



Making Our Voices Heard

By Keren Weinberger

Following much davening and pleading to Hashem to alter her difficult plight of being incapable to conceive, Rivka, who has been desperate for a child, finally becomes pregnant. In fact, Hashem informs Rivka that she has actually been blessed to bear twins: “Shenei Goyim BeVitneich UShenei Le’umim MiMei’ayich Yipareidu ULom Milom Ye’ematz VeRav Ya’avod Tza’ir,” “Two nations are in your womb and two states. They will be divided from one another, starting from within you. One state shall become mightier than the other and the mighty one shall serve the lesser” (BeReishit 25:23).

These Pesukim preface the complex, and oftentimes contentious, relationship between Yaakov and Esav that begins to unfold in this week’s Parashah, and which has continued to manifest itself through their descendants throughout the ages to present day.

Yaakov and Esav mature and proceed on very divergent life paths. Yaakov develops into a “wholesome man” dwelling in tents of Torah scholarship, whereas Esav goes on to be a “cunning hunter, a man of the field” (ibid. 27). Towards the end of the Parashah, we read of how Rivka instructs Yaakov to approach Yitzchak to receive the Berachot. Yaakov is initially reluctant, as doing so will entail an element of deception which is anathema to him. Rivka, however, realizing the great importance of the Berachot and how it is imperative they be bestowed on Yaakov and his progeny, ultimately prevails on Yaakov to relent.

When Yaakov meets his father to receive the Berachot, Yitzchak, who is blind, is quite perplexed. Expecting Esav, Yitzchak notes that “הקל קול געלב ונהגים גדי” “עשו”, that the individual before him speaks like Yaakov, yet physically feels like Esav (as Yaakov was wearing a hairy cloak that his mother provided him) (ibid. 27:22). The

Midrash interprets this Pasuk homiletically, that so long as Yaakov’s voice is engaged in prayer and Limud HaTorah, Esav’s hands (i.e., his might) will be powerless to triumph over Yaakov. However, if Yaakov is lax in utilizing his voice for spiritual means, then Esav is empowered.

The Vilna Gaon elaborates on how Chazal derived this lesson from the Pasuk. He astutely notes that the word “Kol” is mentioned twice in the Pasuk, yet there is a discrepancy. In the first instance, the word “קל” is spelled Chaseir, in its abbreviated form, with only a Kuf and a Lamed, but no Vav. By contrast, in the second instance, the word “קול” is spelled Malei, in its full form with the letters Kuf, Vav, and Lamed. The Vilna Gaon extrapolates that the missing Vav indicates that something is absent; our voice is lacking and not as loud as it could be. When this situation exists, it creates the potential of ונהגים גדי עשו. This lesson was important during the times of our Patriarchs and continues to be relevant today as well.

We are unfortunately a people that has been discriminated against and persecuted throughout history. This, however, is not a phenomenon that has ceased in modern times, rather it remains fresh and continues to occupy front page news. Be it Kanye West, Kyrie Irving, the United Nations singular focus on Israel (most recently requesting that the International Court of Justice “urgently” weigh in on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli “annexation”, while seemingly oblivious to atrocities throughout the world), and even something so mundane as ice cream sales where Ben and Jerry’s manages to find selling its products in Israel so abhorrent despite having no issue with sales in places like Iran, Saudi Arabia and China, antisemitism is regrettably alive and well.

In their book “Why the Jews?”, Dennis Prager and Jospeh Talushkin note that despite its prevalence on the world stage throughout history, antisemitism cannot be

explained rationally. Jews have at times been hated for allegedly being a “fifth column”, unwilling to be integrated into the dominant society, and at others for being too assimilated. They have been loathed for being poor and parasitical, and similarly detested for their affluence and success, “controlling Hollywood” and the world financial system. This persistent and profound hatred is ultimately unexplainable.

If that is the case, what steps should we take to try rectifying this situation? Undoubtedly, we need to use our voice to speak out against discrimination and Jew hatred by, individually and collectively, protesting vehemently against antisemitism. However, while this remains critically important, by itself it is insufficient and misses the mark. Our Parashah teaches us that to safeguard our safety, security and prosperity, we must ensure that our “קול” is “Malei BeVav”. We must invest time, effort and enthusiasm into our davening and our Torah learning. We must use our voices in a “loud”, “full-throated” manner in the service of Hashem.

Appearance and Middot: Looking Like Your Father’s

Son

By Dovid Gopin (23)

Parashat Toledot starts off “וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם אֲבְרָהָם” וְהוֹלִיד אֶת־יִצְחָק” “And these are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham; Abraham begot Isaac” (25:19). Rashi (s.v. Avraham Holid Et Yitzchak) explains that the Torah repeated that Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak after it had already said that Yitzchak is the son of Avraham because the people of the generation claimed that Avimelech begot Yitzchak. Therefore Hashem changed the face of Yitzchak to look like Avraham so that everyone would say that Avraham begot Yitzchak.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe poses several questions on this. One, in what way did Hashem change the face of Yitzchak and why would Hashem need to change Yitzchak’s face if a son typically looks like his father? Second, why does the Torah hint to Hashem changing Yitzchak’s face specifically in Parashat Toledot where it talks about the descendants of Yitzchak? Why not in the section where it talks about Yitzchak’s birth?

The Rebbe answers that in general a son looks like his father because he is also similar to him in his actions. However, Avraham and Yitzchak who acted

totally different from one another didn’t really resemble each other. For example, Avraham preached Chesed and love to everyone, while Yitzchak preached Gevurah and fear/resept.

This was the argument of the people of the generation, that since Avraham and Yitzchak didn’t act the same way, Avraham can’t possibly be Yitzchak’s father. Therefore Hashem changed Yitzchak to look like Avraham because really in nature they shouldn’t look alike.

This is also why this is mentioned in Parashat Toledot which speaks of Yitzchak’s life and his actions. By seeing Yitzchak’s life story we find the difference between his and Avraham’s actions. This gave room for the people of the generation to say that they are not father and son as they don’t act similarly.

It is possible that Hashem not only changed the physical appearance of Yitzchak, but also made their inner traits similar. This means that the characteristic of Yitzchak’s Gevurah was an outcome and a continuation of Avraham’s Chesed, so this is how Hashem made them look similar.

There are a few lessons we can take from this: One, that everyone should incorporate the traits of Chesed and Gevurah in their daily lives and try to perfect these characteristics. Second, if there is a doubt to choose Chesed or Gevurah then choose Chesed because Gevurah is just an outcome of Chesed which is why Hashem changed Yitzchak’s actions to be like Avraham and not the other way around.

The Voice is Yaakov’s Voice, but the Hands are

Eisav’s Hands

By Binyamin Bak (24)

In this week’s Parashah, Parashat Toledot, there is a well known phrase “הקול קול יעקב והידיים ידי עשו” “The voice is Yaakov’s voice, but the hands are Eisav’s hands.” Rashi explains that it was not Yaakov’s voice which was different from Eisav’s, but rather it was the way Yaakov spoke - with his refined manner - that surprised Yitzchak. However, this doesn’t seem to make sense: Yaakov was well aware of how his brother (Eisav) spoke, and he knew that he was pretending to be him. So why didn’t he speak the way Eisav would? Rav Moshe Feinstein gives a beautiful answer: A person who is filled with Torah

values - a “sincere Jew” - is not able to speak in an insensitive way, even if he tries. Therefore, Yaakov Avinu, who spent all his days learning Torah in the study hall, was incapable of speaking the way Eisav would speak.

Who Chooses the King?

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Hashem or Us?

Who chooses the Melech, us or Hashem? In the first half of Devarim 17:15, “Som Tasim Alecha Melech, Asher Yivchar Bo Hashem Elokecha,” “appoint a king that Hashem will choose” indicates that Hashem chooses. On the other hand, the second half of Perek 15, “MiKerev Achecha Tasim Alecha Melech Lo Tuchal LaTeit Alecha Ish Nochri,” “one may not appoint a Nochri as the Melech” implies that we make the choice.

Four Classic Answers

Explanation #1: Ramban Citing Chazal

Ramban (to Devarim 17:15) first cites Chazal’s very straightforward approach. They explain that the first half of Devarim 17:15 applies when a Navi is available. In such circumstances, the Navi communicates Hashem’s choice, as done by Shmuel HaNavi regarding Shaul HaMelech and David HaMelech. However, if a Navi is unavailable, then the second half of Devarim 17:15 applies, that the people choose.

Chazal’s approach may be seen as a model for decision-making. We begin by exploring whether Hashem sets forth specific instructions about the matter at hand in the Torah. If so, we follow His clear guidance. On the other hand, if Hashem’s direction is not explicit, then the decision is left to us. The next two approaches teach us how to make a decision absent an overt divine directive.

Explanation #2: Rashbam

Rashbam to Devarim 17:15 argues that the first half of the Pasuk talks about the king, who must be appointed by none other than Hashem. The second half talks about selecting the head of the military¹. We might be tempted to think that when it comes to security, we take the most qualified person, regardless of his spiritual stature.

The Pasuk teaches that even when it comes to security, we must consider Hashem and His Torah. We do not want someone in such an influential national role

¹ The Rashbam may be understood as referring not only to the appointment of the military leader but to all leadership positions other than the king.

unless they live a model Torah life. Moreover, we believe military success stems primarily from Hashem and not our soldierly skills. Indeed, each day at Shacharit, we recite the Pasuk in Tehillim (20:8) “Eileh VaRechev Ve’Eileh VaSusim, Va’Anachnu BeSheim Hashem Elokeinu Nazkir,” “while these attack with chariots and these attack with horses, we call out to Hashem.”

Explanation #3: Seforno

According to Seforno (to Devarim 17:15), both parts of the Pasuk address a time when we cannot access a Navi. The second half of the Pasuk clarifies that we are speaking of a time when a Navi is unavailable. The first half of the Pasuk teaches us to pick someone Hashem would have chosen. The Torah teaches that a leader must not only meet the secular qualifications but also be a proper Jew so that they serve as an appropriate role model for the nation.

Seforno teaches us that even when we make “secular” choices, we should fully consider Hashem and His Torah. All the choices we make should be what Hashem would have made. This approach is an excellent strategy for good decision-making. One should consider what Hashem would choose in such a situation.

Approach #4: Ramban’s Peshat Approach

The Ramban then presents a stunning and bold Peshat approach. He explains that both halves of the Pasuk are true. As expressed in the second half of the Pasuk, we appoint the leader. The second half, though, teaches that although we select the king, Hashem makes the choice. In other words, we appoint the king, but Hashem does it through us - Hashem influences our choice.

The Ramban cites two sources to support his most fascinating approach. First, he quotes Sefer Daniel (4:29), presenting none other than Nevuchadnetzar’s proclamation² that Hashem “שְׁלִיט בְּמַלְכוּת אַנְשָׁא וּלְמַן-דֵּי יִצְבֵּא, “rules the kingdom of men, and gives the kingship to whomsoever He wills”. Ramban then cites Bava Batra 58a, which states that “אֶפְיָלוּ רִישׁ גְּרָגוּתָא מִשְׁמַיָּא מוֹקְמִי לֵיהּ,”

² We paraphrase Nevuchadnetzar’s thought in Kah Ribbon Olam on Friday nights. For further explanation see my work on Sefer Daniel, “Opportunity in Exile: An In-Depth Exploration of Sefer Daniel,” available at https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_Daniel%3B_Opportunity_in_Exile%2C_Perek_3%2C_Why_Do_We_Paraphrase_Nevuchadnetzar_When_Singing_Kah_Ribbon_Olam%3F?lang=bi

Hashem determines even the appointment of the administrator of irrigation ditches³”.

Interestingly, the Ramban to Shemot 7:3 similarly argues that Hashem controls the actions of a leader. As support, he cites Mishlei 21:1, which states, “Lev Melech BeYad Hashem, Al Kol Asher Chafetz Yatenu,” “the heart of a king is in the hand of Hashem; He tilts it to that which He desires.” Ramban marshals this Pasuk to resolve the contradiction between our belief in Free Will and Hashem hardening Paroh’s heart. Ramban believes that the principle of Free Will does not apply to a king.

Ramban apparently believes that certain very large matters are too big for us to determine⁴. The Gemara (Moed Katan 18b and Sotah 2a) similarly teaches that the marriage decision is left to Hashem. Such a momentous occasion with such large and generational implications is too important for Hashem to delegate to us.

We should note, however, that the Rambam (chapter eight of his Shemonah Perakim and his letter to R. Ovadiah HaGer (Iggerot HaRambam, Sheilat edition, 1:237) rejects the idea that Hashem determines who one marries. The Rambam explains Moed Katan 18b and Sotah 2a to mean that if we honor Hashem’s Mitzvot, He rewards us by helping us find a worthy match.

It seems that the Rambam would not adopt the Ramban’s Peshat approach to Devarim 17:15. Rather, he likely would adopt the Seforno’s approach that the Pasuk teaches us to appoint a king that Hashem would choose⁵.

³ The Bracha upon seeing a king “Baruch Shenatan MiKevodo LeVasar VAdam”, Blessed is He who shares his glory with humanity,” (Brachot 58a) also implies that Hashem appoints a leader.

⁴ The Ramban writes that the same applies to the decision of the location of the Beit HaMikdash. The Ramban explains Devarim 12:5 that describes the Beit HaMikdash as “HaMakom Asher Yivchar Hashem, the place Hashem will select,” to mean that whatever place we choose to build the Beit Hamikdash, ultimately the choice will be made by Hashem. We may think we are making the choice, but it is Hashem who influences our decision.

⁵ The Rambam did not write a commentary to the Chumash. I think that Seforno tries to fill this role, as he often adopts a Rambam-like approach in his commentary to the Chumash. I believe the same applies to Radak’s commentary to Nach. This important matter merits extensive exploration.

The Tension between Free Will and Hashgacha Peratit

A fine line separates Hashgacha Peratit (divine influence over earthly matters) and Bechirah Chofshit (Free Will). The Rambam more strongly emphasizes free will, whereas the Ramban seems to place the stress on Hashgacha Peratit⁶.

Conclusion – Who Chooses a Leader

Devarim 17:15 presents an ambiguity as to who decides on the appointment of a leader; is it us or Hashem who makes the decision? Ultimately, the question is not fully resolved, and the ambiguity remains. Our question seems embroiled in a dispute between our greatest of Rishonim, the Rambam, and Ramban.

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⁶ For a full discussion of the differences and similarities between Rambam and Ramban regarding the balance between Hashgacha Peratit and Bechirah Chofshit, please see the essay by Rav Assaf Bednarsh archived at <https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/issues-mussar-and-faith/divine-providence-and-natural-order>.