

# This Land is My Land

## A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

### Essay #33—Parshat Toldot (1) 5762

Hello and greetings from Jerusalem.

The Torah reading begins this week with, "These are the children of Yitzchak the son of Avraham, [for] Avraham begat Yitzchak." Once again, the Torah reminds us that Avraham's seed is Yitzchak and not the previously mentioned Yishmael, who, at the end of last week's reading, *nafal*, had been consigned to demise. The Torah assigns to Yitzchak the role of torchbearer for Avraham, to beget offspring who will work to reveal God in this world. And so, the week's Torah reading begins with Yitzchak's children, Yaakov and Esav, both of whom were meant to carry on that torch.

However, have you ever met anyone who heard of "Esav" being the torchbearer of spirituality? the torchbearer of Godliness? And yet, the Torah testifies, "these are the children of Yitzchak"?! So, there must be more to meet the eye than just that Yitzchak had two children, Yaakov and Esav. For each, in his own way, is a cause of Godly revelation in this world. Furthermore, Esav has quite a lot to do with revealing the sanctity of the Holy Land. Let us begin an examination of this week's reading, which has enough material to supply us for several months of essays about our connection to God and the Holy Land.

Yishmael was 14 years older than Yitzchak. He was the firstborn of Avraham, and, technically, could have claimed the birthright along with the perks and responsibilities that come with it. However, there were two obstacles to his doing so. Firstly, he was born of Hagar, the maidservant, the concubine. Secondly, and more importantly, both God and Avraham rejected him outright, refusing to allow him to be Avraham's heir. The main reason for this was his capital crimes—idolatry, immorality and murder—and dastardly deeds, in particular his penchant for stealing from anyone who was "lucky" enough to pass through his nomadic neighborhoods (see Rashi, *Genesis* 21:9; 21:20).

Thus, Yitzchak becomes Avraham's heir and has twin boys, born from the same wife, at the same time. This seems to set both children on equal footing. Yet this is impossible since physically only one can exit the womb first. At this point the Torah tells us that even before their birth the two battled: Yaakov sought God while Esav sought idolatry; Yaakov sought the eternal world, Esav yearned for the material (Rashi 25:22). They were incompatible from the start and the battle for primacy began in Rivkah's womb.

Now Yaakov was conceived from the very first drop of Yitzchak's seed and thus claimed to be the firstborn. However, Esav, brash and brazen from the beginning, pushed his way out first. Yaakov tried to restrain him, holding onto Esav's ankle, but to no avail—the bully got off to a roaring start (see Rashi 25:26).

So here we have it. Two children born at the same time demanding the birthright and all that comes with it. Yaakov spends his time learning about God, while Esav becomes the "man of the field," serving idolatry, committing immoral and indecent acts, while at the same time putting on airs about his

deep-rooted piety (Rashi 25:27; 26:34). That is, until Esav hears that servitude to God is expected. Then he sells the birthright for a measly portion of lentils, for in his eyes, being able to recognize and serve God is worth even less than a cheap porridge. His true colors are revealed to all, except his father whom he has learned to deceive—and even respect, to a certain degree.

For the meantime, let's abandon Esav and his lifestyle and look at how Yitzchak reflects the Holy Land.

**Genesis 26:** A famine comes, forcing Yitzchak to make a critical decision: Stay home, or descend to Egypt as his father Avraham had. While contemplating the situation, Yitzchak merits to a message from God, saying, "Stay in the Land! Live here and I will be with you; for to you and your seed I will give all these Lands and I will fulfill My oath to your father Avraham. He will have many descendents, I will give to them all of this Land...and all the nations will be blessed with your seed. [I will do] this, because Avraham listened to My Voice, and observed My mitzvot." Yitzchak obeyed and stayed in Philistine territory (present day Gaza area), all part of the Holy Land. Rashi explains that Yitzchak was commanded not to leave the Holy Land. Since he willingly sacrificed himself at the Akeidah (Binding of Yitzchak), he attained a level of perfection and was not to depart from the sanctity of the Land (Rashi, *Genesis 26:2*). So Yitzchak settled temporarily in Gerar and brought blessing to the area. His fields yielded crops some 100 times the amount that would normally be harvested in such an area!

This passage teaches that one should stay in the Holy Land despite all the hardships one faces. One has to be willing to go beyond the limits of ordinary self-sacrifice and give 100% maximum effort. Then, not only does one merit experiencing God, but remaining steadfast in the Holy Land, as well. Not only does he remain, but he merits a blessing which defies all natural explanation. By the way, those of us who live here are, to an extent, as meritorious as Yitzchak. For we've come as far as we can in displaying our willingness to sacrifice ourselves before God, as has actually, very unfortunately, happened to so many of our brothers and sisters, may God console their families and us, as well as Zion and Jerusalem. May it soon be time to reap the blessings bestowed upon our Patriarchs. Amen.

As the weekly Torah reading continues, Yitzchak leaves Gerar—in fact, he was chased out—yet he persisted in bringing blessing to his neighbors, this time by digging wells and providing water for them. Instead of thanking him, they seized the wells from him and drove Yitzchak further away. Eventually, he found peace, but not until he paid a hefty price for it. Where is the blessing? Wherever Yitzchak went, he sought to bring bounty and good, despite the opposition of his neighbors. He never let negative public opinion get him down; he knew that this was his Land and that the nations would be blessed in his merit. What was that blessing? That Yitzchak never let them down. He was there to provide for his enemies! To see that they, too, would benefit from his efforts.

This is Yitzchak's and the Jews' mission in life, to work at bringing blessing to this world. Of course, in a situation in which it's my life or theirs, mine comes first. But I need not look to battle. I need to look to build, to provide, to nourish, to sustain. I have to want to do this, I have to be willing to make sacrifices for it, even extreme self-sacrifices. And then, despite the evil intentions of my neighbors, I will merit to live in peace in my land. As Rebbe Nachman teaches, "These are the children of Yitzchak son of Avraham, Avraham gave birth to Yitzchak." Avraham represents Chessed, acts of kindness. Yitzchak represents Gevurah, restraint and sacrifice. Only when we are willing to endure restraint and self-sacrifice, as Yitzchak did, can we begin to reap the benefits of (Avraham's) Chessed (*Likutey Moharan I, Lesson #74*).

But this is not a blanket promise, at least not as of yet. For, as the Torah continues, we've got to contend

not only with our Gazan/Philistine/Yishmael neighbors who seek nothing less than to chase us away into the sea, but with Esav and his minions. And, he's even more of a bargain than Yishmael and his cohorts. For Esav was, like "Yasir and Co." (i.e., "cohorts"), deceitful. He displayed his piety before his father by asking questions about unnecessary tithing (of salt and of straw), while, at the same time, routinely committing murder and rape. Esav "excelled" in idolatry. He married two women, each a worse idolater than the other, who brought idolatry into Yitzchak's home. Yet, despite Esav's deceit his father, the tzaddik Yitzchak, held out hope for him too.

And so, as it came to pass, Yitzchak called to Esav and told him to bring some game for a meal, as a prelude to being given the blessing. Despite the complete deceit of Esav, Yitzchak wanted him to have all of this world. Yitzchak knew that Yaakov was the righteous one, while Esav was an accomplished villain. Thus, Yaakov, who will inherit the Eternal World, who will live for eternity in good, has no need whatsoever for this world. On the other hand, Esav is not so destined. Why should Yitzchak give evil Esav power and wealth, which would certainly be used to perpetrate more wickedness?

Yitzchak thought that Esav had some redeeming qualities. After all, he was careful to tithe his "salt and straw," so certainly Esav would share his wealth and material good with Yaakov. He would become a pillar of support for his brother Yaakov, for the Jews, and thus, by his charitable deeds, merit some measure of the World to Come. But Rivkah knew only too well how wicked Esav was and thwarted his efforts to take these blessings (as we shall see in the next essay).

Nevertheless, with his deceitful manner, Esav the bully chiseled a blessing out of Yitzchak. Here we have the main reason for our suffering throughout the exile, as well as our difficulties in claiming the Land. What can we do about it?

(to be continued)

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