

Toledot: Dimming Our Vision to See More Clearly as One

November 5, 2010

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Good Shabbos and thank you for again giving me the honor to share my thoughts with you about this week's *parsha*.

I feel obligated to say that writing this was an interesting exercise because after I had taken notes, read, wrote it all out, etc., I tripped and dropped my computer and killed the hard drive. I'm sure you know where the story is going here - much to my extreme grief, I hadn't done a back up for three weeks and I lost the whole *d'var*, notes, etc. I had to rewrite it quickly from memory, which, honestly, isn't my best thing these days. So, I kept telling myself I'm glad for a tradition that cycles and provides the lesson of going over things again and again to find new ways to bring old stories to life. I hope the quickness of my rewrite makes sense and honors that tradition of looking at stories with new eyes, especially as the concept of dimming our vision is part of this *parsha*.

This week's *parsha* talks about the lives of Yitzchak, Rebecca, Yakov and Essau. When I was a child, I had a big green book with bible stories in it that I got as part of a scholarship for Hebrew School. The first story was the akidah, the binding of Yitzchak, and the second story was from this *parsha*, with a large picture of Yakov pretending to be his hairy brother Essau by wearing animal skins on his arms at the bedside of his old, blind father Yitzhak. As I thought about this *parsha*, I wondered why I was so intrigued with this story as a child. I thought about some themes of the *parsha* – deception, pretending to be who you are not, not seeing what is in front of you, deception between parents and children. Growing up with a lot of abuse and in a poor neighborhood with drugs, prostitution and gangs, I knew lots about deception and people pretending to be someone they are not, wishing you were someone else or you could hide under someone else's skin, about blinding yourself to the reality in front of you, and about the challenging need and task of trying balance one's corporeal, intellectual and spiritual needs. On reflection, I deceived, hid, and dimmed my vision, just as, perhaps Yitzchak, Rebecca, Yakov and Essau often chose to do these things, all of us acting in the service of survival. And too, like these historical figures, I struggled, and still do, with trying to balance body and spirit.

At forty years old, Yitzchak and Rebecca pled to have children and Rebecca conceived twins, Essau and Yakov. Essau was born first and because he was so hairy, they named him Esau; because Yakov was born holding onto Essau's heel, they named him Yakov. Essau became a good hunter and was a course, crude outdoors type of person concerned more with corporeal matters, while Yakov is studious and stays at home in the tent concerning himself more with spiritual and intellectual matters.

One day, Esau comes in from the fields saying he is “famished” and asks Yakov for some soup. Yakov says he will give him some in exchange for his birthright (must have been some soup). Esau replies, “I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?” and thus, Esau gives up his birthright. While the passage is often interpreted as how easily and wantonly Esau spurns his birthright, I thought about his words here. In one way, it is true, if he is famished and near death his birthright IS of no use to him. As anyone who has truly gone hungry or tried to teach hungry kids knows, it’s hard to think about the future or lessons if you’re hungry. Esau doesn’t seem really near death here, but his words, at least, say there is an intensity in his need. And, Yakov’s intentions are questionable – why would you not feed your brother if he was famished? What righteous intentions can we find when Yakov takes this advantage of his twin who is famished?

Later in the *parsha*, when Yitzchak is old, going blind, and feels his death will be soon, he asks Esau to go into the fields, find some food, prepare it and bring it to him; then Yitzchak will give Esau his blessing. Rebecca overhears this and tells Yakov to bring Yitzchak some stew and put animal skins on his arms to pretend to be Esau. Thus, the nearly blind Yitzchak will feel Yakov’s arms and think he is Esau. Yakov will then get his father’s blessing that was meant for Esau. While Rebecca asks Yakov to do this in order to get the needed blessing, she knows that “passing” in this way, that “deceiving” in this way, pretending to be someone else, even if for a so-called positive outcome, has consequences. She tells Yakov, “Your curse, my son, be upon me!” Certainly, I wasn’t surprised that a woman would understand the need to pass, to dress up and pretend to be someone you are not, sometimes to survive and that even if doing so ensures your survival, there are consequences, curses, to your soul.

So, with his mother’s so-called “blessing,” Yacov goes to his father and says he is Esau. Yitzchak is confused and says, “The voice is the voice of Yakov, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.” The voice, the breath, the nefesh, the emotion is of Yakov, who is more concerned with spiritual matters, but the body is that of Esau, who indeed is more concerned with matters of the body. For Yakov to receive the blessing, it seems, he has to be both of the body and the spirit – perhaps the twin sides of ourselves that we need in order to be fully blessed. Yakov and Esau are not just brothers, but are twins, so connected that Yakov has to hold onto the heel of his brother at birth, has to be able to walk in the shoes of Esau (or wear his arms) to be blessed. Perhaps some of what goes on here is not only deception, but acknowledging the need for these twins sides, the body and the spirit, to come together for blessing.

But what of the deception and Yitzchak’s part in it. Indeed, Yitzchak is used to dimming his vision to not see what is around him. While my childhood bible book has Yitzchak as a child in the *akidah*, most scholars believe he was an adult and there are places in the text where it appears that he has some knowledge of what is going to happen. If he does, what does he have to blind himself to in order to go on with his father, Avraham? How is his relationship with his father dimmed after seeing his father tie him and almost

bring a knife to him? I wish this was only metaphor, but there are children and adults, mostly adult women, in the world today who literally get tied up and threatened with weapons and violence by parents and partners and sometimes, but not always, something or someone intervenes that saves them from being actually physically hurt or even murdered, but their spirits die, they are cursed each time violence comes towards them. They learn the need for deception – to not see others, to pretend to be someone else so they can deal with the betrayal by their loved ones; they learn to be out of balance with their body or their spirit, or both.

Rashi gives a number of reasons for Yitzchak's blindness. One is that he goes blind so that he may bless Yakov. Yakov needs the blessing, but it is not "right" that he gets the blessing and both Yitzchak and Rebecca knows that. The only way that Yitzchak can feel okay about giving Yakov the blessing is if he is fooled into it or perhaps he fools himself into believing that Yakov is Esau. Another reason Rashi says that Yitzchak vision is dimmed is because when the angels saw him tied on the altar they cried and their tears got into Yitzchak's eyes and dimmed his vision. Did the angels themselves know that Yitzchak needed not to see what his father was doing to him and that his vision would need to be dimmed to deal with many events in his life after this time?

In another part of this *parsha*, Yitzchak also deceives the men of Gerar and tells them that Rebecca is his sister, not his wife, because he is afraid they will kill him because Rebecca is so beautiful (that concept perhaps food for an entire other *d'var*). Yitzchak feels he needs to pretend he and Rebecca are not what they are to each other in order to survive. Is this part of the *parsha* found *before* the deception with Yakov and the blessing in order to show us how Yitzchak and Rebecca are used to deceiving people about the true nature of themselves and their relationships? To show that they understand this type of deception can be important for survival, but can bring potentially unwanted consequences? After Essau finds out what his brother did, he threatens to kill Yakov, which sets off a long series of important events.

Still, on the surface Yakov is seen as the more holy, righteous and historically important twin than Esau, but perhaps the archetypal figure is not just Yakov, but Yakov and Esau as one, for Yakov cannot exist without Esau. Yakov HAS to hold onto Esau's heel in order to come into the world, HAS to deny Esau food for his birthright, and HAS to pretend to be Esau to get his father's blessing. The body and the spirit, the inside and the outside, the duplicities have to be joined. Rather than two separate figures, these twins seem to be more reflective of the *sh'ma* – all is one. I believe we need to see all the sides of ourselves in one. When my son, Mayim, was younger we didn't let him play with superheroes for numbers of reasons, but one of them was that we didn't want him to think that people were all evil or all good. We hoped that even at a young age, he might understand and accept that each of us are many things whether we wear our superhero capes, our bad guy disguises, or even our plain clothes.

As it is the month of *Chesvan*, a month shockingly without any holidays in it, I was free to think about holidays of the year that reverberate with some of the themes I saw in this *parsha* in order to find a few concluding thoughts. I thought of Purim where one gets drunk enough not to know the difference between evil Haman and righteous Mordochai and Esther, and how dimming our vision can be an important path to finding compassion. I thought about Tu B'Shevat, where we eat different types of foods, some that represent times when we need to have a hard outer layer to protect ourselves, some represent times we need protection around our hearts, and some foods represent times when it's important to be totally open. At times, Yitchak, Rebecca, Yakov and Esau are all these foods and all the characters in the Purim *spheil*, maybe even all the characters in the superhero stories. That we can see the need for protection, dimming of vision, and even deception, and a need for both corporeal and spiritual needs to be attended to, will hopefully help us understand those who are most powerless and vulnerable and the times when we ourselves feel powerless and vulnerable, so we will be able to not only forgive ourselves and others, but truly walk in each other's shoes so we may be blessed and give blessings, clearly seeing all of who we are.

Shabbat shalom.