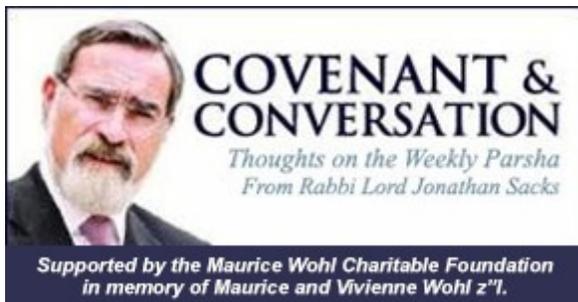


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Communication Matters

The Netziv (Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893, dean of the yeshiva in Volozhin) made the astute observation that Isaac and Rebecca seem to suffer from a lack of communication. He noted that Rebecca’s “relationship with Isaac was not the same as that between Sarah and Abraham or Rachel and Jacob. When they had a problem, they were not afraid to speak about it. Not so with Rebecca.” (Ha’amek Davar to [Gen. 24:65](#))

The Netziv senses this distance from the very first moment Rebecca sees Isaac, as he is “meditating in the field” ([Gen. 24:63](#)), at which point she fell off her camel and “covered herself with a veil” ([Gen. 24:65](#)). He comments, “She covered herself out of awe

and a sense of inadequacy, as if she felt she was unworthy to be his wife, and from then on this trepidation was fixed in her mind.”

Their relationship, suggests the Netziv, was never casual, candid, and communicative. The result was, at a series of critical moments, a failure of communication. For instance, it seems likely that Rebecca never informed Isaac of the oracle she had before the twins, Esau and Jacob, were born, in which God told her “the elder will serve the younger” ([Gen. 25:23](#)). That, apparently, is one reason she loved Jacob rather than Esau, knowing that he was the one chosen by God. If Isaac had known this foretelling of their sons’ futures, would he still have favoured Esau? He probably did not know, because Rebecca had not told him. That is why, many years later, when she hears that Isaac was about to bless Esau, she is forced into a plan of deception: she tells Jacob to pretend he is Esau. Why does she not simply tell Isaac that it is Jacob who shall be blessed? Because that would force her to admit that she has kept her husband in ignorance about the prophecy all the years the children were growing up.

Had she spoken to Isaac on the day of the blessing, Isaac might have said something that would have changed the entire course of their, and their children’s, lives. I imagine Isaac saying this: “Of course I know that it will be Jacob and not Esau who will continue the covenant. But I have two quite different blessings in mind, one for each of our sons. I

will give Esau a blessing of *wealth* and *power*: ‘May God give you the dew of heaven and the richness of the earth ... May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you.’ (Gen. 27:28-29) I will give Jacob the blessing God gave Abraham and me, the blessing of *children* and the *promised land*: ‘May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham.’” (Gen. 28:3-4).

Isaac never intended to give the blessing of the covenant to Esau. He intended to give each child the blessing that suited them. The entire deceit planned by Rebecca and carried out by Jacob was never necessary in the first place. Why did Rebecca not understand this? Because she and her husband did not communicate.

Now let us count the consequences. Isaac, old and blind, felt betrayed by Jacob. He “trembled violently” when he realised what had happened, saying to Esau, “Your brother came deceitfully.” Esau likewise felt betrayed and experienced such violent hatred towards Jacob that he vowed to kill him. Rebecca was forced to send Jacob into exile, thus depriving herself of the company of the son she loved for more than two decades. As for Jacob, the consequences of the deceit lasted a lifetime, resulting in strife between his wives and even between his children. “Few

and evil have been the days of my life” (Gen. 47:9), he said to Pharaoh as an old man. So many lives scarred by one act which was not even necessary in the first place – Isaac did in fact give Jacob “the blessing of Abraham” without any deception, knowing him to be Jacob not Esau.

Such is the human price we pay for a failure to communicate. The Torah is exceptionally candid about such matters, which is what makes it so powerful a guide to life: real life, among real people with real problems. Communication matters. In the beginning God created the natural world with words: “And God said: ‘Let there be’”. We create the social world with words. The Targum translated the phrase, “And man became a *living* soul,” (Genesis 2:7) as “And man became a *speaking* soul.” For us, speech is life. Life is relationship. And human relationships are built through communication. We can tell other people our hopes, our fears, our feelings and thoughts.

That is why any leader – from a parent to a CEO – must set as their task good, strong, honest, open communication. That is what makes families, teams and corporate cultures healthy. Everyone must know what their overall aims are as a team, what their specific roles are, what responsibilities they carry, and what values and behaviours they are expected to exemplify. There must be praise for those who do well, as well as constructive criticism when people do badly. Criticism must be of the act, not the person; the person must feel respected whatever

their failures. This last feature is one of the fundamental differences between a “guilt morality” of which Judaism is the supreme example, and a “shame morality” like that of ancient Greece (namely, guilt makes a clear distinction between the act and the person, which shame does not).

There are times when much depends on clear communication. It is not too much to say that there are moments when the very fate of the world depends upon this.

One such instance happened during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 when the United States and the Soviet Union were on the brink of nuclear war. At the height of the crisis, as described by Robert McNamara in his film, *The Fog of War*, John F. Kennedy received two messages from the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. One was conciliatory, the other far more hawkish. Most of Kennedy’s advisers believed that the second represented Khrushchev’s real views and should be taken seriously.

However, one man offered a different perspective. Llewellyn Thompson Jr. had been American ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1962 and had come to know the Russian president well. He had even spent a period of time living with Khrushchev and his wife. He told Kennedy that the conciliatory message sounded like Khrushchev’s own personal view while the hawkish letter, which did not sound like him, had probably been written to appease the Russian generals. Kennedy listened to Thompson and gave Khrushchev an

opportunity to back down without losing face – and the result being that a potentially devastating war was averted. It is terrifying to imagine what might have happened, had Thompson not been there to establish which was and which was not the real act of communication.

So many aspects of our lives are impacted by misinformation and enhanced by genuine communication. This is why friends, parents, partners and leaders must establish a culture in which honest, open, respectful communication takes place, and that involves not just speaking but also listening. Without it, tragedy is waiting in the wings.

Shabbat Shalom

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. If God knew that Rebecca and Isaac did not communicate freely, why was the prophecy only given to Rebecca before the twins were born?
2. Can you think of other examples from the Torah when communication issues had consequences?
3. Is it ever better to hold back and communicate less?



Family Dynamics

Sometimes family life can be complicated, but the family of Yitzchak and Rivka was particularly complex. At the root of the complexity was a prophecy: God informed Rivka that her two children, Esav and Yaakov, would be in conflict, that each would sire a separate nation, and that the younger of the two (Yaakov) would be superior.[1] As far as we know, Rivka never repeated this prophecy to her husband Yitzchak. Perhaps she reasoned that had God wanted Yitzchak to be privy to this "inside information," He would have shared it with him directly; Yitzchak was certainly no less a prophet than she.

Years go by; the boys grow up, and Rivka acts upon the knowledge of the future she has been given.[2] When she hears that Yitzchak intends to bestow blessings on Esav, she instructs Yaakov to go surreptitiously and take those blessings. Yaakov is afraid that his father will discover the ruse, and will curse him rather than bless him.[3] Rivka assures him that if a curse is forthcoming, she will be the one to bear the brunt of it.

As Yaakov voices his reservations, his inner world is revealed - and it is a place of spirituality: Yaakov fears his father, as a son should, but he does not fear for his own physical safety, nor does he consider what his enraged brother might do to him. He concerns himself only with blessings and curses, with the spiritual fallout of what his mother has commanded him to do; he gives not a thought to the fury or the physical strength of his brother the hunter.

On the other hand, it is altogether possible that Yaakov was not afraid of Esav's reaction because they had already made a deal: Years earlier, Yaakov had purchased the birthright from Esav. This is no trifling matter; the birthright - and more particularly the responsibilities it brought with it - weighed upon Esav like a millstone around his neck. Yaakov had offered him a way out, and he was convinced that Esav loved him for helping him escape the hated burden of being firstborn. Esav detested the birthright, and - at the time - was happy to be rid of it.[4]

Now, years later, perhaps Esav was embarrassed to admit to his father that he had sold the birthright and forfeited his right to the blessing reserved for the firstborn. Looking back on the bargain he had struck with Yaakov years earlier, Esav reconsiders his brother's act of kindness, and with hindsight construes it as having been self-serving, even conniving. Esav manages to forget how eager he had been at the time to accept Yaakov's offer, and how, at the time,

he had been only too eager to escape the onerous burden of responsibility.

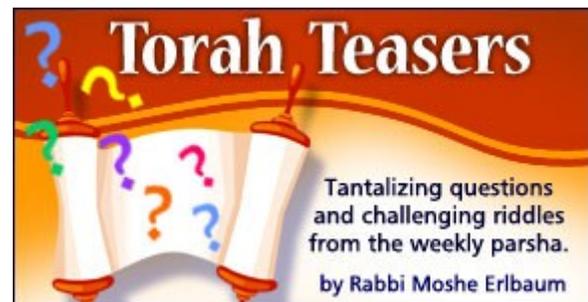
Yaakov believed, quite sincerely in fact, that Esav was still grateful for relieving him of the birthright, but understood that Esav would have to save face rather than admit to his father what he had done years earlier. The plan to spare both Yitzchak and Esav from this dreaded confrontation was simple and ingenious: Yaakov would present himself as Esav, receive the blessings earmarked for the firstborn which were rightfully his, and neither Esav nor Yitzchak would be forced to confront the sad reality of Esav's negative attitude. There was only one possible problem with the plan: What if Yitzchak saw through the disguise? This was Yaakov's only concern; he feared his father's curse, his disappointment, his hurt response - both to the ruse and to the secret it was meant to conceal.

Rivka allayed his fears; she assured him that if any curse was to come from this plan, it would be on her own head: "On me," she says - "*ala*" - spelled *Ayin*, *Lamed*, and *Yud*. The Vilna Gaon points out that these three letters form an acronym of the names of three people who tormented Yaakov later in life: **E**sav, **L**avan and the tragedy of **Y**osef. Despite Yaakov's clear conscience, despite his conviction that the blessings of the firstborn were rightly his, despite the fact that Rivka devised the scheme because she was convinced that she was acting to fulfill the prophecy with which she had been entrusted, and despite Rivka's assurance that Yaakov

would be unharmed and any curse would fall on her own head - Yaakov's fear was well founded, albeit not as he imagined: Esav was furious, and vowed to hunt him down and kill him. Lavan abused him for years. His own children did not fear or respect him; they abused their brother Yosef, considered murdering him, and sold him into slavery, leaving Yaakov to suffer and grieve for decades.

When Yaakov impersonated his brother and pulled the wool over his father's eyes, he inherited a life punctuated by pain.

1. [Bereishit 25:23](#).
2. See Targum Unkolus [Bereishit 27:13](#), and Commentary of Rashbam [Bereishit 27:13](#).
3. [Bereishit 27:12](#).
4. [Bereishit 25:34](#).



Torah Teasers Parshat Toldot

1. In what two contexts does the number 40 appear in this parsha?

Yitzhak marries Rivka at the age of 40 ([Genesis 25:20](#)). Esav also marries at age 40 ([Genesis 26:34](#)).

2. In what other contexts does the number 40 appear in the book of Genesis? (5 answers)

Noah's flood lasts for 40 days ([Genesis 7:12](#)), and at the end of 40 days from the

appearance of the mountaintops, Noah opens the window to send out the raven ([Genesis 8:6](#)). Avraham asks Hashem if He will save the city of Sodom if there are 40 tzaddikim living there ([Genesis 18:29](#)). Yaakov sends Esav a gift that includes 40 cows ([Genesis 32:16](#)). Yaakov is mummified for 40 days before his burial in Hebron ([Genesis 50:3](#)).

3. Which verse in this parsha has five verbs in a row?

When Esav takes the lentil soup from Yaakov, the Torah states: "And he ate and he drank and he got up and he went and he degraded the birthright" ([Genesis 25:34](#)).

4. In this parsha we are informed of the birth of the twins Yaakov and Esav. Which other set of twins appears in the Torah?

Twin sons, Zerach and Peretz, were born to Yehudah and Tamar ([Genesis 38:27](#)).

5. Besides Esav, who else in Tanach is called an "admoni" – a person with reddish complexion?

When the future king, David, first meets the prophet Shmuel, David is described as having "reddish complexion" (1-Shmuel 16:12).

6. Who in the Torah is referred to as a firstborn male or female? (10 answers – 9 in the book of Genesis)

The following people are called a firstborn: Abraham's nephew Utz ([Genesis 22:21](#)); the eldest daughter of Lot ([Genesis 19:31](#));

Naviot, the oldest son of Yishmael ([Genesis 25:13](#)); Esav ([Genesis 27:19](#)); Leah ([Genesis 29:26](#)); Reuven ([Genesis 35:23](#)); Esav's son Eliphaz ([Genesis 36:15](#)); Yehudah's son Er ([Genesis 38:7](#)); Yosef's son Menashe ([Genesis 41:51](#)); and Nadav, the son of Aaron ([Numbers 3:1](#)).

7. Whose neck is mentioned in this parsha? (2 answers)

Yaakov's neck is mentioned when his mother places the goat skins upon it ([Genesis 27:16](#)). Esav's neck is mentioned by Yitzhak in his blessing ([Genesis 27:40](#)).

8. Where else in the book of Genesis is a neck mentioned? (4 answers)

In [Genesis 33:4](#), Esav cries on the neck on Yaakov. In [Genesis 46:29](#), Yosef cries on the neck of Yaakov upon their reunion after 22 years. In [Genesis 41:42](#), Pharaoh places a golden chain on Yosef's neck in appointing him viceroy of Egypt. In [Genesis 45:14](#), Benjamin cries on the neck of Yosef upon their reunion.

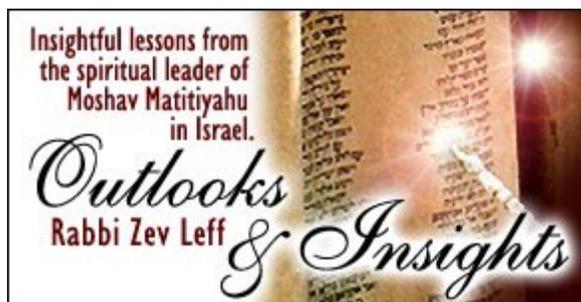
9. Who cries in this parsha? Where else in the book of Genesis does someone cry? (8 answers)

Esav cries when he finds out that Yaakov received the blessings ([Genesis 27:38](#)). Elsewhere in the book of Genesis, Hagar cries when she thought that Yishmael would die (21:16). Avraham cries at the funeral of Sarah (23:2). Yaakov cries when he meets Rachel (29:11). Yaakov and Esav cry when they reunite (33:4). Yaakov cries about the

apparent death of Yosef (37:35). Yosef cries when he reunites with Yaakov in Egypt (46:29). (According to Ramban, it was Yaakov who cried when seeing Yosef.) Yosef and Benjamin cry when they reunite in Egypt (45:14-15). Yosef cries when Yaakov passes away (50:1).

10. Which single verse in this parsha mentions all the following: A grandfather and grandson, a grandfather and granddaughter, a father and son, an uncle and nephew, a husband and wife, a father-in-law and son-in-law, and a brother and sister?

The last verse in the parsha ([Genesis 28:9](#)) contains the following relatives: grandfather and grandson – Avraham and Esav; grandfather and granddaughter – Avraham and Machlat; father and son – Avraham and Yishmael; uncle and nephew – Yishmael and Esav; husband and wife – Esav and Machlat; father-in-law and son-in-law – Yishmael and Esav; brother and sister – Nivayot and Machlat.



Free Will or Predestination

"And the children clashed within her." ([Genesis 25:22](#))

Whenever she passed the entrances to the House of Study of Eber, Jacob struggled to exit, [whenever] she passed the entrance to houses of idol worship, Esau struggled to exit (Rashi)

The Midrash cited by Rashi requires much study, for it seems to imply that Esau and Jacob were already fixed in their tendencies to evil and righteousness, respectively, prior to birth. That would seem to contradict the very foundation of Torah: the principle of free will.

The Midrash also seems to contradict another teaching of the Sages. The Talmud ([Sanhedrin 91b](#)) relates that Rebbe Yehudah, the descendant of Jacob, and the Roman leader Antoninus, the descendant of Esau, debated when the *yetzer hara* enters a person. Rebbe Yehudah maintained that it enters at conception, and Antoninus maintained that it enters at birth. After Antoninus brought scriptural proof to bolster his opinion, Rebbe Yehudah acquiesced that it enters only at birth.

Yet the Midrash, cited above, seems to attribute a *yetzer hara* to Esau prior to birth!

Maimonides begins *Hilchos De'os* with a discussion of in-born personality traits and predispositions. For instance, he writes, some people are by nature cruel and others merciful. Yet Maimonides in the fifth chapter of *Hilchos Teshuvah* is emphatic that a person's nature does not cause him to be righteous or evil, merciful or cruel, wise or

foolish, generous or stingy. The choice lies completely in his own hands.

Aside from the apparent contradiction with *Hilchos De'os*, this statement is problematic for another reason. The assertion that wisdom or foolishness is not decreed seems to contradict the Talmud ([Niddah 16b](#)), which states clearly that wealth, strength, and intelligence are decreed at conception. Only whether one will be righteous or wicked is not decreed.

Resolution of the problem of in-born traits with individual free will is based on the following premise: While no two people are born with the same exact character traits, and those traits are influenced by many factors - including spiritual forces both prior to and at conception - these traits are not inherently good or bad. They are "pareve." A predilection towards anger, for instance, is not necessarily an evil trait. There are situations when anger is required and is the correct response [e.g. displaying anger when a child does something dangerous].

Similarly, all natural traits and tendencies can be directed in both positive and negative directions. The tendency to shed blood, for instance, can be utilized as a *shochet* (butcher), a *mohel*, or surgeon, or alternatively it can be directed towards crime and murder. Although the character traits are predetermined, their function and control are totally in the hands of the individual. He exercises his free will in utilizing them for good or bad, and suppressing these tendencies when necessary.

Wisdom and intelligence are two distinct realms. One can have the IQ of a genius and act like a fool, and one can lack a high IQ and yet act with wisdom. Although intelligence is largely predetermined, as the Talmud states, whether one acts wisely or foolishly is, as Maimonides writes, a function of one's free will.

There is, however, one point that still needs to be clarified. While it is true that no single character trait or tendency is intrinsically good or bad, there are nevertheless certain traits that are more conducive to righteous conduct and those more prone to evil. A tendency towards anger, for example, is more prone to be abused, since there are more instances where anger is negative than where it is positive. By contrast, a natural tendency towards calmness is more prone to lead one to righteous conduct, since there are more instances where this behavior is positive than not.

Thus the difference in natural tendencies might seem to contain an element of injustice. But three points must be kept in mind. First, every person embodies a myriad of character traits. Though someone may be born with a trait that is predominantly negative, he will almost certainly have other traits that are predominantly positive.

Secondly, God takes into consideration one's predispositions in determining the situations he will be confronted with in life.

Finally, as the Vilna Gaon states, God judges each individual in relation to his specific

nature. Hence, a person prone to anger by nature will be judged less harshly if he succumbs to a fit of anger than a person who is by nature calm. Likewise, a person with a predisposition to anger will receive more reward for controlling his anger than a person with a calm disposition.

Considered in this light, the Midrash is not telling us that Jacob and Esau were acting in a good or evil fashion prior to birth. Rather they displayed tendencies toward either the more spiritual aspects of this world or the more physical. The houses of Torah study represent the epitome of spirituality and those of idolatry the epitome of physicality (idol worship being the deification of physical forces).

Esau and Jacob ideally represented the partnership necessary to bring this world to perfection - the mastery and perfection of the physical world as a basis for spiritual perfection. The Jewish people would need both the Tribe of Yehudah, from whom the kings came and whose role was to master the world and conquer the forces of evil, and the Tribe of Levi from whom the High Priest (Kohen Gadol) came and whose role was to provide spiritual guidance and inspiration.

The Sages tell us that Jacob and Esau divided *Olam Haze'h* (this world) and *Olam Haba* (the World to Come) between themselves; Esau taking the former and Jacob the latter. This does not mean that Esau divested himself of a share in *Olam Haba* before birth, but rather that these two embryos had the ultimate potential to control

the physical world and the spiritual world respectively. Had Esau used his traits and tendencies properly, he could have become a partner with Jacob in bringing the world to perfection. Similarly, had Jacob abused his traits, he could have developed into one who distorted and corrupted spiritual concepts and values.

The example of what the partnership of Jacob and Esau could have been was epitomized by their descendants: Antoninus - the might of Rome conquering the physical world, and Rebbe Yehudah - the spirituality of Israel directing it toward spiritual values and goals. Nowhere does it state that Esau wanted to serve idolatry, only that he had a tendency towards it; he was just as capable of destroying idolatry and vanquishing the idolaters, as serving and promoting it. His mother Rebecca, says the *Sifsei Kohen*, deliberately passed by these places of idolatry in order to influence the heathens to renounce their idolatry.

Now we can understand why Isaac wanted to give Esau the blessing, and loved Esau the hunter more than Jacob, the diligent student. Esau deceived Isaac into thinking that he could employ his tendencies towards the physical world to conquer the world for Torah and subdue the forces of evil. Isaac attributed the differences he noted in Esau's and Jacob's behavior - the fact that Esau did not mention God's name and acted without proper courtesy - to Esau's role as the mighty warrior who spoke with force and not finesse. He assumed that Esau was afraid to mention

God's name out of fear that he might forget himself in places to which his mission in life would inevitably bring him where mentioning God's name is prohibited.

Isaac thought that Esau was utilizing his unique traits for the good. True, in less than sublime ways, but that is the role of a king, who has to engage in war and to meet evil head-on to maintain justice in the world. Therefore Isaac desired to give the blessings, which were all material in nature, to Esau, who would need them to fulfill his role. Jacob, he felt, did not need those blessings in the safe confines of the tents of learning.

Only Rebecca saw through the righteous facade of Esau and recognized his deceptive ways - in part because of her familiarity with her own family of frauds and charlatans. She alone was able to expose Esau for what he really was and cause Isaac to see that both roles would be the domain of Jacob - that Jacob would be the sole progenitor of the future Jewish people. Esau had exercised his free will to channel his tendencies toward evil, thereby disqualifying himself from a position in the future nation.

Parshas Toldot should serve as an incentive to us to delve into our own personalities, to better understand our natural tendencies, so that we can develop and channel our unique traits to their most sublime purpose: the perfection of the world through the promotion of Torah and Divine service.

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