

Change in the Blink of an Eye

R. Yaakov Bieler

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The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, not only famously said, “You can’t step in the same river twice,”^{1 2} but framed a similar sentiment in terms of an oxymoron: “Nothing endures but change.”³ Although human nature typically desires everything to remain static and known, particularly when good things are happening to an individual,⁴ human experience starkly tells us that it is otherwise, and our fortunes and conditions will inevitably fluctuate, at times widely and wildly, from point to point.

In this week’s *Tora* portion, the fortunes of Yitzchak and Rivka as well as their children Yaakov and Eisav, change dramatically over the course of their lives :

- a) (*Beraishit* 25:20-26) After twenty years of childless marriage, Rivka conceives and the couple must deal with raising twins;
- b) (*Ibid.*, 29-34) The birthright is sold, either symbolically or even legally by Eisav to his younger brother Yaakov;
- c) (*Ibid.*, 26:1-11) The family is forced to relocate due to famine, and the king of Gerar has designs upon Rivka, which are narrowly averted;
- d) (*Ibid.*, 12-14) Yitzchak goes from being a relatively indigent person to one of great success and wealth;
- e) (*Ibid.*, 15-22) Yitzchak’s success leads to conflict with the local population and the family has to relocate a number of times until the hostilities cease;
- f) (*Ibid.*, 34-35) Eisav marries Canaanite women to the displeasure of his parents;
- g) (*Ibid.*, 27:1-30) Rivka masterminds a plot whereby Yaakov pretends to be Eisav in order to receive his father’s blessing intended for Eisav;
- h) (*Ibid.*, 41-28:5) Eisav’s intention to kill his brother once their father dies, leads Rivka to create a pretext where her younger son relocates to Charan, ostensibly to seek out a wife for himself, and the family unit is disrupted forever;⁵

¹ The Yale Book of Quotations, ed. Fred Shapiro, Yale U. Press, New Haven, 2006, p. 356.

² The premise of Heraclitus’ comment is that everything is in flux; not only is the river constantly changing, but you are as well, as is the earth, the universe, etc.

³*Ibid.*

⁴ Rabbi Avi Weiss once related the following story:

A father, upon marrying off his last child was overheard to cry out to God, “Give me a nail!” When asked by his disciples what the father could possibly have meant by such a request, the *Rebbe* stated, “The man understands that life is like a point on a moving wheel, which is either ascending or descending. Now that he is experiencing this wonderful point in his and his family’s lives, he desperately wishes for a means by which he could permanently preserve this sense of euphoria and intense happiness, in effect stopping that point on the wheel’s impending descent.”

⁵ Although Rivka is thought to have kept her word to Yaakov regarding sending for him when she perceives that the threat posed by Eisav has passed (*Beraishit* 27:45)—this is indicated by the otherwise

- i) (Ibid., 6-9) Eisav, finally recognizing his parents' displeasure over his initial marriage partners, marries an additional wife, namely his uncle Yishmael's daughter, in an attempt to appease his parents.

The changes in the family structure and consequent challenges to Yitzchak and Rivka are direct outgrowths of the natural progression of their lives. Children are considered an important aspect of marriage; the birth and maturation of children not only change the dynamic that had previously existed between the parents, but also often carry with it strains and tensions due to typical competition among offspring; the growth of a family creates acute concerns about providing for all of its members and economic considerations become that much more important; a transition from poverty to wealth brings with it its own unique set of challenges; and when children begin to marry, new individuals are introduced into the family unit, accompanied by their own psychological, cultural, moral and religious baggage. Thinking along these lines brings us to a fresh interpretation of the couplets at the beginning of the third chapter of *Kohelet*, verses 1-8:

To everything there is a time, and a moment for every purpose under Heaven.

A time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot that which is planted.

A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to destroy and a time to build.

A time to cry and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance.

A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to distance oneself from embracing.

A time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away.

A time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak.

A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

Not only are these opposites natural parts of human existence in general, but either literally or figuratively, they will be part of the life of every human being. Changing and even contradictory modalities make up the human experience.

While life without all of these permutations would perhaps be simpler and less potentially aggravating, on the other hand, it could be said that life without such developments and the myriad dilemmas that accompany them would constitute a relatively incomplete life. Perhaps the template for this sequence of developments could be said to be a verse describing the projected pattern for mankind, particularly according to one commentator's interpretation:

unexplained presence of Devora, Rivka's nursemaid among Yaakov's entourage (Ibid., 35:8), he initially extends his stay with Lavan beyond when he first mentions to his wives that he wishes to return to his family home (Ibid., 30:25 ff.), which might have coincided with Devora's first coming to him at Rivka's behest. By Yaakov agreeing to stay with Lavan in order to expand his wealth in the end might have caused him to miss even Rivka's funeral, which the Rabbis interpret is being hinted at by the plural form of *Alon Bachut*—see *RaMBaN* on Ibid., 35:8.

Beraishit 2:24

Therefore an individual is to leave his father and mother and cling to his spouse and they will be one flesh.

RaShI, op. cit. LeBasar Echad

The child is formed by both of them and in that way their flesh is made into one.

Quite a few changes are described in Yitzchak and Rivka's domestic lives in *Parashat Toldot*, and it is obvious that they take place over the course of 60 years. At the beginning of the *Parasha*, Yitzchak is 40 when he marries (Ibid., 25:20); he is 60 when the twins are born (Ibid., 26); the incident entailing the selling of the birthright takes place when Yitzchak is 73 according to the Rabbinic view that the term "*VaYigdelu*" (Ibid., 27) represents the boys reaching the age of puberty/*Bar Mitzva*;⁶ if Eisav is 40 when he marries his first two wives (Ibid., 26:34) then Yitzchak would have been 100.⁷ Consequently, although there may have been times of extreme turbulence during Yitzchak and Rivka's lives, there were other periods, sometimes lasting for several years, of relative calm and routine. Our different attitudes to times of turbulence as opposed to interludes of normalcy and even tranquility, is reflected in one of Bill Watterson's classic strips, Calvin and Hobbes, describing a conversation between the boy and his stuffed tiger, as they are careening down an embankment in a wagon, ultimately ending up in the middle of a stream:⁸

Calvin: I wish we could stop summer right here and have the days stay just the way they are.

That's the problem with life. It rolls along with speed you can't control. You can't go faster or slower.

Fun experiences always go roaring by...

While bad experiences never pass quickly enough.

I wish we could choose how fast and slow events go.

⁶ See *RaShI on Beraishit 25:27, op.cit. VaYigdelu HaNa'arim VaYehi Eisav*.

⁷ According to the Rabbinic interpretation that Yitzchak's inability to see (*Beraishit 27:1*) was directly due to his daughters-in-law offering up idolatrous incense (see *RaShI on Ibid., op. cit. VaTich'hena*—1st of three interpretations), then the incident of Yaakov's taking Eisav's blessing did not take place long after Yitzchak reached the age of 100. According to *RaShI on Ibid., 35:29, op. cit. VaYigva Yitzchak*, Yaakov was 63 when he received his blessings (he not only got the blessing intended for Eisav, but also one that always meant for him—see *Ibid., 28:1-4*) from Yitzchak, thereby making Yitzchak at that point 103.

⁸ Homicidal Psycho Jungle Cat: A Calvin and Hobbes Collection, Andrews McMeel Publishing, Kansas City, 1994, p. 172.

For example, I'd like to speed up childhood and get to driving age.

Hobbes: It's not the pace of life I mind. It's the sudden stop at the end.

Yet some changes come fast and furiously, seeming to turn topsy-turvy one's very existence in a fraction of a second. *Parashat Toldot* contains at least one example of such a phenomenon, as well. Yitzchak is going along, thinking that he understands his children, knows what to expect from each of them, and is prepared to confer on each an appropriate blessing, until he suddenly comes to grips with how terribly mistaken he has been. Yaakov has barely left his father's presence, when Eisav returns with the venison that his father had requested as a prerequisite for his receiving Yitzchak's blessing.

Beraishit 27:30-33

...And Eisav his brother came from his hunting.

And he also made for him tasty food and he brought it to his father,
and he said to his father: Let my father arise and eat from the
hunted food of his son in order that your soul will bless me.

And Yitzchak his father said to him: Who are you? And he said: I am
your son, your first born, Eisav.

**And Yitzchak trembled an excessively great trembling and he
said; Who therefore was it who hunted food and brought it
to me and I ate from all of it before you came, and I blessed
him...**

A poetic metaphor for an instantaneous event that involves fundamental change is utilized by R. Yose when explaining the length of the period of time between the end of one day and the beginning of the next, i.e., *Bein HaShemashot*:

Berachot 2b

R. Yose said: *Bein HaShemashot* **KeHeref Ayin** (like the blink of an eye.)

It is this very metaphor that the Midrash utilizes when describing how *HaShem* Came to the immediate aid of a key biblical figure, effectively turning the tables of a battle that had reached a stalemate:

Beraishit Rabba 59:11

...This is what is written, (II *Shmuel* 21:16) "And Yishbi BeNov, who was of the sons of the Rafa, the weight of whose spear was 300 Shekels,⁹ he being girded with a new sword, thought to have slain David." He (Yishbi) lifted him (David) up with his shield and he (David) jumped backwards 18 *Amot* (27'). Each was awed by the

⁹ This indicates that he was as formidable an opponent as Golyat had been—see I *Shmuel* 17.

other. This one was awed by the other, saying: If he can jump backwards like that, who can tell how far he can jump forwards? And that one was awed by this one saying: If he can throw me with his shield in this manner, how will I be able to overpower him? At that moment, David said: If only I had one of my family and he would help me! Immediately, (Ibid., 17) “But Avishay the son of Tzeruya came to his help, and smote the Philistine and killed him.” Was he standing behind the door?¹⁰ The Rabbis said: Even if he had been at the ends of the earth, God Caused him to fly and Brought him **B’Heref Ayin** (in the blink of an eye) in order that that righteous individual not be troubled any more than was necessary...

And so it was with Yitzchak, in the sense of a cruel realization rather than an act of Divine Salvation, that **K’Heref Ayin** he had to come to grips with realities that had never before crossed his mind—what were Yaakov and Eisav really like, and had he drastically miscalculated with respect to doling out Blessings in accordance with what they had done in the past and were going to do in the future?

Such sudden reversals of fortune **KeHeref Ayin** have been brought squarely before the world as a whole and our community in particular this past week. On the one hand, a young woman in our midst is suddenly and completely unexpectedly taken ill and as much as possible we find ourselves trying to be supportive of her and her family and do what is necessary to answer the needs of all concerned. *Baruch HaShem*, it appears that there has been a sudden *Yeshua, Beli Ayin HaRa*, that parallels the original calamity, and we pray for her continued and steady recovery. Unfortunately Rabbi Gavriel and *Rabbanit* Rivka Holtzberg, *A”H*, along with ≈200 others, did not fare so well and were killed cruelly and suddenly by terrorists in Mumbai. Many members of our community have passed through their Chabad House and been the recipients of their hospitality and assistance. It is literally incomprehensible to imagine how individuals who dedicate themselves so unstintingly and sacrificially to the *Mitzvot* of *Hachnasat Orchim* (welcoming guests), and *Kiruv Rechokim* (trying to bring closer to Judaism those who have grown distant from their religious heritage) should be made to suffer and die in such a horrendous manner. However, it is important to keep in mind a Talmudic statement that addresses how one is to respond to situations and events such as these:

Said Rava, and others R. Chisda: If a person sees that afflictions have come upon him, let him inspect his actions, as it is said, (*Eicha* 3:40) “Let us inspect our actions and analyze and return to *HaShem*.” ...

Although the specific context of the Talmud suggests that such situations may have come about due to some type of shortcoming in ourselves, it seems to me that another means by which this can be viewed is to resolve that as a response to the states of affairs that are disturbing us, we should find ways to respond positively,

¹⁰ I.e., how could David have received the assistance of his family member so quickly?

each in his own way and in accordance with his own ability and capacity, to allow what has happened to these individuals to inspire us to raise our own commitments and devotions, to do more than we have done previously for the ill, to decide how we can ourselves be more sacrificial in our own lives. In this way these situations will have some positive effect upon us all, even as we deeply wish they never had taken place at all.

Let us sincerely pray for a full *Refua Shleima* for all those who are sick and/or injured, as well as resolve to dedicate our own lives just that much more to *Tora* and *Mitzvot* as a proper remembrance of those who have suffered so much.