

Parashat Toldot 5770, 2009:

Avraham's Blessing

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *alehah hashalom*, and to the *refuah shalaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel and Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The final chapter of our *parasha* begins with these four *pasukim* (sentences):

And Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and he commanded him and said to him, “You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take yourself from there a wife of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. And may the Almighty G-d bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, and you shall become an assembly of peoples. And may He give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your seed with you, that you may inherit the land of your sojournings, which G-d gave to Abraham.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 28:1-4, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

On the surface, Yitzhak's statement prohibiting Yaakov from taking a wife from “the daughters of Canaan” seems to be a self-generated fatherly command. The truth, however, is found in the *pasuk* immediately prior to our passage: “And Rebecca said to Isaac, ‘I am disgusted with my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Heth like these, from the daughters of the land, of what use is life to me?’” (27: 46) Rivka knew full well what “the daughters of Heth” truly represented – her son, Eisav, had married two of them: “And Esau was forty years old, and he married Judith, the daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Basemath, the daughter of Elon the Hittite. And they were a vexation of the spirit to Isaac and to Rebecca.” (26:34-35) Why were they a “vexation of the spirit?” Rashi (11040-1105), based upon the Midrash, makes the answer perfectly clear: “For they worshipped idols. [Midrash Tanchuma, Toledoth 8].” Thus, while both Yitzhak and Rivka knew the truth about Eisav's Hittite wives, it was

Rivka who was the motive force in ensuring that her beloved son Yaakov would marry someone from her own family instead one of “the daughters of the land.” This is in consonance with her prior actions wherein she guaranteed that Yaakov, rather than Eisav, would be the recipient of Yitzhak’s blessing and thereby the progenitor of our people. Beyond a doubt, Rivka had the singular vision to guarantee the future of *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people).

Let us now return to the opening statement of our Torah passage: “And Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and he commanded him...” The order is quite clear: blessing first, command second. Naturally, we would expect the Torah to proceed in precisely this fashion. Instead, we find the exact opposite formulation, i.e. the command stated prior to the blessing: “You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take yourself from there a wife of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. And may the Almighty G-d bless you...” This seems to be a straight out rejection of the well-known Rabbinic principle of addressing the “first topic first and the last topic last.” (*Pirkei Avot* 5:7) If this is the case, what happens to the concept of primacy of precedence?

The great Spanish exegete, Rabbi Avraham Saba (1440-1510), in his classic work of Torah analysis entitled “*Tzror Hamor*,” was apparently also bothered by the problem of Yitzhak commanding Yaakov and only subsequently giving him his *bracha* (blessing). He notes that Yitzhak’s command was an expression of the alacrity necessary for Yaakov to properly fulfill his mission – for only in Padan Aram would he find a woman “who

would be proper and fitting for him.” Therefore, he rereads the phrase “...and take yourself from there a wife of the daughters of Laban...” as “and take yourself from there a woman who has awe of Hashem and who is thereby blessed and may the Almighty G-d bless you.” It is at this juncture that he provides a solution for the Torah’s seeming lack of concern for the concept of primacy of precedence:

And it is very possible that the blessing and the command are, in fact, one and the same. This is the case, since after he [Yitzhak] commanded him [Yaakov] not to take a woman from the daughters of Canaan, there could, in reality, be no greater blessing than this. This, then, is the precise meaning of “And Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and he commanded him and said to him, ‘You shall not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan’” (Translation and emphasis my own)

In other words, Yitzhak simultaneously uttered the blessing and command in his adjuration to Yaakov to eschew the daughters of Canaan in favor of choosing a marriage partner who believed in Hashem and held Him in awe. Therefore, there was no problem of “first topic first and the last topic last” at all.

Rav Saba’s resolution, however, seemingly leaves us with another exegetical problem. If “the blessing and the command are, in fact, one and the same,” how are we to understand the continuation of Yitzhak’s words to Yaakov: “And may the Almighty G-d bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, and you shall become an assembly of peoples. And may He give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your seed with you, that you may inherit the land of your sojournings, which G-d gave to Abraham?” This certainly appears to be Yitzhak’s *bracha* to his beloved son! Here, too, Rav Saba provides a brilliant solution to this quandary:

But the phrase: “And may the Almighty G-d bless you...and may He give you the blessing of Abraham,” is not Yitzhak’s blessing. Instead, it is Hashem’s blessing [for which Yitzhak is asking] in order that G-d will bless him [Yaakov] in the future with Avraham’s blessing.

In other words, for Rav Saba, Yitzhak was simulating the role of a kohen in the *Birkat Kohanim* (Blessing of the Kohanim). Just as a kohen does not give the *bracha* per se, but rather serves as the viaduct through which Hashem's blessing is delivered to His holy people, so, too, did Yitzhak beseech Hashem for the fulfillment of His blessing to Avraham upon Yaakov.

We live at a time in history when we long for the fulfillment of the Almighty's blessing to Avraham. The world continues to question the validity of our claim to *Eretz Yisrael* – the very land that Hashem promised in no uncertain terms to Avraham. Our beloved nation, Israel, is the poster child for international abuse in the halls and forums of the United Nations. Arab terrorism, both domestic and foreign, seems never-ending. Global anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial seem to be on an inexorable rise. Perhaps now, as never before, we ask *Avinu Malkeinu, she'ma koleinu* (Our Father our King, hear our voices) and fulfill your blessing and promise to *Avraham Avinu* (our father, Avraham). May this time come soon, and in our days, with the coming of the one true Messiah. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

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