

# Gastronomic Reflections Concerning Yitzchak and Eisav

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In Parshat Toldot, **food** plays a highly significant role in **two** separate **incidents** that are central to the family history of Yitzchak, Rivka and their children Eisav and Yaakov, and ultimately the development of the Jewish people.

In the first instance, Eisav is depicted as desperately hungry to the point where he gives in to Yaakov's demand that he sell his birthright in exchange for some lentils.

## **Beraishit 25:29-34**

And Yaakov prepared pottage, and Eisav came from the field and he was enervated.

And Eisav said to Yaakov: Feed me now from "HaAdom HaAdom HaZeh" (lit., this extremely red substance; since the lentil pottage was red in color, it is referred to in this manner) because I am exhausted. For this reason he was called Edom.<sup>1[1]</sup>

And Yaakov said: Sell to me your birthright as of today!

And Eisav said: Behold I am on the verge of death and what is the birthright to me?

And Yaakov said: Swear to me this day! And he swore to him, and he sold his birthright to Yaakov.

And Yaakov gave to Eisav bread and pottage of lentils. And he ate and he drank and he arose and he went away. And Eisav despised the birthright.

Rabbeinu Bechaye reflects upon the combination of Eisav's behavior with respect to needing to be immediately gratified with lentils regardless of the personal cost, and his formative inclination to be a hunter in the fields (25:27),<sup>2[2]</sup><sup>3[3]</sup> in order to develop a character portrait of Yaakov's twin.

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<sup>1[1]</sup> This is not the first time that the color red is associated with Eisav. At his very birth, he is already described in red terms:

### **Beraishit 25:25**

And the first came out red, all over like a hairy garment...

RaShBaM explains how the reinforcement of the association between Eisav and redness made by his infamous need for lentils solidified his secondary name, Edom:

### **RaShBaM on 25:30**

He was red and desired to eat red food. And as a result of his ravenousness he sold his birthright. It was in order to disparage him that he was given the name Edom, to constantly call to mind that for the sake of something red he sold his birthright.

<sup>2[2]</sup> Rabbeinu Bechaye could claim literary structural support for his analysis in light of the Tora itself suggesting an intrinsic connection between Eisav's devotion to hunting and the manner in which he conducts himself in terms of obtaining the pottage by not inserting a space (neither a "Petucha" [a space from the end of the sentence to the end of the column in the Tora text indicated in a printed text by a large Hebrew letter "Peh"] nor a "Setuma" [a space of nine letters within the column indicated by a "Samech"] between the facts of Eisav's hunting, his father's love for Eisav as a result of him providing hunted food for Yitzchak, and the incident of the sale of the birthright.

<sup>3[3]</sup> The biblical character who the Tora describes as the quintessential hunter was Nimrod.

### **Beraishit 10:8-9**

And Kush fathered Nimrod. He began to be a mighty individual in the land.

## **Rabbeinu Bechaye on Beraishit 25:27**

...Eisav was drawn after the sensuous pleasures of the body...

For this reason the Tora states concerning Eisav, "And Eisav was a man who knew hunting," for this is the craft of an idle individual,<sup>4[4]</sup><sup>5[5]</sup> someone who pursues the lusts of the world; "A man of the field" is comparable to referring to him as "a man of the earth". "For this reason he was called 'Edom'", a term that was derived not only from redness (associated with the lentils that he so coveted), but also "Adama" (earth), that is to say that he was "Afrai" (**earthy**).

**And it is well-known that an inordinate emphasis upon obtaining food and drink, as well as being drawn to hunting, all physical, this-worldly pleasures,<sup>6[6]</sup> are directly related to despising the**

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He was a mighty hunter before HaShem, therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before HaShem.

Yet the same Rabbeinu Bechaye who waxes so eloquent about the negative qualities of the character of Eisav who is drawn to hunting, is silent regarding Nimrod. This could be due to at least two reasons:

- a) Aside from the Tora's description of Nimrod as a "mighty hunter before HaShem", we are given no more personal information concerning him. It is specifically because of the ensuing anecdote regarding the sale of the birthright that Rabbeinu Bechaye develops his hypothesis. Consequently it is possible that there are hunters who are not sybarites or hedonists.
- b) There is a qualitative difference between just a "hunter" (Eisav) and a "mighty hunter before HaShem" (Nimrod). While some commentators take the latter to be a different type of negative evaluation, e.g., RaShI—He manipulated people to rebel against HaShem, leading to the Tower of Babel (making the connection between 10:10 and 11:9), others see the description of Nimrod as particularly positive, e.g., Ibn Ezra—he built alters and sacrificed the animals that he caught as offerings to HaShem. Therefore, it is not intrinsic to the trade of the hunter to be self-indulgent and idle. On the contrary, Nimrod parleyed his notoriety as a hunter into making himself into a monarch and controlling an entire kingdom, hardly the accomplishments of an "Adam Batel".

Another approach that does equate Nimrod and Eisav focuses upon the quality of stealth that a hunter must display. Just as Nimrod was able to catch animals due to his subtlety and manipulations, so too was he able to entrap and enlist followers, ultimately resulting in his ascending to the throne over them. In a similar manner, Eisav used the mindset that he developed as a hunter to "hunt" his father's mind, and mislead him into thinking that he was a righteous individual deserving the highest of blessings (see RaShI on 10:9 and 25:27, 28). According to this line of reasoning, there is no need to assume that Eisav was a hedonist based upon the verses with which we are presented.

<sup>4[4]</sup> The commentator is comparing the agricultural life to that of a hunter. Whereas the former has to incessantly toil in order to produce the food that he needs, the latter can satisfy his desire for food with far less effort and can gratify his desires much more quickly. Gur Aryeh, in his commentary on RaShI (see fn. 4 below) distinguishes between the term "Ish Sadeh" (a man of the field) and "Ish Adama" (a man of the earth). Whereas Rabbeinu Bechaye associates Eisav, a.k.a. "Edom", with the term "Adama" with respect to a certain base sensuality (see the continuation of the commentary cited in the body of the essay below), Gur Aryeh suggests that "Ish Adama" would refer to someone who works the land, as in the instance of Noach (9:20), in contrast to the "Ish Sadeh" who might dwell in the field/land, but only lives off it via hunting, rather than improving it via agriculture.

<sup>5[5]</sup> RaShI on the phrase "Ish Sadeh" (a man of the field) makes a similar comment to that of Rabbeinu Bechaye in terms of Eisav's work ethic:

### **RaShI on 25:27**

As is implied, an idle person, who hunts with his bow wild animals and fowl.

However, he does not appear to go as far in terms of assuming that while not industrious, Eisav in fact was a hedonist. It could be imagined that an individual who hunts does only as much as is necessary for him to survive, but does not necessarily engage in a concerted effort to pursue a life of pleasure and self-indulgence.

<sup>6[6]</sup> Klee Yakar understands Eisav's interest in hunting in the fields as reflecting not only an inherent laziness and desire to be able to eat what he traps immediately, but also a penchant for pursuing forbidden pleasures:

**service of HaShem** (a reference to the final phrase in 25:34 regarding the status of being the firstborn)<sup>7[7]</sup> and a diminution in one's sense of God-fearingness, ultimately making such matters secondary and in turn promoting as one's primary focus the pleasures of the body. This was Eisav's orientation, as reflected in "...And he ate and he drank and he arose and he went away. And Eisav despised the birthright"...

The commentator goes on to say that just as Eisav's divestment of the birthright in exchange for immediate sensual gratification via food symbolizes his personal commitment to materialism and lack of spiritualism, just the opposite applies to his brother Yaakov. Eisav's twin was ready to sell his food in order to aspire to greater levels of Divine Service as symbolized by the birthright.

If we accept Rabbeinu Bechaye's premise regarding Eisav's sensuality and need for immediate physical gratification being antithetical to the more spiritual orientation represented by the whole-hearted Yaakov sitting in tents, then where does this leave Yitzchak, concerning whom the Tora states:

**Beraishit 25:28**

And Yitzchak loved Eisav because of the hunted meat that was in his mouth...

And were one to counter that Yitzchak only partook of what Eisav unsolicitedly brought home from the field in order either to humor his son or because he simply ate whatever happened to be available without paying attention to its particular origins or unique taste, and that he therefore did not necessarily share in Eisav's lusts and passions, Yitzchak's specific request prior to attempting to bless Eisav<sup>8[8]</sup>

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**Klee Yakar on 25:27**

That he would hunt married women for his entire first 40 years, and according to the Rabbis (Bava Batra 16b), when the exhausted Eisav comes to Yaakov from the field, "He had just raped a "Na'ara Me'urasa" (an engaged young woman)." It is for this reason that he is described as a "Yodeah Tzayid" (cunning hunter), he knew how to "hunt" women who were engaged if not already married. And he would always seek them out in the fields, because concerning a young engaged woman, the Tora states (Devarim 22:27) "Because he (the rapist) found her in the field, and the engaged young woman cried out, but there was none to hear her"... it is also possible that the expression "Tzayid BeFiv" (hunting in/with his mouth) indicates that (rather than by force which would suggest literal "hunting"), Eisav would entrap women by his mouth, i.e., verbally seducing them.

If we are being expected to view Eisav as a sybarite, it is not unremarkable that the individual's character and personality would be reflected not only in his eating habits, but his sexual ones as well. The Tora establishes such a relationship early on in the story of the Garden of Eden (Beraishit 3) where eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil directly leads to an awareness of nakedness and sexual attraction.

<sup>7[7]</sup> Being officially declared the "firstborn" was not only a matter of inheriting a double portion of the estate of the father, but also initially, before the sin of the Golden Calf, but also being designated as the family member who would devote himself to Divine Service. Consequently, the relative ease by which Eisav swaps the "Bechora" for a bowl of lentils and his subsequent disparagement of such status, is not only understood by Rabbeinu Bechaye as an instance of "sour grapes" in terms of the well-known Aesop's Fable, but also because he never really was enamored with the opportunity to devote himself to such spiritual activity. Although one could debate the morality of Yaakov's exploiting his brother's state of exhaustion and hunger to further his own designs, the fact that he cared about becoming the "Bechor" is again not viewed as a mere attempt to eventually enrich himself materially from his father's possessions, or even to justify obtaining the special blessing that he believes is reserved for the firstborn, but to position himself to be able to fulfill the highly spiritual role of priest.

<sup>8[8]</sup> The attempt of course was ostensibly foiled by the plot that Rivka concocted and Yaakov carried out in Beraishit 27.

appears to identify him very much with Eisav's basic sensibilities, the personal, unspiritual qualities that Rabbeinu Bechaye roundly disparages.

#### **Beraishit 27:3-4**

...Now therefore take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt for me something hunted.  
And make for me tasty food as I have loved, and bring it to me and I will eat it in order that my soul will bless you before I die.

Here is the manner by which this commentator distinguishes between Eisav's fixation with meat, and his father Yitzchak's request:

#### **Rabbeinu Bechaye on 27:4**

Yitzchak's intent when he requests tasty food has nothing to do with the pleasures of the **body** or the physical sense of taste, but rather in order that his **soul** would be in a state of rejoicing and pleasure. For when the strength of the body is enhanced, similarly the strength of the soul is also invigorated. And when the soul is in a state of joy, the Divine Prophetic Spirit Descends upon it, as the Rabbis have stated, (Shabbat 30b) "The Divine Presence does not Dwell within a context of laziness nor within one of sadness, but rather within a state of joy, as it is said, (II Melachim 3:15) 'And it was when the musician would play, and the Hand of HaShem would Be upon him.'"

It is for this reason that the soul is always mentioned in association with the Blessing, as it is said, (27:19) "...In order that your soul will bless me..."; (27:25) "...In order that my soul will bless you."

And the fact that he (Yitzchak) requested tasty food to invigorate his soul rather than a harp to be played in accordance with the custom of the prophets, is because his intent was to bless him (Eisav) with material blessings: (27:28) "Therefore HaShem should Give you of the dew of the Heavens, and fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine." It is for this reason that he wanted the catalyst of the joy to be food, the type of thing about which he wished to convey blessing. This then becomes an example for the teaching of the Rabbis:

#### **Rosh HaShana 16a**

Why did the Tora say to pour before Me water libations<sup>9</sup>[9] on Sukkot? In order that through them there would be blessed the rains of the year.

Bring before Me the Omer Sacrifice (consisting of barley) on Pesach in order that there will be blessed the grains in the fields.

Bring before Me the Two Loaves (consisting of the first of the wheat harvest) on Shavuot in order that there will be blessed the fruits on the trees (to which the law of first fruits also applies<sup>10</sup>[10]).

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<sup>9</sup>[9] The standard liquid sacrifices in the Temple consisted of wine, as opposed to water.

<sup>10</sup>[10] RaShI on the Gemora adds that according to Sanhedrin 70a, the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil from which Adam and Eve ate in the Garden of Eden was a "wheat tree", and therefore wheat can be associated with fruits.

The Talmud's examples operate in accordance with the symmetrical concept of "Mida KeNeged Mida" (lit. a correspondence between principles, i.e., there will be a response in kind for every preceding action), that the blessing will take effect on the very type of substance as a reward for its offering and libation. And the intent of the Rabbis regarding this passage is not that the results are a reward for the performance of these Commandments, "Chas VeShalom". For behold, they have also proclaimed, (Kiddushin 39b) "The reward for a Mitzva does not occur in This World," i.e., the essence of the reward is not in This World, but rather the reward (realized in This World) is the "interest" of the Commandments that an individual enjoys in This World that is manifest in the form of the Mitzva itself, while the principle is preserved for the World To Come. It is parallel to the Rabbinic statement: (Shabbat 23b) Whomever is careful with regard to his "Tzitzit" will merit a beautiful "Tallit"; whomever is careful with regard to "Mezuza" will merit a beautiful home; whomever is careful with regard to "Kiddush" will merit filling his wine receptacles, and the like, since the essential reward is not enjoyed in this world, but rather the "interest" in the form of the Mitzva.

R. S.R. Hirsch understands Yitzchak as not caring about his own feelings or desires when he asks his son to prepare some food for him, but rather as attempting to sublimate Eisav's proclivity for violence and bloodshed into something constructive and productive.

...Yitzchak wanted to bless Eisav in the sense of his future calling. As he hoped that his natural tendencies would come to be employed for useful moral purposes, he wanted him to show that he was turning in that direction at the time he received the blessing. Let him for once employ his wild sport for a true humane purpose. For it certainly seems that this hunting of Eisav's was not usually pursued for the purpose of providing his old weak father with a strengthening meal. What he enjoyed was the hunt for its own sake, the sight of the streaming blood gushing out of the animals. But to hunt for providing refreshment for somebody who was weak and ill, would not enter Eisav's mind, it was not in his character to do so. "Now for once gather up the weapons of your daily occupation, stalk some game, and you yourself prepare a dainty dish for me";<sup>11[11]</sup> you are now for once to use your love of hunting for a benevolent purpose, for the refreshment of an old man, are to feel for once how good it feels to use one's strength and skill to give someone else pleasure. That is also why in the blessing he gave to the supposed Eisav (27:27) he led him from the joy of hunting over to that of agriculture, to the "field blessed by God" with an eye to the prosperity of the future Jewish National Life. This becoming refreshed, and this receiving the blessing by having brought about the refreshment lies in the phrase "in order that my soul will bless you." That is why it says in 27:5 "Then Eisav went out on the hunt **for once** for the purpose "LeHavi" (to bring [it home]).

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<sup>11[11]</sup> The reason for why Yitzchak is originally described as loving Eisav in 25:28, "...because there was hunted food in his mouth" would appear at least at first glance to contradict R. Hirsch's contention regarding previous hunting trips. However it is also possible that whereas prior to when Yitzchak intended to bless Eisav, the hunter had brought his father leftovers, saving the best for himself, this time the intent is that his primary purpose was to serve his father and to try to make him happy.

The two reasons being offered by Rabbeinu Bechaye and R. Hirsch regarding why Yitzchak was so insistent upon Eisav's bringing him fresh food that he had caught and prepared, offer very divergent perspectives of Yitzchak's motivations and intentions. Was Eisav's father trying to summon up as much energy—both personal and metaphysical—as possible in order for his blessing to hopefully take effect, the extra effort indicating that Yitzchak realized that Eisav was far from worthy and that there was a good chance that the blessing would go unfulfilled, **or** was he trying at least one more time to rehabilitate his son and encourage him to change the focus and emphasis of his life? Rather than someone disconnected from the reality of his children and family life, R. Hirsch sees Yitzchak as using the same cunning as some commentators attribute to Eisav himself, in terms of trying to educate his son to live a constructive and helping life through subtle orchestration and the creation of "learning moments". According to R. Hirsch, Yitzchak, perhaps to Rivka's complete disbelief, may have understood very well what Eisav was and wasn't until this point; perhaps by means of sending him to hunt food for him, he was trying to give Eisav one more opportunity via first-hand experience, to recognize that a life spent in the service of others can be much more fulfilling and meaningful than one dedicated to self-indulgence and pleasure. Preaching and remonstrating more often than not drives the rebellious individual away, confirming within their own minds that no one understands and/or empathizes with them. Parents must not only mean well, but also do well.

Shabbat Shalom, and let us hope for peace in our families, devotion to Service to HaShem and our fellow man, and meaningful existences.

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