this prophecy in his heart for close to 50 years. On his deathbed in Egypt, he called in his son Yosef and told him that G-d had blessed him as follows:

הִנְנִי מַפְרֶה וְהִרְבֵּיתָ וּנְתַתִּיךָ לְקַהֲל עַמִּים
וּנְתַתִּי אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְזַרְעָהּ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶחָזֶת עוֹלָם.
Behold, I will increase your numbers and you will be a congregation of nations, and I will give this land to your descendants after you for an eternal legacy. (48,4)

Again we ask: Where is the “Light unto the Nations” aspect of the blessing? The answer can be found in Yaakov's words to Shimon and Levi after they took their lethal vengeance on the residents of the city of Shechem: “*You have besmirched me, to discredit me among the inhabitants of the land*” (34,30). Shimon and Levi did not provide a positive example of “light unto the nations.” On the contrary, they created hatred and desire for revenge; it was only the fear that G-d instilled in the nations that prevented them from striking back at Yaakov's family: “*The fear of G-d was upon the cities around them, and they did not pursue Yaakov's children.*” (35,5)

This is why, when Hashem blessed Yaakov after the incident in Shechem, He omitted this phrase that He had included earlier when Yaakov slept: “*all the families of the earth will be blessed via you and your descendants*” (28,14). How astonishing it is that Yitzchak knew to leave out from his blessing to Yaakov exactly that which Hashem omitted 34 years later!

■ The Triple Mission

The prophetic light was thus passed down from generation to generation, disappearing for some 200 years until it was revealed once again to Moshe Rabbeinu in Egypt. There, the time arrives for the fulfillment of the promise made to the Fathers of the Nation, and for Israel to arise and fulfill the role of “Nation of G-d.”

Our forefathers, with their sanctity and elevated ethical status, were those who bore the word of G-d from generation to generation. The eternal expression “*G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak, and G-d of Yaakov*” includes within it the following Divine message, to which we may not add and from which we may not detract: “Hashem is the G-d, and He reveals Himself in the Land of Israel to the People of Israel (and from them, to the entire world).” Every one of our Patriarchs knew this message in its entirety, yet each of them took upon himself to specifically disseminate one of its components:

- Avraham Avinu installed Hashem as G-d with every step he took. His life-long mission can be summed up in this command: “*I am E-l Shad-dai, walk before Me and be perfect.*” (17,1) (This is the explanation of the previous prophecy, “Arise and walk through the land...”)
- Yitzchak Avinu held on with all his strength to the Land of Israel, even in the face of famine and Gentile hatred. The command of his life was this: “*Do not descend to Egypt; dwell in the land that I will tell you. Live in this land...*” (26,2-3)
- And Yaakov Avinu took upon himself to build the House of Jacob, that which would become the Nation of Israel. Hashem told him: “*I am G-d (E-l Sha-dai): Be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a congregation of nations shall come into existence from you, and kings will come from your loins.*” (35,11)

We recite this three-fold message in our prayers every day, in the first blessing of the Sh'moneh Esrei: “*Barukh atah, You are the source of blessing,*

Hashem our G-d, G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak, and G-d of Yaakov...”

Prior to the great prophetic revelation to Avraham Avinu of the Brit Milah (Covenant of Circumcision), Hashem was known as *E-l Olam*, “G-d of the world.” For instance, Avraham “*proclaimed [in Be’er Sheva] the name of the L-rd, the God of the world*” (B’reshit 21,33). But from the time of the Brit Milah revelation and afterwards, Hashem singled out His name, not upon the entire world, but upon Avraham:

וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין זַרְעֶךָ אַחֲרַיִךְ לְדֹרֹתָם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם
לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לֵאלֹהִים וּלְזַרְעֶךָ אַחֲרַיִךְ.

I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for their generations, for an eternal covenant, to be G-d for you and your descendants after you. (17,7)

This special covenant continued with “the G-d of Yitzchak,” without requiring of Yitzchak any further commitments, and concluded with “the G-d of Yaakov.” Yaakov Avinu uniquely requested that “*Hashem should be my G-d*” (28,21) – thus preparing for a higher level of G-d’s presence. And this is in fact what happened: When Yaakov returned to Eretz Yisrael, *He erected an altar and called it, “L-rd, the G-d of Israel.”* (33,20)

This name is a direction-setter for the Nation of Israel, which is destined to proudly bear and carry the Name of G-d, fulfilling and transmitting the message forever and ever. Israel will be the Nation of G-d, and Hashem will be called its G-d. This is the wondrous evolution of *Birkat Avraham*, the Blessing of Avraham.

