

Free Agents or Automatons?

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Parashat Toldot

Had the plan to obtain Yitzchak's Blessing been sufficiently thought out by Rivka and Yaakov?

Following the deception of Yitzchak¹ with regard to Yaakov's obtaining the blessing that at least ostensibly, appears to have been intended for Eisav,² Rivka explains to Yaakov the "end game" of her plan. During the plotting of how to assure that Yaakov instead of Eisav would be blessed by Yitzchak, the only concern that was raised was the possibility that Yitzchak would discover Yaakov's true identity (Beraishit 27:11-13), resulting in a curse instead of a blessing. Doesn't it appear short sighted that no planning was devoted to how to deal with Eisav's reaction once the ploy would be eventually uncovered? Eisav had been sent out by Yitzchak to obtain food in anticipation of his receiving a blessing (v. 3-4), and would sooner or later return. It was inevitable that he would go straight to Yitzchak once he had completed his mission, and he would discover that he had been usurped by his brother. While until this point, the biblical text had stated nothing about Eisav's temperament and personality other than a "sour grapes" reaction to the birthright that he had "sold" (25:34), the verse that contrasts the twin brothers, 25:27, could readily lead to the conclusion that Eisav, the man of the field, would be prone to violence and was familiar with the use of weaponry, whereas, Yaakov, the mild man of the tent, would possess neither the temperament nor the training to defend himself against his brother's anger. If more than two decades after the deception took place, Yaakov mightily feared Eisav's possible violent retributions (32:4 ff.), why was he not afraid prior to carrying out the plot? Yet

¹Elements of the deception include: a) Rivka's devising the entire plot (Beraishit 27:6 ff.); b) Yaakov's obtaining and Rivka's preparing of a goat that would substitute for the wild animal that Eisav was hunting (v. 9-10); c) dressing Yaakov in Eisav's clothing and placing goat fur on his arms to provide tactile and olfactory evidence to Yitzchak that it was in fact Eisav standing before him (v. 15-16); d) two verbal declarations of what appears to be false identity (v. 19, 24); the reluctance to correct Yitzchak's impression once he has convinced himself that this indeed was Eisav (v. 27).

² When Yitzchak confronts the inescapable conclusion that he had blessed Yaakov rather than Eisav (v. 33), instead of reacting in anger and stating that the blessing is obviously invalid since it was obtained under false pretenses, he ratifies the blessing! (end of v. 33). Furthermore, before Yaakov leaves to travel to Charan and live with his uncle Lavan, Yaakov gives him yet another blessing (28:3-4), behavior hardly fitting a father who is perturbed at the son who has just deceived him regarding obtaining a blessing. Based upon the terminology of v. 4, some commentators maintain that this latter blessing is the key Divine Promise that had first been bestowed on Avraham, and that Rivka had misunderstood Yitzchak's intention when he told Eisav that he wished to bless him. Consequently, it is to be concluded that Yitzchak had always known that Yaakov was the preferred son to carry on the Abrahamic tradition, and the blessing intended for Eisav, that Yaakov also received due to his collusion with his mother, was intended for the first born of the immediate family, to which Eisav could at least biologically lay claim (there is always the matter of whether or not the "sale" of the status of being firstborn was a legitimate transaction (25:31 ff.), rather than for Yaakov, the next patriarch engaged in the formation of the Jewish people.

the text curiously contains no anticipation of such a result, on the parts of either Yaakov or Rivka.

Reasons why Eisav's anger and frustration upon having his brother take the Blessing that he was promised should have been anticipated

Rivka's obliviousness appears to be out of keeping with the precedent established by Sara, where women are posited to have greater insight into family matters than men. When Avraham is unhappy with Sara's decision to banish Hagar and Yishmael, God instructs him to agree with her decision (21:12). If ChaZal's approach with regard to Sara is followed, i.e., that she made the determination to expel her handmaiden and surrogate child due to a prophetic vision—e.g., RaShI on 21:12—Rivka also appears to obtain information regarding the destiny of her progeny via prophecy in light of 25:22-23. And if one contends that the revelation received by Rivka was never meant to be acted upon by her, but rather was designed to only account for why there already was³ and would continue to be conflict between her two children, basic common sense would seem to indicate that dealing with Eisav's virtually inevitable anger would have to enter into the plan's preparations.

Rivka had dealt with difficult individuals her entire life; why was she not more circumspect with regard to Eisav's reactions to Yaakov's taking the Blessing that he believed was meant for him?

A further reason to be surprised at Rivka's lack of insight in terms of Eisav's thinking is the fact that she grew up in the home of her brother Lavan, an individual infamous for his plottings and even homicidal tendencies.⁴ With such a background, wouldn't she have been aware of the potentially explosive situation that she was creating for her son Eisav?

What would have happened had Rivka never been told of Eisav's determination to avenge himself on his brother?

Yet it is only after "the cat is out of the bag" with respect to Eisav's murderous intent (27:41) that Rivka proposes to Yaakov what to do next in response to Eisav's fury (27:42 ff.) Although Eisav reacts with powerful emotion when he understands what Yaakov had done—"...And he screamed out a great and exceedingly bitter scream" (v. 34); "...And Eisav raised his voice and cried" (v. 38)—he never verbally expresses any explicit intent to harm his brother. Rivka's advice to Yaakov to distance himself from his sibling is given only after she is apprised of Eisav's counterplot to vengefully kill Yaakov once Yitzchak dies (v. 41). How she is able to discern Eisav's intentions is unclear, in light of the text (v. 41) stating that Eisav kept his own council and went no further than thinking ("And Eisav said in his heart...") about murdering his brother. The text suggests that had she not been "told"⁵ about Eisav's plan, Yaakov would have remained with Yitzchak, Rivka, and Eisav, and the pretense that it was time for Yaakov to find a wife in the same place that Yitzchak himself had done so (v. 46), via the good offices of Eliezer, would never

³See RaShI on Beraishit 25:22.

⁴See Da'at Zekeinim MiBa'alei HaTosafot on Beraishit 24:55.

⁵Commentators are divided as to whether this too was an act of prophecy or, more realistically, that while Eisav was relatively secretive about his intentions, he did confide in a friend who in turn alerted Rivka.

have been devised. Wasn't it both shortsighted and naïve for Rivka and Yaakov to have assumed that Eisav was going to allow himself to be taken advantage of without any repercussions? What good would it be for Yaakov to obtain a special blessing, if he would very soon afterward possibly be killed by his brother, before he had the opportunity to in turn father children upon whom this precious blessing could likewise be bestowed? This would not have been the first time in the book of Beraishit that fratricide was perpetrated due to the jealousy felt by one sibling towards another (4:1 ff.), nor the last (37:18 ff.).

Rivka's expectation that Eisav would eventually "get over" Yaakov's improperly obtaining the Blessing proves to not be justified

Yet another lack of understanding of Eisav's psychology on the part of Rivka is evidenced when she assumes that over time, Eisav will forgive Yaakov (v. 44-45) for his having gotten the best of him. While Beraishit Rabba 67:10 removes the onus from Rivka and places it upon Eisav:

"His mother in her righteousness said, '...Until the anger of your brother abates', but it did not, and instead, (Amos 1:11) 'And his anger tore perpetually and he kept his wrath forever.'"

But shouldn't it have been clear to his mother that Eisav's temperament and value system was different from her own—could this be why she preferred Yaakov over Eisav (Beraishit 25:28), and therefore she should not have projected what she expected from herself emotionally, i.e., that over time she would forget and forgive, to be the case concerning her son? So wouldn't one expect greater depth of understanding on the part of Eisav's mother?

Yaakov's worries about Eisav seeking revenge for being usurped regarding the blessing decades later

Whether or not Yaakov in Chapter 27 was convinced by Rivka that Eisav would eventually forgive him, when he is returning from Charan in Chapter 32, he certainly does not act as if he expected Eisav to let bygones be bygones. Yaakov first worriedly sends emissaries to determine Eisav's state of mind (32:4-6). Hearing that Eisav is on his way to meet him accompanied by 400 men (v. 7) Yaakov divides his camp in the hope that at least some members of his household would survive a military attack (v. 8-9, 33:1-2), offers a substantial tribute that is designed to arrive in stages for maximum effect (32:14 ff.), and bows down obsequiously when he finally meets Eisav (33:3). The Rabbinic interpretation by the Rabbis quoted by RaShi for the dots over the word (33:4) "VaYeshakeihu" (And he [Eisav] kissed him [Yaakov]) suggests that Yaakov's fears were not the result of undue paranoia, since up until the last moment, and perhaps even beyond, resentment lingered in Eisav's heart towards his brother.

A perspective that might account for why the elements in this story were not mere human oversights

One manner, by which these apparently glaring miscalculations can be accounted for, is by proposing that they may not have been the fault of those who seem to make them. Robert Alter,⁶ describing his understanding of the bible in general and Beraishit in particular, writes,

⁶ The Art of Biblical Narrative, Basic Books, NY, 1981, pp. 33-4.

“(the text) seeks through the process of narrative realization to reveal the enactment of God’s Purposes in historical events. This enactment, however, is continuously complicated by a perception of two, approximately parallel dialectical tensions. One is the tension between the Divine Plan and the disorderly character of actual historical events, or to translate this opposition into specifically biblical terms, between the Divine Promise and its ostensible failure to be fulfilled; the other is the tension between God’s Will, His Providential Guidance, and human freedom, the refractory nature of man ...(re Beraishit, there is) considerable latitude for the elucidation of a Divine Plan, with however this sense of design repeatedly counterbalanced by the awareness of man’s unruly nature, the perilous and imperious individuality of the human agents in the Divine Experiment.”

In the same manner that it is proposed that Yaakov’s final exile from Canaan entailing a descent to Egypt, thereby fulfilling the predictions made to Avraham by God in Beraishit 15:13, was catalyzed by the selling of Yosef—see RaShI on 37:2—so too Yaakov’s original exile also could have come about due to Divine Manipulation of human behavior. If we assume that God, in order to actualize His Grand Designs, needed Yaakov to feel that he had to leave his home for a protracted period of time, in order for all sorts of things to transpire, not least of which is his fathering thirteen children with Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah, then a situation had to be created whereby this is necessitated. Again, just as good sense would have mitigated against Yaakov’s displaying favoritism towards Yosef to the chagrin and frustration of his other children, so too Rivka could have been more subtle in her planning and attempts to avoid enraging Eisav. But then Yaakov would have ended up staying home in both cases, and the Divine Plan would have had to come about in some other way.

Free Choice vs. Divine Intervention vis-à-vis stories involving the Founders of the Jewish People

The extent to which biblical characters are masters of their own destinies as opposed to serving, at least for finite periods of time, as pawns in some greater design, is interesting to contemplate. Of course, an inherent difficulty in such an approach, is when we read the bible, expecting to find behaviors after which we can model ourselves, if the actions and decisions portrayed are less than optimal choices that have been Divinely Imposed upon certain individuals so that a national or even worldly objective can be achieved, how should this affect the ultimate reputations of the people involved, and how are we to evaluate whether or not such approaches deserve our emulation? This problem is particularly acute according to the assumption that biblical characters, particularly the Avot and Imahot should be above reproach in all that they do.