Zera Shimshon

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Chapter VI: Toldot (Gen. 25:19-28:9)

Essay 14: Isaac blessed his son despite foreseeing some bad descendants

מָלְרָים שֶׁהָרֵים בְּגָדָיו", אַל תִּקְרֵי "בְּגָדָיו" אֶלָא "בּוֹגְדָּיו" וְכוּ'. קַשֶּׁה שֶׁהָרֵי פַּרַשׁ רַשִׁ"י עַל פָּסוּק "וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים מְּלָּהִים "וַיָּבֶרָה אֶלְהִים לּא רָצָה לָבָרֶךְ אֵת יִצְחַק הוֹאִיל שֶׁצָּפָה שֶׁעַתִיד לָצֵאת מִמֶנוּ עֵשַׂו, וְכָאן אূפִילוּ שֶׁרָאָה בּוֹגִדַּיו בָּרַכְהוּ.

Isaac wanted to give a blessing to Esau, but Jacob and his mother, Rebecca, tricked him into giving the blessing to Jacob instead. Jacob dressed in Esau's clothing and went to meet him.

There is a midrash, "'And he smelled the smell of his garments [begadav] [בְּנָדָיו] and blessed him, and said: See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the L-rd has blessed' (Gen. 27:27). Don't read 'his garments,' but rather 'its traitors' [bogdav] [בּוֹנְדָיו] (Yalkut Shimoni remez 115)."¹

A difficulty is that Rashi explained on the verse, "After the death of Abraham, G-d blessed his son Isaac" (Gen. 25:11), that the blessing came from G-d because Abraham hadn't wanted to bless Isaac, because he saw that in the future, Esau would come from him. But here, even though [Isaac] perceived² "its traitors," he blessed [his son]. Why was Isaac willing to give a blessing to Esau?

ּוְגֵשׁ לוֹמַר שֶׁמֵעֵשָׂו נִשְׁתַּרְבָּבָה אוּמַת אֱדוֹם, וְשָׁאנֵי בֵּין כּּוֹשְׁעֵי אוּמוֹת הָעוֹלֶם לְפוֹשְׁעֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּכְתִיב "כְּפָלַח הָרמוֹן רַקְּתֵךּ" אָפִילוּ רֵיקַנִין שֶׁבָּךְ, מְלַאִים מִצְוֹת כְּרמוֹן. וְעוֹד כּּוֹשְׁעֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵין אוּר שֶׁל גֵיהָנָם שׁוֹלֶטֶת בָּהֶם קַל וָחֹמֶר מִסָּלְמַנְדְּרָא וְכוּ'. וְעוֹד דְּמֵיִתִי הַתָּם הַמִּדְרַשׁ, כָּגוֹן יוֹסִי בֵּן מִשִׁיתַא שֶׁחַזַר בָּתִשׁוּבַה, וּמִשׁוּם הַכִּי "נִיבַרֵבָהוּ וַיֹּאמֵר רָאֵה" וְכוּּ'.

It can be said that from Esau spread out the nations of Edom, but there is a difference between those who would hurt the peoples of the world, i.e., the descendants of Esau, and those who would hurt Israel, which is a euphemism for Jews who sin. As it is written, "'your brow is like a slice of pomegranate' (Song of Songs 4:3)—What is [the meaning of] 'your brow' [rakatech] [קקתק]? Even the most ignorant [reikanin] [ריקנין] among you, Israel, are as full of mitzvot like a pomegranate." Also, [as far as] those who would hurt Israel, it says:

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¹ In addition to the midrash, this appears in Sanhedrin 37a.

² Literally "saw," but of course Isaac was blind at that point.

³ Sanhedrin 37a; Berachot 57a.

Rabbi Abbahu said that Rabbi Elazar said: **The fire of Gehenna has no power over [Torah scholars]**, [this can be derived by] **an** *a fortiori* [inference] **from the salamander,** [a creature created out of fire and immune to its effects, and whose blood is fireproof]: If a salamander, which is a product of fire, [and nevertheless when] one anoints [his body] with its blood, fire has no power over him, all the more so [should fire not have any power over] Torah scholars, whose entire bodies are fire, as it is written: "Surely My words are as fire, says the L-rd" (Jer. 23:29) [and the words of Torah become part of the Torah scholars' very bodies].

- Chagigah 28a

Also see what is derived there in the midrash, Gen. Rabbah 65:22. For example, that "he smelled the smell of his garments" refers to Yossi ben Mishita who returned in repentance. The midrash explains that when the Romans desired to enter the Temple, they wanted a Jew to enter first, and they told Yossi Mishita to enter and to take something, and that he could keep it. He entered and took the menorah. As an important symbol, they told him that was too much for him to keep, and told him to go again. He refused. They offered him three years' worth of tax collections, but he still refused. "Is it not enough that I have angered G-d once, that I should anger Him again?" The Romans then tortured him to death.

Thus, Isaac may have been fooled into thinking that Esau was standing before him asking for a blessing, and he foresaw that from the son he was about to bless, there would descend traitors. But at the same time, he saw that their power to harm Torah scholars was limited, and he also saw that even the worst of these traitors had some redeeming qualities and could repent before their deaths. **Because of this, "and he blessed him, and said: See**, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the L-rd has blessed."

וְאִיתָא שָׁם בְּמִדְרָשׁ, "רְאֵה רֵים בְּנִי" מְלַמֵּד שֶׁהֶרְאָה לוֹ הקב"ה בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ בָּנוּי וְחָרֵב וּבָנוּי. "רְאֵה רֵים בְּנִי", הָרֵי בָּנוּי וְכוּּ "כָּרִים שַׂדָה", הָרֵי חַרֵב, וְכוּי. וְקַשֶּׁה דְּמַה עָנְיֵן רְאָיָה זוֹ בִּשְׁעַה זוֹ, וְעוֹד מִלֶּת "רְאָה" מִיוּתַּרת הִיא.

It is also brought there in the midrash, Gen. Rabbah 65:23, "see, the smell of my son" teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, showed [Isaac] the Temple: built, destroyed, and built [again]. "See, the smell of my son," this [alludes to the Temple] built, as in the verse, "a pleasing aroma unto Me, you shall observe to offer unto Me in its appointing times" (Num. 28:2), which could only be offered in the Temple. "Like the smell of the fields," this [alludes to the Temple] destroyed, as in the verse, "Zion shall be plowed as a field" (Micah 3:12).

A difficulty is what is the relevance of this proof of the midrash at this time when Isaac was about to give his blessing? Also, the word "see" [re'eh] הַאָּה] in Gen. 27:27 is superfluous.

ְוִצֵשׁ לוֹמֵר דְּאִיתָא בְּמִדְרָשׁ רַבָּה עַל פָּסוּק "אִם־כֶּסֶף מַּלְנָה אֶת־עַמִּי", כְּיוֹן שֶׁבָּנָה שְׁלֹמֹה אֶת הַבַּיִת אָמַר בִּתְפָלָתוֹ, רְבּוֹן הָעוֹלְמִים, אָם יֵשׁ אָדָם שָׁיִּתְפַּלֵל לְפָנַיִּךְ שֶׁתְּמֵן לוֹ מָמוֹן, וְאַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁרֵע לוֹ אוֹתוֹ הַמָּמוֹן, אַל תִּתֵּן לוֹ מָמוֹן, וְאַתָּה יוֹ שֶׁהָיָה זוֹ שֶׁהָיָה יִנְשִׁר וְּבְשָׁת וֹנְקְנָיךְ בְּעוֹשֶׁר וּבְמָמוֹן יִצְשְׁרָכוֹת הָרְאָה לוֹ בֵּית הַמְּקְדָּשׁ בָּנוּי. וְאָמֵר לוֹ "רְאֵה" אַף עַל כִּי שֶׁאֲנִי מְבָרֵך אוֹתְךּ בְּעוֹשֶׁר וּבְבָמוֹן וּנְכְעָיְה עִוֹ בְּעְנִיךְ, אֵינִי רוֹצֶה שֶׁתְּקְיֵּים בִּרְכָתִי, כְּמוֹ הַתְּפַלָּה שְׁעְשָׂה שְׁלֹמֹה. וְעוֹד הָרְאָה לוֹ בִּית הַמִּקְדָשׁ חָרֵב, מִשׁוּם דְּאָמְרִינֵן בְּפֶּרֶק ט' דִּבְרָכוֹת מִיּוֹם שֶׁנָּחֶרב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָשׁ, נִגְּזְרָה גְּזִירָה עַל בָּמִיהֶן שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים, שְּׁיָּחְנַב. שִׁיּהְוֹב שָׁרָב שְׁיִּהְוֹה כְּרַבּוֹ, שֵׁאַף בָּאוֹתוֹ הַזְּמֵן לֹא יוֹכְלוּ לְהָתְקְיֵים הַבְּרָכוֹת כְּתִיקוּנָם.

It can be said that it's brought in the Midrash Rabbah (Ex. 31:5) on the verse, "If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them" (Ex. 22:24), "When Solomon built the Temple, he said in his prayer, 'Master of the Universe, if there is a man who prays before you that you should give him money, and you see that the money would be bad for him, don't give it to him.'"

Henceforth, at this time that Isaac would give [his son] blessings, [G-d] showed him the Temple built. [Isaac] said to [his son], "See," although I bless you and your seed with wealth, and money, and possessions, if this wealth will not be good for you and your children, I do not want my prayer to be fulfilled, so I want my blessing to be conditional, like the prayer that Solomon made.

[G-d] also showed [Isaac] the Temple destroyed, because it says in the ninth chapter of tractate Berachot (58b): "Rabbi Yochanan said thus: From the day that the Temple was destroyed, a decree was issued upon the houses of the righteous that they would be destroyed, as it is stated, "In mine ears said the L-rd of Hosts: 'Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant" '(Isaiah 5:9)." It is enough for a servant to be like his master, i.e., if the Shechina would suffer through the loss of the Temple, then the righteous Jews who serve G-d would also suffer. This showed Isaac at that time that the blessings he was giving wouldn't be able to be fulfilled as they were formulated.

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⁴ Sifra, Behar, 4:8; Yalkut Shimoni on Nach 499:1; Alshich on Torah, Gen. 17:1.