

Shiur for Shabbat Parshat Toldot

"BECHIRA" and/or "BRACHA" in Sefer Breishit

Yitzchak vs. Rivka

What we think:



Board #1: The bechira goes to one of Yitzchak's children - but which one?

What Yitzchak thinks:



Board #2: The bechira goes to both of Yitzchak's children

What Rivka knows:

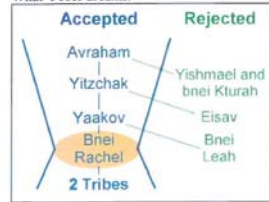


Board #3: The final bechira process

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Yosef & his brothers

What Yosef dreams:



Board #4: The bechira goes to Bnei Rachel

What the brothers wish:



Board #5: The bechira goes to Bnei Leah

11/12/99

Dedicated in memory of Chana Friedman :
 (Chana bat Yaakov u'Devorah) A"H
 on her 12th yahrzeit"

THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT TOLDOT - ' the chosen son'

Are Yitzchak are Rivka playing 'favorites'? Indeed, a cursory reading of Parshat Toldot certainly leaves that impression.

Furthermore, why does Yitzchak choose to bless only **one** of his children? Would it have been so terrible had he planned to bless both Esav and Yaakov?

In the following shiur, we search for the deeper meaning of these events. To enable our discussion, we must first consider the distinction between two concepts that we encounter in Sefer Breishit - 'bechira' [choosing] and 'beracha' [blessing].

INTRODUCTION

Our shiurim thus far on Sefer Breishit have focused on its theme of "bechira" - i.e. God's designation of Avraham and his offspring to become His special nation. We made special note of the numerous times that God had promised Avraham that his offspring ('zera') would become a great nation in a special land ('aretz'). Even though each promise added a unique dimension to Avraham's destiny, they all shared an element of the same phrase:

"le-ZAR'ACHA natati et ha-ARETZ ha-zot...
 - to your OFFSPRING, I have given this LAND."
 [See 12:7, 13:15, 15:18, 17:8]

However, despite these numerous blessings suggesting that this nation will emerge from **all** of Avraham's offspring, God later informs Avraham that specifically Sarah's son: Yitzchak - to the exclusion of all other offspring - has been chosen to fulfill this destiny:

"For it is [only] through Yitzchak that there shall be called for you ZARA [your offspring]." (see 21:12)

Parshat Toldot opens as God Himself confirms this blessing of 'bechira' to Yitzchak, when He forbids him to leave the land during a famine:

"Reside in this land and I will bless you... for I will assign all this LAND to YOU and to YOUR OFFSPRING." (26:2-5)

What will happen when Yitzchak has children? Will only ONE of his children be chosen, as was the case with Avraham, or will ALL his offspring be chosen?

Considering that the reason for God's 'bechira' (selection) of Avraham was for his offspring to become a NATION (see 12:1-2), obviously this 'filtering' process of choosing only ONE son over the others could not continue forever. Should only one 'favorite son' be chosen in each generation, obviously - a nation could never develop. Sooner or later, this 'filtering process' must end, and an entire family must be chosen.

Thanks to our 20/20 hindsight, we know that this process ends after THREE generations (Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov). However, the Avot themselves may have been unaware of when this 'bechira' process was to end.

Let's consider this possibility in regard to Yitzchak.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

A priori, Yitzchak has no reason to assume that only ONE son would be chosen, and the other rejected. Unlike Yitzchak and Yishmael, who had DIFFERENT mothers, both Yaakov and Esav are born from the same mother. What more, they are twins!

Therefore, it is only logical for Yitzchak to assume that BOTH

Yaakov AND Esav will become the 'chosen family'.

Furthermore, even if there is some divine reason to choose only one son, it should be GOD's choice and NOT Yitzchak's! After all, God alone had been involved in this BECHIRA process heretofore. He had chosen Avraham and He alone had chosen Yitzchak, and He alone decided that Yishmael would not be chosen. Hence, without a specific divine command, why would Yitzchak even consider making such a bold decision to choose only one of his children?

Thus, it would only be logical to assume that Yitzchak believed that **all** of his children were chosen, i.e. both Yaakov and Esav would be chosen - and their offspring would become the nation of Israel.

So why does Yitzchak intend to bless only ONE of them?

'BRACHA' OR 'BECHIRA'?

To answer this question, we must differentiate between TWO basic types of blessings found in Sefer Breishit. For the sake of clarity, we will refer to one as BECHIRA and the other as BRACHA. Let's explain what each word refers to:

BECHIRA*

We use the term BECHIRA (selection) to describe God's blessing of 'ZERA va-ARETZ' to the Avot, the privilege of fathering God's special nation. BECHIRA implies that only one son is chosen while the others are rejected. As we explained, this process began with God's designation of Avraham Avinu and continued with His choice of Yitzchak over Yishmael. It is not clear, however, when this "bechira" process will end.

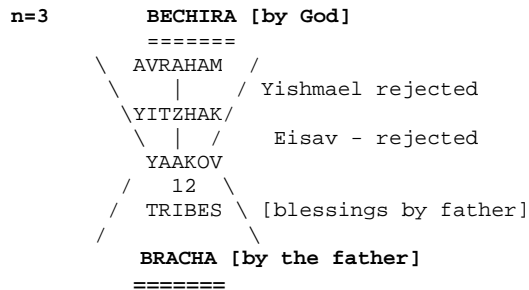
'BRACHA'

We will use the term BRACHA to describe a father's blessing of personal destiny to his sons. For example, when Noach bestows a BRACHA on each of his three sons (see 9:24-27), he does not choose one son over the others to become a special nation - rather, he blesses (or curses) each son based on their individual potential.

The best example of BRACHA (in contrast to BECHIRA) is Yaakov Avinu's blessings to his twelve sons prior to his death, in Parshat Vayechi (see 49:1-28). Clearly, Yaakov does not choose one or several of his children to become God's special nation. Rather, he bestows a blessing of personal destiny upon each son, according to his understanding of each son's individual character and potential (see 49:28).

Thus, according to these definitions - BRACHA is bestowed by a father, while BECHIRA is established by God.

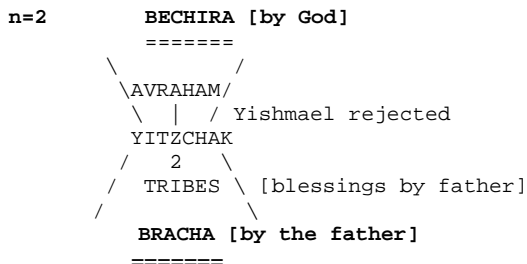
The following diagram illustrates the primary points of our discussion thus far:



The above diagram reflects the final outcome of the bechira' process - that there were THREE stages, God original choice of Avraham Avinu (#1); his subsequent choice Yitzchak (#2) - to the exclusion of Yishmael; and his choice of Yaakov (#3) over Eisav. Once Yaakov has been chosen, we reach a 'critical point' - where ALL of his children are chosen, and hence the 'bechira' process is complete. At this point, the father bestows 'blessings' on his children, which reflect the interrelationships among the different tribes - but all 'within the chosen family'.

Using an analogy from 'algebra', one could say that in this diagram $n=3$, where the variable 'n' refers to the number of stages in the "bechira" process. In our shiur, we will claim that Yitzchak assumes that $n=2$, i.e. he assumes that there will be only two stages in this process - Avraham & Yitzchak; and hence both of his children would be chosen; and hence, and plans to bless both.

The following diagram reflects what may have been Yitzchak's understanding [$n=2$]:



YITZCHAK'S BRACHA TO ESAV

With this distinction in mind, we return to our opening question regarding the kind of blessing that Yitzchak intends to bestow upon Esav. Is it a blessing of BRACHA or BECHIRA?

Considering that Yitzchak has no apparent reason to choose only one son, we should expect that his intended blessing to Esav was one of BRACHA (and not BECHIRA).

To determine if this assumption is indeed correct, let's examine the content of the actual blessing that Yitzchak bestowed - intended for Esav but deceptively seized by Yaakov:

"May God give you of the dew of heaven
and the FAT of the land,
and an abundance of GRAIN and WINE.
Other nations shall SERVE you and bow down to you;
be MASTER over your brother,
and let your mother's sons bow down to you ..."
(27:28-29)

Note how this blessing focuses on prosperity and leadership, and hence would fall under our category of BRACHA. It cannot be BECHIRA, as it does NOT contain the phrase of 'ZERA va-ARETZ'. In fact, this blessing strongly resembles the blessings of prosperity and leadership which Yaakov himself later bestows upon Yehuda (see 49:8) and Yosef (see 49:25-26).

But if indeed if this is a blessing of BRACHA, why does Yitzchak (intend to) bestow this blessing only on Esav? Would it not have made sense had he blessed both sons?

THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE JOB

As we posited above, Yitzchak expects that both his children will be chosen. Realizing that this nation (that will ultimately evolve from his two sons) will require leadership, Yitzchak must first appoint **one** of his sons to take family leadership; afterward he can bless the other. But which son should he choose for this responsibility?

One could suggest that Yitzchak concluded that Esav - the "ish sadeh" [a 'man of the world' (see 25:27)] - was the more suitable candidate for this job. Let's explain why:

Yaakov & Esav are over sixty years old - Esav is married with children, has a job, and can thus care for himself (and for others). Yaakov, on the other hand, is still single and 'living at home'. It is readily understandable, then, why Yitzchak chooses Esav to become the family provider and leader.

We can even presume that Yitzchak had a blessing in store for Yaakov as well - most probably one that involves spiritual leadership. Yaakov - the "ish tam yoshev ohalim," a man of the book (see 25:27) - can provide the family with spiritual guidance. [This 'theoretical blessing' to Yaakov resembles the ultimate

responsibility of shevet Levi (see Devarim 33:10).] However, without FIRST establishing a nation (with the help of Esav), there would be no one around for Yaakov to guide.]

The fact that Yitzchak had called upon Esav to receive his blessing FIRST, does not rule out the possibility that he may have intended to bless Yaakov afterward. Note that in Parshat Vayechi, Yaakov FIRST blesses Yosef - bestowing upon him family leadership- before proceeding to bless all twelve children.

So what went wrong? Why does Rivka intervene? Why must Yaakov 'steal' Esav's BRACHA? Or, to put it more bluntly, is Rivka simply standing up for her 'favorite son' or did she perceive the situation differently?

To answer this question, we must return to the beginning of the Parsha.

RIVKA KNOWS BEST

Apparently, Rivka knows something that Yitzchak doesn't. Recall that Rivka suffered from an unusually difficult pregnancy and seeks God for an explanation (see 25:22).

Note how God's answer to HER (and not to Yitzchak!) already alludes to the fact that the BECHIRA process has not yet ended:

"And God answered HER saying: There are TWO NATIONS in your womb, and TWO SEPARATE PEOPLES shall issue from your body. One people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the YOUNGER." (25:23)

Rivka here learns that her twins are destined to become TWO NATIONS, and as such, only ONE - the younger one (see 25:23, "ve-rav ya'avod tza'ir") - can be chosen. Thus, Rivka knows that YAAKOV is destined to receive the BECHIRA, and not Esav. Or using our analogy, she knows that $n=3$ (or that $n=>3$).

Yitzchak, however, is unaware of this prophecy. [Note 25:23: "va-yomer Hashem LAH" - to HER, and not to him!]

It is unclear why Rivka never informs Yitzchak of this prophecy. She may assume that Yitzchak also knows, and only later realizes that he doesn't (see Ramban 27:4). Alternatively, the very fact that she was privy to this special prophecy may have led her to the logical conclusion that God wanted specifically ONLY HER to know, and NOT Yitzchak.

However, whatever that reason may be, each parent carries a different perception of their children's destiny as they grow up. Yitzchak ASSUMES that both Yaakov and Esav are chosen, while Rivka KNOWS that it will only be Yaakov, but cannot share he secret. The day will come, she may assume, when she will ultimately understand why God has given her this information

RIVKA'S DILEMMA

After overhearing Yitzchak's intention to bless Esav (27:5), Rivka now faces a serious dilemma:

- * Does Yitzchak plan to bless Esav with the BECHIRA (or that God should grant him the BECHIRA)? If so, she must act quickly, as the future of "Am Yisrael" rests on her shoulders.
- * Does Yitzchak think that BOTH children are chosen? Is he giving a BRACHA of leadership to Esav? The result of this blessing could be no less disastrous!
- * Can Rivka just tell Yitzchak that he is making a mistake? Is it too late? Will he listen? Would he be willing now, after so many years, to change his perception?

Rivka has limited time to act, yet feels responsible to the prophecy she had received and hence obligated to rectify the situation. In her eyes, this may have been the very reason why God had originally granted her this information. Unfortunately, however, Rivka must resort to trickery to ensure that Yaakov receives the blessing.

Now that we have explained Rivka's course of action, we must explain Yitzchak's, as the plot thickens.

YITZCHAK'S BLESSINGS

After Yitzchak grants Yaakov (whom he thought was Esav) a BRACHA of prosperity and leadership, the real Esav arrives and begs his father for another blessing (see 27:34,36). Yitzchak's initial response is that the special blessing intended for Esav (prosperity and power) had already been given to Yaakov (27:35,37). Hence, Esav cannot receive any other BRACHA, since the BRACHA of spirituality, originally intended for Yaakov, would be unsuitable for Esav. However, after Esav pleads with his father, Yitzchak grants Esav a different BRACHA of prosperity.

"And Isaac his father answered and said: Behold, of the fat places of the earth shall be thy dwelling, and of the dew of heaven from above; And by your sword you shall live and serve your brother; but should you [or him /see Rash] fall, then you shall shake his yoke from off thy neck." (27:39-40)

In light of our above interpretation, this second blessing is quite understandable. Let's explain why.

Review this blessing "[tal ha-shamayim u-shmanei ha-aretz]" (27:38-39), noting how it speaks of prosperity in a manner very similar to the first blessing. This makes sense, because 'prosperity' can be shared by both brothers. However, the second half of the original blessing - that of political leadership ("hevei gvir le-achicha - see 27:29) - can only be given to one son. Yitzchak therefore blesses Esav that - should Yaakov's leadership falter - he shall take his place (see 27:40 & Rashi).

At this point of the story, it appears that Yitzchak still understands that both sons will be chosen. When does he find out the 'truth' that the 'bechira' process is not over yet?

CLEARING THE AIR

Even though the Torah never reveals the details, it would only be logical to assume that Yitzchak must have asked Rivka to explain to him the reason for her actions; whereupon she must have informed Yitzchak regarding what God had told her. Upon hearing the details of God's earlier prophecy to Rivka, Yitzchak finally realizes that only ONE son, Yaakov, is to be chosen. [Using our analogy, he now realizes that $n=3$.] To his dismay, he must now accept the fact that the BECHIRA process must continue into yet another generation.

This explains the final blessing that Yitzchak grants Yaakov, before he embarks on his journey to Padan Aram (in search of a wife). Review this blessing, noting how it obviously relates directly to the blessing of BECHIRA:

"May God grant the BLESSING OF AVRAHAM [i.e. BECHIRA] to you and your OFFSPRING, that you may inherit the LAND which ELOKIM has given to Avraham..." (28:4).

Note once again the key phrase - "zera va-aretz" - of the BECHIRA blessing! In contrast to the BRACHA of prosperity and power discussed earlier, this blessing involves the familiar concept of God's special NATION inheriting a special LAND. Clearly, Yitzchak now understands that the 'bechira' process is not over yet.

Note as well that Yitzchak does not actually grant this blessing to Yaakov, rather he blesses him that **God** should grant him the 'bechira' - "**ve-Kel Sha-kai** yevarech otcha..." (28:4). As we explained earlier in our shiur, the 'bechira' process is God's decision. Yitzchak is now 'rooting' for Yaakov - that God should grant him the BECHIRA, but that decision must ultimately be confirmed by God - and that's exactly what takes place a few psukim later, at the beginning of Parshat Vayetze! (see 28:12-14)

MA'ASEH AVOT, SIMAN LA-BANIM

Despite our 'technical' explanation for Yitzchak and Rivka's behavior in this Parsha, a more fundamental question remains: Why must the BECHIRA process be so complex? In other words, why is it that at the very inception of our national history, trickery must be employed for us to arrive to our divine destiny?

Or re-phrased in terms of our shiur - why does God want

Yitzchak to think that $n=2$, while telling Rivka that $n=3$. It appears that God wanted these events to unfold in this manner!

Although this is a very difficult question to answer, one could suggest that this entire episode may carry an important message concerning how the spiritual goals of our nation relate to the necessities of entering the physical world of prosperity and political leadership.

Indeed, to become a nation, there are times when the 'aggressive' qualities of an Esav type individual are needed. However, there is a popular notion that these physical responsibilities should be delegated to the 'ish sadeh', the son who is an expert in the physical realm, but ONLY in that realm [the 'chiloni' son]. Similarly, the spiritual realm should be delegated to the Yaakov type individual, the delicate 'ish tam' who knows only how to study in the tents of Torah [the 'dati' son].

Yitzchak's original intention to bless Esav may reflect this notion, as Esav will be the provider, 'serve in the army', and enter the political realm; while Yaakov will dedicate his life immersed in the tents of Torah. Separating these responsibilities between two sons may reflect the notion that spirituality cannot be found in the physical world of establishing a nation.

To negate this notion, despite its simplicity and logic, the Torah presents it as Yitzchak's original plan. However, the other option (possibly Rivka's original plan), that Yaakov - the 'ish tam' - alone can manage both realms remains equally unacceptable.

At the time of these 'brachot', Yaakov himself is not yet ready to take on the responsibilities of the 'ish sadeh', but sooner or later it will become incumbent upon him to do so. To establish God's special nation, there are times when it is necessary for the 'ish tam' to take on the responsibilities of the 'ish sadeh'.

To solve this 'dialectic', it was necessary for Yaakov to first don the 'hands of Esav', i.e. to pretend to act like Esav, but not actually become an Esav. It remains significant that the primal character of Am Yisrael is that of Yaakov, the 'ish tam'.

If this interpretation is correct, then we can better appreciate why Yaakov must endure so much hardship during his twenty some years in Charan. Before God can bestow on him the 'bechira' - to become the final stage of this complex "bechira" process, Yaakov must first learn to become and act as an "ish sadeh", while remaining an "ish tam". Not only will he need to learn how to deal with the trickery of Lavan, Yaakov must also confront the 'angel of Esav', and later Esav himself - upon his return to Eretz Yisrael. By surviving those challenges, Yaakov will prove himself worthy of that leadership task. That battle may leave him 'limping', nonetheless triumphant; as he has learned the proper balance between these two character traits.

Even though many situations in our history will arise when we must don the 'hands of Esav' - i.e. when we must act as an 'ish sadeh' - our dominant trait must always remain that of an 'ish tam'. For when God provides Am Yisrael with prosperity and political leadership, it is towards the purpose that they serve mankind with personal example and spiritual guidance.

Throughout our history, even though we must periodically 'don the hands of Esav', our voice must always remain 'the voice of Yaakov' [see 27:22]!

shabbat shalom
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. See Ramban (on 27:4), noting how he would basically disagree with the entire approach presented in the above shiur. From the very beginning, he understands that Yitzchak's intention is to bless Esav with the BECHIRA.

1. How does Ramban understand why Rivka doesn't tell Yitzchak about her nevu'a? How, if at all, does this affect his understanding of the entire parsha?

2. With which basic assumption of the above shiur does Ramban disagree?

3. Does Ramban (see 27:28) find any hint to "zera va-aretz" in Yitzchak's first bracha to Yaakov/Esav?

4. How does Rashi understand this sugya?

5. Try to relate this issue to the klal of MA'ASEH AVOT, SIMAN LA-BANIM. [ly"H, this will be the topic of a future shiur.]

6. See also Radak on 27:4, noting how he explains that Yitzchak knew all along that Yaakov would receive the 'bechira'. Nonetheless, he still wanted to grant Esav a 'bracha'.

B. Towards the beginning of the Parsha, Esav sells his birthright to Yaakov and makes a striking statement:

"Hinei anochi holeich lamut, ve-lama zeh li bchora?"

Esav seems very practical. He sees no reason to have the 'bchora', as he lives only for the present with no dreams or goals for the future.

1. Relate this to the above shiur and the reason why Esav is rejected.

2. Could it be that this attitude, a lack of appreciation of his destiny and purpose, leads to his ultimate rejection?

3. Can this explain why Yaakov is interested in buying the birthright?

4. Does Yitzchak know about this incident? If so (or even if not), how may this affect the blessing that he later intended to give his children?

C. The blessing of BECHIRA to Yaakov in 28:3-5 contains several key phrases found in earlier blessings to Avraham Avinu. Try to find these parallels.

1. Are most of them from the parsha Brit Mila? (see Breishit 17:1-10).

If so, can you explain why? [What additional message did Avraham receive after Brit Mila?]

2. When did Hashem actually confirm this blessing? (See 35:9-13!)